

Hungary as a Sport Superpower: Football from Horthy to Kádár (1924–1960). By Lorenzo Venuti.

Berlin–Boston: de Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2024. 328 pp.

<https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111137414>

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This book is a well-documented study of the history of Hungarian football from 1924 to 1960. However, it goes far beyond sports history by exploring the fields of political, international and transnational history. Football is not merely an object of research, but also a lens that allows an in-depth exploration of almost forty years of Hungarian history.

The subject of investigation mainly focuses on cultural and social aspects, more specifically on the relationship between football and politics. This includes an analysis of how political transformations before and after World War II influenced the development of Hungarian football and its global reach. The volume also proposes an extensive study of international football relations, examining how the national team and clubs played a diplomatic role in certain circumstances. Given the focus of the text, there is understandably little room for in-depth analysis or statistical comparison.

The adopted chronology meets both sporting and political criteria. It covers the period from Miklós Horthy's reign until the János Kádár government hat followed the suppression of the 1956 revolution. Worthy of note, however, is that both the beginning and the end of the book refer to sporting events, such as the Olympic football tournament at the Paris Games in 1924 and at the Rome Games in 1960.

The book is divided into two sections. Each of them has an introduction, three chapters and a conclusion. The first part is dedicated to the “Interwar Years and World War II (1924–1945).” In the first chapter, “Football in the Admiral's Country (1924–1927),” the author analyses the steps that followed the unexpected defeat against Egypt in the second round of the football tournament at the Paris Olympics in 1924. Such a crucial event determined the embrace of professionalism. The study also emphasises the growing political significance of national football team matches and their composition. The second chapter, “Sport and Revisionism (1928–1938),”

focuses on the Hungarian contribution to the establishment of two significant international competitions (the International Cup and the Mitropa Cup). It also explores how revisionist aspirations for “a place in the sun” were manifested in the realm of sport. The third chapter, “A New Spirit for Hungarian Football (1939–1944),” examines the evolution of Hungarian football during World War II, demonstrating the influence of international politics on sport in general. As proof of this, Hungary played against Poland just four days before the German invasion, and then hosted the German national team in Budapest three weeks later. Additionally, the chapter deals with the inclusion of teams from territories that Hungary annexed in the early years of the war, as well as the consequences of the defeat.

The second part of the book is dedicated to the “People’s Republic (1945–1960).” The fourth chapter, “A Fragile Democracy: Football before the People’s Republic (1945–1948),” focuses on the disputes between social democrats and communists over the reconstruction of Hungarian football organisations, the transformation of football clubs, and the reorientation of football relations towards countries within the Soviet sphere of influence. The fifth chapter, “The Most Beautiful Product of Socialism (1948–1954),” analyses the “Golden Age” of Hungarian football. The author illustrates how the success of the national football team (particularly the historic victory at Wembley in 1953) became a propaganda tool and a diplomatic asset.

Having described the success of the “best ambassadors of socialism,” the author goes on to discuss the consequences of the unexpected defeat against Germany in the 1954 World Cup final. Such defeat “provided opposition forces with the first opportunity to demonstrate against” the Hungarian government (p. 239). Finally, the last chapter’s focus is on “The End of the Mighty Magyars (1955–1960).” This analyses the impact of socialist patriotism and the consequences for Hungarian football of the 1956 Revolution and the latter’s repression.

