H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Simon Kuper. *Ajax, the Dutch, the War: Football in Europe during the Second World War.* London: Orion, 2003. 244 pp. $117.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7528-5149-5; n.p. (paper), ISBN 978-0-7528-4274-5.

Reviewed by Chris Thomas (J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College)
Published on H-War (June, 2013)
Commissioned by Margaret Sankey

Soccer Is Politics by Other Means

An examination of soccer in the Netherlands during World War II provides a microcosm of Dutch resistance, reaction, and anti-Semitism. Established soccer journalist Simon Kuper takes a second look at Holland's behavior during the Second World War, and his conclusions are not pretty. Basing his work on the actions of soccer fans, players, and club owners in Holland and throughout Europe, Kuper rejects the longstanding image of Holland as the heroic underdog resisting the Nazi juggernaut while simultaneously trying to protect its Jews. According to Kuper, the Holland of Anne Frank is a construction built to salve a guilty national conscience.

Kuper argues that the Dutch have divided World War II history into two camps: *goed* (good) and *fout* (wrong)–*goed* Dutch and *fout* Germans; *goed* resistance and *fout* collaboration. Establishing this myth, for example, the Dutch film *Soldier of Orange* (1977) depicts the Dutch as weak but scrappy resisters to Nazi tyranny. This myth, however, is running into challenges: Frank was hidden by one Dutchman but denounced by another; the Netherlands had more Jews killed in proportion to the population than any other country save Poland; and, according to Adolf Eichmann, the Dutch were the most collaborative country in Europe.

Kuper approaches the myth of the *goed* Netherlands in a unique way, by looking at soccer. As stated in the title, he attempts to trace the politicization of European soccer, tell the history of the Ajax soccer club, and explore the plight of European Jewish soccer players in general–all in less than three hundred pages. While each of these is a fascinating topic, worthy of its own volume, unfortunately together they serve as the book's biggest drawback. True to the title, each chapter addresses Ajax, the Dutch, the war, or soccer, and in many cases two or even three of these subjects, but a single volume cannot possibly cover all of these topics adequately. Most chapters could stand on their own as articles; however, in combination with the others the book loses is structural spine, leaving the reader adrift in an ocean of interesting, but disconnected anecdotes, arguments, and interpretations.

Rather than approach the book chapter by chapter, it is best to approach it by theme as expressed in the title. First is Ajax, a premier Dutch soccer club that had a high number of Jewish players. In the prewar years, clubs like Ajax demonstrated that the Netherlands and its Jews had reached a suitable degree of integration and assimilation; however, during the war the fans who had previously cheered for Jews turned on them, purging them from the club. After this first chapter, Ajax does not make another appearance in the book until chapter 8, at which point Kuper states a different scope for his study; Ajax, the Jews, and the war, but no mention of soccer–another example of the book's weak organization. It is this chapter that details the history of the club, including prewar acceptance; wartime resistance and collaboration (and there were instances of each); and the token de-Nazification actions taken after the war. Kuper shows that while some members of Ajax truly were *goed*, others were clearly *fout*, and the majority was lesser degrees of both. Having accomplished all of this in a single chapter, what is left for the succeeding chapters? And what were the previous seven for? One was dedicated to Sparta, another Dutch team that had a significant number of Jews. Kuper asserts that "the experience of these hundreds of Spartans–collaborators, Jews, and everyday folk–add up to a microcosm of the Dutch war" (p. 70). He makes a similar statement about Ajax. Why then does the book not focus on this team instead of Ajax? Why is the title not more general about Dutch Jews and soccer instead of a single team that does not really feature until halfway into the book?

After Ajax come the Dutch people and the myth that as a country the Netherlands were overwhelmingly *goed*

with every family hiding Frank or printing anti-German newspapers. In contrast, Kuper calls the Dutch "grey or cowardly," showing that only a small percentage of Dutch people resisted in one form or another (p. 139). Kuper asserts that the Dutch *know* the myth is false, but refuse to accept it, choosing instead to emphasize their own suffering or the heroics of the few: the bombing of Rotterdam, the strike of '41, and of course Frank. Citing public history as evidence, Kuper points out that monuments to these events are all but lit up in neon, while monuments to Jewish deportations are small, conspicuous, and difficult to find even if one knows where to look. At soccer games both before and after the war, anti-Semitism was prevalent, Kuper notes. Before the war, for example, Ajax games were rife with anti-Semitic songs, chants, and jeers from the opposing team and visiting fans. These songs persisted in postwar games, some even going so far as to include visiting fans shouting "to the gas chambers" and making hissing sounds (escaping gas) instead of booing. Such callousness, Kuper argues, was not a wartime or postwar creation. Fathers teaching their sons to shout anti-Semitic slogans at games shows not only that latent anti-Semitism has deep roots in the Netherlands, but also how it persisted.

Kuper's most intriguing argument relates to how the Dutch have gotten away with their myth. He asserts that because of the country's geographic, cultural, and linguistic isolation, the Netherlands are able to keep it, so to speak, in the family, especially in comparison to other countries, like France or Poland, whose location, size, and language make covering collaboration nearly impossible. Such an intriguing argument, however, gets only a single paragraph and is introduced more than argued.

After Ajax and the Dutch comes war. Kuper demonstrates that the popularity and politicization of soccer are a direct result of the war itself; however, while he makes several good points, his discussion is not without problems. The majority of chapters exploring this topic focus on England and Germany (even though the book is supposed to be about the Dutch) because they were "Europe's two main combatant nations"–the Soviet Union would strongly disagree (p. 154). Additionally, Kuper's argument that the Nazis never used soccer as a propaganda tool ignores the historical record. In Nazi Germany, *everything* was propaganda, especially sports. When Kuper does turn to the Netherlands, it is to show that soccer boomed in the Netherlands because it was one of the only areas of life that alleviated the boredom of occupation and was left untouched by the Germans (other than forcing the expulsion of Jewish players).

In the end, Kuper concludes that only some Dutch were truly *goed*, and many more were *fout,* often by convenience than conviction, but as a nation, the Netherlands has no business perpetuating the myth of the *goed* Dutch. The thesis is not new, but using soccer as an approach to the topic is. Judging by the bibliography, Kuper has done his research; unfortunately, he does not provide notations of any kind in the text. The language is clear and reads well, but the book's organization makes the central theme difficult to pin down, let alone follow. There is only a comprehensive title that draws the many topics together in a cloud. Kuper has opened the door, but a more organized, annotated, and focused study of many of his topics is called for and will hopefully be forthcoming.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Chris Thomas. Review of Kuper, Simon, *Ajax, the Dutch, the War: Football in Europe during the Second World War.* H-War, H-Net Reviews. June, 2013.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=37109

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.