

Sport as a Modernization Segment of the Republic of Turkey and Turkish Society in the Period Between The Two World Wars (According to Yugoslav Sources)

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“Just a few years ago, it was hard to find anyone who could think that one man would come who would carry out so many radical reforms in Turkey in such a short time, mercilessly attacking what was most sacred to the Muslim world, i.e. Abolish the fez, women take off their hijabs, change the calendar, reject Islam, change the alphabet, change the language by rejecting Arabic words and introducing new Turkish ones that are unknown even to the Turks themselves, and take Sunday instead of Friday as a day of rest!” - a Yugoslav diplomat wrote in an extensive essay on the internal situation in the Republic of Turkey in 1938, expressing undisguised enthusiasm for the personality of Mustafa Kemal - Pasha, i.e. Atatürk, the creator and inspirer of these tectonic modernization changes that engulfed Turkish society during the 20s and 30s of the 20th century, and which the Yugoslav government and public opinion followed with great interest. The official Belgrade followed with particular attention the reform moves of the Kemalist authorities, which paved the way for the Turkish people towards the values and achievements of Western civilization, because the events in Turkey, in some way, also reflected the attitudes of the Muslim population in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (from 1929, the Kingdom of Yugoslavia) which, to the greatest extent, expressed sympathy for the conservative Ottoman tradition, imbued with Islam as a key social norm, present on the Balkan Peninsula for centuries.¹ One of the segments that formed the basis of the Kemalist reform system was sport, which had a significant place and role in the

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1 In early 1924, the Yugoslav diplomat in Istanbul, Trajan Živković, wrote about the importance of Kemalist reforms, especially those with a secular content: “It is of great

new ideological discourse, carefully constructed after 1923. The sport was perceived as a powerful tool for mobilizing the masses, that is, as a means of breaking centuries-old constraints that kept the population in a state of traditional lethargy and fatalistic social consciousness. It was also perceived as an important element in the field of health culture (strengthening of physical and mental health), the process of emancipation of the female population, modernization of teaching, but also the strengthening of individual military abilities through the system of physical exercises, which ultimately contributed to the militarization and stabilization of society.

Sport as a social phenomenon with specific social functions and an expression of certain social needs was present, in a certain sense, in the period before the proclamation of the Republic of Turkey in 1923. However, although certain sports disciplines were practised during the period of the Ottoman Empire, there was no more organized form of sports activities, especially one that would be directed from the highest state level, but everything, more or less, came down to personal initiative and enthusiasm. Traditionally popular sports were wrestling, swimming, some athletic disciplines (throwing a stone from the shoulder, running, long jump...), and archery (bow and arrow) and had more the character of folk, traditional entertainment, than they represented organized, systemic competitive sports. manifestations. As an expression of the Westernization of Turkish society at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, especially after the proclamation of constitutionalism in 1908, the slow penetration of sports that were practised in Europe at that time was noticed, among which there were mostly those in the domain of collective sports.

The fact that some of the first measures aimed at reforming Turkish society were carried out in the field of sports is a testament to how important the modernization of sports was to the new republican authorities. According to the daily newspaper "Obzor", which was published in Zagreb, the Turkish government already formed a special department in the first months after the proclamation of the republican state system, which had the task of improving physical education and "public hygiene". Fehmi Bey was appointed to his leadership position, in the rank of "special commissioner". Propagation of

interest for us to note that institutions are already being abolished in Turkey, whose respect our Muslims". - Archives of Yugoslavia (AY)-370-2-26, Report of the Chargé d'affaires of the Embassy of the Kingdom of SHS in Constantinople to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of SHS, 28. II 1924.

the need and importance of physical education became an obligation of religious officials (muezzins, hodjas and alims), who were supposed to “give lectures and joint exercises to children on exercise and physical education of the body” during religious education classes.² Also, the government allocated significant financial resources and hired several excellent sports coaches from England and Germany, “at high fees.” Their task was to travel throughout Turkey and establish sports organizations, making sure that children of both sexes were equally involved.³

The popularization of sports was especially aimed at the youth, and special attention was paid to girls and women because in this way the process of their emancipation was facilitated and accelerated.⁴ The Belgrade press emphasized the role of Mustafa Kemal Pasha in this, and the sports that developed the fastest among the female population were swimming and tennis.⁵

An important place in the popularization of sports and physical culture was played by “People’s Homes”, a kind of centre of cultural and educational activity, especially in the rural areas of Turkey.⁶ In addition, physical education occupies an important place in school curricula and plans. At the beginning of July 1930, the Ministry of Education ordered all secondary schools to form sports clubs that would compete against each other.⁷ In the mid-30s of the 20th century, gymnastics was represented in primary schools with three lessons lasting 20 minutes a week, which, according to the authorities in the “Central Committee for Sports”, was insufficient, so they insisted on increasing the number of lessons in physical education.⁸ The so-called Swedish gymnastics, based on “Ling’s system”, which was considered the best model for organizing and arranging physical education in schools and the army in many European countries, such as Sweden, England, Holland, Poland, Greece, Romania...⁹ In addition, boys received a certain semi-military

2 “Sport u Turskoj”, *Obzor*, 14. III 1924, 3.

3 *Ibidem*.

4 “Sa puta po novoj Turskoj”, *Jugoslavenski list*, 2. II 1928, 3.

5 “Први конкурс женске лепоте у Турској”, *Време*, 22. XII 1927, 6.

6 “Анадолија – дух нове Турске”, *Политика*, 4. XI 1938, 8.

7 “Reforme turskih škola i sport”, *Jugoslavenski list*, 18. VII 1930, 7.

8 AY-370-3-40, Report of the Embassy of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia to the Ministry of Physical Education of the People of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, March 2, 1936.

9 The Swedish gymnastics system was founded by Per Henrik Ling (1776-1839). Due

education in these classes, and special medical courses were organized for girls.¹⁰ To create enough professional staff for teaching physical education, two schools were formed – a high school in Ankara and a high school in Istanbul, from which qualified teachers graduated.¹¹

How much the Kemalist establishment valued the importance of sports for the statist concept of the organization of society is evidenced by the fact that the Ministry of Sports was established and a law was adopted regulating physical education.¹² From February 1936, all sports associations and clubs were members of the “Turkish Sports Association”, which was under the auspices of the ruling Republican People’s Party and, apart from providing the necessary funds for the further development of sports, also had the task of “implementing the policy of strengthening sports awareness”. It was headed by a general at the beginning of 1940.¹³ With this centralization, the aim was to achieve a unified organization of the physical education system and arrange the framework of sports competitions by the models of developed Western European countries, while at the same time, the government has full insight and control over sports activities.

Apart from intensive propaganda aimed at popularizing sports,¹⁴ the state authorities allocated large financial resources for its improvement. Sports organizations, clubs and associations, the number of which grew intensively from year to year,¹⁵ they enjoyed significant financial support, both from the

to its orientation towards improving health, it is also known as the “health system of gymnastics”. Ling believed that physical exercise is not only for healthy people but should also become therapy for the sick. Apart from that, “Ling’s system” had another goal, which was the aspiration to create an obedient and disciplined soldier with the right attitude and good physical preparation, which was achieved by group performance of precisely designed exercises. – “Лингов систем у Шведској, *Учитељ*, 1. V 1929, 422-423.

10 Od Sarajeva do Carigrada, *Jugoslavenski list*, 16. IV 1940, 7.

11 Schools like these also existed in other countries: Germany, England, Belgium, Poland, Hungary, Italy, Denmark, Holland... – “Неопходно је потребно да се и код нас образује Висока школа за телесно васпитање”, *Политика*, 22. IV 1936, 19.

12 “Od Sarajeva do Carigrada”, *Jugoslavenski list*, 16. IV 1940, 7.

13 М. Световски, **Атагуркова Турска**, Балкански институт, Београд 1938, p. 218.

14 An important tool in this propaganda was the press so that all leading Turkish dailies devoted several pages to news from the sports and physical education segment. Also, the “Turkish Sports Association” published its newspaper – Turkish Sport, whose circulation was around 2,000 copies at the end of the 1930s. – *Ibidem*.

15 At the beginning of 1941, 932 sports clubs with 88,000 registered members were registered in Turkey. – “Sitne sportske vesti”, *Jugoslavenski list*, 23. III 1941, 8.

state budget and from the funds of municipal self-governing authorities.¹⁶ In addition, when travelling to competitions, members of sports clubs and societies were provided with privileges for transportation by rail and ship.¹⁷ The state also financed the construction of sports infrastructure facilities and the purchase of modern sports equipment, so a multi-purpose stadium with a capacity of 35,000 spectators, two covered ("winter") swimming pools, several gymnasiums and seven playgrounds were built in Istanbul, and similar investment projects were also realized in Ankara,¹⁸ Izmir and other major city centres.¹⁹

The greatest popularity, according to the estimates of Yugoslav journalists who followed events in Turkish sports, was wrestling. It represented a truly national sport, deeply rooted in folk tradition and culture, and had several different forms, such as "oil wrestling", "arm wrestling", "leg wrestling" and the like. Wrestler competitions attracted so much attention from the audience that it was not uncommon for more than 15,000 spectators to gather at them. According to the Yugoslav press, Turkish wrestlers were among the best in the world, having won one gold, one silver and one bronze medal and two fifth places at the Olympic Games in Germany in 1936, and only the Swedish and Finnish national teams were more successful than Turkey.²⁰

On the other hand, the sport whose development progressed with the greatest dynamics, both in terms of popularity and quality, was football. Its beginnings in Turkey appeared at the beginning of the 20th century when it was practised by the English who lived in Istanbul.²¹ In the mid-20s and during the 30s of the last century, news about the development of football in Turkey,²² the visits of foreign clubs in Turkey, but also the visits of the Turkish

16 According to the knowledge of the Yugoslav diplomats in Ankara, in 1935, 80,000 lira were allocated in the state budget for the development of sports. - AY-370-3-40, Report of the Embassy of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia to the Ministry of Physical Education of the People of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, March 2, 1936.

17 Isto.

18 In Ankara, the correspondent of the Belgrade daily "Vreme" was impressed by the monumental stadium built of granite, which could accommodate around 35,000 visitors. Its construction was financed by the municipal administration. - "Велика турнеја С.К. Југославије у Турској", *Време*, 15. XI 1939, 12.

19 "У Турској је држава преузела старање о спорту", *Време*, 23. XII 1930, 8.

20 "Od Sarajeva do Carigrada", *Jugoslavenski list*, 16. IV 1940, 7.

21 "Десетогодишњица Нове Турске", *Правда*, 26. X 1933, 2.

22 In mid-April 1924, the newspaper *Pokret* wrote that to improve football skills, the Turks were hiring professional football players from Hungary as coaches. - "Ситне вести",

national team and leading clubs abroad, were frequent topics on the pages of the Yugoslav press.²³ Thus, in early May 1931, the Belgrade daily “Vreme” conveyed to its readers the characteristics of Turkish football and the way the Turkish football organization functions.²⁴ The territory of the country was divided into 18 districts (sub-associations) and the club that triumphed in the competition at the district level would gain the opportunity to participate in the matches for the championship of the republic held in Ankara, where, at the expense of the state, for three to four weeks continued the competition according to the cup system. The winner of the cup held the title for two years. Another type of football competition was the competition for the “Turkey Cup”, during which the teams visited each other. According to the evaluations of Yugoslav football experts, the quality of the football played by the clubs in Istanbul was constantly on the rise, so that at the beginning of the 30s of the 20th century, their game was at a higher level than the clubs from Bulgaria, Greece and Romania.²⁵ The fact that a year later 252 clubs were registered in the Turkish Football Association speaks volumes about the mass and popularity of football, and that, it was estimated, around 150 more were operating unofficially. The centre of football was Istanbul, where eight clubs operated, of which the most famous and the best were: “Galatasaray”, “Beşiktaş”, “Fenerbahçe” and “Istanbul Sports Club”, and Ankara, with six clubs, and Izmir, with eight, was among the leading football centres.²⁶ The national team was mostly composed of players from clubs from Istanbul and Izmir.

Покрет, 19. IV 1924, 201.

23 According to the available data, the first football team from the Kingdom of SHS that visited Turkey, i.e. Istanbul, was “Građanski” from Zagreb, in 1924. – “Ближе познанство са Турцима”, *Правда*, 5. V 1932, 8.

24 Yugoslavian sports journalists found the way of scoring in Turkish football matches unusual, according to which the winner was awarded three points, a draw meant two points, and the defeated team received one point. – “Какав се фудбал данас игра у Турској?” *Време*, 7. V 1931, 7.

25 *Ibidem*.

26 The most famous soccer clubs in Ankara were: “Moafe Gücü” (“Guardian of the Republic”), “Gençlerbirliği” and “İşahat”, and in Izmir “Karşıyaka”, “Alti Ordu” and “Alpaj”. – “Ближе познанство са Турцима”, *Правда*, 5. V 1932, 8.

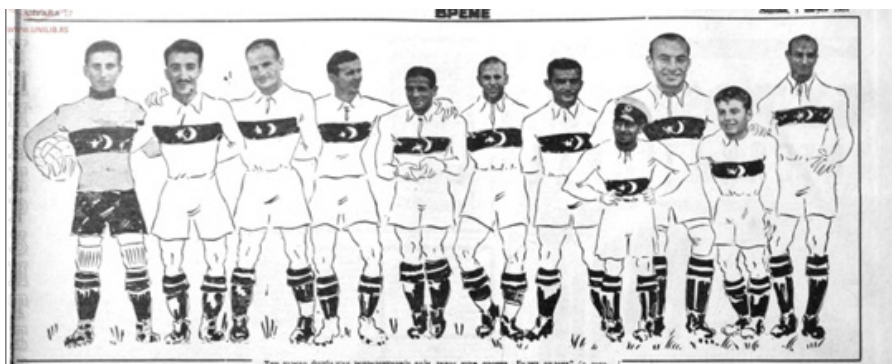


Photo No. 1: Football players of the Turkish national football team in 1937, from left to right: Dihât, Farouk, Husni, Reşat, Hasan, Fikret, Niyazi, Sait, Niyazi and Re. (Source: *Bpeme*, 1. VIII 1937, 12.)



Photo No. 2: Football players of the Turkish national football team in 1937, from left to right: Jaşar (right back), Rasiĥ (centre forward), Farouk (left back), Riza (left half), Sait (right wing), Haki (reviving centre forward) and Andan (centre forward). (Source: *Bpeme*, 30. VII 1937, 10.)

Football matches attracted a large audience to the stadiums, who cheered on their pets with frenetic cheering. A journalist from the Belgrade newspaper *Vreme*, following the visit of the Belgrade football club “BSK” in Istanbul in April 1931, impressed by the atmosphere in the stands, wrote that the audience was “very noisy and temperamental”, especially during penalty kicks.²⁷ Despite great enthusiasm, the development of football, especially

27 “When two penalties were awarded, there was such a celebration that during the execution of these kicks, a fence was formed in front of the goal, that is, in the field of play, which goes towards the players and the whole world watches how that kick is executed. And when the ball enters the net, then all over For 10 minutes, the joy cannot be contained.” - “Какав се фудбал данас игра у Турској?“, *Време*, 7. V 1931, 7.

the different tactical variants in defence and attack, seriously lagged behind the quality national leagues of Western European countries. One of the most obvious weaknesses of the Turkish footballers, who were otherwise decorated with combativeness, self-sacrifice and speed, was the lack of skill when shooting at the opponent's goal. Their attacking actions were characterized by various combinations and passes, but mostly without a decisive final shot towards the opponent's net. Such qualities were especially devastatingly manifested during the participation of the Turkish football team at the Olympic Games in Berlin in 1936, as well as during its tour of the Soviet Union, where it suffered numerous defeats. This convinced the authorities in the Turkish Football Association of the necessity of radical changes for the sake of qualitative improvement, i.e. better results in the future. One of them was the hiring of three quality English coaches who were tasked to work with the teams in Istanbul, Ankara and Izmir and thus create the "core of the national team".²⁸ The improvement of the tactics and the change in the playing style of the football team came to the fore very quickly. This was already noticed during the first visit of the Turkish national team to Belgrade, at the beginning of August 1937. The Belgrade daily *Vreme*, analyzing the play of the Turkish footballers, wrote: "The Turkish national team plays football that we have not seen recently. The Turkish players are unusually developed and excellent sprinters, which we do not have at all in our football clubs. (...) Today the Turkish national team there are not only speed and sacrifice as the main qualities. After persistent training under the supervision of the English coach Jimmy Elliott, she also learned how to play football, modern football."²⁹ *The Belgrade municipal newspaper pointed out that the Turks* "Have made a lot of progress in football technique": "With their self-sacrificing, spirited and technically polished game, they are not far behind the excellent Central European football teams".³⁰

A lot of effort was put into the creation of football referee staff. Special training courses for referees were organized, led by the English coach Bott, called "head coach", and former footballers were invited to join the referees' organization. The most radical measure related to the reorganization of the football league itself. The previous division into three leagues, first, second and third, was abolished and a new league was formed, which will consist

28 "Турци реорганизују свој фудбал", *Правда*, 2. XII 1936, 12.

29 "Југославија – Турска", *Време*, 1. VIII 1937, 12.

30 "Југославија-Турска 3:1", *Београдске општинске новине*, VII-VIII 1937, 503.

of eight clubs- four from Istanbul and two each from Ankara and Izmir. It was believed that in this way the quality of football would improve, and thus a better national team would be created.³¹ Also, at the beginning of 1937, it was decided to introduce the category of professional players into football, but with a limit on their monthly earnings.³²

Athletics competitions were also very popular among the Turkish public. In the improvement and modernization of athletics, the state invested significant financial and material resources and hired experienced coaches from abroad, among whom the German Alex Abrahams stood out in particular. Thanks to him, many talented athletes were discovered in the interior of Turkey, who won leading places in numerous Balkan and European competitions already in the 30s of the last century.³³ Their results prompted a journalist from the Belgrade daily *Pravda* to state that in Turkey "track and field is starting to take big steps forward".³⁴

At the beginning of the 30s of the 20th century, the progress of several new sports was noticed, such as various water sports (swimming, rowing, diving, etc.)³⁵, winter sports (skiing and mountaineering, above all),³⁶ cycling, motoring, tennis,³⁷ air sports, etc.³⁸

31 "Турци реорганизују свој фудбал", *Правда*, 2. XII 1936, 12.

32 "Турска уводи професионализам", *Време*, 16. I 1937, 7.

33 Thus, under Abrahams' coaching supervision in 1934, the Istanbul runner Semuh ran 100 meters in 10.8 seconds, and the runner Raif ran 200 meters in 23.4 seconds. In the triple jump, Pulios held the national record with a distance of 13.45 meters, the best long jumper was Tefvik with 6.36 meters, and in the high jump, Sedat jumped 1.75 meters. The highest pole vault was achieved by Fethi- 3.35 meters. The discus was thrown the longest by Naili- 37.44 meters, and the javelin by Karakas- 48.51 meters. - "И Турци се спремају", *Правда*, 25. VII 1934, 12.

34 "Турци се надају трећем месту", *Правда*, 27. VIII 1934, 9.

35 For the organization of rowing sport, the model of the German Rowing Association was adopted. - "Разне новости", *Правда*, 31. I 1933, 10.

36 Centar za razvoj zimskih sportova postala je planina Uludag kod Burse. - "Десетогодишњица Нове Турске", *Правда*, 26. X 1933, 2.

37 At the beginning of October 1934, the Yugoslav tennis team successfully visited Istanbul, where they played several matches with the best Turkish tennis players: Sadat, Sirin, Suat and tennis player Gordoeski. - "Our tennis team won in Constantinople with 8:0", *Правда*, 2. X 1934, 11.; "Успех наших тениских првака у Цариграду", *Време*, 5. X 1934, 10.

38 According to the impressions of M. Svetovski, a Yugoslav journalist who travelled to different areas of Turkey during 1936, 1937 and 1938, air sports gained more and more popularity among the youth day by day. This type of sport was developed under the auspices of the "Turkish Aeronautical League" and the "Turkish Bird" association. -

Generally speaking, the modern Turkish state with a republican form of government in its first decades of existence made “huge steps” in the segment of sports development and popularization of physical education of the people. At the same time, with a series of reform solutions, which fit into the sharp reformist concept of the Kemalist authorities, it carried out a kind of transition of society from a traditional, patriarchal one, strongly based on theological foundations, to a modern, lay republic, which built its foundation on the model of the achievements of the leading European state of that time. The development of sports thus, in a certain way, promoted radical changes in the general cultural matrix of the Turkish people and the state, contributing to their further modernization transformations.

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