

# **Hilary Silver: Winning by losing -- Germany's innocent nationalism**

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BERLIN

LIKE MOST Americans, I have never been a soccer fan. The closest I ever came to the game was the debate over the politics of soccer moms. Yet living in Germany since May, I was caught up in World Cup fever.

One could not avoid it. Every commercial and public establishment in Berlin was bedecked with the world's flags or inappropriate images of soccer balls. They even painted the sphere atop the Alexanderplatz TV needle like a pink soccerball. With my multi-national friends and colleagues, I watched the games in the local beer gardens, regardless of whether the Americans, Germans, or other teams were playing.

Nevertheless, I have long thought that it would be a good thing for Germany to lose in the semi-finals. It was precisely the right game in which to do so. Imagine if the German team had made it to the finals and had had to compete with France. What an odd replay of old nationalist rivalries that would have made! Anyway, a host should let the guest win. Germany has shown that it can be a "good loser."

The country can be proud of a respectable showing and its contribution of dramatic momentum to the tournament without having to confront what a united Germany would do if it emerged as Weltmeister, world champion. A third-place showing was adequate to give the politicians photo-ops and the public cause for celebration.

Many observers have noted that, perhaps for the first time since the fall of the Berlin Wall, Germans have been displaying their flag and other signs of patriotism. Some people have expressed concern, even disgust at the exhibition. Yet, rather than a much feared resurgence of nationalism, this expression of national pride is pedestrian. Supporters of the World Cup finalists, France and Italy, were at least as outwardly jubilant as German fans at their teams' showings. As The New York Times's Roger Cohen put it, Germany exhibited a "liberating normality."

Safely ensconced in the European Union, once again sending its soldiers abroad

but under limited conditions and with international legitimacy, Germans have rejoined the nations of the world by confirming their essential commitment to democracy and human rights. Despite the taxing challenges from domestic extremists, German leaders have committed resources and moral capital to ensure civil rights and public security without heavy-handedness, and to reinforce the universalist message of the World Cup. To be sure, the authorities displaced panhandlers and "sanitized" the central city for the tourists, but this was no different in places where the United States and other countries have hosted the Olympics or other large festivals.

Analogies to the 1936 Olympics are simply misplaced. Today, Germany's government is a grand coalition of right and left parties, presided over by the nation's first woman chancellor, Christian Democrat Angela Merkel -- who watched the semi-finals sitting beside Italy's recently elected socialist leader. Both countries have come a long way since the '30s.

One anecdote might well convey what I see as the essential wholesomeness of this sort of German nationalism. I watched the first World Cup game in which Germany competed on the giant screen in front of the Brandenburg Gate, from which the "fan mile" stretched out through the Tiergarten behind us. A gang of skinheads -- half-naked, pierced, and tattooed, some with Mohawks dyed red, black, and gold, the German national colors -- clearly had had too much to drink. Those of us packed around them tried to keep our distance, but another group of blond, blue-eyed young Germans made the mistake of laughing at their compatriots.

A facedown ensued, with all of us exceedingly tense -- worried that violence might erupt with no possible exit. Yet after a skinhead pushed his opponent in an apparent attempt to save his honor, the security forces quickly moved in, pulled the offending gang aside, put them up against a wall, frisked them, and ultimately ejected them from the festivities.

The surveillance was undoubtedly heavy, but one was pleasantly relieved by the scrupulousness with which the police had responded, the protection of everyone's civil rights, and how public peace was preserved. This could have been ugly.

"Friendly Germans": Is this not an oxymoron? Yet Berlin, with its diverse, multi-racial international visitors, truly feels at present like a "global city." The city government may be insolvent, unemployment may be in double digits, but the "carnival of cultures" went on everywhere. Brazilians, Africans, Latinos -- Berlin has rarely seen such a palette of colors. As Germany finally recognizes that it is "an immigration country," the World Cup has given ordinary Germans an opportunity to

practice hospitality to foreigners, especially in the more provincial cities, which have few people of color. Perhaps in future the Germans will even emulate France by putting more immigrants on their teams.

After Germany lost its match with Italy, people on the streets of Berlin were subdued, sad, but, surprisingly, not angry. There were still cars happily honking their horns, as the Germans had done after previous games. Some fireworks were still set off. The prostitutes on Oranienbergerstrasse were still strutting their stuff in platform boots and bustiers. The pizza parlors were full, despite the issue there of an occasional "Viva Italia!"

My neighbor, who put her television out on the sidewalk to watch the game, proudly displayed a homemade Italy sign, but was not accosted. The only potentially dangerous character I witnessed that night was a very drunk fellow holding his German flag aloft in the middle of the street, daring a sympathizer to offer him a ride home.

It was as if the entire city, the entire country, had stayed at a party into the wee hours, and now, with regret, the party was over.

On Saturday night, July 8, Germany redeemed its self-esteem by taking third place, over Portugal. The city once again exploded in jubilation, horns blasted, close to a million people of all ages rejoiced in the streets. Fireworks lit the sky as Angela Merkel congratulated the "Klins-men." Fans looked forward to 2010.

Indeed, the Sunday, July 9, final, in which Italy -- the team that deprived Germany of its championship -- defeated France, was something of an anti-climax.

Will Germans put away their red, black, and gold now that the 2006 Weltmeisterschaft is over? Will the flags come down? What will become of those ridiculous football hats people have worn? The sales on souvenirs have already begun.

In the end, does this sort of harmless national sentiment really matter? Regardless of who won the World Cup, Germany, in losing, can consider itself a winner as well.

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