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Making Gymnastics Catholic: The Life, Death, and Resurrection of the Croatian Orao in Interwar Yugoslavia (DRAFT)

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Abstract: This article focuses on the Croatian Orao, a gymnastic organization that became hegemonic among the Croatian Catholic population of interwar Yugoslavia. The first section examines the genesis of the Croatian Orao within the changing Catholic landscape of Croatia, Yugoslavia, and Europe more broadly, with particular emphasis on Orao's relationships with Orel – a gymnastic movement very similar to Orao that was popular among Slovenes – and the Holy See, as well as Orao's role in conflicts in the Croatian Catholic sphere. Part 2 will situate the Croatian Orao in the complex ecosystem of youth and gymnastic organizations present in the first Yugoslav state, especially with respect to the different Sokol organizations. Focusing on the actual sport activities practiced in Orao, the aim is to tackle the specific place of gymnastics in the associational culture of the Croatian Orao. The third and final part will explore the dismantling of Orao's associational network by the state in 1929, and the association's reorganization in other, more radical guises in 1930.

Keywords: First Yugoslavia, Croatian Catholic Movement, Catholic Action, Orao, Voluntary association

At first glance, the history of gymnastic organizations in Central Europe seems to be a story of mimicry. Created in the mid-nineteenth century by the German-speaking, liberal-minded

bourgeoisie of the region, the Turnverein (Gymnastic Association) was first appropriated by Czech nationalists in the 1860s under the well-known name Sokol (“falcon” in Czech, as in most Slavic languages). From Prague, this type of organization spread south and east, becoming one of the major tools of the nascent Slavic nationalist movements in the Habsburg Empire and beyond, and it was characterized by a spirit of pan-Slavic reciprocity. This series of borrowings did not end here. First, following the flows of intercontinental economic migration, Sokol spread well beyond Europe and became particularly well developed in North America. Second, and more importantly, these gymnastic organizations were appropriated by political actors who did not necessarily identify with their distinct nationalist and liberal agendas; sometimes such actors – for example supporters of socialism or social Catholicisms – openly opposed them.

Exploring the trajectory of the Croatian Orao (Eagle), the youth and gymnastic organization that became hegemonic among the Croatian-speaking Catholic population of Yugoslavia in the 1920s, feels akin to analyzing the final link in a long chain of institutional mimicry. The Hrvatski Orlovski Savez (Croatian Eagles’ Union), established in 1923, and its parallel women's umbrella organization, Savez Hrvatskih Orlica (hereafter Orlice federation; members were also referred to as *orlice*), created in 1925, may appear as belated and quite marginal phenomena in the wider history of Central European gymnastic movements. Yugoslav historiography written during the socialist period tended to stress the fact that part of the organization’s leadership drew progressively closer to Ante Pavelić’s Ustaša movement in the 1930s and actively engaged in the Independent State of Croatia after 1941. Thus, the Croatian Orao was often labeled “clerical” and “fascist,” downplaying the fact that it belonged to the larger family of European gymnastic organizations (Žutić 1991). After the dissolution of Yugoslavia, two new streams of scholarship offered a new and more nuanced understanding of Orao. Religious history, mostly developed inside the walls of Catholic

research institutions in Croatia, tended to reinterpret Orao as part of a broader Catholic mass politics that sought to organize the Catholic vote, defend the national distinctiveness of Croatia, and fight multiple political opponents – liberals, Serbian nationalists, and communists (Strecha 1997; Matijević 1998; Krišto 1994, 2004).

Exploring Orao's connections with Slovenia, Moravia, and Bohemia, this scholarship also took great pains to situate the Croatian Orao in the longer history of Catholic youth and gymnastic associational culture in Central Europe (Ceraj 2013, 2016). It is important to recall that this historiography has sometimes been hagiographic in tone – in a few cases quite literally. Research on some of the leaders of the associational network, such as Ivan Merz and Marica Stanković, was produced for the process of beatification initiated by the Catholic Church in connection to these two figures, following the highly contested beatification of Alojzije Stepinac in 1998 (Matijević 2002; Matković-Vlašić 2001).¹ During approximately the same years, other scholars addressed these organizations from the point of view of nationalism studies, exploring the often tense relationship of the Croatian Orao and its organizational successors with the Yugoslav state and with other gymnastic organizations, especially the Yugoslav Sokol. These works, which have given us a more nuanced understanding of the interplay between nation and religion in interwar Europe, made a valuable contribution to our knowledge about the specificities of Orao's associational culture, both in discourse and practice (Prlenda 2013: 82–109). This scholarship has also convincingly contested previous allegations that there is a clear ideological and organizational continuity between the Croatian Orao and the Ustaša, both as movement and regime (Biondich 2007: 383–399, and 2015: 357–366). Despite the fact that there is not a lot of cross-pollination between these historiographies, together they have helped generate a new understanding of these organizations, insisting on their ambiguity and internal heterogeneity.

¹ Merz's beatification was completed in 2003; Stanković's one is still ongoing. On the production of saints in (post-)Yugoslav space, see Perica 2002.

In terms of this special issue, which is dedicated to Sokol and its biopolitical functions in Central Europe, this article shifts the focus to one of Sokol's fiercest adversaries. This choice may serve to decenter Sokol in the broader ecosystem of gymnastic organizations during the interwar years and allow us to grasp the similarities and differences of, and especially cultural transfers between, competing associational networks (Espagne and Werner 1987). With these goals in mind, this article proceeds in three parts. Part 1 examines the genesis of the Croatian Orao within the changing Catholic landscape of Croatia, Yugoslavia, and Europe. Orao's relationship with Orel – the Slovene gymnastic movement – and the Holy See, as well as its role in conflicts within the Croatian Catholic world receive special attention. Part 2 will attempt to situate the Croatian Orao within the complex ecosystem of youth and gymnastic organizations that characterized the associational landscape of the first Yugoslavia (1918–1941). This part will also address the sports activities organized by the association. The aim is to tackle the specific place gymnastics held in the associational culture of Orao. The third and final section deals with the dismantling of this associational network by the state in 1929, and its reorganization in other – more radical – guises in 1930. Because the archives of the two federations – male and female sections – of Orao are unavailable, this article draws on printed sources, published memoirs by some of the association's leaders – in particular Marica Stanković, and correspondence between the Apostolic Nunciature in Belgrade and the Holy See's Secretariat of State. The rich sources preserved in the Vatican Apostolic Archive have never been used to study gymnastic organizations, but they allow us to situate Orao in the landscape of national and international Catholic activism. They also shed light on the conflicts within the worlds of Croatian and Yugoslav Catholicism.

From Orel to Orao

The history of Orao in Central Europe can only be understood within the context of the transformation of European Catholicism starting in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Catholic gymnastic associations were, in fact, one piece of a larger institutional mosaic created by Catholic clergy and laity, which consisted of philanthropic and welfare associations, political parties, cooperatives, and recreational clubs organized across Europe. These were complex initiatives that reacted to multiple ongoing processes perceived by the Catholic elite as fundamental challenges to the role of religion in European life: the political ascendancy of bourgeois liberalism, which was perceived as indifferent – and sometimes openly hostile – to religion and Catholicism in its public and private dimensions; and the burgeoning popularity of socialist organizations among the urban working classes. Moreover, the openly anti-Catholic tendencies of several European governments (e.g., the German *Kulturkampf*, French *laïcité*, the anticlericalism of unified Italy, and the liberal governments in Cisleithania after 1867, among others) had prompted the Roman Church to react and demand a greater commitment from its adherents, clergy and laity alike (Conway 1997; Clark 2009).

Catholic gymnastic organizations emerged precisely in this context, through complex circulations involving Moravia, Bohemia, Carniola, and Dalmatia – regions in Cisleithania, places where suffrage rights were gradually expanding (universal male suffrage was achieved in 1907) – and, thus, posed the challenge to the Church as it worked to organize the Catholic vote. Gymnastic organizations, which had already been popular among the Slavic-speaking middle classes in Central Europe for several decades, became a tool to attract younger persons to the Church and politicize newly enfranchised Catholics. The agents responsible for the elaboration of this associational culture between northern and southern Cisleithania were a series of priests linked to the Slovene space: Janez Krek (1865–1917), a publicist, Christian Socialist politician, and representative to the Austrian Parliament; G. Franc Terseglav (1882–

1950), a theologian, journalist, translator, and the author of *Zlata Knjiga* (Golden Book, 1910), the text that established the principles of the Slovenian Catholic gymnastic movement Orel (“eagle” in Slovenian); but, above all, Anton Mahnič (1850–1920). Born on the coast of Gorizia and Gradisca counties and later the bishop of Krk, by 1900 Mahnič was already regarded as the lodestar of the Croatian Catholic social movement, with its virulently antiliberal and antimodernist orientation. It was Mahnič himself who uttered the words: “everyone is organizing: Freemasons, socialists, freethinkers are organizing themselves – let us also organize” (Stanković 1944: 13) – a phrase that effectively captures the reactive nature of these initiatives. In fact, the bishop of Krk was among the tireless promoters of a series of Catholic newspapers, the aim of which was to vigorously oppose the penetration of liberal ideas into the public sphere and stymie the increasingly visible process of secularization in urban spaces. Years later, his tireless activities as an organizer and his intransigence would earn him the title of *div s Jadrana* (Giant of the Adriatic) by the leadership of the Croatian Orao, which considered Mahnič to be its inspiration and founding father (Stanković 1944: 11–15).

It was against this backdrop of intense organizational creativity that the first associations that included sport – in particular mountaineering and gymnastics – among their activities began to emerge. In Ljubljana in 1906, the president of the Christian Social Federation inaugurated the city’s first fitness hall; two years later, in the town of Škofja Loka (20km north of Ljubljana), the first Slovenian athletes performed in public. A network of Catholic gymnastic organizations named Orel after their counterparts in Moravia and Bohemia, developed quickly: by 1910, the network included 128 sections, boasting a total of four thousand members. Already before the First World War, the Slovenian Orel, organized into a federation, established contacts with other “sister” organizations in the Habsburg Empire and beyond, notably France (Ceraj 2013).

Developments in Croatia-Slavonia proceeded along a rather different timeline. It is true that even before the Great War, Mahnić created a series of youth associations (students were given preference) in Zagreb that were very active in the public sphere, such as the *Domagoj* university association (1906) and the Croatian Catholic Seniority (1912), an organization that brought together laymen and clergy and aimed to form the core of a Catholic political and cultural elite (Krišto 2004). But the success of associations dedicated to gymnastics was a later phenomenon; indeed, the popularity of such associations exploded at the end of the Great War, in the turbulent years that ultimately led to Slovenes and Croats living in the same state, the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes. In a country where no religious group could claim an absolute majority, Catholics accounted for just under 40 percent of the total population – 4,700,000 in 1921 – second only to Orthodox Christians, whose share in the population ranged from 45 to 50 percent. For those who had, until the Great War, lived in the two halves of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, their incorporation into the first Yugoslav state coincided with them becoming part of a numerical minority for the very first time.

Between 1919 and 1920, various members of the Catholic clergy active in the region of Zagreb or in Dalmatia launched local associational initiatives aimed at different sectors of society – children, young people, students, etc. – which included gymnastics among their activities. At a time when Croatian and Slovenian Catholics finally lived in the same state, it seemed that the fate of the gymnastic initiatives that were multiplying in Croatia, Slavonia, Herzegovina, and Dalmatia was merging with the existing Orel federation based in Ljubljana. In 1920, the Maribor *Slet*, a true showcase of the organizational capacity of the Slovene Orel in which several Croatian and Dalmatian delegations participated, only confirmed the hegemonic position of Slovenes in Catholic gymnastic organizations in Yugoslavia. However, the plan to have a single gymnastic federation for a single religion in a single state was short

lived: after Maribor, the federation process continued but separately. In 1923, an openly Croatian Orao men's federation was established with its headquarters in Zagreb; it had its own structures that were entirely separate from those in Ljubljana (Ceraj 2013).

To understand the significance of this rupture in the federation of all Catholic gymnastic societies, it is worth pausing to look at the profiles of activists – secular, this time – who became the leaders of the Croatian Orao during these tumultuous years, particularly Ivan Merz (1896–1928). Born into a confessionally mixed family in a city – Banja Luka – that had, until a few years earlier, belonged to the Ottoman Empire, a place where Catholics held minority status, Merz studied first in Zagreb and then at the Catholic University of Paris. A member of the Seniority, Merz met and worked with Bishop Mahnič, who was to be his lifelong source of inspiration. His stay in the French capital, in those years the center of the “school wars” (Déloye 1994 :199–286) between the Catholic Church and the French secular state, allowed him to become involved in local Catholic intellectual circles and develop what Martin Conway calls a “fortress mentality” (2004: 162–206), i.e., the perception of the Catholic faith as an entity under siege, requiring sudden and uncompromising action. Intellectual work always went hand in hand with his charitable work in Paris's suburbs, and playing sports and frequenting militant Catholic associations such as the *Croisade eucharistique* (Eucharistic Crusade) allowed Merz to develop a different level of commitment to the re-Christianization of society (Matić and Lagetar 2013).

The 1922 publication of the papal encyclical *Ubi arcano Dei consilio* was a watershed moment in this history. In this proclamation, the new pontiff Pius XI made explicit the principles that were to guide the work of Catholics in society. In this text, which is considered *the* founding text of Catholic Action, the laity – men and women – were invited to engage in the various “‘voluntary extra’ of Catholicism” (Conway 1997: 12) in the public sphere and in structures reserved for the laity. These activities would be under the strict supervision of the

bishops (*Nulla sine episcopo*) and in strict obedience to the pope. Faced with the tendency to limit faith to the private sphere, Pius XI called on the faithful to develop a fully Christian society in which Christ reigns over all aspects of life – both public and private. This was a call to make a social and political commitment; however, it was envisaged as a commitment separate from political party affiliation, including mass parties. The Croatian Orao's bond with Pius XI was very strong: it is no coincidence that one of the federation's first initiatives was to organize a pilgrimage to Rome in 1925, where they would meet the new pope in a private audience "to kiss his holy hand" (AAV 1).

The organizational principles of the *Ubi arcano Dei consilio* were progressively adopted by other Croatian lay activists who later took on increasing responsibilities in the organization, notably Ivo Protulipac (1899–1946) – a lawyer and later president of the Orao federation, and Marica Stanković (1900–1957) – a teacher and president of the Orlice federation. In contrast, similar Catholic activists found it difficult to establish these principles in Slovenia. In that context, Catholic gymnastic organizations had been created before the Great War, and members of the clergy participated as regular members, side by side with the laity. Gymnastics played a predominant role in associational life. But above all, from its founding, the Slovenian Orel had extremely close ties with the Slovenian People's Party, an organization that had been successfully mobilizing the support of the Catholic population since 1892. Throughout the interwar period, Orel would maintain a link to this political party, which was led by Anton Korošec, a Catholic priest who would later be part of several government coalitions and serve as a state minister many times during the interwar period.

In the reports that Apostolic Nuncio Ermenegildo Pellegrinetti (1876–1943) sent to the Holy See, the Orel was linked to a political party and did not answer directly to hierarchy of the Catholic Church, a development that did not collate with the functioning of the newly established Catholic Action movement. When, for example, the Nuncio described the

complex ecosystem of Catholic associations in Yugoslavia to the Secretary of State in 1929, he carefully explained that “the Slovenian Orel is not formally part of Catholic Action; it does not bear the name Catholic, and although based on the Christian concept and operating in close moral union with the clergy, it is not dependent on the hierarchy in the way that the Croatian **Orao** is” (AAV 2). This divergence seems to have been of primary importance for the leaders of the association, and it was mentioned as the main cause of the Croatian-Slovenian associational divide. In the foundational *Zlatna Knjiga* of the Croatian Orao, Merz stressed the importance of keeping the organization under the authority of the bishops and independent from political parties, implying that the latter were unfit to promote the common good (Merz 1924: 1).

This gradual definition of a specific Croatian Orao associational culture, inspired in part by the Central European Orel but transformed by Catholic Action, was not only the outgrowth of Zagreb-Ljubljana conflict. The decision to develop the Orao firmly under the auspices of Catholic Action emerged as the result of a series of clashes, never fully resolved, within the Catholic political arena. The reaction to Pius XI's encyclical among Croatian Catholics was, in fact, far from unanimous. The most important resistance came from men who in 1919 established – following the Slovenian model – a Croatian People's Party; this party was to have a tempered Yugoslav orientation, and its founders aspired to capture the overwhelming majority of the Catholic vote, similar to their Slovenian counterpart. The Croatian political arena, however, was organized very differently during the era of the Constituent Assembly. In the elections of 1921 and in subsequent elections, the party able to mobilize the Croatian vote, particularly in the countryside, was the Croatian Peasant Party led by the Radić brothers. This party had a federalist, Croatian nationalist orientation and, above all, was characterized by a profound anticlericalism. The leadership of the newly formed Croatian People's Party (scornfully described as a “party of intellectuals and poets, with

almost no following among the people” [AAV 3] by the Apostolic Nuncio a few years later) proved to be irrelevant in the electoral contest. To cope with this failure, party leaders tried to gain hegemony within Catholic organizations, and in particular Orao; thus, the party would use voluntary associations as a surrogate organizational platform. This political option, i.e., binding the men's and women's federations of Orao to a political party, was soundly rejected by Merz, Protulipac, and Stanković.

If Orao’s Catholic press organs tried to show that the association remained united under the banner of Catholic Action throughout the second half of the 1920s, the Vatican Apostolic Archive reveals a much more complex reality. In fact, in a detailed report sent by Merz to the Holy See in 1927, we learn that partisans of the Croatian People's Party maintained a certain influence in the Orao federation, particularly in Herzegovina and Dalmatia. Indeed, the associational network of Orao became a battleground between different clerical factions (bishops and locally influential religious orders such as Jesuits and Franciscans), indulging in veritable “priests’ wars” (*guerre pretesche* – the expression is, once again, the Nuncio's) (AAV 4) replete with poisonings, conspiracies, and attempts to take control of or break up the Croatian Orao.

Despite these internal conflicts, the growth of the Croatian Orao did not cease. Within a few years, it had become the hegemonic Catholic umbrella organization for the Croats in the Kingdom, and its influence was particularly felt in Croatia, Slavonia, Dalmatia, and Herzegovina. In 1927, the men's organization included 192 associations boasting nine thousand members, while the women's federation, created only two years earlier, had one hundred local sections and more than five thousand members (AAV 5).

Ornithological Wars

The distinctive elements of Orao depended, as we have seen, on the balance of power inside the Catholic political arena – in Croatia, Yugoslavia, and globally. This aspect, however, intersects with another core dimension. In the period between the two world wars, Orao was far from holding a monopoly on youth gymnastics. In the aftermath of the Great War, the field of gymnastic organizations was already crowded and rapidly restructuring. There were, of course, the organizational networks of the numerous national minorities of the new state (Janjetović 2005), especially German-speaking ones (Mezger 2020), as well as the Scouts, which had spread across the British imperial space and far beyond, including in Central Europe, starting in the first years of the twentieth century (Manin and Popovčić 2018). However, the associational networks that enjoyed a hegemonic position in the Yugoslav space were undoubtedly those that harked back to Sokol.

It is important to remember that in Yugoslavia in the 1920s, a diverse group of organizations referenced Sokol culture. At the outbreak of the First World War, three Sokol federations, the Slovenian (8,000 members), the Croatian (15,000 members), and the Serbian (8,000 members) had already built distinctive and uneven networks in the region. The creation of a unitary state for South Slavs in 1918 was accompanied by efforts to unify the various Sokol organizations operating in the Yugoslav space. The union, called the Sokol Union of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, later Jugoslovenski sokolski savez (Yugoslav Sokol Union), continued to use Slovenes as its main pillar, and it experienced a rapid expansion especially in Bosnia, Herzegovina, pre-war Serbia, and Montenegro. However, this organizational unity was short-lived. From the outset, the leadership of the Yugoslav Sokol Union showed itself to be intransigently Yugoslavist and close to the Serbian politician Svetozar Pribićević. While the leader of the Democratic Party was the champion of Yugoslav political and administrative centralism, the leaders of the Yugoslav Sokol Union were in favor of an associational centralism that left little autonomy to the pre-existing networks. This, then, was a project that

met with great resistance, especially in Croatia and Slavonia, where Sokol leaders favored a federation rather than a union. As a result of these differences, the Croatian Sokol became autonomous again in 1922; it quickly grew to 27,000 members in 1929, becoming the first Sokol organization in Croatia and Slavonia. To these networks must be added the aforementioned Slovenian Orel, which had 15,000 members in 1928 (Troch 2019). In order to distinguish themselves from this field, the leaders of Orao codified and standardized a set of symbols: uniforms, flags, a greeting (*Bog živ!* or “God lives!”), a motto (*Žrtva, Euharistija, Apostolat*, “Sacrifice, Eucharist, Apostolate”), songs (e.g., *Lijepa naša domovina*) that served to create a sense of belonging – to the association, to the global Catholic community, to Croatian nationhood – during the Orao *slet* and in everyday life.

The field of gymnastic organizations was not only diverse but also, as Troch states, characterized by “clear elements of competition” (Troch 2019: 65). Research on Sokol in particular emphasizes both the minor and major conflicts that pitted falcons against eagles, but especially the Croatian and Yugoslav Sokol against each other starting in the immediate post-1918 period. Competition was a structural feature of the wider movement, and articles published in the numerous publications promoted by the separate gymnastic networks constantly reaffirmed their particular federation’s moral, pedagogical, and organizational superiority. As the official press organ of the Orao federation reiterated in 1923, “Sokol is sokol, whether Croatian or Yugoslav. For us it is a liberal organization, which must be suppressed at every step. . . In the struggle against Sokol, be elevated and enlightened. Never provoke but at the same time do not be afraid. The Orao wins with reason and truth” (“Korak naprijed” 1923: 7). At various times, especially in connection with historical commemorations or general elections, the rivalry between the Croatian and Yugoslav Sokol spilled out onto the streets and squares, taking on a paramilitary character. In these cases, state authorities acted as arbiters or, more frequently, took the sides in the struggle, depending on whether or not the

Democratic Party was governing at the time (Newman 2015: 131–132, 149–157). If the Yugoslav Sokol initially aligned itself with Pribičević's party, the Croatian Sokol gradually moved closer to the party of Radić and – after Radić's assassination in 1928 – Vladko Maček. While less involved than their counterparts in street clashes, members of the Croatian Orao were involved in confrontational, sometimes violent episodes, especially when rival organizations used the same venues for their training. Occasionally, Orao members ended up in the press for particularly violent acts. The most famous episode in terms of its seriousness was one that occurred in Čitluk in February 1928: around four hundred local peasants faced off against each other under the Orao and Croatian Sokol crests at a Mass. The political life of Yugoslavia had become characterized by a violent radicalization that reached its zenith with the assassination of Stjepan Radić in Parliament a few months later. In this context, the small town of Herzegovina became the scene for violent clashes between persons armed with revolvers and makeshift weapons, which left a few dozen people wounded and a Sokol activist lying dead on the ground after the intervention of the gendarmes (“Krvavo razračunavanje sokola i orlova” 1928: 6).²

The specificity of Orao is also, and above all, visible in the way the federation leadership conceived of gymnastics. In a 1927 article published in the bulletin of the Orao federation, one can read an interesting discussion about the place of physical training programs – composed of “free exercises (calisthenics and athletics), exercises with apparatus, group exercises and combat exercises” (Troch 2019: 61) – in the association's agenda. “Everywhere in our beautiful Croatian homeland, a new generation is growing, a new spirit, the spirit of Orao masculinity [*Orlovska muževnost*], which transforms the young and the entire nation into new people, people endowed with chivalry [*viteštvo*] and nobility.” This was a regenerative masculinity inscribed onto men's bodies through physical activity, but not just

² I am indebted to Vladana Putnik Prica for this article.

any physical activity. In particular, such regenerative masculinity would not result from participation in competitive sports – an aspect on which Sokol and Orao agreed. The same article goes on to say, “sport is a child of the modern age and carries with it all the weaknesses of modern training,” particularly its competitiveness: “the sportsman wants to ‘win’ completely and win by any means. It should be understood that such a disposition awakens all the weak elements of our nature such as anger, envy, injustice”; a member of the association “will cultivate harmonious exercises [*harmonična tjelovježba*], so as to develop the body in a harmonious manner” and will prefer these activities to disciplines such as football. Paraphrasing a well-known Sokol motto, the article argues that “the masculinity of Orao orders all its members to perform a chivalrous act, not for money, not for personal gain, but for the love of God and neighbor” (Jeraj 1927: 100). The purpose of gymnastics is, in short, religious rebirth, since only religious awakening saves humanity. As Protulipac asserted in 1929, “rebirth begins in the field of religion, and then extends to the social and national fields, and not the other way around. Instil Catholicism into the souls, into life, make it powerful so that it transforms national and social life” (Protulipac 1929: 35).

The leadership of the Croatian Orao pursued the separation of gymnastics from the liberal and primarily nationalist agenda that characterized the Turnverein and Sokol gymnastic societies in Central Europe in order to use them to advance a different agenda: the recatholicization of modern society. The activities of Orao’s associational branches were under the supervision of bishops and imbued with Catholic moral theology; from the perspective of the Catholic church, these measures offered the best guarantee that gymnastics would be purified of its negative aspects. If Sokol networks were, at least in theory, open to every Croat/Yugoslav regardless of religious affiliation, the Croatian Orao rejected what its leaders called “confessional indifference.” Orao’s membership would be exclusively Catholic,

and the organization sought to reinforce the borders of a community it conceived of, first and foremost, in terms of confession.

The self-portraits that appear in Orao publications are optimal for examining the specifics of the associational culture of the Croatian Orao. At first glance, the 1927 photo of the Karlovac chapter could be mistaken for any number of rival associations: standing and seated men, young and muscular, in uniforms or gym clothes, organized in two rows with the associational symbol in the center.

[PLACE ILLUSTRATION 1 HERE]

Orlovi from Karlovac, associational self-portrait, 1927 (Source: *Orlovka straža* 1927: 83)

Careful observation of the photograph, however, and the accompanying caption written by an Orao activist, unequivocally conveys the specificity of the association: “The knights of Orao rise up and declare war with more strength than their enemies [i.e., liberals]. They are not afraid, they have already chosen their symbol on the battlefield, the sign of the cross, the battle cry: God lives! How divine is the symbol of Orao. In the shadow of the falcon's wings is the symbol of the cross, so dear and holy to us: red, white, and blue!” (*Orlovka straža* 1927: 83). The juxtaposition of male bodies with religious and Croatian national symbols served to create a model antagonistic to that which was perceived as hegemonic and oppressive, namely that of Sokol, which was referred to as “our opponents” (*naši protivnici*) in the association’s press. Self-portraits such as this also constructed and broadcasted a model of “muscular Catholicism” (McDevitt 1997; Vanysacker 2021) aimed at dissociating Catholicism from the idea that it represented the past, a rear-guard struggle, the antithesis of modernity. Young and strong bodies like these were to be the material representation of a generation that aimed to restore strength, honor, and, above all, a future to the contemporary Catholic Church.

At the same time, the gymnastic practices of the Croatian Orao, and their regenerative purpose, were heavily influenced by gender. As Troch explains, in the Yugoslav Sokol, men and women performed essentially the same exercises; both sexes had access to all sports, and gymnastic performances included groups of women and men. Gymnastics, therefore, at least implicitly, “challenged patriarchal gender patterns” (Troch 2019: 70). In the case of the Croatian Orao, the approach to gender appears to have been more complex, and the participation of women in gymnastics was decidedly more problematic. Referring to the European bishops' stance against the indiscriminate presence of women in gymnastic performances, especially in Germany, Italy, and Czechoslovakia (Vanysacker 2015, 2022), leaders of the Croatian Orao insisted on a number of things: the health, hygienic, and nationalist imperatives of Orao were never to undermine the belief in gender difference or Catholic sexual morality. This meant, first and foremost, that all illicit contact between boys and girls was prohibited. Indeed, the entire organization was to be entirely segregated with respect to gender, in contrast to the Yugoslav Sokol. Thus, formal and informal contacts between boys and girls were reduced to a minimum.

The association's leadership appeared obsessed with the presence of girls in the ranks of the association, during gymnastic performances, and in everyday life. The association's press insisted on the need to preserve the idea of a Catholic femininity based on modesty. Stanković, for example, recalled that, “practically every day,” Merz “broadcasted a circular from a Catholic bishop on fashion, a discourse from the Holy Father on the same issue,” and noted that already in 1925, Merz was inviting *orlice* (members of the women's federation) to undertake a real “radical fashion apostolate” (*radikalni modni apostolat*) (1944: 128). As early as 1926, the assembly of the Savez Hrvatskih Orlica adopted a resolution against the spread of “contemporary fashion” and required all members of the federation to wear “chaste, decent, Christian clothes. The skirt is at minimum above the knee, the sleeves cover the

shoulders, the dress is neither transparent nor tight.” The assembly also decreed that members of the association must refuse to listen to contemporary music, and that “the only dance allowed is the chaste, popular kolo” (Stanković 1944: 139). When in 1928 some sectors of the Roman Curia, concerned about potential moral drift in the international Catholic movement, launched an inquiry into the dress codes adopted in Catholic schools and associations around the world, the Apostolic Nuncio in Belgrade reassured the Holy See by saying that the outfit in which girls practiced gymnastics was “modest, close-fitting, with sleeves and skirt reaching a little below the knee” (AAV 6). The photos reproduced in the association's publications, in fact, suggest that *orlice* always participated in public gymnastic events wearing particularly high-collared clothing.

[PLACE ILLUSTRATION 2 HERE]

Orlice at the Sarajevo *Slet*, 1920s (Source: Stanković 1944: 1)

In spite of the level of attention the sartorial modesty of association women received, the Nuncio emphasized that among Catholics, not everyone approved of Orao performances: “nevertheless, many people do not look favorably on such public productions as the modesty and privacy of young girls certainly suffers” (AAV 6).

Lose the Body, Radicalize the Soul

Recent historiography on religion insists that relations between the Yugoslav government and the Croatian Orao were poor and describes the latter as the object of systematic state repression. However, evidence suggests rather that the relationship between Catholic gymnastic associations and Belgrade was nuanced. It is true that when Pribičević was part of the governing coalition (for brief periods in 1922 and between 1924 and 1925), restrictions on students' participation in the Croatian Orao were introduced because the association was

considered a separatist organization. However, measures such as these proved to be relatively ineffective and inconsistent because the bans were lifted as soon as the leader of the Democratic Party left his position (Troch 2019). Certainly, the fact that the Croatian Orao was a rival of the state-friendly Yugoslav Sokol did not help to cultivate sympathy toward the Catholic gymnastic organization among government circles. As Orao's leadership complained several times to the Apostolic Nuncio, the Serbian press close to the government persistently accused Orao of insufficient loyalty to the Yugoslav political project.³ At the same time, this perceived disloyalty did not prevent the association from receiving the support of a member of the royal family at international events. Even Merz, in a confidential exchange with the Nuncio in the late 1920s, stressed that Orao's relations with state authorities were not terrible. As the leader of the federation explained, "in Brač and Šolta [two islands in Dalmatia] and in some other places, the local authorities seriously persecuted our branches and several secondary school headmasters did not want to allow pupils to join our association." However, he added, "in general, the political authorities have not posed great difficulties for our development" (AAV 5).

In early 1929, a major rupture occurred that profoundly altered the political order of Yugoslavia and, consequently, also altered relations between the state and Orao. On January 6, 1929, King Aleksandar suspended the constitution, dissolved Parliament and all the political parties, and asserted his direct rule over the country, flanked by a government of loyalists. Officially, he did this to counter the intense violence in parliamentary life that had culminated with the assassination of the Croatian political leader Radić in Parliament the year before. However, this marked the beginning of the royal dictatorship. In the months that followed, the state – renamed the Kingdom of Yugoslavia – officially adopted a new national theory known as Integral Yugoslavism, which denied any legitimacy to "tribal" identities –

³ See, for example, the article "Depolitizacija na djelu," *Narodna Politika*, no. 68 (September 10, 1927), cited in AAV 7.

Serbs, Croats, Slovenes – recognizing “Yugoslav” as the only legitimate national identification. A reorganization of the country's administrative borders to erase historical regions, accompanied by the establishment of press censorship and increased police repression, completed this authoritarian project of national unification. In this context of forced unification, associations considered as “tribal and separatist” – a sufficiently vague formulation that left the authorities plenty of room for maneuver – were abolished. One field in which the royal government showed its intransigence was that of gymnastic organizations: in order to put an end to the crowded ecosystem of gymnastic associations, the government in Belgrade forced all existing associations to unify into a single Yugoslav federation charged with transmitting the new national theory of Integral Yugoslavism to new generations. Existing networks, including that of Orao, could choose between merging into the newly formed Sokol Kraljevine Jugoslavije (Sokol of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia), a quasi-state organization in charge of physical education, or disbanding altogether (Nielsen 2014: 77–136).

In the weeks that followed, the victory of the royal government seemed total. The leaders of the men's and women's federations of the Croatian Orao chose, without hesitation, to disband. The Yugoslav Catholic bishops, through their representative the Archbishop of Zagreb, publicly attacked the Sokol of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, which forced Catholics to participate in an aconfessional organization side by side with non-Catholics (Nielsen 2014: 221–228; Troch 2015: 157–164). This was an unprecedented conflict that lasted for a good part of the 1930s, and which the Holy See tried to remedy by signing a Concordat with Yugoslavia. A few months later, however, Ivo Protulipac and the other leaders of Orao (Merz had passed away in the meantime) succeeded in rebuilding the association's network using a legal contrivance: the organizational infrastructure of the Croatian Orao was reconstituted as a religious association that was dependent on the Apostolate of Prayer and under the

supervision of the Jesuit order, thus escaping the new law's restrictions on voluntary associations. Sporting a new name, Križari (Crusaders), but essentially composed of the same people, activities had already resumed in 1930. The only important difference was that the newly re-established organization pledged to abandon all forms of gymnastic and physical education, giving the state a monopoly in this arena (Prlenda 2013).

It is astonishing, both in the documents and in the memoirs of Orao leaders, to see the ease with which the association abandoned its gymnastic practices and how this had no bearing on the success of the organization. In her personal memoirs about this difficult period, Marica Stanković's sadness and melancholy centered on the loss of symbols, uniforms, and flags, but never gymnastics (Stanković 1944: 55–57). Why?

As early as the publication of *Zlatna Kjniga*, Ivan Merz – who was himself a great sportsman, playing tennis, cycling, skating, and performing gymnastics – described the mission of the Orao as follows: “to make [the Croatian Catholic youth] a legion of apostles by educating them religiously, intellectually, morally, socially, and physically.” The same text then reiterates that gymnastics “is only an tool that must be subordinate to the religious, moral, educational, and social instruction of the eagles. It is better to abolish exercise in associations than to let the religious, moral, educational, or social training of its members suffer” (Merz 1924: 2). This ancillary and instrumental role of gymnastics would also seem to be confirmed by the activity reports published in numerous Orao journals, which usually relegated gymnastics hours to the end, and placed a higher value on the federation's other activities. In a confidential report sent by Ivan Merz to the Apostolic Nuncio in Belgrade in 1927, which was forwarded to the Holy See, gymnastics is described as a means to draft young people into the movement, preventing them from ending up in other gymnastic organizations such as the Yugoslav or Croatian Sokol. The presence of gymnastics in the Croatian Orao responded – in Merz's words – to the need to offer young people “captivating

elements,” namely “physical education, uniforms, fanfare, and, finally, the great gymnastic performances known as *Slet*.” Again, according to the ideologue of the Croatian Oration, “indeed, experience has proven: when we organized our events with speeches in front of a large mass of people and accompanied them with gymnastic performances, our ranks have absolutely grown [. . .]. Often attracted by the uniform and gymnastics, [people] were transformed by the study circles and invigorated by the Catholic apostolate” (AAV 5).

These words point to what other studies on gymnastic movements suggest, specifically “an implicit, though largely unexpressed, conflict between what the organizers wanted the sport to be and what the gymnasts themselves expected of their sport” (Holt 1981: 53). Even clearer and more decisive were the reports that the Apostolic Nuncio sent to the Vatican: in a document from 1929, it is very clear that in the federation, “physical education was a tool, and not the main one, of religious education; in fact, a large number of members did not take part in gymnastic exercises” (AAV 2). In short, gymnastics was an instrument of Catholic mobilization, and its practice was uneven from one section to another.

The development of the new association was rapid, especially considering that the state administration did not hesitate to thwart the Crusaders. In a 1935 report sent to the Holy See, the Nuncio denounced Belgrade's measures aimed at “monopolizing education, as was attempted in Italy, [and] as is now being attempted in Germany with the ‘Hitler Youth,’” as well as emphasized the state authorities’ frequent harassment of Catholic associations. According to the diplomat, despite the fact that the Crusaders had been founded in accordance with the law, “the authorities proceeded as if everything that was not strictly religious was forbidden; in various places, they harassed the associations because the young people went on a few outings, or set up a choir or a small band, or even a literary academy or a performance in a small theater.” The Yugoslav authorities, therefore, tried to “lock Catholics in church” (AAV 8), preventing them from playing an active role in the public sphere. In spite of this,

and in spite of the precariousness of its position, the Crusaders enjoyed major success. They not only reconstituted the previous associational network of Orao but expanded it: in 1936, the association already had more than 20,000 members, and this increased to over 43,000 members across Croatia, Slavonia, Bosnia, and Vojvodina alone in 1939 (Prlenda 2013).

The victory of the royal government over the Croatian Orao appears even more like a pyrrhic victory when one considers transformations in the discourse and practices of these organizations. Like the Orao had done earlier, the Crusaders promoted through a panoply of activities and its press organs the true re-Christianization of Croatian society, the cornerstone of which was the pursuit of the physical and spiritual purity of youth. In addition to promoting the participation of young people in liturgical life, the association organized an intense series of educational events featuring very different topics including faith, morals, social issues, anticommunism, the history of medieval Croatia, and many more. The association's press releases provided updates on how successful this Catholic reconquest of society was versus the influence of state schools, which were considered the outposts of liberal, Masonic, and anti-Catholic culture. As highlighted by Sandra Prlenda, among others, despite being deprived of physical education, in the 1930s the Crusaders managed to organize a real educational counter-space where generations of young Croatian Catholics cultivated a national, social, and state project that served as an alternative to the Yugoslav one. As the Nuncio commented, “the association of the Crusaders [. . .] in every speech magnifies the past, the present, the future of Croatia, and even with its most refined ascetic character, it has achieved great popularity and diffusion” (AAV 3). Thanks to sections of the association, a “great” Croatian nationalist discourse managed to circulate throughout wide segments of society – sometimes silently, sometimes in open conflict with Yugoslav authorities – contributing to younger generations of Croats’ alienation from the Yugoslav project. Long before Serbian political leaders decided to abandon national unitarianism and state centralism by authorizing the

establishment of a Banovina Hrvatska, a Croatian governorate with wide autonomy in 1939, associations such as the Križari were already cultivating and disseminating the idea of a Holy Croatia that extended beyond historic Croatia to Dalmatia, Bosnia, Herzegovina, and Bačka. In this new homeland, Catholic and national revival went hand in hand.

Conclusion

Focusing on the trajectory of the Croatian Orao and its institutional successors, this article demonstrates that the circulation of gymnastic practices in the first half of the twentieth century was anything but orderly. The construction of an associational culture specific to this organization – which was progressive and never completely stable – depended on developments in both the Catholic Church and the first Yugoslavia, two entities that offered Orao leaders a wide array of associational practices and organizational models from which to draw inspiration. Orao culture became increasingly well-defined through complex and extremely creative processes of adoption, selective appropriation, and opposition. By mobilizing sources that can be traced back to the Catholic Church's leadership and associational leaders, an attempt was made to “seize the perspective of those who receive, interpret and select the elements of these models that seem to them the most relevant, the most attractive” for their own political agenda (Downs 2019: 6). A study of trans-institutional and transnational circulations indeed allows us to understand to what extent gymnastic organizations are part of a deeply interconnected institutional archipelago that can only be understood through these interconnections.

The Croatian Orao helps us understand the transformation of European Catholicism in the years following the Great War, when a new generation of men and women – priests, and, above all, lay people – committed themselves to opposing many political projects: liberalism, socialism, feminism, and the many other “-isms” in vogue in the great political laboratory of

interwar Europe. The battle against these visions of social transformation – which appeared contrary to, or simply indifferent to religion – was intertwined with another: the struggle against new social and consumer practices that, thanks to technological progress, were becoming increasingly pervasive and contributed to the progressive secularization of society. In order to increase their chances of success, Catholic activists did not hesitate to domesticate social practices such as gymnastics that were initially foreign to them, developed in other geographical contexts, and/or originally associated with other political ideologies. The transformation of gymnastics into a format compatible with Catholicism was a process that was never fully completed and always fraught with tension, particularly with regard to the ethical and gender implications of this form of physical exercise. The example of the Croatian Orao clearly shows that the history of biopolitics involves both state and civil society.

Orao also sheds light on the transformation of state-society relations in the first Yugoslavia. As we have seen, in the 1920s, relations between the Croatian Catholic gymnastic organization and the government were marked by a cold non-belligerence tinged with mutual distrust. With the establishment of the royal dictatorship in 1929, the relationship changed, and distrust became open hostility. Rather than revealing the pervasiveness of Belgrade's repressive policies, the history of the Croatian Orao demonstrates the limits and counterproductive character of this authoritarianism. Regarding limits, the plan to autocratically eliminate all forces perceived as separatist within the country, which was announced in January 1929, clashed with the balance of power on the ground (Croatian society) and internationally (the Holy See). Such policies were counterproductive because the persecution of the association after 1930, together with the monumental failure of the state to ratify a Concordat with the Holy See, only radicalized a significant segment of the Catholic population of the country against Yugoslavism, and the recently obtained state monopoly on physical education could do little to moderate this tendency. Resurrected under another name,

Orao became the foundation for a new, structured space of education and sociability that rivaled the state's.

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