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How Ultra Firms in Former Soviet and Yugoslav States Became Political Actors

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How Ultra Firms in Former Soviet and Yugoslav States Became Political Actors

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Abstract:

When you go to a football match one of the first things that you will undoubtedly notice are the ultras. Their loud coordinated chants and movement fill the stadium with energy that would not be there otherwise, and their tifo and flairs add an artist's touch to the stands. There are ultras for just about every club, and every city in the world, with each group having their own unique identity. The local standing of football clubs, paired with the devoted and organized structure of ultras has seen them become political and military actors across the world. Ultras based in former Yugoslav and Soviet states have gained a reputation for showing Nazi and Fascist symbolism at games, which is especially fascinating when one considers that many of these ultras do so for clubs with communist related names and badges. In this paper I will explore the history of ultras and football former Yugoslav and Soviet states, and to offer a theory for why they came to hold these harmful and fringe ideologies.

Introduction:

The 1950 World Cup hosted in Brazil, was perhaps one of the key turning points in football culture as a whole. To this day, horror stories of the tragic defeat by the Brazilian team to Uruguay in the Maracanã lives on to this day. While the on-pitch product and the hosting of the World Cup were memorable, as was the reassertion of football as a global game in the aftermath of World War 2, the most important legacy of the tournament is arguably the export of Brazil's vibrant fan culture. This was dubbed as *Torcida*, and as players and sailors from Croatia returned home, *Toricida Split* was formed to mimic the atmosphere that was created in Brazil (Lawson, 2013). At the same time, Italian ultras began to emerge in the early 50s, and Italian ultra's impact on the European footballing community was clear to see (Martino Interview, 2022). Italian ultras brought new ideas, traditions, and style that would quickly traverse across Europe. As it spread around Europe, ultra-culture continued to adapt and change. This newfound fan culture also informed those with political ambitions, who attempted to conduct the energy in football stadiums for their own political gain. Throughout the world the diverse array of political, social, and economic climates helped to shape unique ultra-cultures in every corner of the globe. In other words, while ultras have a shared language, style, and tradition; they have unique concerns to their own communities.

Perhaps some of the most visible ultras in recent years have been the ultras of former communist states. While this may be due to press coverage, the culmination of football, ethnic divides, and nationalism in post-Soviet Eastern Europe has resulted in shocking displays of violence and racism throughout the past decades in countless stadiums and competitions. While ultras vary greatly globally in terms of their values, they do tend to share an absolutist world view, a view of us versus them heightened by the local nature of football clubs, and an unwavering stance

against authority. Since the 1990s and the fall of European communism many Eastern European states have been incorporated economically and politically into greater Europe, however, anti-Europeanism and nationalism in the stands is extremely common throughout the former-Eastern bloc (Benedikter and Wojtaszyn, 2018). This is no surprise as clubs and ultra-firms are local entities. Clubs have strong identities and histories, have founding myths similar to that of countries, and employ massive amounts of people in their community. On pitch success means so much more than meets the eye, as in many cases these football clubs are the center of community.

Because of this it should be of no surprise to see such intense fan culture in Europe, and while there is nothing wrong with passion, the ugly sides to this are all too common. Confronting the challenge of violence and racism by ultras throughout Europe has been a challenge that countless countries have needed to confront. The destructive nature that runaway aggressive fandom can have should not be understated. One person that I interviewed who grew up near Millwall recounted to me how his parents used to have to board up their windows on matchday. Hooliganism ran rampant throughout England, the Ultras of Italy are famed for their choreography and at times violent nature, and ultras of France have caused abandonment of many 2021/22 season matches. Ultras have also proved to be important political actors globally, with violent ultras in Serbia alignment with their president, and ultras in Egypt playing a crucial role in the Arab Spring (Woltering, 2013 & Dojcinovic, 2017). The experience and organization that ultras cultivate through their demonstrations in the stands translate well to outside the stands.

Throughout the repressive Yugoslav and Soviet regimes of the past, football was turned into both a political game by the regimes, while at the same time affording fans an outlet for expression. This is perhaps why in Eastern Europe ultra-culture is so intense, as it reflects the history of repression and identity within their territories. That brings me to my research questions:

What forces formed ultra culture in former Soviet and Yugoslav states? What commonalities and differences do former do ultras of former Yugoslavia and Soviet states have in their formations and views?

In this investigation we will first briefly overview literature of sports fanaticism as well as important global trends and context in football, after which the research methodology, definitions, and frameworks guiding this inquiry will be discussed. Then we will investigate specific case studies in Russia, Ukraine, and various former Yugoslav states. Lastly, we will discuss conclusions as well as areas that need further research.

Literature Review:

Before delving into the topic of ultras in the former Soviet and Yugoslav states, it is first important to investigate the theoretical framework of ultras and hooligans, as well as to investigate a sociological explanation of football fanaticism. Koller notes that “despite all of the positive elements that we are inclined to attribute to the most popular pastime in the world, we should on no account forget that something which appears so apolitical is actually the entry point for nationalism, chauvinism, and regionalism” (Koller et al., 2015, p. 139). Generally, the schools of thought split into two when it comes to hooliganism and ultra-culture. The first is a sociological explanation that violence is due to the political emotions of ‘us’ versus ‘them’ that football brings out at football matches, with the other being a more Marxian explanation framing ultras as a response to social and economic changes (Koller et al., 2015, p.139).

The sociological explanation is fascinating as much of the evidence suggests that many fans are drawn into violence, but do not set out of the match with this intent (Dunning et al., 1986). A combination of drinking and masculine crowds with aggressive mindsets, encapsulated by the

game and violence occurring on the field create an environment ripe for violent confrontations. Furthermore, the prerequisites for collective action are met by football clubs, where fans with similar purposes come together and renew their beliefs and identifications (Millward, 2012, p.634).

The Marxian explanation is also useful, framing historic, social, and economic factors as the reason for ultra-violence. Over recent years there have been numerous supporter protest movements against the buyouts of local clubs, the infamous European Super League, and against the over commercialization and commodification of the beautiful games (Millward, 2012, p.633). This is especially important since ultras generally consist of, and are perceived of consisting of, those of a low socioeconomic status. A football match is an “opportunity to ‘revive’ feelings, that is, to express the feeling of frustration caused by poor living conditions” (Savković and Đorđević, 2010, p. 15). Not only that, but under repressive regimes that limit speech stadiums have become “refuges for political autonomy”, as holding crowds numbering in the tens of thousands accountable for their actions is almost impossible (Koller, 2015, p. 151). Both frameworks are undoubtedly useful, and while academics of both fields tend to dismiss the other side, both the sociological and historical approach have merit in these discussions.

With that being said, one of the main criticisms of discourse surrounding ultras is that it has been subject to “agenda setting”, with the significance of the phenomena being over emphasized and misrepresented” (Moorhouse, 2006, p. 257). This happens in large part because the loud, violent, and visible nature of Ultras tends to overshadow the vast majority of relatively quiet and civic fans in the Stadium (Ricatti, 2010, 220). Some also argue that this obsession with ultra-culture may be due to the state working in conjunction with the press, framing them as dangerous, and thus warranting state violence against these groups to maintain their monopoly over violence (Dyal, 2012).

Lastly, it is impossible to talk about ultra culture and football fanaticism without discussing the broader trends in global football. Football in recent years has become increasingly linked to the political sphere, which is in no way a completely bad thing. It has the power to serve as a diplomatic tool and has been argued as being a potential tool to forge European identity (Pyta, 2015)(Lasocki, 2009). With that being said, a combination of increased commodification of the game, as well as increased links to the political has led to political actors using football as a tool for political power and influence. In 1986, Silvio Berlusconi bought AC Milan, gaining popularity as a result and becoming the Prime Minister of Italy three times (Veth, 2014, 56). His political party Forza Italia was even named after the famed chant to encourage the national side. Recently, sovereign wealth funds from Qatar, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia have bought up clubs across Europe in an effort to “sports wash” their money (Mortiz & Merrington, 2021). This method does work, as after now former Chelsea owner Roman Abramovich was sanctioned by the British government due to his ties with Putin, chants of “Abramovich” were heard at Stamford Bridge during what was supposed to be a moment of silence in solidarity with a besieged Ukraine (Evans, 2022).

Furthermore, blatant corruption by FIFA resulting in awarding Russia the 2018 World Cup even after the Georgian War and 2014’s annexation of Crimea; and awarded Qatar the 2022 World Cup despite their positions on woman’s rights, LGBTQ+ rights, their countless human rights violations, and their involvement in Yemen (Panja & Draper, 2020). When decisions such as these are made it is difficult to view football as anything but a political game, and the economic elites and footballing powerholders have only served to create greater animosity among communities that feel alienated from a game that by nature is democratic. As concerns raise about extremism in the stands, it seems that making money is the priority rather than ensuring the communities

involved in football are seen and heard. This is perhaps why one of the most common symbology shared among ultras is the phrase “against modern football” (Doige & Lieser, 2018, 6). A short but powerful sentiment, as it is a reminder amongst all the political and economic utilization of the beautiful game, it is in its essence a game for the people and by the people.

Research Methodology:

To my surprise, academic literature on football fan culture and its relation to the political sphere was not too hard to come by. This meant that much of my research took place on JSTOR and on other digital databases. Given the topic chosen, using qualitative data over quantitative made more sense, due to the simple fact that there is no accessible quantitative data to use. Perhaps one of the most interesting pieces of data to look at would be attendance records, however, these prove difficult to locate, with most attendance records beginning at the turn of the century and with many seeming to be incomplete.

While this limited the ways in which I could collect data, there is already a large amount of literature on the history of Yugoslavia and Soviet sporting ambitions, as well as on politically motivated ultra and hooliganism from across the world. Along with literature, interviews were also used. These interviews were both formal and informal. I made sure interviewees knew the potential uses of this paper and gave them the option to define how anonymous they would like to be, whether that be only using a first name, a full legal name, or none.

Issues such as nationalism and identity are obviously difficult to discuss at times and are deeply personal. This absolutely affected some of my interviews and many of the primary and

secondary sources that I consulted in my research. Furthermore, my ability to find and read primary sources was extremely limited as I do not know Russian or any of the Slavic languages that would have aided me in my research.

My final research tool were Telegram channels that one of my interviewees passed onto me. The first group is largely an info group in which ultras and bystanders can anonymously post videos of various fights, the second is the extension of the website hooligans.cz and serves to post videos and pictures of ultras in action globally. The last channel focuses on the Ukrainian ultra-scene and currently the chatter is mostly about various ultras work in resisting the Russian onslaught. While I was unable to have the time to fully use these sources to their full potential, I certainly hope to use them in future research as they are an extremely fascinating source.

Definitions and Framework:

Before analyzing ultras in former Yugoslav and Soviet states, it is first important to define a series of terms. The first terms, ultras and hooligans, are of utmost importance to this investigation. Ultras and hooligans can be used interchangeably, and talk about the same thing, with hooligans being used to typically describe British fan groups, and with ultras typically describing fans based around the Mediterranean region. Rather than using both terms, ultras will be the word in which I will be using due to fact that fan groups in former Eastern-bloc states are commonly referred to as ultras. Ultras are at a most basic level fan groups, with groups being referred to as “firms”, and as seen through Telegram, Hooligans groups in England refer to their groups as firms as well. They cover all political ideologies, with many being a-political, and can be found in almost every country and every level of the game. They put on displays of

pyrotechnics, tifo, and coordinate deafening chants to back their teams. They organize fights with other fans, cover their cities in stickers and graffiti, and take on the responsibility of being an Ultra as a huge commitment. Their chants and counter chants with rival fans are almost as much of a competition as the game itself. They also have their own language in a way, with the most prominent being the referencing of police as 1312 (signifying ACAB or “All Cops Are Bastards”).

The way in which the political affiliations of Ultras are talked about is also important. As I interviewed Martino Simcik, the Fan Culture Editor of Copa90, a fan focused football content platform, he stressed that it was important to not fall suspect to viewing ultra-groups in former Eastern-Bloc states through the Western-perspective, but rather to view them through as nuanced a perspective as possible. The prism of far-right and far-left sold to us in the West does often not fit the ultras of the former Eastern Bloc, and he told me to be careful not to see this type of conflict as something that is black and white. What it means to be far-right and far-left in Eastern Europe is largely different to in the West. Martino commented that leftist fans in Germany will wear “Stalin or Lenin shirts, but if you showed up to a leftist stand in Eastern-Europe you would get slapped”. There is a great diversity, or “tapestry” of political viewpoints of ultras, and it is important to recognize this.

It is also important to stress that fascist, neo-Nazi, and nationalist ultra-groups are not a problem unique to Eastern Europe or football. Across the world these same fringe views exist, and they certainly exist in America only without the context of nationalist ultra-groups and a strong footballing culture. This is then only one context, so steps will obviously need to be taken broadly to discourage these views that have inflicted such harm on the world rather than simply within the context of football.

Analysis:

As Mirko Poledica, chief of the Serbian professional soccer players' association said, "our politicians always fear the stadium and its terrible power" (Higgins, 2021). Serbia has what is considered to be among one of the most intense ultra cultures in the world. In particular, Belgrade's two major powers in Red Star and Partizan are known for having staunchly ethno-nationalist fans, who have been labeled as being fascist and racists. Despite these characteristics, both Red Star and Partizan were both founded by Socialist-Yugoslavia in the wake of World War 2, carrying socialist symbolism in their crests and in their names, but having fans that carry values so far from those propagated Socialist-Yugoslavia requires an in-depth investigation.

The same way in which Yugoslavia founded Red Star and Partizan across the Eastern-Bloc teams with state affiliation were made. Government, police, or army sponsored football clubs would in fact go on to dominate the footballing scene in much of the Eastern-Bloc. Teams with the name Dinamo or Dynamo typically signaled police sponsored teams within the Eastern Bloc, while teams with "CSKA" or a lingual equivalent signaled army sponsorship (Riodan, 1993 & Edelman, 2002). These teams with state backing held the power to draft any players that they wanted into their club almost ensuring that government teams would stay on top.

Russia:

Interestingly, if you look back into Soviet Russia it was not a team with the name of CSKA or Dynamo that became beloved by common Russians, but it was Spartak Moscow. Named after Spartacus, the gladiator that led a slave revolt against the mighty Roman Empire, it is almost poetic that it would serve to represent the working class in the USSR. One Soviet scholar noted that supporting Spartak was "a small way of saying no" (Edelman, 2002). In a repressive society sport

was one of the few free places in which one could make their own choices and express feelings towards the party state. Choosing your football club was an individualistic choice to voluntarily join a community in the Soviet Union. Interestingly the community of Spartak Moscow supporters represented a “low social class” that were “a bit violent”, language not too dissimilar in how many describe ultras today (Edelman, 2002, 1444). Meanwhile, Dinamo Moscow represented the police and the upper and middle classes of Soviet Society. This was represented even in way in which Spartak played, who’s tradition style of support and play had little to do with sportsmanship and was often violent. Dinamo meanwhile played a much more respectable and fair play style.

In 1936 Soviet football underwent a vast reorganization, moving away from a local model of competition to creating a Soviet first division on par with other European leagues. The league was an overnight success, and from this first division Spartak emerged as the favorite team of the male workingmen. They led the league in attendance and were dubbed “people’s team” (Edelman, 1453). Furthermore, Soviet teams generally aligned with industry, and Spartak chose to align with Promkooperastiiia, which was an organization for simple trade workers like barbers or tailors. One Spartak fan named Iurii Oleshcuk described the feeling that Spartak fans held towards the Dinamo Moscow fans as being “highly antagonistic”. “Dinamo represented the authorities; the police, the organs of state security, the hated privileged elites.” (Edelman, 1454). Another lifelong Spartak fan named Boris Nazarov interviewed after the fall of the Soviet Union recalled hearing “kill the cops” or “kill the soldiers” at games. These words were some that would perhaps not have been even muttered by one in the context of the Soviet Union’s intense security state, but when surrounded by tens of thousands of fans there was a certain ability to speak one’s mind that was not there before. The popularity of football was strong enough that the police held little choice but to permit the matches (Edelman, 1457).

The Starostin brothers who founded the club soon found themselves subject to suspicion on behalf of the party. The press began rumors of various financial breaches, and while some of these rumors did prove to be true, their sentencing of ten years in 1942 for hard labor due to “anti-Soviet Statements” and “doubts about Soviet victory in the war” as well as specific financial charges such as the embezzlement of Rubles (Edelman, 1469). Edelman noted that the economic charges were specific while the political charges were vague, which could have been a method to keep the charges out of a court that could have a football-loving judge. Even then, due to their status as the minds behind the ‘people’s club’ they received preferential treatment by labor camp guards.

Perhaps one of the largest reasons for becoming the people’s club was the Soviet alignment of clubs to various industries. Teams were divided upon section of the workforce, for Spartak it was trade workers, for Lokomotiv Moscow it was the railway workers, and for Dinamo Moscow it was the police. This gave almost predetermined lines of support through work, rather than by geography which is the way in which support is typically chosen. While one was allowed to choose whatever club to support, this structure gave a large base and framework for ultra-culture to spread (Liebenau, 2019). While it seems fan culture in Soviet-Russia had some commonalities with ultras today, especially among Spartak Moscow’s faithful; but according to Avram Liebenau the birth of Soviet Ultra culture was the 1972 Cup Winners Cup between Dinamo Moscow and Glasgow’s Rangers. As Dinamo attacked late in the game chasing a famous win, Rangers fans stormed onto the field stopping the game. For Soviets watching the game, especially for the impressionable youth, they saw an attractive energy and camaraderie.

It did not take long until organized ultra groups sought to imitate British Ultra firms. From Spartak and Dinamo to smaller clubs these fan groups grew in popularity, bringing large amounts of fans into the stands. None of this, however, explains the far-right-extremism seen at games in the Russian stands. At games across former Soviet states racism, antisemitism, and fringe views run rampant. In Russia there is only one far left ultra-group, the “Red-White Djits” who support Spartak Nalchik in Caucasus and began fairly recently between the two Chechen Wars. As Rustam Kalibatov, the leader of the Moscow chapter of the Red White Djigits thought, “I cannot understand - the country that defeated fascism has more fascists than Germany” (Petkova, 2018).

While it is impossible to create a collective story behind fascist and neo-Nazi supporters in Russia, there certainly do seem to have been common forces that shaped these groups. With the end of the Soviet Union the Russian economy was in tatters, ultra groups emerged as something to do, and an employment opportunity of sorts. Far right politicians “saw Moscow’s football thugs as a possibly forceful group of disenfranchise voters - and began to court these young men, laying on free transport to away games, paying members to work as bodyguards or street muscle, and even offering the occasional well-paid role as a party official” (Parkin, 2018). This role as “street muscle” made ultras uniquely tied to the political in Russia, and physical strength and fighting skill became prerequisites to joining these groups. In a tryout to join an Ultra firm, young men are brought into forests to brawl, with the strongest earning a place. One firm leader, Vasily “The Killer” Stepanov was filmed in a BBC documentary saying that these groups were essentially Putin’s foot soldiers (Parkin, 2018).

In 2018 Russia hosted the World Cup, and one of the biggest stories in the build up to it were worries about the potential chaos that could be caused by Russian far-right Ultras. A similar narrative was pushed prior to Ukraine and Poland’s jointly hosted EURO 2012 tournament. There

was in fact good reason to be concerned. During EURO 2016 prior to a group stage match held in Marseille between England and Russia, around 150-200 Russian supporters descended upon England supporters in what could be described as no less than a coordinated attack. Two English fans were left in comas, and after the game finished 1-1 the Russian fans again attempted to attack the English away end. The scenes were ugly, and UEFA threatened to throw Russia out of the tournament. In response to the scenes Russian fans accused the French authorities as “further stoking of anti-Russian sentiments”, one senior Russian parliamentarian tweeted “well done lads keep it up”, and prior to condemning the attacks Putin smirked questioned how “200 [Russian] fans could hurt several thousand Englishmen” (Parkin, 2018). The UK government in fact suspected many that those who attacked the English supporters were linked to the Kremlin, which given the history of Russian ultras would be something of no surprise (Boffey, 2016).

However, this has now resulted in a new chapter of ultras in Russia, as since then the Russian government has seen up government intermediaries at every club to communicate with fans to attempt to control their aggression, especially during the build up to the 2018 World Cup where the presentation of a good public image was essential. Behind the scenes Russian ultras have voiced concern over the vanishing of government support. This change in Russian policy towards ultras was undoubtedly an opportunity as well to have deeper control over the groups, as one ultra said, “they are far more concerned that something like the Ukrainian revolution might happen here, and that, if it does, the rightwing hooligans will take to the streets against the authorities. So, in private, they still support violent fan groups. I believe that political power remains in the hands of rightwing fans” (Parkin, 2018).

Ukraine:

This reference to Ukraine is certainly worth digging into, as the role of Ukrainian ultras is extremely important within the context of the current Russian invasion of Ukraine. Ukrainian football ultra-groups followed a similar pattern to those in Russia, and increasingly nationalist, and far right groups became influential in the stands. Similar to Russia, Nazi and fascist symbolism were common, as were racist chants. Ukrainian fans then had justly created a reputation for violence and far-right extremism. However, the role that these far-right ultras have in the day-to-day life differs greatly in Ukraine in comparison to Russia.

While the left of Ukraine wanted to be closely aligned with the European Union and NATO, the right-wing nationalists that encompassed much of the Ukrainian ultra-scene besides Arsenal Kyiv wanted a Ukraine free of the influence of both Russia as well as the European Union (Syal, 2012). The common goal of freeing Ukraine of Russian influence became clear, as then President Yanukovic, known ally of Putin, attempted to back away from an agreement to join the European Union, prompting thousands to flood Maidan Square in Ukraine's capital in 2014 (Dickenson, 2021). Despite the keeping distance from the European Union being at the core of the demonstrations, right-wing-ultras across Ukraine saw it as a noble cause devoted to the sovereignty of their country. One Ukrainian ultra said that Maidan was "not left wing or right wing, Nazi or Commie, ... this was the war against Yanukovic" (Montague, 2020, 182). Ultras took to the front lines in Maidan, seemingly attracted to the fire, violence, and energy that brought them to the adrenaline filled terraces in the first place. After years spent fighting in the woods with other ultras and clashing with the police on a weekly basis, they now became a tool of massive importance for a Ukraine independent of Russia.

After a brutal battle in the streets of Kyiv, Yanukovic was forced out, fleeing to Russia, and Putin responded to the fall of the pro-Kremlin president with the annexation and invasion of Crimea. This annexation continued war in the East of Ukraine, and the interior minister Arsen Avakov allowed for the creation of volunteer fighting forces up to 12,000 strong (Montague, 2020, 184). The need for fighters is in which the creation of the creation of the Azov Battalion can be found. The Azov Battalion is a far-right Neo-Nazi paramilitary organization, with many of its members hailing from ultra-groups of Dnipro and Dinamo.

One documentary *Ultras* displayed how the common enemy of Russia united Ukrainian ultras of differing ideological perspective. In the Azov battalion, 2 out of 3 members of the Azov Battalion were involved in the ultra-scene. The Azov Battalion became famous through the liberation of Mariupol, and the city since then has become their base (Montague, 2020, 185). This, paired with ultras battle changed their reputation domestically and abroad almost overnight. As aforementioned, in the run up to the 2012 European Championships, the far-right extremist ultras of Ukraine were perhaps one of the biggest narratives, with images of Nazi salutes and stories covering the violent antics of the supporters airing on many sport focused publications. In 2014 as well, the Azov Battalion was brought into the National Guard to defuse the ultra-nationalist fervor, but this seemed to have failed. It was not just the Azov Battalion, as many other far right fan groups founded new groups to with the goal to resist This newly emboldened far right, “hiding under a veneer of patriotism and what they describe as ‘traditional values’” made many attacks against “womens rights activists, ethnic minorities, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) people, and others who hold views that differ from their own” (HRW, 2018).

These violent attacks were condemned win a joint letter to Arsen Avakov, the Minister to the Interior and Yuriy Lutsenko, the Prosecutor General of Ukraine. The letter was written on

behalf of Amnesty International, Front-Line Defenders, Human Rights Watch, and Freedom House, condemning both the upticks in attacks, as well as the creation by Ukrainian authorities to “create an environment of near impunity” (HRW, 2018). The emboldened far right thrived in an environment in which they were tolerated due to their critical role in Maidan.

In 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine, with the Kremlin pushing a narrative arguing that the Ukrainian government was run by Neo-Nazis. This narrative is far from the truth. While the Ukrainian government has aligned with the Azov Battalion due to a common cause, it has also failed to punish far-right groups and grapple with their role in the Maidan Revolution. In fact, US Congress were in discussion to label the Azov Battalion as a foreign terrorist group, prior to its introduction into the Ukrainian National Guard in 2016 (John & Lister, 2022). With that being said, the narrative seems more so to be about the fact that the Kremlin lost their allied President due to the defense that Ultras provided to protesters in Maidan. The Ukrainian government is not run by Neo-Nazis, and the politicians elected in Ukraine have reflected this reality. Furthermore, as was seen in Russia, the embrace by the Russian government of their own far-right ultras shows that they have no moral high ground on this issue, and the ultra-situation in Ukraine in no way would warrant the full-scale invasion in the first place.

Yugoslavia:

Football in Yugoslavia shared many common trends to those seen in the Soviet Union, but also was distinctly focused on the issue of nationalism. In an effort to eradicate nationalism, many clubs were disbanded or rebranded to remove nationalist symbols (Mills, 2012). Richard Mills noted that as communist monuments arose across Yugoslavia commemorating the fight against

the Nazis during WW2, communist clubs were made to commemorate the party. There are countless examples of this, but the most notable are Serbia's Red Star and Partizan and Croatia's Dinamo Zagreb. Croatia's biggest club Hajduk Split was quickly rebranded, and all nationalist Croatian symbolism was removed from their crest (Mills, 2012, 544). The purging of pre-socialist era clubs during the revolution was extremely common as they were "deemed to have an insufficiently socialist and divisive nationalist past" (Mills, 2012, 544). Zrinjski Mostar and Gradanski Zagreb were both eradicated due to carrying names of nationalist symbolism. Hajduk Split, a club formed prior to the formation of Yugoslavia only survived due to playing an active role in resisting their Axis occupiers during WW2 and maintained a strong relationship with the party and the Tito regime. The Italians attempted to force the club to play in their top division, but Hajduk Split resisted.

Hajduk Split "acted as a prominent symbol of Tito's emerging regime by embarking on a wartime propaganda tour of liberated allied territories around the Mediterranean and maintain[ed] warm links with the party in the post-war years" (Mills, 2012, 552). Hajduk Split also plays a particularly important in the story of Yugoslav fan culture, as they are home to the first ultra-group that was found in Yugoslavia named the 'Torcida' after the famed Brazilian fan groups that became popularized after they hosted the World Cup in 1950. The legend goes that the 6 Hadjuk Split players that traveled with the Yugoslav national team recounted the environment after returning home, and the Hadjuk Split fans attempted to recreate this magical atmosphere in a First League match against Red Star in the Autumn of 1950 (Mills, 2018, 116 & Martino Interview). This, however, was quickly banned by government of Yugoslavia, who in a sense saw the danger towards the state from these types of weekly or bi-weekly demonstrations. Since these clubs were symbols of the regime and the Yugoslav state, it was also important that Tito continued his control,

and thus upon seeing Torcida Split unfurl a banner emphasizing Split's Dalmatian identity, Tito then banned the group. It threatened his values of brotherhood and unity (Mills, 2010) (Martino Interview).

With the death of Tito, the group reemerged, which in a large part shows the lasting impression that that one night must have had over the city of Split. As the sun set on Yugoslavia in the 80s, the increased commercialization of football abroad and greater amounts of TV coverage showing the demonstrations of Italian Ultra groups allowed the culture to diffuse into the Yugoslavia. With this inspiration, a weak Yugoslav state with the death of Tito and the waning strength of the communist states, ultra groups began to gain traction. Many of these groups also became increasingly aligned with fascist and Nazi ideology. Martino of Copa90 explained that to me that the "far right represented an appeal to anti-communism". In the post-Soviet sphere, many did not deeply understand politics allowing it to exist in a binary space. Tito and the clubs across Yugoslavia in a way-built monuments to pay tribute to those who lost their lives in resistance to the Axis, attempting in large part to create a narrative in which Yugoslavia became truly unified. This narrative in a sense, and the memorialize of it, was one of the ways in which Tito attacked nationalism (Mills, 2012). This meant that it was "counterculture" to show nationalist, fascist, or Nazi symbolism in the terraces.

To express their anti-communist stance, they had to become the enemy to it. While it is interesting that capitalist and American democratic values were not adopted given the context of the Cold War, it does make sense. Nationalism already existed, and Fascism and Nazism are far easier ideologies to represent. Not only that, but the fans that held these fringe ideologies were likely the "biggest and scariest fans" as Martino noted. With this rise of nationalism within the context of the multi-cultural Yugoslav First League football rivalries heated up, and the derbies

that took place between Dinamo Zagreb and Red Star Belgrade were responsible for 48% of footballing related arrests between 1985 and 1987 (Mills, 2018, 186). As nationalist sentiment grew in the leadup to the Yugoslav Wars there were already organized groups of individuals that were expressing these nationalist ideals in the stands, and populist political leaders were then able to latch onto this powerful feeling. Thus, “football supporters' groups were a significant source of recruits for incipient national armies and paramilitary organizations across Yugoslavia as the country descended into conflict. It is well documented that members of these organizations enrolled together, and that - in the case of Red Star Belgrade's Delije (Valiants) group - they even formed the nucleus of a paramilitary formation” (Mills, 2012 561). Another paramilitary group known as the “Tigers” was led by Zeljko Raznjatovic, known as ‘General Arkan’, and was charged with war crimes in The Hague, but died before action was taken (Dojčinović, 2009).

It should also be noted that this nationalist sentiment was not completely due to the stands, and more so due to the underlying factors of an unraveling Yugoslavia. In Slovenia for an example, football was not always considered something of massive importance, and while other parts of Yugoslavia produce elite footballers, Slovenia was far more renown for producing skiers (Starc, 452). Slovenian football “seems to be caught in a vicious circle of nationalism, otherness, and national (im)purity” (Starc, 452). Slovenia left Yugoslavia and escaped unscathed in large part due to geographical considerations, however the nationalist push that caused Slovenia to choose this course still existed without a footballing culture that was nearly as developed as the rest of Yugoslavia. It is important then to note that nationalism was clearly not on the rise due only to counterculture ethno-nationalist movements in the stands, but there were countless other large forces at play.

In the areas of Yugoslavia that did experience massive amounts of conflict, football ultras who died became martyrs. The commemoration was not all too dissimilar to what occurred after WW2, and clubs with ethno-nationalist supporters set up monuments to commemorate those fallen, but also to place blame and use religious symbolism. One football related monument in Sarajevo is dedicated to “victims of aggression on Bosnia and Herzegovina” while another commemorates “defending their city and their country from the Serbo-Montenegrin aggressor” (Mills, 2012 564-65).

The rise in ethno-nationalism directly led to the targeting of specific clubs, specifically those that did not fit the image of ethnically homogenous states that extremists desired. Velez Mostar, a club that was both beloved by Tito and reciprocated this feeling, was said that Velez helped in “‘guarding and developing sporting spirit’ [and in] preventing ‘nationalist tendencies’” (Mills, 2010, 1108). Located in the ethnically diverse city of Mostar in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the club became a “vehement supporter of socialist Yugoslavia and Tito’s principle of brotherhood and unity” (Mills, 2010, 1112). As we have looked at many supporters’ groups that moved towards ethno-nationalism throughout the 80s, due to the diversity of Bosnia and Herzegovina’s cities Velez Mostar’s Red Army and Zeljenicar Sarajevo’s Maniacs adopted pro-Yugoslavia stances before the events of 1991 (Mills, 2010, 1115). Following the outbreak of war in 1991, and the collapse of the Yugoslav First League this stance was no longer viable.

The conflict would lead even directly towards Velez Mostar’s historic home of the Bijeli Brijeg stadium, and it is believed that the Croatian Democratic Union bombed the stands before a match against Partizan (1116). Furthermore, Zrinjski Mostar, a club prohibited by the Tito regime was “reformed by Croat nationalists in 1992 ... [and] both the name of the club and the club badge, which features the distinctive red and white checkered sahovnica emblem that is an important

element of Croat nationalist symbolism, also underscore a Croat identity for Zrinjski Mostar (Mills, 2010, 1120).

The targeting of Velez Mostar also focused in large part upon their stadium. Their historic Bejeli Brijeg Stadium was used as a detention facility for Mostar's Muslim population prior to "either expulsion or transfer to the infamous Heliodrom concentration camp" (Mills, 2010, 1124). Not only that, but the Bejeli Brijeg stadium itself was targeted and a council in West Mostar leased the ground to Zrinjski Mostar for 99 years, banishing Velez in the process. The club however endures and plays in the Premier League of Bosnia and Herzegovina, although when it comes to footballing standards their product is far inferior to that of Zrinjski.

[The] red star, which since 1922 had been the club emblem and had symbolized Velez's unmistakable alignment with 'the revolutionary workers movement of the world' (Skoro 1982, p. 16), was removed from the club's badge in 1994. Explaining the reasons for this, club employee Enes recalled that 'the wounds were still fresh, and just after the war nobody had the courage to put the star back because it was a symbol of communism'... However, just 10 years after the end of the Bosnian conflict this politically loaded symbol was proudly reinstated as the club's emblem, emphasizing the extent to which those involved with Velez were finally ready to emerge from a turbulent period of identity crisis and uncertainty (see Figure 8). The modern presence of the petokraka on Velez shirts, symbolic both of a return to the club's founding multiethnic principles and of the reclamation of a proud socialist era history, serves as a poignant reminder of how against all the odds Velez Mostar Football Club zealously battled to protect the communist legacy. In this respect, the club has faithfully fulfilled Tito's command to defend the socialist principle of brotherhood and unity against every nationalist assault. (Mills, 2010, 1132)

The example of Velez Mostar is important in showing the ways in which territory and memory affects football clubs. Croat nationalists clearly had attempted to wipe the history and identity of Velez, but this failed. In the same way in which Zrinjski supporters who had their club's history and identity purged by Tito, the same looked set to happen to Velez. In an almost Animal Farm like scenario, Croat nationalists attacked religious diversity in the same way the Tito regime attacked nationalism. To push against communist Yugoslavia, the nationalists encapsulated the same ideological intolerance of the Tito regime, but to a far greater extent.

Conclusion

As the Swiss Cup Semi-Final kicked off the St. Gallen supporters that had traveled 220 kilometers to watch their team put on a show of flares, firecrackers, and tifo. The air smelled of sulfur, and the rhythmic chanting from the away end did not stop for the entire game. The home team, Yverdon Sport was located in a small town, and had a small ultra-group that was largely unable to make as much noise, but even after conceding a second goal to go down 2-0 they too never stopped singing. I talked to one fan from the Yverdon section, who told me about how his group used to show up to the games before the rest of the community had taken notice. He also told me that the Yverdon fans and St. Gallen fans were far different from those in the former Eastern Bloc. Parents and kids were also in the Ultra section dubbed as KOP 14, and based on what the fan told me, as well as what I saw, it was clearly an inclusive section. The same can be said for the St. Gallen section, who had covered much of the town stickers, some of which read “yes to football, no to racism”.

While these St. Gallen stickers were clearly new, the symbology and language of ultras is everywhere in Europe once you know what to look for. On drainage pipes, lamp posts, or public benches of just about any city in the world you will see stickers and spray paint with messaging from fan groups of local clubs. Often competing sticker and spray paint are found. Football clubs are local institutions, the hearts of communities, and supporter groups who follow their club attempt to define their local areas that generally have their futures so often defined by distant decision makers defined backed by broad institutions. Even in Brussels, the heart of the European Union a fan of Anderlecht told me that their club mainly was supported by Flemish supporters despite the bilingual nature of the city. From this, it is of no surprise that ultras in a sense have a small view, and in many cases anti-global views.

Benedikter and Wojtaszyn remarked that “As a result of its historical opposition against the communist system, the milieu of the...spectator continues to be dominated by antisystemic and resistance mythologies” (Benedikter & Wojtaszyn, 2018, 89). For many fans, these anti-systemic views apply to the EU, their own government, and in the case of separatists these views apply towards a unified state. Ultras are deeply devoted to their own community and this manifests itself in various ways. This passion for one’s club and community, however, can often taken advantage of and weaponized by bad actors.

In the case of Yugoslavia and the Soviet-Union, football was clearly a powerful outlet of emotion for its citizens, who living in repressed societies were not afforded freedom of expression. Furthermore, in repressed societies citizens will be far less likely to be educated on alternative political systems and forms of governance, which could potentially allow politics to exist in a binary space, and to explain why ultras moved towards fascist and neo-Nazi values. Greater technology and the connection to the greater footballing world beyond the Iron-Curtain meant that ultra-culture had a simple avenue to travel into, and with ultra-culture now cemented, various actors manipulated the energy formed in the stands for their gain. In Russia, far-right politicians used ultras as street muscle, and in the Yugoslav states nationalist leaders used ultras as a social and military tool. Now, three decades after the fall of the Berlin Wall we see ultras being used in Ukraine in the form of the neo-Nazi Azov Battalion against the unjust invasion by Russia.

Ultras are clearly about so much more than just football, but the harmful and dangerous neo-Nazi and fascist views in some stands simply need to be attended to. For many governments in which these views exist, such as we saw in Serbia, government officials have little reason to crack down on them because ultra-groups’ intimidation reaps political rewards and results. Ultras are also not easy to wage war against as they are already strong and competent in fighting against

police, are well organized, and usually wear a hat, balaclava, and glasses to ensure anonymity. UEFA and FIFA can do very little, and while they can force teams to play in front of empty stadiums, as I saw at a UEFA youth league game in Nyon, Ultras are perfectly content watching other forms of soccer such as U-20 games as long as they are singing and lighting flairs.

Because of these factors, I would be surprised if extremist-ultras do not continue to be treated with an attitude of reluctant toleration. It is certainly not an easy issue to solve and it will have to be done so in a holistic manner. Moving forward I hope to research various ways in which ultras in Eastern Europe and Western Europe compare, as well as seeing government and business policy pertaining to football and how that affects fan culture.

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