

The Rebirth of a Nation: West Germany Versus Hungary, the 1954 World Cup Final

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Throughout its history, the popularity and influence of the game of association football has been consistently subjected to a great deal of assessment and analysis through the respective lenses of culture and politics. Football has been posited as the bringer of war and as an arbiter of peace. While some view football culture as the vulgar exercise of tribal rites in modern society and the World Cup tournament an excuse for the mass indulgence in crude jingoism, others have noted its redemptive qualities: To this day, many Germans believe that winning the 1954 World Cup signified the rebirth of their nation, which less than a decade earlier had lain in ruins after the fall of the Third Reich.

British Labour Prime Minister Harold Wilson believed that he lost the General Election of 1970 to his Conservative Party rival Edward Heath, because of England's shock 3-2 defeat to West Germany in a World Cup quarter-final match held in Leon, Mexico. And while myth surrounds a claim that Pele's visit to Nigeria with his club Santos in 1969 led to a ceasefire between the warring armies of Nigeria and the secessionist state of Biafra, it was certainly the case that a two-legged World Cup qualifier between El Salvador and Honduras sufficiently exacerbated already existing tensions between the two states to cause a war. *La guerra del futbol* lasted for 100 hours.

As is the case with national achievements in sporting events, football events have allegedly caused spikes in birth rates. This was apparently the case with Germany -a country which perennially struggles with a low rate of birth- in the aftermath of the 2006 World Cup tournament. Such is the hold which football has over the minds of millions that Bill Shankly, the man behind the rise of Liverpool Football Club as a force in British and European football, once famously claimed the following:

Some people think football is a matter of life and death, I assure you, it's much more serious than that.

While some might consider Shankly's words to be verging on the pretentious -if not outright preposterous, they tend to strike a chord with others. For many German people, the victory of an unfancied national team in the 1954 World Cup Final was more than a temporary moment of popular exhilaration: it was a transcendental event of profound significance to the psyche of a recently defeated and divided nation, and one which would shape their collective destiny.

Dubbed *Der Wunder von Bern*, the match was a clash between pre-tournament favourites and a team of underdogs that the Hungarian side had trounced 8-3 in an earlier match held in the group stage.

It cannot be overstated just how lauded and respected the Hungarian team were. They were Olympic champions, had a lengthy unbeaten run, and could boast of many great players including Ferenc Puskas. One highlight of the 'Golden Team' was the 6-3 dismantling of England at Wembley Stadium the previous year. That victory irrevocably changed the English, who for decades had remained aloof and unimpressed about the development of the game they had created.

While Josef Herberger, the West German coach, had left out several first choice players in the group match for tactical reasons, no one could foresee his team beating the 'Mighty Magyars'. And victory for the Hungarians seemed a certainty when they quickly raced to a 2-0 lead.

But captained by Fritz Walter, the Germans came back. All seemed to be in their favour. Fortune smiled in the form of two Hungarian plays bouncing off the German goalpost, and a Puskas effort which ended at the back of the net was disallowed. The weather elements played their part, because the rainy conditions in which the match was played was known to German football fans as 'Fritz Walter Weather'. The more adverse the conditions, the better Walther's game is claimed to have got. Technology also played a part. The Germans were kitted-out with Adidas boots, which had revolutionary screw-in studs. And the German players were emboldened and fortified by what was claimed to be a pre-match injection of either glucose or Vitamin C, but which some suspect may have been Peritin (methamphetamine), a stimulant which had been given to German soldiers during the Second World War.



Fritz Walter (left) and Ferenc Puskas, respectively the captains of West Germany and Hungary,

exchange pennants before the 1954 World Cup Final in Berne, Switzerland.

West Germany won the match 3-2.

Only nine years previously, their nation had been reduced to ruins by allied armies advancing from the west and the east. Many German footballers had been consumed by the flames of war. For instance, the talented Adolf Urban, a player for Schalke who had represented the pre-war German team, was posted to Stalingrad where he perished alongside the many dead of the vanquished Sixth Army.

The aftermath of the war had been a horrific episode in German history. Defeat did not end with the people being subjected to inevitable physical and material privations of what came to be known as “Zero Hour”. Widespread anti-German sentiment meant that they suffered pogroms across the continent, while German females were victims of mass rapes conducted by soldiers of the Red Army. They were also subjected to sexual abuse and exploitation by occupying allied soldiers. Across Europe, ethnic Germans had been ejected from lands on which they were long settled such as East Prussia, the Sudetenland and Volga-Land.

While the reasons for the subsequent *Wirtschaftswunder*, or economic miracle, are manifold and complex, many Germans continue to insist that victory in the 1954 World Cup was a key factor in the economic and political resurgence of West Germany in the post-war period. For them, German football commentator Herbert Zimmerman’s exultant proclamation to millions of his countrymen listening on the radio that “Deutschland ist Weltmeister” symbolised their collective emancipation from “Zero Hour”.

As Joachim Fest the German historian put it, the game marked the “true birth of the country.”

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