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Sporting Diplomacy: Did Rugby Almost Change the Face of Europe Before 1914?

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In the 19th century the very British game of rugby football was adopted successfully throughout her Dominions; by 1906, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa were regularly beating us at our own game. In the years preceding the First World War, rugby tried to conquer territories closer to home with expeditionary forays into Continental Europe.

Rosslyn Park was the pioneer club in Europe in April 1892, playing Stade Français in Paris, while London newspapers fretted that this might lead to 'International Complications'. Baron Pierre de Coubertin, French rugby cup final referee and admirer of English school sports, took a hand in organising the game; he even wrote a match report under the byline Pierre le Vieux. Later that year he made his first public call to revive the ancient Olympics. The first modern Games took place in Athens in 1896; Rosslyn Park can surely claim a part in their inspiration. Park won in Paris through 'superior science and training' and repeated their visit in 1893, 1900 and 1912. A mixed Stade/Racing team toured London under the colours of Coubertin's Union des Sociétés Françaises de Sports Athlétiques (USFSA) in 1893. Their jerseys carried two linked rings of red and blue - see where he was going there? A London editor hoped that the growing popularity of rugby would have a pacifying effect on the old warring enmities of Europe:

Judging by the number of clubs springing up not only in France but Germany we may, in a few years hence, see friendly football fights between those old rivals in less agreeable warfare, and also between the continental and British nations.

By 1912, Park was boldly carrying the gospel to the Central Powers, bringing light to nations not only ignorant of Rugby, but also rattling sabres in the general direction of England. A visiting Hungarian Association Football team saw Rugby Football played and wanted to introduce it at home. The necessary finance was found (the hosts put up £400 and the Club £100 - good business) and, bolstered by reinforcements from universities, the Services and hospitals, 42 players toured Austria-Hungary. Two sides, christened Rosslyn Park and London Nomads, played each other; 3,000 miles were travelled in ten April days.

Despite European press fears that such a violent game must inevitably lead to an increase in duelling rugby was a huge popular success:

Both Austrian and Hungarian crowds were very lavish in their applause and at the conclusion of each match much laughter was caused when some of the younger onlookers raced onto the field and started forming scrums and trying to collar one another.



The first exhibition match in Prague attracted 'a large enthusiastic crowd, who although very amused at the scrum formation, thoroughly appreciated the various points of the game and heartily applauded every clever piece of play, especially the keen tackling.' The circus moved to Budapest, where 'many spectators were evidently conversant with Rugby rules.' The missionaries were making conversions: their hosts announced that a 'Rugby Club would shortly be formed in Buda-Pesth'.

The tour rounded off in Vienna, where 'a very handsome silver cup was presented to the Captain of the winning team, E H Mitchell, who returned thanks'. In a warm-up for its wartime columns, The *Times* correspondent hinted at flaws in the opposition's national psyche:

The unanimous verdict of today's Press is that the game, although amusing and even comical as a spectacle, is totally unfitted to the Austrian temperament and ought not to be taken up. The Austrian writers praise highly the self-control and sportsmanlike spirit of the English players but confess unreservedly that such virtues are at present beyond Austrian footballers, and seem inclined to the verdict that, however excellent the Rugby game may be a form of violent exercise, it is not football.

Did rugby miss its chance to change the world? Pre-war Vienna was home to men who would shape the century: Leon Trotsky, launched *Pravda* there and met Josef Stalin travelling under the alibi Stavros Papadopoulos; Josip Broz, later Marshall Tito, worked in the local Daimler factory; Sigmund Freud opened the secrets of the mind on Berggasse. Perhaps even a homeless 23 year-old Austrian student witnessed this last Rosslyn Park game in Vienna. His dreams of studying painting at the Vienna Academy of Fine Arts had been twice dashed and he now lodged in a doss-house in Meldermannstrasse near the Danube. What if Adolf Hitler had channelled his frustration at rejection by the Academy into becoming a chippy scrum-half, rather than a fanatical dictator (some may see little difference).

It was not to be, nor in 1913, when further expeditions were made to Hanover in Germany. Both the Habsburg Empire and Deutsches Reich remained unmoved. In July 1914, after the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand at Sarajevo, Vienna was at the heart of events that saw Europe descend into the abyss of war. If the touring spirit and camaraderie of rugby had instead prevailed, how might Europe look now?

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