
“That German Boy who Played for Manchester”: Bert Trautmann – Biography, History and Politics

„Dieser deutsche Junge, der für Manchester spielte“:
Bert Trautmann – Biographie, Geschichte und
politischer Kontext

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Abstract

This essay examines the life and the social and political significance of the German footballer Bernhard ‘Bert’ Trautmann. Trautmann came to England as a Prisoner of War in 1945 and played League football there between 1949 and 1964. A talented sportsman, he was discovered, while in his prisoner-of-war camp, to be an especially talented goalkeeper and soon established a reputation in North West England. A number of top English clubs hoped to recruit him and he became a Manchester City player in 1949. He achieved something verging on global fame when he kept goal for City in the FA Cup Final of 1956 and finished the game despite having, as doctors discovered later, sustained a broken neck.

A number of myths have formed around Trautmann since the 1950s. Two are scrutinised in this essay. One is that, as the fabled ‘good German’, he won over

an angry populace in Manchester, thousands of whom had turned out in a massive demonstration against his signing and, through force of personality and heroic performances on the field, almost single-handedly effected a post-war reconciliation. The essay argues instead that Trautmann was already integrated into working class life in the area by the time he came to Manchester; that the widely-cited demonstration against him almost certainly did not take place; and that the reconciliation myth was fashioned retrospectively to celebrate a purportedly special British capacity for tolerance. The second myth concerns Bert Trautmann's recent honours for services to Anglo-German relations. The essay suggests that Trautmann's re-emergence has been to do, not with Anglo-German relations, but with the attractiveness of his life – and, in particular his Second World War and football experiences – in relation to the burgeoning media-heritage industry.

Zusammenfassung

Der Aufsatz untersucht das Leben und die soziale bzw. politische Bedeutung des deutschen Fußballers Bernhard 'Bert' Trautmann. Trautmann kam als Kriegsgefangener im Jahr 1945 nach England und spielte dort zwischen 1949 und 1964 professionell Fußball. Noch im Gefangenenlager wurde er als außerordentlich talentierter Torhüter entdeckt. Schnell erarbeitete er sich einen Ruf in den einschlägigen Fußballkreisen Nordwestenglands, woraufhin eine Reihe von Spitzenmannschaften versuchte, ihn zu verpflichten. 1949 wurde er schließlich Spieler von Manchester City. Sein nahezu weltweiter Bekanntheitsgrad geht auf das FA Cup-Finale aus dem Jahr 1956 zurück, als er für Manchester City das Spiel bis zum Ende bestritt, obwohl die Ärzte später feststellten, dass er sich während der Partie einen Genickbruch zugezogen hatte.

Um die Person Trautmann ranken sich seit den 1950er Jahren mehrere Mythen, wobei der vorliegende Essay zwei von ihnen nachgeht. In einem Mythos gilt Trautmann als der legendäre 'gute Deutsche', der in Manchester eine aufgebrachte Bevölkerung umstimmte, die in Demonstrationen mit tausenden Teilnehmern gegen seine Verpflichtung protestiert hatten – und dies nur aufgrund seiner Persönlichkeit sowie seiner heroischen Leistungen als Torwart. Demnach bewirkte er gleichsam im Alleingang eine Versöhnung der beiden Länder in der Nachkriegszeit. Der Artikel argumentiert demgegenüber, dass Trautmann bereits in das Arbeiterleben in der Großregion integriert war, als er nach Manchester kam. Weiterhin wird angenommen, dass die berühmte Demonstration gegen ihn sehr wahrscheinlich niemals stattfand. Auch geht der Beitrag davon aus, dass der Versöhnungsmythos erst im Nachhinein Ver-

breitung fand, um eine vermeintlich spezielle britische Toleranz hervorzuheben. Der zweite Mythos bezieht sich auf Bert Trautmanns jüngste Auszeichnungen im Dienst der englisch-deutschen Beziehungen. Hier argumentiert der Beitrag, dass das neuerliche Interesse an Trautmann nicht mit den englisch-deutschen Beziehungen in Zusammenhang steht, sondern vor allem mit der Attraktivität seiner Lebensgeschichte, also der Mischung aus II. Weltkriegs- und Fußballerfahrung, und dies insbesondere im Kontext der aufkommenden medialen *Heritage*-Industrie.

Football people, especially those of a certain age (say, 50 and over), commonly regard the Soviet Russian Lev Yashin (1929-1990) as the best goalkeeper ever to have played the game. Yashin himself, not given to false modesty, publicly endorsed this verdict, adding that the only player to challenge his place in the pantheon of top keepers was “that German boy who played for Manchester” (Ramsden 2006: 325). This essay considers the German boy in question, Bernhard ‘Bert’ Trautmann, who came to England as a Prisoner of War in 1945 and signed for Manchester City four years later. It is concerned not with his claims to greatness, but with his political and social significance. This significance was considerable in the 1940s and 50s, has grown once again in recent times and has varied in nature according to time and place. The essay looks critically, therefore, not so much at what Trautmann was or was not, but at what he was, at various times, taken to represent and it is guided by two noted exhortations – C. Wright Mills’ much quoted insistence that sociology should prove an explanatory bridge between history and biography¹ and Roland Barthes’ equally influential call for myths to be properly scrutinised. Barthes was, of course, using the word ‘myth’ to mean not legends, as such, but ‘depoliticised speech’ (Barthes 1973: 142) – accounts of events that are simply taken for granted and not open to critical appraisal.

At the time of writing Trautmann is in his late eighties and living in retirement in Spain. A great deal of what has been written about him has been published in the last twenty five years or so. Alan Rowlands, a writer with a principal interest in the history of football, published a biography of Trautmann in 1990, re-issuing it, in an updated version, in 2005 (Rowlands 2005/1990). The following year, John Ramsden, a professor of modern history, devoted virtually a whole chapter to Trautmann in his study of British-German relations since 1890 (Ramsden 2006:

1 Mills (1970: 12) states: “The sociological imagination enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society. That is its task and its promise”.

325-362). In 2010, Catrine Clay, a former producer in the BBC's History Unit who had made documentary films about Nazi Germany, published a life of Trautmann which concentrated principally on the period before her subject became the Manchester City goalkeeper in 1949 (Clay 2010) and in 2011 the accomplished documentary filmmakers Testimony Films produced *The Bert Trautmann Story*². These revisitations of the man have brought renewed press interest in Trautmann, including a number of recent stories available on the internet, which have in turn prompted reminiscences of Trautmann and his time. I draw on much of this material, as well as contemporary newspaper reports and Trautmann's own 'ghosted' autobiography of 1956 (Trautmann 1956), in this essay.

The essay has two principal purposes and is divided accordingly into two sections. The first aim is to discuss the popular view of Bert as the 'good German' who, with the Second World War fresh in people's minds, won over a doubting English football public with his genial personality and sterling performances: Fred Eyre and Roy Cavanagh have for example, suggested that Trautmann "defied British chauvinism and won British hearts with talent and good manners", making him, effectively, "a Teutonic one-man United Nations" (Quoted in Ramsden 2006: 328). The hope here will be to present a more nuanced account. Second, there will be discussion of Trautmann's re-emergence as a public figure during the last decade or so. Here again, the argument will be somewhat contrary to the popular view (expressed for example, in the citation for the OBE awarded to him in 2004) that it constituted (apparently belated) recognition of "his work for Anglo-German relations"³. Without wishing either to dispute or disparage any work that Bert Trautmann may have done in this regard, the essay will suggest that his re-discovery was to do with other factors – related chiefly to globalisation and the burgeoning interest, especially (but not solely) among media organisations, with 'heritage'.

2 http://www.testimonyfilms.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=23&Itemid=9. Access: 28th October 2012.

3 "Football Star Trautmann given OBE". <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/manchester/3972309.stm>. Access: 29th October 2012.

1 **“Rows and Rows of Tiny Terraced Houses”: Bert Trautmann, Social Class and the North West of England**

A revisionist cloud has recently hovered over the notion of Bert Trautmann as a/ the ‘Good German’. In 2006 John Ramsden described the Trautmann family as “not particularly unwilling collaborators in the Nazi regime”, adding that Trautmann was classified as a Nazi on capture in 1945 and claiming that Trautmann had joined the Hitler Youth apparently before Hitler came to power (Ramsden 2006: 331). (If this is true, Bert would have been nine. He himself, not entirely without justification, likened the Hitler-Jugend to the Boy Scouts (Trautmann 1956: 16). Moreover, when Clay’s biography of Trautmann was published in 2010, reviewers, while generally guarded about the book, were considerably less so about its subject. In *The Observer*, Simon Hattenstone asked: “Why did Trautmann agree to collaborate with this book? To ease his conscience, get the truth out there, or did he simply feel he had nothing to hide?”⁴ Paul Coughton in *The Sunday Times* accused Clay of having given Trautmann “a relatively easy ride”⁵ and, in *The Times*, Sir Howard Davies (then Director of the London School of Economics and a supporter of Manchester City) went further. “My father”, he wrote, “– a D-Day veteran – told me all about Trautmann. I have a very clear recollection of the story he recounted. How Trautmann was a good German, not a Nazi, how he had been captured early in the war and spent a long time in a prisoner-of-war camp on the Isle of Man. How he was a gentle giant who never hurt a fly... The only problem is that none of the above description of his life is true... This book is an interesting tale. But I wish that I had never read it”⁶.

However, sifting through accounts of Trautmann’s experiences growing up in Nazi Germany (he was ten years old when the National Socialists took power and Hitler became Chancellor) and his engagement both with the north west of England and the culture of the Football League, it is hard to credit either the notion of Trautmann as a “one-man United Nations” or as being “soaked in the blood and horror of the Holocaust” as he is depicted elsewhere in Hattenstone’s

4 Simon Hattenstone: “Trautmann’s Journey: From Hitler Youth to FA Cup Legend”, *The Observer* 4th April 2010. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/football/2010/apr/04/trautmanns-journey-from-hitler-youth>. Access: 29th October 2012.

5 http://www.theomnivore.co.uk/Book/Classification/Non_fiction/Genre/Sports_Hobbies_Games/5565-Trautmann_s_Journey_From_Hitler_Youth_to_FA_Cup_Legend/Default.aspx. Access: 29th October 2012.

6 Ibid.

review⁷. To quote Mills again, “When wars happen, an insurance man becomes a rocket launcher; a store clerk a radar man [...] Neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both” (Mills 1970: 9).

Bernhard Trautmann was born in the port of Bremen in northern Germany in 1923. His father was a qualified electrician (Trautmann 1956: 13) who worked on the docks for the Kali chemical company (Clay 2010: 13) and is described by Rowlands as a social democrat, notwithstanding the rise of Hitler (Rowlands 2005/1990). In *Steppes to Wembley*, the routinely stylised sports biography written for him by *Guardian* football journalist Eric Todd, Trautmann acknowledges membership of the Hitler Youth, which he joined as a ten year old in 1933; his enlistment at 17 in the *Luftwaffe* in 1941, having trained as a motor mechanic; and his participation in Operation Barbarossa (the German invasion of the Soviet Union) the following year (Trautmann 1956: 16). Both Trautmann’s biographers give a strong contextualisation to Trautmann’s early life, showing the tentacular growth of the totalitarian state in Germany in the late 1930s. Rowlands notes how by this time the *Kraft durch Freude* (Strength Through Joy) movement was operating in all German cities, how in 1937 all teachers in Germany had to take an oath of loyalty to the Führer, and Trautmann’s induction as a teenager into the *Landjahr* programme of sport and militaristic training in rural camps (Rowlands 2005/1990: 24-27). Clay, somewhat of a specialist on life in Nazi Germany, likewise gives a detailed account of the prevailing political circumstances, which were not, of course, of Trautmann’s own choosing, or the choosing of many like him: she talks at length about increasingly compulsory National socialist youth programmes (see, for example, Clay 2010: 24-26, 52); the dissolution of trade unions in 1933 and the confiscation of all the assets of the German Communist Party (ibid: 35); and observes that by the eve of the Second World War “only football remained relatively free of state intervention” (ibid: 41). So, remembering Mills and contra the revisionists, one is inclined to agree with a web correspondent called ‘sammer’ who replied to Hattenstone’s review thus:

“Trautmann fought in the Ukraine which was a nasty theatre of war, but I don’t think there is evidence to link him with ‘genocidal reality’, as this article does. Like many footballers Trautmann’s politics would be largely nondescript: To be drawn into the HJ [Hitler-Jugend – Hitler Youth] as a 10 year old hardly marks him out from other German boys at that time. As a keen athlete and a character

7 Hattenstone “Trautmann’s Journey...”, see footnote 4.

who obviously relished challenges it's hardly surprising he embraced the macho military ethos of Nazi Germany"⁸.

Similarly, two further notions need a degree of correction: one, as we've seen, of Bert Trautmann as some kind of Pied Piper figure trailing an enchanted English football public in his wake and the other of Trautmann's acceptance being evidence of some special British capacity for forgiveness. The latter idea was certainly encouraged by Bert himself when, in the summer of 2012, he told an interviewer from *Saga* magazine: "I've always said my education began in the UK. The way I was treated - with fairness, kindness, tolerance - even as a prisoner of war - by the people of Lancashire, Mancunians and Great Britain. I am more English than German, even though I was born German. You are a special kind of people, and this is a special kind of island"⁹. But, looked at the round, Trautmann's experiences and his recollections of them, are more inflected by social class – an increasingly inadmissible social difference in post-war Britain – than nationality, ethnicity or any other factor.

As we saw, Trautmann was brought to England as a Prisoner of War in 1945 and was held in various camps. It is certainly the case that, when British intelligence came to categorise German PoWs politically as A (for anti-Nazi), B (for the apolitical) or C (for pro-Nazi), Trautmann was classified as C. Moreover, at a subsequent camp at Northwich in Cheshire, prisoners were divided into East (anti-Nazi) and West (pro-Nazi) contingents and Trautmann was allocated to West. However, C was a broad grouping which embraced both members of the SS and young soldiers who had known no adult life other than under the Third Reich. Trautmann was still only 22 in 1945 and this, or the fact that he had ended the war as a paratrooper, could explain his initial C grading; soon, because of his youth, perhaps, or his lack of political fervour, he was reclassified as a B prisoner (Rowlands 2005/1990: 63). On the other hand, as Clay makes clear, the fiercest friction was not with the English public but between prisoners. Many inmates of the Marbury Hall transit camp in Cheshire who were designated as Category C and 'West' were unreconstructed Nazis who saw the 'East' prisoners as traitors: men who failed to give the Nazi salute or spoke disparagingly of the fuhrer were tried in secret kangaroo courts and, perhaps, found hanging in the toilets the following day (Clay 2010: 191). A and B category PoWs by contrast began to be

8 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/football/2010/apr/04/trautmanns-journey-from-hitler-youth>. Posted 4th April 2010. Access: 30th October 2012.

9 Andy Stevens: "From the Iron Cross to the OBE – Bert Trautmann talks to *Saga*". <http://www.saga.co.uk/lifestyle/people/real-lives/from-the-iron-cross-to-the-obe-bert-trautmann-talks-to-saga.aspx>. 10th July 2012. Access: 30th October 2012.

assimilated into local communities. In 1946, Trautmann was among a batch of prisoners to be redeployed to a camp near Ashton-in-Makerfield, a town in what was then the south Lancashire coalfield. Here they got up a football team to play charity matches against local sides; they got passes to go dancing on a Saturday night (they aroused considerable female interest – Clay records that nearly 800 young Englishwomen married German PoWs, *ibid*: 235); and they were invited into people's homes, on Sundays and at Christmas (Trautmann 1956: 35; Rowlands 2005/1990: 67).

These latter gestures were not, of course, confined to Bert Trautmann; nor can they be attributable to the charm of a one-man United Nations. Rowlands is at pains to attribute them to regional and ethnic factors. The labour force of this predominantly mining and agricultural area, he argues, had avoided conscription because they were in reserved occupations, deemed essential to the war effort; they therefore lacked the bitterness often generated by combat. Besides, they preferred the German prisoners, whom they saw as hardworking, to the Italians, who were seen as skivers (Rowlands 2005/1990: 65). But, aside from rehearsing some very weary national stereotypes, this may underestimate the desire of many people in a predominantly working class area simply to have done with the war. Certainly his experiences in Lancashire in the late 1940s enhanced Trautmann's strong sense of class and community. He was, after all, a working class man from a working class family, a motor mechanic and the son of an electrician. And, whatever else may be said of his war record, it did not diminish his sense that war was something inflicted on the common people. Reflecting on his experiences in Operation Barbarossa, Trautmann wrote in his autobiography "I am convinced the 'man-in-the-street' in any country wants no part in war. War is dictated by a higher authority and the soldier, sailor and airman come inevitably under that authority" (Trautmann 1956: 27).

When Bert Trautmann arrived in the north of England, one of the first things he noticed was the condition of the working classes: staring from the train window at the "rows and rows of tiny terraced houses all backing onto the railway line" he and his fellow PoWs asked "how did they ever win the war?" (Clay 2010: 189). Later, in a camp football game, Trautmann was asked to go in goal; he immediately excelled and rapidly gained a reputation in local football circles. This brought him to the attention of St Helens FC, which was in the process of being re-established, chiefly at the instigation of the manager of the local Cooperative grocery store, the 'Co-op', of course, being an historic bulwark of the British labour movement. Trautmann signed for St Helens in 1946. St Helens Town FC was sited in Sutton, an area of St Helens dominated by one of the biggest coal mines in Lancashire, opened in 1909. Trautmann stressed the importance to him of class and

community when he spoke to the St Helens Star in 2009: “St Helens gave me a new life – the five years in the war and three years as a POW took eight years out of my life. I came out and was welcomed in to a beautiful community in Sutton. It was a mining district – miners are the same the world over and very warm-hearted and they took to me”¹⁰. The community embrace of Trautmann was, it seems, strong enough to transcend grievous personal loss: George Houghton, whose father-in-law Dick Kitts was trainer and groundsman at the St Helens club said recently: “My wife remembers Bert Trautmann coming to her home when there was still some resentment from certain people about him being German and her mother welcomed him saying ‘Well he is some mother’s son’. Despite losing a son of her own in the conflict, they became very friendly with Bert and they regularly went to see him play at Manchester City” (ibid). Trautmann, then, soon became part of this working class community, drinking in the Junction Inn on Junction Lane¹¹ and wearing the cloth cap and muffler that still characterised the northern working class male (Ramsden 2006: 339). In January 1949, with Trautmann due to visit his family in Bremen, St Helens supporters presented him with a trunk full of groceries (donated via their own ration books) and an envelope containing fifty £1 notes – a considerable sum in those days (Rowlands 2005/1990: 81). When he received the Footballer of the Year in 1956 Trautmann made a brief, predictably humble speech, in which he paid tribute to “the man who represents the backbone of your national game – the chap on the popular side with his cloth cap and muffler, and penetrating voice. To him and his lady I owe more than I can hope to repay” (Ramsden 2006: 339f.). By that time, though, he had long since been integrated into the northern English working class. He wore his own cap and muffler. He could very easily have said ‘*our* national game’. On his visit to Bremen back in 1949, his brother had told him “You’re a bloody Englishman now” (Rowlands 2005/1990: 82).

In October of 1949 Bert Trautmann moved into what might be called the aristocracy of sporting labour¹² when he signed for Manchester City. As he himself

10 <http://www.suttonbeauty.org.uk/suttonhistory/sport.html>. Access: 31st October 2011.

11 <http://www.suttonbeauty.org.uk/suttonhistory/suttonpubs.html>. Access: 31st October 2012.

12 I’m aware that historians have used the term ‘aristocracy of labour’ somewhat differently. As R.J. Morris puts it: “The labour aristocracy were a section of the 19th century working class who were relatively better paid, more secure, better treated at work and more able to control the organisation of their work”. See his “The Labour Aristocracy and the British Class Struggle”. In: *ReFresh: Recent Findings of Research in Social and Economic History*, Autumn 7, 1988: <http://www.ehs.org.uk/ehs/refresh/assets/Morris7a.pdf>. Access: 8th November 2012. English League footballers in the 1940s did not, of

reflected, this could be a test of his assimilation into northern football culture since he was leaving St Helens “for the less parochial atmosphere of Manchester and Salford with their combined populations of over a million people” (Rowlands 2005/1990: 102). According to a number of popular accounts, he was right to be apprehensive. Indeed, it is a central element in the Trautmann myth that he won over an angry Manchester football public calling for City not to sign this German. Ramsden suggests that, when Trautmann’s signing was mooted “all hell broke out” (although, paradoxically he appears to offer several reasons why it did not) (Ramsden 2006: 327–331). Clay suggests that 25,000 people demonstrated outside City’s Maine Road ground in the working class district of Moss Side and that the local papers were deluged with abusive letters (Clay 2010: 274). Similarly, a number of contemporary websites carry the assertion that there was a demonstration of 20,000 people in Manchester against the deal. Most of these accounts repeat the phrase “The club’s decision to sign a former Axis paratrooper sparked protests, with 20,000 people attending a demonstration”, which appears in Trautmann’s Wikipedia entry¹³ and seems to have been cut and pasted by writers posting elsewhere on the web, perhaps with minor alterations to the wording. One site says simply that 20,000 people “took to the streets”¹⁴ and another that the same streets were thronged by 40,000¹⁵. A further version has it that City received 20,000 letters of protest¹⁶ and the most recent suggestion is a march of 25,000 by the writer Anthony Clavane (2012: 89)¹⁷. In his autobiography Trautmann refers only to the “hundreds of letters” that poured into the offices of the local press and to others apparently destroyed by his father-in-law (Trautmann 1956: 45). Rowlands provides some good historical detail on Jewish Manchester, reports that the City was divided (with the Jewish community and the Gentile ex-servicemen’s club opposed to the transfer) and quotes Trautmann as saying that, given the controversy, he wished at the time that he’d never left St Helens (Rowlands 2005/1990: 92f.). But the local papers do not mention the actual demonstration and it is possible

course, fit this description; they became ‘aristocrats’ through social honour, as celebrity exponents of ‘the people’s game’.

13 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bert_Trautmann. Access: 31st October 2012.

14 <http://soccernet.espn.go.com/columns/story?id=344190&root=england&cc=5739>. Access: 1st November 2012.

15 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/manchester/3972309.stm>. Access: 3rd November 2012.

16 <http://www.twohundredpercent.net/?refsite=www.n1ads.com&ref=alexa-traffic-rank&paged=545>. Access: 1st November 2012.

17 I’m grateful to Anthony for assistance via email on this issue, between 2nd and 6th November 2012.

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