
Fabio Giomi, Stefano Petrunaro (eds), Voluntary Associations in Yugoslavia (1918-1941) / Le fait associatif en Yougoslavie (1918-1941)

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- 1 The special issue of the *European Review of History / Revue européenne d'histoire* on voluntary associations in interwar Yugoslavia testifies to the renewed historical interest in twentieth-century associational culture. Focusing on the largely-unknown-to-English-speaking-readers Yugoslav case, the explicit intention of its editors is to de-center the Western paradigm regarding associational activities and culture.
- 2 The Kingdom of Yugoslavia is a fascinating case study, as the editors acknowledge in their thoughtful introduction. It encapsulates the main European dynamics of the period: transition from empire to nation-state, coexistence of religious and ethnic minorities, political strife and fragile democratic institutions, repeated elections and dictatorship, strong inequalities. The seven papers comprising the special issue each focus on an important voluntary association, with numerous adherents and intense activities, and examine two aspects programmatically: the association's multifaceted

relations with the state and the role of gender in associational culture, both under-researched issues in the general historiography on voluntary associations.

- 3 That the dichotomy between voluntary associations and the state, assumed for a long time to be clear-cut, is not documented in historical practice, is a central contention of the editors. Together with a growing number of other historians, they maintain that the boundaries between voluntary associations and the state were porous and complex. The forms and activities of voluntary associations, their internal culture and the role of individuals in these dimensions greatly depended on the political circumstances at the local or national level. The analysis of a wide range of activities and agendas shows the great complexity of the phenomenon in which intense commitment was characterized by tolerance by or conflict with the state.
- 4 The editors also ask to what extent voluntary associations contributed to the reshaping of gender relations or became vectors for the reproduction of normative ideas about masculinity and femininity? As most articles document, while there was a gradual feminization in respect to adherence, women remained subordinated in associational life as in society at large. However, their participation contributed to increasing their visibility in public life, in allowing them to develop new experiences and skills, and in widening the space of their activities, even if sometimes in the context of traditional models of gender relations.
- 5 Ana Kladnik examines how membership in the popular Volunteer Fire Departments in southern Slovenia from the end of the nineteenth century to the eve of World War II became the locus of conflicts regarding national and local identities, torn between pro-German, Slovenian and Yugoslav loyalties. Kladnik points to the role of important members of the firefighters' associations who were also politicians at the local or national level. In the context of the intricate political changes that characterized interwar Yugoslavia, firefighters became engaged in conflicts around ethnic identities in the process of national unification. Their associations changed dramatically in the course of these years, from ethnic to national, from peripheral to central, from male to mixed.
- 6 Gajret, the most important Muslim association, with a wide range of activities, from literacy to craftsmanship, publishing and housing, and involving thousands of men and women, is studied by Fabio Giomi. He shows how, in its attempts to ensure the social, cultural and national transformation of Bosnian Muslims into Yugoslavs, Gajret's middle-class officials entertained changing relations with the Yugoslav state. These relations ranged from cooperation in the 1920s, to co-option by the state during the dictatorship and to opposition by the end of the period when the association lost its privileged position. These relations were influenced by changes in the political configuration of Gajret itself, from national indifference to nationalization, and then to pro-Serbian orientation. The author approaches the gender agenda of Gajret as part and parcel of its civilizing mission that included the modernization of Muslim women's social position. Through the example of the associational involvement of Muslim women, mainly daughters of spouses or leaders, Giomi shows that women's participation offered them some empowerment but did not play a crucial role in altering gender relations in the Muslim community.
- 7 The Sokol gymnastics movement, one of the largest associations in interwar Yugoslavia, is analyzed by Pieter Troch. Founded during the imperial period as a pan-Slavic movement, Sokol gradually grew as a local (Croatian) association before it

became central and state-controlled, following internal political changes. During the dictatorship, when it was torn by internal struggles between centralist and Croatian tendencies, Sokol became a state institution with compulsory participation. Aiming at training “physically healthy, morally strong and nationally conscious citizens of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia,” Sokol was established as a pillar of the regime, and of the unified state, before its sudden collapse after the death of King Alexander. Throughout its intervention, Sokol promoted a liberal and secular ideology for the sake of bodily health and national revitalization. While it also promoted gender equality, men remained predominant and women peripheral.

- 8 The Federation of Jewish Youth Associations of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes studied by Bojan Mitrović comprised most of the Jewish associations, whether Sephardic or Ashkenazi, that adhered to its Zionist goal. The federation aimed at recruiting prospective pioneers to Palestine through its multifaceted activities. Through the official journal of the federation, Mitrović analyses the various motives of Yugoslav Jews for participating in its activities; the confrontation between *aliyah* and the civic integration of Yugoslav Jews; the hierarchies between those ready to leave and the rest; as well as the attempts to construct “modern” gender relations. Mitrović shows that while forging a common identity among young Jews, the federation also contributed to promoting their Yugoslav identity.
- 9 The internal power struggles between old and new generations of activists in the ethnic-German welfare cooperatives in the Vojvodina in the 1930s is at the center of Bernd Robionek’s analysis. Welfare cooperatives that derived from previous voluntary associations and provided health care for poor landless German peasants as a means to preserving their ethnic identity were accepted by Serbian authorities because they relieved them from the burden of devising a comprehensive health care system. With numerous local branches, represented by strong personalities and supported by German resources, the health care cooperative movement was divided along political lines. It suffered internal conflicts and divisions opposing activists to physicians, and promoted traditional gender relations as a key to safeguarding “pure” Germandom.
- 10 The Adriatic Guard, studied by Igor Tchoukarine, was an interwar voluntary association aiming at transforming Yugoslavia into a naval nation. With its wide range of activities and its extended support network, the Adriatic Guard sought to promote the country’s maritime interests and contribute to the development of the Dalmatian coast. Tchoukarine maintains that in spite of its success in securing numbers and funding, the association did not meet its goals because of operational problems, internal ethnic and political tensions and fluctuating relations with the Yugoslav state. In fact, the Adriatic Guard promoted a project that was against the plan of developing cross-country transport across the Danube. The inability of the Yugoslav state to support the guard in its opposition fostered the increase of pro-Croatian tendencies in the Dalmatian region.
- 11 Prehrana, examined by Stefano Petrunaro in the final article of this special issue, was the largest charitable association in interwar Croatia that organized hot meals in poor urban districts in Zagreb and other urban centers. Examining Prehrana’s organizational structure and social profile, Petrunaro’s goal is to explore the role played by voluntary associations in building the poor-relief system in interwar Yugoslavia and to thus underline the importance of private-public relations in the formation of welfare structures. Focusing on the public services of a private association and using an actor-centered approach, Petrunaro stresses how middle-class understandings of family and

gender shaped the activities of poor-relief associations and how social discipline was promoted by the welfare provision offered through both state institutions and non-governmental structures.

- 12 The articles meticulously analyze the relations of the voluntary associations with state authorities and the role they played in structuring gender relations. They also contribute to a better understanding of the difficult and unfinished process of Yugoslav national unification. While all the articles are well-structured and thoroughly documented, some are more analytical than others, and some provide so many details that they will puzzle the reader unfamiliar with the intricacies of Yugoslav history. Also, the two thematic threads stressed by the editors, private-public relations and gender relations, are unequally pursued, no doubt because of the nature of the available sources. However, the coherence of this special issue is remarkable. It proves convincingly its editors' contention that the Yugoslav case is not a deviation – but a variation – of what has been considered for long as the European model of associational culture, based in fact on a few Western countries.
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