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Italy's Troubling Relationship Between Soccer and anti-Semitism

Racist chants and insults of 'nasty Jews' are increasingly common at soccer stadiums, reflecting a rise in right-wing extremism throughout European soccer.

Anna Momiigliano and Italy | Mar 01, 2016 6:26 PM

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Paolo Di Canio making a fascist salute as a player for Lazio. Credit: Reuters

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MILAN – Last week, David Guetta, a soccer commentator from Florence, Italy, was waiting at London’s White Hart Lane railway station for the train back to his hotel, having just covered a match, when approximately 20 men started chanting to him in Italian: “Guetta, a train to Mauthausen is waiting for you,” referring to the Austrian concentration camp.

Guetta, who is Jewish, is well known in his hometown and used to anti-Semitic insults. “People have stopped me in cafes calling me ‘shitty Jew’ and stuff like that,” he told Haaretz. Once, they made a sign that said “David Guetta is circumcised.” He considers it an “occupational hazard,” but he’s no longer willing to let it slide. “Now I am starting to think that we need to be more vocal against racism in soccer, or this kind of thing will happen again and again,” he said.

That already seems to be the case. These episodes are representative of a growing problem of racism in Italian soccer – not just against Jews, but other minorities as well. In February, a referee had to interrupt a match in Rome because fans wouldn’t stop chanting xenophobic slogans at a black player.

Racist incidents have been steadily on the rise in Italian soccer for the past few decades, according to a 2014 report by the Observatory on Anti-Semitism at the Foundation Jewish Contemporary Documentation Center in Milan. Between 2000 and 2014, 630 soccer-related racist episodes were recorded, compared with 56 in the previous decade.

Major teams such as Verona, Lazio and, to a lesser extent, Roma and Inter Milan have some fans that are openly neo-fascist and neo-Nazi. In 2014, Verona supporters celebrated the end of the championship by forming a swastika with their cars. A year earlier Lazio supporters, trying to insult their archrivals, distributed stickers with images of Anne Frank

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wearing a Roma shirt.

Meanwhile, Italian Jews have reported an increased level of anti-Semitism in the country. According to a recent survey by the London-based Institute for Jewish Policy Research, 68 percent say they feel that anti-Semitism has increased over the past several years. Their sense is well-founded: A 2014 Pew Center survey indicated that 24 percent of Italians reported having a negative opinion of Jews.

“Racism in soccer is just a mirror of racism in society,” said Luca Pisapia, a reporter who covers the intersection of sports and politics at *Il Fatto*, a daily newspaper in Rome. “If right-wing extremists are more common among the fans of Lazio and Roma [both based in Rome], that’s because Rome has a bigger problem of right-wing extremism than other cities.”

Are soccer authorities serious about tackling racism?

At times, fans have been punished for engaging in hate speech. For instance, Lazio’s fans were banned from attending the stadium for two matches after chanting xenophobic slogans at a player.

But some have questioned the commitment of Italian soccer authorities to tackle racism – and even their credibility, since anti-Semitic remarks have come from top officials. In November, the president of the Italian Football Federation, Carlo Tavecchio, was caught on tape talking about “nasty Jews.” Earlier he was quoted as describing Africans as “banana eaters.” “If fans hear that people on the top say racist things, they think ‘Why shouldn’t I be allowed to say the same?’” noted Ruben Lopes Pegna, a Jewish soccer fan from Florence.

Guetta concurred: “People on the top, like Tavecchio, set the tone and everybody else follows.”

The trickle-down effect was on display in February when Federico Di Francesco, a soccer player for Virtus Lanciano, celebrated a goal by hailing fans with a Roman salute, a fascist gesture with strong racist implications. He received no reprimand. (He insisted his gesture wasn’t really a Roman salute, but a video leaves few doubts.)

“There is a tendency to trivialize these kinds of incidents,” said Ugo Tassinari, an expert on extremist right-wing movements and author of the book “Fascisteria.” “For a moment the [soccer] federation tried taking a tougher stance, but in the last few years, economic interests prevailed. The result is that there is a contradictory approach: Sometimes racism is punished, sometimes it is not.”

Fear of an economic backlash may deter teams whose fans are more closely associated with the far right from taking stronger action.

“To some extent, clubs are the hostage of hooligans, they are the ones bringing people to the stadium and thus providing revenues,” said Lopes Pegna. He believes the government, not the teams, should take on the issue. He also noted that as soccer attendance declines overall, extremists now constitute a larger proportion of fans in the stadiums.

Experts also blame the rise of racism in soccer on the infiltration of neo-Nazi and neo-fascist groups among soccer fans, which started in the 1990s. “Extremists see organized soccer fans as a good place to recruit people,” said Pisapia.

The Italian Interior Ministry currently recognizes 40 groups of soccer fans associated with the extreme right, encompassing around 3,700 people and comprising about 10 percent of the total extremist population, a small but vocal minority.

A modern Kristallnacht

Italy is not alone in its troubling relationship between sport and anti-Semitism; the problem persists throughout European soccer.

Episodes in the Netherlands and the United Kingdom have been reported by the international media, because they involve two major teams – London’s Tottenham Hotspur and Amsterdam’s Ajax, both of which have somewhat of a Jewish identity.

Tottenham is a team from North London, where Jewish immigrants used to live, and Ajax is the club of Amsterdam, which was once called the “Jerusalem of the West.”

Tottenham’s fans call themselves “Yids,” while Ajax supporters call themselves “Superjews” and their fans often display Stars of David and Israeli flags. As a result, they are sometimes greeted with anti-Semitic slurs and chants. In April, for instance, Utrecht fans shouted “Hamas, Hamas, Jews to the gas” to Ajax supporters, an incident that made headlines in the New York Times.

Despite such high-profile examples, an assessment released in June by the Anne Frank House found that the number of soccer-related anti-Semitic incidents in both countries has gradually decreased, possibly thanks to repeated calls from soccer authorities to avoid racist language and the work of organizations such as Kick It Out, an independent anti-discrimination organization active in British soccer.

“Since the late 1990s, the number of anti-Semitic incidents in and around [British] stadiums has gradually decreased,” the report said. “Chants and songs in this setting have become rare. However, the issue seems to have crossed over to a different domain. Anti-Semitic verbal abuse on social media has increased exponentially.”

However, this is not the case in Germany, where soccer has seen “an increase in anti-Semitic slogans, chants that refer to the Holocaust and the use of Nazi symbols around stadiums,” due to the “infiltration of right-wing extremist groups,” according to the same report.

“Germany and Sweden are the two countries where the situation is worsening the most,” said Tassinari. In both countries recent attacks on immigrants have involved soccer fans acting in coordination with far-right extremists. Though the violence is often directed at immigrants and Muslims, it implicates Jews as well. Many German soccer fans now identify with the far-right German movement PEGIDA, or Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the West, according to Tassinari, whose supporters have blamed Jews for the influx of immigrants.

In January, nearly 250 extremists vandalized shops and kebab restaurants in the German town of Leipzig. The episode targeted mostly refugees, immigrants and second-generation immigrants. “The attacks were organized by far-right groups,” said Tassinari. “But the ‘labor force’ that carried them out came from soccer fans.” German media compared it to Kristallnacht.

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