

Sport at fascism's disposal: the 1934 Football World Cup as a case of ideological propagation and political enforcement

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ABSTRACT

The inter-war period in Europe brought enormous transformations in people's daily life. The political regimes of the time: fascism, communism, Nazism and Western democracies utilized every single means to ensure internal stability and triumph abroad. Italy was one of these regimes that became the birthplace of fascism, which placed a very special emphasis on sport. The awarding of the organization of FIFA World Cup to Italy in 1934 was precisely what Mussolini desired. The preparation of the host nation involved enormous promotion of the fascist regime's image. In 1934, attempts to identify fascism with the pure ideals of sport reached their peak. They had already begun in the early 1920s and took the form of radical reforms of every field of Italian life exemplified by the massive construction of sport stadiums and venues of "fascist design" all around the country. In every advertisement, report and campaign, fascism and sport were interconnected. On the one hand, Italy was glorified as a football power after winning the FIFA World Cup. On the other hand, in terms of the organization of the competition, Italy was perceived as a political power ready to play the leading role in the international political scene. The 1934 FIFA World Cup made the perception of Italy abroad not only as a colonial power but also as one of the greatest regulative powers.

KEY WORDS

sport, fascism, politics, Italy, ideology.

Introduction

The process of Italian unification (*il Risorgimento*) of the late 19th century coincided chronically with the emergence of enormous transformations in every field of human culture. To be more accurate, the turbulence in social structures, economy and leisure, along with changes in international relations, warfare, borders and constitutions continued for several decades. Due to that continuous turbulence, radical ideologies and extreme views found a suitable ground in many social layers. Through a number of approaches, movements and elective procedures, various authoritarian regimes with class, nationalistic or biological orientations emerged in many countries around the world. Any generalization of that phenomenon may lead to misinterpretations, because each case of those state regimes should be considered unique. Therefore, for example, when we refer to the years 1920-1940, the term "fascism" must be only applied to Italy. Fascism had had its roots in the past and reemerged when Benito Mussolini came to power after the March on Rome (*Marcia su Roma*) in 1922.

It is not easy to retrace and classify the characteristics of fascism because it was a phenomenon that lasted for more than 20 years. Additionally, fascism as a regime

corresponded to wider sociopolitical changes and diplomatic relations. Thus, some aspects of the fascist ideology refer to what modern historians call "fascist government". The main aim of this paper is not to define the basic attributes of fascist government; however, in order to fully understand the main issues in this paper some references to that phenomenon should be made. The study examines and attempts to explain fascist aims, methods and contributions related to sports in general and to Italy's FIFA World Cup in 1934 in particular.

Methodology

The present study attempts to investigate, transcribe and highlight the 1934 FIFA World Cup in view of Italian fascist regime's ideological and political actions. The data for the study was collected from archival research and mainly focuses on the political exploitation of the 1934 FIFA World Cup by the Italian fascists. In order to ensure straight and objective interpretations the authors first make a brief introduction to Italy of the 1930s as well as the birth and growth of fascism.

The collected data are mainly based on primary written sources and case studies of contemporary researchers. Many

useful research data came from A. Matsaridis's post-graduate paper "The political utilization of sport by the authoritarian states of Europe in the inter-war period".

Fascism and sport

As already mentioned, in the inter-war period fascist views penetrated the mazy control system of Italian social life [5]. These views included a special interest in structures, in which the majority of people were interested, too. This was the reason why the fascist regime paid much attention to youth, education and sport. Undoubtedly, fascism did regard sport as the means of reforming of Italian people. The benefits of sport for the body and the soul combined with nationalistic overtones did not produce exactly the same "Hyperborean rhetoric" as in Nazi Germany. Sport, on the one hand, contributed to the healthy and powerful body, and on the other hand created bonds with the glorious Roman past (the notion referred to as "Romanità" [1] or "Italianità" [6]). It brought to light virtues which had disappeared in the early 1920s, but mainly enhanced the incorporation of Italian society into a single entity and the development of specific leading skills along with the team spirit, so characteristic of fascism. It should be emphasized that during that period sport was the basic tappet for execution of state public policies.

In this way, sport came to be controlled in terms of spectacle and entertainment by the fascist regime [7]. Amateur and professional athletes and sport organizations were supervised by the Grand Council of Fascism. It controlled all aspects of sports in the country as well as the "role models" influencing the young Italians¹.

As far as women's sport in fascist Italy was concerned, at the beginning there were questions whether sport distracted women from their real objectives such as house chores and upbringing of young fascists, and whether it enhanced masculinity in women contrarily to their nature [8]. All these worries, which came especially from the Roman Catholic Church, disappeared quickly. Sport soon gained more ground in the central than in the northern parts of the country and it appealed more to men than women [9]. For fascism every athletic event was a theatric performance with the scene, spectators and athletes in actors' roles. Such performances, on the one hand, produced semiotic and state power benefits, and on the other hand, financial ones. It is important to mention that that period witnessed the emergence of "football tourism" – an offshoot of athletic tourism – becoming a highly dynamic market. The awarding of the organization of 1934 FIFA World Cup was the outcome of all fascism's efforts for more than one decade.

Italy's bid for the World Cup

Following the great success of the early Olympic football tournaments the FIFA sent questionnaires to all its member states to examine their willingness to stage an international championship outside the Olympics. If their response were

positive a special committee was to examine the answers and decide for further moves².

On May 29, 1928, after a recommendation of the special committee, the FIFA council in Amsterdam decided to hold the first World Cup itself. Candidate host countries included Italy, the Netherlands, Spain and Sweden. Italy had already had a rich football past and the year 1928 was the seventh year of the fascist regime. The bid for the first World Cup was won by Uruguay for many reasons: athletic (winning two consecutive Olympic football tournaments in 1924 and 1928), political (1930 marked the centenary of Uruguay's independence) and financial (the Uruguayan Football Association was to cover all the expenses related to the organization of the tournament, while the incomes from the event were to be shared among the participants). Ultimately, the other candidate countries withdrew their bids and at a conference in Barcelona in 1929 Uruguay was named by FIFA as the first World Cup host nation. The organization of the first tournament faced many hardships. The global financial crisis had just begun with the Wall Street crash in 1929. For many European national associations the participation in the Uruguayan tournament meant a long and expensive journey to Latin America and two-month absence of the best players from the football heartland.

The next FIFA World Cup took place in 1934. Italy had been chosen the host country at a conference in Stockholm on October 9, 1932 following eight meetings of the FIFA executive committee [10, 11]. Italy assigned a budget of 3.5 million lire for the tournament organization – an astonishing amount of money for the time [12].

The organization

Thirty-two countries entered the competition, and after qualification, sixteen teams participated in the finals tournament [10]. However, some parts of the organization process did not go well. For the first and only time in history the previous host and world champion Uruguay 1930 declined to participate in the Italian tournament. The decision of Uruguay was not made on the grounds of the length of journey to Europe, but in protest of the refusal of several European countries to travel to South America four years earlier.

Additionally, the British Home Nations were also absent. Charles Sutcliffe, a Football Association committee member stated that "The national associations of England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland have quite enough to do in their own International Championship which seems to me a far better World Championship than the one to be staged in Rome". The British refusal to participate sheds light on the hostility between the British and Italians in the years 1920-1940. In this period, however, their battlefield was still the football pitch [6].

For the first time, the qualifying matches were arranged on a geographical basis: twelve out of sixteen places were allocated to Europe, three to the Americas, and one to Asia and Africa. Despite the fact that Italy was the host nation, they were still required to qualify. Chile and Peru withdrew

¹ F.I.G.C., *Annuario Italiano Giuoco del Calcio* (Annual Italian edition for football), 1928, p. 44 (Firenze).

² www.fifa.com

from the tournament, which resulted in Argentina's and Brazil's free entrance without playing a single match. Moreover, the qualifying match between the United States and Mexico took place three days before the official opening of the World Cup in Italy.

The organization of the event was at the highest level. The number of fans travelling from other countries was higher than at any previous football tournament, including 7,000 from the Netherlands and 10,000 each from Austria and Switzerland.

Eight cities with stadiums of monumental architecture were the hosts of the tournaments. The stadiums were "temples" in which the sports event was to unfold covered with a fascist veil. In any case, the sports competition was not to overshadow the organizers. The host cities and the stadiums were:

Bologna	Stadio Littoriale
Florence	Stadio Giovanni Berta
Genoa	Stadio Luigi Ferraris
Milan	Stadio San Siro
Naples	Stadio Giorgio Ascarelli
Roma	Stadio Nazionale PNF
Trieste	Stadio Littorio
Turin	Stadio Benito Mussolini

Football in fascist Italy

Sport played a significant role in the fascist propaganda and in Italian social life. Without a doubt, the 1930s was the decade of Italian football ("Il calcio") and this is clearly confirmed in the history of the sport. Both the Italian national team ("Gli Azzurri") and the country's football clubs won outstanding victories at domestic and international tournaments.

In 1930, a milestone year in the history of Italian football, Vittorio Pozzo, a WWI veteran, became the head coach of the Italian national football team. Until 1938 Pozzo's team achieved forty-five wins, eleven draws and was only defeated six times. Their most notable achievements included the winning of the FIFA World Cup in 1934 and winning the Olympic football tournament in Berlin in 1936. Italy then won the world championship for the second time in France in 1938 in a match against very strong Hungary and in the presence of a hostile audience. It also won a number of politically prestigious matches, including one against England.

Similar successes were attained by Italian football clubs, with Bologna F.C. winning the Mitropa Cup (Central European cup) in 1932 and beating Chelsea F.C. in Paris in 1937. Additionally, a number of football competitions were successfully established in Italy, for example, "Coppa d'Oro" (Golden Cup) and "Coppa Italia" (Italy's Cup). All of these increased the general interest in Italian football, but also in other sports with Italy's top places in the Olympic Games and victories in many other sports such as boxing, athletics, etc.

During the 1930s sport became an instrument of diplomatic pressure for each government of the era, and the Italian regime was no exception [5]. The Italian mass sport programs pursuing the ideals of a healthy and a well-shaped body started to return first crops. In the decade of powerful diplomacy, some laws were inevitably flouted at, especially if the state image abroad was at stake. A prominent instance, reminiscent of Germanic racist laws [13], was the Carta di Viareggio. That document, published on August 2, 1926, placed Italian football under the government's supervision. Parts of the document were concerned with restrictions on players' origin. In the years 1926-1927 each football club was only allowed to hire two foreign players, and only one of them could participate in any given match [1]. When there was a problem related either to the player's origin or beliefs, the state could intervene. However, these restrictions did not apply in the case of talented players of Argentine origin, who were descendants of Italian immigrants to South America and could legally play matches on the Italian national team [1].

The pervasion of fascism

In the 1930s cinema was a relatively young invention, however, it had its special and enchanting dynamics. The power of moving and talking pictures bewitched ordinary Italians. Since 1860 the Italians had been a traditional and a unified community, although the social inequalities at the local administrative level were high, while – approximately 10 years before the March on Rome – the illiteracy rate amounted to 35% of Italian population. In a suffering society the use of cinema for all kinds of propaganda brought impressive results, as exemplified by the coverage of the 1934 FIFA World Cup that used more than 15,000 meters of film.

The famous adage "A picture is worth a thousand words" can be illustrated by the persistence of the Italian fascist regime on the use of imagery. Researchers compared the functioning of totalitarian inter-war regimes and their policies in general to religions. Indeed, the 1930s are a representative example of immense glorification of politics in society [14, 15]. Rituals, shows, imposing celebrations and images overwhelmed Italy for many years, and in accordance with these guidelines the 1934 FIFA World Cup was organized. About 100,000 posters, 300,000 cards and one million stamps were printed for the World Cup [16] promoting material relevant to Italy's identification with fascism. A remarkable case was the image of a football player in one of the posters performing the fascist salute with an upward gaze into the future, and with the year 1934 transcribed as the XII of the fascist era, i.e. twelve years after the March on Rome. Another poster depicted a ball in the goal net, a caption "Campionati Mondiali di Calcio è Italia", and a bundle of fasces on the left side. The distinctiveness of the event was also indicated by a special brand of cigarettes called "Campionato del Mondo".

The propaganda was also present in newspapers, which after 1920 embraced sports and since then published news releases on sport on a daily basis. Sport newspapers had exaggerating elements – especially in the titles and cover pages – and their goal was to immediately grasp readers'

attention. At that time, newspapers were the only means of information and communication. Radio was also present in Italy but there were not enough radio receivers to effectively disseminate the information and propaganda. The most reliable information was only spread through newspapers. Below are some examples of Italian newspaper headlines referring to the 1934 World Cup:

- “Duce’s congratulations for the Italian players’ big win”³.
- “In the name of Duce, the Azzurri win a new world title”⁴.
- “We continuously see the Azzurri apply the teachings of Duce, who wants to forge a dynamic, methodological and persisting race”⁵.
- “Harmony, discipline and courage are victory’s virtues”⁶.
- “That was not a game but a battle”⁷.

“[...] Italians showed their fervent hospitality, discipline and organization [...]”, General Vaccaro, President of the Italian Football Association⁸.

Additionally, the newspapers did not only describe the sporting successes of the team and the perfect organization skills that Duce had inculcated into the youths, but also the financial success of the World Cup⁹. That was a consequence of a well-designed and methodological preparation of the fascist control over sport and development of skills “to accomplish every obligation”.

The World Cup matches were watched by the Italian royal family and by many officials of the regime. It should be mentioned that Duce himself bought tickets for the whole family and appeared at the stadium. There were high expectations as far as the fullness of the stadiums was concerned, and the attendance reached satisfying levels (approximately 400,000). On average each match was watched approximately by 23,000 extremely passionate spectators [16]. Quite suggestive was the title of the newspaper “Il Popolo d’Italia”: “The screams of 20.000 people spurred the Azzurri on to attack”¹⁰.

The Italian fascist regime left nothing to chance. Everything took theatric, ritual and metaphysical forms [17]. Even the choice of host cities was not accidental. To be more specific, all the selected cities were of incomparable beauty and replete with elements of Italian culture harmonically interlaced with the dynamic presence of fascism. The architecture also comprised a significant medium of visual and semiotic enforcement, a fact later powerfully exemplified at the Berlin Olympics of 1936 [18]. Entire towns and individual buildings were decorated according to fascist aesthetics and style. Stadiums themselves followed the fascist model by symbolizing the Roman past, and at the same time following the regime’s guidelines and directions [1]. The 1934 FIFA World Cup was one of the most successfully organized sports events in the first half of the 20th century.

³ “Corriere della sera”, 12/06/1934, p. 4.

⁴ “Il popolo d’Italia”, 12/06/1934, p. 8.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ “Il popolo d’Italia”, 2/06/1934, p. 8.

⁷ “Il popolo d’Italia”, 01/06/1934, p. 8.

⁸ “Il popolo d’Italia”, 26/05/1934, p. 8.

⁹ “Il popolo d’Italia”, 26/05/1934, p. 6.

¹⁰ “Il popolo d’Italia”, 01/06/1934, p. 8.

Conclusion

Italian fascism was a type of political system that defined the historical processes of the last century. Fascist methods became the objects of study for researchers of all specialties. Undoubtedly, the area of sport served on the one hand many fascist goals, whereas on the other hand, was a legitimate force. At that time sport started to be perceived as completely identified with ancient ideals. When fascism identified with sport, it shared the latter’s attributes. Hence, the 1934 FIFA World Cup was a chance for fascism to display its powers not only on the agonistic level but also organizational one. That organization of the event was a great success for Italy. The Italian team won the World Cup satisfying and confirming the Italian “calcio febbre”. Furthermore, the Italian football stadiums and fascist symbols mirrored the government’s plans to make Italian citizens lead a good life under the colors of the Italian flag. Finally, in terms of foreign policy, Italy was defined as a sport power and a state which had successfully managed all its social problems. In other words, the Italians were shown as a society of quality, arts and culture. The knowledge of the realities of the 1934 World Cup in Italy permits accurate assessment of the event and proper identification of the use of sport for political and social or personal propaganda.

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