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# Soccer, the Saarland, and statehood: win, loss, and cultural reunification in post-war Europe

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## ABSTRACT

Football proved to be one of the few areas that fueled West Germany's ambition to reintegrate Saarland into the fractured post-war republic. Denied participation with the German football federation in the wake of the Second World War, yet unwilling to don French colors, Saarland's national football team (*Saarländische Fußballnationalmannschaft*) epitomised the uneasy space embodied by its citizens. Unable to compete in the 1950 World Cup – despite FIFA recognition – Saarland focused instead on dominating the lower French leagues and creating their own tournament. Despite two losses to eventual champions West Germany in the qualifying round of the 1954 World Cup, Saarland's footballers and their supporters left no doubt as to their cultural and political desire to reunite with the nation that had been denied to them. Studying Saarland and its football team this way, this paper juxtaposes sport, politics, and nationalism within the context of post-WWII German history.

## KEYWORDS

Nationalism; Germany; soccer; post-war; Saarland

## Introduction

Saarland's inspired performance in the 1954 World Cup qualifying round – where they fell to eventual champions West Germany – spilled into the political sphere. The small nation's unrelenting style of play inspired impassioned rallies culminating in the 1955 Saar Statute. On January 1, 1957, with enthusiasm rivaled only by the echoes of the football pitch, Saarland rejoined West Germany. In the aftermath of reunification, Saarland continued to provide a meaningful aspect of Germany's success in international football. In conjunction with their region's bounty of natural resources, the *Saarländische Fußballnationalmannschaft* secured itself a position as a vital part of West German cultural identity in the late twentieth century. Several former Saarland footballers dedicated their lives to the development and formalization of German football and by extension the nation's post-war identity, both nationally and internationally. Helmut Schön, the manager of Saarland's squad between 1952 and 1956, continued his role with the merged West German team through the 1960s and 70s. At the time of his retirement in 1978 he held records for the most wins and most match appearances in World Cup history with sixteen and twenty-five, respectively. After

impressive performances in the 1954 and 1958 World Cup, Schön and the West German side emerged victorious at the 1974 World Cup. His impeccable run that year resulted in one of just three teams from the post-war era to win the tournament as the host nation. He was not Saarland's lone representative in the annals of West German football. In 1962, Herman Neuberger, the former president of the Independent Saarland Football Association, played a leading role in the foundation of the Bundesliga, the top league for German association football. These deeply rooted connections necessitate the present examination of the importance of sport, public spectacle, and German nationalism through Saarland's brief but brilliant appearance on the international football stage.

## Soccer, imagined communities, and Saarland

Nations are nothing more than imagined political communities. This lasting sentiment authored by Benedict Anderson in the early 1980s continues to dominate academic literature on social and national formations of sport. The 'image of communion' was critical to Anderson's thesis because as members of a nation, whether small or expansive, individuals involved would likely never all meet (Anderson 2006, 7). Though Anderson himself wrote rarely on the impact of sport, his contemporary Eric Hobsbawm, aptly reconciled the two when he wrote, 'the imagined community of millions seems more real as a team of eleven named people' (Hobsbawm 1992, 142).

Before examining Saarland's brief existence within international football, a discussion on the intersection of imagined communities and nationalism will precede an analysis of the unique nationalising role of football. Nationalism, according to Anderson, is an ideology based on paradox. In brief, nations are both modern and timeless, universal but unique, and influential yet undefinable (Anderson 2006, 5). The proposed duality eventually defined the shift in sport scholarship during the social turn. At a crossroads, football and nationalism became 'contested terrain' (Falcous and Booth 2017, 1826).

Writing in the run-up to the 2006 World Cup, one sport sociologist asserted that 'nowhere are imagined communities better manifested... than in football, the world's most popular sport' (Burdsey 2006, 12). Studies tracing the historical intersection between football and national identity are nearly all focused through the narrow framework of the nation state (Adam 2017, 1371). Football, more than any other sport, lends itself to examining the construction of national cultures, the reinforcement of national sentiment, and the flourishing presence of Anderson's 'imagined community.'

Anderson's nationalism paradox will serve as the crux of this paper as football is often understood through the same self-contradiction. Recognizing the potential of sport as an arena of nationalism in the interwar period, an English sport journalist wrote, 'whatever his nationality, every sensible man knows the thud of the football is sweeter than the rattle of the sabre' (*The Leeds Mercury*, December 7, 1934). Sensibility, however, is a characteristic often absent under nationalism. Harnessing the power of myth and popular sentiment, nationalism hinges on the element of irrationality as a defining trait (Emmerich 2009, 244). Anderson was among the first to argue that national self-consciousness belongs in the realm of the mythic. In his seminal work, he presented nations as 'imagined political communities' necessitated upon 'a deep, horizontal comradeship' that itself is a fiction that seeps 'quietly and continuously into reality' (Anderson 2006, 7). The irrationality inherent within nationalism is what allows for the presence of the paradoxes

Anderson highlighted, as its purpose is to generate and feed off popular emotion (Gibernau 1996, 1003).

Irrationality provides another link between nationalism and sport as both rely on popular emotion as opposed to logical sobriety. The emotion and paradox which pervades the myopic focus of nationalism distinguishes it from the nation-state itself. Nationalism, as an identifying philosophy, is distinct from the geopolitical reality of a nation-state (Rowe 2017, 1471). As evidenced in the post-war Saar, the logical option was to embrace the economic and political recovery instituted by the French occupation. However, the emotional attachments of the quasi-autonomous region remained with the economically battered, but culturally aligned West Germany (*The Guardian*, August 30, 1954). In an analysis of World Cup fandom, Kersting determined that nationalism and national pride are often conflated. The latter is a personal connection whereas the former constitutes an ideological sense of communal superiority. Both, ultimately, differ from the far-less emotionally charged category of 'national identity' (Kersting 2007, 1302). His distinctions support the previously theorized shift from patriotism to nationalism. The two '-isms' are perhaps best understood as an evolution of cultural processes and acceptance within a state, both having significant overlap and influence on the other (Gems 2013, 101).

Malleable identities often coalesce around a singular moment, one which is brimming with 'passionate intensity' (Cassels 1996, 31). It should therefore come as little surprise that sport, a physical expression of such a phenomenon, served as an imagined community's spatial anchor. Existing on the extreme end of mythic and romantic interpretations of nationalism, sport is attractive to a given community through the *power of fascination* (Bonde 2009, 1309). If, therefore, the identity of individuals is best understood as a fluid process, then national identities – Anderson's 'imagined communities' – would be best viewed in like fashion. This outpouring of political and eventual social rights within post-war Europe coincided with desire for acceptance and participation in the 'full social heritage' of a given community (Guschwan 2014, 859–860). Part of the reason football aligns well with the constructs Anderson set down in the early 1980s is due to the need for unifying narratives within imagined communities. The inherent passion of nationalism as an ideology is neatly packaged and presented through football. In its dual capacity as a political tool and romantic ideal sport became a medium through which fascination with past heroes and a reengagement with a common folk history, culminated in a specific and highly visible form of cultural nationalism (Rowe 2017, 1471).

It is worthwhile to remember that national football teams do not always represent a nation in the traditional sense (Hesse 2014, 2–3). More accurately, they are teams which define an idea, a shared, communal identity – in short, an imagined community.

In the interwar period, as nations were reimagined and reconstructed through mandates from the League of Nations, continental European identity experienced a new reckoning. Faced with the daunting task of addressing competing post-war identities that did not fit neatly into prescribed camps, German scholars welcomed the return of the nation as a cultural entity despite its partitioned geopolitical status (Berger 1995, 201). Historically, though, wrestling with a national cultural identity in the face of political partition was nothing new for the German people. Since the formation of the modern German state in 1871, there have been 'at least six different states, each with its own rationale, borders, economy, population, society, and political order' (Dann 1992, 285–290). Among German historians, there continues to be a sense of *disequilibrium* in the recording of the immediate

post-war histories. That makes reducing the fractured German identity to that of an easier to grasp asymmetric relationship insufficient (Kleßmann 2001, 142). An inability to reconcile or comprehend one's national existence was not only a question for scholars, as most Germans in the immediate post-war era initially questioned whether they still existed – either as a nation or a people (Hermand 2012, 284). The deeply personal and communal existential question was such a powerful and constant point of reflection that it was granted its own word, *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (Henke and Woller 1991, 32). Translated as 'coming to terms with one's own and one's nation's past,' the process articulated the struggle of acknowledging an unconscionable legacy with a desire to embrace a renewed communal identity (Huth 1994, 489).

In 1966, the then-West German newspaper *Die Zeit* claimed an irrefutable reality, that 'sport is the continuation of politics by other means' (Balbier 2009, 548). Their claim was centered immediately on the rising tensions between the German Democratic Republic and the Federal Republic of Germany as contested through medals tables and Olympic glory. That quote could also apply to an earlier intersection of West German cultural identity and sport. Two decades prior, nestled in the dense woods southwest of Germany's Rhineland and bordering France's Alsace-Lorraine, a collection of local footballers – players and managers – embarked on one of international football's finest forgotten five-year stretch.

Due to the absence of a traditional nationalized space, Saarland's sport history has been overlooked in sport literature. Studies on post-war Germany focus either on Germany's relationship with the Allied powers or on the struggle between the 'two Germanies' (Planert 2002, 25–30). Saarland's role in unifying West Germany is a crucial and understudied aspect of the re-emergence of sport and the reconstruction of identity in post-war Europe (Harres 1997, 12). The process of reformulating German cultural memory in the immediate post-war period provides an appropriate vehicle to examine Anderson's paradox. Through the dynamic – often unconscious – creation of social memory, remembering is always pitted against forgetting (Figlio 2017, 121). New social memory requires a stimulus. Setting the stage for football, Saarland's lone appearance at the Olympic games in Helsinki in 1952 became a 'place' of glorious memory for the Saarland's collective culture of recollection (Großmann 2005, 510–515). Internal stimuli can be found through religion or prayer, whereas external stimuli can be centered around momentous cultural events such as a ritual or experience (Assmann 1992, 36–43). A football match perfectly satisfied the criteria for an external stimulus. Also, the western border of Germany was where football first gained national appeal, so its return in some ways satisfied the internal stimulus of a spiritual like reflection (Assmann 2000, 106). Football's return in Germany accelerated and strengthened its post-war identity (Assmann 1988, 11–14). Along Germany's lush, industrial western border burned a passion for football. Under alternating French and German control, the region increasingly rewrote the English roots of the imported game and replaced them with the national narratives of each continental power (Adam 2017, 1372). However, cultural memories derived from and entrenched by football's passionate allure fostered a sense of national belonging that superseded the constant redrawing of national borders. The 1954 World Cup qualifying match in Stuttgart between West Germany and Saarland, overshadowed by the *Miracle at Bern* several months later, bound together the culturally unified but politically separated entities in a 'symbolic order' that heightened calls for national reunification.

It is worth examining a recent critique of Anderson's thesis. Renowned transnational historian Thomas Adam, in an essay on the intercultural contexts of football in longtime

rival nations Argentina and Germany, argued that ‘the game created its own space [and] is not determined by the imagined and constructed spaces ascribed to particular nations’ (Adam 2017, 1372). The transnational critique is one which requires acknowledgement because it shares two crucial elements with Anderson’s nationalism. First, the transnational critique exists without a specific methodology. Like Anderson’s thesis, the focus is on the importance of communal connections and generalized rather than personal developments. Secondly, the transnational critique highlights those individuals who forged such connections through which scholars can refashion social history. As Anderson’s thesis rapidly approaches its fiftieth anniversary it is important to remember that his imagined communities served a similar purpose; to return the agency of nations to the sovereign people who founded them. This paper adds a unique wrinkle to Adam’s transnational critique, as Saarland actively voted against self-governance and independence in deference to a desire to rejoin their culturally cohesive German family. The unusual decision to forgo the isolating but passionate allure of nationalism for the comfort of a familiar cultural community aligns itself well with the framework provided by Anderson. Shedding light on the previously unexplored history of Saarland’s football team, this paper examines the role football played in Saarland’s eventual reunification with West Germany. Anderson’s thesis, critiques and all, will now be examined through the delicately intertwined history of football, sovereignty, and collective cultural identity in the small, overlooked, mineral-rich German State. Caught in the midst of the struggle – waged militaristically, ideologically, and eventually athletically – Saarland employed football in the post-war period to reject both French occupation and independent governance to reunite with West Germany, the imagined community from which it had been torn.

## Soccer and Saarland

In Anderson’s seminal work, he presents nations as ‘imagined political communities’ necessitated upon ‘a deep, horizontal comradeship’ that itself is a fiction that seeps ‘quietly and continuously into reality’ (Anderson 2006, 7). Studies of sport and nationalism have prioritized discussions vis à vis nation states and assertions of international recognition. There exists, however, another use for sport within the framework of the nation-state: a use that rejects national autonomy in favor of reconciliation. While admittedly a less common approach, the implications for favoring a cultural community beyond geopolitical borders, lends weight to the validity of Anderson’s imagined community. Saarland, a small German state nestled to the southwest of Germany’s Rhineland and just to the east of France’s Alsace-Lorraine, presents an intriguing case study for sport and nationalism. This is a region that voluntarily rejected independent nationhood and relinquished all emblems of nationalism (*Belfast News-Letter*, October 24, 1955).

Over the first half of the twentieth century, Saarland had been torn apart by contentious Franco-German relations and the broader global conflicts of two world wars. The region swung between French and German control throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As early as 1870 the Prussian leadership in Germany established nationalized mining and manufacturing complexes throughout Saarland (*The Guardian*, August 30, 1954). Following the First World War, the region was granted quasi-independence under the League of Nations after the First World War. In 1935, Saarlanders voted to rejoin the German Third Reich. The outcome of the vote was as consequential as it was surprising.

Over ninety percent of the votes cast were in favor of full reunification, vastly outperforming the other two options on the ballot which included an adherence to France or a continuation of governance by an international committee (*The Los Angeles Times*, February 7, 1954). The overwhelming vote was most surprising to the French. After World War I, France attempted to override the provisions of the 1920 Peace Treaty to establish Saarland as a French province. As such, leaders of the occupation were frustrated by the preference of Saarlanders for reabsorption into Germany (*The Guardian*, August 30, 1954). A return to Germany led to renewed control of the national mines and manufacturing apparatus founded more than half a century earlier. Despite economic relationships and cultural traditions linking Saarland with Germany, a reunion with Hitler's Reich was uncomfortable. Home to a strong tradition of socialist movements and connection with the Catholic Church most international observers were stunned that Saarland chose to align with a Nazi regime who had ruthlessly interfered with those two institutions (*The Age*, December 3, 1952). Ignoring pleas from their own local leadership to embrace autonomy, Saarlanders once more chose to reunite with its cultural home over independence.

After the Second World War, Saarland once more fell under French control during the Allied partition of Germany. In the war's immediate aftermath, West German leaders feared that any possible reconciliation with Saarland was lost. The temporary measures taken by the Allied powers in 1948–1950 seemed more than likely permanent to German leadership in Bonn who believed the drafters of post-war peace treaties would not be inclined to disturb French control (*The Guardian*, January 17, 1950). Envisioning their new territory as an economic goldmine over which they could exert full control, French occupational leaders officially maintained a desire for an autonomous Saar state (Heinen 1996, 175). The post-war occupation by France placed the German-aligned population in a difficult environment. Economically the region prospered via increased commercial traffic driven by French coal interests, but culturally suffered from an uncertain future (Sander 1990, 110–111). One diplomatic correspondent presciently noted in the early 1950s that a territory could not be tied be economically to one sovereign state and politically to another (*The Guardian*, January 17, 1950). The majority consensus during the initial post-war decade was that Saarland would resume its status as an international protectorate, as it had been during the interwar era. The whole of Europe – often argued under the case for unity – believed to have as much of a say in Saarland's affairs as its 950,000 residents. An American foreign affairs correspondent best articulated the thoughts of the European elite when he wrote, 'it is obvious that the Saar is the last place on earth where the future of the Saar will be determined' (*The Los Angeles Times*, February 7, 1954).

Instead, the fate of Saarland hinged, at least partially, on the football pitch. It was the return of football in 1948–1949 that catalyzed national passions and roused national sentiment, which once embraced could not be rescinded (Cassels 1996, 64). One way the divisions of the nineteenth century remained a present reality for Saarlanders in the immediate post-war era was linguistic. In romance languages, such as French, the word 'nation' can mean either a state or a people. In German, however, each concept has its own word. *Staat* is the geopolitical entity while *Nation* is cultural. From 1947 to 1957, Saarland was a French *Staat* that identified with the German *Nation*. The fight between cultural identity and political authority found a symbolic battleground within soccer stadiums.

Saarland football, both provincial and national, during the late 1940s and 1950s became a principal driver of nationalism (Hüger 2009, 429). As Danish historian Hans Bonde

argued, the ‘dramatic bodily acts’ inherent to sport builds identification through ‘the excitement of results and hope of release’ (Bonde 2009, 1309). International matches, beginning with a dominant run through the French second league, offered Saarland an avenue for direct international confrontation. The region effectively confronted – and triumphed over – their French occupiers on the pitch.

Channeling Anderson’s thesis, Gleaves and Llewelyn argued that national sports offer imagined communities a cultural text (Gleaves and Llewellyn 2014, 6). Saarland’s national football team, through international competition, rewrote their own cultural texts to the astonishment and embarrassment of their French occupiers. Germany, which longed to reclaim Saarland, used the region’s football success – and French inadequacy – as the rationale for cultural unity. FC Saarbrücken, the club team within Saarland’s capital, provided the catalyst.

A dominant squad within the German league as recently as 1943, FC Saarbrücken laid waste to the second tier of the French Football Association to which they had been invited as a non-point-scoring member. Their inclusion into the league came reluctantly, as the French leagues did not believe Saarland capable of playing at the demanding pace customary of the French style of play. Such claims were rudely doused by the Saarlanders themselves as they defeated a first-tier team, AS St. Etienne by four goals in Saarbrücken. The following year, with a team of just fourteen players, FC Saarbrücken returned to play in the French second league (Haas and Freyer 2020). The pride of Saarland decimated their French opponents, including blowout victories facilitated by a dynamic, high-scoring offense. Operating as a ‘guest’ participant in the league they won it by six points. Saarland’s 59-53 final point margin over the ‘official’ champions from Bordeaux is even more impressive considering Bordeaux’s refusal to play the Saarlanders. The undermanned team won 26 of their 37 games, out-scored their opponents by over three goals per game and landed half of their squad in the top ten rankings for total goals scored (Haas and Freyer 2020). It was a thorough domination and an abject humiliation for the French who witnessed control of Saarland slipping further away with each victory. For the Saarlanders, the victories were defiant triumphs over an unwelcome occupied presence. The inclusion of Saarland’s most dominant club team portended the demise of French plans for regional cultural supremacy. Even coverage of the matches refused to acknowledge the embarrassing French defeats, because praise of an ex-German club would have been blasphemous (Laurent 1984, 26–28). Saarland’s success in France lasted only one year, which coincided with resumption of the German football association.

Territorial rights along the Ruhr, Rhineland, and Alsace-Lorraine have long been the driver of nationalized sporting movements among old rivals. German *Turnen* gymnastics was born in response to the Prussian defeat at the hands of Napoleon. Likewise, French Olympism was spurred on in part by France’s territorial losses at the hands of a revitalized Prussia. Ill-will continued to define Franco-German relations in the interwar period as France banned international football competitions with Germany in 1938. France’s crack-down on expressions of Germanic culture in Saarland was vehemently opposed. Most Saarlanders, outraged at their continental occupiers, believed they had to accept the French terms of occupation under duress and that the Allies had manipulated their way into power (*The Guardian*, April 21, 1952). French resistance to German international sport participation continued in the post-war era, stalling attempts for German inclusion into the global football community until the mid-1950s. This resistance did not apply to Saarland. All too



readily, the French initiated physical education schools as well as national club-level football to instill their own cultural values. Both efforts, endorsed by the French high commissioner Gilbert Grandval, failed spectacularly within a few short years (Joyce 2008). While the schooling efforts were plagued by poor weather and inadequate facilities, it was Saarland's proficiency in professional and national football that proved the ultimate humiliation for the French (Dichter 2008, 91).

Reviewing the remaking of the national landscape in the post-war era, German scholar Dietmar Hüger argued that political battles over Saarland were waged in legislative houses, but the 'symbolic battlefield' was the football field where 'politicians negotiated autonomy and internal contradictions melted away' (Hüger 2009, 438). National teams embody this impassioned coalescence by 'invoking *our* [sic] team... into our daily routines, reminding us with whom we stand' (Meier and Leinwather 2013, 1202). Even at the club level, representing a localized intimate community, professional football provided an outlet for an increasingly urbanized Europe over the long nineteenth century (Hobsbawm 2003, 298). In Germany, Hobsbawm's observation manifested itself. As the English Game made inroads on the continent in the late 1800s, the sport quickly became the preference of the German working class. The Ruhr area, a similarly heavily industrialized region just north of Saarland, became – and remains – the geographic stronghold of national football (Merkel 2007, 223–224). This is a somewhat unsurprising development as Anderson contended that nationalist movements in general were typically 'populist in outlook and sought to induct lower classes into political life,' often channeling popular class energies – such as football (Anderson 2006, 48).

Despite slipping in recent years, Saarland's footballing success allowed it to maintain a connection to the German state even when disconnected politically and economically. It is the personal connection vis-à-vis the passion aroused through the on-field action which makes football such a potent driver of communal identity. This is especially true for rural communities where football has long enjoyed pride of place for both the athletes and the community. Football's ability to occupy spaces in memory by way of heroic figures or mythic narratives increases the likelihood of remembrance by a population (Briegleb 1997, 31–35).

The Allies allowed the Germans to resume limited football activity as early as 1947. However, the geographic regions of the revitalized national league excluded the French controlled Saarland. The four regional leagues of the Oberliga – Berlin, North, West, and South – were joined by a fifth region in 1950. Having thoroughly whipped and embarrassed the French football establishment in the 1948–1949 season, the occupation government of Saarland relented and allowed FC Saarbrücken to rejoin the German league as the South-West region (Hesse-Lichtenberger 2003, 108–112). By 1951, supported by the rebirth of its national football league, Germany began to re-establish itself in the international community. For their part, the German leadership attempted to depoliticize sport. Under the guidance of Willi Daume, the inaugural years of the *Deutsche Sportbund* (DSB) were focused as much on national unification as in opposition to the communist East German state (Missiroli 2002, 9–10). The message of nominal apoliticism resonated with Saarland's weary population. Worn down by attempts at external fights for control of imposed sovereignty, Saarland's footballers expressed an antipathy for politics, preferring to identify solely as sportsmen. The region's continued presence and success through international athletics during the early 1950s forced an uneasy reconciling of national politics between French control and German cultural adherence. Before being fully accepted into the German

Football Association, West Germany watched as Saarland – then operating as an independent sporting community – entered the 1952 Olympic stadium in Helsinki in front of them. The opening ceremony combined with an inspired performance by Saarland’s athletes shifted the attitudes of both the German and the French when it came to vying for the supremacy of internalized cultural allegiance (Großmann 2009, 515–520).

One prominent historian built on Anderson’s thesis by proposing the concept of ‘banal nationalism.’ Distinct from the brow-beating, shortsighted characteristics typical of nationalism, his argument centered on sport operating as an ‘unnoticed flag of nationhood, embedded within everyday media’ where it can draw ‘readers, viewers, and listeners together as a part of a community’ (Billig 1995, 174–175). These ‘symbol-laden conflicts’ and ‘ritualized gestalt’ of sport provided the breeding ground for the cultivation of national sentiment (Bonde 2009, 1309). As such, the roots of sport within a given community – tangible and imagined – run deep and have become an integral part of those identities.

After thoroughly dominating the French league, Saarland football was granted an exceptional recognition. The international football federation, FIFA, granted the small protectorate independent competitive status in the summer of 1950, mere months before West Germany (Vonnard 2020, 23). Perceptions of Saarland as a separate, though slightly weaker, German side was a harbinger of the community’s future. One thing Saarlanders did well was play football. In a belated assessment of Saar’s ability to utterly dominate the pitch, the coach of the heavily favored Hungarian side in 1954 remarked that Saarland could outplay the best Europe had to offer (Haas and Freyer 2020). After success in the French league, Saarland opted to create their own tournament. In the uncertain years between their expulsion from the French league and their acceptance into the German sport federation, Saarland hosted, then won, the inaugural Internationaler Saarlandpokal – a forerunner of today’s European Cup. Fifteen European clubs and one from Chile (although notably none from Germany) all bowed out to the hosts who claimed the trophy and the two-million-franc prize (Joyce 2008). The prizes, however, were a small consolation for a nation facing a crisis of identity. In the face of stiff opposition from the French occupiers and international community, football had rekindled hope of reconciliation with West Germany. In 1951, that ember of hope burst into a fully formed flame when Saarland was granted re-entry into the German league. Their national hopes again rested primarily on the footballers from FC Saarbrücken. Wasting no time, the men from Saar’s capital swiftly advanced to the championship where they faced neighboring Stuttgart in a closely contested final (Potter and Chaplin 2015). The location of the match foreshadowed the pinnacle moment in Saarland’s crash-course of unification with West Germany. Stuttgart’s home stadium provided the venue for one of the most nationally charged football matches since the end of World War II.

## Unity through sport

Fall 1953 saw national football galvanize a rare movement of cultural reintegration. Among German historians, 1953 is often described as the best year since the war. One reason for the unusual optimism came courtesy of the first World Cup since 1938 (Wolfgang 1972, 26). The draw for the 1954 World Cup placed West Germany in the same qualifying group as Saarland. Only one team, though, could advance to the knockout stage. Concurrent with the football drama came increased calls for Saarland’s return to West Germany. Led by the head of the German SPD political party Kurt Schumacher, sport reinforced the similarities

between the two nations. Global media coverage, driven by Schumacher, heightened the political importance of the first match between the two sides. (*The Tampa Tribune*, February 4, 1952) On October 11, 1953, fifty thousand culturally homogenous fans packed Stuttgart's national stadium for the first qualifying match between Saarland and West Germany. Adding to the tension was Saarland's early lead in the group standings. From the beginning, any notion that the match was strictly about football was laughable. Navigating a diplomatic minefield, the West German hosts opted not to fly the national flags of either side (Joyce 2008). Far from being a festive embellishment, the flags of West Germany and Saarland stirred up questions of national imagination, including autonomy and power (Hill 1999, 5). At the time, the questions of 'who represented Germany' and, more broadly, 'who were Germans' were at the forefront of both populations, including those in the stadium and those listening on the radio (Hughes and Owen 2009, 447). The game itself was less dramatic, with West Germany coasting to a three-goal shutout.

Five months later, with West Germany's bid to the World Cup on the line, the two teams met again in Saarbrücken. Notes from a private collection reveal that the game being played had far more riding on it than just a chance to gain entry to the World Cup. Several months prior to the game, the French Commissar of Saarland – Andre François-Poncet – sent a telegraph back to the administration in Paris warning his superiors that the match would offer declarations in favor of a return to German by the Saar, which would result in an unpleasant turn for France. Fulfilling the commissar's fears, tensions and excitement descended on the full-capacity stadium of fifty-three thousand Germans. A state of emergency was implemented for the contest in and around Saarbrücken. In a report from the day, four minutes prior to kickoff, the powder keg went off. A group of pro-German sympathizers took to the field with an illegally obtained loudspeaker and proclaimed, rightly, that 'the separatist government wanted to prevent this game against our German brothers!' Over the loudspeaker the rebels then led the crowd in chants of 'We are Germans! The Saar is German! The Saar remains Germany!' before playing the first stanza of the German national anthem 'Deutschlandlied' (Hüger 2009, 442). The sold-out crowd was treated to a game that lived up to its pre-match hype. Although the West Germans ultimately prevailed by a score of three to one, Jules Rimet the French president of FIFA remarked that Saarland had played better that day and was perhaps 'the most interesting team in Europe' (*11Freunde*, December 3, 2013). Herbert Brinker, the legendary scorer for the Saarland side, recalled in a 2009 interview that game was – despite the loss – the greatest game he had ever played in Haas and Freyer (2020).

Saarland's defeat at the hands of West Germany did little to drive a wedge between the two nations. If anything, passion for reconciliation and national reunification soared higher than ever. One Saarland winger recalled his emotions after the game, remembering that he was not unhappy. He saw himself as a German and as such, did not want to prevent the team he had cheered on as a boy from making it into the World Cup (Haas and Freyer 2020). As an olive branch to their soon-to-be countrymen, the West German team invited the Saarland national side to Wankdorf Stadium in Switzerland to watch the World Cup final. Following a match now known as 'The Miracle at Bern,' Saarland's footballers were extended another invitation, this time to celebrate with the recently crowned West German world champions at their hotel (Haas and Freyer 2020). Celebration seems too small a word for the overflowing of emotions that poured out of Saarland as Herbert Zimmerman's exasperated voice called out the go-ahead goal '*Tor für Deutschland! Drei zu zwei führt*

*Deutschland. Halten Sie mich für verrückt, halten Sie mich für übergeschnappt!* ('Finale 1954 – Rahn Schießt' 2010). The author of the digital collection of Saarland football materials recalled his face pressed against the glass of a television shop in Saarbrücken as a child watching the final moments in sheer joy as his neighbors crowded into pubs and radio shops to listen to their long-separated countrymen fulfil the miracle victory (Haas and Freyer 2020). Fifteen months later, with public euphoria still at peak levels from the German victory, Saarlanders overwhelmingly voted against a referendum on independent statehood in October of 1955 (Wiskemann 1956, 287). This rejection was widely perceived as a vote for reunification with Germany. The passionate intensity present in Saarland ever since the first football match with West Germany two years prior, guided a fiercely nationalistic course. Saarlander's nationalist ambitions rejected offers for self-governance as well as status as an independent protectorate. A pro-German Saarland vote in 1955 concluded with the reintegration into West Germany on January 1, 1957. As a result, Saarland's national football team, after nearly a decade of hard-earned respect and international recognition, left FIFA and resumed play as a regional member of the top German football league (Hesse 2014, 3). The region and its people, embodied by their football team, basked in the reunification with their imagined community.

Despite the West German desire for sport to remain divorced from politics, they could not halt the injection of nationalism and increasing calls for unification highlighted by Saarland's football prowess. By 1955, the French owned up to their cultural losses in the region. Exacerbated by the brilliance of Saarland's footballers, the French occupational government agreed to return control of the region to Germany. Economically, the transfer of power would take nearly a decade (E.W 1957, 27). Culturally, the battle for Saarland's soul had already been won in the soccer stadiums in Stuttgart and Bern in 1953–1954.

Celebrating the official re-entry of the Saarland into West Germany, German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer remarked that Saarland's journey invited European powers to rethink reconciliatory capabilities in building a united Europe. The congratulatory mood masked the occasionally turbulent road both nations traversed to arrive at their unification. While sport had been a catalytic factor in accelerating the reunion, for many Saarlanders cheering on their nation against a nation they hoped they would again call their own, constituted a bizarre spectacle (Heffernan 2015, 4–5). Also, despite early claims to the contrary, the German Sport Federation came to represent the whole of the German people, an overtly political position (Hughes and Owen 2009, 448). Far from a contradictory stance, the *Deutsche Sportbund* and the *Saarländische Fußballnationalmannschaft* embraced a word often used along the Franco-German border. The word is 'Verechtungen,' which refers to the interwoven nature of things (Gardner and Kries 2017, 1). Just as the communities of Saarland and West Germany remained interwoven despite external partitions, so too were football and politics.

Saarland's tale offers sport historians a glimpse into the unifying power that can be achieved even in the absence of on-field victory. The legacy of Saarland's team lingered in the German consciousness for years to come. When West Germany repeated as World Cup champions in 1974 their coach was Helmut Schön, the same man who managed Saarland's unifying World Cup run twenty years prior. Schön's time at the helm resulted in one of the finest eras of German football, in many ways an extension of the resilient performances of his Saarland squad. The following year, in 1975, Hermann Neuberger president of Saarland's national football association during its magical era in the 1950s, was elected the seventh

president of the German Football Federation, an organization credited as one of the most public symbols of modern German nationalism.

## Conclusion

It is hardly coincidence that the rise of sport emerged concomitant with nationalist ideology. The intertwined nature of sport and nationalism rests on the inherent competitiveness associated with both phenomena. It is therefore little surprise that the image of Saarland's football team defying French influence and proving itself loyal to Germany still evokes strong emotions in the collective memory of the region's inhabitants (Großmann 2005, 525–530). Perhaps Anderson channeled the likes of 'sub'-nationalisms like Saarland when he argued that the era of nationalism was still going strong because of its legitimizing value in our collective political life (Anderson 2006, 3).

The hierarchical valuation of worth and intense competitive pride binds people to created dominant traditions – observable in both the rise of the nation-state and organized sport (Maguire 2011, 978). The lengthy tenure of sport's presence as an intimate thread in the cloak of national identity was recognized by Hobsbawm, who wrote that sport was 'one of the most significant practices [during the late nineteenth century]' and the institutionalization of sports on a national and even international stage marked a decisive transformation from recreational pursuits and ad hoc nature of sports from the early nineteenth century. In perhaps the most direct connection between sport and nationalism made outside the confines of sport studies, was Hobsbawm's own assertion that 'the very act of cheering for one's side is an expression of nationalism' (Hobsbawm 2003, 31).

From the start, wrote Anderson, 'the nation was conceived in language... and that one could always be "invited into" the imagined community' (Anderson 2006, 145). As the West German players, managers, and fans erupted in celebration at the Miracle of Bern, so too joined their brothers and sisters from Saarland. There could have been no more apt invitation than one delivered from a strong left foot just inside the box. Saarland's brief and remarkable appearance on the international football stage is a strong reminder to historians to reflect on the unifying aspects of nationalism, even in defeat. Within established nation-states, imagined communities have their place, and they can often be found gathered around the nearest pitch.

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