

Sporting Gymnastics, Patriotism and Violence in Friuli Venezia Giulia up to the end of World War 1

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The first “gymnastics” performance in Trieste. The whole present Friuli Venezia Giulia part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.¹

In 1861 the Kingdom of Italy was proclaimed, but the whole present Italian district of Friuli Venezia Giulia belonged to the Austro-Hungarian Empire, even though it was inhabited by peoples who mostly felt Italian.



fig. 1 The present situation

In 1863, the "Società Triestina di Ginnastica" arose in Trieste, the district capital. The year after it presented a performance including individual and team "gymnastic" exercises with trapeze, rings, horizontal bar, parallel bars, bar-bells, vaulting horse, and somersaults from spring-board. Icarian games were also performed, in which a supine gymnast pushed upwards another gymnast placed on his feet; the latter did acrobatic feats, then he would fall back onto the former's feet. Those were not yet competitions with athletes from other clubs and with codified and standardized rules, least of all similar to the present ones.

It was an elegant activity for gentlemen, but the competitive aspect was clearly present, showing that the split between educational/healthy gymnastics and sport was already feeble.

The whole performance was attended by the Police, paying attention to any possible sign of conspiracy.

The new club was in fact formed by many supporters of the annexation of Trieste to the Kingdom of Italy who were likely to take advantage of the insurrectionary movements in nearby Friuli.

In the same year, 33 of them took part in a demonstration in Capodistria, presently in Slovenia, with irredentistic aspects.

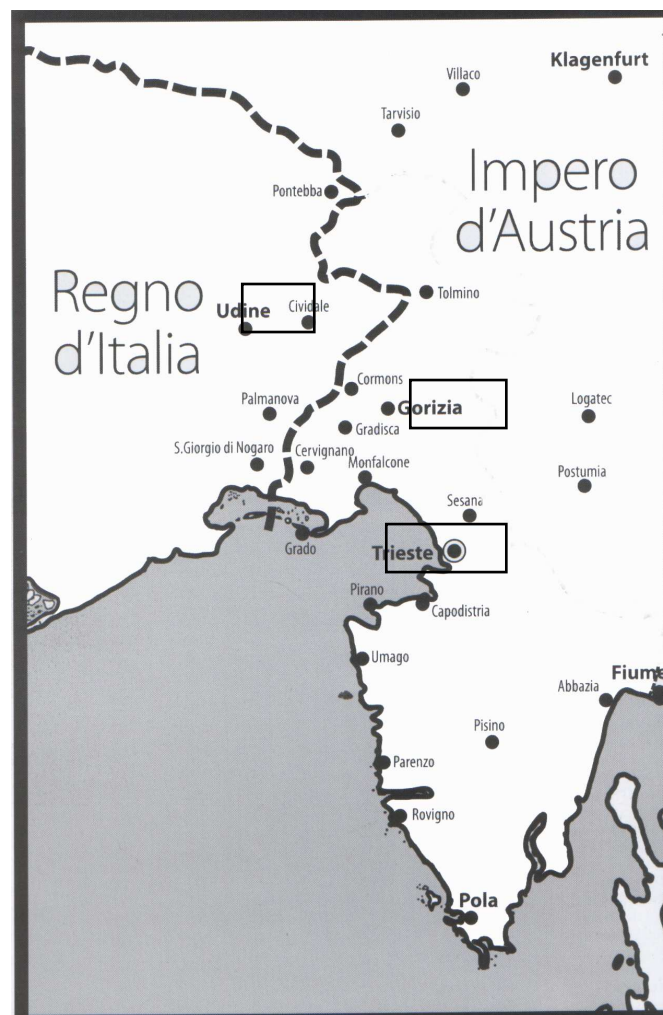
That was the pretext for the immediate dissolution of the club, counting as many as 702 members, by the Hapsburg authority.

On the whole, the situation was extremely strained; in Friuli and in Cadore, a state of siege was proclaimed because of insurrectionary movements and two of their promoters had links with Trieste.

Udine Italian again. Trieste and Gorizia fighting for more rights. ²

In 1866 the Kingdom of Italy conquered over a half of present Friuli Venezia Giulia, that is a large part of Friuli and its most important town, Udine.

The present districts of Trieste and Gorizia and East Friuli, on the contrary, remained under Hapsburg rule.



In 1867 the new Constitution of the Empire granted the right of association, the teaching and public use of the languages of all its peoples who, for their part, became more and more aware of their identity.

So in Gorizia, some Italian supporters of the annexation of that area to the Italian Kingdom founded the “Società di Ginnastica, Scherma e Canto” (Society of Gymnastics, Fencing and Singing), counting 237 members from the very beginning.

Already the year after, however, it was dissolved because of the irredentist leanings of some of its managers, well known to the Police and condemned as conspirators and disturbers.

In its place the “Società Goriziana di Ginnastica” was born at once.

In the same year also the “Associazione Triestina di Ginnastica” was founded.

Meanwhile new laws took the control of schools away from the clergy.

In Trieste the Diocese and the large Slovenian minority leaning on it protested.

The Italian majority, on the other hand, demonstrated against the pro-Slovenian politics of the Bishop and the Vatican limiting the sovereignty of the Italian Kingdom.

Rows took place between Italian nationalists, among whom tens of members of the new “Società Ginnastica”, and Slovenian nationalists.

During one of such rows, some policemen shot, killing one member and hurting many others.

*Great scholars and methodologists. Female gymnastics. The Hapsburg power against the gymnastics clubs.*³

In 1869 Costantino Reyer (Trieste 1838, Graz 1931) and Venetian Pietro Gallo and Domenico Pisoni organized the first Italian gymnastic Conference- Competition, in Venice.

Despite the few people present, rules, exercises and societies were discussed.

It was immediately followed by a second one, where the “Federazione Ginnastica Italiana” (FGI), the first sports League in Italy, was officially established, with Reyer as president, even though for a short time.

It was to deal with the diffusion and organization of gymnastic activities, as well as of other sports (swimming, tennis, football, riding, fencing and running), which in some cases were to remain among its activities until the beginning of the new century.

The relations among the managers, however, were troubled from the very beginning; Reyer was at odds with the hegemonic will of the Turin gymnastic school.

In 1870, Reyer himself was named President of the Reorganizing Technical Council of the German Gymnastics League, a very prestigious role, and later of the Technical Committee.

He was one of the most famous experts of Italian and German gymnastics, being the latter one of the most famous schools in the world.

He was sure that spreading gymnastics in Italy was depending on spreading gymnastic clubs, like in Germany.

He was warlike but shy and averse to writing essays, so he left such task to his friends Gallo and Emilio Baumann or wrote along with them.

He left above all articles of denunciation against the Italian Government's inadequacy about gymnastics and sometimes he was even open to pay for its development.

In 1871 in the Trieste club a primary school teacher born in Parenzo, a small town on the Istria coast, at present Croatian, 20 year old Gregorio Draghicchio was chosen as assistant.

A female section was also set up, proposing gymnastics with no pieces of apparatus, because they were thought not to be appropriate, mainly based on arrays and rhythmic steps.

Only in the 20th century beams and chords were introduced.

In 1872, Reyer and Gallo founded a gymnastic club in Venice.

In order to avoid further irredentist developments, the Hapsburg authorities forbade the Trieste club to take part in the gymnastics conference in Florence and the Gorizia club to be

present at the conference in Berlin, since some of its members were arrested and condemned for anti-government demonstrations.

In 1873, again for political reasons, the Trieste and Gorizia clubs were not allowed to participate in the 4th Italian gymnastic conference in Florence and the Trieste club was also forbid to attend the Bologna congress the next year.

Draghicchio, who most of all studied the German gymnastics, was called to serve on the jury of the Florence conference, where the following events, which nowadays we would call either gymnastic and athletic, were present:

- leg flexions and swings
- jump of an 80 cm. space between two parallel ropes, 60cm high, with and without a run-up
- jump with a 3m pole over a rope 1.5 m high
- climbing up a pole 5.5 m high
- walking on a balance beam 5m long, 5cm wide, and 50cm up from the earth
- exercises at the horse, parallel bars, horizontal bar, rings
- shot put of a 13 kg. ball, triple jump and 140 m. run.

In 1874, as mentioned above, the Bologna conference took place, where disagreements among FGI managers became more marked.

Some of them, among whom Reyer, founded the “Federazione delle Società Ginnastiche Italiane” (FSGI).

Since then, therefore, two Leagues, organizing separate conferences and competitions, operated in Italy.

The first gymnastic Society in Udine. The first major agonistic outcomes. Irredentism and Hapsburg repression. ⁴

Late in 1874 in Udine some notables, led by Mayor Antonino di Prampero, decided to found the first gymnastic Society also in order to “... give the necessary resources... maybe someday for (conflicts) against foreigners.”

Patriotic spirit was evident, even though the town was already part of the Kingdom of Italy. The name of the club was “Fiore dei Liberi” (“Flower of the Free”), then “Society of Gymnastics and fencing”.

Late in 1875, there were 179 members.

In 1876, the three gymnastic clubs of present Friuli-Venezia Giulia took part in the 2nd gymnastic conference competition in Venice, organized by FSGI.

Athletes from Trieste, Giuseppe Benvenuti and Achille Damini, took 10th and 12th places respectively.

Those were the first outcomes achieved in gymnastic competitions by athletes, born and/or lived in present Friuli Venezia Giulia, we know about.

In 1879, the Gorizia club was dissolved soon after the irredentist speech of its President on occasion of the decennial, on which athletes from Trieste, Istria, Dalmazia and Trentino gymnastic clubs met.

There was a clear will to keep all lands that were mainly Italian, but subject to the Hapsburgic government, connected.

More meetings of the sort were to follow in the decades to come.

In the same year, the Gorizia club saw the light again thanks to a new memorandum.

Its name was ”Associazione Goriziana di Musica, Drammatica e Ginnastica”.

The rapid dissolutions and rebirths of the Trieste and Gorizia clubs until the end of the Empire show their importance above all in respect of the will of the majority of the people to become part of the Kingdom of Italy.

Meanwhile the rivalry between FGI and FSGI did not help the Italian Clubs, since, as Draghicchio said, in 1880 less than a half of them was associated to either league.

Again in 1880, Draghicchio took part in the Italian official representative at the 5th Festival of the German gymnastic League in Frankfurt. He himself expressed gratitude from Italy. The Udine Club was present at the competition in Cividale del Friuli, where another gymnastic club had started, thus giving evidence of sympathy to the Italians in the area, very near the border on the Empire, controlled by the clerical pro-Slovenian party, regarded as “Enemy of Fatherland” by many of them.

In 1882 the Trieste club stopped a festival because of Giuseppe Garibaldi’s death, a hero of Italian Unity.

The authorities dissolved the club and suspended the issue of the review “Mente Sana in Corpo Sano” (A Healthy Mind in a Healthy Body) edited by Draghicchio.

According to the 3rd statistics of the Italian Gymnastic Clubs by Draghicchio himself (1885), in 1882 in Italy and Italian areas there were 113 sports Clubs (66 not belonging to any league, 3 to the Helvetic gymnastic League, 7 to the FGI and as many as 37 to the FSGI). They had 14,409 members of whom 9,703 were active, very small figures, often concentrated in the North, compared to the German or the British.

The 37 clubs belonging to FSGI doubled in a short time, a clear sign of its supremacy.

In 1883 in Trieste, a hundred people demonstrated in favour of the monarchy. They surrounded the gymnasium of the dissolved Trieste club and devastated it.

Mainly thanks to Felice Venezian, a clever mediator between Hapsburgh authorities and Italian extremists, however, the “Unione Ginnastica Triestina” was founded.

At the beginning, gymnastics was followed by famous Reyer, at last a teacher in Trieste who, however, in the same year resigned because of the suspiciousness shown by the Hapsburg authority, and went back to Venice.

The same authority forbade the new Society to take part in the International Dresda Competition, against Draghicchio’s will.

He was still very active and proved himself to be a great patriot too.

His new review “Il Ginnasta” sponsored the sports circles which were having troubles with the authorities. For this reason, he served six months’ prison.

Soon after he founded “Il Palladio”, which also did duty for a bulletin for the different sports clubs.

Its subtitle “Monthly Magazine of Gymnastics and Sports” gave evidence that the sport aspect of gymnastics was by then accepted and widespread.

From 1883 to 1889 also female gymnastics, still of a healthy type and lacking official competitions, developed a lot in Trieste; the gymnasts increased from 56 to 100.

In 1887, the splits were overcome. A new League “Federazione Ginnastica Nazionale Italiana” was founded in Rome, in place of the two pre-existing ones. It was to exist until today, with just small changes in its name.

In 1889, the Gorizia club was dissolved again for irredentistic reasons.

The Udine club took part in the first national gymnastic competition in Rome. It deserved a gold medal and a silver one in team competitions and more medals in individual events. In 1890 the “Unione Ginnastica Goriziana” started with as many as 300 members.

The Trieste and Udine clubs got very good outcomes at the national gymnastic conference in Milan, to which also clubs from Italian districts not belonging to the Kingdom were invited. The Trieste team got the silver crown and also a few individual medals; the Udine club only got individual medals; the Gorizia team was forbid to take part by the Hapsburg authority.

On the contrary, it was present at the celebrations of the “Federazione Ginnastica del Trentino”, another mainly Italian district subject to the Hapsburg authority.

In 1891, the Trieste club was forbid to organize, again for irredentistic reasons, the

prearranged international gymnastic competition.

The next year, Draghicchio resigned from the Trieste club, perhaps for disagreements with the management or for the secondary part he was playing by that time. After prison, he had in fact been deprived of his teaching diploma and relegated to “chief of gymnasium”. He had to sell wine to earn his livings.

In the 8 following years he carried out his precious activity as a trainer and scholar in famous “Società Pro Patria” in Milan.

The 2nd national gymnastic competition took place in Genoa and the Udine team got the top honour, the silver crown.

In 1893 in Trieste, the issue of “Il Palladio” came to an end and in Rome the 3rd national gymnastic competition took place. Draghicchio himself was the general manager. The presence of King Umberto 1st, indeed a special spectator, gave evidence of the importance ascribed to the event and to gymnastics.

The Udine athletes got various acknowledgements as a team and as individuals.

In the Gorizia club, a female gymnastic department was created which was to last until World War 1.

*The first modern Olympic games. Very good athletes in Trieste and Udine. Bombs in the Trieste club's seat.*⁵

In 1896, Italy officially sent no athlete to the 1st modern Olympic games in Athens.

Enthusiastic Giovan Battista Tellini from Udine, one of the founders of the Udine club 22 years before, however, participated in a personal capacity, at his expence. We only know he got no medals.

Since then, group gymnastics (compulsory and/or free group movements) slowly left more and more room to individual competitions (pommel horse, rings, parallel bars, horizontal bar, male and female horse vault and rope climbing).

In Italy, on the other hand, competitions included also athletic and swimming events and weightlifting for a few decades more.

In 1897 the Italian League invited all clubs to set up a female department.

Few of them did so lest gymnastics might lose the virility which had always characterized it. The Trieste and Gorizia clubs already had one.

In 1898, Draghicchio won the competition of gymnastic methodology in Turin. He was the best expert and the best informed on foreign gymnastics.

He was the general manager at a national competition again, this time in Genoa.

He moreover maintained the need for coordination between sports exercises and gymnastic teaching.

In 1899 two teams of the Trieste club got the gold medal at the gymnastic Academy in Belluno and the laurel wreath in the large gymnastic apparatuses event at the Como competition.

The Udine Club organized a big provincial competition, with 1600 participants, of whom as many as 300 girls, for the first time in Italy within a context like that.

In 1900 a group of pro-Hapsburg, having heard about the Empress's assassination, demonstrated against irredentist people and institutions.

They attacked the Trieste club and were repelled by the gymnasts barricaded inside.

Draghicchio was the general manager of the national competition in Monza, attended again by King Umberto 1st just before he was murdered. The Trieste club went into mourning for his death and stopped all events until his funeral.

Draghicchio went back to his hometown, Parenzo, where he founded the gymnastic club “Forza e Valore” (Strength and Value).

He came to an untimely end two years later.

In 1901, famous composer Giuseppe Verdi died. The Trieste club in mourning commemorated him. Soon after it was dissolved again for irredentist reasons.

In 1902 the “Società Ginnastica Triestina” saw the light.

Its gymnasts gained the first prizes in Sampierdarena and Turin.

They were coached by Aldo Boiti, a good athlete and teacher.

In 1903 an underground irredentist group belonging to an Italian organization was set up.

Giacomo Fumis, a well-known gymnastic teacher of the club, was one of its members.

In a room of the club, explosive material was gathered to make bombs to use in case of violent actions.

The year after the bombs were found out under the floor in a changing room, along with other dangerous stuff. The club was dissolved. Fumis managed to flee.

*More very good athletes and the first great trainer. Irredentism and repression toward war.*⁶

Still in 1904 the “Circolo Sportivo Juventus” (CSJ), thanks to very active athlete and trainer Boiti, and the “Unione Triestina” (UT) saw the light.

At Brescia competition, the CSJ got the most important medal and individual prizes, even first-rate ones.

In 1905, the CSJ won the first prize in the team event at Padova competition.

At the competition in Palmanova, today in Udine district, Gorizia gymnasts were secretly present as “Gorizia team”, regularly affiliated to the Italian League, one more sign of devotion to Italy.

They participated in the same way also to other competitions until 1914.

In the same year the CSJ and the UT take part in the Gorizia competition along with clubs from Trento, Istria and Dalmatia. The organizer committee, among whom Reyer, Boiti and Ernesto Fabretto, decided to found a “Federazione Adriatica delle Società Ginnastiche”.

The Gorizia club was coached by Fabretto from Udine. On the entry of Italy into the war, he went back to Udine in order to escape deportation as an Italian.

The CSJ was 1st:

- in 1906 in the team event B at the international competition in Milan;

- in 1907 for the total result and with the female junior team at the international competition in Venice, where female teams were present for the first time.

Again in 1907, the CSJ and the UT merged into the new “Associazione Ginnastica Triestina”, technically managed by still very good athlete Boiti.

In 1908 at Paris Olympic Games the first official participation of Italian gymnasts took place. Female events were not present yet.

Since then and until the 1932 Olympic Games (as well as in 6 consecutive events) the Italian gymnasts always got up on the podium.

No other time was to be so fruitful, even for the females.

The first female league event took place in Milan.

Meanwhile in Varese the Trieste male team got the first place, as well as in Rieti. Its coach was Sereno Sereni who had left his hometown, Rome, also to challenge the Hapsburg politics, detrimental to the Italians in Trieste, without any thought of economic interest and sometimes even facing personal sacrifices.

Boiti finally won his first competition of gymnastic methodology.

In 1909, the Trieste club was dissolved, again for irredentism.

Soon after “Società Ginnastica Triestina” was founded.

In 1910 it counted as many as 3000 members, 600 junior males and 600 junior females.

It was still technically managed by Boiti, by then well-known and recognized as gymnastic teacher in many States, enthusiastic and free also in former Clubs.

He was an international gymnastic judge as well.

Again in 1910, the Trieste club was present at all most important national events sending its gymnasts even though it was not allowed to participate officially.

At the Genoa national competition, the Trieste team got the laurel wreath and the large silver medal.

At Turin international competition in 1911 it got two first prizes.

Meanwhile, Trieste was the 3rd city in the Empire for inhabitants (230,000), after Vienna and Budapest.

Boiti won his 2nd competition of gymnastic methodology, confirming the importance of his ideas.

In 1913, the Italian national gymnastic male team, who was 3rd after Czechoslovakia and France at the Tournament of Nations in Paris, was led by Boiti himself.

The Trieste club was again not allowed to take part in the Milan competition. Therefore its team took part under another name, winning one more laurel wreath and one more large silver medal.

Some Hapsburg supporters stole almost all of the Trieste club's collection of medals, while the club was celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of its foundation and clubs of Split, Zadar, Parenzo and other parts of Istria (towns and localities at present Croatian), Gorizia and Trento were present.

The Vienna Parliament was at that time paralyzed by national clashes. The Empire was ruled with the only Crown's consent.

In 1914 the Trieste club organized a large Gymnastic Conference to which also sports clubs of Dalmazia, Istria, East Friuli, Trentino and Trieste, that is all lands of the Empire inhabited by an Italian majority, were invited.

That was planned and arranged by Boiti, who also was the first vice-president of the jury.

Sereni was the general manager of the competitions attended by a large audience. The event was stopped because of the heir to the throne Francesco Ferdinando's death in Sarajevo. One month later, World War 1 began.

The gymnasium of the Trieste club progressively became empty.

The athletes and many juniors were called to arms but very often they did not want to fight for the Empire. They often tried to reach Italy, also resorting to the most unexpected expedients.

So did the President, the vice-president and many teachers as well. They went to increase the number of those who were asking for entry into war against the Empire.

In Gorizia there was the same situation, moreover the gymnasium was seized.

In 1915 Italy entered into war.

Many of the irredentists remained were interned. The Trieste and Gorizia clubs were dissolved.

The Trieste club supplied to the Italian armed forces as many as 500 volunteers, 67 of whom died in the field and many deported. It moreover suffered the fire and destruction of the gymnasium from the pro- Hapsburg. After a terrible war which cost hundreds of thousands of dead only in this areas, destructions and material losses, present Trieste and Gorizia districts became part of the Kingdom of Italy.

¹ Pagnini, Cesare & Cecovini, Manlio & Pangher, Giuseppe & Ambrosi, Eugenio. *I centotrenta anni della Società Ginnastica Triestina*. Trieste 1993. p.13-15, 18- 20; Amodeo, Fabio. *Trieste. Una storia per immagini. Volume I 1900- 1918*. Trieste. 2004. p.82

² Amodeo, Fabio. *Trieste*. p.16; Agostinetti, N. *Gorizia e la ginnastica*. Gorizia 2001. p. 47-53; Pagnini & Cecovini & Pangher & Ambrosi: *I centotrenta*. p. 35,36,38

³ Ballerini, F. *La Federazione Ginnastica Italiana e le sue origini*. Roma. 1939. p.10-17; Ulmann, Jacques. *Ginnastica, educazione fisica e sport dall'antichità ad oggi*. Roma. 2001. p. 376,377; *Cento anni di vita della federazione ginnastica d'Italia. Venezia 1869-Roma 1969*. Roma 1969. pp. 25, 26; Pagnini & Cecovini & Pangher & Ambrosi: *I centotrenta*. p. 66, 100; Spangher, L. *1868-1968. Cent'anni della ginnastica goriziana*. Gorizia 1968. p. 34; Ferrara, P., *L'Italia in palestra. Storia, documenti e immagini della ginnastica dal 1833 al 1973*. Roma, 1992. p. 29- 35.

⁴ Cola, G. *ASU cent'anni 1875-1975*. Udine. 1976. p. 6-10, 44, 54 ; Pagnini & Cecovini & Pangher & Ambrosi: *I centotrenta*. p. 68,74,79, 86,89,92,97; Spangher, L. *1868*. p. 44, 67; *Cento*. pp. 59; *Cinquant'anni di educazione fisica a Udine*. Udine. 1925. p. 37; Ferrara, P., *L'Italia*. p. 47- 52; Agostinetti, N. *Gorizia*. p. 69; *Gregorio Draghicchio, un istriano a Milano. Il contributo giuliano- dalmata allo sport milanese e lombardo*. Milano 2002. p. 29, 30,81;

⁵ *Cento*. pp. 75; *Gregorio Draghicchio, un istriano a Milano. Il contributo giuliano- dalmata allo sport milanese e lombardo*. Milano 2002. p. 29,30,81; *Cinquant'anni*. Udine. 1925. p. 65; Pagnini & Cecovini & Pangher & Ambrosi: *I centotrenta*. p. 101, 108,110-116,118-120

⁶ Spangher, L. *1868*. p. 83; Pagnini & Cecovini & Pangher & Ambrosi: *I centotrenta*. p. 127-129,142-144,145-154,157,139,145,159; Ferrara, P., *L'Italia*. p. 70; Amodeo, Fabio. *Trieste*. p.30; *Cento*. p. 93