

Cosmopolitanism and Patriotism Blend during the World Cup (June 19, 2006)

Abstract

A team of reporters describes the euphoria that reigned during the 2006 World Cup in Germany. The soccer tournament showed off an attractive national team, and German citizens displayed friendly hospitality towards visitors from around the globe. The World Cup also served as an occasion for new-found pride in both national unity and the historic achievements of a stable democracy.

Source

Germany, a Summer Fairy Tale

Like a different country: hundreds of thousands in the stadiums, millions in front of the TV and on the streets celebrate soccer and themselves – with Mediterranean cheerfulness and an uninhibited, open-minded patriotism. Will the mood last once the party's over?

[...]

At the moment soccer rules almost every corner of the country. It fills the heads, the hearts; as though in a summer fairy tale, it's turning Germany into a different country, a spellbound, happy country, a country under a black-red-gold cloth. Since November 9, 1989^[1], there has been no greater party than this one. Back then, the Germans celebrated with each other; now they're celebrating with each other and the world.

The country experienced the greatest World Cup ecstasy thus far last Wednesday, when the German team beat Poland 1:0 in Dortmund. It was the perfect script, a long offensive play, never-ending fear and hope, and then deliverance in overtime through a goal by Oliver Neuville. The roar that followed was probably the loudest the Federal Republic has ever heard.

It wasn't only in the Westphalia Stadium that people were cheering and dancing. Half of Germany was gathered in front of large TV monitors. There were half a million people on the Straße des 17. Juni [June 17th Street], the fan-mile in Berlin. Shortly before the kickoff, organizers closed the gates to the Heiligengeistfeld [Holy Spirit Field] in Hamburg; 50,000 people were already inside, another 10,000 were trying to get in. In Stuttgart, 70,000 spectators were following the live broadcast in front of the Neue Schloss [New Palace], where officials had originally wanted to allow only 40,000. Car parades brought traffic to a standstill on the downtown ring in Hanover; the bleachers along the banks of the Main in Frankfurt were closed because of overcrowding.

The German flags, which are made in China, are nearly sold out. Adidas has sold a million German national team jerseys. During the last World Cup the company sold 250,000. Germany is wearing Germany again.

The land is vibrating, it's buzzing. If you walk through the streets you hear the voices of the TV commentators and the roar from the stadiums coming from every window.

The country is colorful as never before. In the cities where games are being played, flags and jerseys from 32 countries blend to form a picture that, when viewed from far above, must look like an Impressionist

painting of a spring meadow.

The country is friendlier than ever before. The Germans want to be good hosts and mother their guests whenever they can. And the country is suddenly cool. Kirsten Bach and a few friends are lying on a lawn between Leipziger Bahnhof [Leipzig Train Station] and Augustplatz [August Square]. They're all around twenty, and almost all of them have small German flags painted on their faces. Kirsten wears hers on her forehead; she has a piercing in her left nostril and a second one in her belly button. They're not drinking beer, but water, and instead of battle chants, lounge music is wafting across the grass. A woman approaches from the train station with a giant rubber condom on her head and hands out samples.

Kirsten says that she and her friends are here no so much for the soccer but for the atmosphere. It's loose and relaxed here, a little like Hyde Park in London or Amsterdam. Leipzig is now – she's groping for a word – “metropolic.”

If you point to the German flag on her forehead and ask if she's proud to be German, she answers: “Nah.” Does it feel better now, during the World Cup, to be German? “Of course.”

One could say: everything is splendid, let's enjoy this party. But there's a “but.” In Germany there's still always a large “but” when the issue is Germany.

Isn't this already too much black-red-gold in city squares and on TV screens? Is it permissible to sing the German national anthem fervently? Didn't the hooligans who went on a rampage in Dortmund launch their charge with the battle cry “Hooray, hooray, the Germans are here,” thus confirming some Germans' distrust of Germanness?

The Labor Union for Educational and Scientific Professions [*Gewerkschaft Erziehung und Wissenschaft*] already wants to distribute brochures warning against the singing of the national anthem. Supposedly, it's laden with National Socialist sentiment and ideas about the preeminence of German culture. Already the country is embroiled, once again, in one of its popular debates about identity.

Behind all this looms the question of whether this World Cup and the delirium of joy will change Germany in a lasting way, whether the Germans are fueling up on self-confidence and will show it. Another question is whether they will be able to preserve the newly-won unity in happiness.

The search for answers begins at the place where one finds the people whose primary responsibility actually is changing the country – in the Berlin government quarter.

It's Wednesday afternoon, eight men and two women sit underneath light brown wooden paneling; the word “Federal Press Conference” is emblazoned above them. They are the ministry spokespersons. Thomas Steg, the deputy press secretary of the Federal Government, sits in the middle.

Nineteen journalists have come; there's room for 300. It's the forum in which journalists inquire about the work of the government, reveal its weaknesses, bore into things. Normally.

“So, ladies and gentlemen, this morning the cabinet met according to schedule and there are some decisions to report on,” said Steg. He listed the topics: parental benefit payments [*Elterngeld*], migration report, Renewable Energy Law, and, “the last topic of the cabinet meeting,” the continuation of the United Nations Organization Mission UNMEE in Ethiopia and Eritrea. Germany will participate with two unarmed observers, Steg said. It would appear as though governing is taking place as usual, as though nothing could impair the working of the machine.

“So,” Steg asks, “are there any questions?”

There are a couple questions, one about copyright law, one about the value-added-tax, another about protection for non-smokers. They're all answered quickly. It's warm in the meeting hall; it won't be long before the kickoff of Spain versus Ukraine, Germany plays in the evening. No one is talking about soccer, but the World Cup is making its presence felt. No one is interested in asking more questions; it's time to bring the press conference to an end.

For the Grand Coalition the World Cup is a stroke of good fortune. It is descending on the country at a moment when the government is revealing its weakness by blocking itself and being at its wit's end on the large issues – for example, health care policy – or by passing laws like the ones last Friday: the value-added-tax was raised, the commuter allowance was cut, and the homeowner's tax deduction was abolished. These are laws that would cause quite a stir in normal times. But hardly anyone is aware of them. Presumably the federal government could double the value-added tax and hardly anyone would care.

Steg is coming down the stairs from the hall. "At the moment we could actually skip these press conferences," he mumbles. He walks across the street to the open-air section of the MediaClub, an artificial beach directly along the Spree, complete with a splash pool and a screen that shows the Spaniards having their way with the Ukrainians. Steg has to speak briefly with the chancellor; then he sits down in a red lounge chair and rolls up his sleeves.

He says there is indeed an incredible lightness and carefreeness in the country; that people apparently can't tear themselves away from such a world event, that even politics can't do it either.

When the chancellor opens the cabinet meeting in the morning, she speaks first of the pudgy Ronaldo, whose weight has already been identified as a problem even by Brazilian President Luiz Inácio "Lula" da Silva – and evidently for good reason. That much she learned the previous evening at Berlin's Olympic Stadium. Only then does she transition to the topic of parental benefits.

Steg says that politics has its own rhythm, which can't be changed from the outside, and that the business of governing is going on as usual. On the other hand, it's wrong to think that politics could use the World Cup to its advantage, that the enthusiasm could somehow be redirected to politics. "People's fears and worries may recede somewhat into the background now," says Steg. "But that passes quickly. You can't build anything on it."

The actual federal press conference now takes place almost every day at the ICC [International Congress Center] in Berlin. At the moment it's the "German Soccer League Media Center." Here, national coach Jürgen Klinsmann speaks to reporters. Here, sentences are uttered that electrify Germany. And this is also where patriotism is being stoked.

On Wednesday, before the game against Poland, Klinsmann said at the media center: "It's nice to see that we have a shared dream. I know that from the U.S.^[2] On Independence Day, the fourth of July, there are flags everywhere. Yes, that's nice. I put the German flag out [on that day]."

Is all of Germany now being Americanized by Klinsmann? He has already done it to the team, with American fitness programs and an American corporate-identity ideology. That often drew condescending smiles, but at the moment it seems to be a gain for German soccer.

It is this new combination of ease and passion that few foreigners would have believed the Germans capable of. Germany used to play quite unimaginatively, doggedly; Germany had its sights on nothing but results, and that's why German soccer players are still described as tanks in England, Spain, or Italy. This time, however, the Germans are surprising the others, and probably themselves, as well, with the fact that a different model is possible: to play for victory – up to the last minute – with energy, with speed, with imagination.

Are reforms possible in this country, after all? For that's precisely what Jürgen Klinsmann wanted: a Germany that plays, not one that sits back on defense. A Germany that's not paralyzed by fear of failure, a Germany that comes out full of hope and with an idea. An inspiring Germany on the field, an enthusiastic Germany in the stands. "The mood in Germany is gigantic, in every city it's one big party," said Klinsmann after the 1:0 victory against Poland, after his leaps in front of the bench, the final whistle, "these are moments you won't forget."

The team is now the center point of the good mood that's radiating into the country. Klinsmann, who has no stars in his ranks aside from Michael Ballack, wanted to forge a collective, a single entity. So far he has succeeded. And what's more: as long as the team is successful, it also unifies the country.

It is in fact a mood of unity that has taken hold of Germany. And this is new, for the debates of recent months revolved more around differences, incompatibilities. Around an underclass whose contact to societal life has been ruptured. Around immigrants who are having a hard time adjusting to national customs. Around East Germans who still have not arrived in the Federal Republic. These groups are now uniting during the World Cup, in the stadiums and in front of TV screens.

It's the 64th minute when the fans in the stands notice that Germany needs support. The score is 0:0, the Poles look stronger, the game could end badly.

From the Eastern curve, upper stands, "Germany, Germany" rings out; the call spreads over the entire arena, becomes stronger and stronger; then suddenly the young David Odonkor appears on the screen. He was just put in, and the people in the stadium stand up, scream, stomp their feet.

This is not the Westphalia Stadium in Dortmund. This is the arena in Berlin. Adidas built a small replica of Berlin's Olympic Stadium on the field in front of the Reichstag, an arena of plastic and steel, with artificial turf, with upper and lower stands, with space for around 10,000 people. Tickets cost three Euro, technically.

Shortly before the kickoff many fans were standing in front of the entrance with small cardboard boxes; they were looking for tickets. In the glow of sunset the inscription on the Reichstag portal – "For the German People" – was sparkling, the starting whistle was drawing closer, and prices on the black market were rising.

In the end, some paid 40 Euro for a ticket; 40 Euro to watch soccer on television. It's not even a large screen they're looking at. You can probably watch the game in better quality in any German living room. But it's not about the picture quality.

It's about sharing emotions. Shortly before the beginning of the game, when the TV is broadcasting the national anthem from Dortmund, all those in Berlin rise from their seats and sing along. Later they clap rhythmically, they do "La Ola," the wave; they rollick and scream and tremble and rejoice.

They paid 3 or 30 Euro not to be alone with their emotions, to hear, see, and feel others. Thus the large screen becomes a campfire around which to gather in search of warmth, and soccer becomes the glue for a society that's drifting apart. For the duration of the tournament, Hartz IV recipients, investment bankers, and intellectuals share the same interest. The jubilation blurs the boundaries of social background.

The jubilation dissolves the conflicts between East and West, in that many Easterners suddenly recognize themselves as citizens of the Federal Republic.

[...]

So is there no new patriotism? Only a little euphoria? Or not even that? At least there's an increase. Four years ago hardly anyone drove around with a flag on his car. "Good," says Andrei Markovits,^[3] who was born in Romania, grew up in Vienna, studied in New York, and is American, over a Coke after his lecture, "a World Cup at home still increases national feeling. The nation – Germany, that is – is getting special attention these days."

Andrei Markovits says he fears every kind of nationalism. It has rarely brought about anything good. To cheer for the [local soccer] club was all right. "That's not so atavistic," says Markovits. But he doesn't expect a new, nationalistic Germany. After July 9th, the emotion will be gone. "I don't believe it will last."

But there's also the view that the World Cup won't change much because so much has already changed. The great German celebration is only an expression of this change.

Supposedly, there's a new patriotism of the heart, a love of country that shows itself in flag-waving and in chants of "Germany, Germany." The little people, in particular, have felt that all they could expect from globalization is hardship. That's why they're now turning to the nation again. In this view, the elation over German successes is based on a feeling of being moved by emotion.

That feeling might exist. But anyone who's travelling the country, who's in the stadiums and hanging out in front of the large TV screens, comes away with the sense that the great masses simply want to celebrate. The flag or jersey is less an expression of patriotism than a desire to party. Whoever wants to join the party has to show the colors.

According to this view, the national colors *are* signs of belonging, but not so much to a nation as to an international party congress that is currently meeting in Germany. The good mood also contains a dose of patriotism, but that can be summoned only for one party event, namely for the games of the German team. When German soldiers set out for the Congo in the near future, there won't be tens of thousands waving the black-red-gold flags they bought for the World Cup.

But this lightness is only possible because something has changed. You can learn this from Edgar Wolfrum, Professor of History in Heidelberg. He's 46, that is, quite young for his job. He has shoulder-length hair and wears a striped shirt. His book *Die geglückte Demokratie* [*The Successful Democracy*], a history of the Federal Republic, was published in March.

The title itself already shows that Wolfrum is willing to cast this country in a positive light. But that doesn't make him a cheering patriot. "I hate flags of any kind," says Wolfrum. As for the national anthem, he says: "I actually find the stanza we have nice, but singing along? I don't know."

But he ventures to utter a word that is actually taboo in connection with Germany. It's the word "proud." "We can be proud of what we've accomplished," says Edgar Wolfrum.

Meaning the leap from the Third Reich to a democracy in which institutions function in a stable manner and that strives for reconciliation and accommodation in its foreign policy. "There's hardly a nation in the world that's changed as much in 60 years as Germany," says Wolfrum.

So you can go ahead and wave a little black-red-gold flag without having to feel bad. And that doesn't mean that the Third Reich is forgotten, least of all by the historian Wolfrum. It's only natural that the German attitude towards life takes on a greater ease as more years of successful democracy go by. That doesn't mean that there will be constant partying, but the willingness to feel good will remain.

One German player who thinks about these things is Christoph Metzelder. On Friday, he's sitting in the ICC and talking about his feelings shortly before the start of the game. "For me the national anthem is the emotional climax of an international game," he says, these minutes with those eleven players side by

side “show that we really stick together.” How “embarrassing” it used to be when the text had to be displayed on the scoreboard [because no one knew the words] – and how intoxicating it is today when an entire stadium sings with such gusto and as loudly as in Dortmund. He couldn’t even hear the music.

These days, Christoph Metzelder is experiencing a different country and a different World Cup, different from what he had expected.

Of course, “you have to laugh sarcastically” about *Bild* and all the others who are eagerly working on a new or actually an old attitude and therefore heap abuse on Ballack because of his T-shirt.

He says: “People aren’t thinking in categories such as victory or defeat. They’re freeing themselves from that sort of thing and enjoying the fact that we’re here. The World Cup has detached itself from us a little bit; it’s become the great festival of many cultures, which is celebrated in a really, really great and very open way.”

What’s happened here, what’s changed? The soccer player Metzelder believes that it’s a generational question: “My generation has, after all, grown up in one of the most stable democracies in the world. We’re not forgetting the admonition of those twelve years of the Nazi era; we have it in our heads. But we can live without inhibitions and worries, and we can also play soccer that way.”

NOTES

[1] [¶] The night the Berlin Wall opened up – eds.

[2] [¶] Jürgen Klinsmann is married to an American and resides in California – eds.

[3] [¶] Andrei Markovits is Professor of Political Science at the University of Michigan. He is the author of numerous books, including *Offside: Soccer and American Exceptionalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001). At the time this article was written, he was “Visiting Professor of Soccer Studies” at the University of Dortmund – eds.

Source: Dirk Kurbjuweit et al., “Deutschland, ein Sommermärchen”, *Der Spiegel*, June 19, 2006, pp. 68–81.

Translation: Thomas Dunlap

Recommended Citation: Cosmopolitanism and Patriotism Blend during the World Cup (June 19, 2006), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/a-new-germany-1990-2023/ghdi:document-3677>> [May 11, 2024].