



Ajax, the Dutch, the War: The Strange Tale of Soccer During Europe's Darkest Hour

Simon Kuper

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When most people think about the Netherlands, images of tulips and peaceful pot smoking residents spring to mind. Bring up soccer, and most will think of Johan Cruyff, the Dutch player thought to rival Pele in preternatural skill, and Ajax, one of the most influential soccer clubs in the world whose academy system for young athletes has been replicated around the globe (and most notably by Barcelona and the 2010 world champions, Spain).

But as international bestselling author Simon Kuper writes in *Ajax, The Dutch, The War: Soccer in Europe During the Second World War*, the story of soccer in Holland cannot be understood without investigating what really occurred in this country during WWII. For decades, the Dutch have enjoyed the reputation of having a “good war.” The myth is even resonant in Israel where Ajax is celebrated. The fact is, the Jews suffered shocking persecution at the hands of Dutch collaborators. Holland had the second largest Nazi movement in Europe outside Germany, and in no other country except Poland was so high a percentage of Jews deported.

Kuper challenges Holland’s historical amnesia and uses soccer—particularly the experience of Ajax, a club long supported by Amsterdam’s Jews—as a window on wartime Holland and Europe. Through interviews with Resistance fighters, survivors, wartime soccer players and more, Kuper uncovers this history that has been ignored, and also finds out why the Holocaust had a profound effect on soccer in the country.

Ajax produced Cruyff but was also built by members of the Dutch resistance and Holocaust survivors. It became a surrogate family for many who survived the war and its method for producing unparalleled talent became the envy of clubs around the world. In this passionate, haunting and moving work of forensic reporting, Kuper tells the breathtaking story of how Dutch Jews survived the unspeakable and came to play a strong role in the rise of the most exciting and revolutionary style of soccer — “Total Football” — the world had ever seen.

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