

# National Identity and Sports in Latin America

## The Hundred-Hour Football War between El Salvador and Honduras

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**Abstract.** “La Guerra de Fútbol,” Spanish for The Football War, erupted after a qualifying match in Mexico City between El Salvador and Honduras for the 1970 FIFA World Cup. Despite El Salvador winning the match, the state dissolved diplomatic ties and invaded Honduras on July 14, 1969. However, a football match was not the primary cause of the war. Instead, the sport was used as a political tool by the government of El Salvador to direct the attention of its frustrated citizens towards the actions of its neighbouring state in expelling and attacking Salvadoran immigrants, while attempting to remain in power. This paper argues that citizens of El Salvador could be motivated to invade Honduras because of the build-up of tensions between both states, providing an optimal opportunity for the Salvadoran government to create an “us vs. them” mentality surrounding the events of the 1969 football matches. The role of the sport in Latin America is analyzed and considered how it could be used for a nationalist cause to invade another state. Moreover, the xenophobic feelings of Hondurans towards the Salvadoran immigrants (legal and illegal) is examined as is the economic distress and political tensions of both states and discusses how it ultimately played out in the football field because of a blurred line between sports and national identity.

### Introduction

Governments have long recognized the socio-political importance of football and have used the sport to aid nation-building processes, promote ideologies, and create collective identities (Zec and Paunovic, 2015). Football is also an influential tool for governments in achieving other objectives. Such was the case in 1969 when El Salvador invaded Honduras following a football match. “La Guerra de Fútbol,” Spanish for the football war, erupted after a qualifying match in Mexico City between the two states for the 1970 FIFA World Cup, with El Salvador beating Honduras 3-2 (Russell, 2016). Despite its victory, and to the surprise of Honduras, El Salvador dissolved all diplomatic ties with Honduras and invaded the neighboring state after the match on July 14, 1969 (Newton, 2014). Although Latin-America is renowned for its love for football, the sport was not the primary cause of the war that lasted four days. Instead, football was used as a political tool by the government of El Salvador to turn the attention of its frustrated citizens towards the actions of the citizens and government of Honduras in expelling and attacking Salvadoran immigrants. Thus, this article argues that the build-up of tension between El Salvador and Honduras provided an optimal opportunity for the Salvadoran government to create an “us vs. them” mentality surrounding the events of the 1969 football matches. With the military government seeking to divert the attention of its citizens from domestic turmoil and consolidate

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its power, football became an influential tool in the Hundred-Hour war, with the defense of national identity at its core.

National identity plays a vital role in sports in Latin-America, especially in football. National identity is the perception of a state as a cohesive whole, represented by a distinct culture, traditions, and language (Oxford Dictionary, 2017) and sports play a central role in a state's self-perception (Grix, 2016). At the core of national identity is a sense of 'us,' proving to be a powerful tool that evokes the image of the nation as a 'person' with an autobiography, aspirations, predispositions, boasting evident characteristics (Hausmann, 2016). In international competitions, national teams represent the state and are commonly 'equated' with the nation (Grix, 2016), that is, it represents the national identity of the state, which is characteristic of Latin-America in their fervent support for their national football teams.

It is essential to analyze the role of football in Latin-America to understand how it could be used for a nationalist cause to invade another state. In the late nineteenth century, a massive influx of Europeans brought the sport to Latin-America (Reyes, 2015). Football spread rapidly because it transcended socioeconomic class, becoming a symbol for the different cultures that were divided by race and class. Crucially, in Latin-America football has served as a vehicle for reinforcing authoritarian, national, class-based aspects of identity and culture (Bar-On, 1997). Football rivalries, which also influence politics and identity, are prominent among neighboring states (Nadel, 2014). Citizens identified more with the game than they did with the institutions of the state, identifying with the sport at the neighborhood, regional and national level (Bowman, 2015). Thus, football became an influential weapon for politicians. The sport was used for political manipulations by the socio-economic elites of Latin-America for nationalist, class-based objectives, creating "us versus them" characters between states or different cultural groups within states (Bar-On, 1997).

Critically, language plays a crucial role in the development of national identity because it shapes and reflects how citizens interpret social realities (Sewpaul, 2009). More importantly, however, is that identities exist in different historical and geographical spaces, and at various societal levels (Sewpaul, 2009), which came to play a critical role in the Football War. Most Salvadorans immigrating into the southern departments of Honduras were indigenous farmers from the lowest socioeconomic class (Newton, 2014), meaning that their identity conflicted with that of the mixed-European Mestizos of Honduras and El Salvador who spoke Spanish. Thus, not only did national identity play a crucial role in the Football War but the regional identity of the immigrants and their socioeconomic status contributed to the escalation of tensions between the two states because Hondurans felt the need to protect their state and economy from free-riders.

This article is organized into four sections. In the first section, it provides a short history of the tension between El Salvador and Honduras leading up to the 1969 qualifying match which took place in Mexico City. It provides the necessary background concerning the migration of Salvadorans into Honduras and its contribution to the political stress between the two states. In the second section, it reflects upon the Honduran stance surrounding the Salvadoran immigrants and analyzes the motives behind the government of El Salvador and its reasoning for starting a war with Honduras, discussing the relationship between land scarcity in El Salvador and the increasing unpopularity of the Salvadoran military government. In the third section, it relates the actions of both states during the preliminary matches that ultimately led to war after the third game in Mexico City while analyzing the motives and actions of the Salvadoran government, specifically those of Pres. Sanchez Hernandez. In the fourth section, the article assesses the importance of sports in politics, specifically football in Latin-America, and its use as a tool by politicians eager to remain

in power. The article concludes by examining and discussing the relationship between football and national identity in Latin-America.

### **El Salvador and Honduras: Land Scarcity and Migration Issues**

The tension between El Salvador and Honduras had lasted almost thirty years, with land dispute being the most contested issue (Carter, 2011). El Salvador is approximately five times smaller than Honduras, with a population that was growing faster than that of Honduras in the sixties (Russell, 2016). By 1969, the population of El Salvador was 3.7 million in comparison with 2.6 million in Honduras. Salvadorans began migrating to mostly uninhabited regions of Honduras and settling, mainly as farmers. The Land Reform Law of 1967 (Carter, 2011), started a series of events which would ultimately boil over onto the football field. Honduras began expelling many of the illegal immigrants as well as the legal Salvadoran citizens who had lived in the state for many years. Salvadoran citizens suffered physical violence at the hands of the Hondurans. Many were beaten, and there were allegations of torture and cruelty, escalating the tension between the citizens and government of the two states (Carter, 2011).

The actions of Honduras amplified the response of the government of El Salvador (Carter, 2011). From 1967 to 1968, the expulsions of poor, Salvadoran citizens from Honduras were minimal (Newton, 2014). However, this changed in 1969. Honduras began expelling large numbers of illegal immigrants from El Salvador, and the Salvadoran government closed its borders to its citizens. As the football matches were played, Salvadorans viewed Honduras as aggressors towards the citizens of El Salvador, calling the expulsions discriminatory by nationality. In other words, Hondurans were seen as hostile and treating the illegal immigrants unfairly, becoming the primary source of contention between the two states (Newton, 2014).

However, in the 1960s, Honduras was ill-equipped to deal with the massive influx of Salvadorans across its borders (Newton, 2014). Honduras, in the early twentieth century, had only recently begun to develop its economy by implementing projects such as road-building and foreign direct investment through banana companies which controlled most of the Honduran territory (Merrill, 1995). The immigrants were becoming a socioeconomic strain on an already economically burdened state, and with El Salvador refusing to address the situation, the Honduran government began forcefully removing the immigrants as a quick way to solve the problem (Newton, 2014). El Salvador then closed its borders to its citizens attempting to force Honduras to renegotiate the Land Reform Law (Merrill, 1995), a prominent factor that would set the stage for the football war.

### **The Honduran View on Salvadoran Immigration**

Many Hondurans, as well as most politicians, were anxious and dissatisfied with the influx of Salvadorans into their state and held firm convictions that it did not benefit their society (Newton, 2014). Most of the immigrants were ‘campesinos’ a term used to refer to farmers who are largely from the lowest socioeconomic class in Central America. Primarily, the immigrants were viewed as an economic strain on an even poorer state than their own, and as shops owned by legal Salvadorans immigrants began to expand and succeed, Hondurans felt that their jobs were “taken away” (The 1969 ‘Soccer War’ between Honduras and El Salvador, 2017). The situation was deemed unfair and stirred unrest because although Honduras is much larger than El Salvador, the smaller state boasted of a better economic situation. In 1969, the Honduran GDP was two-

thirds that of El Salvador (Newton, 2014). Furthermore, large corporations in Honduras, such as Chiquita, which owned around ten percent of the state, sought to expand and viewed the Salvadoran immigrants as a threat to their plans (Russell, 2016).

The views of the government of Honduras and the population, in general, can be classified as having far-right sentiments, evidenced in their argument that the Salvadoran immigrants were leading to the further decline of their economy. Importantly, like right-wing parties, the government adhered to strong nationalist sentiments and promoting xenophobic feelings (Carter, 2005), arguing that the Salvadoran citizens, illegal as well as legal, were receiving benefits intended for the Honduran population, thus robbing the more impoverished Honduran state of opportunities to advance. So, as the tensions continued to rise, the Honduran population was primed to defend Honduras, and the events surrounding the football matches provided them with a reason to do so.

### ***Behind the Curtain: El Salvador's Motives for War***

El Salvador's motives begin at the root of distrust towards the military government by the lower socioeconomic class. The lingering memories of "La Matanza," Spanish for the killing, provoked feelings of discontent and distrust toward the government decades after it occurred (Haggarty, 1988). La Matanza was carried out by General Maximiliano Hernandez Martinez, mostly referred to as Martinez, who started El Salvador's history of military dictatorships (Lovato, 2011). Communist uprisings by the 'campesinos' or farmers led to retaliation by the military government, resulting in the death of approximately 30,000 indigenous people in 1932 (Haggarty, 1988). The message was clear: the military government was in control and no challenges to its rule would be accepted (Haggarty, 1988). Moreover, as the land monopolization produced drastic contrast between the upper class and the campesinos, the political unrest also increased, threatening the government's consolidation of power.

Unity in the Salvadoran society proved a difficult task for the government of El Salvador to achieve as it began facing harsh criticism in 1968 (Soccer War 1969, 2017). The economic situation of the state produced political unrest and growing labor conflicts, which escalated in 1969 when the Honduran government refused to renew the 1967 Bilateral Treaty on Immigration, calling the Salvadoran immigrants illegal land invaders. Moreover, the massive influx of Salvadorans into Honduras threatened to provoke social unrest, undermining support for the Sanchez government in El Salvador (Haggarty, 1988). The solution to the political turmoil, according to the government of El Salvador, was a war with Honduras and football became the rallying cry. The actions of the Honduran government, which saw its citizens resorting to physical violence to expel the Salvadoran immigrants, provoked nationalist feelings that resulted in the unity of the legal, political parties and a clear majority of Salvadorans, in support of the war to defend their state. Although the government of El Salvador most likely foresaw that such unity could not last and that immigration of its poorest citizens to Honduras temporarily lessened the economic strains (Haggarty, 1988), the war shifted the focus from its defects to the 'injustice' of the actions of the Honduran government.

### **The 1969 Football Matches: Ready, Set, Fight!**

As the contention between the two states increased, the qualifying football matches for the 1970 FIFA World Cup not only became an outlet of anger for the frustrated citizens but an

alternative battlefield. That is, the football matches became an opportunity for the loyal and passionate fans to defend their national identity. A three-game elimination match as a preliminary to the World Cup occurred in June 1969 (Merrill, 1995). The first game was hosted by Honduras in its capital city, Tegucigalpa, on June 8 (Russell, 2016). The night before the game, Honduran fans beat tin pans, empty barrels, and set off firecrackers outside the hotel where the Salvadoran national team was staying (Kapusinski, 1986). The idea was that a sleepless team could not win the match the next day, and it was so. The host state would go on to win the game, 1-0. However, Salvadorans disputed the win feeling “cheated,” as the goal occurred in overtime (Russell, 2016). Also, igniting the fury of the Salvadorans was the suicide of Amelia Bolanios, after the loss of El Salvador (her home state) to Honduras (Kapusinski, 1986). She became a national heroine, and a symbol of revenge against the Hondurans, leading up to the second match in El Salvador that would take both states down a path of no return.

The second game, hosted by El Salvador in its capital, San Salvador, occurred on June 15 (Russell, 2016). The night before the match, the Honduran national team experienced severe harassment from Salvadoran fans (Dart and Bandini, 2007). The fans broke all the windows of the hotel while throwing dead rats, rotten eggs, and stinking rags inside (Kapusinski, 1986). The Honduran players had to be taken to the stadium in armored cars, to avoid bloodshed. As the National Anthem of Honduras was played, the Honduran flag was burned, and in its stead, a dirty dishrag was hoisted on the flagpole, as the crowds cheered and whistled. The military surrounded the pitch with sub-machine guns to prevent the Salvadorans fans from committing any crimes. El Salvador beat Honduras 3-0 (The 1969 ‘*Soccer War*’ between Honduras and El Salvador, 2017). Furthermore, after the match, Salvadorans took to riots in their capital city, attacking buses and cars headed to Honduras, which resulted in the death of two Honduran fans (Russell, 2016).

As the news of what had occurred in El Salvador reached Honduras, Hondurans vandalized Salvadoran shops in the major cities of San Pedro Sula and Tegucigalpa and began attacking Salvadorans in mobs (Russell, 2016). Many were dragged out of their homes and beaten, forcing approximately 1,400 Salvadorans back to their home state daily, traveling mostly by foot. Houses belonging to Salvadorans were broken into and burned, as fleeing Salvadorans were robbed. The government of El Salvador called on the Organization of American States (OAS) to intervene as they accused Honduras of committing genocide, but to prevent further turmoil, the OAS remained impartial to the situation (Russell, 2016).

The third and final match occurred in Mexico City on June 26, with El Salvador beating Honduras 3-2 (Russell, 2016). Despite their win, and the first-time qualification to a World Cup, Salvadorans were blood drunk with revenge and angered at the lack of international response to actions of Honduras against Salvadoran citizens. The government of El Salvador dissolved diplomatic ties with Honduras, justifying its actions because the Honduran government did not punish its citizens for their crimes against Salvadoran immigrants (Hickman, 2017). Both governments expected a military confrontation and purchased World War II vintage fighters from private sellers. Notably, the football war was the last war to use piston-engine fighters. On July 14, 1969, El Salvador’s Air Force began striking targets in Honduras, starting with the international airport in the capital city, Tegucigalpa (Hickman, 2017). On July 18, 1969, four days after the war began, the OAS could arrange a ceasefire, which became effective two days later (Cartohistory, 2017). With the truce in place, it would not be until August 2, that El Salvador would begin to withdraw its troop after the OAS threatened economic sanctions and Honduras promised that the remaining Salvadoran immigrants would be protected (Cartohistory, 2017), which was a pivotal moment in easing the tension between the two states.

***Fidel Sanchez Hernandez: A President Fighting for the Salvadoran People?***

Fidel Sanchez Hernandez, the President of El Salvador at the time of the Football War (Fidel Sanchez Hernandez, 2018), was a man with an extensive military career using his presidency as a forefront, because, in reality, the National Conciliation Party (PCN), was the political face of the Salvadoran Armed Forces (Martinez, 2016). Importantly, the PCN, during the 1960s and 1970s, was the dominant political party of El Salvador while it was supported by the military (Haggarty, 1988). Herein lies the importance of the Football War: A military man, using the government to his advantage, was nothing new to Salvadorans. Presidents like Mr. Sanchez Hernandez had become a norm since the early 1930s and citizens from poor socioeconomic background, such as the campesinos, could not trust, or identify, with such governments. Thus, as the paper has argued, the events surrounding the football matches provided an optimal window of opportunity to remedy the broken relationship between the Salvadoran government and its citizens. So, unlike his Honduran counterpart, Pres. Sanchez actively engaged with the training of Salvadoran troops, visiting and claiming the territory previously inhabited by the peasant Salvadorans in Honduras during and after the war (Martinez, 2016).

What was the government of Sanchez Hernandez doing? Plagued by economic difficulties due to a decline in world prices of coffee and cotton (Schultze-Kraft et al., 2018), it sought to divert the attention of Salvadorans to the issues surrounding the football matches and the Salvadoran immigrants who were forced back to a home-state that was already overpopulated (Martinez, 2016). President Sanchez began preparing for a war with Honduras several weeks before the third match took place in Mexico City, as the Honduran president relied on the Organization of American States to solve the dispute between Honduras and El Salvador (Martinez, 2016). Importantly, the football war showcases that in times of political unrest, a government can use sport to divert the attention of its citizens to issues that benefit the government. Key to the Salvadoran government's actions is that the President, who was considered a man of arms, actively supported his troops, visiting them and encouraging the invasion of Honduran territory from which the Salvadoran citizens were expelled. With the lingering memory of La Matanza by Gen. Maximiliano, the actions of Pres. Sanchez could be viewed as heroic and interpreted as him being more than a military president, but a president who cares for citizens oppressed by such governments.

Moreover, there is a darker, more sinister nature to such actions. Here, a president seeks to construct an identity of “us vs. them,” surrounding the violence of the football matches, thus creating, briefly, an inclusive Salvadoran national identity since citizens identified with football more than they did with the Salvadoran state. As outlined by Grix (2016), national teams are commonly viewed as representing the state and are usually ‘equated’ with the nation. What does this imply? It implies that the Hundred-Hour war represents the skillfully crafted manipulation of national identity by a government seeking to maintain a stranglehold on power.

**Analyzing the Motives for War: Did Football Cause the Hundred-Hour War?**

El Salvador’s motives are called into question concerning its role in the “Guerra de Futbol.” Was the government angry at the lack of remorse from the international community? Or was there a mixture of hidden motives behind the invasion of Honduras? The actions of the government of El Salvador in its refusal to acknowledge or attempt to solve the migration crisis transformed the issue into a defense of national identity. Most of the land in Honduras at the time was uninhabited,

and the state presented better job opportunities in the banana companies for citizens of poor socioeconomic backgrounds (The 1969 “Soccer War” between Honduras and El Salvador, 2017).

However, Hondurans viewed the Salvadoran immigrants as “stealing” the best jobs and slowly invading their sovereign state. The Salvadoran citizens, beginning in 1967, began to view the Hondurans as hostile and aggressors against citizens of poor socioeconomic backgrounds (Merrill, 1995). Moreover, facing political criticism at home, the football matches shifted the attention of Salvadorans away from the government towards the actions of Honduras in expelling Salvadoran immigrants and harassing the national football team as a symbol of attack on all Salvadorans.

Would the war have occurred in the absence of the preliminary matches for the 1970 World Cup? The political tension between El Salvador and Honduras spilled over into a rivalry that played out on the football field (Pike, 2016). The cause of this tension resulted from the land scarcity issue in El Salvador which saw the Salvadoran immigrants representing roughly 12.5 percent of the population of Honduras in 1969 (Newton, 2014). With the increasing tension between the two states, the 1970 FIFA World Cup qualifier exacerbated the patience of Salvadorans and Honduras. In Latin-America, football is a source of national pride (Nadel, 2014) and the borders around football and national identity are blurred (Kapuscinski, 1986), that is, football becomes equated with the national identity and losses or insults are taken to mean abuses against the individual people of that state. Thus, the necessary conditions for war were already in place, but the events surrounding the football matches acted as a catalyst and justifiable reason to start an invasion.

The actions of the Salvadoran fans ignited the fervent nationalism that is characteristic of Hondurans (Kapuscinski, 1986) to which they resorted to violence as the only way to achieve justice. The burning of the Honduran flag was not merely an act of disrespect but a symbol of defiance to the national sovereignty of Honduras. Honduran public schools are passionate leaders in providing education that centers on allegiance to the flag, teaching Hondurans to respect it as a symbol of peace, unity, liberty, and justice (Redhonduras, 2003). Furthermore, Article 315 of the Constitution of Honduras dictates that although there are no specific sanctions against the misuse of the national flag, any disrespect to a National symbol would result in two to four years of jail and a fine of fifty to one-hundred thousand Lempiras (Redhonduras, 2003). Moreover, the flag must only be burned when it is no longer fit for display or has touched the ground during a national ceremony because it embodies the national sovereignty of Honduras. Hondurans felt provoked and called to protect their national identity. Importantly, the five stars of the Honduran flag symbolize unity between the ‘five sisters’ states of Central America. Thus, the burning of the flag could be viewed as a direct attack on the bond between the former Spanish colonies. The football war, as it was termed by the Polish journalist Kapuscinski (1986), is perhaps the correct name for the 1969 War between El Salvador and Honduras, as it was the football matches that promulgated the “us vs. them’ feeling between citizens of both states.

## **Conclusion**

The Football War showcases the importance of the sport in Latin-America and how it is used by political leaders to either consolidate power or to shift the national attention when political unrest threatens their government. El Salvador could not address the return of its citizens due to land scarcity and political and economic unrest of its citizens caused by the land monopolization of the oligarchy. Further contributing to the turmoil in El Salvador was Honduras’ refusal to renew

the Immigration treaty of 1967, and forcefully expelling the immigrants back to their home state. Against the backdrop of political turmoil, fans greeted the football matches for the 1970 FIFA World Cup with anticipation, anger, and filled with the need for revenge.

Football was recognized by the government of El Salvador as a powerful socio-political tool that could create an ‘us vs. them’ mentality, useful for directing the attention of the citizens to other issues. In the history of Latin-America, the sport helped solidify the identity of the states that were former colonies of Spain since citizens identified with the sport at the community, regional, and geographic level. Thus, as politicians needed to garner support or unite their state, football became the go-to method. In 1969, the sport provided an optimal opportunity for the citizens of El Salvador to join and identify with the sport as well as with the government, thereby fostering an identity that became contrasted with Honduras.

The football matches that would ultimately lead to the war between El Salvador and Honduras could also be viewed as passionate, extremists’ fans seeking to ensure the victory of their national team. However, the fans quickly interpreted the losses and action of each other as an attack on the national identity of the other, which, when mixed with the tensions of land reform and illegal immigrants, boiled over into a war over football. Thus, the historical and cultural importance of football runs deep in the souls and minds of Latin-Americans, proving to be a useful tool in times of political crisis and even in winning elections.

The Football War, aided by xenophobic feelings, economic distress, and political tensions, ultimately was the result of a blurred line between sport and national identity. That is, in Latin-America, football is thought to be the heart of the state, with an attack on the national team as a means of survival, turning the sport into a powerful and dangerous tool in the hands of politicians who seek to consolidate power. In other words, football, the sport of the common man, can also be used as a silent weapon to pursue political objectives of identifying a government with a forgotten people, providing false hope that social reforms could be possible, thereby quelling any threat to what such governments consider their “rule.” Thus, the Football War leads one to question whether the sport, fervently promoted as the sport that can unite and change the world, is not merely another veil of darkness covering the eyes of those suffering from the malady that is poverty.

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