

Review / Reseña

Raanan Rein. *Fútbol, Jews, and the Making of Argentina*. Trans. Martha Grenzeback.
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The Historical Contingencies of Ethnicity and Place in Buenos Aires's Soccer Clubs

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Buenos Aires is a hotbed of soccer fandom and producer of global superstars. British expatriates introduced football to the city in the late nineteenth century, modeling it as part of the hygienic and modern lifestyle of a “sportsman.” *Porteños*, or residents of Buenos Aires, quickly appropriated and transformed *fútbol* into the city’s most ubiquitous pastime by the early twentieth century. Young men formed hundreds of clubs across the city’s emerging barrios in tandem with a boom in associational life. Raanan Rein’s book examines this process by outlining the way in which specific soccer clubs wove themselves into the political and cultural fabric of the city.

Rein’s *Fútbol, Jews, and the Making of Argentina* focuses on the history of Club Atlético Atlanta, a soccer club in the Villa Crespo neighborhood of Buenos Aires. The

book is a translation of Rein's 2012 *Los bohemios de Villa Crespo: judíos y fútbol en la Argentina*. The 2015 English-language version though adds a few dozen helpful images, maps, and tables where the Spanish version had none. Rein is an accomplished scholar of Peronism and ethnicity in Argentina and positions both as important subjects in his case study of Atlanta. The existing literature on soccer in Argentina tends to tie soccer's significance in the region to nationalism and, in some works, masculinity. This literature's scope is broad and mainly examines Argentina's international squad or leagues as a national phenomenon. Rein's book is one of the only sources in English that takes one institution as its object of study. In doing so, Rein is able to focus on a more detailed analysis of its role in a specific neighborhood and ethnic community.

A brief introduction sets out the major themes and challenges. Rein argues the historiography of Jews in the region fails to demonstrate the active role they played in shaping local culture. For Rein, the history of the Atlanta soccer club offers the opportunity to examine how Jews balanced ethnic values with social integration in an important form of popular culture and everyday life. Two types of club documents are of particular importance in laying out this history and are the main primary sources in Rein's book. The first are the club's minutes of the board of directors. All soccer clubs in Argentina are non-profit civic associations with boards of directors elected by dues-paying members. The *Actas de la Comisión Directiva*, or board meeting minutes, often provides a window into the logics, politics, and tensions of club administration. The second source, *Memorias y Balances*, contain clubs' annual reports detailing the noteworthy cultural, social, and athletic events of each year in addition to financial figures. As readers will note from the numerous data gaps in one of the book's tables (72), these sources are scarce, as they have largely disappeared from the few public archives or club headquarters that bothered to keep them. Most importantly, these are sources that must be read as produced *by the club* and as a result, often tell us more about the incumbent administration's particular agendas in shaping these reports than the material realities of the institution. Rein's incorporation of these sources is an important addition to work on soccer clubs in Buenos Aires, though an interpretive framework may have helped introduce readers to the complexities of reconstructing club histories with their own official documents.

Rein begins his book chapters by contextualizing the Jewish presence in Buenos Aires within the wider immigration boom that transformed the city into the region's largest metropolis. Jews arrived from Europe and the Levant, bringing with

them a diverse set of political ideologies and cultures. By the early twentieth century, the Jewish community in Buenos Aires had concentrated in two *barrios*, or neighborhoods: Villa Crespo and Once. Jews, alongside other Levantine gentiles, experienced discrimination and hostility from Argentine elites who pushed for liberal immigration policies in the hopes of “whitening” the nation. Rein points to publications like the English-language *Buenos Aires Herald*, which lamented the arrival of Russian Jews and Arabs as evidence of Argentina becoming a “Semitic republic” and a politician who feared that “these people...can shatter the homogeneity of our race” (21). Rein argues sports offered immigrants a vehicle for integration in the face of this hostility. The second chapter examines tango and participation in civic associations as a way for Jews to participate in and create popular culture and build a nascent neighborhood lifestyle. Villa Crespo developed as a neighborhood with prominent tango bars and civic associations including mutual aid societies, social clubs, and cultural institutions.

After briefly summarizing the emergence of soccer clubs as an important part of life in the city, Rein introduces the main subject of the book: Club Atlético Atlanta. Founded in 1904 and probably named after a U.S. warship, the club began life in the central district of Montserrat, but spent the next two decades wandering from neighborhood to neighborhood, earning the club the nickname “*bobemios*” or “gypsies.” Atlanta finally settled in Villa Crespo in 1922 and would later build a permanent stadium in 1933. Even with these successes though the club’s fortunes varied in the 1930’s era of professional soccer. After a failed merger with another club, the national soccer association intervened in the club’s administration as a consequence of the club’s illegal gambling operations and poor financial health. However, the club experienced resurgence under the presidency of an ambitious plastic surgeon who led an expansion of social activities and amateur athletics that attracted many new dues-paying members. It is here, at the end of the 1930s, that Rein begins to explicitly trace the Jewish presence in the club. Though there were relatively few Jews on the board of directors or on the field representing Atlanta, the Jewish population of Villa Crespo grew 67 percent between 1936 and 1947. In chapter four, Rein examines the social and cultural activities life that developed within the club during this resurgence in the 1930s and 40s, particularly during Carnaval dances and other social events. This broad set of cultural, social, and athletic activities—or “social sphere” as scholars of Argentine sport often call it—strengthened the club’s ties to Villa Crespo and led to the creation of a neighborhood

clubhouse in 1942. This chapter also describes the emergence of Atlanta's rivalry with their neighboring club, Chacarita Juniors.

Atlanta continued to expand in terms of infrastructure and popularity during the Peronist decade (1946-1955). Like many clubs in this period, the club benefited from soft loans provided by the Peronist state and a general emphasis placed by Perón on sports as a symbol of a more robust and equitable nation. For example, Atlanta received 1.5 million pesos loan to build a new stadium in 1947 and featured a message of support for the Peronist Second Five-Year plan on the cover of its 1954 *Memorias y balance*. Throughout chapter five, Rein traces how Atlanta incorporated the language of Peronist social justice into club documents and speeches given by club officials thereby linking the club to key political figures. Rein points to the closure of Atlanta's stadium and oral testimony from fans as likely evidence of the price Atlanta paid for "loyalty" in the post-Peronist period. Still, the club continued to prosper after Perón as it began construction of a new stadium, added more amateur sport offerings, and facilities, and returned to the first soccer division in the late 1950s under the presidency of a Jewish Communist named León Kolbowski.

The book's sixth chapter, "The Rise and Fall of a Neighborhood Caudillo", centers on Kolbowski's time as president of Atlanta. Kolbowski, in a profile perhaps illustrative of the complexity of the Communist Party and its figures in Argentina, was the owner of a famous shop named Galería Durero. Deeply involved in credit cooperatives, Kolbowski served as president of Atlanta between 1959 and 1969. Rein describes how the "Kolbowski period was characterized by great advances in both the physical facilities and social activities of the club" (121). These advances included the completion of Atlanta's new stadium in 1960 and the soccer team's most successful period in the first division. Under Kolbowski, Jewish Argentines composed a majority of the board of directors for the first time; Atlanta became the first Argentine team to play soccer in Israel. As Rein puts it, "the club's Jewish image was forged to a large extent during this period" (133). The final chapter describes Atlanta's institutional decline and relegation to the second division in 1975. This chapter also describes the xenophobic, racist, and anti-Semitic songs and insults directed at Atlanta and its supporters. This hatred, Rein writes, "is in many respects the result of an identity imposed from outside, by rival fans" and thus results in glaring contradictions including non-Jewish Atlanta fans receiving anti-Semitic abuse by *Jewish* fans of rival teams (145).

The book lays out an institutional history rich with complexities of ethnicity

and identity as well as the economic and social shifts of *porteño* soccer clubs. For example, Rein undoubtedly shows Atlanta has links to Jewish identity and the presence of the Jewish community in Villa Crespo. However, Rein's book also reveals that this identity has its contradictions and only consolidated in the 1960's some time after the identification of Villa Crespo as a Jewish neighborhood. Clubs like Argentinos Juniors and Chacarita Juniors represent neighborhoods and fan bases that include many Jews, yet Jewishness does not figure into those clubs' identities. Perhaps this reveals more about the complexities of ethnicity, neighborhood, and soccer clubs, and the historical contingencies of how clubs are understood in popular imaginations. Rein could have strengthened this translated version by elaborating on these themes in a longer epilogue. However, this shortcoming does not detract from the overall strengths of the book as an illuminating and valuable contribution to our understanding of soccer, ethnicity, and neighborhood life in Buenos Aires.