

INPRINT

The Emperor: Downfall of an Autocrat

By Ryszard Kapuscinski

Translated by William R. Brand and Katarzyna Mroczkowska-Brand

Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 164 pp., \$12.95

By Pat Aufderheide

When Ethiopian army officers finally brought an end to the rule of Emperor Haile Selassie in 1974, Polish reporter Ryszard Kapuscinski already was an old hand on the scene. Not only had he previously covered Ethiopia for the Polish Press Agency, he had travelled throughout the Third World for decades, always getting the stories behind the story.

This time, he had a rare opportunity—to interview the courtiers of an instant *ancien regime*. *The Emperor*, which appeared in Poland in 1978, is the result.

Avidly read all over Poland, it was seen as an allegory to Polish politics—a cautionary tale for dictators. But it's much more than that. It is an insider's view of hierarchical society, of the terms of authoritarian power, of the cost of underdevelopment and of the origins of revolution. There are insights here about authoritarian stratagems of multinational corporations, for instance, and rich material for anyone looking to understand the roots of Central American peasant revolt and military coups. For those who study state formation—the growth of bureaucracies and the development of elite factions around centralized power—it's a riotously colorful case study.

All of this goes without even mentioning the entertainment value of scenes from a history that keeps threatening to turn into a madly magical realist novel.

The glory days of Haile Selassie's court were structured around some simple axioms. The emperor cultivated loyalty first and last, and discouraged competence. As one courtier puts it, "The King of Kings preferred bad ministers....he liked to appear in a favorable light by contrast." He expected and even en-



Haile Selassie had one courtier who did nothing but open doors for him.

ETHIOPIA

All the emperor's men

couraged corruption among his minions—it was the spoils of loyalty.

Minister of pillows.

One official had nothing more to do than to open the door at just the right time for the emperor. Another's function was to bow distinctively to signal the end of a reception hour (they called him the emperor's cuckoo clock at court). Still another was in charge of 52 different-sized pillows to slip under the emperor's feet on different-sized thrones, so that his feet would never touch the floor. The emperor knew the value of appearance, and the subversive power of humor—he forbade jokes at court.

When things began to fall apart, they did so in ways that betrayed the terms of the old order. A 1960 coup, led by foreign-educated officials embarrassed by the stagnancy of Ethiopian economy and society, failed. But when, prompted by the warning sign of the coup, the emperor attempted to add economic development to his imperial agenda, he planted the seeds of his own fall. His development projects fostered a new group of technicians: the opening of a university produced dissident students; in order to quell disorder, the army size was increased.

The old terms of power clashed with the new. Officials sabotaged the development reforms, and generals absconded with the army budget—the spoils of loyalty, after all. The emperor's carefully cultivated "nest of mediocrity" at court divided into three

equally ineffective factions arguing over how to restore order: "talkers," who wanted to negotiate; "jailers," who wanted repression; and the biggest group, "floaters," who just wanted to go with the flow.

The crisis wasn't precipitated by oppression—that had been around a long, long time. As the emperor himself explained to over-greedy tax collectors, a poor person can tolerate immense burdens, but will not stomach a sudden new one. He feels, one courtier recalls, that "you have trampled what remains of his already strangled dignity, taken him for an idiot who doesn't see, feel or understand. A man doesn't seize an ax in defense of his wallet, but in defense of his dignity."

That's what happened when the army revolted, too, over the issue of funerals. The officers had a right to be buried, but bodies of common soldiers were abandoned to vultures, and as combat deaths increased, that became intolerable.

Outraged students.

The outrage of the oppressed was matched by demands from the newly favored, not just students but ambitious young officers. Joining them were frustrated clerks and technicians, who the old courtiers despised.

"Who destroyed our empire?" rants one. "Neither those who had too much, nor those who had nothing, but those who had a bit."

These reminiscences unself-consciously present the world-

"A man does not seize an ax in defense of his wallet, but in defense of his dignity," Selassie said before his fall.

view of those who serve established power. The royal purse-bearer—someone who has had daily experience with royal non-payment of debt to the working poor—has contempt for the masses: "Wherever His Majesty went, the people showed their uncontrolled, insatiable greed."

Another courtier blames foreign journalists—who can never be incorporated into the web of loyalty—for fomenting trouble by reporting on famine. "Death from hunger had existed in our empire for hundreds of years, an everyday, natural thing," he protests. After all, he says, "it is not bad for national order and a sense of national humility that the subjects be rendered skinnier, thinned down a bit."

These people cannot imagine change without total destruction, and they can't see why any change was necessary. "Our empire had existed for hundreds,

even thousands of years, without any noticeable development. All the while its leaders were respected, venerated, worshipped."

Creative quoting.

The voices are eloquent, even elegant and sometimes spiced with an elegant wit. But are they authentic? Just how much has this journalist, whose own eloquence is manifest in introductions and asides, crafted his own style and even his own political insights into their remarks? There is a pervasive poetry to everyone's commentary, and a shared tendency to use certain stylistic forms—metonymy of body parts, for instance.

There is also a savage irony in their remarks that echoes his style. One man, describing the rising tide of informers, says that people learned to speak in code, and that "we simple and uneducated folk suddenly became a bilingual nation."

But suppose the journalist has refined his speakers' comments into a condensed, more poetic form. The voices still present a distinctive perspective, and what they have to tell us is well worth thinking about.

The journalist's art and craft transform these reminiscences into unforgettable, movie-like scenes—scenes that encourage one to generalize from Joan Didion's recent perception that Garcia Marquez' "magical realism" is actually social realism. For instance, at one point Kapuscinski leaves an opulent banquet for foreign dignitaries. Walking out to the back of the palace, he hears the sound of "shifting, murmuring, squishing, sighing and smacking" rising and falling with the ends of course in an interminable meal. It is the sound of massed beggars feeding on scraps that waiters relay to them.

Or consider this example of managing dissent with old-style ritual: after student unrest, one prince stages a pro-emperor student demonstration, dressing police up as students. Real students counterdemonstrate, a student is killed and a huge funeral turns into another anti-emperor demonstration. More deaths and massive arrests result, and the emperor closes the university for a year—"thus saving the lives of many young people," says a courtier gratefully.

Accidents of history.

The last days of empire have a macabre humor. Courtiers become afraid to go home, since army officers are picking them off one by one. They abandon their former concern for rank and status, bedding down helter-skelter in the palace, squabbling over curtains they tear down to use for blankets. In the mornings they must all perform calisthenics, which the emperor has ordered and even imported Swedish physicians to conduct. The emperor retreats finally to his office, where military officers show up to hunt for hidden wealth. They lift up the Persian carpet to reveal another, green carpet beneath it composed of rolls of dollar bills.

These are the implausible realities of a way of life that, once it was over, seemed fabulous even to its own participants. "Wasn't it just yesterday?" says one. "Yesterday, but a century ago. In this city, but on a planet that is now far away." Maybe that once-upon-a-time quality to the reminiscences is no artistic recreation. It may legitimately belong to the courtiers themselves, who are now accidents of history. ■

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SPORTS

Kicking around a few thoughts about soccer

Soccer Madness

By Janet Lever

University of Chicago Press,
200 pp., \$17.50

By Lester Rodney

Back in my intensely sports-minded youth—light years before Little League, television and computer games—we kids played baseball and football games on empty lots. Out on the streets, we played stickball, punchball, a form of non-tackling football we called “association,” and even an ingenious kind of hockey without ice. In high school I ran the middle and long distances, played some infield and, though weighing 120 pounds soaking wet, valiantly (stupidly) tried out for the glamor team—football. Two days of being crunched by the big boys was enough.

Soccer? A foreign game. We vaguely knew it existed. In more strongly ethnic neighborhoods you might see a few kids fooling with a soccer ball, though it undoubtedly carried the stigma of being non-American. Running around interminably after a bouncing ball and directing it with your feet and your head, for goodness sakes.

Later, as a sports writer, I became aware of weekend and evening league play before passionately involved fans. The players were workers and amateurs—Yugoslav, Hungarian, Polish, Italian, Scottish and German-Americans, with the teams organized by nationality. Famous soccer teams from abroad occasionally came over here to play exhibition games before spectators who were probably 95 percent foreign born, or first generation Americans. It was a foreign scene, off to one side.

And today?

We have a professional soccer league, but only a handful of the players are native born, and the league is no attendance threat to the American Big Three of team sports—baseball, football and basketball. It gets very secondary treatment in the sports pages of the nation's newspapers.

The best comment on American fans' interest in soccer can be found in the price range of events in next year's Olympics, scheduled for Los Angeles. Top price for the championship soccer final is \$20, just \$5 more than field hockey. By comparison, top price for the basketball final is \$95.

Soccer at the grassroots.

Ah, but “down below” something significant is going on. One million American youngsters now play on organized soccer teams. That's about half as many as play Little League baseball. Youth soccer is becoming a familiar part of the suburban scene, no longer bearing a “foreign” stigma. Our friendly neighborhood high school football coach out here in Southern California can be heard grumbling that he no longer always gets the best athletes to come out for the team, because some of them are opting for soccer (much to the relief of

some mothers who no longer have to worry about hemstitched knees, concussions or worse.)

And, glory be, soccer turns out to be a game in which the female of our species is enthusiastically and increasingly involved, even though they do not yet always get equal facilities, coaching and scheduling.

Soccer is a development that almost cries out for thoroughgoing tracing and analysis, giving some idea of just how far this upstart sport may go.

Janet Lever, a sociologist who has taught at Yale, Northwestern, UCLA and UC-San Diego, has not written such an examination. *Soccer Madness* is a many layered, absorbing study of soccer and its impact in Brazil—a land where the game drenches and permeates everyday life and where 200,000 fanatics waving huge team banners to samba rhythms jam the world's largest stadium in Rio, which features a moat 10 feet wide and 10 feet deep to keep them from getting at the players, referees and the rival fans across the way. It is the country that produced the world's most famous athlete, the nonpareil Pele, who led Brazil to two straight world championships, in 1958 and '62. The World Cup, the only true worldwide professional team championship event, is played quadrennially, but it takes two years and about 250 preliminary games to determine the participants for the final competition. After missing in '66, Brazil went bonkers over an unprecedented Third World title in '70, but hasn't won since.

(Confession: this traditional American sports fan, who has never seen a soccer match in the flesh, finally got hooked into watching last year's final rounds on TV, successfully rooting home the underdog Italians over the West Germans. Though the more picturesque style of the French team made them my favorites. If it happened to me, it must have happened that a lot more folks gained a possibly reluctant appreciation of the sport.)

British beginnings.

Soccer Madness, in addition to being an excellent sociological study of a sport, its fans and its inter-relationship with “real

life,” details the origin of soccer and the way it was spread around the globe from England, where it all began. British sailors first brought the game to Brazil in 1884. As in other lands, the local elite learned it from the British and then the working class took up the sport.

The infrastructure of soccer in Brazil, as most other nations, is the non-profit club, which inevitably also plays a major social role in a community. (Schools in Brazil do not have our kind of sports facilities and competition.) Lever found that through the clubs and allied fan organizations, soccer fans gain a feeling of impact on their favorite teams that is missing in our profit-oriented setup for pro sports. It would be inconceivable in Brazil to yank a team out of its traditional base to another area, as has become commonplace here.

Just a couple of startling statistics: there are 8,300 professional soccer players in Brazil, three times the number of pro athletes in all U.S. sports. A mammoth lottery, looked upon favorably by Lever, provides much of the revenue needed by the clubs for the teams, the training of youngsters in juvenile play, and even some social services sorely lacking under the military regime. Lever found that 92 percent of all of Rio's adults bet at least once a month, and 62 percent once a week, using cards similar to the less legal ones found in many American workplaces during our football season. Interestingly, she asked Brazilians about betting against their own favorite teams and discovered that 60 percent of those who bet never give themselves that kind of conflict.

Pele, the great one.

During her years in Brazil, the author came to know and admire Pele, and tells us a few things about the great one. He came from a typically poor family in a small city, was a shoeshine boy and peanut vendor helping to support his family, while his schooling suffered. When his great athletic talents were discovered, he became a soccer player at 15 and flamed into superstardom within two years. When he retired at 33 he was the kind of international sports celebrity beyond the ken of Americans. His

ebullient personality and always cordial response to fans clamoring for a word or an autograph added to his popularity.

Fabulous contracts never dulled his consciousness of his Brazilianess, his class origins and his blackness. When the New York Cosmos lured him out of retirement to give instant credibility to the emerging soccer league here, Pele as part of the deal insisted that Warner Communications, parent corporation of the Cosmos, sponsor and bankroll a sports school for the kids of Santos, his native town. We learn that after scoring his historic 1,000th goal, he wept and said: “Remember the children, remember the poor children.”

Not a guidebook to soccer.

What one would like to see in a book called *Soccer Madness*, and doesn't get, is a description of the game itself—its rules, techniques and tactics, something about the overriding role of defense and the offside whistle, which tend to turn off Americans who never played the sport. The world's number one game still needs a popular introduction to we insular isolates.

Also on the negative side, the book tends to go overboard on tedious scholastic footnoting. A scrupulously thorough worker (as a sociologist ought to be), Lever sometimes gets swept away by her findings and loses the difference between a book and a doctoral dissertation. We sometimes learn more about the inner organization of Brazilian soccer than we really care to know.

A few lines showing Lever's personal judgment made this reader wince. Try “Argentina's infamous urban guerrillas, the

Clubs and fan organizations in Brazil give soccer fans a feeling of impact on the game that is missing in our profit-minded professional sports set-up.

Montoneros...,” as though that's what's been wrong with Argentina, not the infamous murderous government. And, “people everywhere...sharing the joy of Prince Charles' wedding.” Everywhere? Even in Dublin?

However, Lever is not at all sycophantic toward Brazil's military rulers, and does speak of their attempt to manipulate soccer madness to their advantage.

As a good sociologist, she delves into the old question as to whether professional sports is an opiate of the people, diverting them from the struggle for a better life. Drawing on her Brazilian experience, her answer is a strong no. “Nor is soccer an opiate that would stop the revolution,” she concludes. In fact, she sees it as a positive force for social change, through its very dynamics. In one chapter on “the paradox of sport,” she develops the thesis that international competitions “reinforce nationalism while simultaneously uniting people into a global folk culture...,” surely an interesting proposition for chewing over.

I recall some fellow leftists arguing that soccer would replace our football when a better way of life replaced capitalism. I didn't agree then, and in spite of my new appreciation for soccer, I don't now. Football grew out of the peculiar American experience. Certainly it is rough, sometimes brutal and it should probably carry a warning label: “Can be dangerous to your body.” But I like it better than soccer. So do most Americans. I doubt that will change. I *do* look forward to it evolving for the better some day, along with other aspects of American life now distorted by the *profit-uber-alles* ethic. No football coach in that happy day will be driven through fear of losing his job to teach dirty football, or to play a kid who is hurt.

Oh, but he (or she) can still be a character, can still celebrate individuality and run things his own way. That's American, not capitalistic. Our kind of socialism wants to take the corporate-dollar monkey off of sports' back, freeing sport for true individualism, which is not at the expense of others, or at the expense of the sport itself.

In the meantime, here comes soccer, long a stepchild, finding an increasing role in American life. And deservedly so. Let's hope that Janet Lever (or someone of equal talent) turns her attention to a look at this newest American sports phenomenon.

Lester Rodney was sports editor of the *Daily Worker*.



Photographer unknown