

# Extremism in European Football: Historical and Contemporary Review of Nine Countries

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Fan hooliganism, far-right, extremism, football (soccer), neo-fascism, sport history, sport sociology, sport-politics intersection

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\***Review articles** are papers that provide a balanced synopsis of the current literature within a specific area of inquiry. These papers summarize the literature comprehensively and also identify outstanding questions and areas for future inquiry.

## Abstract

Political and public extremism is present in many facets of everyday life. This is no different in professional sport, where fans embolden themselves as a collective unit of a particular commonality: the team, country, or political structure(s). Fan extremism represents the collectivization of political extremism, whereby fans use sport to justify public displays of far-right ideologies, racism, and bigotry under the guise of hooliganism. This targeted review explores the early roots of the relationship between 20<sup>th</sup>-century fascism, how authoritarians manipulated football across Europe, the growth of football extremism in counterculture across multiple European countries with or without a direct history of fascist leaders, and its manifestation and intersectionality in 21<sup>st</sup>-century society. Research demonstrates that fan extremism is prevalent in countries that were ruled by fascist dictators, countries ruled by oppressive Communist regimes whose people fought against socialism with fascist ideology, and countries that experienced neither form of authoritarianism, thus raising a question for further research: *Is fascist ideology, authoritarianism, or the resistance against authoritarian regimes inherently required to create a culture (or counterculture) of far-right fan extremism in sport?*

## Introduction

First and foremost, the content, examples, and extrapolations from this paper and its research include sensitive content, harmful ideologies, and offensive demonstrations. Fan extremism takes many forms, most notably, the use of racial epithets, vulgar language, and violence. Despite the researcher's redaction of offensive language, the meanings and implications of themes discussed bear generational trauma and the systemic abuse of multiple ethnic, cultural, religious, and gender/sexuality populations. The chapters analyzing Italy, Spain, and England contain the majority of this content. *Extremism in European Football* is not a political analysis of far-right extremism but is instead an exploration of its manifestation within European football culture.

This paper critically examines extremist behaviours through a thoughtful and carefully constructed contemporary review of select European countries over a 100+ year period. The researcher aims to shed light on these sensitive topics and explore how the legacy and continued impacts of 20th-century fascism and the history of football hooliganism manifest and intersect in the current sport industry. Fan misconduct includes many forms of behaviours, including racism, xenophobia, violence, hate speech, harmful symbolism and vulgarity. While these behaviours range from *legal* to *illegal*, this review aims to tackle football hooliganism (as defined by Spaaij, 2007) and the range of actions extremist fan groups exhibit against rival fans, people of different ethnicities, and the continuation of far-right and authoritarian ideologies in football stadia.

Only a handful of European countries (England, Germany, Spain, Italy, and some of the former USSR/Soviet Bloc countries, including Russia, Poland, Bosnia & Herzegovina, North Macedonia, and Kosovo) were selected for analysis to narrow the scope of this paper. Football extremism exists in virtually every European country and is predicated on a multitude of factors. The nine countries selected were based on the following factors: WW2 Allies and Axis powers, exempt from WW2 but had an authoritarian ruler (Spain), and former USSR and Soviet Bloc countries. Examining the roots, development, and modern proliferation of football extremism in all or most European countries would perhaps fit the scope of a master's thesis or PhD. dissertation more appropriately.

While conceptually separate, right-wing nationalism, fascism, and fan hooliganism inextricably co-exist and 'feed' off each other. The frameworks and definitions for this review are extrapolated from M. Doidge and R. F. J. Spaaij's works. Doidge (2017) for example writes that the "Imperial and Colonial histories of European nations" and the ever-expanding player transfer market further drove the globalization of football (p. 2). The early embers of the "conflation of nationhood and race in the late nineteenth century," in combination with the quickly rising fascist and nationalist ideologies around the time of the Interwar Period "reached its nadir" of intra-fan and intra-ethnic conflicts (p. 2). However, Doidge proposes another 'answer' to this issue; the growth of "localised identity" during the 1970s and '80s further emboldened fanbases, thus creating *football ultras* (p. 3).

In his 2007 dissertation, Spaaij discusses that many academics at the time could not 'agree' on a definition of "fan hooliganism" and the relationship between sport and violence (pp. 3, 8–10). To guide his central thesis, Spaaij defines football hooliganism as "the competitive violence of socially organized fan groups in football, principally directed against opposing fan groups" (p. 11). The latter proposition is especially important in this context as there is a need to separate hooligan actions brought on by like-minded groups against general populations, and the *targeted* demonstrations against those deemed as "others"—usually by ethnicity or culture (pp. 10–11). To illustrate this point, football hooliganism can take many forms; in one configuration, it could be the collectivization of fan groups in public displays of support for their team, such as tifos, artwork, pyrotechnics, and songs (in this form, these fans are often regarded as non-violent ultras). In another configuration, hooliganism could embody the darker side of fan cultures, such as those who use violence against other teams' fans or minorities as their "form" of football fandom. These fans are often labeled as violent ultras, skinheads, or "true" hooligans. To varying degrees, football hooliganism is a "transnational phenomenon" found across the world, prevalent in countries such as Germany, Argentina, Italy, Peru, Hungary, France, Slovakia, and Greece (Spaaij, 2007, p. 2).

England and Germany act as two comparative cases in this analysis: England, for example, did not have an authoritarian ruler during this period, yet the roots of football hooliganisms are often attributed to the Home Nations; Germany, however, had a fascist dictator, but repents its history through the active suppression of far-right extremism post-war.

## Method

The purpose of a targeted literature review is to collate related research and explore the similarities, differences, and findings of multiple international publications. The researcher began by collecting general topic information to gauge the over-arching landscape of sport's relationship with political extremism.

Academic articles and media considered for inclusion were determined by the title, keywords, and abstract. Research was limited to a handful of European countries, namely some of the 'big players' in World War II (England, Italy, Germany), nations that had fascist regimes (Spain), and nations in the Soviet Union or Soviet Bloc (specifically, Poland, Austria-Hungary, and the south Balkan region), though the influence of the former

USSR and modern Russia necessitated its inclusion as the ninth country. As noted previously, democratic England and Germany act as “comparative cases” (or controls) to contrast fascist and communist nations against the hypothesis that extremism can manifest in any nation’s sporting environment.

Using tools available in the Humber Library Database (EBSCO, SPORTDiscuss, ScienceDirect, and JSTOR) and Google Scholar, the first phase of keyword searching included the terms and phrases “Fascism + football,” “Football fan hooliganism,” “‘Far-right extremism’ in football” “Football fan extremism,” and “Racism + football.” The second phase of keyword searching included general location keywords

(“Europe, European”) and specific country keywords (“England, Germany”) which permitted narrowing the results from >2000 to <200. Approximately 45 articles were initially screened for their potential in this review. Thirty articles were excluded for a number of reasons including, the articles were not written in English, the abstract or full content were not aligned with the scope of this paper, or the articles widened the number of countries included beyond the abilities of the researcher. Fifteen articles were read in full, with five articles removed after this process. The inclusion of the BBC documentary, *Fascism and Football* (2003), was instrumental in the scope and timeline of this review. See [Table 1](#).

**Table 1. Critical appraisal and metadata.**

Author(s) & Affiliation	Title	Published	Publication	Type of Study	Methodology
Benedikter, R., & Wojtaszyn, D.; University of Wrocław-Breslau.	Football politics in Central, Eastern Europe: A symptom of growing anti-Europeanism and anti-globalization?	2018	<i>Geopolitics, History, and International Relations</i> 10(1).	Historical and geopolitical analysis.	Scoping review, case study.
BBC, Comely, B., Granlund, C., (Producers), & Hughes, S. (Director).	Fascism and Football.	2003	<i>British Broadcasting Corporation</i> .	Documentary.	Primary and secondary source analysis, and subject-matter-expert interviews.
Curtis, M.; Indiana University.	Antisemitism and European football.	2019	<i>Antisemitism Studies</i> 3(2).	Historical and socio-political analysis.	Primary and secondary source analysis.
Doidge, M.; University of Brighton.	Racism and European football	2017	Handbook of Race and Ethnicity in Sport (1st. ed.).	Historical and sociological analysis.	Primary and secondary source analysis.
Kassimeris, C.; European University Cyprus.	Deutschland über Alles: Discrimination in German football.	2009	<i>Soccer and Society</i> 10(6).	Historical and sociological analysis.	Primary and secondary source analysis.
Kapidžić, D., Hirkić, M., Bakić, S., & Dudić-Sijamija, A.; University of Sarajevo.	Meso approaches to the study of radicalisation and violent extremism: A view from the Balkans region.	2023	Connekt Regional Report, 1. European Institute of the Mediterranean.	Community-based, Meso-level analysis.	Case study, qualitative analysis.

Table continued to next page...

Author(s) & Affiliation	Title	Published	Publication	Type of Study	Methodology
Llopis-Goid, R.; University of Valencia.	Racism and xenophobia in Spanish football: Facts, reactions and policies.	2009	<i>Physical Culture and Sport Studies and Research</i> , 47(1).	Historical and sociological analysis.	Primary and secondary source analysis.
Martin, S.; The British School at Rome.	Football, fascism and fandom in modern Italy.	2018	<i>Revista Crítica de Ciências Sociais</i> 116.	Historical, contemporary, and political analysis.	Case study, primary and secondary source analysis.
Piskurek, C.; Technical University of Dortmund.	The right wing of the pitch: English football and the new right	2018	<i>Coils of the Serpent 2</i> .	Sociological and political analysis.	Primary and secondary source analysis.
Spaaij, R. F. J.; University of Amsterdam.	Understanding football hooliganism: A comparison of six Western European football clubs.	2007	PhD. dissertation; Universiteit van Amsterdam, Vossiuspers.	Multi-disciplinary.	Historical, contemporary, and political analysis, case study, and primary and secondary source analysis.
Tobar, F. B.1, Ramshaw, G.1, & Fritz, F2; 1Clemson University & 2University of Siegen, Hamburg.	Never again! Fandom and the culture of remembrance in German football.	2024	<i>Leisure Sciences</i> , 1(21).	Historical and sociological analysis.	Primary and secondary source analysis.

## The Early Relationship Between Fascism and Football

Extremism in European football has its roots, like with many modern issues, in the 1920s. The rise of fascism began in 1922 Italy when Benito Mussolini ascended to power. Various scholars attribute football's influence as one of the key drivers of this relationship; football, as a form of populism, is rife for exploitation. As such, the rise of fascism and fascist dictators manipulated football to further their political and ideological agendas for decades, with its legacy still affecting the European and global football ecosystem to this day (BBC et al., 2003; Martin, 2018; Tifo Football, 2018, Nov.).

One of the first significant intersections between fascism and football, as the aptly titled 2003 BBC documentary notes, was the 1934 Italy World Cup. Throughout the competition, Mussolini 'globalized' Italian fascism through propaganda-

fueled football, which included match-fixing and collusion (Hart, 2016). Miloslav Jenšik, a BBC interviewee, shared, "the Italian victory ... was analogous to what Hitler succeeded in doing in the 1936 Olympic Games. It was used as propaganda for a fascist state and for a fascist regime" [Translated] (BBC et al., 2003, 13:30–14:00). During the Interwar Period, particularly in Germany but throughout Europe, 'unwelcomed' populations including Jewish people, *Romani*<sup>1</sup> and immigrants were excluded from participating in sports, in clubs, and on national teams (Doidge, 2017, p. 2).

Not to be outdone by Italy, Hitler who at this time cared little about football, organized a match in London against the Tottenham Hotspurs—possibly the only instance the swastika

1 Romani (or Romany, Roma) is the modern accepted term for the Indo-Aryan ethnic group. Romani was chosen to differentiate from AS Roma, one of the clubs in Rome, Italy.

flew over England during peacetime (Tifo Football, 2018, Nov.). Moreover, Hitler's greater ambitions, *Lebensraum*, included usurping the great Austrian *Wunderteam* to 'improve' the weak German team. On 11 March 1938, Nazi Germany executed *Anschluss-Oesterreich*<sup>2</sup>, formally annexing Austria. One month later, on 3 April 1938, the Austrian *Wunderteam* played Germany in its last game—a faux match—dubbed the *Anschlussspiel*<sup>3</sup> (Williams, 2020). Austria's wonder talisman, regarded as one of the greatest footballers of his generation, Matthias Sindelar detested the regime. Through his public protests, Sindelar became a symbol of the fight “between fascism and football,” whereby Austrian football became a “vehicle to express resistance; it became a means of politics” (BBC et al., 2003, 23:30–24:15). Only a few months later, Sindelar was found dead in his home with his partner from apparent carbon monoxide poisoning. He was 35 years old. Of course, his death was marred with controversy as some suspected he was murdered to silence his protests while others believe he committed suicide as a result of Austria's annexation (26:50–32:20; Tifo Football, 2018, Oct.). Sindelar's death was officially, and technically illegally, ruled as an accident so that the regime would permit a grave of honour (Duffy, 2003). An often fraught and stifled fact is that two months after the Annexation of Austria, and not to disturb the policy of appeasement, the England national team played Germany in Berlin. During the anthems, the British players raised a fascist salute to symbolically “legitimize the Nazi regime,” the Anschluss, and not to offend the Fuehrer, who was not in attendance (BBC et al., 2003, 34:35–35:45; Duffy, 2003).

## Democratic Germany: Fandom Without Fascism—Mostly

Fast forwarding to post-war Germany, society and football are recovering slowly. The fall of fascism opened the door for Western ideologies—although only in Allied-occupied West Germany. As Tobar et al. (2024) stated:

Motivated by feelings of shame and collective guilt and by the desire to find a new collective identity ... the German government promoted self-reflection and self-criticism as part of the process of 'working off the past.' Firmly based on a 'politics of regret,' a network between fans, left-wing political activists, educators, historians, and journalists

2 German (anglicized): literal translation Anschluss “to conjoin” + Oesterreich “Austria.”

3 German (anglicized): literal translation Anschluss + Spiel “game.”

has been primarily responsible for bringing to light the involvement of clubs during the Third Reich. (pp. 6–7)

Long before East–West reunification, German football united on common ground: expelling far-right political extremism from sport and society. Tobar et al. (2024) note that the “culture of remembrance” and left-wing ideologies “represent a collective and ongoing work” when tackling the new wave of racism, xenophobia, and anti-Semitic expressions post-war (p. 8). Today in Germany, clubs exemplify the modern ethos of German football culture. Upon ratifying its guiding principles in 2009, FC Pauli became the first professional club to exhibit social and political responsibility, acknowledge its role and impact in the community, its history, and its values (FC St. Pauli, 2009). Multiple clubs throughout the German football pyramid are well-known for their work in *de-Nazifying* German football; St. Pauli fans “supported the creation of the *iNie Wieder* (Never Again!) project,” embrace messages and tifos such as *Every Human Being is Welcomed* and *No Football for Fascists* (Tobar et al., 2024, p. 7). Clubs like Werder Bremen and Babelsberg display tifos in support of LGBT+, women's rights, and anti-fascist artworks, “reminding their fight against racism, fascism, and openness to war refugees” (p. 14).

Despite these efforts, political extremism still exists in Germany. Extrapolating some of the examples Kassimeris (2009) examines: (1) Schalke 04 player Victor Agali of Nigerian origin was subject to targeted abuse following his teams' poor start to the 2003–04 season; (2) before the 2006 World Cup in Germany, one neo-Nazi group “published a World Cup guide” where they claim “white is not only the colour of the kit” in protest of the black players who earned their spot to represent the country; (3) when German-Ghanaian Gerald Asamoah became the first black footballer to represent Germany in 2001, another group “produce[d] a photograph [and] message stating ‘No Gerald, you are not Germany’” (pp. 760–762). The reunification of Germany in 1989 initiated a new form of ‘terrace racism,’ whereby a “hybrid of xenophobia, hyper-nationalism and anti-communism had begun to take shape among a section of the skinheads” rooted in the “rise of the far right, particularly in the east where deep social and economic insecurities prevail” (p. 758). Yet despite these issues, football and ‘football-politics’ in Germany actively practises its “Never Again” posturing through social media and gameday campaigns (see Bundesliga, 2024). Moreover, the reproduction or dissemination of Nazi propaganda or iconography is criminalized. In one such example, an English fan during the

2006 World Cup in Germany was “banned from attending football matches for 25 months” for painting a swastika on his chest (p. 762).

## Italy and Spain: Two Sides of the Same (Fascist) Coin

### *Postwar Italy: Calcio and the Rise of Ultras*

Unlike in the new Federal Republic of West Germany, Italy and Spain did not repent their fascist history. As Martin (2018) explores, “extreme right-wing ideologies nonetheless persisted in postwar Republican Italy, and football has since provided a visible outlet for the expression of their beliefs” (p. 112). The relationship between Italian football—*Calcio*—and fascism did not, and has not, gone away. Martin (2018) examines further:

Calcio’s contemporary relationship with neo-fascism was evidenced again within weeks, with Eugenio Maria Lupi’s post-goal celebratory gesture ... [t]aking off his team jersey to reveal a T-shirt bearing the flag of the Italian Social Republic, the player also gave a straight-armed Roman salute. (...) Lupi’s gesture was even more scandalous given the team’s opponents, Marzabotto. In 1944, [the village] was witness to a mass murder of at least 770 citizens carried out by Nazi Waffen SS forces. Fascism set about restructuring the sport and moulding it to respond to the regime’s needs as a tool of propaganda and national identity. (p. 114)

Italian football developed two types of fans, *Ultras* and *UltraS*—of which the differences in spelling are particularly apposite. Both trace their roots to “traditional Italian soccer *barrakers*”<sup>4</sup>; however, *UltraS* differentiate themselves as a form of hooligans that are “inextricably linked with late 20th-century Italian neo-fascism” (Martin, 2018, pp. 119–120).

The rise of neo-fascism in *Calcio* is defined as beginning in the late 1960s, where political violence, protests, and weak government leadership propagated and fueled this newfound form of extremism in football (Martin, 2018, p. 120). With the division between the population’s support of Communism, Fascism, and Liberalism, ultras further splintered, creating self-propagating echo chambers “mimicking the style, structure and countercultural features of political groups” (p. 120).

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4 English, Australian: Rowdy fans who chant and jeer but are not “hooligans.”

### *‘Duce, Duce’ in the 21st Century*

The following examinations of modern Italian and Spanish extremism contains content that readers may find offensive, visceral, or uncomfortable. Racial slurs have been redacted by the researcher, but their meaning and impact remain to present the degree of extremism analyzed in literature.

In 1998, during the Rome derby (AS Roma vs. S. S. Lazio), fans unveiled a banner reading, “Auschwitz is your homeland: the ovens’ your homes” [sic]. In 2005 again against Lazio, AS Roma fans displayed flags, swastikas, Celtic crosses, and sang choruses of *Duce, Duce* (p. 121). The return fixture at Roma’s stadium saw repeated sentiments when AS Roma fans unfurled the tifo: “*Lazio-Livorno: stessa inziale, stesso forno*”; [Lazio-Livorno: same beginnings, same oven].

When a Treviso player was racially abused in 2001, his teammates “‘blacked up’ to show solidarity” (Doidge, 2017, p. 6). During a Champions League match in 2000, Siniša Mihajlović called Arsenal’s Patrick Vieira “a f—king black monkey,” in which Lazio fans “taunted Arsenal’s black players and hurled objects at the team” (Martin, 2018, p. 125).

Throughout the 2004-05 season, Italian national team player Paolo Di Canio celebrated multiple goals by displaying a Roman salute to the admiration of *Il Duce*’s granddaughter, Alessandra (Martin, 2018, p. 123). The Italian Football Federation sanctioned Di Canio for his actions, but the charges were dismissed by the courts because in Italian law, fascist symbolism remains a form of free speech and is not a direct provocation to re-form the former party (Martin, 2018, p. 123; see *la Repubblica*, 2005). Maurizio Zamparini, president of Palermo FC, once praised an opponent by describing him as a “crafty little gypsy” (Doidge, 2017, p. 10). Former Italian national team player Mario Balotelli has been racially abused throughout his long and oft-controversial career (see Dawson, 2020). As Balotelli described, one example included comments like “there are no black Italians” (Doidge, 2017, p. 7). When Balotelli transferred to AC Milan in 2013, then-vice-president Paolo Berlusconi (brother to Silvio Berlusconi, the former Prime Minister of Italy and former owner of AC Milan) “invited attendees at a political rally for his brother [to] meet the ‘n—er of the family’” (p. 11).

The culture of racism in Italy in more recent years remains complicated. When Italy exited the 2014 World Cup in the Group Stage, sport executive Carlo Tevechio blamed foreigners

for Italy's failure. In a rant to party guests, he described a fictitious player, "Opti Poba," as someone who "was previously eating bananas and now is a first-team player at Lazio" (p. 11). Tevecchio further expressed that "players from Africa were monkeys and not worthy of playing in Italy" (p. 11). Even more recently, the Italian Football Association was heavily scrutinized by fans and the media in 2019 when ape artwork was used to promote its new anti-racism campaigns (Reuters, 2019). Today, the former dictator's legacy continues with his great-grandson, Romano Floriani Mussolini, a fan-favourite footballer at S.S. Lazio<sup>5</sup>, and whom is often surrounded with praise and controversy from fans and rivals, respectively (see Kassam, 2024).

### ***Francoist Spain: "Fascism and Football"***

While absent from WW2, Spain was not without its form of fascism. As BBC et al. explore in *Fascism and Football* (2003), Francisco Franco "realized that football could help him consolidate his control over Spain ... 'adopt[ing]' Real Madrid as the symbolic embodiment of his fascist dictatorship" (40:30–40:55). Conversely, FC Barcelona became emblematic of "Republican resistance against Franco's regime" (40:55–41:05). Poetically, the Barça and Catalan social revolution mirrors that of Matthias Sindelar. Reflecting, as an outsider, on the oppression of Catalan culture, former England-national and FC Barcelona player Gary Lineker comments:

It was felt that Real Madrid represented fascist Spain and Franco. Regions like Catalunya, where the people felt they were oppressed ... they weren't allowed to speak their own language. The only place they [could] turned out to be the football ground. [Barcelona] came to represent Catalunya. (44:30–45:05)

In the 1950s, one of the best footballers in the world, Alfredo Di Stéfano, was heavily linked to join Barcelona. However, Franco threatened government intervention to blackmail Barça leaders away from signing Di Stéfano. Football historian and academic Pierre Lanfranchi remarks:

The role of Di Stéfano in Francoist Spain is crucial ... [to] use the best player in world football at that period as an example of a normalized situation. Di Stefano will completely change the image of Spain's intonation [Translated] (51:40–52:05).

5 In editing this paper, Romano Floriani Mussolini joined Serie A team Cremonese on loan in July 2025.

Franco is probably the dictator [who], more than anybody else, understood how football could be important in international relations. [Spain] is completely excluded from the rest of Europe. Through Real Madrid [and] the European Cup, the Spanish state is reintegrated into the world. [Translated] (53:45–54:25)

Franco's rule over Spain and Spanish football continued long after the Second World War. In fact, his reign ended with his death in 1979. Nonetheless, his influence on Spanish football persists to this day.

### ***Francoist Spain: Gone But Not Forgotten***

Moving forward to 2004, and ahead of an international match against France, Spanish national team coach Luís Aragonés 'harangued' José Antonio Reyes, remonstrating he should "tell the black guy, I'm better than you! Black piece of sh-t, I'm better than you!" in reference to Reyes' Arsenal teammate and France international Thierry Henry (Llopis-Goig, 2009, p. 36). Weeks later in a match between Spain and England, "many spectators launched racist insults at the black players on the English team" (p. 36). The Spanish Football Federation were fined only €65,000 by the European football authority, UEFA. Anti-Semitic chants, monkey noises, and throwing bananas and nuts on the field are commonplace in Spanish football (p. 39). Cortegana (2024) cites "24 incidents of racist abuse directed towards Real Madrid forward Vinícius Junior" between October 2021 and 2024, with many assailants making monkey chants, or throwing bananas and other items on the field. In 2023, "an effigy dressed to resemble him was hung from a motorway bridge." Vinícius Jr testified in a Spanish court against the racist abuse he received. For the first time in its kind, severe punishments were sentenced (Reuters, 2024; Cortegana, 2024; Dotson & Sung, 2024).

While German and English institutions (as explored later) attempted to relinquish far-right extremism from its football grounds, Italy and Spain, among other European countries, continue to struggle with rising tensions and fail to abate these extremist sentiments.

### ***The Iron Curtain: Soviet Socialism Turned Neo-Fascism***

As the second half of the 20th century approached the fall of the Soviet Union, fascist sentiments grew considerably. Fascist propaganda became a means of protesting Socialist ideologies and order—to "manifest the opposite of

Communism”; in turn, these attitudes found their way into football (Benedikter & Wojtaszyn, 2018, p. 86; Kassimeris, 2009, p. 758). Kapidžić et al. (2023) provide another consideration of this intersection: “football fandom in the post-conflict region of former Yugoslavia is linked to national-building processes and the establishment of symbolic and physical borders between nations” (p. 17).

The fall of the Soviet Union and the fractured tensions between rival ethnic and cultural factions further divided the former Yugoslav and Iron Curtain countries. Political conflicts and violent extremism did not cease in later years; rather, the socio-political-ethnic divisions between these new nations and the ingrained abjection to Communism further fueled football hooliganism as a new form of counterculture, which in turn meant that stadiums became ‘new battlegrounds’ for conflict. Marred by the frequent socio-political clashes—and multiple regional wars in the mid-late 90s and early 2000s—complex and deep-rooted socio-ethno-cultural tensions, leaving ‘deep wounds’, continued to spark further conflicts in the late 2000s and 2010s. Post-Kosovo War, the ‘new battles’ between Balkan countries were fought in and around football stadia. Nationalism and ‘otherism’ meant that football hooligans became more violent, with deadly results (Kapidžić et al., 2023, p. 10). Clashes between Polish clubs Wisła Kraków and Cracovia Kraków led to eight deaths before kickoff, with police using water cannons and other extreme measures to end the violence (Curtis, 2019, p. 276). In an international match between Poland and Russia in 2012, Russian fans displayed banners reading “This is Russia,” sparking riots leading to “15 injuries and more than 180 arrests” (pp. 275–276).

Hate speech, violence, religious extremism, fascist symbolism, and the denigration of ethnic, religious, or sexual identification are frequent methods of extremist hooligans. Crimes against these populations are often not investigated as ‘hate crimes’ but instead described as “motivated by hooliganism” (Kapidžić et al., 2023, p. 13). In 2012, members of the Russian club Zenit St. Petersburg wrote an op-ed to the club’s board “stating that they should not sign ‘dark-skinned players’ or ‘sexual minorities’” (Doidge, 2017, p. 1). In a FIFA World Cup match between Poland and Germany, hooligans on both sides “threw bottles, chairs, and launched fireworks at each other,” leading to 429 arrests (Curtis, 2019, p. 276). Arch rivals Dinamo Zagreb and Red Star Belgrade caused a riot in the stadium throwing bricks, debris, and other items at

rival fans and onto the field; sixty people were shot, stabbed, or injured by stones (p. 276).

Fascism became a tool of resistance of former Eastern Bloc football fans to “manifest their anti-socialist ... position” (Benedikter & Wojtaszyn, 2018, p. 88). Fascist ideologies were an “immanent feature” of the *Central European Skinhead Culture*, Benedikter & Wojtaszyn continues, “anti-Semitic, xenophobic, and racist sayings were heard throughout the 1980s in the GDR [German Democratic Republic], Hungarian, Czechoslovak, and Polish football stadiums” (p. 88). In 2013, a Polish league game between Lech Poznań and Widzew Łódź included chants such as “Move on, Jews! Your home is at Auschwitz! Send you to the gas (chambers)!” (Benedikter & Wojtaszyn, 2018, p. 81). In a match between England and Bulgaria in 2019, many English players were subjected to racist abuse, causing the game to be stopped momentarily. Kapidžić et al. (2013) note that North Macedonia also faces similar issues of violence between football groups who promote their hate speech and extremism in complex inter- and intra-ethnic groups, most notably between other Balkan countries and Greece (p. 17).

In his analysis, Doidge (2017) writes, “denigrating rivals is part of this ritual. When fans sing, ‘I’d rather be a P-ki than a Turk,’ they are implicitly saying that being Pakistani is ... morally low ... [but] being Turkish is judged as worse” (p. 4). Rather more controversially, football fans and to an extent governing organizations appear to have scrupulous levels of bigotry, of which only some are pursued criminally. For example, racism against African peoples faces higher scrutiny compared to anti-Romani and anti-Semitic abuse; in many countries, “Jew” is not considered hate-speech and is used frequently as a pejorative term to denigrate rival fans (p. 5).

## **Brexit Means Brexit: English Elitism in Postmodernism**

### ***Roots of ‘The English Disease’***

To many academics, the beginnings of football hooliganism are attributed to the coevolution of fan cultures in England, the Netherlands, and Spain during the 1960s, with “pattern[s] of disorder at football matches” affecting neighbouring countries such as Germany, Belgium and France (Spaaij, 2007, p. 77). The way English stadiums were constructed, in addition to the placement of fan groups within the stadium, played an essential role in the rise and controversies of football hooliganism. Stadiums housed *youth ends*, with

young-adult audiences placed on terraces; these groups would replace the existing 'old'-ethos of English football culture with a "complex[,] often obscene and symbolically violent repertoire" (p. 77). This bashful new era of early hooligans "began testing their ... reputations for 'toughness'" during away games (p. 78). Another vital factor of English stadiums was the 'segregation' of away fans. To control fan groups, stadiums micromanaged entry points, away ends, frequently fencing these areas. While authorities aimed to maintain the space *between* opposing fans, little was done to control the fans *within* these sects. This is where the "super hooligan groups" emerged—with these groups "develop[ing] an elite self-conception based on their perceived sense of superiority" (Spaaij, 2007, p. 81). In some regions, racism is "seen as only directed against people with black skin," whereby "a black/white dualism emerged in anti-racism campaigns in the 1960s; this dualism remained dominant and unchallenged in English football for longer than in other institutions" (Doidge, 2017, p. 6).

The effect of the "English disease," as described by Spaaij (2007, pp. 77–79), is not exclusive to the United Kingdom: "The behaviour of English supporters on Dutch territory [in the '70s] played an important role in the transformation of the pattern of spectator violence" (Doidge, 2017, p. 94). During the UEFA Cup final between Feyenoord and Tottenham in 1974, English fans "attacked [the] home fans. [...] Over 200 people were injured." As extreme fan behaviours worsened throughout the 1970s to the mid-1990s, the concept of *voetbalvandalisme*<sup>6</sup> became increasingly common, with politicians, journalists, and academics eventually defining these actions as "football violence, football crime, and hooliganism" (p. 95). In a match between Dutch rivals, Ajax and Vitesse, on 27 January (the day of International Holocaust Memorial), a tifo read "Long live Zyklon B: The pesticide used by Nazi Germany to kill Jews in Auschwitz" (Curtis, 2019, p. 282). Moreover, "chants of ' Hamas, Hamas: Jews to the Gas' [are] often heard ... in Rotterdam, Arnhem, and Leeuwarden" (Curtis, 2019, p. 273).

'Football hooliganism', according to the English tabloid paper *The Sun*, was to blame for the Hillsborough Disaster of 1989, where 96<sup>7</sup> Liverpool fans were crushed to death in crumbling

terraces in an over-packed away section (Gibson, 2004). Andrew Devine was included as the 97<sup>th</sup> fatality 32 years later in 2021, after a coroner deemed he was "unlawfully killed" as a result of his severe injuries (Conn & Vinter, 2021). Devine was crushed beneath dozens of fans as a boy at Hillsborough and lived the following three decades unable to walk and remained severely disabled. Four years prior to Hillsborough, in 1985, the Heysel disaster killed thirty-nine spectators when Liverpool fans stormed across barricades to fight opposing Juventus fans (Mullen, 2015). The subsequent European investigations and the English-domestic Taylor Report sought to examine the incidents and reinvent stadium safety measures, including 'cracking-down' on hooliganism (Mullen, 2015; Gibson, 2004; Conn & Vinter, 2021; see Taylor, Lord Justice, 1990).

### ***Modern Manifestation of 'The English Disease'***

The English Defense League (EDL), a far-right political party, was founded by a group of disgruntled Luton Town supporters in 2009 (Piskurek, 2018, p. 99). Predicated on the belief that 'Islamic populations are invading England,' the political group demonstrates far-right extremist views, matching those of its "de facto leader" Tommy Robinson (born Stephen Yaxley, Robinson is his pseudonym; Sherwood & Quin, 2014). The EDL regularly demonstrate against perceived threats of Muslim populations; despite the organization's human rights posturing, "the record of violent incidents [at] their rallies" displays clear incongruence (Piskurek, 2018, p. 99). As the original hooligans of the 1970s and '80s aged, concurrent with the advent of the internet, former and new hooligans began engaging in "substitute battles" through social media and forums (Piskurek, 2018, p. 100; e.g. "social media extremism in football"). The apex of this issue and how English elitist hooligans internalized their beliefs meant that they interpreted "their relegation at the hands of state forces which allegedly prefer refugees and immigrants from Islamic countries over them" (pp. 96, 100).

"Colour-blindness," Doidge (2017) argues, "is particularly apposite in football as club owners and administrators deny that race is an issue." For example, in 2009, Uruguay international and Liverpool player Luis Suárez was alleged to have called Manchester United's Patrice Evra "a n—er." However, some (including Suárez) claim he referred to Evra as "a n—gro," justifying the latter phrase as a "friendly remark in South American culture" (Evans, 2019). One week earlier, Chelsea's John Terry allegedly called QPR player Anton

6 Dutch: Literal translation Voetbal "football" + vandalisme "vandalism."

7 94 fans died on 15 April 1989, either in the stadium or in emergency care; a 14-year-old boy died in hospital on 19 April, and a 22-year-old man died in March 1993, both after being taken off life support (Johnson, 2013; BBC, 2014).

Ferdinand a “f—king black c—t.” Terry’s defence was that he said, “Anton, I didn’t call you a...” (Evans, 2019).

A popular chant today is when Liverpool fans sing, “We’re not racist, we only hate Mancs<sup>8</sup>” in response to the Suárez allegations (TVshaky, 2012). In another example, Manchester United fans ‘admire’ their former South Korea-international player Park Ji-Sung, chanting: “Park, Park! Wherever you may be; you eat dogs in your home country! Could be worse, could be Scouse<sup>9</sup>: eating rats in your council house.” Set to the same tune, Tottenham Hotspur derogate Arsenal’s Sol Campbell: “Sol, Sol! Wherever you may be; you’re on the verge of lunacy! And we don’t give a f—k if you’re hanging from a tree, you Judas c—t with HIV!”

Doidge (2017) reflects that “governing bodies either go straight into denial about racism or pass a superficial sanction,” adding: “in Britain ... managers and coaches also hold racist attitudes and use racist language” (pp. 7, 9). After the Suárez and Terry incidents, in which both were given multiple-match suspensions and hefty fines, then-FIFA president Sepp Blatter stated, “these issues should be dealt with by shaking hands at the end of the match” (Doidge, 2017, p. 9). While the idea of ‘true’ fan hooliganism is in the past of English football history, fans today instead engage in new forms of political and racial extremism through social media. One such example is after England lost the 2020 EUROS on penalties against Italy (England hosted the final at Wembley Stadium), three black players who missed their penalties—Marcus Rashford, Bukayo Saka, and Jadon Sancho—were racially abused across social media, leading to international investigations and multiple domestic arrests (AP, 2021; Lee, 2021; Holden & Phillips, 2021; see Kleinman, 2021). In contrast, in 2017, West Ham Utd. fan Mark Harding was given an 18-month suspended sentence, fined £150, and given 60 hours of community service for “telling a Jewish fan to ‘stick your head in the oven like the Jew you are’” (Curtis, 2019, p. 273). The relationship between English fans and Judaism has been a topic of conversation for years. Tottenham Hotspurs fans call themselves “Yids”<sup>10</sup> or the “Yid Army,” appropriating

the Yiddish word meaning “Jewish,” based on the high Jewish population in the area (Curtis, 2019, pp. 279–280). Rival fans in turn use pejorative terms such as Yids or other anti-Semitic language.

## Conclusion

The modern effects of extremism in football are ubiquitous and pervasive. The digitalization of media and the ubiquity of social media, coupled with anonymity creates an environment whereby regular people can engage in targeted acts of abuse. However, in-stadium abuse is also rampant, though less so in certain countries (e.g. England and Germany) than in others such as in Eastern Europe, Italy, or Spain.

The seemingly convergent evolution of extremism in football in nations with fascist history, communist or authoritarian rule, or the absence of either political structure, lends to the belief that extremism has the potential to proliferate in any nation. Yet despite this, there is a pattern of behaviours and developments that create this environment for extremism to spread and flourish. The divergence of structural approaches in reducing, or conversely, the systematic failure to mitigate, political extremism of fan cultures across European countries is evident. Socio-ethnic and cultural identities are key drivers of manifesting the ‘importance of their belonging’; football as a means of nationalism is predicated on one’s past and “othering” visible, ethnic, and cultural ‘invaders’ of the white-nationalist nations (Kapidžić et al., 2023, p. 25). As a form of populism, football became a tool of power in fascist and communist regimes. Fans fight against these institutions and “others” through violence and fan hooliganism. Upon these establishments, further research may be warranted to explore the extent to which fascist or authoritarian ideology contributes to the rise and development of nationalism and extremism within football stadia.

The assessments and recommendations from literature suggest a multifaceted approach to tackling violent extremism in football. Kapidžić et al. (2023) highlight the importance of specific, targeted intervention that meets the areas assessed in their report. For example, religion is a key motivator of “radicalisation of among youth” in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, and Kosovo, whereas “economic deprivation” has a greater impact in Bulgaria, Kosovo and North Macedonia (p. 28). Moreover, territorial disputes and “perceptions of rivalry” leads to violence between fan groups and clubs, and “transnational dynamics” such as

8 Manc is a common term for the people and dialect of Manchester (aka. Mancunians), or by rival fans pejoratively.

9 Scouse is a common, non-derogatory, term for the people and dialect of Liverpool.

10 When pronounced YEED in English phonetics, Yid is not pejorative, however, the bastardized YID (rhyming with did) is offensive (Pearson, 2003–04).

propaganda, “contribute to radicalisation in Bulgaria” (p. 28). Other means of prevention may be warranted to discourage the proliferation of fan extremism, depending on the history, culture, and nature of the nation’s roots with political extremism.

The 1990 *Taylor Report*, created in the wake of the Hillsborough and Hysel disasters produced a comprehensive list of recommendations. Lord Justice Taylor notes his “serious misgivings” on the feasibility and impact of the Football Spectators Act of 1989, specifically regarding “the implementation of Part I of the Act” (p. 75, para. 424). Lord Justice Taylor’s final recommendations included, but are not limited to, the provision of exclusive all-seater stadiums in England, the creation of the Advisory Design Council—tasked with researching and improving existing stadia—the creation of the National Inspectorate and Review Body to give further powers to the Football Licensing Authority, and multiple advisories on terraces, club’s responsibilities, CCTV, policing, and other means of security (pp. 76–82). It is difficult to determine which measures were approved, though the abolition of standing terraces, the banning of alcohol in view of the pitch, and the growth of securities-related efforts are noticeable (Author, personal observation).

This review only scratches the proverbial surface of the intersectionality between politics and football. Further, deeper explorations of the sociological connectors between the themes disseminated in this review may shed light on the intrinsic motivators of fandom and extremism more aptly—namely: *Is fascist ideology, authoritarianism, or the resistance against these regimes inherently required to create a culture (or counterculture) of far-right fan extremism in sport.*

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The author declares no known conflicts.

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As a graduate of polytechnic education with a focus in Sport Management, I hope this paper contributes to continued discussions of the intersectionality between football fandom and behaviour ethics, specifically, how the leaders of today

and tomorrow can shape their organizations to promote ethical behaviours, notice patterns of extremism, and welcome inclusive fan cultures for all to enjoy the beautiful game.

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## Note on Contributor

**Jon Deighton** is a graduate of Sport Management, achieving Honours in the Class of 2025. Growing up in Toronto, ON, to English parents, football (soccer) has always been a hallmark of my life. I played football from when I was a boy to early adulthood. I began my career as a referee aged 15. Since then, I have worked my way up to the Provincial level, officiating some of the highest games in Ontario, and locally in Toronto at the lower levels of the football pyramid. Competent in research, with passions in environmental sustainability, nuclear energy and physics, and sport management, I hope to share my passions for discussion and change.

## Glossary of Uncommon or Non-English Terms

**Anschluss-Oesterreich**—German (anglicized): lit. “Connection”; (colloq.) “Annexation” + *Oesterreich* “Austria”: The German annexation of Austria in 1938.

**Anschlusspiel**—German (anglicized): *Anschluss* + *Spiel* “game”: “Annexation game.”

**Barrakers**—English (Australian): Rowdy fans who chant and jeer but are not “hooligans.”

**Calcio**—Italian: lit. “[to] kick”; (colloq.) “Football.”

**Lebensraum**—German: lit. “living room/space”: The belief that

Nazi Germany needed to expand its territory and resources to adequately 'home' the Aryan peoples.

**Romani**—also known as Roma, Romany, or derogatorily as “gypsies.” *Romani* was preferred to make a distinction between *Romani* and AS Roma, a football club in Rome, Italy.

**Ultrà and UltraS**—Italian: *Ultrà* are a traditional form of Italian “ultras,” whereas *UltraS* are a collection of right-wing hooligans holding onto Fascist ideology.

**Voetbalvandalisme**—Dutch: lit. *Voetbal* “football” + *vandalisme* “vandalism,” the early term (c. 1970s) of violent fan extremism stemming from English fans abroad in the Netherlands.

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