

Italy, World Football Champion 1982: A New *Risorgimento*?

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World Cup competitions offer an excellent opportunity for mobilizing national patriotism in Italy. If the 1982 World Cup victory did not succeed in eradicating the dual loyalty (local and national) that is the foundation stone of Italian identity, it did strengthen the bond with the nation. The impact of Italy's victory on the Spanish football fields was particularly important because it coincided with and contributed to a growing awareness of renewed Italian identity.

Les compétitions de la Coupe du monde offrent une excellente occasion à l'Italie de s'unir à l'enseigne du patriotisme national. Si la victoire de 1982 en Coupe du monde n'a pas réussi à supprimer la double loyauté (locale et nationale) et pierre angulaire de l'identité italienne, elle n'en a pas moins resserré le lien avec la nation. La victoire de l'Italie sur les terrains de football de l'Espagne a eu des effets importants puisqu'elle coïncidait avec l'éveil grandissant au renouveau de l'identité italienne.

ITALY BEAT France to win the World Football Cup for the fourth time on July 9, 2006 in Germany, in its 16th tournament out of the 18 organized since the World Cup was first held in 1930. This high level of success gave no signs of abating, and the victory was welcomed by ecstatic crowds celebrating a “Historic Night” throughout the Peninsula.¹ The *Gazzetta dello sport*'s headline could be attributed to the sports media's usual penchant for hyperbole, but, at the same time, it highlighted the important role that football has played in Italian society, becoming almost an essential element in the construction of national identity.² In its edition the day after the victory in Munich, the very serious *Corriere della Sera* informed its readers that “we are champions because we are Italian” and added that, from now on, “the white-red-and-green passport will be admired in every corner of our planet.”³

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1 *Gazzetta dello sport*, July 13, 2006.

2 Franco Ferrarotti, “Calcio” in G. Calcagno, ed., *L'identità degli Italiani* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 1998), pp. 31-35.

3 *Corriere della Sera*, July 13, 2006.

Of course, Italy is not the only country where football is a key vector for national identity.⁴ However, Italy did not become a nation-state until the mid-nineteenth century; as a result, the sense of belonging remains an “enigma” that “still awaits a convincing and in-depth explanation.”⁵ Speeches and demonstrations of national sentiment that sporting events inspire in Italy can therefore provide elements for further reflection. Indeed, while the Italian nation is often perceived as ambiguous or even incomplete, its participation in the World Cup seems to give substance to the vision of an “imagined community”⁶ in which “men are part of the same nation if – and only if – they see themselves as part of the same nation.”⁷ During these moments of collective experience, even if they are not crowned with victory and are sometimes painful, Italians can set aside the rivalry between “little homelands”⁸ (their home cities or regions), and the massive expression of national unity counterbalances the social divisions that underpin the country’s unity (constituted by the elites) and “imperfect national integration.”⁹

Despite his lack of enthusiasm for a sport imported from England that was already generating violent behaviour in the stadiums,¹⁰ Benito Mussolini recognized the benefits offered by football in terms of national sentiment and international recognition. His Fascist regime certainly profited from the organization of the Italian World Cup in 1934 and from the victories by a *Squadra Azzurra* of players in black shirts that year and again in France in 1938.¹¹ After the Second World War, Italy was forced to take a back seat in international affairs; on the domestic front, political instability and violent terrorism during the “Years of Lead” in the 1970s gave the impression that the Republic was in permanent crisis.¹² Meanwhile, on the football field, there were few opportunities for national pride: the *Nazionale*’s only victories lay in a series of wins against its French neighbours, often seen as due comeuppance for their Gallic superiority.¹³ In the circumstances, victory in the 1982 World Cup was seen as a significant step towards the emergence of a “great Italian nation.”¹⁴

4 Albrecht Sonntag, “Le football image de la nation” in P. Boniface ed., *Géopolitique du football* (Brussels: Complexe, 1998), p. 31.

5 Nicola Tranfaglia, “Italia” in B. Bongiovanni and N. Tranfaglia, eds., *Dizionario storico dell’Italia unita* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 1996), p. 487.

6 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1983).

7 Ernest Gellner, *Nations et nationalismes* (Paris: Payot, 1999), p. 19.

8 Bruno Tessier, *Géopolitique de l’Italie* (Brussels: Complexe, 1996), p. 19.

9 Ilvo Diamanti, Alain Dieckhoff, Marc Lazar, and Didier Musiedlak, *L’Italie, une nation en suspens* (Brussels: Complexe, 1995), p. 12.

10 Paul Dietschy, “Pugni, bastoni e rivoltelle. Violence et football dans l’Italie des années vingt et trente,” *Mélanges de l’Ecole Française de Rome. Italie et Méditerranée*, vol. 108, no. 1 (1996), pp. 203-240.

11 Mauro Grimaldi, *La Nazionale del Duce* (Rome: Società Stampa Sportiva, 2003).

12 Joseph La Palombara, *Democracy, Italian Style* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987).

13 Stéphane Mourlane, “Le jeu des rivalités franco-italiennes des années 1920 aux années 1960” in Y. Gastaut and S. Mourlane, eds., *Le football dans nos sociétés 1914-1998. Une culture populaire* (Paris: Autrement, 2006), pp. 146-158.

14 Emilio Gentile, *La Grande Italia. Il Mito della nazione nel XX secolo* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 2006).

Forty Years of Sporting Disappointments

To understand how important winning the World Cup was for the Italians in 1982, we should first examine the history of Italy's presence in major international competitions since the fall of the Fascist regime. Football continued to represent national allegiance to the point where Ernesto Galli della Loggia felt compelled to admit that, after the war, the meaning of the word "Italy" had almost been reduced, in colloquial language at least, to "football team," with few opportunities for national pride.¹⁵ The *Squadra Azzurra*'s defeat by England (4-0) in May 1948 seemed to confirm the hierarchy of nations at the end of the war. Italy's early elimination from the Olympic Games later that year reinforced a feeling of national decline. It is significant that it took the loss of the entire Torino team, Italian champions for three successive seasons since 1946, in the Superga air crash in May 1949 to generate a demonstration of national communion. Throughout the Peninsula, Italians dressed in mourning and joined in the national funeral ceremonies for a team that, through its brilliant success, had come to symbolize the country's recovery, as if it were still necessary to atone for the crimes of Fascism.¹⁶

In World Cup tournaments, Italy experienced a series of disappointments. In the first postwar series in Brazil in 1950, it was eliminated in the first round after a victory over Paraguay (2-0) and a defeat by Sweden (2-3). Worse was yet to come when Italy was knocked out in the qualifying phase for the 1958 World Cup. Although the success of neo-realist cinema, early signs of an economic miracle, and a more ambitious and autonomous foreign policy were enhancing Italy's image in the rest of the world, the *Squadra Azzurra*'s absence from the final phase, for the first time in history, indicated that the country "had ceased to belong to the football elite."¹⁷ Italy was once again eliminated during the initial rounds of the 1962 World Cup in Chile, while the English World Cup in 1966 provided another traumatic experience with a defeat by a minor football nation, North Korea (0-1). *Studio*'s front page on the day after this match summed up the country's reaction: "*Vergogna!*"¹⁸ *Il Giorno*'s Giani Brera wrote, "[T]his is the greatest shame in our history, not only in the history of football, but also in the history of transalpine sport."¹⁹ Emotions were running so high that the national coach was thinking of sending the team back to Italy in small groups to avoid public condemnation. Even though he rejected this idea, he was right to be worried: the players were pelted with insults and tomatoes on their arrival at the Genoa Airport.²⁰ For Italians, whose national identity (unlike that

15 Ernesto Galli della Loggia, "La morte della patria. La crisi dell'idea di nazione dopo la Seconda Guerra mondiale" in G. Spadolini, ed., *Nazione e nazionalità in Italia* (Bari-Rome: Laterza, 1994), p. 153.

16 Paul Dietschy, "The Superga Disaster and the Death of the 'Great Torino'," *Soccer and Society*, vol. 5, no. 2 (2004), pp. 298-310.

17 Antonio Papa and Guido Panico, *Storia sociale del Calcio in Italia* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2002), p. 287.

18 Literally "Shame," *Stadio*, July 20, 1966.

19 *Giorno*, July 20, 1966.

20 Antonio Ghirelli, *Storia del calcio in Italia* (Turin: Einaudi, 1990), p. 287.

of other countries) had not been forged on the battlefield, national sportsmen were expected to represent the country's prestige and pride. Defeat by North Korea revived painful memories of military losses at Adoua in 1896 against an Ethiopian army armed only with spears and at Caporetto in 1917, where Austro-Hungarian troops had broken through the Italian defences.²¹ The crisis went far beyond the world of football and led to a real debate on Italian identity. According to Antonio Ghirelli, the key question lay in Italy's capacity, thanks to its strong economic growth and social changes, to sit at the same table as other developed European nations and its capacity to throw off its famous defensive padlock (*catenaccio*), the Italians' supposed propensity for treachery.²²

A series of reforms launched by Italian football managers at last led to the *Squadra's* victory in the European Nations Cup in 1968. Victory over Yugoslavia in Rome's Olympic Stadium led to a huge wave of enthusiastic demonstrations throughout the Peninsula. To celebrate their first international title since 1938, after years of severe disappointments and a few humiliations, Italians poured into the streets forming immense processions filled with national flags. Given that, at the time, marches were more often marked by red flags representing international revolution due to the rise of rebellious youth movements, these demonstrations stood out as an expression of patriotism.²³

As a result of this victory, Italy had high hopes for the World Cup to be held in Mexico in 1970. The pressure on managers and players was intense. Italy reached the semi-finals, in which it beat Germany in an extraordinary match that was marked by many changes of fortune and became known in the Peninsula as the "match of the century."²⁴ Italians took this victory as an opportunity to display their national pride and rise above internal antagonisms, particularly in the political arena. Rome's daily newspaper, *Il Tempo*, gave a significant interpretation for this reaction: "Honour to the men in Mexico who allowed us to live a long night of exaltation and national unity."²⁵ However, the celebrations were short-lived, as the *Nazionale* was resoundingly defeated by Brazil in the final (1-4). In addition, during the next World Cup in West Germany in 1974, the *Squadra* was unable to live up to its performance in Mexico: it was eliminated in the first round. This counter-performance contributed to the portrait drawn only a few months earlier by the British daily newspaper, *The Times*, of "Italy in agony," plagued by governmental crises, financial scandals, and numerous terrorist assassinations.²⁶ In the terrible Years of Lead, a fourth place in the Argentinean World Cup in 1978 did little to heal the social divisions that undermined Italian society and, for many, threatened the very foundations of national unity.

21 Paul Dietschy, Yvan Gastaut, and Stéphane Mourlane, *Histoire politique des Coupes du monde de football* (Paris: Vuibert, 2004), p. 255.

22 Ghirelli, *Storia del calcio*, pp. 287-292.

23 Papa and Panico, *Storia sociale del Calcio*, p. 318.

24 Nando Della Chiesa, *La partita del secolo. Storia di Italia-Germania 4-3* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2001).

25 Quoted in Fabien Archambault, "Italic-Allemagne," <http://www.wearefootball.org>.

26 Quoted in Frédéric Attal, *Histoire de l'Italie de 1943 à nos jours* (Paris: A. Colin, 2004), p. 265.

President Pertini in the Stands: A Symbolic Presence

In the early 1980s, there were many indications that the 1982 World Cup in Spain would bring a sunnier result. It is not surprising that, in the collective memory, the *Squadra's* victory in the final against West Germany (3-1) came to be closely linked with the presence of Italian President Sandro Pertini, standing in the grandstand at Madrid's Santiago Bernabeu Stadium and enjoying the match as enthusiastically as any other *tifoso*. Elected in July 1978 at the age of 82, President Pertini was the incarnation of democratic values for the Italian people because of his anti-fascist activities as a youth.²⁷

President Pertini was a member of the Italian Socialist Party when the Fascists came to power and one of their most fervent opponents. He was tried for his political opposition before the Special Tribunal for State Security and sentenced to banishment, imprisonment, and then a long exile in France (after a short stay in Paris, he took up residence in Nice). When Benito Mussolini's regime fell, he became one of the leaders of the Italian Resistance and a member of the National Liberation Committee. He was then elected to the Constituent Assembly.

His image as hero, anti-fascist, and founding father of the Republic led to unanimous recognition as the most popular president in Republican history. His popularity was linked to what Renzo de Felice called, in a critical article, the "Resistance myth" as the foundation stone for national unity after the Second World War. The historian Ernesto Galli della Loggia stated, "It was only through the fight against fascism, when the Resistance was at its zenith, that the new democratic and republican forces could legitimize their role and the political and institutional rupture that they were planning to make."²⁸ In the circumstances, Pertini's presence could only have a positive effect on a national football team to which he gave his unstinting support, at a time when the country was torn by festering divisions.

Political violence and instability marked Italy's Years of Lead, from the late 1960s through the 1970s.²⁹ In 1969, a bomb blast in Milan's Piazza Fontana was the first in a series of terrorist activities, responsibility for which was initially attributed solely to extreme leftist movements, in particular the Red Brigades. However, this wave of terrorism was in fact launched by extreme right-wing groups seeking to introduce a "strategy of tension" in order to bring down the Republic.³⁰ Setting aside the various implications, especially those at the international

27 Paul Ginsborg, *Storia d'Italia dal dopoguerra a oggi, Società e politica 1943-1988* (Turin: Einaudi, 1989), p. 567.

28 Ernesto Galli della Loggia, "Formes et fonctions de l'antifascisme dans la vie politique italienne : légitimité ou légitimation ?", *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d'histoire*, vol. 4, no. 100 (2008), p. 69.

29 See Sidney Tarrow, *Democracy and Disorder. Protest and Politics in Italy, 1965-1975* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989); Donatella Della Porta, *Social Movements, Political Violence and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); L. Manconi and R. Cantazaro, eds., *Storie di lotta armata* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1995); Marc Lazar and Marie-Anne Mattard-Bonucci, eds., *L'Italie des années de Plomb. Le terrorisme entre histoire et mémoire* (Paris: Autrement, 2010).

30 Anna Cento Bull, *Italian Neofascism: The Strategy of Tension and the Politics of Reconciliation* (New York: Berghan Books, 2007).

level (including involvement by the CIA), there can be no doubt that these events sparked new violent actions by the far left, even if the reasons behind this escalation were undoubtedly more complex. In fact, this political violence revealed deep cracks in Italian society. The climax of the Years of Lead was the kidnapping and assassination of the leader of the governing Christian Democratic Party, Aldo Moro. This drama not only led to a tremendous outpouring of emotion, but also forced Italians to look for new forms of consensus and national compromise. In this political context, Pertini was elected president, and a five-party coalition of all the lay parties and the Christian Democratic Party was invited to form a government.

Initially, no one thought that football could contribute to this move towards national reconciliation. The media, for example, were highly critical of Enzo Bearzot, who had been appointed to coach the national team. However, President Pertini's enthusiastic support for the *Nazionale* during the final phase led to the team emerging as a strong symbol for national cohesion in a country torn apart by over a decade of painful years. On the night of the World Cup final, Sandro Pertini told the press that it was the happiest day of his presidency,³¹ giving greater resonance to an event that transcended the world of sport. In the days following the World Cup, the press, regardless of political affiliation, unanimously published photos of the president – in the stadium grandstand, in his aeroplane with the World Cup trophy and the players who accompanied him back to Rome, on the tarmac at the Ciampino Airport, and during the official reception that he hosted at the Quirinal, the presidential palace.

Italian Identity in the Balance

Alberto Toscano, Paris correspondent for numerous Italian media, noted that “in the first flush of victory another Italian passion, this time for songs, was a resounding international success.” He reported, “Toto Cotugno’s *Lasciatemi cantare* offered supporters an opportunity to be proud of their ‘true Italian-ness’.”³² Other indicators show how the identity issue was linked to this event. The communist daily newspaper *Unità* reminded its readers that Italy’s third World Cup title was the first since the introduction of democracy.³³ Others considered this success to be more significant than previous victories because the coach had fielded a team of “native Italians,” with no *oriundi* (South American players who had migrated to Italy).³⁴

The President of the Council, Liberal Republican and historian Giovanni Spadolini, claimed that this victory was a way “of helping to bring Italians closer together.”³⁵ Many journalists jumped on this idea, referring to a “second

31 *Corriere della Sera*, July 12, 1982.

32 Alberto Toscano, *France-Italie. Coups de tête, coups de cœur* (Paris: Tallandier, 2006), p. 119.

33 *L'Unità*, July 12, 1982.

34 Franco Ossola and Renato Tavella, *Cento anni di calcio italiano* (Rome: Newton & Compton, 1997), p. 362.

35 *The Times*, July 12, 1982.

Risorgimento” which would contribute to the development of national unity,³⁶ as shown by the tremendous public demonstrations in the streets of Italy following victories over two major football nations, Argentina (2-1) and Brazil (3-2).

The highpoint was obviously the final watched by 40 million viewers. The Rome edition of *Corriere della Sera* claimed that a million people had poured into the *piazze* of the Eternal City.³⁷ Similar demonstrations of collective joy erupted in every city in the Peninsula, accompanied by the waving of flags and banners proclaiming, “Italy is great.” Observers agreed that no event since the end of the war had given rise to so much patriotic fever. The exhilaration of extraordinary national sentiment was accompanied by pride in the articles published by the international press and reproduced in the Italian media. *L'Équipe*'s front page, with its banner headline “*bravissima la Squadra!*,”³⁸ offered its foreign readership a positive image of Italianness. The striker Paolo Rossi, one of the main contributors to this victory, wrote a few years later in his autobiography that “the world title awakened feelings of national pride, dignity, cohesion and confidence.”³⁹

Despite his involvement in the Totonero scandal which had led to a two-year suspension,⁴⁰ Paolo Rossi made a decisive contribution to this victory by scoring all three goals in Italy's qualifying match against Brazil, two goals in the semi-final against Poland, and one goal in the final. This led to Rossi being named the best goal-scorer in the World Cup, further strengthening football as a symbol of the new Italy. The Totonero affair had revealed corruption in the world of football that was seen, in many ways, as similar to the Mafia's involvement in politics and business: a truly structural evil that weighed heavily on the whole of Italian society, as demonstrated in numerous Italian films (such as Francesco Rosi's *Hands over the City*, which portrayed scandals in real estate development). In the Totonero affair, attention focused on Rossi, at the time the highest paid player in Italy's football history and immensely popular. Based on testimony from an obscure greengrocer, Massimo Cruciani, who felt he had been cheated, the star attacker and some 30 other players were accused of illegal betting. Rossi was accused of sharing 8 million lira earned from arranging a draw with three teammates in the match between Avellino and Perugia on December 30, 1979. In fact, Rossi had scored two goals in this match, which ended in a draw, and he always claimed that he was innocent of the charges. Rossi was one of the players who received the heaviest sentence: three years' suspension, later reduced to two years. He was also found guilty in a civil court for “illicit activities linked to secret betting on football matches,” and his passport was confiscated. He complained that he was being “treated like a delinquent.” Following his suspension,

36 Oliviero Beha and Franco Ferrarotti, *All'ultimo stadio : una Repubblica fondata sul calcio* (Milan: Rusconi, 1983), p. 104.

37 *Corriere della Sera*, July 12, 1982.

38 *L'Équipe*, July 12, 1982.

39 Paolo Rossi, *Ho fatto piangere Il Brasile. Un'autobiografia* (Arezzo: Limina, 2002), p. 154.

40 Stéphane Mourlane, “Paolo Rossi ou le football italien de l'ombre à la lumière,” <http://www.wcarefootball.org>.

Paolo Rossi was once again selected for the national team and the Spanish World Cup. The coach expressed his confidence in the footballer, who had scored 73 goals in 122 matches between 1975 and 1980, even though his performances in preparation matches were not particularly impressive. During this tournament, Rossi demonstrated his tactical skills, sense of space, and willingness to score. With six goals to his name, he was the best scorer in the whole competition. "Pablito," as his supporters affectionately nicknamed him during the World Cup, was welcomed home as a national hero. The same year, 1982, he was awarded *France Football's* Golden Ball, confirming international recognition for his performances. This marked the end of an affair that had contributed to the stereotyped and negative image of Italians as cheaters.

Italy's victory on the Spanish football fields had a particularly important impact because it occurred at a time when there was a growing awareness of renewed Italian identity, to which it contributed. It was no coincidence, as emphasized by Marc Lazar, that 1982 was also the year in which Italy commemorated the centenary of Giuseppe Garibaldi's death: the most popular hero of Italian unity, Garibaldi participated in the *Risorgimento* war that sought to force Austria out of the Italian regions of Lombardy and Venetia, in the Roman Republic, and in the unification of Italy with the Expedition of the Thousand in 1860, which was followed by the proclamation of the Kingdom of Italy in March 1861. This centennial was celebrated with great pomp by the Italian government, and the entire Peninsula was thrown into a fever of commemorative events, exhibitions, conferences, galas, and spectacles in a large number of communes.⁴¹

Another important event in 1982, the sending of a contingent of Italian soldiers to Lebanon, was seen by public opinion as the expression of a major role in international affairs and a source of national pride. A visit by the *Nazionale* to the soldiers stationed in Beirut, on a plane provided by the Defence Minister, on the day after a European Cup qualifying match against Cyprus, was also seen a significant symbolic event.⁴²

Conclusion

In fact, most people agree that World Cup competitions offer an excellent opportunity for mobilizing national patriotism in Italy. Photographs of the *Nazionale's* finest hours in these tournaments, shirts worn during the matches, and the ball used during the 1982 World Cup and signed by all the Italian players were featured in an exhibition on the theme "symbols of belonging,"⁴³ organized by the Minister of Culture in Rome in 2005 as part of a series on the "Roots of the Nation," which ended in 2011 with the festivities for the 150th anniversary of the birth of the Italian state. Their inclusion in the exhibit is clear testimony of the role played by the World Cup in the construction of national identity.

41 Marc Lazar, *L'Italie à la dérive* (Paris: Perrin, 2006), p. 93.

42 Mario Pennacchia, *Il Calcio in Italia* (Turin: Utet, 1999), p. 499.

43 See the exhibition catalogue, Giuseppe Galasso, ed., *Simboli d'appartenenza* (Rome: Gangemi editore, 2005).

Of course, these demonstrations of national unity as part of the celebrations of the 1982 World Cup victory could appear ephemeral compared to numerous celebrations lasting several days that occurred when the *Scudetti* was won by Naples (in 1987 and 1990) and by AS Rome (in 1983 and again in 2001). Nevertheless, if the 1982 World Cup victory did not succeed in eradicating the dual loyalty (local and national) that is the foundation stone of Italian identity, it did strengthen the bond with the nation.⁴⁴ Employed by the Fascist regime as a nationalist emblem, this competition became, after the war, the unique vector for patriotic fervour. As such, it was proof, according to Stefano Pivato, of the “strong connection between enthusiasm for sport and national sentiment” in Italy.⁴⁵ As Paul Dietschy noted opportunely, “[S]porting victories have succeeded in partially healing the wounds inflicted on Italy’s national pride by its military and diplomatic failures.”⁴⁶ In the circumstances, given the widely perceived feelings of guilt and inferiority, the World Cup offered Italians in 1982 an opportunity for national catharsis.

44 Stefano Pivato, “Football et identité régionale. Le cas italien” in S. Gehrman, ed., *Football and Regional Identity in Europe* (Muenster: Lit Verlag, 1997), pp. 233-241.

45 Stefano Pivato, “Identità sportiva e identità nazionale,” *Mélanges de l’Ecole française de Rome. Italie et Méditerranée*, vol. 109-1 (1997), pp. 277-284.

46 Paul Dietschy, “L’Italie vue des tribunes. Sport et histoire dans l’Italie contemporaine,” *19/20-Bulletin du Centre d’Histoire contemporaine de l’Université de Franche-Comté*, no. 5 (2001), p. 37.