World Cup!

History, Politics, and Art of The Beautiful Game

Edited by
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Chapter Three

Nationalism and Football: The Football War between El Salvador and Honduras

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Abstract

This study examines the 1969 "Football War" between El Salvador and Honduras, a four-day conflict often attributed to sporting rivalry. It evaluates whether football was indeed the catalyst for the hostilities or merely a backdrop for deeper socio-political tensions. The scope focuses on the events leading to the war, centering on the World Cup qualifying matches between these two nations. The first section explores the linguistic dimension of the concept, extending beyond a purely athletic context. The second section provides a chronological account of the 1970 World Cup qualifiers, widely regarded as a trigger for the conflict. The third section evaluates the significance of nationalism in shaping this confrontation, while the conclusion offers an argument for a more nuanced understanding of this historical episode. By assessing whether football alone can spark a war, the study aims to contribute new insights to the broader discourse on sports, politics, and conflict.

Keywords: Football War, Soccer War, El Salvador, Honduras, Politics of Sport, International Relations, World Cup Mexico 1970.

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In 1969, El Salvador and Honduras engaged in World Cup qualifying games for the 1970 Mexico World Cup. Following the initial defeat, a tragic incident involving a young girl, Amelia Bolaños, who took her life due to her unwavering "national pride," intensified the already strained situation. In the days following the decisive match, these two countries found themselves in an "actual war," known as the Soccer War. This study delves into whether a football match alone can be the impetus for armed conflict or if deeper socio-political issues underpinned the eruption of hostilities.

The FIFA World Cup encompasses not only group matches and finals but also the pivotal qualifying matches leading up to the tournament. When it comes to matters of "national identity," these qualifying matches, held within the borders of the participating nations, take on particular significance. This is epitomized