

Dirty Wars and Football: The Ghost of General Videla

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Global Research, July 04, 2014

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I think the 1978 World Cup is one of the deep wounds of Argentine society.

– Norberto Liwski, former political prisoner, ESPN, Jun 9, 2014

As the elimination phase of the Football World Cup unfolds in Brazil, the political slant on such events is hard to resist. Sporting events on such a scale are political promotions and projections. Brazil's own government was thrilled about obtaining the tournament, so much so that it ran up the bills, raised the cost of transportation, and imposed a series of near draconian measures for population control.

The return of the World Cup to South America has a wafting smell of regret and denial to it. When it was staged in 1978 in Argentina, the country was being bled and controlled by the military junta of General Jorge Rafael Videla. All in the name of order; all in the name of pride.

The local boys did not disappoint the general. The remarkable Mario Kempes, along with the mercurial midfielder Osvaldo Ardiles and such figures as Ricardo Villa, won the tournament. The football could at stages be beautiful; Kempes, a part gangling creature of beauty who proved lethal with his golden boot; Ardiles controlling play with mesmerising potency.

For all their efforts, they could not help but be marionettes of the military junta, the playthings of a brutal regime which expended an exorbitant amount on hosting the tournament. The amount, by one estimate, was eighteen times more than that of West Germany in 1974. Nothing would be spared.

Kempes, along with his team mates, denied knowledge about the sanguinary antics of the military regime. The captain of the side, Daniel Passarella, who received the trophy from General Videla himself, now claims that, had he known about the gross human rights violations, a refusal to participate in the World Cup would have been made.

Just a thousand metres from the famed River Plate stadium lay one of the largest torture and detention centres of the dictatorship, so busy it saw some four thousand inmates processed by the torture machine. The military regime had many such centres – some 340 in operation during its time in power. While football was being played on the pitch, torture was being practised off it. Indeed, prisoners at the Navy Mechanics School (ESMA) could hear both screams of pleasure in the Stadium and pain of torture being inflicted in the complex.

Such is the perversion of tribal ritual than Argentina's victory over The Netherlands could even divide political prisoners. The home side had been used as a weapon, and everyone was feeling it, both as toxic revelation and terrible deception.

Between 1976 and 1983, the systematic campaign of forced disappearances and brutality waged against union members, members of the left, and political opponents of the regime left between 15,000 to 30,000 dead. 1978 served as a centrepiece of apologia and promotion – a regime that could not be all that bad if it was enthusiastic about a game Argentineans played rather well. Such a point was sufficiently noted when the revered football magazine, *El Gráfico*, ran an interview with Videla suggesting that the junta leader, not Kempes, had been the instrumental figure in winning the World Cup (*Play the Game*, Jun 28, 2003).

It was not merely the Argentine side playing in a simulated darkness of denial, a desperate illusion where football could transcend the moment as an act of possession over and above politics. The Dutch, who reached the 1978 finals and lost 3-1 to the hosts, were hardly squeaky in their political cleanliness. The Netherlands proved to be an investor of some worth during the Dirty War era. The Dutch ambassador Van den Brandeler went so far as to claim that General Videla was a man of honour. How far had countries fallen to court the military regime.

The history of the two countries continue to mingle – the father of Queen Maxima of the Netherlands, Jorge Zorreguieta, was one of the longest serving civilian ministers in Argentina's military dictatorship. In 1976, when the military coup was initiated, Zorreguieta led the Rural Society, a conservative organisation representing landowning interests. He proceeded to head up the agricultural portfolio in the ministry.

Such links did lead the Dutch Parliament to commission historian Michiel Baud to examine possible links to human rights violations. Lawyers also got busy. What were the sins of that father? While the investigation did not unearth any direct link, Baud did suggest that, as “director of ‘Sociedad Rural’, [Zorreguieta] was part of the group of people that at least stimulated the coup, and its significant that he stayed with the dictatorship for a whole five years, until Videla himself left the government” (*News OK*, Feb 3, 2013). Hard to get off an accelerating train once you are on it.

For such reasons, the 1986 Argentine World Cup victory in Mexico, spearheaded by Diego Maradona, remains lionised and mythologised. The efforts of Kempes and his team are inconspicuous footnotes, suggesting a form of forgetting in the face of pain. The resurfacing of some of these dark habits in Brazil prior to and during the tournament, though the poorest of imitations relative to Videla, suggest that the police state, with its stifling tentacles, remains more than mere history. Football remains both game and code, a crude weapon, and an intoxicant.

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