

**Football as an Instrument of Nation-Building II: (South-)East-Europe and Overseas Countries. 10th Irsee Sports Historical Conference**

**Veranstalter:** Schwabenakademie Irsee

**Datum, Ort:** 17.02.2017–19.02.2017, Zürich

**Bericht von:** Dina Klingmann / Maximilian Seltmann, Deutsche Sporthochschule Köln

Building on the elaborations of the first Irsee sports historical conference, it was this year's aim to focus on contemporary and global history perspectives in (south)east European and overseas countries and to discuss the extent to which football was, and still is, a central element and instrument of nation-building. MARKWART HERZOG (Irsee) and DOMINIK SCHALLER (Heidelberg) welcomed the speakers and participants to the 10th Irsee sports historical conference, thanking FIFA for its great sponsorship and for the opportunity to stage the conference anniversary at FIFA's headquarters in Zurich.

The first panel of speakers highlighted examples of (south-)east European countries. ENIKA ABAZI and ALBERT DOJA (Lille) opened the conference, outlining the political power that is inherent in football and its fan culture, illustrated by the example of the Serbian-Albanian football match in October 2014. The conflict between Albania and Serbia points out how a sporting event can turn geopolitical, building on the momentum induced by hooliganism. Contrasting this recent case, CATALIN PARFENE (Paris) illustrated the debate on the „Romanianization“ of Romania's national team in the interwar period. Romania's national team, and the debate which arose about its composition, shed light on the importance of a representative national team in times when national identity is formed in a country that evolved from different ethnic groups and where the role of numerous minorities has to be considered.

Shifting the focus from a political movement originating from the grassroots of society to the instrumentalization of sport by political leaders, LUKE HODGES-RAMON (London) explored the phenomenon of football as an instrument in building national pride and affirming a country's political lead-

ership. Victor Orbán, Hungary's president and a football enthusiast, offered a suitable case for such investigations. Paralleling the success of the so-called „Golden Team“ in the 1950s and the victory of Hungary's team against Austria in the 2016 European Championship, the research conducted outlined not only motives and aspirations but also the limitations of using football to promote political beliefs and national pride.

OCTAVIAN ȚICU (Chisinau) attempted to answer the question why Moldovans do not play football, fostering discussion about limitations of football in the process of nation-building. Ticu described the complexity of football-related policies of the Soviet authorities in the Moldovan SSR, who used football as an instrument of „Russification“ and imperial dominance over the local population between 1944 and 1989. The strong Russian influence on Moldovan society as well as on a large number of different ethnic groups led to the absence of both unity and self-assurance regarding national values. Consequently, a common ground on which football could have flourished as a national sport could not be established. As Soviet football was perceived as being purely Russian by the Moldovans and most of them considered themselves Romanians, the population did not identify with the „Russian style“ of playing football. The idea of a typical „way of playing football“ intrinsic to a particular culture was taken up in a number of the talks which followed.

Further insights into football in the former Soviet Union were provided by MIKAYEL ZOLYAN (Yerevan), who explored the role of the Ararat football team of 1973 in building Armenian identity and pride. Consonant with the most prestigious Armenian symbol, Mount Ararat, the success of Yerevan Ararat Football Club in 1973 marked a crucial event in building Armenian identity in the Soviet era. However, in current times the notion of Yerevan Ararat is linked to nostalgia for Soviet times rather than to national pride and identity.

How football can play a role in a continental integration process was examined by CAN EVREN (Durham). He argued that the accession of Turkish football to the UEFA coincided

---

with the rapprochement between Turkey and the European Union in the early 2000s. However, in football as well as in politics, Turkey's ambivalent relationship with Europe can be seen. On the one hand, endeavors are made to establish closer relations with Europe. On the other hand, there is a strong suspicion within Turkish football of conspiracy and unjust treatment by UEFA and the EU. Football provided an opportunity to take revenge and show strength towards the „imaginary other“ (Europe) and fostered nationalism contrary to the process of Europeanization and continent-building.

The second session was dedicated to football and nation-building in overseas countries. CHRISTIAN TAGSOLD (Düsseldorf) with his focus on Japan delved into the topic of nationalism from a perspective hitherto not touched upon: gender. He highlighted the instrumentalization of the women's national football team („Nadeshiko“) as a symbol of new hope after the threefold catastrophe of 2011 in Japan. The team's World Cup win, in 2011, was immediately seized upon as a national symbol of an unbending will to overcome the Fukushima disaster. The decontamination and reestablishment of the former training camp „J-village“ in Fukushima can be seen as a highly national symbolic act. Financed by the Tokyo Electric Power Company, J-village is to be used for the preparation of the national football teams prior to the Olympic Summer Games in Tokyo (2020). The medialization of women's football was (and will further be) used to stage national rebirth.

The importance of football in the conflict between Israel and Palestine during the era of Mandatory Palestine from 1917 to 1929 was elaborated on by OMER EINAV (Tel Aviv). Football challenged the reality of diverging cultures and politics as it was popular among both the Israeli and Palestine populations. The large influence of the British, acting as a mediator of the game, brought about different arenas in which football was played between Arabs and Jews, according to the degree of organization and oversight of the British. Many events that have happened in recent history relating to football and politics in Israel are to be seen in light of the situation during these formative years in Israel's history.

How and why football as a nation-building tool can also lose its power over time was explored by ILAN RACHUM (Ramat-Gan) using the example of Brazil. Drawing conclusions from the history of Brazilian football, he rejects the idea that football currently works as a nation-building instrument. Football within a divided nation has its limits due to the inherent possibility of failure. The game is still a constituent of collective feelings, but the lack of national support for (sport) governing bodies, the absence of the country's own best players and scant success has diminished the strength of a former nation-building tool.

GARY ARMSTRONG and HOLLY COLLISON (London) enhanced the discussion of the benefits and limitations of football with regard to building and restoring a nation, drawing on the example of the West African country of Liberia. Football played a crucial role in building society; the government relied on football to bring the nation together and the game thus became very popular. With the rise of Liberia's most famous football player, George Weah, who was awarded the title of World Footballer of the Year in 1995, the political importance of sport reached its climax. The notion of distrust in politicians, but trust in sportsmen, became evident when Weah just narrowly lost the election for presidency in 2005. Even today much trust is put in football to help restore the fractured nation of Liberia. Armstrong and Collison offered a critical perspective on such endeavors, arguing that football often works seductively and does not hold the power to guarantee sustainable change and nationhood.

Exploring the role of football star Eusebio, TODD CLEVELAND (Fayetteville) reflected on the changing symbolism of the Mozambican who was promoted as a model for Portuguese empire-building. In his country of origin, however, Eusebio's success fostered the idea of political independence from Portugal. What was expected to contribute to the support of one political idea (the colonial empire) brought about just the opposite reaction in the colonies, and a national identity emerged.

The emotions generated through sporting success and the media play an enormous role

in this process, as pointed out by CARL ROMMEL (London). Looking into the case of Egyptian football, he argued that the media and sporting authorities constituted a „football bubble“ which was supposed to support the notion of a successful state and government. The successes of Egyptian football teams (clubs and the national team) and the continual attention given to them by the media were hoped to foster affection for the Egyptian state under the regime of President Mubarak.

In his lecture on Mohammedan Sporting in Bengal, SUDIPTO MITRA (Kolkata) focused on the divisions between Hindu and Muslim nationalism in Bengal during the period of the British Empire. Mohammedan Sporting's success as a Muslim football club against native and British football clubs, as well as the composition of the Mohammedan Sporting team with its different origins and identities, inspired the creation of a larger Muslim identity in India and supported the overcoming of regional boundaries.

With regard to current sports culture, India – in contrast to the other BRICS states – has not yet shown any interest in hosting international sporting mega events. This was argued by DEREK CATSAM (Odessa, USA), who explored the role of mega events as a tool for the geopolitical positioning of the BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa). According to their international status, the BRICS states show very different motives and preferences with regard to staging such events. Russia and China have used the Olympic Games and the Football World Cup to express their strong international status, and it can be argued that South Africa and Brazil desired nation-building through hosting these events.

Thanks to the composition of the two panels, many different facets of the role that football can (or cannot) play in nation-building (and even further in empire- or continent-building) across the globe and various time periods were explored. The concluding round table highlighted the essence of the conference: football, when representing a national sports movement, possesses significant political power and can function as an instrument in the continuous process of nation-building.

Nonetheless, the limitations and risks of using football for this aim became evident. Governments and regimes face challenges when taking control of football and instrumentalizing its impact for their own political goals (Romania, Egypt, Turkey, Hungary). The uncertainty of the outcome of a sporting competition, as well as the lack of control over emotions, leads to an ambiguous relationship between football and politics.

#### **Conference overview:**

Markwart Herzog (Irsee, Germany) / Dominik Schaller (Heidelberg, Germany): Welcome and Introduction

#### *I. (SOUTH)-EAST EUROPE*

Enika Abazi / Albert Doja (Lille, France): The Global Politics of Pride and Prejudice: Hooliganism, Nationalism and Racism of a Local Football Game between Serbia and Albania

Catalin Parfene (Paris, France): National Identity and Nation-Building in Interwar Romania: The National Football Team between „Foreigners“ and Romanianization

Luke Hodges-Ramon (London, UK): Golden Team and Nationalist Dreams: The Politics of Hungarian Football Past, Present and Future

Octavian Ticu (Chisinau, Moldova): Why the Moldovans don't Play Football? Football and Empire/State-Building in the Moldovan SSR (1944–1989)

Mikayel Zolyan (Yerevan, Armenia): Football and Nationalism in a Soviet Republic: Ararat-73 and Football Nation-Building in Soviet Armenia

Can Evren (Durham, USA): The Nation against „Europe“: Turkey, UEFA and the Construction of Anti-westernism

#### *II. OVERSEAS COUNTRIES*

Christian Tagsold (Düsseldorf, Germany): The Samurai Spirit of Nadeshiko Japan: The Women's National Team, 3/11 and Nationalism in Japan

Emanuel Femminis (Zurich, Switzerland): Guided Tour: The FIFA Headquarters

Omer Einav (Tel Aviv, Israel): Both Sides of the Field: Football and the Relations between

---

Jews and Arabs in Palestine, 1917–1929

Ilan Rachum (Ramat-Gan, Israel): Brazilian *futebol*: An Agent of Nation-Building that Has Lost its Drive?

Gary Armstrong / Holly Collison (London, UK): Settlers, Kings and Lesser Players: Football and the Nation of Liberia, West Africa

Todd Cleveland (Fayetteville, USA): At home and away: Football Players and Nation-Building in Lusophone Africa across the Colonial/Post-Colonial Divide

Carl Rommel (London, UK): A Successful Bubble for the Nation's Normal: Notes on the Emotional Politics of Football in Mubarak's Egypt

Sudipto Mitra (Kolkata, India): The Nation and its Embodiments: Mohammedan Sporting in Bengal

Derek Catsam (Odessa, USA): BRICS, Bats, and Balls: Nation-Building and the Politics of Mega-Sporting Events in the BRICS Countries

Round-Table: Systematic Perspectives

Tagungsbericht *Football as an Instrument of Nation-Building II: (South-)East-Europe and Overseas Countries. 10th Irsee Sports Historical Conference. 17.02.2017–19.02.2017, Zürich*, in: H-Soz-Kult 21.04.2017.