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Hungary in the Global History of Association Football: From the Beginnings to the 1953 "Match of the Century"*

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When the English national football team was defeated by Hungary at Wembley Stadium in 1953, some commentators regarded the result as a sign of the decline of the British Empire. While this may sound like the usual exaggeration of sports journalism, this article explores the broader connections between football as a modern sport with British roots, the growth of the modern metropolis through migration, and notions of global hierarchy as reflected in sporting results, with particular reference to Hungary. The rise of Hungary's men's national team to the top of world football between World War I and the mid-1950s exemplifies these connections. The article analyzes the factors that contributed to this remarkable achievement, while also examining its political background, the rise and decline of the predominantly Jewish "Danubian School" of football up to the mid-1930s, and the subsequent decline of Hungarian football after 1956.

Keywords: Hungary, global football history, association football, Danubian School of football, Jewish footballers and coaches, transnational cultural transfer, sport and politics, the Golden Team

The place was Wembley, the holy ground, the Cathedral where more than one hundred thousand worshippers paid homage to the God of the leather ball game. Here, the English nation, which had invented the game, celebrated her greatness.[1] Built in 1923 as the "Empire Stadium" for the Empire Exhibition and with its sacred turf cut first by no other than the Duke of York, King George V's son (George VI in 1936), the building symbolized the connection between excellence in sport and political world dominance. From the outset, the stadium hosted the annual final of the Football Association (F. A.) Cup, the

* I would like to thank colleagues of mine who offered commentary on the text: Trevor Lipscombe, Andrei Markovits, Lorenzo Venuti, Christian Koller, and David Winner, as well as the anonymous reviewers and Tibor Takács. Special thanks to Thomas Cooper for his excellent editing.

1 Hill and Varrasi. "Creating Wembley"; Dauncey, "Stade de France and Wembley"; Tassell, *Field of Dreams*.

oldest national football competition in the world, dating back to 1872. No other soccer stadium in the world would receive more attention than Wembley.

It was a smog-laden day in late November 1953. Before the referee had even blown the whistle, journalists had labeled it the "game of the century."[2] Ignoring an embarrassing World Cup in Brazil three years earlier, where the national team had been eliminated by a semiprofessional USA team, England remained the center of the football world because the team had never lost a game on home turf, at least not at Wembley (ignoring the 1949 0–2 score against Ireland in Liverpool).[3] With the crowning of Queen Elizabeth II in June of that year, British hopes were up after eight gloomy postwar years.[4]

The guests, Hungary, had been unbeaten in official matches since 1950, a run of 24 consecutive games, and they had just won Olympic gold in Helsinki in 1952.[5] This time, even the most jingoistic English newspapers could not ignore the defeat. All the glory belonged to the winning Hungarian team, which humiliated the proud English boys, beating them 6–3. It was not the sheer number of goals scored but the way in which the "Mighty Magyars" played and how helpless the English side, with their unflexible system, ultimately proved. The English press tried to capture the historical significance of the match. *The Daily Mirror* borrowed allusions to Norse mythology, evoking the "Twilight of the Soccer Gods."[6] Before the match, the same newspaper had expressed the impassioned hope that England would "beat Hungary because [the Hungarians would] see victory as a justification for their superior [Communist!] way of life," an obvious indication of how very much in the foreground the Cold War background actually was.[7] For *News Chronicle,* the match had turned the world "Upside Down."[8] *The Times*, trying to maintain its English reserve, stated (using

2 All following quotations can be found here: https://www.anoldinternational.co.uk/2013/11/england-3-hungary-6/

3 The 1949 2–0 defeat to Ireland in Liverpool also did not seem to count for some reason. Perhaps Liverpool, seen from London, seemed "almost" another country. See: http://www.englandfootballonline.com/seas1946-60/1949-50/M0249RIr1949.html. David Winner also thinks that Ireland was still counted as a "British team," regardless of its independence. Perhaps more importantly, almost all the Irish starting players played for English clubs.

4 The climbing of the Mount Everest added to this: Hansen, "Coronation Everest."

5 Hungary, like the Soviet Union, refused to participate in the 1950 World Cup.

6 https://www.anoldinternational.co.uk/2013/11/england-3-hungary-6/

7 Ibid. However, the game seems to have been possible because of the thaw, and it might have helped normalize diplomatic relations after Stalin's death: Madarász, "British–Hungarian Cultural Diplomacy, 1953–56."

8 https://www.anoldinternational.co.uk/2013/11/england-3-hungary-6/

words stolen from Winston Churchill's famous war speech) that England was "beaten at all points: on the ground, in the air and tactically the whole side was unhinged. The speed, cunning and shooting power of the Hungarian forwards provided a spectacle not to be forgotten. *England's football can be proud of its past but it must awake to a new future.*"[9]

Most observers regarded this match as a watershed, a caesura, a rupture, a turning point in the continuum of the history of association football. Jonathan Wilson, author of the seminal history of football tactics *Inverting the Pyramid*, writes that "it was only in 1953 that England finally accepted the reality that the continental game had reached a level of excellence for which no amount of sweat and graft could compensate."[10] In other words, the Hungarian team had revolutionized the game that the English had invented, more than half a century before, merging the physical power and energy of the "motherland of the game" with the more elegant, flexible style of the South Americans and the deeper intellectual understanding of the "Danubian School." Some regard the new style of the "Danubian School" as an early form of "Total football."[11] In contrast to the game played in England, the Central European teams focused on space (enlarge it when you are in possession, shrink it when you play against the ball), more flexible positions for the players which meant more play without the ball (moving more freely and not sticking to original positions), pressing against the ball, and quick passing.[12]

For most observers, the Hungarian national team had reached the peak of world football. Even when they lost the rainy World Cup final against a surprisingly stubborn West Germany eight months later, they kept their legendary status. And most of all, representatives of the Hungarian football genius, such as coach Béla Guttman or star player Ferenc Puskas, left their mark in Latin America, but most of all in Europe, at Benfica Lisbon, FC Barcelona and Real Madrid, a team that won five European titles in a row (1956–1960).[13]

But how did such a small, politically unstable country produce such an achievement in the most popular global sport? While Britain had kept the same

9 Ibid. Italics added by me.

10 Wilson, *Inverting the Pyramid*, 86. Wilson's book has become such legendary scripture that even the Apple TV cult series Ted Lasso has Coach Beard holding a copy of the book in the opening sequence of the first episode.

11 Jackson, *Life of Total Football.*

12 I am following Jackson's definition, who treats Budapest extensively in his book. See Jackson, *Life of Total Football,* 9.

13 See Wilson, *Inverting the Pyramid*, chapter "The Hungarian connection," 86–97.

political and economic system (with some modifications, of course), Hungary had experienced at least five radical breaks since football was introduced in the country. What does this tell us about the country's politics, society, and culture? To shed light on this amazing story, in the discussion below, I begin by offering a definition of what soccer is exactly and how the game is intertwined with modern, industrial societies. I then look at the ways in which hierarchies and rankings in sports are established and measured. I examine the beginnings of association football in Hungary and offer an analysis of the successes of Hungarian soccer since the 1930s. I examine the ways in which Italian Fascists challenged British imperialism in the world of football and then consider what the Golden Team and its successes in the 1950s owed to the Horthy period. Finally, I draw some conclusions concerning the team's successes and what these successes tell us about Hungary in the Global History of the "English game" before and after World War II. The aim of this article is to show how soccer has been a prominent part of the global system of political, economic, cultural, and gender hierarchies from the outset, a prominence which explains at least in part why the game also constantly offered opportunities to challenge those hierarchies.

Soccer as Part of the Autonomous System of Modern Sports

Modern association football evolved over the course of the nineteenth century. The English did not "invent" the game on their own. Rather, its development was the product of contributions from many different groups. Schoolboys at public (and elite private) institutions in the south of England, for instance, shaped the game, as did factory workers in the north and the midlands, not to mention the Scots, who introduced a passing-game, and English speakers in other parts of the world.[14] Until the late 1880s, various codes of "football" were played, which eventually diverged and became distinct sports, such as association football, rugby football, American football, Gaelic football, and Australian-rules football.

Since that time, association football, or the "English game," became part of the global, autonomous system of modern sports, a theoretical framework developed by the German sociologist Tobias Werron based on Niklas Luhmann's systems theory.[15] According to Werron, the modern sport system is a part of

14 Collins, *How Football Began*.

15 As Werron has explained in his dissertation and various articles, he focuses on the parallel developments in US Baseball and English soccer in the nineteenth century. See Werron, *Der Weltsport und sein Publikum*; Werron, "World Sport and Its Public." Critical of Werron is Ziemann, *Gesellschaft ohne Zentrum,* 232.

industrial society. It evolved in the last decades of the nineteenth century almost simultaneously in North America and Britain. From a systems theoretical perspective, the main ingredients for the creation of the autonomous system were not only the practice of the sport itself but, just as essential, the reporting of it. This communication included a growing international public, an audience that followed the results of modern games (such as baseball in the United States and football in Britain). The administrators and organizers of the game, as well as the public, understood each game as part of national, global, and local competitions in accordance with standardized rules that ensured the games could be played by everyone and everywhere.[16]

The standardization of rules emerged from competition between teams representing different schools and clubs, whose encounters required them to agree on a common code. This process, in turn, made possible the systematic production of records, rankings, and statistics. This also explains why the sports system needs to be understood as an "autonomous" system. Although soccer has been tremendously influenced by the political, economic, social, and cultural context in which it has been played, observed, and discussed, the rules are set by the international bodies that administer the game and not by anyone outside the sport. Even the most powerful politicians cannot change the rules of the game, even if they can, and sometimes do, try to influence the results.[17] It is, on the other hand, the symbolic importance of winning, of being "on top" of the opponent, that makes the game so interesting for all kinds of groups, something Benjamin Ziemann called the "binary win/lose code" inherent to modern sports.[18] Miklós Hadas emphasized that "football, perhaps more than other sports, has always been related to an intricate field of forces involving politicians, sports leaders, sports specialists, journalists, patrons, fans, and, of course, players."[19] It is the community within the modern sports system that carries the emotional energy, which is not a side-effect or by-product of soccer but its very essence. This emotional attachment of millions of fans and followers of teams

16 The complex history of the evolution of the rules for soccer and the major impact of the F. A. Cup, introduced in 1873, is briefly explained by Kitching, "The Origins of Football."

17 The famous first example is Mussolini, who allegedly helped Italy win the World Cup semifinal in 1934 after he had the Swedish referee over for dinner the evening before the match. However, it is hard to prove exactly how the outcome was influenced by the Fascist dictator. However, Marco Impiglia showed how the Italian organizers secured four referees for the tournament who were willing to support the host team. See Impiglia, "1934 FIFA World Cup."

18 Ziemann, *Gesellschaft ohne Zentrum,* 200.

19 Hadas, "Football and social identity," 43.

and players represents the very basis for the commercial and economic success of the game.[20]

The media, beginning with press coverage and continuing with radio, television, and the internet, have been crucial in reporting match results and all other information concerning matches, players, and anything else related to the game. But there were other media, often forgotten: the chalkboard in the pub where match results were recorded, the colorful match programs and tickets with advertisements (often for cigarettes and whiskey in the beginning, but also football boots, etc.), posters and similar announcements, and later articles, brochures, books, film coverage, vaudeville songs about players, radio reports, TV, internet, and so forth.[21] A large communicative space developed around the game from the start and grew exponentially. The "match of the century" between England and Hungary was not only broadcast on Hungarian and British radio but also was filmed.[22] It was the first football match that was filmed in its entirety. The first half was broadcast live, and the whole match shown the same evening on the BBC, which also explains the enormous impact it had.[23]

Regular seasonal cup competitions and leagues, starting with the US national Baseball league in 1876 and the Association Football League in England in 1888, created the idea that the modern sports system, with its local and national competitions, is not only global but also, theoretically, never-ending, since every season is followed by the next season.[24] Wars and other catastrophes only interrupt the ongoing sports system temporarily. They do not end it. The system constantly generates stories, legends, new records, spectacular matches, and extraordinary athletes, which accumulate to form a treasure trove of traditions, narratives, and stories that strengthen the idea of a historical and cultural continuity, an idea which nurtures the emotional attachments on which the popularity of the game rests.

As the global system of sports was emerging, strong ideologies around empire, nation, gender, religion were at play which tried to gain or keep possession

20 A point well made by Goldblatt, "Another Kind of History."

21 After San Lorenzo won the Argentinian championship in 1927, a tango celebrating the best players was composed. See Horowitz, *The Creation of Modern Buenos Aires*, 49. But music is usually created by fans. The analysis of fan chants has become a research area of its own: Marra and Trotta, "Sound, music and magic." "Heute spielt der Uridil" (1922) celebrated the Viennese legend Pepi Uridil. https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heute_spielt_der_Uridil.

22 The complete game is now on https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YBk82pNWAwk.

23 See https://tvfootballalmanac.weebly.com/progdet.html?AppEp=O6HL1RC2.

24 On baseball, see Brock, "Early Baseball." Soccer: Metcalf, *The Origins*.

of the game, attempting to exclude non-Europeans or non-whites, women, and others from the fields that were, for a long time, considered to belong exclusively to European or European-American male elites.[25] The ideologies of the elites of the British or American empire—ideologies of "muscular Christianity," "gentlemanly amateurism," and "Anglo-Saxon masculinity" which were used to exclude others—were constantly challenged because of the autonomy of the modern sports system. According to the inner logic of this system, the games are theoretically open to anyone, as long as the rules are followed. Before World War I, the rules of association football were standardized by the "International Football Association Board" (IFAB), which was controlled by representatives of the four British football associations. After 1913, FIFA, founded by continental associations, accepted the authority of the IFAB. Later, FIFA would become the master of the game after alternative associations (especially the socialist and communist international organizations) faltered during the twentieth century. Regular international competitions, however, created the necessity for a single, global authority that regulated the rules of the game and its competitions. "International" competitions started in the 1870s (Scotland versus England, 1872) in the British isles, but also in North America (US versus Canada) and, a generation later, on the European continent in the early twentieth century (Austria, Czechia, Hungary, Germany, Switzerland). The first world championships were part of the Olympic Games from 1908 and, after the triumphs of Uruguay in 1924 and 1928, the first FIFA World Cup in 1930. For our topic, it important to note that Hungary became one of the first ten members of FIFA in 1907, following a conflict about the status of the national associations within the Habsburg Empire.[26] By 1914, the country ranked third behind Denmark and England in the (admittedly still small) world of international soccer.[27]

But first, we must analyze how rankings, hierarchies, and distinctions between centers and peripheries in global soccer are made.

25 McDevitt, *May the best man win*.

26 Molnar, "Hungarian football"; Bonini, "Disegregating the Habsburg Empire?"

27 Https://www.eloratings.net/1914. The ELO rankings follow a system invented by the Hungarian–American chess master and physicist Arpad Elo (Élő Árpád). In 1914, it included only 28 teams, only a tenth of today's rankings.

Centers and Peripheries: The Hierarchies of Association Football since the Start

What does it mean that Hungary had risen to the *center* of the football world between the 1910s and 1950s, before the slow decline began that saw the country at the periphery of this world (ranked eighty-seventh in the FIFA World Ranking of 1996!)?[28] Within the global soccer community, the hierarchy was mostly clear. There was widespread consensus concerning which teams were on top and which at the periphery, even before the introduction of the FIFA world rankings in 1992.[29]

In the decades before World War I, the idea of association football was taken over mostly by liberal elites, such as merchants, journalists, teachers, and military officers in countries with strong ties to and similar political institutions as the British Empire. The first countries in which clubs and a national association emerged were Denmark, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Sweden. Another pioneer, Switzerland, became a bridgehead for the apostles of the "English game" in Italy, Spain, and other European countries.[30] These teams dominated the first international competitions, such as the Olympic football tournaments that began in 1900 (Great Britain winning gold in 1900, 1908, and 1912, Denmark silver in 1908 and 1912). The origins of the game thus lay in the core of the British dominated, liberal mercantile world in the years before the Great War

An urbanized society, industrialized economy, and growing population were all necessary preconditions for the early development of soccer. Massive migration was essential, since the football clubs became new "homes" with which to identify for the uprooted urban working classes.[31] In fast-growing English cities such as Sheffield, Manchester, Huddersfield, and others, pubs became communication centers for players and fans after the game had left the inner circles of elite schools and clubs. These were the places where soccer was talked about, teams were set up, players met before and after games, and pub owners provided information, including announcements about games, results, news, etc. Soon, breweries would organize teams or sponsor competitions,

28 See also Venuti, *Hungary*.

29 Https://inside.fifa.com/fifa-world-ranking/men. The ELO ranking for 1996 shows Hungary at position 49 but still below the United Arab Emirates! See https://www.eloratings.net/1996.

30 The history of the spread of soccer is well described in books such as Koller and Brändle, *Goal!* On the spread of football through the pioneer Switzerland, see Ghanbarian-Baleva, "Ein 'englischer Sport'."

31 A good overview of this development is provided in chapter 3 ("The People's Game"): Koller and Brändle, *Goal!*, 43–70. See also McDougall, *Contested Fields*.

together with factory owners who tried to keep their workers fit and away from alcohol, just as churches played a significant role in the early development of the sport in England and Scotland. In Budapest and Buenos Aires, rapid urban development in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries at first created a lot of undeveloped spaces between the new building sites ("grunds" from the German word "Grund" for ground or "potreros" from the Spanish word for pasture or field) where kids could play ball, often just using rags.[32]

The growing urban population also had to have leisure time and a public transportation system for the sport to continue to develop in the manner it did. For example, the gradual introduction of the free Saturday afternoon in Britain was essential for the early growth of football clubs. Soon, stadiums were built for larger audiences, pubs increasingly became places where people communicated about games, and a mass sports press began to flourish. In short, the modern, autonomous sports "industry" emerged.[33] Another essential element in the spread of modern sports was the emigration of British engineers, teachers, merchants, and skilled workers, who brought football to other countries and continents, inside and outside the British Empire, which covered two fifths of the globe before World War II. Soon, non-British "apostles" who admired the "British way of life" of the game from Switzerland, Austria, Germany came to play important roles in the development of soccer in Eastern Europe.[34]

While modern soccer was first established in the urban zones of industrialized, liberal countries, such as Britain, Belgium, Denmark (where it was popular for the most part in Copenhagen), the Netherlands, and Switzerland, by the beginning of the twentieth century, the metropolises of the Habsburg Empire (Vienna, Prague, Budapest) and the Italian industrial triangle (Turin, Milan, Genoa) followed suit and established clubs, cups, and leagues, simultaneously with the coastal towns of South America. These clubs were often founded by British expats and later taken over by local elites. This process could also be observed by the translation of English terms into the local language. In 1903, the "Argentine Football Association," which was founded in 1893 as the first in South America, was renamed "Asociación del Fútbol Argentino," keeping the same acronym (AFA), after having been taken over by Spanish speakers. In Hungary, the magazine *Sport Világ* (Sport World) started to use the Hungarian

32 These similarities are observed by Wilson, *The Names,* 31.

33 Benkwitz and Molnar, "The emergence." The term 'labdarúgás' was used in Bodon, Károly. "A football-játék." *Ország-Világ*, July 15, 1894, 116. I would like to thank Tibor Takács for this.

34 Koller, "Sport und Migration"; Lanfranchi, "Football et modernité."

term "labdarúgás" (literally "ball kicking") from 1896 on, while also using the magyarized English word "futball," as well as "football."[35] Translations marked the process of adaptation and emancipation of local communities that was essential for the development of international competitions.

The mechanisms and dynamics of the ranking systems in the modern sports world are complex. Joseph Maguire has developed a theoretical model that helps explain them.[36] The modern autonomous sport system evolved in constant competition among different centers in England and the United States, including rivalries among the academic centers (public schools and colleges, where different ball games were developed) and social and cultural cooperation and conflicts between the larger London area and the northern industrial towns (Sheffield, Nottingham). In the long run, this led to the establishment of standardized codes that enabled organized competitions like the F. A. Cup and the F. A. League. These competitions among different centers and peripheries are essential for the system. Maguire emphasizes the evolution of this competitive sports system alongside the "intensified global spurt (1870–1920)" in politics (imperialism), economy (globalization), culture, and communication (railway, accelerated overseas travel, telegraphs, telephones, postal delivery). "Its standardization, organizational development, and global diffusion," he states, "reflected and reinforced the global processes that were being powered by the West and, as the twentieth century unfolded, by representatives of the US—in both the public and private sectors. The power geometry of globalization and global sport always involves a complex, unequal balance within and between groups, nations, and civilizations."[37]

Crucial for this dynamic system was the compression of time and space through communication in the wider sense of the word. Newspapers, announcements in pubs, match programs, advertisements, the telegraph, and the expanding British railway system provided the essential logistical and informational network for the emergence of the modern sports system in England and beyond. However, before the age of regular airplane traffic in the second half of the twentieth century, it was almost impossible to organize continental or world sports events. Therefore, in the Olympic Games that had started in 1896 or in the first three FIFA World Cups in the 1930s only very few teams and athletes participated. Thus, until much later in the century, these events remained

35 *Sport Világ*, June 21, 1896, 245. See also Mátis, "Sportnyelvünk változásai," 29.

36 Maguire, "Power and global sport." See also Maguire, "Introduction."

37 Maguire, "Introduction," 1.

potential global events. Because of logistical difficulties, even the creation of national soccer leagues proved extremely difficult for large countries such as Brazil.[38] Politically, the world was still dominated by the colonial European world powers and the increasingly influential United States, which meant that African and Asian states were not independent and could only later, after World War II, become members of FIFA. Egypt, for example, founded its national football association in 1923, after the country had negotiated limited independence from Britain.[39]

Although global sports hierarchies reflect global inequalities in political and economic power in general, sport is much more fluid and can therefore lead to surprising outcomes. A small country like Croatia can temporarily rise to the top, as in the FIFA World Cups in 2018 and 2022. This has to do with the fact that the power relations within the system grow more complex the more players (in the sense of national teams) are involved in the game. Maguire describes the global sports system as a fluctuating, volatile system: "The more power relations become relatively equal among large numbers of groups, the more likely is it," he observes, "that the outcome will be somewhat different to what any single person or group has planned or anticipated."[40] In the long run, however, monopolistic structures also appear, based on concentrations of power. Then, "established" versus "outsider" struggles become more common: "Established groups are better able to organize, within specific zones of prestige, their high-status public image while at the same time constructing a negative image of outsider groups."[41] In the world of football, commentators speak of "favorites" (established) and "underdogs" (outsider) teams, or even of "minnows" (teams like Liechtenstein) and, when using racialized terms, of "exotic" non-European teams.[42] During the time of the British Empire, the British elites saw themselves and their sport as the peak of civilization. Newcomers to the game adapted to this and tried to emulate them, as can be seen in images of early football teams. One needs to look very carefully to distinguish the English "original" from the Budapest "copy." However, as Maguire writes, the relations between the insiders and the outsiders "were always contested,"[43] and

38 Goldblatt, *Futebol nation*.
39 El-Zatmah, "Āhā Gūn!"
40 Maguire, "Introduction," 7.
41 Maguire, "Introduction," 9.
42 Williams, "'The Beautiful Game'?"
43 Maguire, "Introduction," 10.

eventually, as shown in the famous 3-6 upset in 1953, the English were beaten in their own "sacred" imperial stadium.

The Beginnings of Hungarian Football inside the Habsburg Empire

A decade after association football was established in England with the professional league in 1888–1889, the first official soccer match took place in Budapest at the site of the millennial sports complex built for the celebrations marking one thousand years of Hungarian statehood. This fact indicates the relationship between Hungarian national political ambitions and modern English sports to demonstrate the claim of Hungarian gentlemen to belong to the "prestige zone" of the British Empire.[44]

Articles in Hungarian magazines had already introduced football to their readers in the years leading up to the match, a fact, which again highlights the centrality of communication in the modern sports system.[45] The history of the aforementioned *Sport Világ*, a trade journal founded in 1893, demonstrates this point. The idea of modern sport, the concept of association football, arrived in the country before people actually practiced it or at least before the sport was practiced in an organized form. Those who engaged early in the media concerning sports, furthermore, were usually also practitioners. Hugo Balogh, born in Pest in 1871, had started as a fencer when he was 17 years old.[46] While studying law at university, he was active as a swimmer for the *Magyar Atlétikai Club* (Hungarian Athletic Club, or MAC). He then founded the *Magyar Úszó Egylet* (Hungarian Swimmers' Association) in 1893, which would also begin to practice soccer as one of the first associations in Budapest. In the same year, he took on the editorship of *Sport Világ*. A few years later, he became a member of the organizing committee of the Hungarian Footballers' Association (*Magyar Labdarúgó Szövetség* or MLSZ, until 1950). He also worked in the administration of *Ferencváros Torna Club* (Ferencváros Sports Club, or FTC), the most successful football club in the country and the archrival of *Magyar Testgyakorlók Köre* (Hungarian Physical Exercise Circle or MTK).

The journal not only spread news about soccer but also helped with the establishment of regular, organized competitions with its own football tournament, which was played between 1900 and 1903. The journal reflected the

44 Zeidler, "Egy régi pálya." See also Zeidler, English Influences."

45 Zeidler, "English Influences," 38.

46 Https://sportmuzeum.hu/2023/11/28/a-honap-mutargya-december-2/.

transnational imagined community of modern sports by providing not only reports about sports in Britain, the United States, and other parts of the world, but also by creating the necessary sense of competition in the form of tables, statistics, records, and the like. While focusing on cycling, swimming, horse races, hunting, and athletics, it also propagated the joy of "ball games." Its first issue, published in December 1893, contains the following proclamation: "We will have the opportunity to speak more about English sports and ball games in the near future, when we will explain their general rules, but we wanted to draw the attention of our fellow sportsmen to the useful and pleasant institution of such games."[47] Typically for this pioneer time, another editor of the magazine, Ferenc Stobbe (1864-1916), was also an active player for *Budapest Torna Club* (Budapest Sports Club, or B.T.C.), so he wrote about the games in which he participated.[48] Many pioneers were players, journalists, or administrators, and most were very anglophile, wearing English suits and sporting moustaches in the English fashion (and of Indian origin!).

After the start around the turn of the century, the sport developed rapidly in Budapest. This process was facilitated in part by the fact that there were already sports clubs some of the well-trained athletes of which had participated in the first Olympics in Athens. There were also state-of-the-art facilities, such as the Millennium Sport Center, all thanks in no small part to the enormous economic and social progress the country had enjoyed since the 1867 Compromise with Austria. Budapest even competed to host the first Olympic Games.[49] The elites of the country felt that they were part of the same modern civilization embodied by Britain. The gigantic parliament building (which has been called Westminster on the Danube) had given these ideals clear form in stone.[50]

Hence, from the outset, association football was very popular in Budapest. Two thousands spectators rushed to see the first official game between BTC and the Vienna Cricket & Football Club in October 1897, an event advertised and reported in the pages of the *Sport Világ*.[51] It was surely not unimportant that the team came from Budapest's biggest rival within the monarchy, the imperial capital.[52] Since the Hungarian metropolis was growing twice as quickly as Vienna

47 *Sport Világ,* no. 16, April 22, 1894, 178.

48 Stobbe was also an architect and referee. Https://hu.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stobbe_Ferenc.

49 Eisen, "The Budapest Option."

50 Sisa, "London and Budapest."

51 Zeidler, "English Influences," 40. *Sport Világ* was founded in 1893. See Szabó, "A magyar sportújságírás."

52 A brief history of Vienna Cricket: https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vienna_Cricket_and_Football-Club.

at the time, sports offered another field in which Budapest could demonstrate its competitive strength.[53] As was expected, the Viennese club, which had eight Englishmen on its team, won with a score of 2–0. Nevertheless, the match inspired a number of other athletic clubs in Budapest to pursue the game.

Even more impressive for Hungarian sports enthusiasts were the English teams who started to visit Budapest from 1901 on regularly. They brought the nimbus of the "motherland of football," the center of the game. When World War I broke out, English teams had played no less than one hundred matches in the Hungarian capital.[54] Only four years after the first official game, Budapest had established an amateur league, the embryo of the national professional league established in 1926. 1901 was also the year the aforementioned MLSz was founded.[55] A year later, the first official "international" match was played. The adversary was Austria, of course, who beat the Hungarians 5–0 in Vienna.

The timing of the adoption and development of soccer had a strong impact on the hierarchies of the game. England held a leading position for a long time as the mythical "birthplace" of the game. But as the examples of Austria, Uruguay, and Hungary show, even after decades of global success, these small nations still often later suffered long periods of decline. It takes considerable effort and investment, as well as an adequately large pool of talented players and excellent coaches (often secured by immigration), to keep up with the rest of the world.

After World War I, East Central Europe (meaning mostly the urban areas of the former Habsburg Empire) and also Italy rose to the center of global football, together with South America, while France and Spain became active participants.[56] These were the places where the first professional football leagues (Vienna 1924, Prague 1925, Hungary 1926, Italy's "non amateur" league 1929) were founded outside of Britain (England 1888, Scotland 1890) and the USA (1921–1933). The early professionalization of the Habsburg nations contributed a great deal to their successes in the World Cups in Italy 1934 (Czechoslovakia was a runner-up, and Austria was defeated in the semifinal, according to some because of favoritism from the referees) and France in 1938 (when Hungary was defeated in the final by Italy).[57]

53 Urban growth: Bender and Schorske, "Budapest and New York Compared."

54 Clark, "Great Expectations."

55 Https://www.mlsz.hu/hir/120-eves-a-magyar-labdarugo-szovetseg.

56 An overview over the Europeanization of football during that time provides Dietschy, "Did a 'Europe."

57 Ionel et al., "History"; Faje, "Playing for and against the nation."

Before 1918, Hungary remained mostly on the periphery of the game. When the team participated in its first international tournament, the Stockholm Olympics of 1912, they lost 0–7 to the British team.[58] Four years earlier, England had visited Budapest and won with the same score at the Millenium Sports Park in front of 6,500 spectators.[59] Despite these clear struggles, Hungary had taken symbolic steps that brought it closer towards the center of world football. In 1909, Budapest hosted the FIFA congress two years after the MLSZ had joined the international organization together with another rival from the monarchy, Bohemia, as the twelfth and thirteenth members.[60]

In the same year (1909), Hungary finally celebrated its first win against archrival Austria after eleven games lost and one draw. The Hungarians defeated the Austrians 4–3 at the Cricketer's ground in Vienna. At the Stockholm Olympics of 1912, Hungary beat the Austrian team again, this time 3–0 in the Consolation Final.[61] Football had already become an obsession in the rivalry between the two countries and their capitals.[62] But, and this is important to emphasize, in both places, this obsession drove development in infrastructure (stadiums), professionalization, and commercialization. This resembled the early development of soccer in the two extremely fast-growing metropolises of Montevideo and Buenos Aires, where British influence, migration, and soccer rivalry over La Plata was behind the early successes of the two nations and their national teams, which dominated world soccer in the 1920s (in 1928, Uruguay won Olympic gold and Argentina won Olympic silver, and Uruguay then won the inaugural FIFA World Cup in 1930). When Ferencváros went on a tour in 1929, their quick passing and counterattack style was celebrated in Buenos Aires, Montevideo, and several Brazilian coastal cities.[63] "The Hungarian team plays the best football we have seen," wrote the *Gazeta de Notícias* of Sao Paolo.[64] There might have been a sense that, although the two teams were from countries

58 Clark, "Great Expectations." However, the Hungarian Olympic team won more medals than Austria. *Sport Világ* made the following boast: "No one should believe that Hungary is just a poor relation in the line of eternal Austrian dominions. This was the latest step in the recognition of Hungary's independence." Cited in ibid.

59 Http://www.englandfootballonline.com/Seas1900-39/1907-08/M0097Hun1908.html.

60 Https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_men%27s_national_association_football_teams.

61 Clark, "Great Expectations."

62 Marschik and Sottopietra, *Erbfeinde und Hasslieben*.

63 Wilson, *The Names*, 86–88.

64 Quoted in Wilson, *The Names,* 87–88. See also "O Ferencvaros è um grande team!" *Gazeta de Noticias,* Junie 14, 1929, 6, https://memoria.bn.gov.br/DocReader/DocReader.aspx?bib=103730_05&hf=pt.wikipedia.org&pagfis=29015.

thousands of miles away from each other and separated by the Atlantic Ocean, they both surely played a different type of game than the English, with their physical, stereotypical, "kick-and-rush" style.

The sport was effectively professionalized when the necessary infrastructure was available and the game managed to attract adequate public interest and political support. By the late nineteenth century, with the support of the Hungarian parliament, the city of Budapest had started to invest heavily in sports facilities and stadiums. This was done against the backdrop of national ambitions focused on the Olympic movement.[65] Thus, in 1903, Budapest hosted the matches played by the Hungarian national team in a state-of-the-art stadium with 5,000 seats. In 1911, MTK inaugurated a modern stadium for 20,000 spectators, one of the largest on the European continent.[66] These developments show that Hungary had a strong position in the football world from the early twentieth century on and that it continued to gain prominence until the 1930s. This was influenced at least in part by the strong spirit of nationalism and revanchism in Hungary in the interwar period. Soccer became a field in which the small nation could show greatness. Paradoxically, the best time for the sport came after the complete collapse of the prosperous world in the wake of World War II.

Hungary in the Interwar Era of Danubian Football

Soccer clubs in Central Europe suffered from the economic consequences of the breakup of the Habsburg Empire and, in the Hungarian case, of the Treaty of Trianon (1920), which shrank the market and limited the possibilities of lucrative friendly games outside the country. The clubs therefore needed to secure a stream of income by introducing professional leagues in 1924 (Vienna) and 1926 (Hungary), the first such leagues on the European continent. This revolutionary step contributed immensely to the flourishing of Danubian Football, which saw the rise of the Austrian *Wunderteam* in the 1930s and, later, of the Mighty Magyars. Similarly, the founding of the Italian professional league in 1929 and the massive investments in soccer made by the Fascist regime during this time helped create a national team that would win world cups in 1934 and 1938.[67]

65 Sipos-Onyestyák et al., "Politics in Sport Facility Development."

66 Ibid., 11.

67 Martin, *Football and Fascism.*

Migration again played a massive role in these developments, much as it did before World War I, when migration within the country among workers created spaces for the flourishing of soccer culture in industrial urban centers. Péter Szegedi has studied the role of migration of coaches and players from the beginnings of football in Hungary.[68] It started with the import of specialists from England and Scotland. The growing rivalry between Ferencváros and MTK that dominated football in Budapest from 1910 was increasingly but falsely described as an "ethnic" battle between the "Jewish" and the "German–Catholic" parts of the capital. In reality, both teams had Jewish and Christian players. This bitter and politically significant competition in the context of rising antisemitism led to an increase in the number of spectators, which made it possible for both clubs to invest increasing sums of money in players and coaches.[69] In order to beat its rival, MTK hired the Scottish player John Tait Robertson from Chelsea and the English player Joseph Lane from Sunderland, the English champions of 1913. From 1913 on, MTK had English coaches, first Holmes and, from 1915 on, Jimmy Hogan, who had an enormous influence on football in both Hungary and Austria but who was treated as something of an outsider in his own country.[70] When the war broke out, Hogan, who was coaching a team in Vienna, was arrested. He could not leave the monarchy, but with the help of soccer fans higher up in the Hungarian government, he was allowed to train MTK in Budapest, where he could move more freely than in Austria.[71] Hogan, who was a visionary but who had not been very successful in his own country, stayed in Hungary until 1921 and helped MTK become one of the best teams in Europe. In 1953, he witnessed the results of his work at Wembley.[72]

After 1919, because of the economic breakdown, numerous Hungarian players left the country where they had gained vital experience and learned new skills. Jewish clubs, founded explicitly as clubs for Jews (though not exclusively), such as Hakoah or Makkabi, had been very important in the earliest phases of soccer in Budapest and Vienna, so Jewish teams also became destinations for Hungarian and Austrian players in the interwar period. These clubs included, for example, Makkabi Brno and Hakoah Vienna, the Austrian champion in 1925.

68 Szegedi, "A magyar football."

69 The following according to Szegedi, "A magyar futball." See also Molnar and Maguire, "Hungarian Footballers."

70 Taylor, "Football's Engineers?"

71 The story is told by Wilson, *The Names*, 24–25.

72 Bevan, Chris. "Jimmy Hogan: The Englishman Who Inspired the Magical Magyars." *BBC,* November 24, 2013, https://www.bbc.com/sport/football/25055156.

The same pattern extended across the Atlantic during the golden age of professional soccer in the United States, particularly in the American Soccer League (1921–1933), where New York clubs associated with the Hakoah tradition fielded numerous Hungarian and Austrian players, many of them former members of Hakoah Vienna. Other Hungarian footballers migrated to Italy, France, and Switzerland after these countries introduced professional leagues (Switzerland in 1932).[73] Szegedi counted hundreds of players who left Hungary, mostly for Austria, Germany, Italy, or France during the interwar period.[74]

Another representative of the "Danubian School" of soccer, Hugo Meisl (1881–1937) from Vienna, helped realize the idea of a Central European cup competition, the Mitropa Cup, just a year after the start of the Hungarian professional football league.[75] A close friend of Jimmy Hogan, Meisl was typical of this early generation of sportsmen. He had a career as a player, coach, referee, FIFA delegate for Austria, and enthusiastic innovator. His younger brother Willy Meisl (1895–1968) was one of the leading sports journalists of the mid-twentieth century. The Mitropa Cup brought in much needed money and a heightened sense of competition that would eventually also include strong teams from Italy. The first Mitropa Cup winner was Sparta Prague, who defeated Rapid Vienna in the 1927 final, but Hungarian sides soon showed their strength in the competition. In the eleven years between 1928 and 1939, they counted no less than five victories and two second places, compared to four victories by Austrian clubs, two by Sparta Prague, and two by Italian clubs.

Competing Imperialisms: Hungary, Italy, and the FIFA World Cups of 1934 and 1938, World War II and the Holocaust

Despite the successes of Ferencváros and Újpest in the Mitropa Cup, the most significant event that showed that Hungary had almost risen to the top of the football world was the 1938 FIFA World Cup in France. Here, the Hungarian national team reached the final against the defending world champion, Italy. Four years earlier, in April 1934, the Hungarian team had also, for the first time, defeated England 2–1 in front of 35,000 spectators in the FTC stadium in

73 For the US, see https://www.ussoccerhistory.org/overview-the-american-soccer-league-1921-1934/. For Switzerland Koller, "Die Schweiz."

74 Szegedi, "A magyar futball." Koller, "Sport und Migration," also mentions the Jewish coaches.

75 Hafer and Hafer, *Hugo Meisl*. See also Eggers, "Hugo Meisl."

Budapest.[76] That was the last game between the two teams before the 1953 "Match of the Century."[77]

Shortly after that game, the Hungarians traveled to Italy, where Mussolini had spent large sums to impress the world in a tournament that saw, for the first time, a competition of 16 teams from three different continents in eight impressive new stadiums. Behind the idea to name modern association football "calcio" stood the nationalist narrative that Italians had not imported a British game because they had already "invented" the game themselves. They regarded soccer merely as a continuation of the violent Florentine game, ignoring its ritualistic, religious background and the fact that it had not been played since the seventeenth century.[78] The reinvention and claiming of the game as an "ancient Italian tradition" was connected to Fascist attempts to demonstrate Italian "masculinity" and strength in a competition of imperialisms.[79] Fascism understood itself as a movement that would challenge the dominant position of Britain, not only in the Horn of Africa, where Mussolini launched a brutal assault on Ethiopia less than one year after the World Cup, but also on the football pitch. Fascism was not anticolonial. It sought to challenge the British Empire by creating a powerful Italian Empire, thus merely replacing, or seeking to replace, one colonialism with another.[80]

The 1934 World Cup also reflected the colonial reality of the time, mirrored in the world of football, when Hungary played against Egypt, the first African team to participate in a FIFA World Cup, after the North Africans had tragically missed the boat in 1930 that would have taken them to Uruguay.[81] In a game that took place in Naples in front of 8,000 spectators on May 27, 1934, the Hungarians

76 "A magyar labdarúgó-válogatott mérkőzései 1934-ben" [The Hungarian national soccer team's matches in 1934]. *Wikipedia,* https://hu.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_magyar_labdar%C3%BAg%C3%B3-v%C3%A1logatott_m%C3%A9rk%C5%91z%C3%A9sei_1934-ben.

77 After the 6–3 victory, Hungary had three more wins, including a 2–1 win in the 1962 World Cup in Chile. But from 1965 on, Hungary would not win a single game against England for almost sixty years, until 2022, reflecting its long decline. "England national football team: record v Hungary," *Home of Football Statistics and History,* https://www.11v11.com/teams/england/tab/opposingTeams/opposition/Hungary/.

78 Archambault, "Football and fascism."

79 A less successful attempt was the invention of "Volata" to replace the "English game." See Impiglia, "The Volata Game."

80 A new interpretation of the conflict of the 1930s and 1940s between Italy and Britain not as a struggle between Fascism and Democracy, but as a war between imperialisms is proposed by Ortiz, "Anti-Colonialism."

81 For a more detailed treatment of this rivalry, see Klimó, "The Empire is Round."

won 4–2 in a game that was tied 2–2 at half-time.[82] For the Hungarians, this triumph was satisfying revenge, because ten years earlier, a Hungarian national team had been defeated by Egypt (0–3) in the round of sixteen of the 1924 Paris Olympics. *Nemzeti Sport* had given the following warning, but in vain:

> Everybody in the country applauded with great joy at the news brought by *Nemzeti Sport* that the second opponent will be Egypt. It could have been a much stronger team, such as Uruguay, Czechoslovakia, Belgium, or Switzerland, and that would have caused more problems and would have made the community at home much more nervous. But we should not get too excited. As *Nemzeti Sport* has written in earlier issues, the Egyptian team has improved a lot in the last years. Hence, the Hungarian team has to take on this fight with enthusiasm, determination, and great effort.[83]

The day after the match, Dr Mihály Mamusich's report made the headlines: "Catastrophic Defeat against Egypt (0–3) in Paris."[84] "The Egyptians," Mamusich further, "were two classes below us, but they fought like lions." Later, Egypt was eliminated by bronze medal-winner Sweden (0–5), re-establishing the hierarchy of the soccer world but also showing that the 1924 Hungarian team was not strong.[85] Gyula Gömbös, the "race-defender" politician who was on the rise and would become prime minister in 1933, claimed in parliament that the players did not represent the "Hungarian nation" but "international professionalism." This phrase was understood, in a time of rampant antisemitism, to mean "Jewish."[86]

While Hungarian star players like Árpád Weisz, who continued his career as a coach in Italy (until 1937), were victims of antisemitism, for Egyptians, soccer gained significance as part of their anticolonial struggle.[87]

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82 *Nemzeti Sport*, May 27, 1934, 1–3. On page 2, the reporter described the Egyptian team. Although the paper treated the Egyptian team with some respect, it could not resist the temptation to use racist stereotypes: "Mukhtar Titsch a neve. Jobbösszekötőt játszik. Csúnya, fekete, törpe termetű emberke. Különösen az arca nagyon sötét," or "his name is Mukhtar Titsch. He plays at inside right. He is an ugly, dark-skinned, diminutive little man. His face in particular is very dark."

83 *Nemzeti Sport*, May 29, 1924, 6.

84 *Nemzeti Sport*, May 30, 1924, title page.

85 Wilson, *The Names*, 75. One of the Egyptian players who scored against Hungary was Hussein Hegazi (sometimes written Hegazy), who, in 1911, became the first African-born person. He scored a goal in one match he played for Fulham. *Fullham Football Club Wiki,* https://fulham.fandom.com/wiki/Hussein_Hegazi. Hegazi is also called "the father of Egyptian football." See also Tchir, "A Forgotten Legacy."

86 Wilson, *The Names*, 76. For a more general perspective: Oswald, "The image."

87 Weisz first played for Inter Milan in the 1925–26 season. "Arpad Weisz," *Inter,* https://www.inter.it/en/archivio_giocatore/G0650.

The example of Egypt shows two things. First, the world of soccer was still dominated by the old colonial order even as anticolonial movements were beginning to use the sport as a tool to mobilize their followers and challenge the colonizers after elites had also aspired to emulate their lifestyles.[88] Second, small European countries such as Hungary were mostly (sometimes unconsciously) reproducing the colonial gaze towards the non-European world because they had become part of the global sports system in order not to be part of that world. They not only wanted to look like masculine Brits with moustaches, they also wanted to enjoy the same prestige and privilege. As the *Nemzeti Sport* article of 1924 demonstrated, however, the autonomy of the modern sports system somewhat undermined this colonial gaze, because every opponent, even if they were from an African country, had to be treated with respect and could not be underestimated.

In the 1938 FIFA World Cup in France, the Hungarian national team was again matched against a team from the colonized South, a team that arrived under the name "Dutch East Indies" (Indonesia). It was the first Asian team to participate in a World Cup and one of the first Asian members of FIFA (having joined in 1928).[89] The team qualified because Japan and the USA withdrew.[90] Soccer had become an area of dispute between the colonizing authorities and anticolonial forces in Indonesia as well.[91] For example, as of 1930, there were two national football associations which only merged in 1935. The captain of the Indonesian team was Achmed Nawir, a physician, as was his Hungarian equivalent, György Sárosi. This time, the game ended with an easy 6–0 win for the European side.

Nemzeti Sport covered the pre-game excitement on four pages in their issue of June 2, 1938. The paper focused entirely on the Hungarian team, probably because the reporters did not have any information about the "Holland India" side, as it was called in Hungarian. In the next issue, two days before the match in Reims, the newspaper ran an article about Indonesia based on an interview with a Hungarian doctor who had just returned from the Dutch colony after

88 On Nigeria, see Boer, "Football, Mobilization and Protest." However, in places like Zambia, the British authorities attempted to control the local population through soccer. Perhaps unsurprisingly, they did not succeed entirely. See Chipande, "Chipolopolo," 61.

89 "Asia's World Cup Debutants: Dutch East Indies," *AFC*, June 5, 2018, https://www.the-afc.com/en/national/fifa_world_cup/news/asias_world_cup_debutants_dutch_east_indies.html.

90 The US team withdrew because of the intensifying political tensions in Europe. See "The Year in American Soccer – 1938," *Soccer History USA*, https://soccerhistoryusa.org/asha/year/1938.html.

91 Harjo, "The identity politics."

17 years.[92] The doctor was convinced that the Hungarian team would win because the Indonesians were "slim, skinny people" who could only "run but did not work much."[93]

Much worse, the French organizers, who had hoped that the rising imperialist power Japan would participate in the World Cup, purchased only the cheaper third class tickets for the Indonesians (to whom they referred as "natives"), in spite of the fact that the Indonesian team had to take a long voyage to get to Paris.[94] FIFA had to change its original plan, according to which Japan would play a qualifier against the Indonesians in Shanghai, after the Chinese city was overrun and destroyed during the Japanese invasion of 1937. That was why Japan really withdrew from the competition. Looming over the tournament in France was also the Spanish Civil War, in which the defending world champion, Italy, had intervened massively with weapons, ammunition, air raids, and its navy. The French Popular Front government did not show much support for the idea of a competition among teams with professional players. Spain, a strong contender against Italy in 1934, was torn apart and could not send a team. The devastating civil war threw the country's soccer development back for decades to come. Austria, the Wunderteam, had been dissolved after the Nazi occupation of the country, which came only three months before the tournament was scheduled.

The brutal wars launched by the new imperialist powers Japan and Italy, however, foreshadowed the beginning of the next world war, only one year after the world cup in France. Political tensions in Europe, Africa, and Asia were already high. Latin America was represented by Brazil alone. The Argentinians, who had wanted to host the world cup and had been voted down by the FIFA committee, indignantly refused to send their national team.[95] The Brazilian team, as Paul Dietschy emphasizes, was a "promise" for the future of the sport. They won the bronze medal after beating Sweden 4–2. Most of all, their style was celebrated by some French newspapers, which called them "true artists" of the game, with the top-scorer Leônidas da Silva as the next black star player after

92 "Ha meleg lesz, nagyon vigyázunk Reimsben!" [If it gets hot, we will be very careful in Reims!]. *Nemzeti Sport*, June 3, 1938, 4. Again, the article contained language expressive of the prevalent racial stereotypes, such as references to the "straight-haired Malayans and the curly-haired Ambonese" among the 60 million people in Dutch East India.

93 *Nemzeti Sport*, June 3, 1938, 4.

94 Dietschy, "The 1938 World Cup," 92.

95 Ibid., 87.

the Uruguayan José Leandro Andrade in the 1930 World Cup (and in the Olympics of 1924 and 1928), challenging the rampant racism of the time.[96]

After their easy victory in the first round, the Hungarians were on a run. On the way to the final against the defending world champion Italy, they beat Switzerland in the quarterfinals (2–0) and thrashed Sweden in the semifinal (5–1). The top scorer was Gyula Zsengellér (1915–1999), one of the best offensive players in Europe at the time. Zsengellér had started his career at Újpest (1936–1947) and had continued as a player and coach in Italy and, finally, Cyprus.[97] Another star of the team was György Sárosi (1912–1993), who emigrated to Italy after World War II, where he enjoyed a long, successful career as a trainer. Pál Titkos (1908–1988), who played 48 times for Hungary between 1929 and 1938 and who scored one of the goals in the final against Italy, later coached the Egyptian club Al-Ahly and the national team that won the African Cup of Nations in 1959, after which he returned to Hungary.[98] Vilmos Kohut (b. Kohaut) (1906–1986) earned the title "canon Hongrois" in the French press. He was immediately hired to help Olympique de Marseille win the championship in the newly formed French professional league, as well as two French cup titles.[99] These players survived World War II. Many others did not.

Germany (and Brazil) had expressed interest in hosting the World Cup in 1942.[100] Instead, Hitler decided to invade what remained of Czechoslovakia just after the tournament in France and to also invade Poland, France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Norway, Denmark, Yugoslavia, and, in June 1941, the Soviet Union. In the end, he would lose the war. But he succeeded in having millions murdered, including six million Jews, several million Ukrainians, Russians, and countless others. Unsurprisingly, these catastrophic upheavals affected football players[101] The war years should not be omitted from football history. The tragic story

96 Ibid., 100.

97 "Gyula Zsengellér," *Wikipedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gyula_Zsengell%C3%A9r.

98 "Titkos Pál," *Wikipedia*, https://hu.wikipedia.org/wiki/Titkos_P%C3%A1l.

99 "Kohut Vilmos," *Wikipedia*, https://hu.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kohut_Vilmos.

100 "Hitler petitioned FIFA to host the 1942 World Cup." Cfr. Lisi, *A history*, 43.

101 The topic is often left out in the secondary literature. Even Goldblatt only sporadically mentions the Holocaust or World War II in his monumental global history of soccer. Goldblatt, *The Ball is Round*. There is some newer research: Herzog, Brändle, ed., *Europäischer Fußball* (which, however, contains no chapter on Hungary); Tovar, "Soccer, World War II"; Zwicker, "Jüdischer Fußball"; Simpson, *Soccer Under the Swastika*.

began in 1939. The so-called Aryanization of football clubs had drastic consequences,[102] the least of which was the de facto dissolution of MTK in 1942.[103]

The "wisdom of the crowd" cultivated by Wikipedia sometimes produces extraordinary results. One of this is the "List of footballers killed during World War II."[104] One could note that this list does not distinguish between fallen German soldiers and murdered Jews. Also, it should rather be called "List of *known* footballers killed during World War II." But it is worth looking at. The Austrian list contains 16 names, ten of which were soldiers who died or went missing in action, mostly on the Eastern Front. Of the six others, four were Jews murdered in concentration camps, one was a communist who was executed in 1943, and one, Karl Stuermer (who worked as a football coach in Italy) was arrested and killed by German troops after the occupation of the country. The German list has 27 names, 25 of which were Wehrmacht soldiers. Only one (Julius Hirsch) was a Jew murdered in Auschwitz, and one was killed during an air raid.

Compared to Hungary, German and Austrian football was much less marked by a strong Jewish presence, which also has to do with the central place Budapest, with its large Jewish population (one quarter around 1910), held in the first three decades of the game. Nine Hungarian players are listed, seven of whom were Jews and two of whom died giving their lives in an anti-Nazi resistance group: Géza Kertész (1894–1945) and István Tóth. Kertész, a former player for Ferencváros and trainer of AS Rome (1942–1943) and of Újpest, was executed by the Gestapo together with István Tóth (1891–1945) on February 6, 1945 for sheltering Jews.[105] Tóth was also a former Ferencváros player who had begun coaching at the club (1925–1930) and had continued in Italy (US Triestina 1930–1931, 1934–1936, Ambrosiana/ Inter Milan 1938–1939). Eight of those listed had been called up for the Hungarian national team: József Braun (or Barna) (1901–1943) (MTK) between 1918 and 1926, Sándor Bródy (1884–1944) (Ferencváros) from 1906 to 1913, Henrik Nádler (1901–1944/45) (MTK), 1924–1926, Imre Taussig (1894–1945) (MTK, national team 1914–1918), Árpád Weisz (1896–1944), 1922–1923, Manager of Inter Milan (1926–1931, 1932–1934), and Ferenc Weisz

102 Aryanization is treated in Hadas, *A modern férfi*, 43.

103 Wilson, *The Names*, 282–83. Hadas, "Football and social identity," 49–51.

104 "List of footballers killed during World War II." *Wikipedia,* https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_footballers_killed_during_World_War_II.

105 "Holocaust Memorial Day: Remembering Geza Kertesz, Roma Coach and War Hero." *AS Roma,* January 27, 2019, https://www.asroma.com/en/news/54213/holocaust-memorial-day-remembering-geza-kertesz-roma-coach-and-war-hero.

(1885–1944), who had played 14 years for the Hungarian squad (1903–1917). The list also shows that they all belonged to an older generation, from which many had transferred into team management by the mid-1930s. The Golden Era of Danubian Football, in which Jewish players and coffee houses had played prominent roles, had come to a bloody end.

Frans Alfred Meeng (1910–1944), one of the Indonesian players from the 1938 World Cup, was also among those who lost their lives in the war. Meeng, an officer in the Dutch Marine Corps, was taken prisoner by the Japanese and transported in a ship that was tragically sunk by a British submarine torpedo.

So, we have seen that Hungary had one of the best European soccer teams before the beginning of World War II. During the war, the national squad played several games against neutral Switzerland and Sweden, but they played mostly against their Allies, Nazi Germany, Croatia, Bulgaria, and Romania. Before 1939, soccer friendlies had become an important area of cultural diplomacy, especially between the authoritarian regime of Horthy and Fascist Italy.[106] The Hungarians remained unbeaten in 1940 (three wins, five draws), but they lost twice against Germany (0–7 in 1941 and 3–5 in 1942) and against Sweden (1943), while winning all other games.

In 1944, the war reached Hungary, and international games, as well as domestic competitions, became impossible. Only three months after the end of the war in Europe, however, football matches resumed, probably to distract the war-weary population. In August and September 1945, Hungary hosted three games, all three of which it won (2–0 and 5–2 against Austria and 7–2 against Romania). One year later, the team played the first three matches abroad, with two wins and one defeat in Vienna against their neighbor. In 1947, the Hungarian side played seven matches, and in 1948, the first postwar edition of the Balkan Cup was played, which Hungary won, ahead of Yugoslavia and Bulgaria.[107] A year later, the Hungarian team suffered only one defeat in eight matches. The statistics for the 1940s show that the Hungarian national side was much stronger and more successful than it had been in the 1930s.[108] The team won most of the games. It only had a negative balance against Germany and Italy.

106 Venuti, *Hungary as a Sport Super Power*.

107 "1948 Balkan Cup." *Wikipedia,* https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1948_Balkan_Cup.

108 "A magyar labdarúgó-válogatott mérkőzései (1930–1949)" [The Hungarian national team's matches, 1930–1949], https://hu.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_magyar_labdar%C3%BAg%C3%B3-v%C3%A1logatott_m%C3%A9rk%C5%91z%C3%A9sei_(1930%E2%80%931949).

Hungarian Stalinism and the Golden Team (1949–1956)

Two world wars and the Holocaust did not stop the further spread of the global system of modern sport. On the contrary, the real boom was still to come. FIFA grew much larger than the United Nations, which was founded at the end of the war. The Cold War did not prevent the complete integration of European soccer with the creation of the UEFA (1954), although the UEFA and the strengthening of the role of the continental confederations was originally meant to keep anti-communist majorities on the international level.[109] Wars and other conflicts had prevented the Europeans from doing this, almost 40 years after the Latin Americans had established their own regional confederation (CONMEBOL) in 1916. And even the English F. A. finally overcame its isolationism and joined FIFA after some back and forth in the first half of the twentieth century.

During this time, the politicization of sports continued in the context of the Cold War. The Italian Fascists and the Nazis had tried, without much success, to use sports for propaganda or to satisfy the needs of the masses for entertainment.[110] Sports, however, could also offer opportunities to express dissent.[111] After the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, experiments to create something like a parallel "proletarian" system of national and international sports sprung up. In the Weimar Republic and "Red Vienna," similar attempts were made, and amateur leagues of like-minded athletes were founded.[112] The split into rivaling social democratic and communist sports movements undermined these ambitions,[113] but it was mostly the allure of the competitions among the "bourgeois" sports organizations that proved decisive. These organizations, after all, had an improving infrastructure of stadiums, growing spectator numbers, and, most of all, a strong presence in the media, mostly newspapers, sometimes movies (where short clips with scenes of great games were shown), but soon also radio.[114]

In Soviet Russia, where a "Red Sports International" (RSI) was founded in 1921, all independent workers' sports initiatives were suppressed by 1923, with the introduction of a hierarchical sports organization controlled by and in the

109 Vonnard, *L'Europe dans le monde du football.*

110 Heinisch-Fritzsche, *Fußball und Faschismus* shows that Fascist propaganda created a negative image of Italian football abroad.

111 Benoit, "The politicization of football."

112 For the general trend, see Gounot, "Social Democratic." For Vienna, Marschik, *Wir spielen nicht.*

113 Gounot, "Social Democratic," 1.

114 Borghini, *Calcio & Cinema*; Crosson, "European cinema." A good example for Danubian Football is the popularity of Sindelar. Maderthaner, "Der 'papierene' Tänzer."

service of the Communist Party.[115] 1931 marked the peak of the two competing workers sports movements, 1933 their end. The Nazis destroyed not only the Communist and the Social Democratic Party in Germany but also the proletarian sport organizations and clubs, and they would do the same in Austria and the Czech lands in 1938.[116] Almost at the same time, in 1936, a Soviet National League was established in the midst of the Stalinist purges.[117] When Beria took over the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs of the Soviet Union (Narodny Komissariat Vnutrennikh Del, or NKVD), he made sure that the popular club Spartak had trouble winning against his side, Dynamo. This made it plainly obvious that in the Soviet Union, even football was under heavy oppression. International games were not allowed until after World War II.

The first time a Soviet national team participated in an international tournament was in the 1952 Helsinki Olympics. There, the Soviet team was beaten by none other than Tito's Yugoslavia, the Soviets' bitter socialist rival, disappointing Stalin's expectations.[118] A "golden era" of Soviet football started after Stalin's death but lasted only a decade.[119] In a similar way, other state socialist countries such as Poland, Bulgaria, Romania, (which had not had a strong presence in world soccer before 1945, because the sport had developed more slowly than in the northwest and Central European centers) rose in the hierarchy, with successful club and national teams in the 1970s and 1980s, a time when Hungary experienced a slow decline.[120] During that period, Socialist states with their "state amateur" system would also dominate the Olympic soccer tournaments, where professionals from the West were banned.

In Hungary, the new Stalinist regime tried to take full control of Hungarian society by means of show trials against real and imagined opponents, hundreds of executions, and the establishment of a forced-labor system with tens of thousands of inmates.[121] In 1949, not only banks and factories, but also pro-

115 The founding of the RSI cemented the split in the workers sport movement, which had its international center in the social democratic-leaning Lucerne Sport International (since 1928 Socialist Worker Sports International"). Gounot, "Social Democratic," 3.

116 Timpe, *Nazi-Organized Recreation*.

117 Goldblatt, *The Ball is Round*, 315. An overview of the historiography provides Riordan, "Russia/The Soviet Union." See also Edelman, *Spartak Moscow*.

118 Klasić, "The Tito–Stalin Football War."

119 Borrero, "Beyond the unfulfilled promise." See also Zeller, *Sport and Society*.

120 For Poland, see Dmowski, "Politicization of the FIFA World Cup."

121 Klimó, *Hungary since 1945*.

fessional football clubs and their stadiums were taken over by the state.[122] Politically "suspicious" teams such as Ferencváros, which had won another league title that year, were given to the food workers' union and called ÉDOSZ and later Kinizsi, and they were stripped of their traditional green and white colors. MTK was taken over from the Textile industry (as *Textiles*) by the secret police (as *Bástya*) and called "Red Flag" (*Vörös Lobogó*, again under the Textile Industry). During and after the profound crisis after Stalin's death, the regime gave up this attempt to suppress the older football traditions, and the teams regained their old names and colors.

How could soccer flourish under such circumstances? Some of the best players had left the country before the borders were closed in the late 1940s. In 1949, there was even a "Hungaria" team in Rome that included refugees from Slovakia, Romania, and other Communist states. One of their players was Gyula Zsengellér, the former Újpest goal scorer and star of the 1938 World Cup.[123] Another prominent player was László Kubala, who would become a superstar at Barcelona, helping them to win national cups between 1950 and 1961. The Franco regime even made an anti-communist movie about him.[124] His statue stands in front of Camp Nou.[125] In 1951, however, Sándor Szűcs, a famous Újpest defender who had tried to escape with his lover, was caught by the secret police, arrested, and executed. This was most probably meant to be a warning to other footballers who were toying with the idea of leaving. It seemed to have worked, as for the next five years, no other professional player tried to escape until the 1956 revolution.

Those who stayed, however, revolutionized the world of football. The most prominent of them was the Hungarian captain Ferenc Puskás. Puskás later said that it was during the 1952 Olympic soccer tournament against Yugoslavia (which the Hungarian team won) where their football "first started to flow."[126] Puskás, who today counts as one of the best footballers of all time, on par with Beckenbauer, Pelé, Messi, Bobby Charlton, was born in Budapest in 1927 to

122 This and the following according to Wilson, *The Names*, 384–85.

123 Wilson, *The Names*, 268–69. Ernő (Ernest) Egri Erbstein (1898–1949), see also Bliss, *Erbstein*.

124 Lénárt, "A magyar diktatúra"; See also Sanjurjo, "La utilización política."

125 Wilson, *The Names*, 271–72. László (Ladislao) Kubala (1927–2002), born in Budapest, had a Slovak–Polish background. He played for Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and later for the Spanish national team. For a broader perspective, see Dietschy, "Football Players' Migrations"; Born, "Ferenc Puskás."

126 Quoted in Goldblatt, *The Ball is Round*, 341.

a family with the German-Swabian name of Purczeld.[127] His father was a player and coach for Kispesti AC, where Ferenc started in 1943. Between 1947 and 1948, Béla Guttman, who had survived the Holocaust in hiding, took over as coach of Kispest before ultimately leaving the country.[128] Two years earlier, Guttman had led Újpest to the national title and had assisted the Hungarian national team. When Hungary met for a friendly with Italy, ten of the Italian XI played for Torino, a side that dominated the Serie A for years. Its coach was another Hungarian, Ernő Erbstein.[129] Erbstein, who had survived the Holocaust, died with most of the players of the Grande Torino squad in the tragic plane crash of 1949. After leaving the country in 1949, Guttman first became coach of Padova and then went on for his great career at the top of Latin American and European football. In Brazil, which hosted and finished in second place in 1950 World Cup, football tactics at the time also saw a strong Hungarian influence in the person of Izidor "Dori" Kürschner Szücs (1885–1941) [130]

Despite this exodus of world-class players and coaches, Hungary would still become the best team in the world in the first half of the 1950s.[131] Even the Stalinist system seems to have been advantageous, at least for the Kispest team. In 1949, the ministry of defense, following the Soviet model of CSCA (TsSKA) Moscow (Central Sport Club of the Army), took over Kispesti AC and named it "Honvéd" (Home Defender).[132] The nationalization of the clubs and the manipulation of the market for the best players led to a concentration of forces which, for a brief period, created a super team around Puskás. He and his teammates were caught in the same Stalinist cage, but they fled when they had a chance in the chaos of 1956. Until then, their cage was golden, not rusty like that of the average Hungarian. In an impoverished, terrorized society under constant surveillance and propaganda, they were showered with privileges by their powerful protectors in the party elite. The communist dictatorship came with the idea of equality for all but simultaneously produced a complex system

127 His birth certificate can be found here: http://www.puskas.com/hu/aktualis/104-puskas_szuletesnapja.html.

128 Wilson, *The Names*, 218–23.

129 Ibid., 258.

130 Mostly known in Brazil as Dori Kru(e)schner, he played for MTK and the national side before World War I and then had a long career as coach in Germany (Nürnberg champion 1921, Bayern, Eintracht Frankfurt, among others) and Switzerland (Grasshoppers) before arriving in Brazil in 1937, where he would train Flamengo with the superstar Leonidas. See Wilson, *The Names*, passim.

131 Handler, *From Goals*; Lenz, "'Sozialistischer Fussball'."

132 Baumann, "The Central Army Sports Club."

of privileges for the so-called nomenklatura, the highest party functionaries.[133] They would distribute access to privileged spaces such as houses, apartments, clubs, and restaurants and also luxury items such as cars or goods that were hard to get during the economic crisis created by enforced industrialization at the expense of the consumer sector. In the case of Puskás, it was Mihály Farkas (1904–1965) himself, one of the three most powerful men in the country, the defense minister, who did his best to "spoil" the best player at "his" club.[134] Farkas would ask his star player what presents he wanted. When Puskás replied that he did not need anything, the Ministry of Defense would send him a 12-piece silver cutlery set and a precious Persian carpet.[135] In an interview in 1985, Puskás said the following of this: "All Hungarian sportsmen came to me with their problems because I could go to those people—there were three or four—who could arrange one or two things. Apartments, furniture, money, a promotion. Between 49 and 56, they half-officially allowed the import of nylon stockings, watches, or scarves from the West." [136]

Elite sports and especially the successful national football team had become one of the most popular features of the Stalinist regime. The Olympic Games in Helsinki 1952 marked the absolute climax of this period. The Hungarians finished as the third best team, winning 42 medals (16 gold, 10 silver, 16 bronze), trailing only the USA and the Soviet Union. The regime did not, however, highlight the fact that the Hungarians had already been the fourth best team in the 1948 London games, *before* the takeover of power by the Communist Party, a clear sign that the rise to the level of a sports superpower had its roots in the Horthy period. Personal connections were key to the success of the team around Puskás, plus the new opportunities that came with protection by the nomenklatura. During this time, a man named Emil Östreicher (1914–1992), who had survived the Holocaust, ran a restaurant where Puskás and other footballers met after the war. In 1949, after closing the restaurant, Puskás and his friends asked him to come to Honvéd, where he would later become the technical director.[137] Because

133 György Majtényi has brilliantly analyzed this system in his *Luxury*.

134 Majtényi, *Luxury*. See also "Rákosi, Puskás, forradalom," *Múltkor*, November 25, 2013, https://multkor.hu/20131125_rakosi_puskas_forradalom.

135 Ibid.

136 Ibid.

137 Wilson, *The Names*, 255. See also "Emil Östreicher," *Wikipedia,* https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emil_Östreicher. With the permission of Prime Minister Imre Nagy, he led Honvéd to Western Europe during the Revolution of 1956 and then remained in the West, where the team played some friendlies to make money to earn a modest living before many players were hired by some of the best clubs. In the 1960s,

the Army could offer young men the option of pursuing a sport instead of doing obligatory military service, it was able to get the strongest players in the country on its team: Sándor Kocsis, Zoltán Czibor, László Budai from Ferencváros, Gyula Lóránt from Vasas and the goalkeeper Gyula Grosics from MATEOSZ were the backbone of the "Golden Team." Kocsis (1929–1979) came from the youth of Kőbánya and had started his career at 17 in 1946. He was a major goal scorer in the 1954 World Cup games. In 1999, *World Soccer* magazine elected Kocsis as one of the 100 World-Best Players of the twentieth century.[138] Czibor (1929–97) was a fast, unpredictable left winger who would often surprise the opponents' defense.[139] Gyula Lóránt (b. Lipovics, 1923–1981) started his career during the war.[140] At the end of the war, he was in Romania, in the city of Arad, before he moved to Vasas Budapest in 1947. An intelligent player, he organized his team's defense well. Goalkeeper Gyula Grosics (1926–2014) also came from a provincial town, from Dorog, before he was drafted to play for Honvéd at the age of 24.[141] This third generation of Hungarian footballers came mostly from outside the capital. They were eager to pursue careers in the center, in contrast to the players of the earlier generations, who were mostly Budapest-born.

The national coach Gusztáv Sebes (1906–1986) built a national team around mostly one club, an idea copied from the Italian world champions of the 1930s.[142] Sebes might have had communist leanings. The party therefore promoted him instead of the much more renowned coaches Béla Guttman and Márton Bukovi. But Sebes was also an experienced player who had spent 13 years at MTK. Wilson believed that he was exactly what the Hungarian team needed at the time

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Östreicher managed Real Madrid and Schalke 04, Valencia, and other teams before returning briefly to Hungary. For Béla Guttman, see Bolchover, *The Greatest Comeback*.

138 After the 1956 Revolution, Kocsis fled to the West and played for Barcelona. "Kocsis Sándor," *Wikipedia,* https://hu.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kocsis_Sándor_(labdarúgó).

139 "Czibor Zoltán," *Wikipedia,* https://hu.wikipedia.org/wiki/Czibor_Zolt%C3%A1n. Czibor also emigrated in 1956, first playing for AS Roma, then in Spain, and, finally in Canada. He started on a Railway team (his father was a railway officer) in the northwestern town of Komárom before he was discovered by Ferencváros in 1948.

140 When Lóránt was a coach in the Bundesliga (Eintracht Frankfurt), *Der Spiegel* interviewed him in 1977. The article appeared under the headline, "Er entdeckte der totalen Fußball" [He discovered total football], *Der Spiegel,* March 27, 1977, https://www.spiegel.de/sport/er-entdeckte-den-totalen-fussball-a-98c28eaf-0002-0001-0000-000040941673?context=issue.

141 "Grosics Gyula," *Wikipedia,* https://hu.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grosics_Gyula.

142 Wilson, *The Names*, 386. Sebes was born Scharenpeck in Budapest and spent some years at a Renault factory in France. Greg Lea, "Gusztáv Sebes: The Pioneering Brain behind Hungary's Magical Magyars," *These Football Times,* August 15, 2020, https://thesefootballtimes.co/2020/08/15/gusztav-sebes-the-pioneering-brain-behind-hungarys-magical-magyars/.

because he was mostly an organizer and not "as blunt as Márton Bukovi or as volatile as Béla Guttman."[143] But Bukovi's idea of a deep-lying center-forward, with which he had experimented during the war when he was coach of Gradinski Zagreb (in the fascist state of Croatia), turned out to be an essential element for the Hungarian "Golden team" once Nándor Hidegkuti joined. Hidegkuti's position, completely unknown to the English defense, was so irritating that they simply did not know what to do. Thus, Hungary could score almost at will in the "Match of the Century" in November 1953. Finally, the former MTK fullback Gyula Mándi (1899–1969), whom Sebes choose as his assistant, gave the most important tactical advice. In brief, much of what made the Magyars mighty in the 1950s came from an earlier, now disdained historical era. Still, it seemed as if the Stalinist system had produced a perfect Hungarian soccer team that was unstoppable. On May 14, 1950, the Hungarians suffered their last defeat in years against their archrival Austria (3–5) in front of 65,000 spectators in the Viennese Prater Stadium. Over the course of the next three years, they would lose only one more game, which was a 1-2 loss against a Moscow XI in Moscow, watched by 80,000 people. However, since that result fit well into the political atmosphere of the time (the propaganda was all focused on "learning" from the Soviet Union), it is possible that the Hungarians had to lose to the "fatherland of all proletarians" if they did not want to provoke Stalin. We do not know who decided that the Eastern European nations would have to withdraw from the World Cup qualifiers for the 1950 Brazilian tournament, but this decision was probably prompted by heightened tensions at the time, which would erupt with the outbreak of the Korean War one day after the tournament began.[144]

The 1952 Olympic tournament in Helsinki would see the Hungarian XI on top for the first time, which was also a major propaganda success for the Stalinist regime. Before the final against Yugoslavia, dictator Mátyás Rákosi called coach Sebes and reminded him that the Hungarian team could not lose to the new enemy of the Soviet camp.[145] Rákosi's concerns were unfounded, because the Golden team was at the peak of its game.

All the meticulous Stalinist planning, however, did not help when the Mighty Magyars faced the West German team in Bern on a rainy day in 1954 and lost

143 Wilson, *The Names*, 386.

144 Unfortunately, I could not find any discussion of this in the secondary literature. The withdrawal of all Eastern European teams except Yugoslavia certainly makes it seem very plausible that this was the result of a concerted effort. And it was Stalin who had the last word at the time.

145 Wilson, *The names*, 312.

the final of the FIFA World Cup to a team of lesser known outsiders. Hungarians, who had endured politically inflicted poverty, economic chaos, ubiquitous propaganda, and surveillance and terror for years, did not stay calm after this disappointment. Riots and demonstrations with thousands of participants broke out after the unexpected defeat. The Hungarian team had to be shielded from the angry crowd. The Stalinist regime had not understood that soccer is a game that cannot be fully controlled even by the best team. "The ball is round," as West German coach Sepp Herberger famously said, meaning simply that one can never know exactly which way it will roll. It did not roll the way the Communist party had hoped, and average Hungarians got so angry that they challenged the armed authorities for the first time since the establishment of the regime.[146]

Conclusions: "The Golden Team" in the Global History of Soccer

How can we explain the impressive achievements of the Hungarian national soccer team in the first half of the 1950s, especially when these achievements are seen in contrast to the long-term decline in the second half of the twentieth century? Even after the defeat in Bern, Hungary's "state amateur" sides still enjoyed considerable success for at least another decade, but soon, they were in steep decline.[147] From the 1960s on, West Germany, Italy, and most of all Brazil with Pelé, but also the Soviet Union (European champions in 1960) and England (World champion 1966) were more successful. This was a similar story to the small pioneer nations of Uruguay, Austria, and Switzerland, which were among the best sides until the mid-twentieth century. The size of the population surely played a role. There was simply not a large pool of talent on which to draw. For Hungary, the traumatic experiences of 1954 and 1956 also contributed to this negative trend. The 1955–56 championship was abruptly canceled, and the state even took measures to limit mention and stifle anything resembling celebration or fond recollection of some of the best players.[148]

146 Majtényi, "Demonstration."

147 Hungary won Olympic bronze in 1960, gold in 1964 and 1968, and silver in 1972. It placed third in the European Championship in 1964 and the Quarter Finals in the World Cups in 1962 and 1966. But ten years after the 1956 Revolution, a steep decline set in. The last time Hungary qualified for a UEFA EURO was in 1972 (when it placed fourth). It did not qualify again until 2016. The team only managed to reach more than the group stages in the 1978, 1982, and 1986 World Cups, and it did not even qualify in 1974 or in any of the World Cup tournaments in the 1990s and 2000s. In 2025, it lost in the qualifiers against Ireland.

148 Fodor, "Erasing, Rewriting, and Propaganda."

What were the ingredients for the rise of Hungarian football teams and clubs between 1914 and the climax in the mid-1950s? What explains the 1953 defeat of England at Wembley, apart from English condescension and tactical ignorance, paired with isolation from developments in the sport beyond the British Isles? As we have seen, in contrast to the stagnating English, three generations of Hungarian players and coaches had learned eagerly from one another and from others, including their Danubian neighbors, the northwest European pioneers, as well as the South Americans, whom they had also helped teach. The small, ambitious country had begun the twentieth century with grandiose plans and investments in sports, cherishing the vision of becoming fully integrated into the new, modern sports system, created in the dominant liberal, capitalist Anglo-American world. It also hoped to enjoy some of the international prestige that came with success in the new field. Such dreams were spread by a dynamic media culture with newspapers, films, and later radio, and a vibrant urban culture, with its coffee houses. During the interwar period, the clubs, which had big stadiums and talented (expensive) starting players, needed money, so they engaged in even more exchange with the outside world and also established, following the example set by Vienna, one of the first professional leagues in the world. After 1945, the Hungarian national team, based on the progress and the transnational experiences of some of its leading players, became, for a moment, the best, most innovative ("total football") team in the world, and the new Stalinist regime tried to use this for propagandist purposes, a risky strategy that backfired in 1954. But it was also Stalinism that perfected, for a moment, the conditions for a national team concentrated on the best players drafted for the army *Honvéd* team. At Wembley, the temple of association football, the traditions going back to the turn-of-the-century Danubian metropolis, professionalized in the Horthy period and effectively assembled in a Stalinist manner, demonstrated a new, modern style of play that overwhelmed the English players, shocked hundreds of thousands of fans, and created the myth of the invincible "Mighty Magyars," who had defeated the British Empire in decline.

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