

The Intersection of Sport and the Shoah: A Technical Analysis of Ajax Amsterdam's Identity Evolution

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The historical intersection of professional sports and geopolitical upheaval provides a unique lens through which to examine sociological shifts, identity appropriation, and historical memory. One of the most compelling case studies in this domain is **Ajax Amsterdam**, a football club whose identity is inextricably linked—both through reality and myth—with the Jewish community of Amsterdam and the horrors of the **Shoah** (Holocaust). Based on the seminal research of **Simon Kuper**, specifically his work *"Ajax, la squadra del ghetto. Il calcio e la Shoah"*, this analysis explores the technical, historical, and sociological mechanisms that transformed a standard athletic institution into a vessel for post-war cultural identity.

The Theoretical Framework of Identity Appropriation in Football

In the context of sports sociology, **identity appropriation** occurs when a fanbase adopts cultural, religious, or ethnic symbols that do not necessarily belong to the majority of its members. For Ajax, this phenomenon is not merely a superficial choice of iconography but a complex response to the trauma of the Second World War. To understand this, we must first define the **Mokum** identity—the Yiddish-derived nickname for Amsterdam—which signifies the city's historical role as a safe haven for Jewish populations.

Mechanisms of Identity Formation

The evolution of Ajax's "Jewish" identity can be broken down into three distinct phases:

- Phase 1: Geographic Proximity (Pre-1940): The club's stadium, De Meer, was located in East Amsterdam, an area with a high density of Jewish residents. This led to a natural, albeit not exclusive, participation of Jewish supporters and players.
- Phase 2: Systematic Eradication (1940-1945): During the Nazi occupation, the club was forced to comply with "Arianization" laws. This period is characterized by the technical removal of Jewish members from the club's administration and roster.
- Phase 3: Post-War Re-imagination (1970s-Present): The adoption of Jewish symbols (the Star of David, Israeli flags) by non-Jewish fans as a form of "tribalism" and a response to anti-Semitic chanting from rival supporters.

Historical Technical Analysis: The Occupation and the Club

The technical reality of Ajax during the **Shoah** is starkly different from the heroic mythos often portrayed in popular media. Simon Kuper's research utilizes a **historiographic methodology** that cross-references club archives with municipal records of deported persons. The findings indicate that Ajax, like many other Dutch institutions, largely operated within the framework provided by the occupying forces to ensure its survival.

The Legal Framework of Exclusion

The implementation of anti-Jewish measures in Dutch football followed a specific bureaucratic workflow:

1. Registration: All sports clubs were required to submit lists of members to the Reichskommissariat.
2. Segregation: By September 1941, Jews were prohibited from participating in public sports or entering sports facilities.

3. Expulsion: Boards of directors were forced to formally expel Jewish members. In the case of Ajax, several prominent members and former players were caught in this dragnet.

Quantitative Impact on Club Membership

To quantify the impact of the Shoah on the club, we can examine the estimated survival rates of the Amsterdam Jewish population compared to the representation within the club's historical records.

Metric	Pre-War (1939)	Post-War (1945)	Percentage Change
Jewish Population in Amsterdam	~80,000	~15,000	-81.25%
Jewish Members of Ajax (Est.)	~300-500	Negligible	~ -95%
Active Professional Jewish Players	7 (Notable examples)	0	-100%

The Myth of the "Jewish Club": A Comparative Evaluation

One of the core contributions of **Simon Kuper** is the deconstruction of the "Jewish Ajax" myth. While the club is globally perceived as Jewish, the technical reality is that the club's board during the war did not engage in organized resistance. The following table compares the **Popular Perception** of the club against the **Historical Data** revealed in technical studies.

Feature/Concept	Popular Perception	Historical Reality (Kuper's Findings)
Resistance Status	Ajax was a hub of anti-Nazi resistance.	The club largely conformed to Nazi administrative demands to continue playing.
Ethnic Composition	The team was predominantly Jewish.	The team was overwhelmingly secular/Christian; Jewishness was a geographic byproduct.
The "Superjews" Moniker	A title earned through centuries of history.	A 1970s subculture phenomenon created by non-Jewish ultras.
Johan Cruyff's Identity	Often assumed to be Jewish.	Cruyff was not Jewish; his connection was cultural and professional.

Technical Breakdown of the Post-War Identity Shift

The transformation of Ajax into the "Squadra del Ghetto" (the Ghetto Team) in the eyes of the public is a case study in **semiotic shift**. When rival fans from clubs like Feyenoord or ADO Den Haag began using anti-Semitic slurs to taunt Ajax (due to the club's association with the city of Amsterdam), the Ajax fans responded not by distancing themselves from the Jewish identity, but by embracing it.

Step-by-Step Procedure of Cultural Appropriation

1. Identification of Stimulus: External groups (rival fans) use the label "Jews" as a pejorative.
2. Subcultural Internalization: The targeted group (Ajax fans) adopts the slur as a badge of honor to neutralize its offensive power.
3. Symbolic Proliferation: Use of the Magen David on banners, tattoos, and scarves.
4. Institutional Dissonance: The club's official management often finds itself at odds with this fan-led identity, as it can inadvertently trigger further anti-Semitic responses.

Case Study: The Tragedy of Eddy Hamel

To understand the human cost analyzed in "*Ajax, la squadra del ghetto*", we must look at the specific case of **Eddy Hamel**. Hamel was an American-Jewish player who played for Ajax in the 1920s. His story serves as a technical benchmark for the club's wartime experience.

Operational Failure of Protection

Despite his status as a former star and an American citizen, the administrative structures of the time failed to provide a safety net. The workflow of his tragedy is a grim reminder of the era's logistical efficiency:

- 1942: Hamel is detained due to his Jewish heritage.
- 1943: Deportation to Auschwitz-Birkenau. Unlike some high-profile figures who were held in "privileged" camps like Theresienstadt, Hamel was subjected to the standard extermination process.
- Technical Note: The lack of institutional intervention from the KNVB (Dutch Football Association) or Ajax highlights the total collapse of civil protection for Jewish athletes.

Historiographical Challenges and Data Limitations

Researching the history of the Shoah within sports clubs presents several technical challenges. Many archives

were destroyed during the Allied bombings or intentionally purged by collaborators during the liberation of the Netherlands.

Data Collection Constraints

- Archive Fragmentation: Missing membership ledgers from 1940-1944.
- Oral History Reliability: Survivor bias and the tendency for post-war narratives to emphasize resistance over compliance.
- Terminology Shifts: Defining "Jewishness" in a historical context (religious vs. secular vs. Nazi racial definitions).

Mathematical Model of Demographic Loss

If we apply a basic **Loss Projection Model** to the Amsterdam sporting community, we can estimate the intellectual and athletic vacuum created by the Shoah:

$$V = (P_i * R_d) - S_a$$

Where: **V** = Total Vacuum (Loss of human capital) **P_i** = Initial Jewish participation rate in city sports **R_d** = Rate of deportation/extermination (~75-80% in the Netherlands) **S_a** = Survival/Return rate

In Amsterdam, the **R_d** was disproportionately high compared to neighboring countries like France or Belgium, leading to a near-total erasure of the Jewish athletic infrastructure that had flourished in the 1930s.

Practical Implementation: Educational and Commemorative Strategies

For modern organizations, the lesson of Ajax and the Shoah involves implementing technical frameworks for memory and education. This is no longer just about football; it is about **Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)** and historical preservation.

The "Memory Integration" Workflow

1. Audit: Conduct a deep-dive historical audit of the institution's wartime activities.
2. Transparency: Publish findings, regardless of how they reflect on past leadership.
3. Education: Integrate the history into the youth academy curriculum. Ajax players today are often educated on the "Jewish" history of the club to understand the weight of the symbols they see in the stands.
4. Commemoration: Installation of "Stolpersteine" (stumbling stones) or plaques for murdered members.

Analytical Summary: The Paradox of the "Jewish" Identity

The technical analysis of Ajax's history reveals a profound paradox. The club is called the "Squadra del Ghetto," yet during the years the ghetto existed in its most literal and horrific sense, the club was forced to be "Judenrein" (free of Jews). The modern "Jewish" identity of Ajax is a **post-traumatic construct**—a phantom limb of a community that was almost entirely severed from the city's fabric.

Simon Kuper's work serves as a critical corrective to simplified narratives. It forces the reader and the researcher to confront the uncomfortable reality that sports clubs are not autonomous moral agents but are subject to the same systemic pressures as any other social institution. The appropriation of Jewish identity by fans today is a complex layer of **semiotic defiance**, but it must be grounded in an accurate understanding of the 1940-1945 period to avoid trivializing the actual suffering of the Jewish members who were lost.

Ultimately, the study of Ajax and the Shoah is a study of how memory is managed, how myths are constructed to fill the voids left by tragedy, and how football remains one of the most powerful vehicles for communal identity, even

when that identity is built upon the echoes of a vanished world. By utilizing technical historical research and sociological frameworks, we can move beyond the surface-level chants and understand the deep, often painful, roots of one of football's most unique cultural phenomena.

Tags: #Ajax Amsterdam #Simon Kuper #Shoah #Football History #Holocaust Studies

