

Citation style

Schiller, Kai: review of: Hans Woller, Gerd Müller oder wie das große Geld in den Fußball kam. Eine Biografie, München: C.H. Beck, 2019, in: German Historical Institute London Bulletin, Vol. XLIII (2021), 1, p. 154-158,
<https://www.recensio.net/r/01c93c432ac1408fb14ab511a070b2da>

First published: German Historical Institute London Bulletin, Vol. XLIII (2021), 1

GERMAN HISTORICAL INSTITUTE LONDON

Bulletin



copyright

This article may be downloaded and/or used within the private copying exemption. Any further use without permission of the rights owner shall be subject to legal licences (§§ 44a-63a UrhG / German Copyright Act).

HANS WOLLER, *Gerd Müller oder wie das große Geld in den Fußball kam: Eine Biografie* (Munich: C. H. Beck Verlag, 2019), 352 pp. 29 ill. ISBN 978 3 406 74151 7 (hardcover). €22.95

HANNAH JONAS, *Fußball in England und Deutschland von 1961 bis 2000: Vom Verlierer der Wohlstandsgesellschaft zum Vorreiter der Globalisierung, Nach dem Boom* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2019), 314 pp. ISBN 978 3 525 37086 5 (hardcover). €60.00

Though the history of football, the most popular global sport, has a life of its own, it can also provide important insights into broader social trends. Evidence for this can be found in two recent books which tackle the history of the West German affluent society from the 1960s onwards through the lens of sport in different, yet complementary ways. One is a scholarly but elegantly written biography of Gerd Müller by a now retired senior historian at Munich's Institute of Contemporary History, and the first such book on football from the flagship history publisher C. H. Beck—a welcome development that suggests sports history is now a fully accepted branch of cultural history. The other book is a meticulously researched comparative history of football in Germany and England from the 1960s until the end of the twentieth century that takes in the post-Fordist shift towards the 'individualized consumer society'. This Ph.D.-cum-monograph by a more junior historian is one of the outstanding products of the Nach dem Boom research cluster at the history departments of the universities of Tübingen and Trier, and equally suggests a recognition among leading German historians that it has become impossible to write contemporary history without paying attention to the histories of sport and leisure.

The main context of Woller's excellent biography of the 'nation's bomber'—the FC Bayern Munich player who still holds the records for most goals scored in a Bundesliga season (40 in 1971/72) and best ever goal-to-game ratio (365 goals in 427 German top-division games)—is the professionalization and commercialization of football in the Federal Republic following the foundation of the Bundesliga in 1963. These processes were accompanied by a combination of important factors which have already been explored in depth in other scholarly publications, but which are given a specific regional

focus and grounding here. They included the oft-repeated assertion by Bundesliga clubs that the main reason for their existence was to benefit the public (*Gemeinnützigkeit*) by also catering for a host of amateur sports under their umbrella. This allowed them to claim tax relief despite operating as businesses and delayed the full professionalization of German football by more than a century compared to England, where clubs were run along corporate lines from the nineteenth century onwards. Other factors going hand in hand with the late professionalization of the game in the Federal Republic were various kinds of (often shady) tax avoidance schemes, under-the-table payments to players, and mutually beneficial relationships between clubs and local and regional politicians. While clubs benefited from these relationships in financial terms, politicians reaped political rewards by demonstrating their similarity to a mostly male electorate through their real or pretend love of the game.

Woller's most damning insight into the special treatment Bayern Munich received from regional politicians emerges from his access to the personal papers of the Bavarian finance minister Ludwig Huber, since the ministry's official documentation remains closed to his and other researchers' eyes. Woller shows that the Bavarian finance ministry actively encouraged the leadership of Bayern Munich to engage in illegal practices, such as hiding profits made during lucrative tours abroad to South America and elsewhere. Ironically, the club became a victim of its own success, as the income from these tours was urgently needed to foot a constantly rising wage bill. While these often extremely tiring trips revealed the players to be 'slaves of their own demands' (p. 105), the practice also deterred them from moving abroad in lucrative transfers to Spain or Italy.

In practice, this meant that, upon their return from foreign tours, the club's charter flights often made stopovers in Zurich to deposit cash in Swiss bank accounts. After arriving in Munich, the players were then smuggled through German customs with pockets full of dollars by a high-ranking politician who had accompanied the team on their tour abroad. Before television money became the dominant factor in club finances that it is now (which forms one of the central topics in Jonas's chapters on the hypercommercialization of football since the 1990s), practices such as this – along with other factors such as the newly built

80,000 capacity Olympic stadium and the ability to retain players like Müller, Uli Hoeneß, Paul Breitner, and Franz Beckenbauer—were instrumental in Bayern's rise to international fame and success in the 1970s. Arguably, they also laid the long-term foundations for Bayern to become the hegemon at the top of the German football pyramid and join the ranks of European super-clubs like Real Madrid and Manchester United. Such illegal practices came to a partial end in the late 1970s, prompting Müller and Beckenbauer to run from the taxman and continue their careers in the USA. Given the long shadow they cast over Bayern's success, it is surprising that hardly an eyelid was batted among German football officials and club functionaries after Woller's revelations—a fact that suggests Bayern and the Bavarian regional government were not alone in such behaviour.

Woller elucidates these broader contexts of the 1960s and 1970s while telling the story of the meteoric rise of the youngest son of a day labourer from a childhood in very modest circumstances in an industrial town in northern Bavaria to international superstardom, which culminated in Müller scoring the winning goal for West Germany in the 1974 FIFA World Cup. With much sympathy and understanding, Woller tells a tale of riches easily gained, but also quickly lost. He shows the heavy price Müller had to pay for his stellar career: constant press intrusion into his private life due to his status in West German society; serious injuries, which were given only a quick fix to make him match-fit, thereby causing long-lasting physical damage; and severe mental health problems, including a long battle with alcoholism. Combining archival work with oral history, the book follows Müller's career from provincial Bavaria to Bayern, then the Fort Lauderdale Strikers in Florida, and back to Bayern as a youth coach. All of this makes for fascinating reading. In essence, it shows a player who—much like the recently deceased Diego Maradona, the global football icon of the following generation—was happiest on the pitch. Yet unlike Maradona, when Müller hit rock bottom, he could rely on the help of his former club—especially Uli Hoeneß, his former partner in the Bayern frontline, who grew into the role of club strongman and patriarch from the 1980s.

Hoeneß, of course, was to become a key figure in the radical commercialization and marketization of German football and in shaping

the football boom from the 1990s, following a period of relative decline in the 1980s—a decade now mostly remembered for hooliganism and disasters like Heysel and Hillsborough. Providing a convincing comparative analysis of this recent and still ongoing process in England and Germany is perhaps the main achievement of Jonas's monograph, whose analysis rests on an in-depth study of German and English football association files, press coverage, and economic and other research on the game in both countries. Jonas interprets the history of professional football in Germany and England as a facet of a new wave of globalization during a neo-liberal age in which football is not only a metaphor, but one of the driving forces of globalization. Jonas takes a variety of factors into account to explain the hypercommodification of the game through the symbiosis of football, the media, and the economy over the past three decades. In the process, she also elucidates its accompanying symptoms, which are comparable in both countries, such as the rise of football people to global celebrity; the heightened importance of advertising; the influx of businesspeople into the clubs; an aestheticized presentation of the game which is now broadcast from televisually optimized 'football cathedrals'; and critiques of commercialization and the search for an 'authentic' football, which is itself often quickly marketized and turned into a simulacrum.

As other scholars have also recognized, football's 'big bang moment' in England was the foundation of the Premier League in 1992, which led to a massive influx of funds for the clubs in this newly formed division as a result of the competition for broadcast rights between commercial television stations. The German equivalent was the sale of broadcast rights to Springer and Leo Kirch's ISPR agency one year earlier. The second catalyst for the hypercommodification of the sport came with the 1995 Bosman ruling of the European Court of Justice, which concerned players' freedom of movement between European countries. The substantial increase in player mobility that resulted from this led to the internationalization of football clubs and—because clubs now competed against each other for personnel—an explosion in player salaries at the top level. It will be interesting to see whether freedom of movement for this particular European workforce will be included in a trade agreement between the UK and the European Union and, more generally, if and how the Premier League will be affected by Brexit.

With Tottenham Hotspur and Manchester United acting as trailblazers, many football clubs in England were floated on the stock market after 1995 to raise funds. In Germany, the professional sections of football clubs were finally permitted by the German FA to become corporate entities in 1998, with some, like Bayern Munich and Borussia Dortmund, also issuing shares. However, an important limit was imposed with the '50+1 rule', which makes takeovers by foreign investors like that of Roman Abramovich at Chelsea FC in 2003 impossible—though, as the current example of RB Leipzig shows, there are ways around such regulations. Interestingly, as Jonas argues, many of the developments of the 1990s were rooted in the 1960s and 1970s—for example in the removal of salary caps in England in 1961 and Germany in 1972 and the beginning of sponsoring. However, as the 1980s showed, without a new generation of business-minded managers and club directors in full control, and without commercial television or a new spectator boom, the hypercommodification of football was impossible at that time.

In the end, the hypercommercialization of football ought to be read as a lesson about the economization of areas of society in which economic factors previously played only a minor role. As Jonas quite rightly points out, these processes of marketization produce both winners and losers, and can also be observed in other areas, including higher education.

KAY SCHILLER is Professor of Modern European History at the University of Durham. He has published widely on modern Jewish-German history, German cultural history, and the history of modern sport, including on the history of football—notably *WM 74: Als der Fußball modern wurde* (2014). He is currently editor-in-chief of *Sport in History*, a leading journal in the field.