



## "COMPLICATED, ILLOGICAL, EFFEMINATE"

*Crispin Andrews on the history of cricket in Germany*

They gathered, wearing pullovers, by the concrete steps under the red cliffs, on the island where no one gets hayfever. On the plastic football pitch below, men and boys wearing white clothes and coloured hats played a strange game with a bat and a ball.

Germans playing cricket – with Englishmen – on Heligoland, the tiny German island where there are no cars and definitely no cricket pitches. CB Fry would have been suitably impressed.

Fry – a diplomat and navy superintendent long after he'd finished playing for England and somersaulting onto mantelpieces – once told Hitler's foreign minister, von Ribbentrop, that the Germans should take up cricket to teach them some manners.

Fry met Ribbentrop in 1934. He was in Germany trying to forge closer ties between the Boy Scouts and Hitler Youth.

Fry had lived through the First World War, and in the preceding decades saw Kaiser Wilhelm II and a succession of pushy Prussian aristocrats on the German Army's general staff throw their weight around in Europe and the African colonies. This, he and many other Brits believed, plunged Europe into a terrible war during which millions died.

By 1934, Germany's new National Socialist leader was making some decidedly inflammatory public statements about Germany's post-war position in Europe being a long way from what he, Adolf Hitler, considered was its rightful place.

Fry was one of those English gentlemen of the 1930s not averse to a strong Germany pursuing its legitimate interests in Europe. Playing cricket, he believed, would teach them to do so in the right and proper manner. Fry thought that the Germans might struggle with the concept

of fair play, but at least the grand old game might show them the necessity of playing by the rules.

There had been some – but not much – cricket in Germany since the mid-19th century. Like football, it was introduced by British students and businessmen. However, unlike football, only a few Germans took it up. Fry quipped that Germany's athletic javelin throwers and hand-grenade slingers might make decent fast bowlers. Ribbentrop said that cricket was "too complicated for us."

Ribbentrop's Führer had stronger opinions. During the First World War, Lance Corporal Hitler, recovering from injury in a Berlin hospital, organised a cricket match between a German team, including himself, and some British officers who were prisoners of war. According to Conservative MP Oliver Locker Lampson, who'd subsequently met some of the officers and written about it in the *Daily Mirror* in 1930, Hitler wanted to learn the intricacies and mysteries of the English national game.

The officers duly obliged. However, by the time Hitler took the field a few days later, he wanted some of the rules changed. Cricket, he apparently believed, was too complicated, illogical and also too effeminate. "The Laws of cricket were good enough for the pleasure loving-English," wrote Locker Lampson, quoting Hitler. "But Hitler proposed changing them for the serious-minded Teuton."

On 3 January 1933 when Hitler was made Reich Chancellor of Germany, England were 2-1 up against Australia and on their way to regaining the Ashes. Judging by what Locker Lampson wrote, the Führer would have approved of Jardine's

Bodyline tactics. Facing Larwood's 90mph thunderbolts might make a good training exercise for soldiers – if, of course, the bowler used a bigger, harder ball, and the batsman had his pads – "artificial bolsters", according to Hitler – taken away.

Once in power, the Nazis used sport, as they did most other things, as a way of indoctrinating people into being good National Socialists and good fighters. Hitler wanted speed and violence from his sport, not subtle nuances. When he heard that a cricket match had gone on for a whole week and still ended in a draw, he supposedly said that Germans had better things to do with their time.

Thankfully, there are a lot of things about modern Germany that Hitler wouldn't have liked: Jerome Boateng, Sami Khedira and Mesut Ozil – brilliant footballers of African, Tunisian and Turkish descent – lighting up the German national team with flair, physical presence and athleticism. Or The Scorpions, German heavy rock musicians, performing shows to sold out crowds all over the world and writing hit songs about Germany's friendship with Russia.

And now, it seems, there are Germans who play cricket. Proper rules: pads, gloves and sometimes even helmets.

Last May, 34 of them jumped out of small open boats, onto the beach at Heligoland. There was no mooring place for the Cuxhaven Ferry on this famous little island, which used to be a British colony before the Brits traded it for Zanzibar in 1890. THCC Rot-Gelb Cricket Hamburg were to play Heligoland Pilgrims, a team made up of Hamburg players and friends from other local clubs. The same two sides met at the same place last year for the



island's first cricket match. Some players wore their whites on the ferry. Time was short. A two-day, two-innings, 30-a-side match to get through. A return ferry to catch the following evening.

The game went to a nail-biting finish. The Hamburg captain was caught at long on with nine to win. "An unnecessary bold shot," Hamburg player Tim Tigges called it. Tigges, who first played cricket at Green Point Cricket Club in Cape Town, wasn't complaining though. The shot, the tension, as the ball flew towards the boundary fielder, just added to the drama.

John Snow and Ken Higgs may have been pictured on The Oval balcony in 1966 celebrating their match-winning last-wicket partnership of 128 against West Indies with a cup of tea, but tea was far too English for Hamburg and the Heligoland Pilgrims. Instead they celebrated their special game with a few cans of non-alcoholic beer, donated by the match sponsors Erdinger, a Bavarian brewery.

Cricket is a minority sport in Germany, but it is growing. There are clubs in Berlin, Cologne, Hamburg, Bremen, Hannover, Kiel, Dresden, Stuttgart, Freiburg and several in Bavaria. About 50 overall. Most of them are made up of expat Asians, some Brits, Aussies, New Zealanders, South Africans and a few Germans. More Germans play in women's and junior teams. The game is overseen by the Deutscher Cricket Bund (DCB), founded in 1988.

Göttingen Cricket Club in central Germany plays on the University sports ground but is not allowed to cut a grass wicket or put down a permanent AstroTurf strip. Instead, club members turn up two hours before every game, put down a layer of plastic foil, some

wooden planks and some matting. "It's a struggle, but the bounce is good enough," says youth team organiser Michael Daub. Most of Göttingen's players are overseas university students from cricket-playing countries. The club recently set up a youth section, all Germans. "The University wouldn't let the kids use the sports field, which they said is for University students only," says Daub, "so our youth team now plays matches on the Göttingen All-Stars baseball pitch."

Phillip Bächstädt, a German TV presenter, plays for Tegernsee Cricket Club, 60 miles south of Munich. Here, 75 per cent of the players are German. The team was founded 20 years ago by a group of school friends who'd been introduced to cricket by a teacher, Wolfgang Albert. Albert had previously spent a year at Michael Atherton's old school, Manchester Grammar, and returned to Germany with a coaching manual.

"After we left school, the team joined the local club league and then became a club in 2000," Bächstädt says. The German national league is divided into six regional leagues. The winner of each plays in the league finals. Current champions are SKG Waldorf, part of a multi-sports club in Hessen where people also play football, tennis, volleyball and mini-golf. "We don't win the league. We play a more chilled game and hope to develop young players."

The German national team play in division eight of the ICC World Cricket League, this year against Japan and Ghana. In 2013, Germany came bottom of division seven. They also took part in the ICC European T20 Championships in Essex in June. Against Norway, Austria, Gibraltar, Belgium and the Isle of Man, they came last, losing all their games. The German

team was made entirely of expat Asians except for one expat Australian.

ICC rules say that a cricketer who lives in a country for four years is eligible to play for the national team. Germany, like any other team, picks on merit, hence all the expats. But Brian Mantle, the DCB's General Manager, says that with more German players of a high standard coming through the DCB's youth development schemes, the national team could be up to 50 per cent German within ten years. Bächstädt believes that better opportunities to play for the national team will encourage more German youngsters to take up the game.

Germany played its first international against Denmark in 1989 and took part in the European Cricket Championship from 1996 through to 2010. In the 1997 final they lost to France by one run, a match *Wisden* later said was the 20th century's 96th greatest cricket match - one below England and David Lloyd's "flippin' murdered 'em" draw with Zimbabwe in 1996-97 and just above England's three-wicket win at Port of Spain the following year. Former Derbyshire stars Harold Rhodes and Ole Mortensen both coached Germany during the team's formative years. In 2000, Mortensen ran the country's first ever ECB level-one coaching course. Ten people turned up.

Germany are currently ranked 44 in the world with Argentina and Zambia on either side. The German football side is No.1 in the FIFA rankings. In 1891, when the Germans set up their first cricket association, the body also ran German football, which back then was also a minority sport played mainly by British people living in Germany.

In 1900, German football established its own Federation, and eventually grew into the all-conquering behemoth that

would win four World Cups and three European Championships and produce some of the world's greatest players. But, while football gained a distinct German identity, cricket remained the epitome of Englishness and, as such, stuttered on as a minority sport with only a few Germans taking part.

It was popular after the First World War and again after the Second, with interest kick-started both times by the British soldiers stationed there. There was also a brief spike in popularity during the interwar period, again mainly in Berlin. This time, more Germans took up the game. A Berlin XI, consisting mainly of Germans, toured southern England in 1930. A few years later, Dartford Cricket Club and Somerset Wanderers made the return trip to Berlin. So did a team called the Gentlemen of Worcestershire.

Sometime in 1936 or early 1937, Nazi Sports Minister Hans von Tschammer und Osten was in London by invite and drinking in the Lord's Pavilion, when he suggested the Worcester Gents should come to Berlin.

In 1936, Hitler had remilitarised the Rhineland - something he was forbidden from doing by the 1919 Treaty of Versailles. Hitler planned to overturn the entire post-war peace treaty and needed to encourage Britain to continue with its policy of appeasement while he re-armed his country. The British government knew what Hitler was up to, and hoped he could be stopped short of a full-scale war, but needed to buy time to re-arm Britain just in case he couldn't. After the Berlin Olympics the previous summer, the Nazis were keen to show the world that Germany was an open and embracing country that was also rather good at sport.

“The Worcester Gents won all their games pretty easily, they were too strong for the Germans,” says Dan Waddell, author of *Field of Shadows*, a recent book about that tour. “The Gents had some pretty decent first-class players and one of the youngsters, in to make the numbers up, opened the bowling for Eton.”

Researching the book gave Waddell some insights into how a team consisting entirely of Germans played the game. His verdict: good fielding, decent club-side standard, bowling OK, but struggled when batting. “Strange grip, crabby stance, lots of back foot nurdling and scooping, very defensive, not many flowing drives,” Waddell says. “They could have done with a few English pros out there to teach them batting technique.”

Waddell explains that the dodgy batting was partly down to the matting wickets. Many of these pitches weren’t even pulled tight, let alone rolled, and were just laid on top of grass. “The 1930 tour to England was the first time the Berlin team had played on a grass wicket,” Waddell says. “They didn’t have spikes and were slipping all over the place.”

He thinks that there was something rather chilling about how the Berlin side played the game: appealing for everything by shouting “out”, setting strangely defensive leg-side fields, eking out runs, with survival the main aim. “They approached the game very seriously, didn’t play with a song in their heart,” he says. “Not at all in keeping with the cavalier way in which the English believed teams were supposed to play friendly cricket.”

In one game, after a dropped catch, a Berlin bowler marched up to the offending fielder and punched him in the face.

The Berlin team’s approach, if not their skill level, reminds Waddell of the West German football teams of the 1970s and ’80s: grim, humourless, focused to the exclusion of all else on the result and the best way of achieving it. “Unfortunately, the cricketers weren’t any good,” he says.

Had they got better over the years, Waddell wonders if the Germans might have ended up playing cricket a bit like the all-conquering Australian teams of the late 1990s and early 2000s. “There was something very Teutonic about the way those Australian teams ground opponents down with such ruthless efficiency,” he says.

The Second World War stopped cricket in Berlin. Then came the Cold War, East Berlin, and a regime even more suspicious of undesirable Western influence. There had been a bit of cricket in St Petersburg in the late 19th century but, following the 1917 revolution, Lenin and co thought the game bourgeois and so discouraged it.

The cricket that we see in Germany today grew out of informal knockabouts in universities, workplaces and parks during the 1960s. Once again, students and visitors from cricket-playing countries – this time mainly the Asian subcontinent – started things off. Unlike their predecessors, today’s German cricketers play with a smile on their face.

For Tigges, cricket is a story that can unfold over several days, alongside a few gin and tonics. Moritz Hagenmeyer, who bowls “slow-motion donkey-drops” for Heligoland Pilgrims, sees himself as the happy eccentric who plays for friendship, fun and the sheer joy of taking part. Hagenmeyer – who has followed the game since 1981 when he lived in Sidmouth and

watched Botham’s Ashes on TV – says: “I can’t really play at all, but my friends know I’m mad, so it doesn’t matter.” Phillip Bächstädt likes cricket’s diversity: “It is a structured game, a technical game, where players have to think a lot.”

Most Germans still don’t get it, though. “My parents have known cricket for 20 years and they still don’t understand the rules,” Bächstädt admits. “People see cricket and they think lazy, beer-drinking people on a field who don’t move, and think it’s boring.”

A shorter form of the game that can be played locally may encourage more German youngsters to take part, but even Brian Mantle admits that cricket will never be a major sport in Germany. “What we do want is for the game to be known to everyone in the country,” he says, “and to have a structure in place that allows everyone who wants to play, to take part.”

Will the game that CB Fry loved teach the Germans better manners, as Fry had hoped? Hagenmeyer believes that cricket can teach sportsmanship, fairness and an appreciation of both team and individual, but he also thinks Fry should have taken a closer look at his own house before pointing his finger at Germany’s: “Tony Weir, one of my lecturers at Cambridge University in 1988, once said that in a society of gentlemen you would not need any law, only to concede that not even England was a society of gentlemen.”

Tigges thinks that it’s a good job for England that Germans didn’t take to cricket too seriously. “Will, determination, gamesmanship, efficiency, tactical awareness – with all our clichéd characteristics, we’d have been a premier cricketing nation by now,” he says. “But aren’t England used to inventing great games only to see other countries learn to play the game better?”

• • •