

England v Germany 1938: Football as Propaganda

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In John Huston's recent film 'Escape to Victory' a football field is used as the battleground for a range of political and moral issues, thereby highlighting the manner in which a game can become far more than a mere sporting occasion. The film is centred upon German attempts to prove Hitler's oft-expressed assertions of racial superiority through a football match set in 1943 between a carefully selected German side and a scratch Allied team composed of prisoners of war. Although 'Escape to Victory' deals with a fictional situation, there is evidence during the inter-war period that football, among other forms of sport, was invested with a political significance, especially by regimes like those in Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy where sports organisations were incorporated into the governmental system. The resulting politicisation of sport meant that other countries, in which sporting bodies were independent, could not remain untouched by this trend, particularly when involved in matches against either Germany or Italy, or in such events as the Olympic Games and World Cup.

In this context, emphasis was placed upon such sports as football in view of its large-scale appeal as a participant and spectator sport, and during the 1930s the outcome of international football matches came to be interpreted by governments and the media as a reflection of the quality not only of a country's soccer skills but also of its socio-political system and overall power. In this manner sport became an integral part of national propaganda machines. Although this was usually associated with totalitarian regimes, there is evidence of an increased awareness by the British government of the value of football as part of a wider programme of national advertisement, that is, of projecting a favourable image of Britain in the wider world.

The basic objective of Nazi propaganda was to convert a relatively passive acceptance of the new regime into a more active involvement by the German people in the construction of the new order, and in addition the regime was anxious to demonstrate a favourable image of the 'dynamic new Germany' to a wider international audience. As a result the German government assigned considerable significance to a variety of propaganda activities under the control and coordination of Joseph Goebbels, whose identification of sporting success with political considerations caused sport to be exploited as one aspect of the Nazi propaganda apparatus. After Hitler's accession to power in 1933 the process of 'co-ordination' was applied to most branches of German life, including not only the labour movement and political parties but also sport, as demonstrated by the creation of a national organisation - the *Deutsche Reichsbund für Leibesübungen*, under the control of the *Reichsportsführer*, Hans von Tschammer und Osten. In December 1935 Sir Eric Phipps, the British ambassador in Berlin, noted the 'tightening' of Nazi control over German sport as well as the political 'exploitation' of sporting victories. The close of 1935 also saw the appearance of a manual for political education in German, *Deutschland über Volk, Staat, Leibesübungen*, which left its reader with little doubt as to the political role of sport. For example, it asserted that 'gymnastics and sport are thus an institution for the education of the body and a school of the political will in the service of the State. Unpolitical, so-called neutral gymnasts and sportsmen are unthinkable in Hitler's state'.

In the face of such overt and extensive state-subsidised propaganda activities, as symbolised by the so-called 'Nazi Olympics' of 1936, it proved difficult for the British government to remain silent, for, as one member of the Foreign Office commented in the early 1930s, propaganda constituted 'a diplomatic fact of life'. During 1932, when the British government was preoccupied with Italian propaganda, Sir Stephen Talents, head of the Empire Marketing Board, advocated a more positive British propaganda effort in his pamphlet entitled 'The Projection of England', while in December 1937 Lord Lloyd, head of the British Council, drew the attention of Anthony Eden, the Foreign Secretary, to the supportive role performed by propaganda for British diplomacy, trade and influence, especially in the context of the current 'fierce war of ideas', the so-called 'European Civil War'.

Philip Taylor in his book *The Projection of Britain* has provided a relatively full picture of the acceptance and development of cultural propaganda in Britain during the inter-war period, even if his writings, by concentrating upon literature, the fine arts, drama and music, tend to stop short of sport. Even so, the basic principles of British cultural

propaganda – which Taylor defines as 'the dissemination of British ideals and beliefs in a general rather than specifically political form' – can be applied to sport – both in its negative role of countering the detrimental effects of foreign propaganda and to a more positive objective of promoting a favourable image of Britain as not only 'a great nation' but also a society characterised by such commendable principles as justice and fair play.

Inevitably, any sporting activity utilised to fulfil these criteria became implicitly a political instrument, although, as Samuel Hoare, Eden's predecessor at the Foreign Office, advised in November 1935, 'the commercial arguments in favour of intensifying the work of British cultural propaganda are no less strong than the political arguments. In all the danger of German cultural and commercial penetration, which may be expected to increase as the power and wealth of Germany revive, make it particularly desirable for British cultural propaganda to secure as firm a hold as possible in the minds of the population'. Thus, it was anticipated that the effective projection of Britain would provide, as Taylor suggests, 'an alternative philosophy to the more dogmatic political doctrines propagated by rival states... the subsequent benefits to Britain's international relations would be invisible, but real', that is, as other states were encouraged to direct their political and commercial orientation towards Britain.

Accordingly sport came to constitute part of the British strategy for cultural propaganda, thereby qualifying the usual impression cultivated by successive governments that in Britain at least sport and politics remain independent of each other. Nevertheless, the scale of state intervention in British sport was of a lesser order than in either Germany or Italy, and was directed mainly towards international rather than domestic sport. For example, the Football Association remained an independent body, exerting a large degree of administrative autonomy. But this status did not rule out the application of political pressure in certain directions, a role reinforced by the government's control over entry visas as well as the Football Association's need for diplomatic support overseas.

Although the 1930s have attracted most interest in terms of government interaction with sport, the preceding decade also witnessed a similar state of affairs, for after the First World War the Allied governments, along with their sporting organisations, ostracised such ex-enemy countries as Germany, not only politically but also in respect of sporting contacts; thus, Germany was invited to neither the 1920 nor the 1924 Olympic Games, while the Football Association, like its counterparts in Ireland, Scotland and Wales, decided against playing German teams at club and national level. The mid-1920s brought a gradual improvement in Germany's international status, such as symbolised by the Locarno Treaties (1925) and German entry to the League of Nations (1926), a political transformation paralleled by the subsequent development of sporting contacts. In 1928 Germany participated in the Olympic Games, while during the late 1920s football matches between British and German club sides increased in frequency to provide the foundation for full international matches in 1929 and 1930 with Scotland and England respectively.

Therefore, the framework within which British international sporting contacts occurred was determined by the British government. As a result sporting considerations were overruled in many instances, where a political will decided for and against particular types of fixtures, and just as matches against German teams were not permitted during the early 1920s, so a Russian side was refused entry into Britain in 1930 on account of fears of the visit being exploited by Soviet propaganda. In turn, during the late 1920s political influences in the form of improved Anglo-German relations provided a more favourable climate for an England-Germany football international. Nevertheless, it still remained a matter for the Football Association to respond to such pressures and to arrange a fixture with its German counterpart.

In fact, for much of the inter-war period, and especially during the 1920s, the isolationism characteristic of British foreign policy was reflected in the lack of enthusiasm for matches against non-British sides shown by the four British football associations, an attitude encouraged by a preoccupation with league and cup matches, the buoyancy of the domestic game, the introverted conservatism of the members of the Football Association's International Selection Committee, as well as by an arrogant belief in the continued superiority of the British game. Thus, the four British associations experienced a rather intermittent, and often stormy, relationship with FIFA, the international governing body for football, a body from which they withdrew in 1920, rejoined in 1924, only to leave again four years later. In addition, the four British football associations, which stayed outside FIFA until after the Second World War,

significantly refused invitations to play in the World Cup tournaments of 1930, 1934 and 1938, while Northern Ireland never played a non-British team during the inter-war period and Wales only played one, in 1939.

Hence, James Walvin's description of British football as an 'insular game' seems particularly apt, even if England and Scotland did begin to play more non-British teams.

Following on from their drawn match in Berlin during 1930, a return England-Germany fixture was arranged for December 1935, by which time Hitler's advent to power had resulted in an important transformation in German politics and sport. As a result, towards the close of 1935 the British government was exposed to considerable pressure to prohibit the forthcoming match, which was scheduled to be played on Tottenham's ground in London in December 1935. The protests against the match originated largely from the British labour movement and Jewish organisations, and their campaign emphasised the Nazi regime's excesses against trade unions, political parties and Jews. However, in the end the Foreign and Home Offices decided not to intervene against either the match or the entry of German players, officials and spectators into Britain. Sir John Simon, the Home Secretary, who had examined the matter largely from the point of view of an alleged threat to public order arising out of anti-German demonstrations, told a TUC deputation on December 2nd, 1935 that the Football Association was 'a quite independent body... I think that we have to keep up in our country a tradition that (this) sporting fixture is carried through without any regard to politics at all'.

But Simon's public stress upon the 'private' nature of a match 'arranged by private individuals' as the rationale for non-intervention does not disguise the fact that in reality the government's decision was determined by political considerations. For example, there was an awareness of the overt *political* significance attached to the match by the German authorities and press, and thus of its significance for the course of Anglo-German relations. Although there was some risk, such as to public order and to Anglo-German friendship, in allowing the match to go ahead, the Foreign Office feared even greater problems if it was abandoned. Such action was adjudged likely to prompt a hostile German reaction, thereby conflicting with the basic foreign policy objective of conciliating Germany.

In the event the match passed without serious incident on or off the field, in spite of the presence of about 10,000 German supporters. Although the German team lost 3-0, it performed impressively and its discipline in defeat contrasted favourably with the misbehaviour of the Italian team a year earlier in the so-called 'Battle of Highbury'. The German performance against the acknowledged 'masters of the game' received widespread press and wireless coverage; for instance, Angriffsand the *Börsen Zeitung* greeted the game in glowing terms, asserting that 'for Germany it was an unqualified political, psychological and sporting success'.

The next match between the two countries was scheduled for Berlin in May 1938, that is, some two months after one of the major international crises of the late 1930s, the Anschluss. This event, which concerned the British government mainly on account of the manner rather than of the fact of the German take-over of Austria, was followed by a re-appraisal of British policy in the context both of the resulting German threat to Czechoslovakia and of closer German-Italian relations, such as reflected by not only Mussolini's acquiescence in the *Anschluss* but also Hitler's state visit to Italy during the week prior to the England-Germany match. But the policy of Neville Chamberlain, the Prime Minister, remained one of seeking international *détente* through the creation of a concert of the great powers, and the consequent emphasis upon Anglo-German rapprochement meant that there was no government attempt to cancel the forthcoming match, which had been arranged in November 1937. As in 1935, the British Government's appreciation of the value of enhancing contacts with Germany at both political and non-political levels was reinforced by a reluctance to antagonise Hitler.

Having accepted both the fact and the desirability of the projected game, the Foreign Office was concerned about the implications for Britain's image and prestige, particularly *vis à vis* Germany in the light of the continuing debate about their relative power. In fact, in 1938 A.J. Mackenzie felt justified in writing about 'the boom in propaganda', for by this time even the British government, through such channels as the Foreign Office News department or the British Council, was engaged actively in a propaganda war with Germany and Italy. The British authorities had already decided that blatant propaganda would prove self-defeating in such countries as Germany, where it would

merely exacerbate Anglo-German relations. In this situation sport was interpreted as an alternative and more subtle form of cultural propaganda, especially as a major spectator game like football was capable of reaching a large and responsive audience both within and outside Germany.

Although Germany had yet to defeat England at football, in 1938 the German authorities and media were confident of their country's victory over England, particularly in the light of the latter's unimpressive record since their 1935 encounter. England's six matches in 1936 brought four defeats and one draw, while an improved record the following year was attributable partly to a string of easy victories in Scandinavia. In contrast, Germany, having played far more internationals during this period, stood undefeated in the fourteen matches played since October 1936, while the *Anschluss* meant that the players of Austria, a major force in world football with a victory over England in 1936, became eligible for selection by Germany. Accordingly the British Consul-General in Berlin reported that the Germans believed that their team would prove at least the equal of an England side, whose international reputation was much higher than its recent record deserved. A good result for Germany would bring considerable kudos to a regime conscious always of its domestic and international image, for, as Nevile Henderson, the British ambassador in Berlin, pointed out, 'the Nazis are looking for victories to boost their regime. It is their way of claiming a super-race'.

Inevitably the Germans showed every indication of taking the forthcoming match very seriously, with careful team selection, the inclusion of former Austrian players and the fortnight's pre-match training held in the Black Forest. In turn, German interest in the contest was reflected not only in large-scale media coverage but also in the receipt of over 400,000 applications for the 110,000 tickets available. An awareness of the 'great importance' attached to the match within Germany led Sir Robert Vansittart, Chief Diplomatic Adviser at the Foreign Office, to contact Stanley Rous, the Secretary of the Football Association, in order to stress that 'it is really important for our prestige that the British team should put up a really first-class performance. I hope that every possible effort will be made to ensure this'. In reply the Football Association assured the government that 'every member of the Team will do his utmost to uphold the prestige of his country', thus, the Football Association placed more emphasis than usual upon pre-match preparations, including the exertion of pressure upon clubs in order to overcome their traditional reluctance concerning the release of players for internationals. However, there was no special training on the German model, and pre-match coaching constituted no more than the usual minimum.

By the time of their arrival in Berlin on 12th May, 1938, the English players were fully cognisant of the press view of the match as a key encounter of national and political significance, and certainly as something far more substantial than a mere game of football. In the remaining two days before the match, the players became more aware of the German press's concern about the game's importance, for one official accompanying the party read out translations of relevant articles. In any case, the need for a successful and disciplined performance was drummed into the players by both C. Wreford Brown, the Football Association member in charge of the match (England had no manager at this time, for the International Selection Committee not only chose the team but also placed one of its members in charge for each individual game), and Stanley Rous. But one instruction delivered by Rous to the team in the dressing room prior to the match went beyond the emphasis upon playing well. The Football Association officials decided that the England players should give the Nazi salute during the playing of the German anthem at the time of the pre-match formalities; such a decision was based partly upon Henderson's advice to secure German sympathy and partly upon Rous' experience at the 1936 Olympic Games about German sensitivity to such ceremonies (and to allegations that Hitler was annoyed by the apparent failure of the British team to adequately acknowledge his presence). Although this instruction caused much heart-searching upon the part of the players as well as subsequent indignation in sections of the British press, the Football Association officials justified the gesture on the grounds that it would ensure a friendly reception by not only the huge swastika-waving crowd present in the Berlin stadium but also the larger audience tuned in to the radio commentary throughout Germany and beyond. The political significance of the gesture was obvious. In giving the salute the players faced the Fuhrer's box, which contained such dignitaries as Goebbels, Goering, Hess, Ribbentrop and Tschammer und Osten, as well as Henderson. Hitler was absent; he had only returned from Italy a few days earlier, while the advantage of hindsight encourages the view that the Fuhrer was engaged in preparations for action against Czechoslovakia towards the

end of May.

The pre-match line-up of the teams seemed to justify Hitler's assertions of German superiority, for the bronzed, smart and fit-looking German players contrasted favourably with the less impressive appearance of their English counterparts, who had just completed a long and arduous season. However, once the match commenced and the early German attacks had been foiled, the English team began to assume the upperhand, with Stanley Matthews prominent on the right wing. He sped past Muenzberg, and centred for his fellow winger, Cliff Bastin, to force the ball home after Len Goulden's initial shot had been parried. But a German equaliser scored by one of the Austrian players, Pesser, threatened to turn the game until two goals in five minutes, first by Jackie Robinson and then by Frank Broome, restored England's control of the match, a point confirmed by Matthew's dazzling run through the opposing defence for the fourth goal. Although the Germans pulled a goal back just before half-time, Robinson resumed the goal-scoring soon after the interval. Then Pesser capitalised upon an error by Vic Woodley in the England goal to bring the score back to 5-3, but before the end of the game Matthews, as if to cap a superlative performance, combined with Goulden, who scored perhaps the best goal of an exciting and skilful match.

Henderson was pleased with both the political and sporting aspects of England's 6-3 victory. The disciplined performance by both teams, the resulting absence of incident, the impact of the pre-match Nazi salute and the manner of England's victory led Henderson to observe that it 'undoubtedly revived in Germany British sporting prestige', especially as it was followed the next day by Aston Villa's defeat of a 'German XI' in Vienna. After receiving favourable reports about both the game itself and the post-match banquet presided over by Tschammer und Osten, the Foreign Office contacted the Football Association in order to express its appreciation of the English team's performance in Berlin; thus, the government felt that its pre-match request had been fulfilled to the letter. It is of interest to note that even after the tour, which included also matches with Switzerland (lost 2-1) and France (won 4-2), the German match remained the major event, and seemingly over-rode the effects of the defeat in Zurich. Similarly, the uniqueness of the Berlin match was emphasised by the Football Association's International Selection Committee, which noted its 'special appreciation' that, 'in the match against Germany, every member of the English team, even though determined to win, realised that his play must be consistent with the best British sporting traditions'. Accordingly, the committee voted in favour of making 'a suitable gift', that is, a canteen of cutlery to each player, whose basic tour remuneration was £8 per match plus expenses of 10/- (50 pence) per day.

Henderson, who was impressed by the manner in which the team had played 'for England', believed that the bonds forged by the match gave the 'promise of cordial relations in the future insofar as sporting fixtures are concerned'. Whether such cordial relations would extend beyond the realm of sport depended upon other factors, although it is clear that the sporting aspect - hitherto a missing dimension in the historiography of Anglo-German relations between wars - was a contributory factor at both the official and popular level to the policy of appeasement, which can be defined in the sense of maintaining contact and striving for a *détente* with Hitler's Germany. Thus the British government came to interpret the England-Germany match as part of its strategy of cultural propaganda, and as a means of scoring points as well as goals at Germany's expense. In the event any long-term benefits of England's victory were submerged the following week by the so-called 'Weekend Crisis' of May 21st-22nd, 1938, when German troop movements threatened Czech independence.

In retrospect, it seems ironic that the 1938 fixture had been arranged in November 1937 as part of a package of two matches. It was intended that there would be a return match in London during 1939-40, thereby enabling each country to avoid foreign exchange problems through the retention of its own gate money for expenses and profit. However, in September 1939 the outbreak of the Second World War transferred Anglo-German rivalry from the diplomatic and sporting spheres onto the battlefield, and the war, while providing a back-cloth for the fictional clash depicted in 'Escape to Victory', served to delay the return fixture until December 1954. In contrast to the 1930s, the German side came to Wembley as 1954 World Cup champions and at a time when English football was in an advanced state of decline, such as reflected in two catastrophic defeats at the hands of Hungary and in a series of unimpressive performances during the 1954 World Cup tournament. Nevertheless, the England team, in which Stanley Matthews provided the only personal link with the previous England-Germany match some sixteen years

previously, maintained the good record against Germany with a 3-1 victory.

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