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Apathy, hooliganism, and bleak provincial towns: Russia 2018 and England 1966

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By [Tosh Warwick](#) · on June 8, 2018 · in [Histories of the Present](#), [History Workshop World Cup](#)

*In the first of our History Workshop World Cup series, **Tosh Warwick** compares the build-up to Russia 2018 with England's own hosting of the games in 1966.*

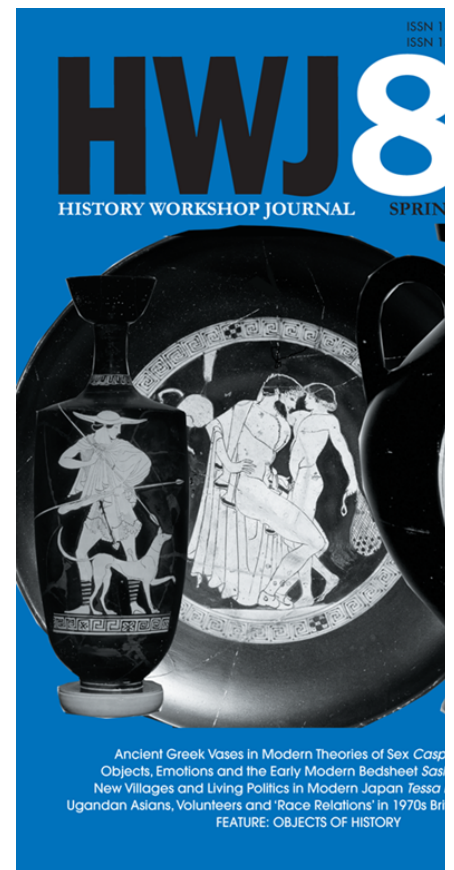
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This summer the attention of millions of fans across the globe will turn to Russia as the host nation of the 2018 FIFA World Cup. The tournament has received a less than favourable build-up, plagued by allegations of political meddling, hooliganism concerns, infrastructure challenges, and fan apathy. While over half a century separates Russia 2018 from England's own hosting of the World Cup, and while the scale of the event has increased dramatically in the intervening years, the concerns expressed by international fans and officials in the build-up to this summer's tournament carry many echoes of those aired prior to 1966. The apprehension of those arriving in Moscow, Rostov-on-Don and ["the unlikely World Cup City"](#) of Saransk this week is perhaps similar to that of the North Koreans who arrived in Middlesbrough, the Argentines who descended on Sheffield, and the Soviets who landed in Sunderland.

Apathy in the UK

England's preparations for the 1966 World Cup were dogged by concerns that – beyond the major cities of London, Birmingham, Manchester and Liverpool – the provincial towns and cities designated as tournament venues were ill-prepared, with little to offer the foreign visitor, and would struggle to attract fans. Just as the prospect of visiting Russia's provincial cities has failed to generate much excitement among England supporters or the British press this summer, in 1966 there was limited international enthusiasm for visiting South Yorkshire's "Steel City", the Middlesbrough "Ironopolis", or shipyard Sunderland, with even local fans apathetic.



While the draw for the group stages helped to prompt some enthusiasm in Middlesbrough, many residents declared that they would not be attending the tournament. A typical local newspaper report recorded a shopkeeper near the host stadium, Ayresome Park, bemoaning potential parking problems and predicting a limited impact on takings. In neighbouring South Yorkshire, the manufacturing city of Sheffield held mixed appeal for international visitors, with one local newspaper reporting that the disappointment of Sheffield football fans at the arrival of the Swiss national team was “matched by the disappointment of Swiss soccer fans when they discovered where their team would be playing.” One Swiss journalist admitted that he was “not very keen at first,” and, despite praising the city and its impressive Hillsborough stadium, expressed disappointment at the lack of night life and “the fact that a city of this size has only five hotels worthy of the name.”

“Bleak, workaday towns”

Insufficient accommodation and significantly increased prices have been prominent issues ahead of Russia 2018. Struggling to cope with the influx of visitors, cities such as Saransk have looked to nearby areas for support, with some fans being housed in [portable shipping containers](#). Similarly creative solutions were sought in 1966, with university accommodation repurposed and appeals made to residents to house visiting fans, although ultimately much of this panic proved to be unfounded.

Even with accommodation issues addressed, some quarters of the press remained pessimistic about what these provincial “bleak, workaday towns” could offer travelling supporters. An article in *The Observer* – under the headline “Hardly the ticket for World Cup Fans” – predicted that “as a national prestige booster,” the tournament would be “a resounding flop”. Derisory references to Sheffield “laying on nice tours round the steel works” or Sunderland’s “guided visits to coalmines” capped off what the article saw as an unimpressive and “typically British welcome” to foreign visitors:



The *Teesside Star* reports on Russia’s match with North Korea at Middlesbrough’s Ayresome Park. Picture credit: Teesside Archives.

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In the six provinces where World Cup matches will be held there are activities ranging from brass bands to folk-dancing, from the excitement of a World Cup concert by the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra to drinking until 11.30 p.m. in the pubs of Sheffield.

If the pessimism surrounding Russia's lesser known provincial cities in 2018 echoes that which surrounded England's northern industrial towns in the 1960s, fans and press travelling to Rostov-on-Don this summer might keep in mind some of the positive experiences of foreign fans by Yorkshire's own River Don in 1966. "Fritzlar greets Sheffield," proclaimed a banner at Hillsborough as West Germany played Switzerland, while the sports editor of the Swiss *Tribune de Lausanne* praised the "naturally kind" and helpful inhabitants of Sheffield.



The 1966 World Cup also gave rise to unlikely

Sir Stanley Rous meets members of the North Korean team. Picture credit: Middlesbrough Libraries/The Gazette.

international bonds. Following North Korea's surprise success in defeating Italy at Middlesbrough's Ayresome Park, coachloads of Boro fans descended on Everton's Goodison Park to support their newly-adopted heroes in their quarter final match against Portugal. In recent decades, the connection has endured, with the spot of Pak Doo-ik's winning strike commemorated in a sculpture trail on the site of the old ground. A 2002 return to Middlesbrough by the stars of the 1966 saw the North Korean flag flying proudly above the Town Hall, while in 2010, the Middlesbrough Ladies team were invited to Pyongyang. This Middlesbrough-North Korea love affair was an improbable moment of spontaneous international solidarity at the 1966 World Cup, made all the more extraordinary by the fact that the British government had not recognised the nation's legitimacy, the Foreign Office having seriously considered excluding the first-time qualifiers from participation in order to preserve relations with Seoul.

The hooligan threat

The Foreign Office has also been prominent in the lead up to Russia 2018, from [Boris Johnson's bizarre allusions to boycott](#) to warnings of the "possibility of anti-British sentiment" and official advice issued to English fans to "[Be on the Ball](#)" in Russia. The main focus of media attention has been the threat of hooliganism, with FIFA's introduction of [anti-discrimination measures](#), a reported "Kremlin clampdown" on hooligans, and English fans reportedly [opting to stay away](#) due to the perceived threat of violence.

Similar panics were prevalent in the lead-up to 1966. While English hooliganism is often seen as having its origins in the 1970s, as early as 1965, FIFA had expressed alarm at outbreaks of violence at England's host stadiums. On one Saturday in November, there were outbreaks of violence at both Old Trafford – where bottles were thrown at Manchester United goalkeeper Harry Gregg, and the Blackburn Rovers coach was attacked with rocks – and Hillsborough, where clashes between Sheffield Wednesday and Liverpool fans during and after the game led to fifteen arrests. Under pressure, FIFA's English president Sir Stanley Rous was forced to declare that he would "take every possible precaution to make sure the World Cup final games are not marred by crowd scenes."

The beginning of 1966 saw calls in the press for a "rigorous effort to rid the game of the trouble-makers of all kinds." While "soccer followers will always be vociferous and demonstrative," argued the *Newcastle Evening Chronicle*, "the thought of a minority of spectators at these world showpiece games throwing bottles, toilet rolls and other missiles, others running onto the pitch to assault players, and still more indulging in abuse is repugnant and must be combated by all means."



Hillsborough hosts World Cup action between Argentina and Switzerland. Picture credit: Sheffield Newspapers.

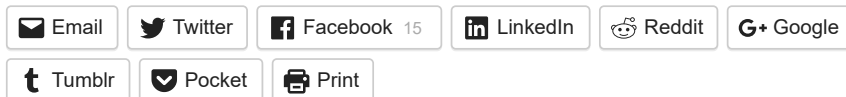
By the end of January, the issue had reached the House of Commons, with the Labour MP for Nottingham Central, Jack Dunnett, joining the secretary of the Football Association in declaring that “every step must be taken, particularly when the World Cup is here, to stamp out hooliganism”, and calling for stiffer penalties for violent and disorderly fans.” Even world famous referee Arthur Ellis contributed to the debate in May 1966 describing hooliganism as “today’s biggest menace to soccer” and calling for referees to use their authority to stop games in the event of disorder.

For all the panic and pessimism ahead of England’s World Cup, there was little trouble, and the tournament is remembered as a success. In the coming weeks, Russia too will be hoping to overcome the apathy and negativity that has dogged the build-up to the “greatest show on earth”, and the example of 1966 might provide some inspiration. In the industrial surroundings of England’s provincial towns, the World Cup was the setting for sporting heroics, surprising embraces of hitherto alien cultures, and the formation of lasting international bonds, showing what is possible when fans, press, officials and politicians from across the globe come together around “the beautiful game”.



[Tosh Warwick](#) is Lecturer in History at the University of Huddersfield and a Research Associate in Urban Studies at the University of Glasgow. In the past he has held a number of roles in the heritage sector including as Heritage Development Officer at Middlesbrough Council where he contributed to a number of major Heritage Lottery Fund supported regeneration projects. He is on Twitter as [@Tosh_Warwick](#).

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