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## **FROM HISTORY TO HEADLINES: FOOTBALL VIOLENCE AND ITS SOCIETAL IMPACT IN CROATIA**

This paper delves into the complex issue of football-related violence in Croatia, linking it to the country's rich historical narrative and social dynamics. It seeks to understand the multifaceted factors contributing to violence within football culture, a phenomenon deeply tied to national identity. The research aims to analyse the interconnections between historical events, societal structures, and political influences that shape football-related violence, guided by the central question: "How do historical, social, and political contexts influence the occurrence of violence in football culture in Croatia?" Two key hypotheses underpin the study: first, that football violence has historical roots extending beyond recent decades, challenging the notion of it being a modern phenomenon; second, that media sensationalism plays a significant role in shaping public perception, often obscuring the historical context of such violence. By examining these dimensions, the paper aims to provide insights into the causes of football-related violence. It may serve as a foundation for potential solutions to at least part of the problem, contributing to the broader goal of reducing violence in football.

**Keywords:** football-related violence; Croatia; historical context; media sensationalism; national identity

## INTRODUCTION

The paper explores the complicated issue of football-related violence in Croatia, which intertwines with the country's complex historical narrative and social dynamics. The problem at hand involves understanding how various factors contribute to incidents of violence associated with football culture, which have accumulated significant attention both locally and internationally. This exploration is particularly pertinent in Croatia, where football is not merely a sport but an important cultural phenomenon deeply linked to national identity and historical memory.

The primary goal of the research is to analyse the tangled relationships between historical events, societal structures, and political influences that collectively shape the landscape of football-related violence. By unpacking these interconnections, the paper aims to provide a subtle understanding of the roots of violence within football culture, ultimately seeking to identify potential measures for reducing such incidents and fostering a more positive sporting environment. The paper poses the central research question: **“How do historical, social, and political contexts influence the occurrence of violence in football culture in Croatia?”**. This question serves as a framework for examining the various dimensions contributing to the violence in football, encouraging a comprehensive analysis that extends beyond surface-level explanations. Two key hypotheses support the research, both crucial in addressing the issue's complexities. The first hypothesis posits that **violence in and around football is not exclusively a feature of recent decades**. While it is often claimed that football violence became more pronounced from the 1980s onwards, historical records suggest that violent incidents have occurred occasionally throughout earlier periods, including the post-World War II era and during the Yugoslav period. This perspective challenges the prevailing opinion that football-related violence is a recent development, indicating that its roots may extend deeper into Croatia's historical context than commonly perceived. The second hypothesis emphasises the **role of media sensationalism in shaping public perception of football violence**. In an era characterised by the rise of digital media and 24/7 news cycles, media outlets frequently amplify and exaggerate violent incidents to attract viewership and increase sales. This sensationalist reporting not only creates a perception that football violence is primarily a contemporary issue but also conceals its historical roots. Together, these elements form a comprehensive framework for examining the intersection of football culture and violence in Croatia. The paper aspires to shed light on the underlying causes of football-related violence by investigating the historical precedents, social dynamics, and

media influences. The insights gained from this research could serve as a foundation for future initiatives to foster a safer and more inclusive football culture, ultimately contributing to the broader societal goal of reducing violence in sporting contexts.

According to Buljan (2021), qualitative methodology can help gain insights into a large amount of data, facilitating the understanding of processes and mechanisms and the formulation of hypotheses that can be tested through quantitative research. A qualitative approach can provide a richer and more nuanced understanding of violence in football, contributing to more effective prevention strategies and policy development.

This research will employ a complex methodological approach to thoroughly investigate football-related violence in Croatia. The selected methods include analysis and synthesis, descriptive methods, content analysis, and participant observation<sup>1</sup>. Integrating these methods will allow a broad examination of football-related violence in Croatia. The quantitative data collected through descriptive methods will complement the qualitative insights gained from content analysis and participant observation, leading to a more comprehensive understanding of the issue. This triangulation of data sources will strengthen the validity of the findings and facilitate an analysis of the historical, social, and political factors influencing football violence.

## 1. ORIGINS OF FOOTBALL AND THE DARK SIDE OF THE GAME

Football, also known as soccer in some regions<sup>2</sup>, is played between two teams of eleven players each, typically on a rectangular field with a goal at each end. The game's objective is to score goals by kicking a ball into the opposing team's goal, using any part of the body except the hands or arms (except for the goalkeeper within the penalty area). Football is one of the most popular and widely watched sports glob-

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- 1 The author has actively followed football since her earliest years. For example, she attended the historic match between Osijek and Dinamo (1:2), where, according to reports from *Sportske novosti*, *Večernji list*, and *Glas Slavonije* from that time, there were 40 thousand spectators present. At that time, there were standing areas, and there were no counters to precisely determine the number. It was assumed that at least 20 thousand were Dinamo fans, among whom was the author. It was the 1981/1982 season when Dinamo, with Čiro Blažević, won the title after 24 years. Since the establishment of the Republic of Croatia, the author has supported NK Osijek, whose matches she regularly attends both at home and away grounds. She has also worked as an official translator for NK Osijek during the organization of home matches in the UEFA Cup against Anderlecht (1998/99), West Ham United (1999/00), as well as Brøndby, Rapid Vienna, and Slavia Prague (2000/01).
  - 2 'Soccer', the term by which Association football is known especially in the United States, Canada and Australia, is used to distinguish it from their own forms of the game. It is an abbreviation of the word 'association' (Dunning 2000).

ally, with professional leagues and tournaments held at various levels of competition. In the Encyclopedia Britannica (2024), we find information about the popularity of this sport. Based on FIFA's (Fédération Internationale de Football Association) estimation, at the turn of the 21st century, approximately 250 million football players and over 1.3 billion people were "interested" in football. Football has been around for a long time. The version we know today started in England around the middle of the 19th century. But different versions of the game existed even before then, adding to its long history. However, there is evidence that violence has existed since the beginning of ball games.

The American specialist of the art of the ancient New World, Mary Miller, Sterling Professor Emeritus of Art (Yale), claims that the idea of the team sport was invented in Mesoamerica, according to Blakemore (2023). According to FootballHistory.org, the earliest known instances of team sports involving a ball, typically made from rocks, date back over 3,000 years ago in ancient Mesoamerican cultures<sup>3</sup>, known to the Aztecs as *ullamalitzli* or *pok-ta-pok* or *pitz* to the Mayas. Many of these games used heavy rubber balls, some weighing 16 pounds, which can still be found in archaeological sites. Besides, more than 1,300 large stone courts are scattered throughout the region, showing signs of gameplay. In China during the 3rd and 2nd centuries BC, the first documented ball game incorporating kicking, *cuju*, emerged. *Cuju* utilised a round ball made of stitched leather with fur or feathers inside, played within a square area. A variation of this game, *kemari*, later spread to Japan and was practised ceremonially. *Marn Gook*, possibly older than *cuju*, was played by Aboriginal Australians and reportedly involved primarily kicking a ball made from encased leaves or roots. Ancient Greece also had various ball games, using leather strips filled with hair (the earliest documented air-filled balls date back to the 7th century). Despite their existence, ball games held a lower status and were not part of events like the Panhellenic Games. In Ancient Rome, ball games weren't showcased in large arenas but were part of military exercises known as *Harpastum*<sup>4</sup>. It was through Roman culture that football reached the British Isles. The prevailing belief is that football began to take shape in England during the 12th century. During this period, similar games were played in meadows and on roads, involving kicks and punches to the ball with fists.

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3 Before Columbus "discovered" them, civilizations thrived in Mesoamerica, the expansive historical area stretching from Mexico to Costa Rica.

4 The FIFA Museum website provides a digital exhibition, "Origins: Pre-Histories of Football" that explores four different ball games from above mentioned eras and geographical regions. Available at: <https://www.fifamuseum.com/en/exhibitions-events/special-exhibitions/origins/>

Today's football took a while to develop. Initially, there needed to be a more evident difference between football and rugby, and there were many different versions with various ball sizes, player numbers, and match lengths. An effort to establish formal rules for the game was made at a gathering in Cambridge in 1848, but they only settled some rule-related issues. Another significant moment in football's history they have occurred in London in 1863 with the formation of the first Football Association in England. This meeting also standardised the size and weight of the ball. As a result of the London gathering, the game split into two codes: association football and rugby.

Initially, the sport served as entertainment for the British working class. Large crowds, sometimes reaching up to 30,000 spectators, attended significant matches in the late 19th century. Advancements in transportation, labour, and technology provided people with both the time and the resources to participate in competitive matches held on mown lawns. The game's popularity grew as British people travelled to other regions, often as part of colonisation efforts. Football remained primarily a British phenomenon for a considerable period, but it gradually began to spread to other European countries. The first documented game held outside of Europe occurred in Argentina in 1867. For an extended period, British teams held dominance. However, over time, clubs from Prague, Budapest, and Sienna emerged as the primary challengers to British supremacy.

Regarding violence, Blakemore (2023) outlines that Aztec rulers reportedly used ball games instead of war to resolve conflicts and show their power. On the other hand, in Maya and Veracruz societies, the consequences were more severe: defeat in specific ritual matches led to sacrifice<sup>5</sup>. According to Maya mythology, the loser of the ball game faces decapitation (Photo 1), a concept modern scholars widely acknowledge, e.g., Berryman, C.A. (2007): the losers, not the winners, faced this fate. Centuries later, roughness in play and violence have remained integral parts of the game in England since the 12th century. During this era, games resembling football were played in open fields and on roads throughout England. The early versions of football involved large numbers of people playing across town areas. These games often caused damage and sometimes led to injuries or deaths, prompting authorities to ban them for many years. However, football-like games returned to London streets in the 17th century. They were banned again in 1835 but had become popular in public schools. Although it is a common belief nowadays that violence in and around football is exclusively characteristic of the 20th and 21st centuries, historical evidence convinces us otherwise: football fan behaviour has been, for many years, a significant

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5 some courts were decorated with panels depicting the gory sacrifice of losing players

concern throughout Europe (Frosdick and Marsh 2005), but also on other continents such as Central and South America and Africa. In their conclusion, they state that “disorder has also affected virtually every country in which football has been played” and add that “spectator violence is nothing new. On the contrary, it is an ancient and historical problem [...] (that) was an excuse for fighting which regularly featured violence, death, injury, and damage (see Elias and Dunning 1971).“

**Photo 1.** The relief shows the ritualistic human sacrifice following an ancient ball game (sculpted onto one of the 17 ball courts discovered at the remains of El Tajin, an ancient city located in present-day Veracruz, Mexico)



Source: National Geographic.com (photographed by Martin Gray, Nat Geo Image Collection)

## 2. MODERN FORMS OF VIOLENCE IN FOOTBALL

Speaking generally about violence in sports, Muzur (2011) emphasises that it can be observed within competitions (for example, in boxing, wrestling, Asian martial arts, rugby, etc.) or outside competitions. Still, it is most commonly analysed as a social



problem, focusing on violence by spectators at sporting events. In doing so, he refers to Michael Smith (2003), who distinguishes between “relatively legitimate” violence and “relatively illegitimate” violence, with the former including violence within the bounds of sports rules and violence that exceeds those bounds but is generally accepted, and the latter including “quasi-criminal” violence, which violates the law and official rules, and “criminal” violence, which, among other things, violates informal regulations and is therefore absolutely unacceptable.

The previously mentioned British researchers Frosdick and Marsh published a book that represents an introduction to football-related violence titled “Football Hooliganism.” According to the authors, the title of this book refers to a concept that signifies “violent and anti-social behaviour amongst football fans (...)”, sometimes “British disease“ or “English disease.“ Football hooliganism, nowadays recognised as a global phenomenon, has been dominated by the English example and by English theorising, according to Moorhouse (2006). According to this Scottish scientist, England is the brand leader for football hooliganism. The primary studies and theoretical viewpoints on football hooliganism primarily stem from British research from the late 1960s. However, more contemporary scientific works are criticised for the limitation in their scope, focusing mainly on domestic hooliganism in England at its height between the 1960s-1990s (Warner, 2013). Some researchers go so far as to claim that there has likely been excessive research conducted on British football hooliganism. Even though violence at British football matches has generally decreased, this phenomenon still attracts a disproportionately high level of research attention (Frosdick and Marsh 2005).

Croatian scientists hold conflicting views on the history of football violence. On the one hand, when disputing the claim that violence is only associated with the modern era, Muzur (2011) emphasises that a particular escalation could be seen in England and Italy from the 1960s onwards, or at least, such an image was created in the media. This reference indicates that the media are an essential link in the chain of violence, alongside fans, clubs, society, and politics. On the other hand, the well-known Croatian sociologist Šime Vrcan dedicated a part of his prolific research work to the sociology of sport. He was not inclined to interpret fan violence in terms of human nature and instincts or any theory that does not consider the historical context, accentuating the particularity of the social conditions that lead to the eruption of violence in sports. Violence in and around sports is a timeless phenomenon that merely oscillates. To conclude, in Lalić & Wood’s words (2004: 149):

“Fan violence generally is a significant and distinct segment of social violence in the contemporary world. It is characterised by interpersonal violence, both physical (fights between fans, attacks on the police) and verbal (rude insults and other attacks on the moral integrity of rival fans and other football actors), as well as intentional damage and destruction of vehicles and other property. These fundamental forms of violence, especially the two types of interpersonal violence, are interrelated.)”

### 3. SHORT HISTORY OF CROATIAN FOOTBALL

The history of Croatian football should be viewed within the context of the former Yugoslavia and beyond. Interestingly, the book by British author Richard Mills is an excellent source of information. Namely, at the end of 2019, the Croatian edition of the book “Football and Politics in Yugoslavia: Sport, Nationalism, and the State”<sup>6</sup> was released. This monograph, which represents an expanded and supplemented dissertation by the author, was initially published a year earlier in London.

Intriguingly, football first appeared in Croatia through direct interaction with the English. Namely, Slavonia’s economic potential and natural resources, particularly its extensive oak forests, drew factory owners from England to Županja in 1880. These newcomers introduced football to the town and engaged the local population, including employees and workers in the timber industry, in playing the sport (Photo 2). Only fifteen years later, Zagreb hosted its first public football match, followed shortly after in 1896 by the translation and publication of the “Rules of Football” in the same city. Today, the location where the first football<sup>7</sup> factory once stood is home to the premises and stadium of the local club.<sup>8</sup> In Županja, a monument is dedicated to this historic ball.

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6 According to Grgić (2020), Mills invested a lot of effort into researching this book (spent an extended period of time and researched for the needs of this book in the ex-Yu countries) and connected various types of sources into an exceptionally interesting narrative. These sources include scattered literature, archival sources, fanzines, “serious” newspaper articles, memoirs, interviews with participants of certain events, as well as independent visits and photography of various locations mentioned in the text.

7 The old football once played with by the English, which has been scientifically verified as the first football in Croatia, continues to be carefully preserved and protected.

8 <https://zupanja.hr/o-zupanji/povijest-sporta-u-zupanji/>



**Photo 2.** The first football discovered in Županja in 1979, found in the possession of the family of Manda and Antun Tuca Oršolić, is preserved at the Stjepan Gruber Local Museum in Županja



Sources: <https://zupanjac.net/prva-nogometna-lopta-u-hrvatskoj/>; <https://hns.family/vijesti/12657/otkrivanje-spomenika-prvoj-nogometnoj-lopti-u-hrvatskoj/>; <https://qtour.org/ima-jedan-granicar-boja-mu-je-plava/prica-o-lopti/>

According to Mills (2019:12), “Yugoslav football emerged within the framework of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes in 1919 in Zagreb. Football officials gathered at Café Medulić in downtown Zagreb in April to establish the Yugoslav Football Association (YFA). As this was a Croatian initiative, Zagreb logically became the headquarters of this new organisation, particularly considering the superior quality of Croatian football at that time. Leading clubs in Zagreb had already gained a good reputation even before the First World War.” The first official football match of the Kingdom’s national team was played at the Olympics in 1920, held in Antwerp, Belgium. Although football at that time was based on territorial rather than ethnic grounds, national identity soon took precedence over the actual interests of football as a sport. Mills (2019: 12) emphasises that at that time, “football was one of the few state-level activities that did not have its centre in Belgrade. However, by the end of the 1920s, elite Serbian clubs and their players had reached a high level of quality and became competitive with their skilled Croatian counterparts,” according to Kramer (1992), Zec (2010), and Jovanović (1973). Influential individuals in the kingdom’s capital soon began to press for the headquarters of the YFA to be moved from Zagreb to Belgrade. In March 1930, the organisation’s headquarters moved to Belgrade, worsening the already strained relations within the Association. Therefore, it is unsurprising that Mills (2019: 27), despite being a Briton, concludes that although the interwar football peak was marked by discord, disputes, and tensions, within its foundations brewed a more subversive form of discontent.

During World War II, football did not come to a standstill. In this challenging historical period, the team of Partisan footballers from Split was given a critical political mission: football became a successful propaganda tool (Mills, according to Eterović 2014). After the capitulation of Italy in September 1943, the Partisans took control of the island of Vis. Its strategic position allowed constant contact with the Allies in Italy. At the end of an improvised runway, a series of matches were played against Allied teams, in which the *Football Group* won 11 out of 16 games. In September 1944, the players of Hajduk travelled by ship “Bakar” to Bari. During their stay in southern Italy, they played a series of matches against British army teams. On September 23, 1944, a match was held between “British Services XI” and “Yugoslav National Liberation Army XI,” which was attended by around 40,000 people. Hajduk continued their tour to Malta, through Egypt (a match against displaced compatriots in El Shatt), to Palestine, Syria, and Lebanon.

With the establishment of Tito’s Yugoslavia, football changed in line with the vision of the new socialist Yugoslavia. Mills (2019: 136) describes the 1950s-60s as a period of domestically and internationally flourishing football. However, economic reforms, decentralisation, and liberalisation directly impacted football, which was burdened with scandals then. State interventions stumbled upon narrow national interests. The next decade ended with Tito’s death (1980). Despite celebrating the multi-ethnic state, the negative phenomena cast a shadow over the green fields of YU football.

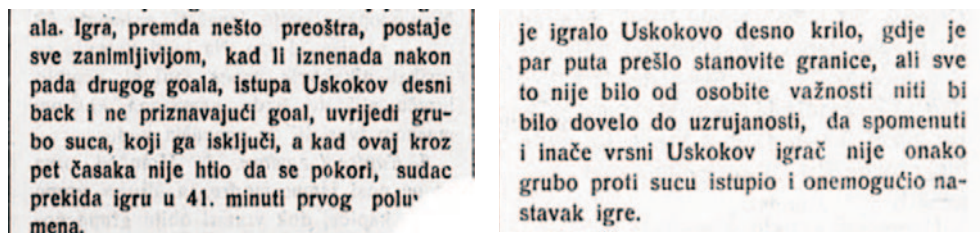
The match between Dinamo and Red Star was supposed to occur on May 13, 1990, but the stands and the pitch of the Maksimir Stadium turned into a battlefield. This match was even ranked fourth on the list of football matches that changed the world by American CNN. In his text “Five Games that Changed the World,” James Montague (2011) gave a brief historical framework: “Yugoslavia was already on the brink of imploding by the time Serbia’s Red Star Belgrade played Croatia’s Dinamo Zagreb at the latter’s Maksimir Stadium. Pro-independence parties had already won recent Croatian elections.” The football spectacle turned into a bloody clash between fans and the police. In the epic Maksimir battle, there were 76 injured fans, 39 from the Bad Blue Boys and 37 Delijes, along with 117 police officers. The conflict began when Serbian hooligans, led by the later war criminal Željko Ražnatović - Arkan, started destroying the fence and seats in the south stand and then attacked the spectators. The police did not react, so the Bad Blue Boys knocked down the wall in the north stand and stormed onto the pitch. During the match, future AC Milan and Croatia captain Zvonimir Boban launched a kung-fu kick at a policeman attacking a Za-

greb fan. The police responded by using batons, tear gas, and water cannons. Chaos ensued on the pitch of the Maksimir Stadium. The question frequently raised in various texts regarding this event is whether it marks the beginning of the war.

#### 4. FOOTBALL IN CROATIAN MEDIA: THEN AND NOW

Thanks to the digitisation of old printed journals, we now have the opportunity to read comments from sports journalists about football matches played over the last hundred years. In its inaugural issue, published on October 16, 1920, *Jadranski Sport*<sup>9</sup> featured football reports from both domestic and international scenes. On the front page, it describes the clashes between Split's "Hajduk" and "Jug" and "Uskok" teams. The author of the text emphasizes the interruption of the second match due to the behaviour of the "Uskok" player, which "crossed certain boundaries" several times, and his "rough" attitude towards the referee "prevented the continuation of the game." (Photo 3) Already back then, as highlighted by Mills (2019), journalists from Split accused those from Zagreb of "chauvinistic coverage of the match between Građanski and Hajduk."

**Photo 3.** Football report from newspapers published in 1920 (domestic game)



Source: *Jadranski sport* from October 16th, 1920 (No.1, p.1)

<http://dalmatica.svkst.hr/?sitetext=367>

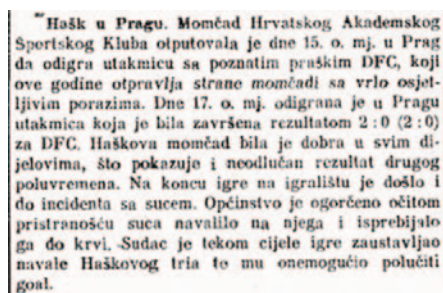
"These reports depict the players of Hajduk as 11 bandit hajduks and the audience that came to see the beautiful game of Građanski, only to be disappointed as the wildest, most vulgar, and most brutal, labelling it 'African.'" (*Jadranski list*, June 1st, 1921)

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9 A sports newspaper, running independently from 1920 to 1921, and then as an appendage to the "Novo doba" newspaper from issue 10 onwards (beginning April 1, 1922) until 1923, marked an important era..

Despite such texts, *Jadranski sport* equally covered the performances of Croatian clubs and those of numerous other European countries. In Photo 4, in addition to a brief description of the match proceedings, the reporter provides a brutal account of the conflict with the referee after the end of the match, describing how he was “beaten to a pulp.” In 1939, a match between the leading national clubs, Hajduk (Split) and Građanski (Zagreb), ended in a massive brawl. The Matošić brothers, players of Hajduk, committed rough fouls against opposing players, leading to a general melee involving players, fans, and the police. A journalist from *Borba* described Frane Matošić’s blow below the opponent’s stomach as “so fierce that he fell like a chopped tree”.<sup>10</sup>

**Photo 4.** Football report from newspapers published in 1920 (international game)



“Hašk u Pragu. Momčad Hrvatskog Akademskog Sportskog Kluba otputovala je dne 15. o. mj. u Prag da odigra utakmicu sa poznatim praškim DFC, koji ove godine otpravlja strane momčadi sa vrlo osjetljivim porazima. Dne 17. o. mj. odigrana je u Pragu utakmica koja je bila završena rezultatom 2 : 0 (2 : 0) za DFC. Haškova momčad bila je dobra u svim dijelovima, što pokazuje i neodlučan rezultat drugog poluvremena. Na koncu igre na igralištu je došlo i do incidenta sa sucem. Općinstvo je ogorčeno očitom pristranošću suca navaliło na njega i isprebijalo ga do krvi. Sudac je tekom cijele igre zaustavljao navale Haškovog tria te mu onemogućio polučiti goal.

Source: “Jadranski sport“ from March 22nd, 1922 (No.11, p.2)  
<http://dalmatica.svkst.hr/?sitetext=367>

After World War II, incidents followed one after another, with threats of closing stadiums due to “poor spectator behaviour and pitch invasions” (Mills 2019: 97). Insults on national grounds begin; terms like *ustasha*, *chetnik*, or *Italian fascists* are becoming more common, yet the state fails to find ways to stop it:

“Last year, it was easier to find culprits because the audience would identify them and hand them over to the police, but this year, it’s more difficult because hundreds or thousands of people are shouting simultaneously.” (Uzelac, Skendžić & Kovačević 1950)

Mills marks this year as when “fans stole the spotlight” (2019: 116). In the euphoria before winning the championship, students from Dalmatia founded a fan group in Zagreb in 1950, inspired by the fan groups seen at the World Cup in Brazil (Mills 2019: 116). The arrival of Zagreb students could have been more peaceful on the train

<sup>10</sup> Published on January 30th, 1939

journey or in Split. Despite the police confiscating fan equipment (trumpets, whistles, rattles, and even school bells) upon entering the stadium, on the intervention of the then-president of Hajduk, the equipment was returned to *Torcida*<sup>11</sup> with the explanation that “Yugoslavia is a democratic country” (Mills 2019: 117). Due to the importance of the match, there was plenty of roughness on the field or fans invading the pitch. The media, especially the Belgrade-based *Borba* strongly condemned such behavior. The political reaction was not lacking; the Communist Party of Croatia punished all those it held responsible, but the founders of *Torcida* received the harshest penalties.

Describing football in the 1980s, Mills (2019) introduces the term football hooliganism, asserting that it became widespread. In the *SN magazine* of that time, a commentator lamented how „it had become normal for the purchase of a ticket to be equated with the purchase of the right to – insult.“<sup>12</sup> According to Lalić (1993: 100), Hajduk was banned from playing a European match in Split in 1984 after a *Torcida* fan slaughtered a cockerel, the symbol of Tottenham Hotspur. The accused members of *Torcida* who attacked cadets from the Naval Academy on the Split Riva in the fall of 1985 – injuring some and throwing others into the sea – defended themselves by claiming that the motive was “fan-related”: it was “revenge” for the beaten Hajduk fans in Belgrade, and the cadets were also fans of Red Star Belgrade. However, Belgrade’s *Politika*, from October 23, 1985, describes them as “a thin militant layer that does not hesitate to engage in fascist-like actions.” The 1980s saw the emergence of supporter groups influenced by English and Italian fans. After the ban, *Torcida* was the first to “revive” in 1980 in the territory of the former Yugoslavia. Only a few years later, other Croatian supporter groups were founded: *Bad Blue Boys* – Dinamo Zagreb (1986), *Armada* – NK Rijeka (1987), and *Kohorta* – NK Osijek (1988).

During the 1980s, football supporter violence became less spontaneous as organized groups arose, and the basis of their antagonism shifted away from club, city, and region to supporters’ groups themselves. Football supporter violence until the end of the decade nonetheless remained mostly symbolic: the attempt, above all, was to humiliate rather than seriously injure a rival supporter (Lalić & Wood 2014: 155). In the context of the emergence of supporter groups, Mills (2019: 181) particularly emphasises how “the media played a key role in spreading news about foreign practices.” In discussing offensive nationalist football chanting (insults directed at political leaders of opposing sides, threats of even sexual violence, and historical claims to certain

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11 The group had adopted a Portuguese name.

12 The article was published on June 11th, 1980



lands, according to E. D. Gordy (1999), Mills (2019: 190) emphasises how “the sports press inflated such behaviour, publishing slogans and chants so that even occasional visitors to Yugoslav stadiums were aware of their provocative content”. In this regard, Mills mentions Belgrade’s *Borba* and Zagreb’s *Sportske novosti*, which launched weekly columns dedicated to fan culture. On the other hand, the Belgrade magazine *Ćao Tifo* (Photo 5), inspired by the Italian model, was for fans to write about their views and activities. It covered topics such as alcohol and drug abuse, crime, fights, and political violence. As the turbulent 1990s unfolded, Mills will emphasise that the forums evolved into places of conflict: from “opposed opinions, nationalist positions, or even threats.” Lalić and Wood (201: 155) stressed that football supporter violence became politically motivated at the end of the 1980s, and because leaders condoned it and many in the general public, it had the potential to escalate into deadly violence.

**Photo 5:** *Ćao Tifo* cover page, about Hajduk and Torcida, Dinamo and Bad Blue Boys



Sources: the Internet (different *Njuškalo* pages)

In the early 1990s, as Croatian politicians and military forces sought to secede from Yugoslavia, predicted an end to spectator violence in an independent Croatian nation-state (Bilić et al. 2002: 33). The expected end of football supporter violence never came to pass. Instead, there were several incidents of violence between members of fan groups, severe and persistent ones between the *Bad Blue Boys* and *Torcida* (Lalić & Wood 2014: 145).

To illustrate the current circumstances surrounding violence in and around football reports from contemporary media outlets – a form previously unavailable: online



news - were analysed. The online search via the Google search engine (March 2024) was explicitly based on hashtags such as **#hooliganism**, **#football**, and **#violenceinfootball**. The aim was to gather data concerning the prevalence and visibility of reports on and around football grounds regarding these predominantly negative occurrences. The headlines were compared with previously analysed periods. Online news about football violence equally covers events from both domestic and international contexts. Football thrives not only in certain countries; it has become a global phenomenon. Unfortunately, violence associated with it has also spread worldwide.

### **#hooliganism & #football**

Eighty-four search results were obtained on digital newspaper articles and comments using hashtags **#hooliganism** and **#football**. The temporal scope of the articles encompasses the years 2008 through 2023. The articles focus on reporting about football matches in Croatia (22%), Europe (61%), and the rest of the world (7%). Notably, the highest frequency of articles utilising these terms was observed in 2023, yielding 23 (27%) available posts. It should also be noted that only three articles were published during the COVID-19 epidemic and the staging of matches without spectators. Unfortunately, the highest number of texts published in 2023 (eight in total) pertains to the tragic death of an AEK fan in Athens just before Zagreb's Dinamo visited Greece for the Champions League playoff.

### **#violenceinfootball**

Another Google search with the hashtag **# violence in football** resulted in retrieving 60 outcomes, encompassing news articles from 2008 to 2023. The ratio of articles reporting from Croatia (25) compared to other European countries (30) is nearly equal, with only 5 in different global regions. Again, it should also be stressed that only two articles were published during the COVID-19 epidemic and the staging of matches without spectators.

The characteristics of headlines for sports articles in and around football fields are much longer than ever. Since they are available on internet portals, news headlines aim to lure the reader to click and generate profit. Therefore, headlines are shocking and often provocative, for example, *Shocking Epilogue of the Great Drama in Mostar: Hooligans Intercept Car with Referees in Tunnel and Set It on Fire*.<sup>13</sup> In addition to the headlines, great attention is given to subheadings. The news from online

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13 <https://slobodnadalmacija.hr/vijesti/regija/sokantan-epilog-velike-drame-u-mostaru-utakmica-je-prekinuta-i-krenula-je-potjera-po-cesti-huligani-u-tunelu-presreli-automobil-sa-sucima-i-zapalili-ga-1129152>

portals is further “enriched” with footage of disturbing content, another clickbait lure (Photo 6).

**Photo 6:** A newspaper headline from the UK about the clash between Polish fans and police in Birmingham (Aston Villa - Legia) from November 30th, 2023 (SN/Hina)



Source: <https://sportske.jutarnji.hr/sn/nogomet/konferencijska-liga/zestoki-sukobi-u-konferencijskoj-ligi-zloglasni-huligani-raketama-gadali-policiju-ozlijedena-tri-policajca-15399970>

A notable contrast emerged when comparing digitalized old newspaper reports from Croatia with the latest online articles. Historically, articles from the past often employed a more formal tone, reflecting the journalistic standards of their time. They tended to describe incidents of violence in a straightforward manner, focusing on the events themselves rather than the socio-cultural context. Headlines from these older reports might have emphasized the facts of the incidents, lacking sensationalism or emotive language (Photo 7).

Photo 7: Neutral depiction of a league match round from 1962 (“Večernji list“)



<https://arhiva.vecernji.hr/article/v11962100820200222164014015-pdf/353286/08.10.1962. / Br. 1005>

In contrast, contemporary online articles, being filled with news about violence related to football that also occurs off the field<sup>14</sup>, adopt a different approach: provocative and eye-catching titles have been frequently used to draw in readers.<sup>15</sup> Headlines like “This is the bottom of the barrel, they’ve killed football entirely. Screw everything, it doesn’t matter... I’m ashamed as a Croat! And what now? When will they play, who cares. They’ve killed Michalis, they need to be severely punished.”<sup>16</sup>, not only highlight the violence but also frame it within a narrative that captivates the audience. This shift in language reflects a broader trend in journalism where sensationalism and emotional engagement are prioritized.

- 14 *Hooligans broke into the “Stjepan Radić” dormitory and attacked Dalmatian students!* (Jutarnji list, SN; November 22nd, 2014 – Zagreb, Croatia) <https://sportske.jutarnji.hr/sn/nogomet/hnl/huligani-provalili-u-dom-stjepan-radic-i-napali-dalmatinske-studente-4215975>
- 15 News articles are typically accompanied by images depicting violence and are frequently supplemented by video recordings: *Video: Shocking Incident Captured! Explosion Resonates Outside Premises of Legendary Club’s Supporters* (SN, January 23rd, 2023; Panathinaikos, Athens, Greece) <https://sportske.jutarnji.hr/sn/nogomet-mix/video-uhvacen-trenutak-sokantnog-incidenta-ispred-prostorija-navijaca-kultnog-klub-a-odjeknula-eksplozija-15294922>
- 16 The article by Frane Vulas published in *Jutarnji list, SN*; August 8th, 2023, Athens (Greece); AEK – Dinamo Zagreb; <https://sportske.jutarnji.hr/sn/nogomet/hnl/klubovi/dinamo/ovo-je-dno-dna-pa-ubili-su-kompletan-nogomet-j-es-sve-nevazno-je-sramota-me-kao-hrvata-15363215>

The analysis of these shifts in language, style, and incidence reveals not only how football-related violence has been reported over time but also how societal attitudes towards such violence have transformed. The evolution of headlines reflects changing journalistic practices and the media's role in shaping public perception of football culture in Croatia. This comparison serves as a lens through which we can understand the broader implications of violence in and around football.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this research has successfully demonstrated the validity of the two key hypotheses regarding football-related violence in Croatia. Firstly, the analysis revealed that violence in and around football is not a contemporary phenomenon, as often suggested. Historical records indicate that incidents of violence have been present in various forms throughout earlier periods, including the post-World War II era and the Yugoslav period. This finding underscores the notion that the roots of football violence are deeply entwined with Croatia's historical context, challenging the prevailing belief that such issues emerged solely from the 1980s onward.

Secondly, the investigation affirmed the significant role of media sensationalism in shaping public perception of football violence. The rise of digital media and continuous news cycles has led to an amplification of violent incidents, often exaggerating their frequency and severity. This sensationalist approach not only misrepresents the historical continuity of violence in football but also contributes to a distorted understanding of its socio-cultural dimensions.

Therefore, these findings provide a nuanced understanding of the complex interplay between historical events, societal structures, and media influences in the context of football-related violence in Croatia. Consequently, the insights from this study could inform initiatives to foster a safer and more inclusive football culture, contributing to the broader societal goal of reducing violence within sporting contexts.

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## OD POVIJESTI DO NASLOVA: NASILJE U NOGOMETU I NJEGOV DRUŠTVENI UTJECAJ U HRVATSKOJ

Rad istražuje složeno pitanje nasilja u nogometu u Hrvatskoj u kontekstu povijesnog narativa i društvene dinamike. Cilj je razumjeti različite čimbenike koji dovode do nasilja u i oko nogometa, fenomena koji je duboko povezan s nacionalnim identitetom. Istraživanje ima za cilj analizirati korelacije između povijesnih događaja, društvenih struktura i političkih utjecaja koji oblikuju takvu vrst nasilja, vodeći se pri tome ključnim pitanjem: “Kako povijesni, socijalni i politički konteksti utječu na pojavu nasilja u nogometnoj kulturi u Hrvatskoj?” Dvije hipoteze provjeravaju se istraživanjem. Prvom se propituje fenomen nasilja u nogometu: ima li ono povijesne korijene koji sežu dalje od nedavnih desetljeća (80-ih godina 20. stoljeća) ili je taj fenomena novija pojava. Drugom se istražuje igra li medijski senzacionalizam značajnu ulogu u oblikovanju javnog mišljenja, često skrivajući povijesni kontekst takvog nasilja. Rad ima za cilj pružiti uvid u uzroke nasilja povezanog s nogometom te može poslužiti kao osnova za potencijalna rješenja barem dijela problema te doprinijeti širem cilju njegova smanjenja.

**Ključne riječi:** nasilje; nogomet; Hrvatska; povijesni kontekst; medijski senzacionalizam

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