

Italy and Yugoslavia on the football pitch 1925-1939

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This paper examines three football matches played between the national teams of Italy and Yugoslavia during the 1920s and 1930s. It mostly explores articles published in the daily press in Italy and Yugoslavia concerning these matches and analyses the behaviour of players on the pitch, spectators in the stands and football associations' officials, i.e. those who organized the matches and the activities that accompanied them. The matches played in Italy (Padua in 1925 and Genoa in 1938) and Yugoslavia (Belgrade in 1939) can be interpreted as three distinct times and places through which images of the "other" were created. Despite the often-strained relations shared between the Italian and Yugoslav states and occasional in-game tensions, all three games served a purpose. Among other things, they promoted a positive image of both countries.

Keywords: Italy, Yugoslavia, Football, Sports Diplomacy, Soft Power, Federazione Italiana Giuoco Calcio, Jugoslavenski Nogometni Savez

Parole chiave: Italia, Jugoslavia, Calcio, Diplomazia sportiva, Potere persuasivo, Federazione Italiana Giuoco Calcio, Federazione calcistica della Jugoslavia

Introduction

During the interwar period, relations between the Kingdom of Italy and the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (in 1929 renamed as Yugoslavia, which nevertheless already served as an informal name for the state since 1918) were marked by a mutual distrust, which is certainly discussed in more detail in other articles of this monographic issue¹. Nevertheless, the regimes in both states promoted sport, especially football, seeing it as an essential means of national representation and cohesion. The Yugoslav national football team, nicknamed the White Eagles (Beli Orlovi) was considered one of the best teams in Central Europe. They competed at the Olympic Games in 1920, 1924 and 1928 and only lost to eventual champions Uruguay in the semi-final of the first World Cup in 1930. The Italian football team, the Azzurri, were even better, winning two World Cups, played in 1934 and 1938². Bearing in mind the fact that Yugoslavia and Italy shared a border during the interwar period, it is perhaps surprising that these two national teams only met each other three times prior to the Second World War – in 1925 in Padua, in 1938 in Genoa, and in 1939 in Belgrade – and all three matches were friendlies.

¹ From the already-published literature: J.H. Burgwyn, *Empire on The Adriatic: Mussolini's Conquest of Yugoslavia 1941-1943*, Enigma Books, New York 2005; B. Krizman, *Vanjska politika Jugoslavenske države 1918-1941*, Školska knjiga, Zagreb 1975; J.J. Sadkovich, *Italian Support for Croatian Separatism, 1927-1937*, Garland Publishing, New York-London 1987.

² Data on all (official) matches of the national football teams of Italy and Yugoslavia are available at: www.11v11.com.

In this paper my aim is to prove that all three of these games between Italy and Yugoslavia can be viewed as cases of sports diplomacy. Sports diplomacy is a form of public diplomacy, defined by Eytan Gilboa as a set of tools which can be used to influence the public abroad in order to accomplish foreign policy goals and improve (or deteriorate) relations between the concerned countries³. It is a tool used for shaping the external perception of a state, building trust and sympathy towards it, but internally it also helps by creating public understanding and support for the government's policy and consolidating its overall credibility and legitimacy⁴. In a way, sports diplomacy falls within the concept of "soft power", described by the American political scientist Joseph Nye as an ability to obtain preferred outcomes by attraction and co-option rather coercion (hard power) in politics. It is important to note that soft power can be used not just by states or their leaders but also by various other actors in international politics⁵ – like the football associations of Italy and Yugoslavia, both of whom were strongly influenced by their country's regimes.

For the purposes of analysis, I will primarily use content analysis of the prominent daily press and sports weeklies published in Italy and Yugoslavia⁶ and will concentrate on three groups of actors – officials from the Italian and Yugoslav football associations, players on the pitch and spectators in the stands. All three of these broad groups have, in their own way, an involvement in the sporting competitions that concern them. During the 20th century, such competitions became spheres for the expression of one's national identity – as the athletes who were involved were considered the nations' legitimate representatives. International matches also served as a good arena for cultivating images of others, especially other states and their citizens. I therefore analyse specific newspaper articles in an effort to detect how each of these three aforementioned groups, both in Italy and Yugoslavia, observed their role and that of the "other" – before, during and immediately after each fixture on the football pitch. Despite the (national) competitiveness, I argue that these three football matches also served as a means to convey a certain mutual cultural and political attraction between the two neighbour kingdoms⁷.

Padua, November 1925

Although football came to Italian and Yugoslav lands during the second half of the 19th century it gained real traction in terms of mainstream popularity among

³ E. Gilboa, *Searching for a Theory of Public Diplomacy*, in «Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science», n. 616, 2008, pp. 55-77.

⁴ M.M. Kobierecki, *The domestic dimension of sports diplomacy*, in «Review of Nationalities», n. 9, 2019, p. 18.

⁵ J. Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, Public Affairs, New York 2004, p. 8.

⁶ Unfortunately, due to Covid-19 restrictions, travel and research opportunities in Croatia and other countries were greatly limited. This is, therefore, evident in this article.

⁷ The concept of soft power as a means of cultural and political attraction among states is best described in: J. Grix, P.M. Brannagan, D. Lee, *Entering the Global Arena: Emerging States, Soft Power Strategies and Sports Mega-Events*, Palgrave Macmillan, London 2019.

the urban population in both countries only after the First World War⁸. The game was played by local students and workers, a population that had some spare time and financial resources available to them, as well as an affinity for spending both of them on football, be that playing it or watching it. Along the way, the game was gradually embraced by other segments of society, including rural populations. The national football associations, Federazione Italiana Giuoco Calcio (FIGC, formed in 1898) and Jugoslavenski nogometni savez (JNS, formed in 1919), were relatively young organizations that tried to establish national leagues and cup competitions in the years following the First World War⁹. Attempts were also made to arrange the first fixtures for the fledgling Italian and Yugoslav national football teams, in which the best players in each country were to play against their equivalents from other countries.

Amateurism prevailed in football until the mid-1920s¹⁰. At the same time, judging by the amount of newspaper columns dedicated to the sport during this decade, the performances of the national teams were not followed so closely by the press and public as the games which would subsequently follow in the late 1930s. The cult of the national team was still being constructed in Italy and Yugoslavia¹¹.

It is under such circumstances that the first match between the national teams of Italy and Yugoslavia, played on 4 November 1925 in Padua, should be observed. It is to be assumed that the invitation was sent by the Italian side, although sources which speak in more detail about everything that preceded the fixture are scarce. Writing about this match, the Belgrade weekly «Sportista» announced it in a large article as a game of first-class importance for the Yugoslav national team, but more from the perspective of Yugoslavia itself. They described in more detail how the match in Padua came just a week after a heavy defeat to Czechoslovakia in a friendly match. The national team of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes/Yugoslavia had lost 7:0 in Prague and the public, or at least some journalists, were thus putting pressure on team, with expectations for a better performance against the Italians. Interestingly, there were accusations of biases along national or club lines in the selection of players for the national team. Surprisingly, there are scant news about the Italian national team, except the standard remarks that this was Yugoslavia's first game against their neighbours from across the Adriatic¹². President of the JNS in the 1930s Mihajlo Andrejević later recalled how the first contacts with the FIGC were established at a meeting held in 1924 in Venice, where the Italian del-

⁸ S. Martin, *Football and Fascism: The National Game Under Mussolini*, Berg, Oxford 2004, p. 51.

⁹ Ivi, pp. 20-21; D. Kovačić, *Hrvatski nogomet u doba cara, kralja, poglavnika i maršala*, AGM, Zagreb 2018, p. 49.

¹⁰ In 1920s Italy «a number of very high-profile big-money transfers led to bitter public discussion and in the 1926 Viareggio Charter, professionalism was officially recognized for the first time»: J. Foot, *Calcio: a History of Italian Football*, HarperCollins E-books, London 2006; D. Kovačić, *Hrvatski nogomet*, cit., p. 71 and S. Martin, *Football and Fascism*, cit., pp. 60-61.

¹¹ J. Foot, *Calcio*, cit.; D. Goldblatt, *The Ball is Round. A Global History of Football*, Penguin Books, London 2007, pp. 142-143, 242, 340-341.

¹² *Jugoslavija-Italija*, in «Sportista», 2 November 1925, p. 4.

egation stood out for their hospitality. At the same cordial meeting Padua friendly was also scheduled¹³.

In the days preceding the game there was no mention of any tensions or antagonisms between the two countries or their populations. Both the Yugoslav and Italian press alike welcomed the warm and «sporting reception» offered to the Yugoslav players in Padua by both Italian football officials and ordinary citizens¹⁴.

On the football pitch, however, the situation was slightly different. The players of the Italian national team, as well as their supporters in the stands, according to the descriptions of the Yugoslav side, somewhat underestimated their opponent. The stadium in Padua, filled to capacity, cheered the home team wholeheartedly. Shouts of «*Viva l'Italia!*» and «*Avanti!*» could be heard, motivating the Italian side. Despite initially conceding a shock goal at the hands of Ljubo Benčić, the Italian team then took the initiative and deservedly emerged from the match as 2:1 winners with both goals scored by Angelo Schiavio¹⁵. The Yugoslav journalists who described this match directed a degree of criticism (or perhaps envy?) at those in the stands. The Italian spectators allegedly did not applaud the play or goal of Yugoslavia at all, while on the other hand every move of the Italian side was celebrated with shouts, whistles, drums and bells. While the journalist of daily «*Politika*» stated that the Yugoslav side was psychologically affected by such an atmosphere, his colleague from the «*Sportista*» newspaper pointed out that it was a «well deserved noise» considering the Italian's play and the final result¹⁶.

The Yugoslav national team looked to apply salve to its wounds by playing a few more games on the territory of the Kingdom of Italy. On 8th November in Naples they defeated a representative side for Southern Italy 1:3. Their opponent was made up of players who played in what at that time was Italy's Southern League, prior to the establishment of a united Serie A on a national basis in 1929¹⁷. After that, Yugoslavia lost on 11 November in Rome in an ad hoc arranged match against the City of Rome Football Team (made up of players from various local clubs), going down 7:3. The Yugoslav press accused the JNS leadership of responsibility for this defeat in Rome on the grounds that they had hastily arranged the match despite allegedly being aware that the exhausted players, who had completed the three games in two weeks, would probably lose. This was thus chastised in the press as an attempt to «deliberately ruin the reputation of our sport»¹⁸.

Politics, however, was in the background of the Rome game. After the swift return of the national team and its officials to their home country, the JNS leadership convened a press conference. They said that the last match in Rome was arranged

¹³ M. Andrejević, *Dugo putovanje kroz fudbal i medicinu*, Dečje novine, Gornji Milanovac 1989, p. 56.

¹⁴ *Svečani doček naše reprezentacije u Padovi*, in «*Jutarnji list*», 4 November 1925, p. 6 and *Gli "Azzurri" battono per 2 goals a 1 la "nazionale" Jugoslava*, in «*La Stampa*», 5 November 1925, p. 7.

¹⁵ *Italija-Jugoslavija 2:1 (2:1)*, in «*Novosti*», 5 November 1925, p. 3.

¹⁶ *Jugoslavija-Italija 2:1*, in «*Politika*», 5 November 1925, p. 5 and *Državni tim u Italiji*, in «*Sportista*», 9 November 1925, p. 1.

¹⁷ *La Jugoslavia batte la Nazionale del Sud (3-1)*, in «*La Stampa*», 9 November 1925, p. 2.

¹⁸ *Državni tim u Italiji*, in «*Sportista*», 13 November 1925, p. 1.

at the request of the embassy of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes in the capital, which had assured them that the Italian press had written positively about the matches in Padua and Naples and that the game in Rome could serve as an additional positive propaganda. For the failures of the team in Italy, especially in the last match in Rome, the JNS leadership decided to place the blame squarely on the players. They had reportedly asked for an additional two to three days to privately visit Rome and Naples and they used to time for sightseeing and not training. Another culprit was found in the team's manager, Dušan Zinaja. He was reprimanded for not having had a more positive impact on the players and, under pressure, he soon resigned. Furthermore, the JNS leadership decided to resolve any speculations about their culpability in this matter by publicly describing the last match in Rome as «private, because the [Yugoslav] team played in plain jerseys, without the national emblem»¹⁹.

Most journalists concluded that, despite the results of the games in Padua and Rome, the Yugoslav national football team had «decently and honourably represented Yugoslav sport»²⁰. Journalists generally wrote about the cordial reception and solid performances of the Yugoslav national team in Italy in 1925, conveying an impression of good neighbourly relations between the two countries. However, the reality was somewhat different. We can speculate that the matches arranged for the Yugoslav national football team in November 1925 were supposed to come on the heels of a certain normalization of relations within diplomatic circles after the conclusion of the Nettuno Conventions between political delegations from the two countries only a few months earlier. The Nettuno Conventions were intended to finally resolve the open issues that had remained between the two states. However, the National Assembly of Yugoslavia, under pressure from Croatian and Slovenian representatives who demanded Italian assurances regarding the South Slav minorities in Italy, at first refused to ratify them and the relations were once again strained²¹. In 1926, Benito Mussolini suggested to his army general Pietro Badoglio that Italy should develop a full-scale invasion plan against Yugoslavia²².

Other events that took place in the Kingdom of Italy failed to leave an impression of stability and good relations with Yugoslavia. Only a day after the match in Padua, on 5 November 1925, local fascists broke in and ransacked the offices and printing house of Trieste's most important Slovenian newspaper, «Edinost»²³. A few days later, the Yugoslav consulate in Zadar, then under Italian control, was also vandalised²⁴. Similar anti-Slavic incidents happened while Mussolini and the fascists were still consolidating their power in Italy. It should therefore come as no surprise that, when writing in November 1925, Yugoslav journalists pointed out that Italy

¹⁹ *Posle Rima*, in «Sportista», 20 November 1925, p. 1.

²⁰ *Vtisi s nogometne tekme v Padovi*, in «Edinost», 8 November 1925, p. 1.

²¹ J.H. Burgwyn, *Empire on the Adriatic*, cit., p. 6.

²² R.J.B. Bosworth, *Mussolini*, Oxford University Press, New York 2002, p. 248.

²³ *Fašisti razbili tiskaru 'Edinosti' u Trstu*, in «Jutarnji list», 6 November 1925, p. 3.

²⁴ *Nakon Trsta-Zadar*, in «Jutarnji list», 10 November 1925, p. 1.

was not a true and sincere friend to Yugoslavia, even while their colleagues in sports pages, even in the very same issues, spoke positively of a cordial welcome for the Yugoslav national team in Italy and the fine football exhibited by their adversaries²⁵.

Although in 1926 enquiries were made about the possibility of a return match hosted by the Yugoslav national team for the Italian side, no agreement was reached. The reason for the termination of negotiations seems to have been discord aroused after one of the most controversial football matches that two club teams from Italy and Yugoslavia played in interwar Zagreb. Italian champions Juventus met their Yugoslav equivalents, Građanski, on 9 May 1926 in a hastily arranged friendly game. The match was abandoned in the 86th minute due to a fight that had broken out between the players, during which dozens of home supporters rushed from the stands onto the pitch and had to be stopped by the police²⁶. At the request of the Italian consulate, which considered this to have been a physical attack on Italian citizens and demanded harsh punishments for all those who had been involved, Građanski and the JNS issued sincere apologies to Juventus and the FIGC²⁷. Furthermore, one of the Građanski players who had been involved in the brawl, Stjepan Pasinek, received a two-year suspension from playing football. In spite of the Yugoslav apologies, relations between the two football associations remained disturbed by these events²⁸. While football clubs from the two countries played matches against each other over the course of the subsequent decade, it was only the next friendly encounter between Građanski and Juventus, played in Zagreb under a slightly different climate of renewed Italian-Yugoslav good relations in July 1937 that led to the normalization of relations between the FIGC and the JNS²⁹. Some Yugoslav papers went so far as to describe this game as «a reconciliation match»³⁰, probably so as to draw attention to the past but also to give importance to the Juventus as a worthy adversary.

The second match between the national teams of Italy and Yugoslavia was only played in 1938 after allegedly drawn-out negotiations between the JNS and the FIGC. Some newspaper articles presented it as an opportunity to ultimately renew the sporting ties between Italy and Yugoslavia which they thought were still affected by the incidents of the 1926 Zagreb game. On the other hand, other articles pointed out that ties between the two associations had never been completely severed since in some segments, especially the boards of referees, they had had continued to cooperate very well with each other during the intervening years³¹.

²⁵ *Proč od Italije!*, in «Jutarnji list», 7 November 1925, p. 1 and *Nakon utakmice u Padovi*, in «Jutarnji list», 7 November 1925, pp. 8-9.

²⁶ *Incidenti a Zagabria durante il "match" tra la Juventus ed il Gradiansky*, in «La Stampa», 11 May 1926, p. 4.

²⁷ *Juventus u Zagrebu*, in «Zagrebački športski list», 15 May 1926, p. 1.

²⁸ *Postavljen naš team protiv Italije*, in «Jutarnji list», 19 May 1938, p. 19.

²⁹ *Gradianski b. Juventus 3:0*, in «Il Littoriale», 5 July 1937, p. 5.

³⁰ *'Juventus' u Zagrebu*, in «Ilustrovane sportske novosti», 6 July 1937, pp. 1-2.

³¹ *Postavljen naš team protiv Italije*, in «Jutarnji list», 19 May 1938, p. 19.

Genoa, May 1938

Political events that took place in the countries on both sides of the Adriatic between mid-1920s and late 1930s can be described as dynamic. Yugoslavia, especially during the 6 January Dictatorship introduced in 1929, sought to implement authoritarian methods to build a unified state and nation. The regime followed the models of other European dictatorships of that time. It attempted to impose mass support and «mobilisation by means of a strong leadership cult [of King Aleksandar I Karađorđević], a pseudo-parliamentary system, political homogenisation, and civil participation through mass events and associations affiliated to the regime (often with a strong military and physical character) or denunciations of “hostile elements” within the nation», although it «did not propagate a revolutionary reorganisation of politics and society but held on to traditionalist concepts of guided democracy and monarchical power»³². The army, police, loyal politicians, schools and universities, but also many ordinary citizens’ associations, were ordered to work towards creating a unified Yugoslav state and nation. The unitary Yugoslav regime also sought to create a stronger sense of unity through sport. In late 1929, a single overarching gymnastics society was formed for the entire country – the Falcon of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia (*Sokol Kraljevine Jugoslavije*). The Falcon gained political and financial backing from the regime, while in return it «promised to create physically fit and patriotic youth, eager to defend both fatherland and kingdom»³³. In 1932, the Ministry of People’s Physical Education was formed, which also intended to serve as a supervisory body for all sports and make sure that all sporting associations worked on building the Yugoslav state and nation³⁴.

The importance of sport in general, and football in particular, also grew over time in the interwar Italy. After the March on Rome in 1922, Mussolini’s new Fascist regime started gaining more and more power. During the 1920s they gradually established their control over politics, but they also started gaining more influence over Italian society as a whole.

Although Fascism preferred more classical, scholarly sports, such as fencing, and the modern sport of motor racing, unlike its liberal, Catholic and Socialist predecessors the regime was quick to appreciate the mass appeal of football (calcio), even if it questioned the game’s merits as a sporting activity. The regime institutionalized calcio as a Fascist game in 1926 after which it was exploited domestically as a political soporific

³² P. Troch, *Nationalism and Yugoslavia: Education, Yugoslavism and the Balkans before World War II*, I.B. Tauris, London-New York 2015, p. 26.

³³ R. Mills, *The Politics of Football in Yugoslavia: Sport, Nationalism and the State*, I.B. Tauris, London-New York 2018, p. 18.

³⁴ N. Žutić, *Sokoli-ideologija u fizičkoj kulturi Kraljevine Jugoslavije 1929-1941*, Angrotrade, Beograd 1991, pp. 42-77. Unfortunately, the archives of the Ministry of Physical Education of the People (kept in Archives of Yugoslavia, Belgrade) don’t contain much information about the matches between the football teams of Italy and Yugoslavia.

to develop a sense of Italian identity, and internationally as a diplomatic tool to improve the standing of the regime in the global arena³⁵.

Despite the fact that many rulers of interwar Europe were not known for their sporting prowess, some of them looked to exploit sport in various ways. In 1936, John R. Tunis noted that dictators like Mussolini had discovered sport as a means to achieve the goals of the countries they led. Sport became an affordable replacement for often tedious military training and was designed to make men capable of defending the Fatherland, but also to keep the younger and naturally more insurgent elements from thinking too much about the internal political conditions and the lack of employment opportunities³⁶.

Sports competitions became places where the state and the regime that guided it could be promoted. Symbols like flags, the colours of jerseys and emblems, as well as anthems and other national songs, were powerful tools for expressing a sense of nationhood. As British historian Eric Hobsbawm noted, «the imagined community of millions seems more real as a team of eleven named people»³⁷. Footballers who played for their national team, but also people who led national football associations, thus became actors with an attributed agenda of consciously or unconsciously promoting the goals of their country in front of domestic audiences and also abroad among others.

This change did not occur overnight. Italian football underwent a gradual process of fascistization during the 1920s and 1930s³⁸. It was only in 1926 that the fascist regime recognized that football was taking on an increasing precedence over other sports and decided to take advantage of this fact. They reorganized the Italian Football Federation and tasked this governing body with achieving as much unification as possible but also taking total control of football in the country. The construction of the first unified Italian national football championship, Serie A, was underway³⁹. In addition, players were finally given the status of professionals, so they did not have to retain other jobs and could instead concentrate solely on playing football. With all of these reforms, the FIGC began to insist that football be regarded as an indigenous Italian game and, as such, that it should be even more Italian in the modern world⁴⁰. This was accompanied by the removal of foreigners from the management and playing staff of individual clubs – although many top players born in South America were retained as Italians by descent and even took Italian citizenship – and by the renaming of foreign-language club names with those that sounded more Italian. In the years that followed, a lot of new football

³⁵ S. Martin, *Football and Fascism*, cit., p. 2.

³⁶ J.R. Tunis, *The Dictators Discover Sport*, in «Foreign Affairs», n. 4, 1936, p. 607.

³⁷ E. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1990, p. 143.

³⁸ N. Sbeti, D. Serapiglia, *Was football fascist? The 1934 World Cup in the postwar memory*, in «Soccer & Society», n. 8, 2020, p. 890.

³⁹ S. Martin, *Football and Fascism*, cit., p. 69.

⁴⁰ Ivi, pp. 197-199.

stadiums were built across the country. They served sporting purposes, but were also architectural monuments to Fascist power and glory. The 1934 World Cup was played at the largest stadiums in Italy, and the home side emerged as winners⁴¹. Sports victories have been used by states to build international prestige, because they are often perceived as indicators of the efficacy of a state and its government, as well as the general prosperity of the country⁴². While any international achievements would naturally have acted as a societal glue, the fascist regime in Italy was also aware of the considerable diplomatic kudos and international prestige that could be gained from having a national team capable of defeating the best countries in the world⁴³.

While Italian football was at its peak in terms of the success of its national team and the apparent unity within the football federation, on the other side of the Adriatic the situation was growing increasingly chaotic due to the internal (multi) national crisis. During the 1920s and even more so in the 1930s, many umbrella sports bodies in Yugoslavia sided with the regime and sought support for their work by emphasizing their commitment to a centralized state and later one-nation ideals. King Aleksandar I was the honorary president of the Yugoslav Football Association⁴⁴. Still, the regime of this predominantly agrarian state always struggled to find enough money to invest heavily in sports. The period of Yugoslav monarcho-dictatorship coincided with the arrival of the Great Depression, inevitably causing many plans to build a homogeneous Yugoslav state and nation to be halted. With a large grant from the ruler himself, Yugoslavia's national football team travelled to the first World Cup in Uruguay in 1930, where they went on to only lose in the semi-finals to the hosts and eventual winners of the tournament⁴⁵. However, the team failed to build on this success. Due to the lack of finances the Yugoslav national football team missed out on competing at the next two World Cups, played in Italy in 1934 and France in 1938. The frequent replacement of coaches and players from the national team in the 1920s and 1930s, combined with the poor Yugoslav traffic and stadium infrastructure, did not contribute to building the stability that was much needed to push on towards greater successes. This was, at least partially, also a consequence of disorganization within the JNS. Despite facing great opposition, the JNS finally voted in 1930 to move its headquarters from Zagreb to Belgrade, but this was followed by internal unrest that characterized its next decade of existence, with accusations of favoritism towards certain clubs, stadiums and players for the national team. Most of these claims came from Croatian football officials, who were, in turn, accused of separatism by the JNS,

⁴¹ N. Sbeti, D. Serapiglia, *Was football fascist?*, cit., pp. 890-899.

⁴² M.M. Kobierecki, *The domestic dimension of sports diplomacy*, cit., pp. 22-23.

⁴³ S. Martin, *Football and Fascism*, cit., p. 76.

⁴⁴ Allegedly, king Aleksandar I Karadorđević was also responsible for the nickname of the national team, calling them the White Eagles in 1922. D. Kovačić, *Hrvatski nogomet*, cit., p. 51.

⁴⁵ R. Mills, *The Politics of Football*, cit., p. 20.

which emphasized the need to homogenize the country through the performances of the national team⁴⁶.

Overall, the Yugoslav authorities' attitude towards sports in general and football in particular rested somewhere between benevolent and authoritarian, but was definitely not totalitarian. This meant that clubs that did not openly pursue political or separatist national goals (Croatian, Slovenian, etc.) were still allowed to exist and operate throughout the whole interwar period. In a way, the state authorities applied a *laissez faire* approach towards the lower echelons of sporting competition, whereas they generally kept the activities of the most important football clubs in the country, as well as the national team, under a more watchful eye⁴⁷. Clubs closer to the regime could receive grants from the state budget, but matters like the construction of a new stadium were most often left in the hands of private individuals who supported the club. These benefactors also provided "under the table" payments to players who in principle retained their amateur status until 1935, when top-tier clubs started paying salaries to their best players⁴⁸.

Relations between Italy and Yugoslavia were strained during the first half of the 1930s. This was due, in part, to open fascist support for the separatist Croatian Ustasha movement, which assassinated King Alexander in Marseilles in 1934, but also the Italian regime's unconcealed territorial claims to the Eastern Adriatic coast. However, in the second half of the 1930s there came a rapprochement between the two states, which were linked by mutual economic interests. In the period 1935-1939, the Yugoslav Prime Minister, Milan Stojadinović, and the Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Galeazzo Ciano, signed several agreements which normalized political and trade relations between the two countries⁴⁹. Cordial relations between the two states were proclaimed and this was followed in 1938 by an agreement between the FIGC and JNS to arrange a friendly match between their two national teams. While the Italians were preparing for the upcoming World Cup in France, defending the title that they had won in 1934, Yugoslavia did not even manage to qualify for the tournament in 1934 neither in 1938.

This second football match between Italy and Yugoslavia, again a friendly, was played on 22 May 1938 in Genoa, in front of about 25,000 spectators, which was far more than the 10,000 attendees who had witnessed the game in Padua in 1925. Before the match in Genoa, both the Italian and Yugoslav newspapers announced the meeting of two national teams that were both very good at football, but were also still constantly advancing in the sport⁵⁰. In anticipation of the 1938 match, the Belgrade daily newspaper «Vreme» published the recollections of the Yugoslav national team's former player Dušan Petković on the match that he had played in 13 years earlier in Padua. Petković recalled that match fondly, giving special attention

⁴⁶ Ivi, pp. 19-22.

⁴⁷ Ivi, p. 14.

⁴⁸ D. Kovačić, *Hrvatski nogomet*, cit., pp. 66-73.

⁴⁹ B. Krizman, *Vanjska politika Jugoslavenske države*, cit., pp. 92-94.

⁵⁰ *U nedelju jaka Jugoslavija stavlja na probu novi tim Azura*, in «Vreme», 20 May 1938, p. 10.

to the details regarding the Yugoslav team's welcome upon arrival in Padua. He described the superb play of their Italian opponents, but also the fantastic cheering of their supporters⁵¹.

Journalists on both sides seemed to be almost competing over who could shower the other country with the most compliments. The Italian journalists wrote about the Yugoslav team in superlatives, depicting their successes in 1937-1938 in matches against Poland and Romania, emphasizing that it was an honour to welcome them to their country. They described the match in Genoa as a friendly encounter against a worthy opponent, albeit one that was relatively unknown to the Italian footballing public, as well as an important barometer of form for the upcoming World Cup⁵². The Yugoslav press also praised the success of the Italian players who «can really be considered the best footballers on the continent»⁵³.

There was a lot of interest in the match in Genoa, so Radio Zagreb sent a team to broadcast it for their listeners. Some enterprising restaurant owners in Yugoslavia invited customers to visit their terraces where they could listen to the broadcast⁵⁴. The Yugoslav players, however, were not especially optimistic for their chances before the game, and most of those who gave statements indicated that they only hoped to give a good account of themselves against the world champions⁵⁵.

The course of the match in Genoa was quite one-sided with the Italian team taking the initiative from the beginning and deservedly winning the 4:0, with goals coming from Gino Colaussi, Silvio Piola, Giuseppe Meazza and Giovanni Ferrari. An article signed by the Italian coach Vittorio Pozzo for «La Stampa» mentions the good weather and the behaviour of supporters, who greeted the Yugoslav players and officials before the match⁵⁶. Some Italian journalists wrote that Yugoslavia turned out to be a weak, i.e. unworthy, opponent⁵⁷. But this was far from one sided with a lot of Yugoslav journalists also writing very critically of their side's performance in Genoa⁵⁸. Looking for the reasons behind the defeat, some pointed out the fact that the Yugoslav players were undoubtedly impressed with the warm welcome in Italy and the pressure put on them by an excellent opponent from the first minute of the match. On the other hand, the FIGC organized a banquet after the match in honour of the Yugoslav officials and players⁵⁹. Such gala dinners undoubtedly served as public manifestations of the good relations between two football associations and their states.

⁵¹ *Trinaest godina kasnije: ispovest*, in «Vreme», 21 May 1938, p. 10.

⁵² *Genova sportiva attende impaziente alla prova gli Azzurri con la forte, anche se poco nota, nazionale Jugoslava*, in «Il Littoriale», 21 May 1938, pp. 1-2.

⁵³ *Odlazak naše reprezentacije u Genovu*, in «Jutarnji list», 20 May 1938, p. 21.

⁵⁴ *Danas igramo drugu utakmicu protiv talijanske reprezentacije*, in «Jutarnji list», 22 May 1938, p. 11.

⁵⁵ *Iako ne veruju u pobjedu, naši fudbaleri se nadaju da će prvaku sveta u fudbalu dati veoma jaki otpor*, in «Politika», 21 May 1938, p. 13.

⁵⁶ V. Pozzo, *Inizio travolgente dei "moschettieri"*, in «La Stampa», 23 May 1938, p. 4.

⁵⁷ P.L.T., *Con due chiare vittorie sulla Jugoslavia e la Germania del Sud Est i calciatori d'Italia completano la preparazione per la Coppa del Mondo*, in «Il Littoriale», 23 May 1938, p. 3.

⁵⁸ *Naši fudbaleri nisu još dovoljno zrelji za ovako velike borbe*, in «Politika», 24 May 1938, p. 14.

⁵⁹ *Italija-Jugoslavija 4.0 (2:0)*, in «Jutarnji list», 23 May 1938, p. 8.

As far as the behaviour of the players on the field, but also the spectators in the stands, is concerned, this was the calmest meeting between the two sides. Sports journalists described how the audience in Genoa was quite composed and relatively quiet, because they were not overly enthusiastic about the *Azzurri*'s performance, «nor could the Yugoslavs have delighted them, at least for a brief moment, with their moves»⁶⁰.

Belgrade, June 1939

During the 1930s, it did not go unnoticed by the Yugoslav press that Italy had developed from an average football team into one of the best in the world, «because Mr. Mussolini saw that sport, and especially football as a sport with the most supporters, was the best propaganda for a nation»⁶¹. Parallel to this, the Italian press also respected Yugoslavia's sporting endeavors, declaring, for instance, that Yugoslav football was the best in the Balkans⁶². Both regimes clearly regarded football as something more than just a sport. In 1939, the JNS pointed out in its official year-book that sport in general and football in particular had become powerful weapons that could shape public opinion in those who follow them within the country. They also emphasized that football could be employed for the purpose of «international propaganda for our country»⁶³.

The Italian national team was to represent an embodiment of the Italian state and the efforts of its regime in 1930s. Leandro Arpinati, President of the Italian National Olympic Committee and the FIGC, noted that «sport, in short, is understood not only just as athletics, as competition between champions, but as an indispensable physical education of the masses, an exercise that may do some good to the body and spirit... For the physical improvement of the race, nothing is as useful as sport that teaches everybody an amount of discipline and moulds muscles with character»⁶⁴. In Italy, sport was to be a means for the physical and mental development of the whole nation, and it was recognized as a tool used to create a sense of togetherness, while in Yugoslavia the approach was somewhat more individual. Writing about the 1930s, an unnamed Yugoslav footballer commented:

I had a history professor who told us quite earnestly that he hoped that there would be no more bloody wars, because we now have football. Two national teams will meet on the football pitch, each in their national jerseys. [...] And then they kick the ball (and, if the referee does not see, also kick the opposing players). Then they run after the ball,

⁶⁰ *Italija-Jugoslavija 4:0 (2:0)*, in «Novosti», 23 May 1938, p. 12.

⁶¹ B. Krmptić, *Pobjeda Čehoslovačke nad Italijom*, in «Novo doba», 2 November 1935, p. 10.

⁶² *La Gazzetta dello Sport o Jugoslovenskom sportu*, in «Novo doba», 7 August 1931, p. 3.

⁶³ *Izveštaj o radu Jugoslovenskog nogometnog saveza za XXII redovnu godišnju skupštinu*, Štamparija Jovanović i Bogdanov, Novi Sad 1939, p. 35.

⁶⁴ S. Martin, *Football and Fascism*, cit., pp. 31-32.

defend, attack, score goals and win – to receive triumphal arches and laurel wreaths in your homeland, to be proclaimed a hero, a giant, and a role model⁶⁵.

While Italian intra-state cohesion was seemingly achieved in the late 1930s, on the other side of the Adriatic the situation was quite different. In 1939, latent internal Yugoslav national and political conflicts came into focus – even in the sphere of football. After demands by Croatian representatives for reconstruction within the JNS were not accepted, matters escalated further. Top tier football clubs Građanski (Zagreb) and Hajduk (Split) refused to release their players to compete for the Yugoslav national team in upcoming matches against England, Italy and Germany. The JNS responded by issuing an immediate suspension of both clubs and their players⁶⁶. In the week that followed, after the match between Yugoslavia and Italy in Belgrade, this prompted a mass exodus of the leading clubs from the Western part of the country and the formation of a renegade Croatian-Slovenian football league. After the process of Yugoslavia's federalization commenced, with the establishment of the autonomous Banovina of Croatia in August 1939, the national footballing conflict quickly ended as the JNS caved in to the Croatian and Slovenian demands. The JNS agreed to enter a process of internal federalization of football within the country. This was most visible on the international level where, in addition to the Yugoslav national team, Croatia also fielded its own separate national team in 1939-1940⁶⁷.

At the beginning of 1939, the JNS described relations with the FIGC and their national team as «very cordial and friendly», especially praising the FIGC officials who «wholeheartedly helped the demands of the JNS»⁶⁸. The defeats of 1925 and 1938 against Italy, the side that by then had become double world champions, were not a valid cause for concern in the eyes of the JNS. On the contrary, they served as an incentive to establish even closer ties with the well-organized and successful Italian football federation.

By 1939, relations between the two countries' governments remained for the most part cordial, despite the fact that Dragiša Cvetković, who had become prime minister in February 1939, was somewhat more reserved towards Italy than his predecessor Milan Stojadinović⁶⁹. Nevertheless, most ordinary citizens were still sceptical towards fascist Italy. This seems to have been expressed in the stands during the last official meeting of the two national teams before the Second World War, played in Belgrade on 4 June 1939. The match came less than two months after Italy occupied Albania, greatly expanding the border between Yugoslavia and Italy, and a few weeks after the Pact of Steel was signed, bringing fascist Italy closer to

⁶⁵ M. Čović, *Priča o lopti*, Croatia knjiga, Zagreb 2001, p. 136.

⁶⁶ *J.N.S. suspendirao Građanski i Hajduk*, in «Jutarnji list», 1 July 1939, p. 11.

⁶⁷ R. Mills, *The Politics of Football*, cit., pp. 21-27.

⁶⁸ *Izveštaj o radu Jugoslavenskog nogometnog saveza za XXI redovnu godišnju skupštinu*, Štamparija Jovanović i Bogdanov, Novi Sad 1939, p. 5.

⁶⁹ B. Krizman, *Vanjska politika Jugoslavenske države*, cit., p. 105.

the Third Reich⁷⁰. Maybe that is why the architect of the Italian national football team's success, Vittorio Pozzo, became somewhat wary of his side's success in the upcoming Belgrade game. The article he published announcing this match in daily «La Stampa» described it as a hard test for the *Azzurri*⁷¹.

The welcome afforded to the Italian players in Belgrade was very cordial. Arriving at Belgrade's Main Railway Station by train at 07:00 two days before the match, the Italian press noted how «the crowd improvised a very warm welcome in their honour», with an orchestra playing the Italian national anthem. Senior officials of the JNS and the FIGC gave speeches on the spot, emphasizing the cordiality and friendship between the two national teams⁷². It was definitely a well-organized welcome, which was intended to make a public display of the good relations between the two sides. The FIGC's highest-ranking functionaries accompanied their team to Belgrade, which acted as an additional incentive for the Yugoslavs to show the closest possible ties between the two associations⁷³. Over the following days, the journalists from the major Yugoslav daily newspapers followed the Italian delegation with undisguised admiration. Eulogies were written about individual players on both teams and the impending match was described as «a great and significant sporting event of worldwide importance»⁷⁴.

The culmination of the two sides' public declarations of mutual respect came with a gala banquet, which the JNS organized on the evening after the match for the Italian players and the FIGC's officials. Mihajlo Andrejević, President of the JNS, gave a celebratory speech in Italian and then the Italian delegation was presented with gifts⁷⁵. The situation would be different on the football pitch.

Prior to the game, the individual Italian players refused to make any statements about the upcoming fixture⁷⁶. Their coach Vittorio Pozzo, however, wrote that he expected a tense match, because his team had to deal with a highly motivated and agile opponent, emphasizing that the home side would have the support of its ardent supporters⁷⁷. As far as the visiting Italian supporters were concerned, as a rule, they were not mentioned in the newspaper articles about any of the three matches between Italy and Yugoslavia. The only exception to this rule is a brief mention that a contingent of 65 Italian *tifosi* arrived by train in Belgrade alongside their delegation⁷⁸.

The Belgrade match was not broadcasted on radio stations in Yugoslavia, yet the positive atmosphere among ordinary football supporters in the country could

⁷⁰ Ivi, p. 106.

⁷¹ V. Pozzo, *Ardua prova per gli "Azzurri"*, in «La Stampa», 4 June 1939, p. 4.

⁷² A.R., *Gli azzurri del calcio festosamente accolti*, in «La Stampa», 2 June 1939, p. 4.

⁷³ *Najpoznatiji funkcioneri italijanskog saveza dolaze u Beograd*, in «Politika», 2 June 1939, p. 12.

⁷⁴ *Da li će naša reprezentacija uspeti da pobedi Italijane i prekine 5-ogodišnji niz njihovih uspeha?*, in «Politika», 4 June 1939, p. 24.

⁷⁵ *Banquet kod 'Srpskog kralja'*, in «Jutarnji list», 6 June 1939, p. 13.

⁷⁶ *Ni jedan od asova 'Azura' ne želi da kaže za štampu ni jednu reč o sutrašnjem susretu*, in «Vreme», 3 June 1939, p. 10.

⁷⁷ V. Pozzo, *Italia-Jugoslavia 2-1*, in «La Stampa», 5 June 1939, p. 3.

⁷⁸ *Danas stiže 'Skvadra Azura'*, in «Vreme», 2 June 1939, p. 7.

definitely be felt through newspaper articles. One of the clothing company took advantage of this as a marketing opportunity by publicly committing to giving the finest silk ties to all the Yugoslav players in the event of victory over the Italians⁷⁹.

According to newspaper descriptions, the game played in Belgrade on 4 June was indeed electric from the outset. Neither team approached this match as an ordinary friendly. The Yugoslav players were encouraged by their recent victory over England, on 18 May, and so expected a degree of revenge over Italy in this rematch of their 1938 defeat in Genoa⁸⁰.

While the Italian team greeted the spectators with raised hands and a customary Roman salute before the start of the match, the hands of the Yugoslav players remained by their sides⁸¹. Maybe this was a foreshadowing of what would subsequently follow. From the newspaper descriptions that are available, it is difficult to ascertain exactly, how, when or why but a fight broke out between the players. Italy took the lead with goals from Silvio Piola and Gino Colaussi before Nikola Perlić reduced the deficit to 2-1, after which journalists describe how both teams behaved very nervously. This led to a «mutual brawl, with punching and kicking on both sides of the pitch, meaning that referee Langenus barely managed to bring this match to its conclusion under a very difficult atmosphere»⁸².

The match was attended by about 35,000 spectators, including numerous government ministers. The stands were packed, even more so than for the game against England that was played just two weeks earlier. At the beginning of the match, the crowd tried to positively support the home side by chanting: «*Beli, Beli!* [Whites, Whites!]»⁸³. However, as the situation on the pitch changed, towards the end of the match they started shouting negatively against the Italian national team and the Belgian referee, John Langenus, who, in their opinion, failed to adequately sanction the rough play by the Italian side. The last twenty minutes of the match, in particular, were especially marked by physical confrontations between the opposing players, which further aggrieved the predominantly home-supporting spectators and provoked stones to fly from the stands in the direction of some of the Italian

⁷⁹ *Poklon reprezentativcima*, in «Politika», 4 June 1939, p. 6.

⁸⁰ In a recently published paper, Dejan Zec explained in great detail the context and importance of the match against England: D. Zec, 'White Eagles', 'Proud Albion' and Spicy Garlic Food-The English National Football Team's Visit to Yugoslavia in May 1939, in *Sporting Cultures: Global Perspectives*, eds. N. Piercey, S.J. Oldfield, Manchester Metropolitan University Sport and Leisure History, Manchester 2019, pp. 106-127.

⁸¹ *Momenti sa utakmice Jugoslavija-Italija*, in «Vreme», 4 June 1939, p. 8. Unfortunately, there is no information about how the Yugoslav team greeted their opponents in Italy in 1925 and 1938, although it is safe to assume that had there been any kind of incident that caused offence to the hosts then this would have been recorded. For instance, Hajduk Split played an away game against Roma in 1937 and it has often been subsequently pointed out in the club's official history that the visiting players, although under pressure from the club's management, refused to greet their hosts with a Roman salute before the start of the match: J. Gizdić, *100 godina Hajduka*, HNK Hajduk, Split 2011, p. 35.

⁸² *Italija-Jugoslavija 2:1*, in «Jutarnji list», 5 June 1939, p. 8.

⁸³ L. Boccali, *Con la Squadra Azzurra sul campo di Belgrado*, in «Il Littoriale», 6 June 1939, p. 1.

players⁸⁴. Dissatisfaction with the apparent Italian rudeness on the pitch and the referee's oversights was also the impression that some prominent Yugoslav politicians remarked in their short statements made to the press immediately after the match. Minister of Physical Education Đuro Čejović allegedly called the Italian side's victory undeserved, while another undisclosed minister was more discreet and chose to point out that it had now been shown that English footballers were real gentlemen⁸⁵.

The story underwent a volte-face over the next 24 hours. The JNS issued a public statement about the unbecoming behaviour of the home crowd. They pointed out that all disputes between the two sets of players were immediately resolved on the field of play during the match and that the two associations would continue their fruitful cooperation⁸⁶. While the Italian team was already on its way to Hungary, where it was due to play its next fixture, the Italian press published a statement which the JNS sent to the FIGC, condemning «accidents that happened» after the Belgrade game – both on and off the field. They called out «irresponsible elements» among the supporters and apologized to their Italian colleagues⁸⁷.

In a longer statement addressed to its domestic public, the JNS publicly commented that due to the nature of the friendly match and the reputation of their opponents, they had tried to call on the spectators in Belgrade to behave in a correct manner before the game. They pointed out that despite this, some of those who had been present nevertheless behaved erratically after witnessing the clashes between the players on the pitch. At the same time, they underlined that the JNS and the FIGC delegates had always cooperated well with each other, especially emphasizing the FIGC's assistance in admitting clubs from Yugoslavia to the Central European (Mitropa) Cup and in reorganizing the JNS's refereeing organization. «Therefore, it is clear that ties with Italy are of great importance for the results of our sport»⁸⁸. The same statement placed blame upon referee John Langenus for the supporters' reactions, on the basis that he had failed to properly curb the players' passions. It was also noted that it was very inappropriate to cast stones at the opposing side just because some of the players had misbehaved. The general conclusion was that this was a clear example of undesirable behaviour which had damaged the reputation of Yugoslav sport and state: «we did not gain anything with stones, we just lost»⁸⁹. The Minister of Physical Education Đuro Čejović, along with his other fellow ministers, was also quick to withdraw his former statement, emphasizing that they had not given any official statements to journalists after the match⁹⁰.

Everything seems to have been smoothed out and Italian newspapers went on to describe how Yugoslavia had made further progress on the pitch and played some

⁸⁴ *Italija je nezasluzeno i neslavno pobedila Jugoslaviju sa 2:1 (1:0)*, in «Vreme», 5 June 1939, p. 7.

⁸⁵ *Izjave o utakmici*, in «Politika», 5 June 1939, p. 13.

⁸⁶ *Povodom utakmice Jugoslavija-Italija*, in «Vreme», 6 June 1939, p. 10.

⁸⁷ *La Federazione jugoslava deplora gli incidenti accaduti*, in «La Stampa», 6 June 1939, p. 7.

⁸⁸ *Povodom utakmice Jugoslavija-Italija*, in «Vreme», 6 June 1939, p. 10.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ *Posle međunarodne utakmice Jugoslavije i Italije*, in «Politika», 6 June 1939, p. 6.

of the best football in Europe. Such descriptions were a sweet consolation prize for the Yugoslav side⁹¹. Ultimately, it seems that relations between the FIGC and the JNS were in no way harmed by the behaviour of either the players or the spectators during the Belgrade match⁹².

Conclusion

Three friendly matches played by the Yugoslav and Italian national football teams in Padua in 1925, Genoa in 1938 and Belgrade in 1939 constitute an interesting litmus test for research into the impact of football on bilateral relations. Both countries simultaneously attempted to prove that they were better than the other on the football pitch – where their teams were to stand as the embodiment of their respective nations. These sporting events were also opportunities to build good mutual relations and positive images about their own, as well as the opposing, country.

The behaviour of the Italian and Yugoslav players, supporters and football officials in the time before, during and after each match was analysed through prominent daily press and sports weeklies published in Italy and Yugoslavia. While it is still difficult to quantify exactly how much of an impact these matches had on relations between the regimes of these countries during the 1920s and 1930s without a deeper breakdown of the internal diplomatic documentation on both sides, it can be said that every match had, to a lesser or greater extent, some sort of political background. All three groups of actors, namely players, supporters and football association officials, played their own role in the events surrounding each particular game. Although relations between the two neighbouring countries were rather turbulent in these two decades that I have focused on, announcements regarding these three international sporting fixtures were usually written with much respect for the opposing national team. In this way, an impression of good relations between two sporting countries was fostered, mainly at times when matches were not played. However, this mutual respect often came to be replaced by troubles that arose during and immediately after each match, instigated mainly by the players and the supporters. The behaviour of players and supporters of both sides, during each of the matches, was in some way an indicator of events that took place in the political relations between the two countries. In such a way, events on the football pitch displayed the political reality, although they undoubtedly helped to create an image of the “other” through each sporting encounter – among the players on the pitch, spectators in the stands, and the wider populace of both countries.

Perhaps the biggest influence over public perception was exerted by the officials of both countries’ football associations, the FIGC and the JNS, who were under the influence of their respective ruling regimes. We can, to some extent, consider both organizations as mere tools in the hands of their ruling elites, given that, despite

⁹¹ *Reprezentacija Jugoslavije zadovoljila je samo u drugom poluvremenu*, in «Politika», 7 June 1939, p. 15.

⁹² *Gli Azzurri dominano i jugoslavi e ne controllano gli assalti volanti: 2-1 (1-0)*, in «Il Littoriale», 5 June 1939, p. 5.

the often-strained relations between the two countries, both associations insisted on praising the other country, its football, players, and its counterpart association. The special banquets prepared for the opponent, exchanges of gifts and ceremonial speeches, as well as the apologies issued for the actions of supporters, undoubtedly engendered the impression of mutual respect and good cooperation between the two sides in football, which doubtlessly fed the image that Italian and Yugoslav relations in other fields were likewise positive. Although part of this was undoubtedly for the sake of unadulterated propaganda, the mutual respect was for the greater part tangible. Through the concept of soft power, football also created a positive image of the broader socio-political efforts of these opposing states.