Germany on song

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Germany and its football team have evolved in tandem over the past six-and-a-half decades. Klaus Neumann traces the story from the 1954 “Miracle of Bern” to this month’s World Cup win.

Happy mascot: Chancellor Angela Merkel with the German football team during the World Cup. Guido Bergmann/ Bundesregierung

On 20 April 2005, the German tabloid Bild splashed three words across its front page: “Wir sind Papst!” The headline – which literally means “We are Pope!” – celebrated the election of a Bavarian cardinal as successor of Pope John Paul II. Bild readers were expected to pride themselves on the fact that “our Joseph Ratzinger” had been chosen to head the world’s one billion or more Catholics. But the headline also subtly reminded them of what “we” were not: Weltmeister (world champions). By then it had been fifteen long years since a German team had lifted the only trophy that truly matters to Bild readers and Bild haters alike, the football world cup.

Nine years later, at last, the collective sense of underachievement was put to rest. On Sunday 13 July 2014, the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, the most earnest and proper of all German broadsheets, announced in its online edition, “Argentinien ist Papst – aber Deutschland ist Weltmeister.” The first person plural and the exclamation mark would have been beneath the Frankfurter Allgemeine, but in this instance it was happy to pay homage to Bild’s 2005 headline.

The global media had been unanimous in its response to Brazil’s 1–7 loss in the semi-final. The result was said to be a terrible blow to a nation that was football-mad like no other, and whose past exploits on the field symbolised all that was admirable about the game. There was broad agreement that the loss against Germany was worse than the 0–1 defeat at the hands of neighbouring Uruguay in the 1950 World Cup final. The result of the game on 8 July left an entire nation in tears, headlines around the world suggested.

Brazil’s players feared that they would be scarred for life, that nothing could ever quite take away the shame they felt after their lacklustre performance at the Estádio Mineirão. Analysts predicted that the national team’s defeat would have dire consequences for the country’s economy and would lead to an immediate slump on the São Paulo stock exchange. When the share market rallied instead, observers assumed that it was because stockbrokers had anticipated another fallout, the end of left-leaning Dilma Rousseff’s presidency. And it’s true that pundits around the world, irrespective of the extent of their knowledge of Brazilian politics, had been quick to point out that the semi-final loss might well cost Rousseff the elections scheduled for October.

Long before the 2014 World Cup began, commentators had conjured the spectre of the Maracanazo, the tragedy of 1950, when Brazil lost in the final. Anything but a win for the host nation would have grave consequences, sports writers and political analysts forecast. And ideally that win would be against arch-rival Argentina.

By contrast, little attention was paid outside Germany to the possibility that the Nationalmannschaft would exit at the group stage, or not progress at least to the semi-finals. That wasn’t because the national team was expected to win – it was considered a strong contender, but by no means the favourite – but rather because the experts
assumed that Germany would cope well with another failed tilt at football’s highest reward, as it had in 1994, 1998, 2002, 2006 and 2010.

Yet I suspect that Germany has been just as fixated on football, and particularly on the performance of its national team, as South American nations. It is difficult to imagine what would have happened if Germany had lost its opening match to Portugal by the same margin, 0–4, by which Cristiano Ronaldo’s team succumbed to the Germans. Or, worse still, if Brazil had thumped Germany 7–1. Joachim "Jogi" Löw, the German coach who led the national team to the final of Euro 2008, and to the semi-finals of the 2010 World Cup and the 2012 European championship, would have almost certainly lost his job if Germany had had to play once more for third place.

If his team had lost the game against Brazil by a big margin, Löw would not have been the only one to be held responsible and sent packing. The consequences would also have been dire for Angela Merkel who, after some initial reluctance, has happily assumed the role of the current team’s mascot. Her fortunes have been at least as entwined with those of the German national side as Rousseff’s have been with the success, or lack thereof, of the Seleção Brasileira. And unlike the Brazilian share market, the DAX index of leading shares at the Frankfurt stock exchange would not have easily recovered following a defeat in the semi-final. Predictably, the DAX rose after Germany’s win in the final.

Ever since the birth of the German Federal Republic in 1949, the nation and its football team have evolved (and regressed) in tandem. The team has reflected not just the national mood, but even the state of the economy. Conversely, success on the football field has inspired Germans with confidence, and poor performances by the Nationalmannschaft have sometimes been the harbingers of more profound social and economic woes.

West Germany played no part in the first World Cup after the war, the 1950 tournament in Brazil. Its representatives had been expelled from the world football federation, FIFA, in 1945, and its team had not been eligible to play in the qualifiers.

By 1954, the Federal Republic’s football federation had rejoined FIFA and qualified for the finals of the world cup in Switzerland. In the group stage, it was drawn to play against the tournament’s favourite, Hungary. It didn’t just lose to Hungary, but suffered an 8–3 shellacking, although it needs to be said that the German coach had decided to rest some of his key players, including goalkeeper Toni Turek. In the quarter finals, the German team faced Yugoslavia, which expected to account for the Germans easily and thereby progress to the next round. But Germany took the lead 1–0 after only ten minutes, thanks to an own goal by Ivica Horvat (who later in life became a successful Bundesliga coach). For the remaining eighty minutes, the German team defended doggedly and, with the final score 2–0 in its favour, successfully.

In the semi-final, Germany played highly fancied Austria. Again the Germans won against the odds. The final score of 6–1 suggested that the win was the work of its strikers and midfielders; however, Germany retained the upper hand not least thanks to the heroics of Turek, who had already starred in the win against Yugoslavia. The defeat of Austria set up a final between the German team and that of Hungary, which had last lost a game in 1950.

The 1954 World Cup final in Bern began in even a worse fashion than had been expected by German supporters. After only eight minutes, Germany was down by two goals. Turek was partly to blame, but in the opening phase he was only one member of a hapless team that looked destined for another drubbing by the world-class Hungarians. Yet in the end the Germans won 3–2, with two goals scored by the man they called “The Boss,” Helmut Rahn. The second of them fell six minutes before full time.

The game, which became known as the "miracle of Bern,” was called for German radio by Herbert Zimmermann. The words he used to call for and celebrate the winning goal became the most famous piece of radio sound in German history. "Schäfer nach innen geflankt. Kopfball. Abgewehrt. Aus dem Hintergrund müßte Rahn schießen. Rahn schießt! Toooor! Toooor! Toooor! Toooor!" (Schäfer puts in the cross. Header. Cleared. Rahn should shoot from deep. Rahn shoots! Goal! Goal! Goal! Goal!)

Zimmermann’s call also included an infamous moment. In the second half, while the scores were level, Turek
denied the Hungarians a seemingly certain goal. Zimmermann was ecstatic: “Turek, du bist ein Teufelskerl! Turek, du bist ein Fussballgott” (Turek, you are a hell of a guy! Turek you are a football god!) He instantly realised he had crossed a line, and apologised to his listeners for being overly enthusiastic. But he nearly lost his job over the “Fussballgott” reference and had to issue a public apology. The station broadcasting the game asked Zimmermann to re-record part of his call; the offending words, “du bist ein Fussballgott,” were replaced by “du bist Gold wert” (you are worth gold). For many years it was assumed that the edited version in the broadcaster’s archive was authentic; it was not until much later that another copy of the original recording resurfaced.

There were other instances of public embarrassment. After the game, a brass band played the German national anthem. Many of the Germans among the crowd sang along, but using the words of the banned first verse (Deutschland, Deutschland, über alles) rather than the officially sanctioned third verse (Einigkeit und Recht und Freiheit), which prompted Swiss radio to abruptly cut its live broadcast.

All three verses of Hoffmann von Fallersleben’s “Song of the Germans” had been Germany’s national anthem during the Weimar Republic. Under the Nazis, only the first verse was sung; the Nazi Party’s “Horst Wessels Lied” became the unofficial national anthem. While the latter was banned after 1945, the “Song of the Germans” was simply not used. Most of West Germany’s political elite thought it was too compromised. In 1950, West Germany’s president, the Free Democrat Theodor Heuss, commissioned a new national anthem, but failed to have it adopted. In the meantime, a host of other songs were used at official functions as substitutes. During a football game between Germany and Belgium, for instance, the Belgians played “Wir sind die Eingeborenen von Trizonesia,” a song composed for the 1948 carnival in Cologne. It was not until 1952 that Heuss reluctantly agreed to the proposal to reinstall the Weimar Republic’s anthem, but to use only its third verse.

Two weeks after the final in Bern, Heuss welcomed the German team at the Olympic stadium in Berlin. He read out the words of the anthem’s remaining verse to the 80,000 strong crowd, then invited them to sing it. He also chided Peco Bauwens, the president of the (West) German Football Federation, for jingoistic comments he had made when Germany won the cup. West Germany’s political elites were anxious that the miracle of Bern not be misunderstood at home – and they were even more concerned that the victory would not be seen as an attempt to reassert German superiority.

The miracle of Bern didn’t end with the final whistle on 4 July 1954. It marked the beginning of West Germany’s economic miracle and the de facto emergence of the Federal Republic as a political entity. For the first time since the end of the war, West Germans felt they were entitled to identify proudly as Germans. The statements, “Wir sind Weltmeister”, which the 2005 Bild headline referenced, and “Wir sind wieder wer” (We are someone once more) encapsulated that pride.

The final on 4 July 1954 and the return home of the victorious team became the most significant mass events in Germany’s postwar history, larger in size and with a more enduring legacy than those in November 1989 after the fall of the Berlin Wall. From the town of Spiez in the Bernese Oberland, where the Germans had been accommodated during the tournament, a special diesel train, the Weltmeisterzug, took the team back to Germany. Perhaps a million people cheered the players in the small southern German towns the train passed on its way to Munich. Individual players were feted in their home towns. In Essen, 100,000 people greeted Rahn at the train station and then in front of the town hall. Düsseldorf organised a parade for Turek, physio Erich Deuser and team doctor Franz Loogen; almost 200,000 locals welcomed them home.

The enthusiasm was spontaneous rather than (as many patriotic demonstrations had been between 1933 and 1945) orchestrated. It was as if the win allowed Germans to release long-repressed emotions. As Paul Legg observed in a recent article, the Berlin correspondent of the Manchester Guardian was among the few contemporary outside observers who was able to make empathetic sense of what was happening in Germany in 1954. His assessment has stood the test of time: “One must remember both the giant load of bewilderment beneath which this nation has been staggering since one type of German pride came to its catastrophic fall nine years ago and also the zeal for an emotional release to lift minds out of the ever-present spectacle of surrounding ruin.”
The German media mostly avoided gloating over Hungary’s loss; newspaper editors tried to emphasise to their readers that the win was, after all, only something that had happened on a football field. That didn’t stop their colleagues in France and Britain warning of a new German arrogance and grab for power. In the interest of European rapprochement, it was probably fortunate that the West German team lost most of its matches in the two years following the miracle of Bern.

Although 1954 marked a new beginning, it was one burdened by the recent past. Sepp Herberger, the coach of the West German team, had been in charge of a regional West German team in 1932 and 1933, and then assistant to Germany’s coach Otto Nerz. He joined the Nazi party in May 1933. In 1938, he was appointed Reichstrainer (national coach). When West Germany fielded a national team again in 1950, its first outing was a friendly match against Switzerland in November, which Germany won in front of 115,000 people. The former Reichstrainer was once more in charge – only his title, now Bundestrainer, had changed.

In hindsight, Herberger’s decision to entrust Turek to keep goal was inspired. By 1954, Turek was the oldest player in the German team; he had fought in the second world war, had been wounded, and still had a splinter from a shell lodged in his skull. He had also been a prisoner of war. Thus he represented a generation of German men who were desperate for recognition and rehabilitation.

Turek was also an excellent goalkeeper. But many sports writers at the time thought that he was not the best German goalie of his generation. Arguably, that was Bernd Trautmann. He too had fought in the war. The British took him prisoner in 1945, and he ended up in England. After his release from a POW camp, he declined to be repatriated, working first as a farm labourer and then with a bomb disposal unit. Besides, he played for a local football club, and married the daughter of its secretary. In 1949, Manchester City recruited Trautmann, who by then was known as Bert and attracted attention for his skills as a goalkeeper. He became one of the best of his era, but was not called on in 1954 because Herberger and the German football federation insisted that no German playing outside Germany would be nominated for the national team.

Herberger’s team was known for virtues that had been celebrated as supposedly distinctly German by the Nazis: endurance, tenacity, strategic nous and physical strength. They did not play elegant football (as the Hungarians did). They were defensively strong, and able to exploit their opponents’ weaknesses when launching counter attacks. They were popular because they won and because they were ordinary men rather than aloof stars. They did not charm fans with their technical finesse. Herbert Rahn was no German Pelé or Messi. And while Rahn may have been the boss on the field, the players in all other respects obeyed Herberger, who was a stern, if not authoritarian, father figure.

After the miracle of Bern, other tournaments and individual games shaped postwar German history. And German history continued to shape German football. This isn’t the place to provide a detailed account of the past sixty years of German (footballing) history, but a few snippets will suffice to illustrate my proposition that what happens on the football field is relevant to broader social and political developments, and vice versa.

Germany’s next major win had to wait until the European championship in 1972, long after Herberger’s day. Playing with flair, the 1972 Nationalmannschaft was perhaps the best ever to represent West Germany in a tournament. Günter Netzer, Franz Beckenbauer, Gerd Müller and twenty-year old Paul Breitner defied the stereotype of the hard-working, tenacious and methodical, but somewhat boring, technically deficient and unimaginative, German player. Headstrong young men with long hair, one of them a Maoist, they symbolised the era of Willy Brandt, the socially progressive chancellor who made peace with Poland and, having emigrated between 1933 and 1945, could claim to represent a Germany that made a genuine effort to break with its Nazi past.

Then there was the 1974 World Cup in Germany, which West Germany won despite Holland fielding the better team and playing more attractive football. Unlike the Dutch, the West Germans actually lost a game in the group phase – against none other than the German Democratic Republic, or East Germany. Jürgen Sparwasser kicked the winning goal in what was the only match ever played between the two national teams. How could West Germans after that most painful loss in the history of the Nationalmannschaft warmly welcome their long-lost relatives from the other side of the iron curtain twenty-five years later? But that’s another story. The immediate
consequences, however, favoured West Germany: during the so-called Night of Malente (named after the Institute of Sport where the team traditionally had its training camp), captain Franz Beckenbauer took command of a disparate group of opinionated individuals and thereby ensured that the team won the cup. The East Germans, having topped the group, faced the Dutch in the next round and were eliminated.

Eight years later, at the World Cup in Spain, Germany made the final but lost to Italy. But few Germans cared, because the road to the final had been too embarrassing. First there was the Schande von Gijón (“disgrace of Gijón”), when the German and Austrian teams conspired to effect a 1–0 win for West Germany, which allowed both teams to progress to the next round at the expense of Algeria, which had earlier beaten Germany. Then came the semi-final against France. Arguably, this was one of the most thrilling World Cup games ever, but it was tainted by German goalkeeper Toni Schumacher’s collision with a French player, Patrick Battiston. The latter was knocked out cold and lost two teeth. Schumacher may not have committed a foul (none was given at the time), but he was clearly guilty of showing a lack of compassion for Battiston. Many Germans swore off the national team and claimed that from now on loyalty had to be earned.

Loyalty was also in short supply a few months later when the Free Democrats left the coalition with Helmut Schmidt’s SPD, bringing the conservative Helmut Kohl to power. He won the subsequent elections in 1983, but failed to win most Germans’ respect, thus sharing the fate of the national team that made the final in 1982 but could not make Germans forget their inadequacies.

But the Nationalmannschaft’s worst performance was yet to come. At the European championship in 2000, Germany came last in the group phase. The Nationalmannschaft lacked cohesion and was as uninspiring as Gerhard Schröder’s coalition government of Social Democrats and Greens. Reunification had turned out to be more costly than anticipated, and many Germans wished, eleven years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, that the barrier had never gone.

The disastrous end to Euro 2000 was a wake-up call. Huge investments were made, particularly in youth development, to help German football catch up. The better-than-expected result at the 2006 World Cup in Germany (when the team lost its semi-final against Italy, which went on to win the tournament), and an impressive performance at the World Cup in South Africa (when Germany once again lost its semi-final against the eventual winner, Spain), were the direct result of these investments. So was the win this month.

The 2014 Nationalmannschaft represents a country that has come a long way since the doldrums of Euro 2000: one that is open to the world, innovative and, with the exception of parts of former East Germany, multicultural.

In 1954, Bernd Trautmann was not German enough because he played for Manchester City. Sepp Herberger, if he were still alive, would no doubt be scandalised about the composition of the current German team. It includes a Berlin-born defender, Jérôme Boateng, whose brother, also born in Berlin, plays for Ghana. Another defender, Shkodran Mustafi, also born in Germany, long wanted to play for Albania, the country his family hails from, and as late as January 2014 was said to be on call for Albania’s next friendly (Albania did not qualify for the World Cup). Like Mustafi, Lukas Podolski plays his club football outside Germany, which would have made him ineligible for selection in 1954. He was baptised Łukasz, and, like veteran striker Miroslav Klose, comes originally from Poland. Real Madrid midfielder Sami Khedira grew up in Germany but has a Tunesian as well as a German passport.

No German players represent the essence of the current German team as much as midfielders-cum-strikers Mesut Özil and Thomas Müller do. The former is a third generation Turkish German who grew up in Gelsenkirchen, home of the legendary Schalke 04 football club. He is a truly international footballer, having played for several German clubs, for Real Madrid and now for Arsenal. Müller, by contrast, is as rooted in his native soil as can be: he was born and grew up in Bavaria and has played for Bayern Munich since the age of ten.

Their style of football bears no resemblance to that of the German players who engineered the miracle of Bern. Twenty-five year old Özil is a genius on and off the ball, and like many a genius he is a capricious contributor. In Brazil, he performed well below expectations throughout the tournament, but was never in danger of losing his place in the starting line-up because of his ability to turn around a match single-handedly when he is on song.
Müller, a year younger than Özil, is a more reliable performer. Like Özil, though, he is unpredictable. For Özil, the ball often seems to be an organic part of his body; he stuns opponents with his elegant moves. Müller, on the other hand, befuddles them with his unorthodox and seemingly nonsensical play and body language.

“Shambling, angular, shaggy-haired forward Müller,” the Guardian’s Barney Ronay enthused about the recent Portugal–Germany game, at times resembled “a pitch-invading dentist out for a job who has somehow strayed in among all those sleekly groomed professional athletes.”

They call him “Radio Müller” because he likes to talk. He doesn’t babble, mind you. In an interview in 2011, Müller created a neologism to describe what he does on the football field. He said that he is a Raumdeuter, an interpreter (Deuter) of space (Raum). The term is reminiscent of, and rhymes with, a well-established compound noun, Traumdeuter, an analyst of dreams. But not only was Müller able – at the age of twenty-one – to articulate intelligently what is innovative about his preferred style, he has also been able to dazzle observers by being exactly where his opponents aren’t looking for him. His play is not nearly as stylish as Özil’s, but it is at least as effective. While Özil was the leading goal scorer during the world cup qualifiers, Müller netted a total of ten goals in only two world cups.

 Özil and Müller were the most eye-catching German players in South Africa in 2010. The football exhibited by the Nationalmannschaft on that occasion was a sight to behold, but it lacked the rigour and pragmatism that is necessary to win the World Cup. Exceptions aside (the first half of the game against Portugal and the first half of the thrashing of Brazil), in 2014 the German team did not play as beautifully as it had done four years earlier. That is not to say, however, that there is much danger of Germany reverting any time soon to a style of play that won them the Cup sixty years earlier.

The win in 1954 was a miracle; it was unexpected and it wasn’t followed up by a series of further wins. In 1966, West Germany should have won (and perhaps would have, had it not been for the referee and that goal), but didn’t dare to think that it could beat England at Wembley. In 1974, the West German team won not least because it played at home. The 1990 World Cup, in which West Germany played Argentina in the final and won 1–0, is not remembered for the quality of its teams or matches. The German win in 2014 differs from those in 1954, 1974 and 1990 because it was more deserved, more convincing and more likely to be the beginning of a new era in world football.

In 1954, Germany’s economic performance was miraculous – not because it outshone its competitors but simply because of the speed with which it was recovering after the war. By the time of the 1974 World Cup, Willy Brandt had been replaced by Helmut Schmidt, the reformist energy of 1972 had largely dissipated, and Germany no longer appeared likely to drive a European agenda for social change. In 1990, reunification seemed a logical and desirable outcome, but even then it was obvious that its costs would be huge and that it would set (West) Germany back for years. In 2014, there is no doubt that Germany is calling the shots in Europe, and that it is likely to do so for some time yet. It no longer sees itself as a vassal of the United States (the Merkel government recently expelled a high ranking CIA official, much to the irritation of Barack Obama). It has come of age.

In 2006 and 2010, non-German audiences found it easy to admire the Nationalmannschaft because it played an attractive – yet ultimately unsuccessful – brand of football. Few teams in the history of the World Cup have been as ruthless as Germany was in the 2014 semi-final, when it scored five times within the space of eighteen minutes. Yet the players wanted to be liked rather than feared. Their celebrations after the 7–1 win appeared subdued because they seemed to be so intent on consoling their opponents.

On and off the field, Germans are now confident of their ability to win. They worry, though, that they will be liked less for it. “Gauchogate,” some German newspapers cried when, in front of 400,000 fans at the victory party in Berlin, six players performed a dance that poked fun at their Argentinian opponents. Was it a harmless joke? Or was it disrespectful, and an indication of an unhealthy nationalism? The opinions have been divided, but just to be on the safe side the president of the German Football Federation sent off a letter of apology to his Argentinian counterpart.

As far as I know, Angela Merkel didn’t comment on “Gauchogate.” I imagine she wasn’t impressed by the players’ behaviour, if only because it reflects on her. Now that Germany has won the World Cup, she is safer in her job
than ever before. There are rumours, though, that she will resign in order to inherit Ban Ki-moon’s job. For that to become a reality, she would need to be seen internationally the way many Germans see her: as Mutti, the nation’s rather harmless and inoffensive mum, rather than as a ruthless leader (who belittles her opponents, to boot).

The 2014 win has reignited German debates about national identity and its symbols. Not that long ago, in West Germany at least, the waving of the national flag and the singing of the national anthem were considered to be dubious relics of the old (Nazi) Germany. Gustav Heinemann, West German president from 1969 to 1974, once famously spoke for many when he said: “I don’t love nation states, I love my wife.” It wasn’t until the 1980s that the flag and the national anthem lost the odour of Nazi Germany. That was in no small part due to Franz Beckenbauer who, having taken over as manager of the German team after the disgraceful performance in 1984, told his players that he expected them to sing along when the anthem was played before games. Once again, football led the way.

In 2014 it would still be unthinkable for a large crowd to celebrate a win of the German team by singing the anthem’s old first verse, as had happened in Bern sixty years ago. In fact, many Germans might feel more comfortable with something as silly as “Wir sind die Eingeborenen von Trizonesien” than with the pathos of the “Song of the Germans.” The flag is a different matter: it now adorns everybody and everything – including toilet brushes in the colours black, red and gold.

Patriotism might have become respectable, but nationalism is still frowned on, as if the latter could be easily divorced from the former. In 2001, another German president, the Social Democrat Johannes Rau, explained the difference thus: “A patriot loves his country. A nationalist despises the countries of others.” Germans’ ambivalent feelings for their country are exemplified by the popularity of the word “Schland”, which supporters of the German team have been chanting since the World Cup in 2006. But does the use of the – in itself meaningless – term “Schland” (instead of “Deutschland”) mean that the feelings aroused in 2014 are very different from those of 1954?

This question is difficult to answer partly because many Germans, from the chancellor down, are reluctant to talk in any detail about their emotions, their relationship with the nation, and the aspirations they have for Germany. Do Germans want their country to be a leader in a global economy no longer reliant on fossil fuels and driven by innovation primarily because they want Germany to excel and perhaps even dominate others, or because they are concerned about the effects of climate change?

I must admit that I can’t shake off my suspicions. Are Germans really as adverse to jingoism as election results, opinion polls, public discourse and their behaviour after 13 July suggest? Or are the somewhat strained attempts to be scrupulously multicultural and tolerant and to be an exemplary global citizen indicative of something lurking beneath the veneer of the new Germany? Maybe the next game will tell us more. •