



Soccer under Fascism: A Comparative Analysis of the Death Match in Nazi-occupied Ukraine (1942) and Real Madrid 11-1 FC Barcelona in Francoist Spain (1943)

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ABSTRACT

George Orwell declared that sport is “mimic warfare” — “war minus the fighting”; others call it a “continuation of war by other means” (Orwell 1945). A comparison of the 1942 Death Match in Nazi-occupied Ukraine and the 1943 Real Madrid versus FC Barcelona (Barça) game in Francoist Spain reflects that political divisions carried into the stadium, and that soccer became a proxy for actual rebellion. For both Ukrainians and Catalonians, soccer served as a potent symbol of national dignity and a vehicle for asserting cultural identity. Under fascism, soccer was the “opiate of the people” (Brohm 1978) — a distraction created by the oppressors to deprive the oppressed of political consciousness — but for Ukrainians and Catalans, it also functioned as a form of cultural resistance and identity. Long after WWII ended, successive generations used these matches to inform historical memory and created myths around them.

KEYWORDS: soccer, sports, fascism, resistance

The *Death Match* took place on August 9th, 1942, nearly one year to the date that Nazi Germany invaded Soviet Ukraine. After a year of mass executions of both innocent Ukrainians and Jews, the soccer match offered FC Start, a squad composed of former Ukrainian professionals, the chance to best their occupiers. The stakes were high, as FC Start allegedly faced threats that their choices were to lose or die. Before the match began, a Nazi officer issued a thinly veiled warning to FC Start players, informing them: “I am the referee of today’s game. I know that you are a very good team. I ask you to follow the rules, and before the start of the game, greet your opponents in our own way” (Kuzmin 1995). Despite the rumors and the warning, FC Start prevailed, winning 5-3. A few days later, the Nazis captured nine players, and eventually killed four of them. To this day, many still use the *Death Match* as a symbol of Ukrainian national character, and a statue of the four executed players still stands outside Dynamo Stadium in Kyiv (Rabitz 2012).

Less than a year later, another game between fascism and its victims took place on the other side of Europe, this time pitting Franco between Catalonia. On June 13th, 1943, Real Madrid hosted FC Barcelona, Catalonia’s team. Again, tensions were high and soccer became a proxy for the conflict between Franco’s Nationalist regime and Republican resistance in Catalonia. Real Madrid fans attending the game prepared rocks to throw onto the pitch and whistles to fill

Estadio Chamartin with the loudest, screeching noises. Angel Mur, Barcelona’s massage therapist, remembered that “I genuinely thought my eardrums were going to burst... When I took up my place on the bench, a policeman came up to me and said: ‘Today you’re going to lose.’ It was not a question. Chamartín was like the Roman Coliseum and we were the Christians.” (Lowe 2014) It is rumored that Franco’s assistant broke into the Barcelona locker room, forcing the Barça players to relinquish the game. Real eviscerated Barça 11-1 that day, which still is the largest margin ever in *El Clásico* history. Despite the lopsided victory, Real never brags about it. Instead FC Barcelona and successive generations used this game to establish themselves as the “freedom fighters” and Real as the fascists.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The political turmoil of fascism haunted both Ukraine and Spain in the 1930s and 1940s. Prior to WWII, power struggles characterized these countries. The Soviet Union took control of Ukraine in 1922, leading to famine in the 1930s, followed by the 1941 invasion of Nazi Germany. Similarly, after centuries of struggle with the Spanish central government, Catalonia fell under the Franco regime, which outlawed the Catalan language, depriving it of the capacity for self-expression. Many Catalans were sent to concentration camps, and many others died from the war and persecutions. During both wars, most had long forgotten about sports. However, as



wars ended and usurpations succeeded, sports became part of the oppressors' propaganda, securing their dominance.

Ukraine

The Ukrainian Central Rada declared Ukraine's independence on January 22, 1918, with two great powers, Germany and Austria-Hungary, along with many others recognizing its legitimacy in the Treaty of Peace signed in Brest-Litovsk. Ukrainian independence, however, was short-lived; it was subsumed into the Soviet Union in 1922 (Zimmermann 2022).

Life in the Soviet Union was far from ideal. With agriculture collectivized, the Soviet Union demanded an unusually high amount of grain allotment to the state as taxes, leaving Ukrainians starving despite the abundant harvest. Around 5,000,000 Ukrainians starved to death between 1932 and 1933. This is what is known today as the Holodomor, or the Soviet famine. Historian Raphael Lemkin calls it the "Ukrainian genocide" (Holodomor Education).

The outbreak of World War II in September 1939 further destabilized Ukraine. Aiming to find additional "living space" for the German race to regenerate itself, Adolf Hitler set his eyes on Ukraine, whose abundance of resources would make the Third Reich economically self-sufficient. The Germans did not care if this land was already populated, for they were going to eliminate local people, especially Jews, leaving only ethnic Germans. Germany declared war against the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941. The Nazis entered Kyiv on September 19 and by October, Ukraine was in Nazi hands, becoming the *Reichskommissariat Ukraine*. Approximately 665,000 Red Army soldiers became war prisoners, and, according to local resident Fedir Pihido, they had no food, "no underwear, no soap; many had lice. Footwear was mostly broken. They had to fight barefoot, or with rags wrapped around. There were no blankets." On June 27, 1941, Stalin ordered that "All valuable materials, energy and agricultural stocks, and standing grain ... must be destroyed, annihilated, and burned" to prevent them from falling into enemy use. People hoarded products and pandemonium haunted Ukraine (Berkhoff 1998).

The NKVD (Naródnyy Komissariát Vnútrennikh Del), the secret police force of the Soviet Union, tried to arrest and persecute "unreliable," people suspected of connection with the Germans. Karel C. Berkhoff (1998), a historian of Nazi Ukraine, writes that "people's relatives had been persecuted, or simply people who had studied in Germany years ago." Spy-mania erupted and innocent people were accused of being spies. NKVD officers also spread fire and planted explosive mines to kill Germans. As there was no water supply, extinguishing the fire was difficult. The Germans responded by shooting people living in houses adjacent to mines and ordered some others to leave their homes, with 25,000 people rendered homeless. Those who were fortunate enough not to be killed faced starvation through the winter of 1941.

At the same time, the Nazis summoned long rows of Jews onto the street for exodus and ordered them to walk to the valley of Babi Yar. Their fate shocked the world. Dina Pronicheva, a surviving Ukrainian Jew, testified on the trial after the war that "Each time I saw a new group of men and women, elderly people, and children being forced to take off their clothes. All [of them] were being taken to an open pit where submachine-gunners shot them. Then another group was brought ... Terrible cries of panic-stricken people and quiet children's voices calling 'Mother, mother...' reached me." Within two days, the Nazis massacred 33,771 Jews. Many others also perished at the same site (Holocaust Encyclopedia).

Sports were completely nonexistent during the invasion. However, by the beginning of 1942, keen to demonstrate the normalcy of life under Nazi rule as well as the superiority of the Aryan race, the Germans decided to form a soccer league. Georgi Shvetsov, a Nazi collaborator and soccer coach, played a key role in convincing the Nazis to take this step (Kuzmin 1995). His initiative set the stage for the formation of FC Start and the famed *Death Match*.

Spain

Catalonia has historically been in conflict with the Spanish central government. The 1716 Decree of Nueva Planta, a law which Catalonians today describe as the "destruction of Catalan identity" (Mas 2016), mandated that Spanish was the only language in Catalonia and that the laws of the Crown replace all Catalan laws.

After the *Renaixença* (Renaissance) of the 19th century, which attempted to revive Catalan culture, the region faced oppression again under the regime of General de Rivera in the mid 1920s. However, the overthrow and exile of King Alfonso XIII in 1931 resulted in the establishment of the Second Republic of Spain. This regime, dominated by middle class liberals and moderate socialists, allowed the formation of the *Generalitat*, the autonomous government of Catalonia. Nevertheless, the nationalist party *Falange*, led by General Francisco Franco, revolted against the Republicans in 1936, sparking the Spanish Civil War (Larios 2015). Franco seized control of Spain in 1939, by which point Catalonia lost 125,000 inhabitants, with over 1,600 executed publicly, according to Catalan historian Conxita Mir. The Francoist regime sent between 370,000 and 500,000 people to concentration camps from 1937 to 1942, all of whom endured appalling conditions in jail and worked as slave labor. The regime's violence could hardly be described as "uncontrolled," for it involved actively going after left-wing leaders, teachers, journalists, and more (Mir 2008), leaving scars for the entire region.

Franco's policies targeted not only against Catalan individuals but Catalan culture as a whole. Spanish historian Paul Preston notes a priest shouting during a sermon "Catalan

dogs! You are not worthy of the sun that shines on you” after the occupation of Tarragona on 15 January, 1939. He also writes that according to a British officer, Franco’s victory parade in Barcelona was headed by a corp of Navarre “not because they have fought better, but because they hate better – that is to say, when the object of this hate is Catalonia or a Catalan” (Preston 2017). Historian Josep Benet (1973) even accuses Franco of cultural genocide against Catalonia. Signs declared “Don’t bark, speak the language of the empire.” As Spanish sport historian Sid Lowe (2014) notes, “By the time the dictator died in 1975, less than 5 percent of books were published in Catalan; forty years earlier, almost a quarter had been.”

Throughout much of the Civil War, however, Barcelona was unaffected, allowing it to host sporting events. According to historian Ray Physick (2019), as many as 52 sporting events were held between August to December 1936, but only 8 took place in 1937, as the Republicans lost control. The worker’s committee collectivized sport, and the money collected from attendance was used to support militias. After Franco’s victory, the first major sporting event took place on June 29, 1939, between FC Barcelona and Athletic Bilbao, at Les Corts, Barcelona. Key fascists such as General Álvarez Arenas attended, and the players lined up in front of the directors to hear pro-fascist speeches. Sports became part of the “State’s machinery.”

THE GAMES

Both the *Death Match* of 1942 and the Real 11-1 Barça game of 1943 were sporting events that featured the oppressors and the oppressed on the same pitch. The underlying political context gave these games outsized political significance, allowing the oppressed to use these games as acts of symbolic resistance. In both cases, the fouls committed against the other side, the goals scored, and the final result became politicized and were manipulated for political ends.

The Death Match

Eager to prove the superiority of their race and assert their authority, the Germans took the match against Ukrainian players very seriously. They even summoned players from outside Kyiv in preparation for the game. On the other hand, surviving player Makhar Honcharenko, in his interview with journalist Georgi Kuzmin in 1992, recalled that the soldiers of the Romanian garrison, who secretly cheered for Start, broke through to their dressing room before the first game against Flakelf, fed them and begged them to “beat the *Deutsches* more.”

In Kyiv, just after the Nazi invasion, Josef Ivanovich Kordik, a Moravian Czech engineer and soccer aficionado who falsely claimed German origin, managed to convince the Nazis that he was a *Volksdeutsche* and secured work as a manager in a bakery (Kuzmin 1992). He recognized former Dynamo Kyiv goalkeeper Nikolai Trusevich on the street, homeless and searching for food. He provided Trusevich shelter and a job

at the bakery. He also asked him to look for former Ukrainian professional players around the city to form a team, which they named FC Start. Start played well in the Germans’ league and became famous among the locals, scoring 35 goals and conceding only 5 in their first five games.

On August 6th, 1942, FC Start played against Flakelf, a squad of Nazi soldiers, and hammered them 5-1. Displeased with the result, the Germans demanded a rematch three days later. On publicity posters before the rematch, the word “revenge” could be seen along with the news that the Germans had strengthened their squad. A day before the game, a Start player named Olexander Tkachenko beat up a German on the street and was shot by the Gestapo after resisting arrest. Finally, the big day arrived. On August 9th, as spectator and friend of the Start players Oleg Yasinsky (2000) recalls, a large crowd of two thousand people gathered at Zenit Stadium. Honcharenko later testified that a Nazi officer warned them to follow the rules and pay homage to Hitler but no match administrator forced them to relinquish the game; some Nazi collaborators did recommend that they don’t “tease the geese.” As for the Nazi salute, “We just politely accepted his condition, but, of course... didn’t intend to [do as he said].” Yasinsky recalls that upon entering the stadium, the Nazi soldiers yelled “Heil” whereas the Start players chanted “Fitzkult- privet” (Kuzmin 1992) in an act of defiance.

(hello physical culture — a slang used among Russian athletes)

As the game began, Honcharenko remembers the opponents playing aggressively, and the referee turning a blind eye to some fouls, angered that they did not comply with the demand of a Nazi salute. It was the Germans who scored the opener. However, Start soon equalized courtesy of an emphatic long-range Kuzmenko finish. Start turned the score around when Honcharenko slotted home after striding away from several defenders and doubled their advantage when Honcharenko converted a Kuzmenko cross. 3-1 was the score at half-time.

Honcharenko recalls the crowd being nervous and whistling, police surrounding the pitch.

The second half was an ordeal for the Start players, who were battling malnutrition. The Nazis scored twice, but Start was equal to it, Trusevich’s brilliance preserving their lead till the end. 5:3 was the final score.

Despite Start’s victory, Honcharenko recalled that “Nobody arrested us afterwards. We calmly left the stadium, though the atmosphere around was tense.” Vladen Putistin, son of player Mikhail Putistin and a ball boy at the game, said in a 2002 interview that after the game, the players celebrated: “Moonshine was brought by one of the fans... We sat and talked for a long time... Nobody had a penny. Another: ‘In debt,’ he reassured them.” The atmosphere was relaxed among the players and no retaliation was anticipated (Vartanyan 2007).

FC Start went on to play another game a week later against

Rukh, a team of Nazi collaborators, whom they demolished 8-0. Two days after the game against Rukh and nine days after the “*Death Match*,” the Gestapo arrested seven players, and two more two days later, sending them to the Syrets concentration camp. Nikolai Korotkykh was captured in October.

The *Death Match* played no role in the first death of a Start player. Korotkykh’s wife Hana told Honcharenko that Korotkykh’s own sister betrayed him, fearing the Gestapo. Korotkykh was discovered as an NKVD officer and was therefore interrogated and tortured. He had a heart attack during the torture and died.

After surviving the harsh winter, Trusevich, Kuzmenko, and Klimenko were shot on February 24, 1943; the context of their deaths, however, seems unrelated to the outcome of the *Death Match*. Tyutchev, who was in the same brigade as the three at the time of their death, testified that they were ordered to transfer firewood at 33 Vladimirskaia Street, a former NKVD building, to a bakery. An Armenian prisoner attempted to go after a warden’s dog, who was trying to snatch a sausage. The Gestapo, upon arriving, beat him violently, and several prisoners stood up for him.

After shooting the Armenian, the Gestapo lined the prisoners up and decided that every third prisoner would be shot for violence against a German officer. Fate chose the unfortunate three.

There can be no definitive conclusion as to why the players were captured, though a German investigation in 1974 led by prosecutor Jochen Kuhlmann concluded that it most likely had nothing to do with the game (Krischer 2013). Russian writer Anatoly Kuznetsov, in his 1966 documentary story *Babi Yar*, writes that the Germans routinely suffered big defeats against local teams, so the game should not have caused their arrest. (How he got around the censorship in Stalinist Russia is unknown.)

Some players accuse the Rukh manager and Nazi collaborator Georgi Shvetsov, who invited the Start players to play for him before the season started, of seeking revenge after suffering a humiliating defeat. However, he was also arrested in December, 1943, which may show that he was not as pro-Nazi as many have characterized him. Additionally, he says that he did not want to betray his country but only did so “to protect the physical culture personnel of Kyiv.”

Yasinsky suspects Ukrainian player A. Skocen, who was denounced by several Start players for his “bourgeois-nationalist” propaganda before the war and only narrowly avoided death. Though he was forced to emigrate to Canada after the war, he was back in Ukraine during the Nazi occupation, and so may have turned the Start players in (Yasinsky 2007).

Despite the lack of evidence linking the outcome of the game of the murdered Start players, the Soviets portrayed

this game as a powerful symbol of patriotism and resistance against German occupation. This narrative emerged in the immediate post WWII era and continues to the present day, elevating the *Death Match* to mythical status and making martyrs of the slain players.

Real Madrid 11-1 FC Barcelona

FC Barcelona has always been associated with Catalan separatism. One of its former presidents, Josep Sunyol, a Catalan separatist politician, was killed by Franco’s forces in 1936 without trial, and became known as the “martyr president.” During Franco’s repression, its stadium, Les Corts, served as a bastion for those sympathetic to the Catalan cause. Even today, yellow and red stripes, which iconically form the Catalan flag, can still be seen on the Barça badge and jersey. Its motto still reads “*Mes que un club*” (more than a club). What is it beyond a club? It is the symbol of the Catalan identity (Kelly 2021). During Franco’s regime, Marca said that Barcelona “always sought to bring a Catalan tone to the heart of the club,” using “sport as a mouthpiece and means of propaganda for an insufferable region” (Lowe 2014).

Real Madrid, on the other hand, assembled a committee that “having first carried out the job of purifying the club, eliminating disobedient and suspicious supporters’ groups and fans, crystallized in a meeting of true lovers of the traditions of Madrid and of good sport.”

During the June 6, 1943 Copa del Generalísimo semifinal, Barcelona hosted Real Madrid in Les Corts. Barça hammered Real 3-0, but Real chafed at the result. They believed that the referee, José Fombona Fernández, granted Barcelona the first goal despite a foul that preceded it, a soft penalty which led to the second goal, and the third goal, which was offside.

Barcelona was not happy about the game either, whistling vehemently throughout because of Real’s aggressive style of play. A Madrid press wrote that “[the game] does not refer to sport, but to anti-sport ... Real Madrid has not been able to play during the entire first half.” As for the referee, “his clumsiness was not partiality or mistake,” for he was not able to officiate properly because of “the gestures, the fuss, the race in search of the referee to expose to him the complaints among the public.” Barcelona was fined 2,500 pesetas, but Catalan media made barely any mention of their fans’ behavior (Futbolgate).

Ya journalist, former Real player and Franco supporter Eduardo Teus praised the Real players for their “courage,” “bravery and toughness” and exclaimed that “Ah, if [only] Chamartín would help Madrid on Sunday like the ‘boiling cauldron’ of Les Corts helped [Barcelona] in the first half!” After an official statement of Real that also channeled their discontent, Real fans responded by letting everyone who bought tickets collect whistles at the social center where Real fans gathered (Lowe 2014).

A week later, back in Estadio Chamartín, as the Barcelona bus

approached the stadium, rocks were thrown at them and the most deafening whistles sounded as soon as they arrived. The last surviving member of the squad and Barcelona's young reserve goalkeeper, Fernando Argila, recalled many years later in 2014 that someone broke into their changing room before the game. "Who was it? I don't know. A policeman, a lieutenant or an I-don't-know-what from the Civil Guard. And he said . . . not that we had to lose . . . but that nothing must happen because there was political tension." The officer was armed and he "told the referee: 'make sure nothing happens.'" As a young player, Argila found it frightening.

By the time they walked onto the pitch, coins were thrown all over the field. Barcelona player Francesc Calvet remembers that "They were shouting: Reds! Separatists! . . . a bottle just missed Sospedra and would have killed him if it had hit him. It was all set up." Masseur Angel Mur said in a 2008 interview that "When I got up to treat an injured player, [an armed police lieutenant] grabbed me and told me to sit back down again." Additionally, he recalled that their goalkeeper, Lluís Miró, was afraid to approach his goal line because when he did, he would be within reach of the supporters behind, who were armed with stones.

Half an hour into the game, Real equalized on aggregate. Just before the third goal, Barça defender Benito García was sent off for what Calvet believes to be a "completely normal tackle." Down to ten men in an already arduous game, Barcelona imploded. Mur says that at that point "we thought: 'go on then, score as many as you want.'" 33, 35, 39, 43, 44. Barcelona stood watching as Real put five more past Lluís Miró for the remainder of the first half. The man in charge of the scoreboard didn't even prepare cards for numbers greater than five. Miró's widow, speaking to journalist Xavier G. Luque years later, said that Real kept scoring as if the game were still level. (Oliva 2017). At halftime, the Barça players were reluctant to go out and finish the game. At that point, according to Valle and Calvet in a May 2000 interview with *La Vanguardia*, a colonel broke in and reminded them they had a duty to carry on — "He threatened us and said literally: 'Go back out on to the pitch or you're all going to jail.'" Calvet, according to his biographer Guillem Gomez, added that when he questioned the colonel why there were not more police, he was told to "shut up, obey, go out there and play . . . and lose!" (Lowe 2014)

Barça conceded three more before their striker Mariano Martín bundled home their consolation goal in the dying embers of the game, a goal which *La Prensa* described as a final act of defiance to remind the crowd that they were still a team capable of playing.

Even a Franco supporter and a journalist for *La Prensa*, Juan Samaranch, wrote that there was no way Barcelona could have lost so badly simply due to poor play; the situation was that "Barcelona did not exist and the same would have happened to any team. In that atmosphere and with a referee who wanted to avoid any complications, it was humanly

impossible to play." Because he criticized Real for their lack of "gentlemanliness," he was censored for almost ten years. He did not write again until the 1952 Helsinki Olympics (Futbolgate).

The Spanish federation fined both clubs 25,000 pesetas in the aftermath of the game, and both Barça president Enrique Piñeyro and Real president Santos Peralba resigned. Lluís Miró took the defeat personally and never played again. Real Madrid, however, fell short in the final that year, as Athletic Bilbao lifted the *Copa del Generalísimo*.

Barcelona definitely threw the game; this is indisputable. However, Barça's rationale for doing so has been recast as a symbol of Catalan suffering and forbearance; it is a form of revisionist history to support Catalan narratives of resistance against Real Madrid and Franco's regime at large.

MYTHS AND MISREPRESENTATIONS

Both games held political significance at the time they happened. However, with the passage of time, their significance increased; they became mythologized to support narratives in historical memory and heroized to inspire the generations to come. The unfair advantage given to the team representing the oppressors has been exaggerated, as has the disadvantage suffered by the team representing the oppressed. Some evidence, however, does not support the dramatized versions of these games and show that the matches were not as politically significant as some accounts suggest. Such myth-making could be interpreted as an attempt to illustrate through soccer, a potent symbol of identity, the cruel injustices faced by the people who suffered and the brave defiance of the people who endured.

Ukraine

The *Death Match* has been characterized as a direct confrontation between the Ukrainians and the Nazis, an unfair game that left the Ukrainian players threatened. This narrative uses soccer to incite patriotism among Soviet citizens. However, some evidence indicates that the game was played in a mostly peaceful, if not friendly, fashion and under mostly fair circumstances. All mythologized versions of the game exaggerate the unfairness against Start in that game to mirror the Nazi oppression against Ukraine. They also heroize Start to characterize the spirit of defiance against oppressors, which is encouraged by the Soviet government.

The first version of the myth of the *Death Match* comes from A. Borshchagovsky's "Death Match" article published in the newspaper *Stalin's Tribe* on August 24, 1946. Borshchagovsky made up many sensational details, such as how the first goal was scored. He has Trusevich holding the ball tight when a German forward raises his foot and knocks Trusevich unconscious. Then Trusevich is pushed into the goal along with the ball, and the referee allows the goal to stand (Vartanyan 2007). Borshchagovsky's writing

was adopted into a 1963 movie *The Third Half* by Yevgeny Karelov, who, along with several other Soviet writers, does not even mention survivors of the game.

Other accounts do not support such damning details. Although Honcharenko said in 1984 that “Hitler’s soccer players started a ‘hunt’ for our goalkeeper Trusevich” and “[o]ne of the Luftwaffe forwards openly kicked Nikolai in the face. Trusevich lost consciousness,” he omitted any mention of Trusevich’s injury in his 1992 interview, after the Soviet Union collapsed (Kuzmin 1992). A picture allegedly taken before the game also shows that both sides were relaxed (Yasinsky 2007). Moreover, Vladimir Nogachevsky, a spectator, testified after the war that “all matches were usually refereed by a German soldier named Erwin, who, it seems to me, had the appropriate education and qualifications.” A local anti-Nazi newspaper, commenting on the game, said that “The game was played in a spirit of camaraderie. The exceptionally correct play of both teams should be noted.” Player Sviridovsky even claimed that they were playing more aggressively than the Nazis. These testimonies somewhat contradict Honcharenko’s account that the German players were aggressive and the referee turned a blind eye on some fouls, but it is clear that the details were not as sensational as Borshchagovsky and others have retrospectively depicted them. Additionally, in response to other exaggerated details, such as “machine guns, the cordoning off of the soccer field by soldiers with dogs, the release of pigeons after a goal is scored,” Yasinsky declared that they were all fiction as well. Despite the disagreements over the facts, these sensationalized accounts make the Nazis appear even more extreme, and inspires patriotism among Ukrainians and Soviets alike today.

Some misrepresentations attempt to establish the *Death Match* as an act of heroic resistance against oppressors to glorify the players. Some say that the Start players were wearing red to symbolize revolution. However, Honcharenko clarifies that “It’s just that we didn’t have another one. What Trusevich got at the very beginning, we played in this all the time.” Renowned sportswriter Jonathan Wilson writes in his 2012 book *The Outsider: A History of the Goalkeeper* that the Nazis directly threatened Start players and warned them of the consequences of winning, to which Trusevich responded by giving a rousing speech to urge his teammates not to fear. Wilson perpetuates the narrative that the players bravely defied the Nazis, but his account directly contradicts Honcharenko’s testimony.

Wilson also says that with four minutes remaining, Klimenko rounded the goalkeeper, but with the goal gaping, chose not to score but kicked the ball back into play. The referee, aware of the humiliation and fearing backlash, ended the game prematurely. While none of this can be supported by any primary evidence, Vladen Putistin does recall Klimenko getting into a fight with a German policeman outside of a cinema later that day: “the German grabbed him by the shirt,

wanted to take him to the Gestapo, but put him down... The next day my father came to see him to find out how and what. Then [the incident] passed.” This incident may be what the myth is based on, and shows that resistance on the pitch is a more effective narrative than defiance off the pitch, because the game symbolizes the collective as opposed to individual action. This explains why the Soviet saw soccer as a powerful tool of propaganda, during and after World War II, and continue to push this narrative today.

Finally, Wilson argues that Anton Kandidov, a character in Lev Kassil’s patriotic story *The Goalkeeper of the Republic*, was based on Trusevich. This could not have been the case because the film version of the story was published in 1936, and the novel came out in 1938, which was years before the Nazi invasion even started. However, this only further shows an attempt to link this game with the national character of Ukraine — unflinching and uncompromising in the face of threats and temptations to betray one’s country.

The origin of the *Death Match* mythology can likely be traced to the Soviet government. Russian journalist Aksel Vartanyan says that immediately after the Nazis left, the Soviet government sent people around Kyiv to collect hero stories in order to chastise Ukrainians who didn’t rebel against the Nazis; this was most likely when the myth of the Death Match first started. Kuzmin says that Soviet journalists who wanted to investigate the case were all advised not to stir the pot. Based on the myth, in 1965, the Soviet Union posthumously awarded the Medal “For Courage” to the four deceased players, and to Balakin, Honcharenko, Melnik, Sukharev, and Sviridovsky the Medal for Battle Merit, a medal which Mikhail Putistin declined (Kuzmin 1992). This medal explicitly commends the defiance that myth portrays. A statue of the Start players was unveiled in 1971 (Sporting Statue Project).

Spain

Even today, FC Barcelona still uses the story of the Real 11-1 Barça game to depict themselves as the freedom fighters and Real as the fascists. Many details have been embellished to suggest Franco’s involvement, which both creates sympathy for Catalonia and diminishes Real’s historic achievements. Nevertheless, though the match was politically charged, there is no reliable evidence documenting Franco’s involvement. Such myth-making is an attempt to equate Franco’s repression of Catalonia with Real’s lopsided victory over Barça in 1943.

Many say that in the first leg, Barça fans were whistling Franco’s regime, but the reality is that they were merely whistling Real’s roughhouse tactics and the referee for not adequately penalizing Real. No newspaper account of the game in Barcelona made any mention of Franco (Lowe 2014).

Some depict the Barcelona goalkeeper Lluís Miró as standing like a stone in protest of Real fans’ behavior. In Catalan historian Jaume Sobrequés i Callicó’s *Historia del FC.*

Barcelona. El Barça: un Club, una Ciudad, un País, Sobrequés writes that “the goalkeeper Miró was like a conscious statue turning into the symbol of Barcelona’s dignity.” *La Vanguardia* journalist Marius Carol wrote in *El Barça* that Miró decided to “turn into a statue in the face of such a mob.” However, such accounts contradict surviving pictures from the game, which show him making an effort to block Real shots (Futbolgate).

Numerous accounts say that Franco’s assistant threatened Barcelona. *Mundo Deportivo* journalist Joan Poqui’s 2011 article “Una Vergüenza Histórica” reads “The General Director of Security and the President of the National Sports Delegation, General Moscardó entered the locker room to give them instructions on how they should behave before the ancestors of today’s Ultras- sur.” Angel Iturriaga in his 2015 book *El Poder Político y Social en la Historia del F.C. Barcelona (1899-2015)* says that “Before the match began, the Barça players were preparing to jump onto the pitch when the General Director of State Security, José Finat Escrivá de Romaní, Count of Mayalde, burst into the locker room.” Jaume Llauredó argues that it was not Barcelona who was threatened but the referee, Celestino Rodríguez, who was “‘instructed’ by a high-ranking official.” Various authors take a more gentle bent: that the authorities reminded the players they were only able to play because of the “generosity” of the regime (Lowe 2014). No reliable evidence supports these assertions, however, and they are inconsistent with each other (Futbolgate).

Several writers back up Barcelona’s account that the police threatened them. Marius Carol writes in his 1995 book *Madrid y Barça: una Noche de Viejas Pasiones* that “The return was hell: the Madrid press heated up the atmosphere and the mechanisms of the regime were put in place so that the dictator would not be disappointed with the result. The police entered the Barça dressing room in Chamartín and threatened the players and the referee did the rest on the pitch.” In Federic Porta’s 2016 book *Barça Inédit: 800 Historias de la Historia*, he says that “At half-time, with the score already 8-0, the Barça players unanimously stated that, under those conditions, they did not intend to go out on the field again. Then the superior chief of the Madrid Police went down to the locker room, who, in a threatening tone, rebuked the Barça footballers with these words: ‘You go out on the field right now or from here you go directly to jail.’” No evidence can prove or disprove if the police broke into the Barcelona players’ accounts, but even if they did, it would still clear Franco or his government of any involvement in the game.

Others say that no one threatened Barcelona; the Barça players gave in to the acrimony in the stadium. Alberto Maluquer’s 1949 book *Historia de F.C. Barcelona* made no mention of anyone intruding the changing room. Jaume Sobrequés writes that “The atmosphere of the press, the public and the Francoist authorities reached such a degree of violence that the azulgranas considered it more opportune

to avoid greater evils, not presenting resistance on the pitch. The ‘political’ result of the match was 11-1 in favor of Real Madrid.” Even though Sobrequés does not argue for any direct interference on the part of Franco, he still calls the result “political” (Futbolgate). Indeed, even if Franco was not involved, the mere fact that both sides harbored so much animosity toward each other shows that the game was politically charged and had political significance, reflecting the divide between the two regions and symbolizing Catalonia’s humiliatingly marginal position in the regime at large.

What further invalidates the myths of Franco’s involvement is that Barcelona and Athletic Bilbao, two clubs representing repressed minorities, won the overwhelming majority of major tournaments between 1939-1953, with Real winning barely any. It was only when Real started to dominate in the 1950s and 1960s that Franco occasionally appeared at Real games, using Real as the emblem of his power and Castilian values. Such myths were created to diminish Real’s achievements and establish them as “Franco’s team,” winning only with the help of the dictator. This is false, as sportswriter Nick Fitzgerald says, because it’s not that “Real Madrid were great because Franco supported them” but “that Franco supported them because they were great” (Fitzgerald 2017). Nevertheless, Barcelona’s incentive for undermining Real’s achievements may be a combination of their sporting rivalry and the desire to express their political repression through myth-making around this game.

CONCLUSION

Both the *Death Match* and the Real 11-1 Barça game represent high stakes soccer games between the oppressors and the oppressed, played amidst the political turmoil of fascism. The former symbolizes the conflict between local Ukrainians and the Nazi during WWII, the latter between Catalonia and the Franco regime. In the former, the oppressed stood up against their oppressors by winning the game; in the latter the oppressed succumbed to the pressure. But both matches are used by the oppressed even today to establish themselves as standing on the side of justice in collective memory.

French sociologist Jean-Marie Brohm writes that sport is “a system of obsessive, repetitive ... proto-fascist and militaristic rites” meant to “[militarize]” and “[regiment] the youth” while “[camouflaging] class struggle” by redirecting people’s attention — the “new opiate of the people” (1978). As seen in Nazi-occupied Ukraine, Francoist Spain and sportswashing nations today, sport can be used to realize the nefarious ends of dictators, to mask injustice and promote their propaganda. However, as seen in these two games and the myths surrounding them, it can also be used by the oppressed to express their suffering and serve as a mirror of oppression.

George Orwell once pejoratively called sport “an unflinching

cause of ill-will” “bound up with ... sadistic pleasure in witnessing violence,” leading to “orgies of hatred” (1945). French anthropologist Christian Bromberger makes a similar point but in a positive way: that soccer is “ritualized war complete with anthems, military fanfares and banners wielded by fans who form the support divisions” (1995). It is precisely because of its ability to oppose “us” against “them” that it is a “controlled decontrolling of emotions” in which “socially taboo values are allowed to be expressed (the crude affirmation of one’s dislike of The Other etc.)” If, according to Bromberger, soccer can, like theater, serve a cathartic function, by safely expressing the parochialism and tribalism between peoples, reinforcing people’s identity, then it is necessary to conclude that soccer is not merely a sadistic entertainment generating hostility, but a cultural product that expresses a common identity, akin with art. Such a conclusion would resonate with English sport journalist and playwright Arthur Hopcraft, who, in his book *The Football Man*, writes that “football has conflict and beauty, and when those two qualities are present together in something offered for public appraisal, they represent much of what I understand to be art” (1968). He even goes further to say that “football has more significance in the national character than theatre has... The way we play the game, organize it and reward it reflects the kind of community we are.” Bromberger, arguing that soccer is a religious ritual, writes that soccer “shows us who we are, by hallowing the fundamental values that shape our societies: the identities we share or dream of,” and “periodically vouches for and turns into a reality the continuity of a collective conscience.” This may explain why the Germans demanded a rematch, why Real attempted to humiliate Barcelona by inundating them with goals, and why the Ukrainians and Catalans attempted to establish redress through these two games.

Both the *Death Match* and the Real 11-1 Barça match mirrored the social injustice of their time and functioned as a cultural product that expresses a communal identity. In the context of the political turmoil of fascism, soccer became a powerful form of “cultural resistance”— “the practice of using meanings and symbols, that is, [culture], to contest and combat a dominant power” (Sociology Research Net). In the face of oppression, cultural resistance, despite the absence of overt or organized political resistance, served as “a smoldering ember keeping the flame of emancipation safe in unfavorable times” and “a satisfying bellow of rage against the darkness while we are looking for the matches” (Barnard 2011). Only by interpreting soccer as a form of cultural resistance can one explain the actions of the people involved, be they the oppressors or the oppressed, and why these two games assumed such importance in historical memory.

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