WORLD CUP FEVER

Also by Simon Kuper

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WORLD CUP FEVER

A Footballing Journey in Nine Tournaments

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For Leo and Joey, even though they support France

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The World Cup Diaries

One evening in June 1990, when I was a twenty-year-old university student, my friend Bryn walked into the college bar. 'If you had tickets to the World Cup,' he asked, 'would you go?'

I didn't think it was a very difficult question.

'I can get match tickets,' Bryn explained, 'but if I bugger off to Italy in the middle of term, I'll get into trouble.'

I said, 'If I had tickets to the World Cup, I'd also get tickets for my friends.'

'Oh, that's not a problem,' said Bryn. 'I can get as many tickets as I want.'

It was all thanks to Mars. The food company was sponsoring the tournament and had thousands of match tickets for business associates, but few of them wanted to go. If they were American or Asian, they probably didn't care about football. If they were European, they tended to be put off by visions of British hooligans sacking the Italian peninsula. (Margaret Thatcher, the prime minister, had encouraged the English FA to 'consider very carefully' withdrawing from the tournament.) And so some guy at Mars – the dad of a friend of Bryn's – had been stuck with stacks of spare tickets.

A few days later, Bryn, our friend Henry and I were chugging to Dover in Bryn's battered car. We crossed the Channel by boat, and spent twenty-four hours in an increasingly smelly railway carriage having the sorts of conversations that bumptious twenty-year-old male students had in the days before PlayStation: about girls, politics, and the World Cup.

Though we had only the dimmest awareness of it, globalisation

had just begun to accelerate. The Berlin Wall had fallen seven months earlier, China was opening up, and new technologies were connecting the world: cheap flights, high-speed trains, cable TV and – coming soon – the internet. The new era would change the World Cup, as I would discover over the next three decades.

The three of us were busy resolving the Bulgarian governmental crisis when our train chugged out of France and stopped at an Italian border post in the middle of nowhere. We waved our stiff-backed blue British passports at the two border guards. They studied them, and spotted that Bryn was born in Liverpool – the city at that point associated with the Heysel disaster, which five years earlier had killed dozens of Italians at the Liverpool-Juventus European Cup final. The guards conferred with each other and then told us, in broken English: 'You cannot enter Italy.'

'What?' we said.

'You might be hooligans,' they pointed out.

We pulled our IDs out of our pockets, but nothing could sway them. As a last resort we waved our library cards. 'Studenti di *Oxford* Università!' we shouted.

The border officials conferred. On a pretty weak sociological basis, they decided that if we were Oxford students, we probably weren't hooligans. It was an early lesson in the benefits of institution-dropping. They waved us back onto the train and into Italy. That's how professional the security operation for the 1990 World Cup was.

I know we arrived in Milan on the evening of 8 June, because the opening match between Diego Maradona's Argentina and Cameroon had just finished in the San Siro, and though an Argentinian victory was a foregone conclusion, we didn't yet know the score. We walked from the station into town behind a lone Cameroonian fan wrapped in his country's flag. Every passing car tooted at him in tribute. We realised that Cameroon had beaten the world champions.

Our friend's father bought us dinner in a real restaurant in Milan, then went off on a business trip. We stayed in his flat for free, and never saw him again. We had tickets for Colombia-United Arab Emirates in Bologna, Czechoslovakia-USA in Florence, and Scotland-Costa Rica in Genoa.

Inside the stadiums, we saw that Mars's business associates weren't the only people to have snubbed the World Cup. Leafing through my photographs of the tournament today, I'm struck by the underpopulated stands. My first World Cup was a village fête.

The amateurish feel extended to some of the teams, too. A few of the American players we saw beaten 5-0 by Czechoslovakia in Florence were college students, as were a large chunk of their followers. And Cameroon's thirty-eight-year-old forward Roger Milla, who scored four goals at Italia '90, had been playing for a waiters' team on the island of Reunion in the Indian Ocean.

My first World Cup game: Colombia-United Arab Emirates, Bologna, 9 June 1990

Our tempers frayed on the journey home, and my friend Henry insists to this day that I chucked his untouched KFC meal into a bin at Dover, but that can't be right.

I have been to every men's World Cup since – nine in all as I write this, in 2025. That ranks me fairly high on the leader board. Even the man who created the World Cup, Jules Rimet, a guiding spirit of this book, only saw five tournaments. In Qatar in 2022, FIFA and the international sports press association AIPS held a ceremony for the seventy-odd journalists who had attended at least eight World Cups. The doyen was eighty-eight-year-old Argentinian radio commentator Enrique Macaya Márquez, who had covered seventeen tournaments since his first in Sweden in 1958. I'm not a member of AIPS, so I wasn't invited to the ceremony; I later watched the video of each journalist being handed a miniature World Cup trophy by the beaming Brazilian great Ronaldo. One of the recipients was Grant Wahl. Within a fortnight, I would watch him die of a ruptured aneurysm in the stands at Argentina-Holland.

I wrote this book partly to share the experience of being at a men's World Cup. (I should say straight away that the book doesn't cover the women's World Cup, a whole different story

that somebody else should tell.) The tournament occupies the thoughts of billions of people, and produces images that many will remember all their lives, but most fans never get to attend it. Much of this book recounts fragments of my journeys around World Cups since 1990. Some of my best moments at these tournaments have been far from the stadium, in exotic places that I'll never see again, from the Amazon to the battlefield at Stalingrad. Nick Hornby wrote that he had measured out his life in Arsenal fixtures. I have done the same with World Cups.

In my office in Paris (the city where I live, thanks largely to the 1998 tournament), I have a bookshelf lined with over 200 journalistic notebooks spanning most of my career – A6 hardcover books that you can slip inside a jacket and carry around.

These notebooks are the primary sources of this book. Sometimes I jotted down something from an interview, or a vignette I saw or overheard, not for the next day's paper, but hoping it might come in handy decades later. For this book, I also pillaged the

articles I pumped out during World Cups. I have written up my experiences using hindsight, trying to evoke what it felt like that day, but also knowing what we know now.

What's it like to be at a World Cup? And what's it like to play in one? I asked winners from Maradona to Kylian Mbappé (and some losers with lifelong regrets). The day after you win the thing, says Didier Deschamps, the victorious French captain in 1998, you wake up, and you still have the same first name, the same surname, but you now also have two more words that will attach to you forever: 'World champion.'

Even if you don't win, an inspired moment or an immortal blunder at a World Cup can fix your reputation forever. One day, that match, perhaps played when you were a twenty-year-old who thought life lay ahead of you, might be the opening line of your obituary. I've tried to evoke certain on-field moments, but I haven't recounted long-gone games. There's nothing deader, for a writer, than a dead football match. I'm sorry, but you really did have to be there.

Football is never just football, and that's especially true of World Cups. In fact, many people love the World Cup despite the football. What gives the tournament its impact? What do we all get out of it? And what does the World Cup tell us about our changing world?

Each new World Cup becomes the biggest media event in history, judged by numbers of TV hours consumed and clicks generated. The tournament is a global carnival that dramatises the role of luck in human affairs, teaches us the psychology of biting, and offers us a peek into the collective Uruguayan soul, all while giving glimpses of undying genius and inspiring a worldwide conversation. For the host country, the World Cup is usually a voyage of self-discovery. Autocrats from Mussolini to Putin have tried to get in on the action.

Since Italia '90, the World Cup's geography has changed. My first five tournaments, from 1990 through to 2006, were played in the developed world, mostly in countries familiar to the tournament's founder, Jules Rimet, so Part One of this book recounts the period when old established countries did the hosting. Two hosts in this period, Italy in 1990 and France in 1998, had staged World Cups during Rimet's reign as president of FIFA from 1921 to 1954. Another host, Germany, had been an obsession of his since his years in the trenches of the First World War. The US, host of the 1994 tournament, might have seemed a new territory, but in fact an American team played in the very first World Cup, in 1930. The biggest departure from the historical norm during my first five World Cups, the 2002 tournament in Japan and South Korea, at least took place in countries that had joined FIFA during Rimet's era.

Part Two, 'New Worlds', captures the move to unexplored territories from 2010 to 2022. FIFA's choice of Russia and Qatar as hosts for 2018 and 2022 prefigured shifts in global power beyond football. Each World Cup since 2010 has dramatised certain themes of the modern world. For South Africa in 2010 and Brazil in 2014, for instance, it was the issue of multinational capitalism invading the 'Global South'.

The book takes a deep dive into the South African World Cup, the tournament with which I have the strongest personal connection due to my family history. In fact, my account of that tournament starts more than a century before kick-off, and ends in 2024. Every World Cup is a much longer story than the one-month tournament itself, but only in South Africa have I tried to tell it from beginning to end.

Brazil in 2014 hoped to showcase *jogo bonito*, its ancestral style of football that had attempted to resist globalisation. In Russia in 2018, the theme was the rise of autocrats. Qatar in 2022 dramatised migration and the might of fossil-fuel states. As I write in 2025, the 2026 World Cup risks becoming a publicity vehicle for Donald Trump. World Cups don't change the world, but they do illuminate it.

PART ONE

IN JULES RIMET'S WORLD

2
Finding Jules Rimet

One beautiful autumn morning I cycled from my flat in Paris to a municipal cemetery in the suburb of Bagneux. I was looking for the grave of Jules Rimet. Bagneux was a surprisingly unglamorous place for him to be buried; when he died in 1956, he had served as FIFA's president for thirty-three years, and the World Cup trophy had already been named after him.

Although I was armed with a map of the cemetery's celebrity graves, it took me half an hour to find the Rimet family's. Nobody seemed to have tended it in years. The flat tombstone with its stone cross was overgrown with moss.

There was a sprig of withered leaves that someone must have left months before. Only one inscription in the stone was still legible: 'Simon Rimet, 1911–2002.' Perhaps the family had died out.

The sole sign of the man I had come for was a small gold plaque inscribed, 'Jules RIMET, 24/10/1873 – 15/10/1956.' It didn't mention anything he had done in life. Only the golden colour evoked the gold of the Jules Rimet Cup – the original World Cup trophy, which has vanished even more fully than its creator.

Rimet's name lingers in football memory, but the man himself is forgotten. Who was the white-haired Frenchman with the careful little moustache who stood at the centre of every group portrait of football officialdom? Very little has been written about him, and that almost entirely in French. But even in France, he is 'practically unknown', writes the historian Renaud Leblond.

Nonetheless, the World Cup that we know today bears the fingerprints of its maker, a man whose desire to create the tournament stemmed partly from his years fighting in the First World War. After encountering nationalism in its rawest forms, Rimet helped steer international football through a second war, during which he collaborated (uneasily) with France's pro-Nazi Vichy regime. He oversaw every World Cup between 1930 and 1950.

Who was Jules Rimet, and how did he shape this tournament?

Most of the moustachioed Europeans who created the great international sporting competitions ranged from upper class to full-blown aristocratic. Rimet was different.

He was born to a peasant family in the eastern French village of Theuley in 1873, three years after his country's catastrophic defeat in the Franco-Prussian war. The Prussians had swallowed France's Alsace and Lorraine regions to create a united Germany. The Franco-German frontier had shifted westwards to just sixty miles from Rimet's village. The French economy had been devastated and Rimet's father had sold his farm and become a grocer.

Rimets had lived in Theuley since at least the seventeenth century, but during Jules's childhood his parents migrated to Paris, leaving their eldest son and his four siblings with their grandfather, who ran a windmill. Jules became a prize-winning pupil and a choirboy, but when he was about eleven, poverty forced the family to sell the windmill. After the boy took his First Communion, he followed his parents to Paris, where they ran a grocery on the rue Cler, in what was then a lower-middle-class neighbourhood a few streets from the Eiffel Tower.

Rimet would recognise the street as it is today: a lively shopping district, dotted with a few Haussmannian buildings. The facade of a horse butcher's that probably dates from his era is still there, but it's now a fancy seafood restaurant. Groceries advertise 'bio' fruits in four languages to tourists and local bourgeois shoppers.

The most modern sport in Rimet's village had been conkers. He probably discovered football in the streets around the rue Cler. Another French biographer, Jean-Yves Guillain, has him kicking balls (as well as playing a medieval fighting sport called *barres*) on the nearby Esplanade des Invalides.

But play was never a big part of Rimet's life. He was what Parisians call, with some disdain, *un ambitieux:* a pious provincial striver. He worked in the family grocery, but also read the classics, took evening courses and studied law at university. Later

he worked for a debt collection agency, which would have brought him into intimate contact with the local poor. He established himself several cuts above them: one photograph captures the young man and two friends in top hats.

By the 1890s, football clubs were sprouting in Paris. In 1897 the twenty-four-year-old Rimet and some friends met in a bistro to create their own club. They called it Red Star, a name suggested by Miss Jenny, the British governess employed by the Rimet family. As well as football, the club had sections for fencing, cycling, running and literature (Rimet was a bad poet).

Rimet served as Red Star president until 1910, and afterwards remained vice president of the Catholic-inspired football federation CFI. His speeches were heavy on abstractions ('liberty', 'youth', 'moral and physical progress') but he was also a canny diplomat and a bureaucratic tiger. In short, he was a born football official.

He doesn't seem to have fallen in love with the game itself. He only played in matches if a Red Star side was a man short. Rather, being a pious Catholic with a social conscience, he saw the game as an instrument to uplift the poor. He wanted them to rise as he had. Football would give working men dignity, and a sense of solidarity. He'd been inspired one day watching players who battled and sweated during a match, then had a drink with their opponents afterwards. In sport everyone worked together, referees were respected and cheats were punished. If only the world worked like that, he liked to say. It was his version of what Victorian Britons called 'muscular Christianity'.

The grocer's son understood that if poor men were going to play the game full-time they would need to be paid for it. His support for professional football – which was already thriving in Britain – put him firmly on one side of the great sporting argument of his age. Also in Paris in the 1890s, a slightly older Frenchman named Baron Pierre de Coubertin was reviving the ancient Olympics. Like Rimet, he thought that sport could help moralise the masses, but Coubertin's creed was amateurism and he didn't see why athletes needed to be paid. The baron's modern Olympics

were strictly amateur. He was happy for football to remain a niche elite sport.

The provincial *ambitieux* Rimet took on the baron, writing: 'The Olympic ideal is of a refined essence. It's the ideal ethic to lead men to perfection, but is perfection of this world?' In an unfinished polemic that he wrote later in life, he denounced amateurism as a way to allow 'the arbitrary domination of a privileged oligarchy'. By the 1910s, Red Star was signing international footballers from the Netherlands, Belgium and Germany, and paying them semi-covertly – in so-called 'expenses', or by giving them sham jobs.

Victorian Britons invented most modern sports but couldn't see the point of playing them against foreigners. That left it to the world's rival elite, the Parisians, to create international sporting competitions, which they did in a whoosh around the turn of the twentieth century.* Coubertin staged the first modern Olympics in 1896. The newspaper *L'Auto* created the Tour de France in 1903. A year later, two international federations were founded within a few minutes' walk of each other in central Paris: the Fédération Internationale de l'Automobile began writing the rules for motor racing, and in May 1904, on a courtyard off 229 rue Saint Honoré, seven European men created the Fédération Internationale de Football Association, or FIFA.

Today, the shopfront at number 229 is a travel shop selling luxury suitcases. The historical plaque in front describes a seventeenth-century Cistercian church that stood on this spot. There's no reference anywhere to FIFA. Number 229's courtyard still houses various small businesses, as it probably did in 1904 and in the main downstairs space, where FIFA might have been founded, there's now an orthopaedist – the foot tradition lives on.

As early as 1905, FIFA's official bulletins raised the notion of holding a championship of national teams, but at this stage it was still a pipe dream. The only existing international football tournament was the Olympics. On 27 and 28 June 1914, at

* I told this story in my 2024 book about Paris, *Impossible City*.

a FIFA congress in Norway, a motion was passed to recognise 'the Olympic football tournament as an amateur World Cup, if organised in conformity with FIFA's regulations'. Rimet, who was present, grumbled quietly about the amateurism – 'We're far from a real World Cup!' – but, knowing he was in a minority, he let it go. Then, on the second morning of the congress, the Archduke Franz-Ferdinand was assassinated in Sarajevo. Instead of a World Cup, there was going to be a world war.

Rimet was already forty-one, with a wife and three young children, but he seems to have volunteered for the front. He joined the army on 4 August 1914, the day after France entered the war, and was still in the trenches in the autumn of 1918. It's a small miracle that he is buried in a civilian's grave at Bagneux and not in one of the cemetery's adjoining fields of military tombstones for French and British soldiers killed in the Great War.

A remarkable photograph survives of Rimet's war. It is 1916, and he is sitting in a trench, wearing his officer's kepi, surrounded by seven black infantrymen. These must have been some of the '*tirailleurs sénégalais*' – literally, 'Senegalese riflemen', though they were in fact recruited all over French west Africa – who fought for France in the Great War. Their presence was decried by the Germans as a scandalous introduction of 'savagery' into 'civilised warfare'. The French themselves were embarrassed by their reliance on black men. They rarely mentioned it afterwards, and fobbed off the African veterans with tiny pensions. The war may have been Rimet's only lifetime encounter with Africans – but presumably quite an intimate one.

Even freezing in a trench on the western front, he remained at heart a football official. His pre-war fellow official in Paris, Henri Delaunay, a bony, bespectacled young nerd, spent much of the war plotting to create a French version of the English FA Cup. It was to be called the Coupe Charles-Simon, named after Delaunay's former boss in the CFI federation, who had been killed in 1915 by German shrapnel. On 16 April 1917, Rimet wrote from the front to Delaunay:

> My apologies, when your first letter reached me I was on the lines and very busy … I don't want to delay longer, and I send you my trusted approval. Yesterday I saw Reichel [another football official serving in the army], who took the trouble to come 15 kilometres on horseback to tell me disagreeable things about the negotiations for the competition in question …
>
> He didn't give me good reason not to approve, and his intervention does not modify my first intention. I am shivering as I write to you, so please excuse my scribble.

Rimet was scribbling this at a fairly dramatic moment in the war: days later, French soldiers staged mutinies against their army leadership. Having lost over a million of their comrades, they were refusing orders to attack. But the French Cup was set up. (Delaunay would eventually create an even bigger football competition; he spent decades pushing for a European Championship for national teams, which finally launched in 1958, three years after his death.)

Rimet had a 'good war'. As always, he was upwardly mobile, 'promoted from private to corporal to sergeant to lieutenant and finally, in 1919, to major', write the academics Philippe Vonnard and Grégory Quin in a biographical paper on Rimet. He also invented a cheap rangefinder that, as he explained in an accompanying booklet, would allow 'everybody, the soldier like the chief, to assess a distance with the least risk of error'. A military dispatch of May 1916 singled him out: 'In a delicate position, this machine-gun officer gave proof of judicious initiative, tireless zeal and a lot of *sang-froid* during various bombardments.' Another dispatch, just before the Armistice, said:

> Monsieur Rimet, lieutenant, at the front for three years now, while engaged on October 20, 1918 with determining the elements of an indirect machine-gun assault, and caught in a violent enemy bombardment, did not leave the terrain until he had accomplished his task.

He won the Croix de Guerre three times.

France lost 1.3 million soldiers in the war, including several Red Star players, while another million Frenchmen were invalided. But almost immediately after the Armistice, in the winter of 1918–19, Rimet was back in action as a football administrator. In April 1919 he became president of the new French national football federation, which united the various squabbling federations of pre-war days. Delaunay was his general secretary, and both men would remain in their posts until after the Second World War. In 1921 Rimet was also elected president of FIFA. Oddly for such a proponent of professional football, he was a strictly amateur president, only accepting travel expenses (though, given his constant motion, these would have added up).

He put his life's energy into these roles. When off duty, he lived quietly as a DIY enthusiast, a reader of Voltaire and Plato, and a gardener who liked pottering around in his clogs in his country cottage north of Paris.

He barely mentioned the Great War after 1918, but it seems to have remade his world view forever. Like many French ex-combatants, Rimet had returned from war obsessed with peace. FIFA, in his mind, was the footballing equivalent of the new League of Nations. His lifetime preoccupation became, to quote the title of a pamphlet he published aged eighty, 'Football and the reconciliation of peoples'. He would always say that FIFA sought 'international solidarity'. He thought the game could eliminate 'suspicions and rivalries that today still set peoples against each other'. Baron Coubertin believed much the same thing, but Rimet argued that Olympic amateurism was at odds with universal brotherhood, because it reserved top-flight sport for men with 'a golden paw'.

Rimet's mission in the 1920s was to realise FIFA's original dream and set up a World Cup. Finally, in May 1928, the FIFA congress in Amsterdam voted to create a competition open to all football nations. By 'all', FIFA meant Europe and the Americas; non-white peoples such as the 'Senegalese riflemen' were colonial subjects who didn't count.

Rimet's World Cup would be white, and it would be professional, unlike the Olympic football tournament, which excluded many of the world's leading players because they were paid. He was snaffling football's world championship from his posh amateur rivals at the IOC. FIFA's World Cup would never be hamstrung by the snobbish arguments about whether to admit paid players that beset the Olympics as well as rugby, tennis and American college sport. And so Rimet helped establish international football as a commercial pursuit, played and watched mostly by working-class men. There was nothing inevitable about this. When the World Cup was conceived, professional football still hadn't been legalised in France.

Once the decision had been made to create the tournament, one obstacle remained: money. 'FIFA didn't have a *sou* at the time,' recalled Yves, Rimet's beloved grandson, decades later. The federation in the 1920s was a tiny outfit, without even a bank account. Its headquarters was the Amsterdam home of its secretary-treasurer Carl Hirschmann, a stock trader who managed FIFA's money. His fellow officials seem to have thought he kept it safely in the bank. In fact, Hirschmann was investing it in the stock market. Then came the Great Crash of 1929, and he went bankrupt. He eventually admitted that he had lost almost all the 400,000 French francs that FIFA had entrusted to him. It was the first in a rich history of FIFA's financial scandals. 'Loss of money is never fatal,' shrugged Rimet. Still, Hirschmann's downfall prompted FIFA to move its headquarters from Amsterdam to Zurich, where it remains to this day.

Even with a responsible treasurer, FIFA couldn't have afforded to fund the first World Cup. The federation needed to find a host country willing to finance the whole thing. Luckily Uruguay, at the time one of the world's richest countries and planning to celebrate its centenary in 1930, volunteered. 'The host pays' has remained the tournament's organisational principle to this day.

Thirteen countries entered the first World Cup, with most of the European teams crossing the Atlantic on the same ship, the *Conte Verde*, their passages paid by Uruguay. Rimet's late-life

memoir, *L'histoire merveilleuse de la Coupe de Monde* ('The Marvellous History of the World Cup'), published in 1954 and never translated into English, recounts all his World Cups. *L'histoire merveilleuse* is now so thoroughly out of print that I could only get hold of it at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, the national library. The book's tone is light, with frequent attempts at humour. Rimet doesn't waste space on political or any other complexity, not even with the hindsight of an old man who had lived through two world wars. He seemed to have emerged from the wreckage with his optimism intact: the memoir reads like a jolly chairman's report of the lads from the first team having fun on foreign tours.

But there is some delicious detail. Rimet spends pages recalling the pleasure of that first crossing to Uruguay – sitting in a rocking chair, gazing out on the sunny Atlantic, spotting dolphins and sharks, with nobody able to phone him, and no irritating unexpected visitors. He was carrying in his baggage 'a statuette 30 centimetres high and weighing four kilogrammes' – the new World Cup trophy. He had commissioned it from a friend, the Parisian sculptor Abel Lafleur, 'of whom one cannot say that he is a sportsman, but who had acquired the sense of sport sufficiently profoundly to express it with talent'.

Sailing on the *Conte Verde* with Rimet and the footballers was the great Russian opera singer Feodor Chaliapin. The captain asked him to sing at the traditional party to celebrate the crossing of the equator. In Rimet's telling, Chaliapin refused, asking, 'If I were a cobbler, would you ask me to make you a free pair of shoes on the pretext that we were going to pass The Line?' Chaliapin was a professional, like Rimet's footballers. The ship made do with a fancy-dress ball.

Landing in Montevideo five hours late, they were 'acclaimed by a joyous crowd', writes Rimet. The president of Uruguay, Dr Juan Campisteguy, immediately invited him for a barbecue, not so much because Rimet was president of FIFA but because he was a Frenchman. Campisteguy, the proud descendant of a French émigré, regarded Rimet as 'a quasi-compatriot'. At the *asado*, he

carved a choice piece from the cow's head and presented it ceremonially to his guest.

The visiting teams stayed near each other by the beach, and, writes Rimet, immediately became great friends, as if 'at a family party'. Football was creating international brotherhood. Meanwhile, construction work continued day and night at the Estadio Centenario. It would only be completed days after the tournament kicked off.

In the first World Cup final, Uruguay beat Argentina 4-2. Afterwards the Uruguayans ran around the pitch waving their own trophy, apparently made of silver – possibly a prize won in some other competition. Rimet, standing lost on a field packed with celebrating fans, eventually just seems to have handed Lafleur's trophy to the chubby bow-tied president of the Uruguayan FA, Raúl Jude. The first World Cup was considered a success.

Soon afterwards, Rimet's belief in human brotherhood began to collide with fascism. In March 1933, weeks after the Nazis took power in Germany, he accompanied the French team to a friendly in Munich. The German crowd listened quietly to the French anthem, and an impressed Rimet promised his hosts that on his return to France he would correct mistaken views of the new Reich.

A year later, the second World Cup was staged in Benito Mussolini's Fascist Italy. By this time, writes Rimet, the tournament had grown to encompass 'the entire world' (again meaning Europe and the Americas). He did his best to get on with his Fascist hosts, though it wasn't always easy. He wrote that he often had 'the impression during the World Cup that the real president of the international football federation was Mussolini'. When the two men sat side by side during matches at Rome, the dictator watched play 'with sustained attention, without distractions', showing no interest in the Frenchman's attempts at chit-chat. Mussolini had commissioned a huge bronze winner's trophy that dwarfed the actual World Cup. Luckily, wrote Rimet, the Italians beat Czechoslovakia in the final and kept the thing, 'as we would not have known how to carry it away'.

The night after the final, the jubilant Italian dignitaries forgot

about the FIFA delegation. Rimet and his colleagues felt lost until General Vaccaro, head of Italy's football federation, kindly invited them to dinner by the sea at Ostia. The general drove them there himself, a terrifying journey along a winding coastal road, but the meal was superb. Rimet, writing after the war, understood that Vaccaro might be in bad odour with some readers for his spell commanding Italian Fascist troops on the eastern front. It was not necessary to 'appreciate his political persona', grants Rimet, but Vaccaro had been a 'prestigious president' of Italian football, and a nice chap. FIFA's consistent willingness to embrace brutal regimes, from Argentina's military junta of the 1970s through Vladimir Putin and Mohammed bin Salman, was baked in from the start. It was all part of 'peace through sport'.

A photograph from the 1936 Berlin Olympics shows Rimet walking with the FIFA delegation through the swastika-bedecked streets of Hitler's capital – his French federation had opposed a press campaign to boycott the Nazi Games. In Berlin, the men of FIFA voted through another of Rimet's dreams: France was named host of the 1938 World Cup.

Rimet's six-year-old grandson Yves performed the draw for the tournament, standing on a table in shorts amid besuited officials, pulling names from a glass vase held up by his beaming grandfather. Soon after the draw was made, Hitler's Anschluss swallowed up Austria, one of the competing nations. This was a nuisance, as it left the tournament with just fifteen teams. FIFA had to cancel the match between Austria and Sweden.

The hosts France met the reigning champions in the quarter-final. Before kick-off the Italians, playing in an all-black kit for the first time, gave the Fascist salute, whereupon French fans pelted them with stones. Italy won the game. After they beat Hungary in the final at Colombes, and the Italian flag was hoisted in victory, Rimet was pleased to see the French crowd applaud, despite the 'serious political disagreements' between the two countries. He commented: 'I can see hardly anything else but sport that is capable of creating these spontaneous appeasements.'

At the FIFA congress in Paris on the eve of the tournament, Germany and Brazil had both bid to stage the 1942 World Cup. But FIFA officials, already sensing that 'politics' might intrude before 1942 rolled around, delayed choosing a host.

Rimet doesn't say a word about the Second World War in his memoir. In life, he initially tried to ignore it. Having fought one terrible war against the Germans, he entered the second dedicated to his belief that football could bring peace between nations – even if one of the nations was Nazi Germany. France declared war on Hitler on 3 September 1939. Forty-eight days later, on 21 October, Rimet travelled to an urgent FIFA meeting in Bern, Switzerland, which was attended by two prominent Germans: FIFA's secretary general Ivo Schricker, and Peco Bauwens, a senior figure in the Nazi-aligned German football federation, the DFB.

When Rimet returned to France, he found himself in trouble. Why had he been consorting with Germans? On the morning of 27 October, he was summoned for an interview at the office of Amédée Bussière, the head of the Sûreté Nationale, the French police. Later that day, one of Bussière's underlings typed up an account of Rimet's self-exculpations:

> He had thought that given the very important interests that he represents within the Fédération Internationale, in which are represented at least 50 nations, that he could go to Bern to attend the urgent committee meeting and, above all, he thought the German representatives would abstain …
>
> M. Rimet has a son at the front, and he is profoundly saddened … it was with tears in his eyes that he asked me to be excused.

That same day, Rimet wrote Bussière a three-page letter in purple ink, providing further explanations. He said the Prefecture of Police had granted him a visa for Switzerland. He knew he was going to meet Schricker, who admittedly was German, but the

man lived in Zurich, and had assured Rimet 'that he was acquiring Swiss nationality'.

Schricker had met Rimet's train at 9.15 a.m. on 21 October. He then informed an 'astonished' Rimet that Bauwens, who headed FIFA's committee on the rules of the game, would also be attending the meeting. Bauwens had been summoned by FIFA's Italian vice president Giovanni Mauro, supposedly to discuss 'certain divergences in the translations of the rules of the game in different languages', and to opine on the regulation of Olympic football. Rimet didn't say it, but the Axis powers clearly wanted to pack FIFA's first wartime meeting with their own men.

Rimet wrote to Bussière that when he discovered that Bauwens was coming, he hotfooted it to the French consulate to ask what he should do. The consulate told him he could proceed provided that Bauwens spoke only about the rules of football, and that he and Rimet didn't talk. Rimet concluded: 'My encounter with Dr Bauwens was wholly fortuitous and involuntary.'

He told Bussière that he had led FIFA for twenty years, having repeatedly been unanimously elected. 'I have always sought to use this confidence in the service of France. Many of our diplomatic agents abroad can testify to this.' He offered to resign if that was what the French government wanted, or to hand off his presidential duties for the duration of the war to one of the vice presidents, the Italian Mauro or the Belgian Rodolphe Seeldrayers. If France let him remain FIFA's president, 'I would be very happy to receive the directives that would permit me, in this position, to serve my country as I always have.' He signed the beseeching letter 'Jules Rimet, Croix de guerre – three citations'. The Sûreté Nationale let him keep his post. After all, the FIFA presidency represented French soft power.

In June 1940 France surrendered to Hitler, and Marshall Pétain established the collaborationist Vichy regime. Rimet now saw his domestic mission, as head of the French football federation, to keep his sport going, but he soon found himself at odds with Vichy. He seemed able to live with the regime's fascism; what he couldn't accept was its support for his old enemy, amateurism

in sport. The Vichyistes, like the Nazis, regarded professionalism as a profound moral evil. Also, Vichy wanted to appoint the country's football officials itself. In March 1942 Rimet stepped down as president of the French federation after twenty-three years, though he remained honorary president.

Meanwhile, the Axis powers were planning a coup at FIFA. Their opportunity came with the meeting of FIFA's executive board at the federation's headquarters in Zurich in January 1941. Football officials travelling to Switzerland from occupied Europe required German or Italian visas. The Axis powers pulled a trick: they first granted the visas, so that the meeting would go ahead, but then suddenly withdrew them.

The hope was that if officials from occupied countries couldn't travel, there would be a German-Italian majority at the board meeting, and the Fascists could capture FIFA. No doubt Schricker, the German secretary general, was in on the plot. It failed, largely, it seems, because the neutral Swiss didn't like political interference in the organisations they hosted.

As it was, Rimet and the other senior FIFA officials in their various warring countries contrived to exchange some friendly messages during the conflict. Schricker, in Zurich, helped keep letters circulating between them, and Rimet managed to visit the city twice in the war years. The footballing brotherhood treated the calamity as a mere interruption.

Almost immediately after Paris was liberated in August 1944, Rimet returned as president of the French federation. Nobody afterwards seems to have held his two-year collaboration with Vichy against him. People understood that football was much more real to him than fascism. And soon after Germany's surrender, as president of FIFA, he was once again holding meetings with FIFA's senior German, Bauwens.*

Bauwens had had a complicated journey through the Third Reich. He had applied to join the Nazi party in May 1933. A

* Much of my account of Bauwens and of FIFA in wartime is taken from various writings by the German political scientist Arthur Heinrich.

membership card in his name was written out. But the party never issued it, rejecting him because of his marriage to a Jewish woman, Elise Gidion.

Bauwens and Elise didn't have a perfect marriage. He would lock her in the bedroom when he received one of his mistresses. Elise became a heavy drinker, and took her own life in 1940 – or so it appears. Their son later accused Bauwens of encouraging her suicide, or possibly even adding the fatal overdose of sleeping tablets to her wine glass.

During the war, Bauwens' family construction company ran its own forced labour camp, which appeared on a post-war list of 2,500 'Slaveholders in the Nazi regime'. Yet after the German surrender, Bauwens sent Rimet a letter in which he portrayed himself as an anti-Nazi: 'Would I not be the worst person in the world, if I had performed only the smallest henchman services for the people who have my wife on their conscience?'

Other FIFA officials resented Bauwens for his 'brown' past, but Rimet didn't. Given his life experience, for him peace through sport meant above all peace between Germany and France. He and Bauwens were brothers in football.

With the war over, Rimet could focus on what mattered: the World Cup. In 1946 a FIFA congress in Luxembourg renamed the trophy the 'Coupe Jules Rimet' – 'to my great confusion', he writes modestly.

For the first post-war World Cup, in Brazil in 1950, Rimet repeated the transatlantic crossing that he had made for the inaugural tournament twenty years earlier. He aimed to restore the comity of the pre-Fascist world. The Axis powers Germany and Japan had been banned from FIFA, but Rimet was smoothing the path for their swift return. In 1950, Bauwens became president of the German football federation. A FIFA congress in Rio de Janeiro, held on the eve of the World Cup, agreed 'to not let politics introduce itself into sports'.

Travelling around Brazil during the tournament, Rimet observed that the country 'seems to live only for football and the cup'. When the Coupe Rimet itself was exhibited in a shop in

Rio, the crowds flocking to see it were so large that a security firm had to be hired. The Brazilians were certain that they would keep the cup. As Rimet noted: 'By a curious phenomenon of collective psychosis, all the city was celebrating victory before it was won.'

FIFA officials weren't invited to the opening ceremony in the new stadium, the Maracanã. Rimet explains in his memoir that for the Rio authorities, 'the World Cup is a strictly Brazilian affair'. The stadium with its 200,000-person capacity was so packed for matches that even VIPs had to fight their way to their seats. Rimet was told that the Archbishop of Rio, 'caught in a besieging crowd, could not free himself except by roughly knocking over his nearest neighbours'.

The 1950 tournament had no official final, just a second stage of group matches. But the de facto final turned out to be the Brazil-Uruguay game. A draw would be enough to make the Brazilians world champions, and a grandiose victory ceremony was planned. While their national anthem played, the Brazilian team were to walk to the centre of the pitch through a guard of honour to receive the Coupe Rimet. With the match tied at 1-1 and only a few minutes remaining, Rimet descended with the trophy through the innards of the Maracanã to the touchline, ready to make his congratulatory speech for the hosts. But by the time he emerged from the tunnel, the crowd was silent. During his descent, Uruguay had scored the winning goal.

Rimet writes: 'There was no longer a guard of honour, nor a national anthem, nor a speech in front of a microphone, nor a solemn awarding of the trophy.' Instead he found himself jammed amid a throng of pitch invaders, the cup in his hand, not knowing what to do with it. He was forced to repeat the rushed handover of 1930: 'I end up spotting the Uruguayan captain, and I give him the cup while shaking his hand, as if in secret, without being able to say a word to him.'

It was Rimet's last official act at a World Cup. Aged seventy-six, he was being phased out as president. At the FIFA congress in Bern, on the eve of the 1954 tournament, he was replaced by the Belgian Rodolphe Seeldrayers (who would die the following year).

The peasant boy from Theuley had overseen the growth of the World Cup into an event that moved the white world. During his thirty-three-year reign, the federation's membership had grown from twenty-nine countries to eighty-five. His associates at FIFA proposed him for the Nobel Peace Prize. In 1956, while they were assembling the supporting dossier, Rimet died, aged eighty-two. Though he lies forgotten in his suburban grave, his obsessions still mark the World Cup.

3

'We Are Someone Again': Germany and the 1954 'Miracle of Bern'

West Germany-Hungary, World Cup final, 4 July 1954, Wankdorf Stadium, Bern, Switzerland

Rimet's last World Cup climaxed in one of Europe's first outbreaks of football nationalism. 'The Miracle of Bern', as it came to be known, was the day West Germany advanced from being a state to becoming a nation. That day provided the first shared happy memories to stick into the new national photograph album.

The West German team that travelled to the World Cup was in many ways still the old Germany. Rimet's wartime friend Bauwens ran the country's football federation. The coach, Sepp Herberger – *Bundestrainer* of the Federal Republic of West Germany – had been *Reichstrainer* under Hitler. After the war, Herberger had passed through a denazification committee, removed the swastika from his tracksuit, and hung a portrait of the Christian Democratic finance minister Ludwig Erhard in his house.

Herberger's star player in 1954 was Fritz Walter, whom he had spotted as an eighteen-year-old in 1938. Walter had fought in the Wehrmacht during the war, and was briefly a prisoner of the Soviets. Only his footballing skills had saved him from deportation to Siberia.

The World Cup final pitted Herberger's men against the great Hungarians, who two weeks previously had hammered them 8-3 in a group game. Going into the final, a series of coincidences gave the Germans a chance. Hungary's chubby genius Ferenc Puskás picked up an injury, a Swiss marching band disturbed the