

Az első aranykor: A magyar foci 1945-ig [The first Golden Age: Hungarian football up to 1945]. By Péter Szegedi. Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 2016. 504 pp.

Péter Szegedi has been researching the history of Hungarian football (I use the term used globally for the sport instead of the American term, soccer) for nigh on twenty years. His writings have played a key role in ensuring that the history of sport is no longer a glaring hole in Hungarian historiography or a minor topic left to amateur researchers, but a serious, legitimate field of study. His first monograph, *Riválisok* (Rivals), which examines the social history of football in Debrecen, was published in 2014. His latest book looks at the first “Golden Age” of Hungarian football, now all but faded from the nation’s collective memory: the age before 1945, which culminated in the first Silver Medal in the World Championships in 1938.

The book begins with the observation that by the first decades of the twentieth century, a well-developed football culture had evolved in three different parts of the world. The first was Great Britain, followed at some distance by Uruguay and Argentina, and then by the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy (or Austria, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary; more specifically Vienna, Prague, and Budapest). Though they were far behind Britain, they nonetheless established leagues ahead of everyone else.

Szegedi’s work seeks to understand the continental hegemony of Austro-Hungarian football and, specifically, the success of Hungarian football within that. After a survey of the foundational myths of Hungarian football, Szegedi turns to the question of why MTK, Ferencváros, and eventually Újpest stood out so prominently among the other clubs in Budapest and its environs. He goes on to demonstrate how the Hungarian provinces (i.e. the rest of the country, apart from the capital) slowly came to take part in competitive football. He conducts a careful analysis of the increasing commercialization of football, and the discourses surrounding it. He provides a wealth of detail in his chronicle of how Hungarian footballers and trainers spread throughout the world and the significant roles they played in the rise of Mediterranean football in particular. He goes on to demonstrate the strengthening role of state intervention in football, and so on.

In the foreword, two paradigms of sports historiography come together. The book begins thus: “In the summer of 1945, after a forced hiatus of almost

two years, the Hungarian National football team was preparing for its first post-War match. The opponents were our old rivals, the Austrians, against whom we played two matches, one after the other. On 19 August, we won 2-0, while the next day, we won again, 5-2, in the Stadium in Üllői Avenue” (p.7). As this citation illustrates, Szegedi starts off using the first-person plural, a characteristic of traditional sports histories borrowed from old-fashioned national and local historiography. He pursues the history of a given community as a *member* of that community in order to recount that history to the very same community. Within this paradigm, the body and sports are not a historical-social construct, but a phenomenon outside history, a timeless natural given, thus, endless lists of sports successes can serve to demonstrate the greatness of the “we.”

But though the book begins with this traditional language of sports historiography, the work itself consciously avoids this approach. There are in fact no further instances of the author writing in the first-person plural. At most, we could say that Szegedi’s account takes on a nostalgic tinge and keeps slightly less distance from its subject when looking at the lives of the three eccentric aces of this Golden Age (Ferenc Plattkó, Alfréd Schaffer, and Béla Guttmann). But he does not delete this part in the interests of narrative unity, fortunately, as this is one of the most exciting passages in what is already a well-written book, documenting a period when the rules of the media discourse surrounding football apparently had not yet solidified, and footballers occasionally told the media not what they were expected to say, but what they really thought.

It becomes clear from the second half of the foreword that Szegedi does not regard himself as a traditional sports historian at all. According to him, “football is much more [...] than [...] just a game” (p.10). For him, what happened on the pitch is very much connected to what was happening off the pitch. His starting point is that the results of matches are a socio-historical product, which, as he puts it, “are an expression of competing identities.” (Zoltán Barotányi, “Ha nyer a csapat’: Szegedi Péter a régi idők magyar focijáról” [‘If the team wins:’ Péter Szegedi on the Hungarian football of yore], *Magyar Narancs*, August 25, 2016, 20.) In other words, the stadium appears here as the site of civilized social conflict. Every World Cup is a World War without bullets, every domestic championship match is a bloodless civil war. We could say that Szegedi and the social historians of football believe that football is, week after week, a measure of the power relations between various social groups and the positions of various collective identities. In this sense, teams tend to be more or less successful, depending on

the power of the social groups they represent (a class, an ethnicity, a religion, a settlement, etc.) and the intensity of the conflicts among these groups.

This conceptual framework seems useful but unfinished. There are many elements of Hungary's pre-1945 footballing success which it cannot explain. The nations within the Dual Monarchy really were engaged in sharp conflict with one another, but this in itself cannot explain the high quality of the football matches that were played. If that were the case, why were the French and German teams not the best on the continent at the time? We can apply the same logic within the Monarchy as well: if it was heady national feeling or sharp inter-ethnic conflict that lay behind the high standard of football, then why did Vienna, Budapest, and Prague become the capitals of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy's football, and not Lemberg (today Lviv), Krakow, or Sarajevo? Or, if the hegemony of MTK and FTC within Hungarian club football found such fertile soil to develop into a Jewish/bourgeois versus non-Jewish/plebeian competition, then why did the peasantry, by far Hungary's largest social class at the time, not express its yearning for emancipation on the pitch? Why was there not a single football club representing the peasants?

So history does not quite fit the model offered in the book, but furthermore, *The First Hungarian Golden Age* also applies it inconsistently. When, for instance, Szegedi is faced with the question of how Újpest finally managed to join the ranks of FTC and MTK in the late 1920s, he abandons this conflict-centered approach and links the high quality of football not to social conflict, but to specific social situations. He believes that teams were successful that were from settlements 1) that were relatively well-populated, 2) in which a significant proportion of employment was provided by industry, and more specifically, factories, and 3) in which a significant proportion of the population consisted of Jews. Of the provincial cities, this description perhaps fits Nagyvárad (Oradea) best, but this city was not part of Hungary for part of the period under discussion. And indeed, the first champions of the Hungarian League to come from outside Budapest and its environs were Nagyvárad AC in 1943/44, but this had nothing to do with the significant Jewish population of the city, and very little with its overall population and industrial development. Nagyvárad managed to get their hands on the title thanks in large part to government support. (Bence Barát, "Futball, társadalom és politika a két világháború közti Magyarországon: Az erdélyi labdarúgás és az államilag irányított futball" [Football society and politics in Hungary in the interwar period: Football in Transylvania and state controlled football], MA thesis, Eötvös Loránd University, 2016.) In his discussion of the popularity of

Ferencváros, Szegedi at one point explains that FTC, like most popular football teams, owed its popularity to their outstanding results. Here, therefore, the author claims that success in football was independent of the world outside the pitch and that it was not the result of the social circumstances behind the various teams, but could be rather accidental at first and a self-reinforcing trend later. We still do not have, therefore, a comprehensive and working explanation of the success of Hungarian football from a social scientific standpoint. The book, in the end, does not tell us *why* pre-1945 Hungarian football developed to such a high standard, but rather only *how*.

But Szegedi's book nonetheless fulfils a very important function: it reexamines in a critical and empirical way the generalizations, half-truths, and suppositions regarding the history of Hungarian football. The analysis of Hungarian football from a social-historical viewpoint began with Miklós Hadas and Viktor Karády's 1995 article, and they began their analysis thus: "this article feeds off the common repository of knowledge present in a substantial proportion of Hungarian men, whose elements very often seem self-explanatory." (Miklós Hadas, and Viktor Karády, "Futball és társadalmi identitás" [Football and social identity], *Replika* 6, no. 17–18, (1995): 89.) Szegedi is more or less going after such "general knowledge," checking up on the facts and adjusting and correcting them. He demolishes the myth that violence on the pitch is a sign of the crisis of our disordered age. The widespread assumption that the stands of the Hungarian stadiums were always full of spectators and it is only recently that they have emptied out also turns out to be false. He investigates the social backgrounds from which the players were recruited and whether the widespread suppositions about the divergent ratio of Jewish players on the various teams were true, as well as the original meaning behind the colors of the Ferencváros club. He uncovers a wealth of data on the financial operation of the clubs (incomes, taxes, hidden payments to the pseudo-amateur players), systematically analyses the results of the national team's and Hungarian clubs' international matches, and looks at the career trajectories of Hungarians abroad. On some points, however, Szegedi's empirical research leaves something to be desired. He mentions several times that football fans came predominantly from the lower strata of the middle class, but there is nothing to support this in the book. The most significant shortcoming of Szegedi's work from a researcher's point of view, however, is that the book is not properly academic in form. Though there is a bibliography at the end, there are no footnotes, so the sources on which Szegedi relies would be very difficult to locate.

Nonetheless, the book is not only an enjoyable read for a wider audience, but also useful for academics. It is in fact a fundamentally important work. But Szegedi does not develop a comprehensive model to explain the success and failure of football from a social scientific point of view, though there is plenty of call for this. I do not claim to have a general explanation, but let me sketch the outlines of a model that may help us understand the social conflicts played out on the pitch. Long-term success comes to the teams that 1) represent social groups that are sharply in conflict with others but 2) their conflict is not so sharp that the members of these groups prefer to resort to bloodshed, as they are satisfied with symbolic victory over their rivals (which is also a recognition of the other's right to exist). But only civilized conflicts that 3) can be expressed physically, which is to say those in which the various camps have physical stereotypes about each other, are suitable as a foundation for lasting football success. Another necessary factor for success is that 4) the parties to the conflict be able to spend significant amounts of money on football, which is to say on the representation of their interests, and this is possible if there are many of them, they live in geographical proximity to one another, and they have large disposable incomes. But all this will only lead to success if 5) football is played out in a free-market environment, and the capabilities of the teams are not subject to political decisions. If the competition is not fair or, in other words, if the league tables no longer actually express the power relations of the various social groups, but merely the will of those in power, then spectators will gradually lose their interest in football. The result of this, sooner or later, will be a game of lower quality.

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