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Forster, David; Spitaler, Georg

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Viennese Football and the German Wehrmacht – Between "Duty" and Evasion

David Forster & Georg Spitaler*

Abstract: »Der Wiener Fußball und die Deutsche Wehrmacht – zwischen ‚Pflichterfüllung‘ und Entziehung«. After 1945, stories about the Wehrmacht and football were integrated into the popular political history of anti-Nazi resistance in the newly formed Second Austrian Republic. This includes, for example, the alleged deployment of the team from SK Rapid to the front lines after their victory in the final of the 1941 German wartime football championship. Against the background of these myths, which were sometimes circulated even in football historiography, this contribution examines the similarities and differences between Viennese football after the 1938 Anschluss and the other regions of the Nazi Reich: How was the conscription of Viennese footballers accomplished and how involved were the players in the soldiers' football teams? Did the Viennese players enjoy the support of local Nazi functionaries or – like some of their national teammates – the help of "Reich Coach" Sepp Herberger in being held back from the front lines? What strategies did Viennese football players and clubs use in order to avoid being sent to the front, or to remain active as players? And to what extent were Viennese players or football officials involved in Nazi crimes during the war? This essay is based on the results of the research projects "Green-White under the Swastika. SK Rapid under National Socialism" and "Austrian victims of Nazi military justice."

Keywords: Football, Vienna, Wehrmacht, National Socialism, World War II.

1. Introduction

On June 22, 1941, the day of the German attack on the Soviet Union, the Viennese football team SK Rapid Wien won the final of the 1941 German wartime football championship at Berlin's Olympiastadion over Schalke 04 4-3. In Austria's popular football memory, this victory is associated with a narrative

* David Forster, Department of Political Science, University of Vienna, Universitätsstraße 7/2, 1010, Vienna, Austria; david.forster@univie.ac.at.

Georg Spitaler, Verein für Geschichte der ArbeiterInnenbewegung, Rechte Wienzeile 97, 1050 Vienna, Austria; georg.spitaler@vga.at.

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of victimhood. As Leo Schidrowitz writes in his 1951 chronicle of Austrian football during the 1941-42 season:

The Hütteldorfers plummeted back. The explanation for their poor performance [...] was attributed to the fact that invisible masterminds had caused approximately eight men from the Rapid eleven to be displaced away from Vienna. [...] In Vienna, it was thought that it had been deemed unwelcome in the *Altreich* that the German football championship had moved to Vienna and that a repetition of this event should be prevented (Schidrowitz 1951, 230-1).

Many of the popular myths surrounding the Wehrmacht and football in Vienna, like those of the alleged transfer of Rapid's championship team to the front lines, revolve to this day around narratives of victimhood, evasion, and compulsory "duty." After 1945, some of these stories were even included in the popular political resistance history and the thesis of Austria as the first victim of the Nazis.

Against the background of these circulated myths, which can even persist in modern football research,¹ we want to take a closer look at some of the questions related to these stories: How had the conscription of Viennese football players been carried out after the outbreak of the war in 1939? What kind of support did the players receive from the local Nazi functionaries or from Nazi sports policy to keep them away from the front? What strategies did Viennese football players and clubs use in order to avoid deployment to the front or to remain active as players? And to what extent were Viennese players or football officials involved in Nazi crimes during the war? This contribution ends with a look at the football-related culture of memory in postwar Austria and some conclusions on the comparison of the Viennese situation with that of the *Altreich*.² This essay is based on research projects in which the authors participated on the history of SK Rapid under Nazism (Rosenberg and Spitaler 2011) and the Nazi military justice system (Manoschek 2003; Baumann et al. 2008) as well as research findings that were published as part of the series "Football under the Swastika," which has been ongoing since 2003 in the football magazine *ballesterer*.

2. Outbreak of the War and Conscriptions

Although the local championship in the *Ostmark* was briefly suspended after the outbreak of the war in September 1939, serious upheavals were initially avoided. In the media's sports coverage, the "normality" of football operations

¹ For a current academic overview on football and Nazism in Austria, cf. Forster, Rosenberg and Spitaler (2014). The best known of these "myths" are the death of the football hero Matthias Sindelar in 1939 and the "Anschluss game" between the *Reich's* selection and the former Austrian national team on 3 April 1938. For critical accounts of these cases, cf. Forster (2014); Forster and Spitaler (2014).

² The *Altreich* refers to the territory of Germany (including the annexed Saar Basin) before the 1938 *Anschluss* with Austria.

was emphasized, as for example in the Viennese edition of the *Völkischer Beobachter* on September 5, 1939:

The population of Vienna – as it was in the entire great Reich – went [...] to the sports fields. [...] But we want to be honest: Some people are trembling! Not because of the British threat of war, but solely over whether Rapid or Admira, Wacker or the Sportklub will leave the football field victorious in the end” (7).

The leadership of the National Socialist League of the Reich for Physical Exercise (NSRL) reorganized the regional championships in the German Reich into a wartime championship in late October 1939 and introduced additional changes to football operations, such as reducing the bureaucratic obstacles for player transfers and facilitating the formation of “combined teams” or *Spielgemeinschaften* (Marschik 2008, 310-2). Those players who had been called to military service should present themselves to the public not only as football players, but also as soldiers, and were therefore required to show their military affiliation by sewing the Wehrmacht eagle emblem onto their jerseys.

The Viennese clubs may have been affected to varying degrees initially by the conscriptions. The *Fußball-Sonntag* reported in October 1939 that 17 players from FK Austria Wien had already been drafted (Marschik 1998, 161). Karl Sesta, one of the stars of the team, had already been serving in the Wehrmacht since May 1939 (Neues Wiener Tagblatt, May 5, 1939, 6). From SK Rapid, only a few players were drafted in 1939: Only five of 41 players are confirmed by the German Wehrmacht research service (Deutsche Dienststelle 2008, 2010), most of whom would have been drafted later than other prominent football players in the *Altreich* (cf. for example Fischer and Lindner 1999, 112). This is confirmed by a 1939 list of the Wehrmacht service ranks of *Reich* selection trainees from the Football Office (*Fachamt Fußball*). The Viennese players were more likely to be involved in “civil” or non-combat positions.³ According to the statements of German player Fritz Walter, after the winter of 1940, almost all of the national team players from the *Altreich* were called up to the Wehrmacht (Fischer and Lindner 1999, 112), while from the *Ostmark*, probably only FK Austria player Josef “Pepi” Stroh was serving at that time (Marschik 2008, 313). In any case, most of the serving active players from the famous Viennese clubs were stationed neither at the front nor too far away from Vienna in the early years of the war, and they could still attend football matches relatively regularly because of exemptions from duty (ibid., 314).

³ DFB Archive, Sepp Herberger collection, Files/Letters: 47 (29/2).

3. Off to the Front? The “Punishment Thesis” and War History

But what about the “non-sporting revenge” thesis, which states that “within a few months, almost all of the winning team Rapid [were] ordered to the front” (Marschik 1998, 361)? This story seems to have already been circulating during the war (Doubek 2003, 237); its genesis is grounded in the football rivalry between Vienna and the *Altreich* that took place within the “Greater German Reich.” The Viennese football teams, which were very successful in the interwar period, played an important role in the construction of regional identity even after the *Anschluss*. “Club fanaticism” (Oswald 2008, 216-51) was high among the Viennese football supporters, and questions over the “right” playing system – the Viennese pyramid system versus the “W-M” system practiced by the German national team under Sepp Herberger – were fiercely debated in the sporting press (cf. for example John 2008, 212-5). Even the local Nazi sports bureaucracy was involved in these disputes.⁴ The “*Sportgauführer*” and Vienna Deputy Mayor Thomas Kozich was a fanatical advocate of local football against alleged discrimination on the part of the football officials in the *Altreich* in such areas as scheduling, controversial refereeing decisions, and the dispute over the playing system (Marschik 2008, 483-91; Rosenberg and Spitaler 2011, 110-23).

In the autumn of 1940, in the wake of the Tschammer Cup match between SK Rapid and SV Fürth on October 20, and the friendly match of Floridsdorfer Admira against Schalke 04 on November 17, “anti-Prussian” riots erupted on the Viennese football fields with far-reaching consequences for Nazi sports policy in Vienna. At the “reconciliation match” between the two opponents from the 1939 final, Admira and Schalke, wild brawls broke out in the stands and in front of the Vienna Prater stadium; after the match, *Gauleiter* Baldur von Schirach’s car was attacked and damaged (Marschik 2008, 469-74; Marschik 2014). This unrest led in December 1940 to a crisis visit by the Staff Director of the NSRL, Guido von Mengden, to Baldur von Schirach’s office in Vienna, and an extensive correspondence between the different representatives of the Nazi sports bureaucracy. Shortly before Mengden’s visit, *Sportgauführer* Thomas Kozich authored a “Report on the Development and Reasons for the Mood of the Sporting Public” for Baldur von Schirach. In it, he mentioned several incidents that have led to an “opposition between sports followers in Vienna and the *Altreich*” as well as the “palpable perception among sports followers [...] that Viennese sport is being treated badly by the respective

⁴ For similar debates in Bavaria, cf. Herzog 2012.

Reich offices.”⁵ During his visit, Guido von Mengden commented on Kozich’s allegations. He laid the reasons for the “disparities” between the Reich sports leadership and the Viennese sports clubs primarily on “the development and steering of Viennese sports life in the time before the *Anschluss*” because “Jewry have had a significant share in the management of the Viennese professional clubs.” Then he came to address the issue of the call-ups:

Von Mengden observed [...] that the Reichssportführer wants the best athletes also to be the best soldiers. It was noticed that the first team from SK Rapid, down to a player, still held their old peacetime occupations, while in the majority of other clubs, more than half of the players on the first team were soldiers.”⁶

Apparently, von Mengden’s accusation led to investigations in Vienna. Two months later, Schirach’s staff member Günther Kaufmann, after consultation with Kozich, let von Mengden know that there would be no favors at the Viennese clubs:

On the occasion of your last visit to Vienna you made me aware that remarkably few leading members of the Viennese sport clubs Rapid and Admira had previously complied with their military service. I have verified this message in detail, and can state that it is incorrect. A very significant proportion of the members of these sport clubs has been called up for military service, another part is in the armament factories and is committed there. As far as the individual members of the sports clubs who have not yet been called up, it is because the local conscripted age groups had not already been called to service in mass before the outbreak of the war for short-term training, as had been the case in the *Altreich*.⁷

A short time earlier, the stars of the Rapid team – Franz “Bimbo” Binder, Hans Pesser, Stefan Skoumal, and Rudolf Raftl – had been called up; a connection with von Mengden’s intervention is quite probable. All four were initially serving in Reserve Signal Detachment 17 in Vienna, in the Breitensee barracks, which was not too far away from Rapid’s pitch (Deutsche Dienststelle 2005). The newspapers reported extensively on the drafted Rapid players (cf. for example *Das Kleine Blatt*, February 6, 1941). On April 2, 1941, the *Kleine Blatt* noted: “Rapid goalkeeper Rudolf Raftl was called up for military service, serving in the same company as Binder, Pesser and Skoumal” (10). Even in the *Altreich* the conscription of the Rapid players drew attention: The *Kicker* (February 11, 1941, 14) reported on the service of the players in an article titled

⁵ ÖStA/AdR, ZNsZ RStH Wien, Hauptbüro, „Fr. Höpken“ / M-Z, No. 154, box 29, „Wiener Sportverhältnisse“ (ff. 1-64); letter from Thomas Kozich to Baldur von Schirach; „Bericht über Entwicklung und Gründe der Stimmung in der Sportöffentlichkeit“, 2 December 1940.

⁶ ÖStA/AdR, ZNsZ RStH Wien, Hauptbüro, Korrespondenz Kaufmann / Allg. (D-F), box 23, Fußball (Fol 1-43), Memorandum on the visit of Guido von Mengden to Gebietsführer Kaufmann, no date.

⁷ ÖStA/AdR, ZNsZ RStH Wien, Hauptbüro, Korrespondenz Kaufmann / Allg. (D-F), box 23, Fußball (Fol 1-43), Letter from Gebietsführer Günther Kaufmann to Dr. Guido von Mengden, 14 February 1941.

“Radioman Binder”; two issues later, the magazine showed a picture of the uniformed player under the title: “Bimbo also knows how to make snacks” (Kicker, February 25, 1941, 6). For sports operations in the *Gauliga* and the Greater German Championship, however, the conscriptions changed nothing for the time being: Binder could contest the rest of the season’s games; Raffl and Skoumal only sat out one friendly match, and Pesser was sidelined by a torn ligament from April 13 to May 31 (Pichler 2010).

Service in a reserve detachment seems to have been typical of the top Viennese players in the early war years. Sports journalist Ludwig Stecewicz noted that the Viennese football clubs generally tried to have their players deferred or advocated that they were not put into infantry companies, but in less combat-related detachments (uniform stores, typing pools, military hospitals) (Stecewicz 1996, 242). This practice is not likely to have differed too much from the *Altreich*, as the example of Schalke 04 shows (Goch and Silberbach 2005, 149-50).

With the beginning of the “war of extermination” on the Eastern Front in June 1941, however, it became more difficult for sport clubs to keep players close or to obtain leaves of absences for games. This was also true for Rapid: Binder, for example, was deployed to regular service in November 1941; Raffl, Pesser, and Skoumal scarcely played in the 1941-42 season after they had been transferred in August 1941 to other Wehrmacht divisions (Deutsche Dienststelle 2005; Pichler 2010).

Even if the number of Rapid players deployed to the front increased after winning the Greater German championship, the official documents still do not prove the “punishment hypothesis” (Spitaler 2008, 550-2) that was spun after 1945 (Forster and Spitaler 2005; Rosenberg and Spitaler 2011, 210-20). Rather, a comparison with teams from the *Altreich* speaks to the fact that the escalation of the war constituted the most important factor for ending the preferential treatment of football players. Both SK Rapid’s final opponents Schalke 04 as well as their semi-final opponents Dresdner SC had to do without key players after the 1940-41 season due to military deployments (Goch and Silberbach 2005, 337; Bitzer and Wilting 2003, 70). The magazine *Fussball* (January 1942, 2) reported in early 1942 that:

Rapid [and Dresdner SC] only succumbed to what had already happened to hundreds of German football clubs before them and what in the future probably no German sports association will be spared. The demands of the front precede everything else, and even our sport has to pay them its tribute.

Rapid star Franz Binder was moved in late 1942 to a paramedics training unit; in early 1943, he received the order to march east (Deutsche Dienststelle 2005), and could then only participate in games with his team in exceptional circumstances.

From the autumn of 1942, the absence of men fit for military service from the playing fields became increasingly apparent in Vienna (Marschik 2008, 388). The call-ups presented teams with a difficult personnel situation, as did

casualties among the Viennese footballers. FK Austria Wien player and member of the Austrian *Wunderteam* of the 1930s Karl Gall, drafted in 1942, was killed by a mine on the Eastern Front in February 1943; his club colleague Franz Riegler, a two-time national player for “Greater Germany,” died in February 1945 of injuries he suffered during a bombing raid on Vienna (Forster et al. 2011, 63; German War Graves Commission 2010). Rapid striker August Fellner fell in December 1944 on the Western Front, while his club colleagues Wilhelm Holec and Engelbert Uridil were listed as missing from the summer of 1944 and February 1945, respectively (Rosenberg and Spitaler 2011, 242).

The clubs in any case took advantage of the relaxation of transfer rules and made do with guest players, returnees from the front, and youth. In the 1942-43 season, SK Rapid had to use a 35-man squad, including eight goalkeepers, while FK Austria used 33 players (Forster 2011, 81). Yet for Austria, “barely eleven people [were] mustered for the first team, while the reserves were completely unthinkable”; at the Vienna Derby on 6 December 1942, the FK Austria team officials “had to go through the grandstands at the Rapid pitch to look for the appropriate forces” (Fonje and Langer 1962, 122).

But even in the late years of the war, there were still opportunities for the betterment of individual clubs. First Vienna FC, regional champions from 1942 to 1944, had a comparatively strong squad thanks to influential patrons in the military (Marschik 1998, 173-4). In addition, some Rapid players were stationed in Vienna or the surrounding area. Thus, for example, Leopold Gernhardt and Franz Kaspirek served together in a hospital and were still used regularly from 1942; goalkeeper Rudolf Raftl was in Vienna in 1942 and played regularly again from the 1943-44 season (Interview Leopold Gernhardt, 2005; Deutsche Dienststelle 2005, 2010; Pichler 2010). According to player Alfred Körner, Rapid could still have a certain influence on the stationing of the players in the later years: “They helped with the exemptions, so that we boys were at least in the vicinity. For example, [Ernst] Happel, [Franz] Prak, who were in the Breitensee barracks – Rapid could make it so that one was always nearby” (Ardelt and Marschik 1995, 87).

Viennese players who were part of Sepp Herberger’s “Greater German selection” could additionally hope for the support of the *Reichstrainer*. However, after 1941 at the latest, it became increasingly difficult for Herberger to obtain waivers for players on his team. His attempts to hold together a strong team and “to ensure that his players survived the war as unscathed as possible” were known as “operation *Heldenklau*” (literally “hero theft”; Grüne 1999, 114). In the winter of 1941-42, Herberger created a list of 25 players with alleged combat experience and awards who should be recalled from the front, which, after some negotiation with the Army High Command (OHK), was arranged in most cases (ibid., 120). In Herberger’s records, there is also an indication of a player shortage for the international match on January 18, 1942 in Zagreb, for which several Viennese players were given leave permits by the Wehrmacht at the last

minute. Herberger later cryptically noted: “Wagner call-up 18 January 1942 (hotline); the ‘*Heldenklau*’ is on the prowl.”⁸ This probably refers to Franz Wagner, who, according to information from the *Deutsche Dienststelle*, was ultimately conscripted by the Wehrmacht on March 16, 1942 (Deutsche Dienststelle 2005) and could still participate in this international game and the following game in Vienna against Switzerland.

In a listing of the 1942 national team players, probably created in April 1943, Herberger wrote that of 52 players, three men were listed as “u.k.” (“deferred”), two players after injuries were “a.v.” (“fit for work”), eight after injuries in reserve troops, three men in the Navy air defense or Luftwaffe, 28 men “in the East,” and three men (including Fritz Walter) were at a field unit in France. Five men – all Viennese – were, according to Herberger, “still in the homeland,” including Rapid player Wagner and Schmaus from First Vienna FC.⁹ Both would suffer “a serious knee and ankle injury” and are therefore at the moment “fit for garrison service.”¹⁰

4. Viennese Footballers on the Military Teams

With the outbreak of war, the importance of sport also rose within the Wehrmacht: Football should not only entertain the soldiers as spectators, but also serve them in return and increase the attractiveness of individual units. Football teams made up of talented enthusiasts, amateurs and/or former league players existed in all of the branches of the Wehrmacht (Forster 2004, 38). The makeup and activities of the teams were as inconsistent as their structure: In addition to loose football teams that only occasionally competed, there were also established select teams that played friendlies against other military teams and traditional clubs or competed in their own military league. There were even military sports clubs that were represented in the *Gau* leagues and in the Tschammer Cup.

The most famous soldiers’ team from the *Ostmark* (later officially known as the “Alps and Danube *Reichsgaue*”) was LSV Markersdorf, which played in 1943-44 in the Vienna area class and finished in sixth place (Marschik 2008, 372). The excellent makeup of LSV Markersdorf, which included many (former) players from the traditional Viennese teams, such as Admira player Karl Durspekt, Rapid players Lukas Aurednik and Max Merkel, as well as Karl

⁸ DFB-Archiv, Sepp Herberger Collection, files/letters 263: The German National Team during the War – Part IV (1941-42), notes concerning [the game vs.] Croatia in Zagreb [probably after 1945].

⁹ DFB Archive, Sepp Herberger Collection, files/letters 263: The German National Team during the War – part IV (1941-42), report [fragment, probably April 1943].

¹⁰ DFB Archive, Sepp Herberger Collection, files/letters 263: The German National Team during the War – part VI (1942-1967), report [fragment, probably 1943].

Sesta and Franz Riegler (“Franz Riegler II”) from FK Austria, prompted the *Neue Wiener Tagblatt* (February 20, 1944, 7) to declare: “it’s nice to continue to see the Viennese players.”¹¹ With so many Viennese soldier-players, recalls Matthias Marschik, the team was “in light of the prominence, rather like a practice match of the *Ostmark* select team” (Marschik 2008, 374). The participation of ex-professionals in Wehrmacht sports can be seen in many contemporary newspaper reports. In December 1940, for example, Vienna Military District Command 17 defeated the SS Totenkopf-Regiment Krakow by a score of 11 to 2, thanks not least to four goals from Georg Schors and one goal from Walter Probst; both players originally played for SK Rapid (Neues Wiener Tagblatt, December 12, 1940, 8). In September 1941, the Pfarrwiese, Rapid’s home field, served as the venue for a Wehrmacht sports festival, the high point of which was a game between the Breitensee barracks (where Franz Binder was still serving at the time) and the Military District Command (Neues Wiener Tagblatt, September 24, 1941, 4). In 1942, the team for Reserve Hospital 1a fielded Rapid players Leopold Gernhardt and Franz Kasperek and Wacker player Ernst Reitermeier (Wiener Neueste Nachrichten, August 27, 1942, 6; and September 1, 1942, 6). Aurednik played in 1942 at the Amsterdam Olympic Stadium as part of a Luftwaffe team against a selection from TSV 1860 München (Forster et al. 2011, 65). Larger matches were often held between Wehrmacht select teams from entire cities; Max Merkel played in one such game in July 1941 on a Viennese soldiers’ side against Berlin (Neues Wiener Tagblatt, July 16, 1941, 3).

One of the most famous military teams of the German Reich was the “Roten Jäger” of fighter pilot Hermann Graf, who founded a football team in his fighter squadron in 1940 to which he could steer numerous footballers of international standing, including the Viennese players Josef Stroh and Franz Hanreiter (Admira) (Herzog 2008, 67-148).

The soldiers’ games may have been well received by the audience, which, for Vienna, Marschik differentiates between the “general sports audience and the organizers” on one side and the “club supporters” on the other. The latter group would not have necessarily been enthusiastic (Marschik 2008, 373). Even in the occupied countries, attendance at the military games was sometimes considerable, though presumably many Wehrmacht soldiers filled the stadiums and guest appearances by traditional clubs or individual stars in particular proved to be crowd pullers. In occupied Paris, where 56 teams from all branches of the Wehrmacht competed for a city championship in the summer of 1941, 40,000 spectators came to a friendly match between a soldiers’ side (with Spilka from SC Wacker Vienna and Gora from Red Star) against Schalke 04 in the Parc des Princes. The end of 1942 saw 20,000 spectators at a match ending in a 4-4 draw between the Paris soldiers’ side and a mixed team with players

¹¹ On the team roster, cf. Wiener Neueste Nachrichten (November 30, 1943, 6; February 2, 1944, 3).

from TSV 1860 München and soldiers stationed in Bavaria, including the former Helfort player Chlad (Forster et al. 2011, 64-5). A similar crowd mobilized in May 1944 for a match between the Vienna army team (with, among other players, Aurednik, Binder, Kaspirek, and Hans Kovar) and Honved in Budapest (Wiener Neueste Nachrichten, May 19, 1944, 5).

Apart from the organized games, there were opportunities for drafted footballers to play in the front areas in looser contexts, although this represented “for the top athletes, at least viewed in retrospect, both recreation and annoyance” (Marschik 2008, 377). Admira player Karl Kowanz said in a 1995 interview:

Everywhere there have been places for [military] exercise, practice, we played a bit there, but I'd had 46 or 47 kilos [...]. In 2, 3 months, the weight was gone and the strength, and a disenchantment was there. And if someone comes, it's: 'come on, let's play a bit – 'No, I'm happy if I can lie down a bit' (ibid., 377-8).

Stories about prominent footballers at the front could in any case be exploited for propaganda purposes, as shown by a report on Franz Binder in the Vienna edition of the *Völkischer Beobachter* (June 2, 1943, 6):

[T]he good 'Bimbo' plays again, albeit in another region and not with the habitual regularity of the past. That he – who has famously been fulfilling his soldier's duty in the East for a long time – has not forgotten his old (football) love, and also his game, and above all his shooting with his old championship control, is apparent from a letter from the East, and will please friends of Rapid and Viennese football, but certainly also the whole German football community.

5. Evasion

A dramatic and dangerous way to escape from being sent as a soldier to the front, or at least temporarily achieve a disability, was so-called self-mutilation. Self-mutilation included both injuries that a Wehrmacht member inflicted upon himself, as well as those that were inflicted on him by another person. Nazi military justice pursued this form of draft evasion as “undermining military strength” and punished them with death, or in less serious cases, with a jail or prison sentence (Fritsche 2003, 196).

Some Viennese footballers attempted, entirely or temporarily, to escape their service in Hitler's army through self-mutilation. The most famous case is probably that of Ernst Stojaspal, who became an Austrian football star after 1945 (member of the 1954 World Cup third-place team; five-time top scorer with FK Austria Wien) (Forster 2003a, 42-4). Born in 1925, Stojaspal played on the first team of SG Reichsbahn (Ostbahn XI) at age 14. In 1943 he was called up to deploy to the Eastern Front. In the summer of 1944, he met his friend Karl Lauterbach in a Viennese café. He knew Lauterbach, a communist

and avowed anti-Nazi, from their time in school together and from football games there.¹² In court, Stojaspal later said for the record:

During my furlough from the front, I also came to the Cafe Weber to visit friends. There I saw many soldiers in plaster casts. I met Lauterbach, who also wore a plaster cast, and to my question of what had happened, he answered that he had allowed his arm to be broken.¹³

At the end of June 1944, Stojaspal allowed Lauterbach to break his “arm by jumping thereupon,” although he told the medical officer afterwards that he “had fallen on the stairs.”¹⁴ But in the summer of 1944, the Nazi military courts had become aware of “the self-mutilation occurring in Vienna like an epidemic,” as *Kriegsgerichtsrat* Dr. Leopold Breitler expressed it,¹⁵ and started targeted investigations. Two members of the Court Martial of Division 177 in Vienna – the German *Oberfeldrichter* Dr. Karl Everts as investigator and prosecutor as well as the Austrian-born Breitler as judge – were particularly prominent in the conviction and condemnation of many Viennese self-mutilators (Forster 2007). The group around Karl Lauterbach was caught and put on trial. Judge Breitler condemned Stojaspal to eight years’ imprisonment, although prosecutor Everts had requested ten years. The young footballer’s defense attorney was initially a certain Dr. Eckerl [no first name given] – this was most likely attorney Dr. Bruno Eckerl,¹⁶ who had been the president (*Vereinsführer*) of Stojaspal’s later club FK Austria Wien since October 1938 (Fussball-Sonntag, October 16, 1938, 6). Eckerl repeatedly helped footballers in legal matters, as he had for example in 1938 for FK Austria star Karl Sesta in the “Aryanization” of a bakery.¹⁷ Stojaspal’s friend Karl Lauterbach was convicted of four counts of self-mutilation, sentenced to death and on 7 February 1945 executed at the Kagran firing range, where prosecutor Everts took part in the execution as “head of enforcement.”¹⁸ Stojaspal remained in prison until the end of the war and began his career with FK Austria in 1945. The football star was also one of a minority of self-mutilators who were accepted as Nazi victims by the Republic of

¹² Archive of the Vienna Schule 1110, Pachmayergasse 6, Lauterbach and Stojaspal school data sheets; Maria Musial interview [aunt of Karl Lauterbach], 2003.

¹³ DÖW 6054, court of Division 177, III 59/44, Criminal case against Grenadier Georg Gabmayr and 42 others, 26 October 1944.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ The term “epidemic” was common in the context of cases of self-mutilation in Vienna at the Court of Division No. 177, as many of Judge Breitler’s case filings show. Cf., for example: ÖSta/AdR, DWM 135/5, court of Division 177, III 78/1944 Rudolf Sobotka proceedings.

¹⁶ According to the Lehmann address book, at least in 1942, only one lawyer named Eckerl practiced in Vienna, namely Dr. Bruno Eckerl <<http://www.digital.wienbibliothek.at/wbrobv/periodical/pageview/279633>> (Accessed April 15, 2013).

¹⁷ ÖSta/AdR, E-uReang VVSt, HA-1055, Kt. 258, verbatim from memory on the concluded purchase agreement, 23 September 1938.

¹⁸ ÖSta/AdR, DWM 135/5, court of Division 177, III 78/1944, record of the death sentence, 7 February 1945.

Austria and received compensation. The relevant authorities believed Stojaspal's argument that the military court sentencing had taken place "because I acted with about 40 comrades against the Nazi regime and campaigned for a free, democratic Austria." The public health officer diagnosed a prison-related rheumatism and classified the "reduction in earning capacity" of the professional footballer, who had just become the Austrian top goal scorer for the fourth time, at 50 percent.¹⁹

Fortunately, the self-mutilation of the former Rapid striker Walter Probst remained undetected. Probst, who had played for Wacker München in 1938-39 and was traded to FK Austria in 1939 (Forster et al. 2011, 65), explained in an interview how he could avoid his transfer to the front: "I'd had a friend who was a doctor [...] who gave me an anesthetic. Beat [the] knee [...], meniscus, broken cruciate ligament, flail joint" (Interview Walter Probst, 2006, cf. Hirt and Spitaler 2006, 36-7). At his reporting station, he faked an accident:

We were deferred to Military District Command 17, in the [former Austrian] War Ministry. There to first I had to supply the cafeterias. I took a witness with me [...], and then I went down on the iron stairs at the War Ministry and just laid there [...] and went straight to the hospital (ibid.).

As Probst tells it, he was indeed suspected and interrogated but ultimately not prosecuted for lack of evidence (ibid.). Likewise undetected went the "undermining of military strength" of Admira player Franz Konecny, who, after being wounded on the Eastern Front, "inflicted or allowed to be inflicted a recurrence of the injury" and was covered by the military health administration and his club, so that he could even continue playing for his club (Marschik 2014a, 100-6).

Similar incidents were reported by the former Red Star player Ludwig Hermanek, who was temporarily deployed during the war as a clerk in the Vienna military district command and used this function to support other footballers in obtaining "deferred" positions. He warned clubs such as SC Wacker of the impending conscription of their players so that they could prepare and give the player a fresh set of "plaster shanks" to put on for the muster (Interview Ludwig Hermanek 2011).

Self-mutilation was a very risky way to evade conscription, so there were other organized attempts at deception in order to obtain deferrals and sick leave for players. In this context the case of Curt Reinisch is especially famous. Reinisch, a member of First Vienna FC, was (in his own words) personnel officer of the Vienna military health administration,²⁰ who used his function to get players "classified as typists or corporals in the various hospitals, or to bargain with physicians to feign injuries or extend hospital stays arbitrarily" (Marschik

¹⁹ WStLA, Serie 1.3.2.208.A36, Ernst Stojaspal victim assistance request, 1952. Cf. Forster (2003, 667-9).

²⁰ WStLA G 103-5/1-6, Provincial Court Vienna Vg 6e Vr 196/51 Karl Everts, letter from Ing. Curt Reinisch to the People's Court Vienna, 21 November 1945.

1998, 242). Through his interventions, Reinisch particularly helped First Vienna FC, which in the later years of the war was temporarily the strongest team in the *Ostmark* or the “Alps and Danube *Reichsgaue*,” but according to Reinisch, other clubs benefitted from his activities as well (Ardelt and Marschik 1995, 109). Vienna FC’s strong personnel contingent led in August 1943 to an anonymous complaint from an “upright German” about “the improper condition of some Viennese football clubs”:

One finds, most notably on Vienna [FC], for example, players seeking to escape their present duties as soldiers for the Fatherland. [...] Word of this injustice and swindling has gotten around in the [Viennese] public. For a long time, there have been World War participants – fathers, even grandfathers drafted, who carry out their duty at the front and such young healthy men are in the hinterland – who actually belong at the front? [...] The same with trainer Fritz Gschweidl. Was never, ever drafted.²¹

The note was forwarded to Reinisch for review who was able to suppress it (Marschik 1998, 243). In August 1944, Reinisch was arrested by the Greater Vienna Army Patrol (*Heeresstreife*) and interrogated and threatened by *Oberfeldrichter* Karl Everts and his henchmen.²² According to his statements, he spent several months in 1944 in detention awaiting trial,²³ but was released for lack of evidence.²⁴

In other cases, it can only be speculated whether stays at field and other hospitals for the “typical” football-related injuries were also partially the results of draft evasion through self-mutilation or deceit. With Rapid, for example, such practices could be suspected due to the institutional proximity of the club to important doctors and some unusual medical histories, but there is of course no concrete evidence for this. In Franz Binder’s medical history, two similar episodes can be found: The *Neue Wiener Tagblatt* (November 12, 1941, 4) reported on a hospital stay due to a heart condition, but Binder’s son cannot remember if his father had ever had any heart problems (Interview Franz Binder Jr. 2010). In November 1943, after his deployment to the Eastern Front, Binder had an appendectomy; his son said in an interview:

That was the chief physician from Hanusch Hospital, which was the [...] reserve hospital [...]. And there was the Rapid club doctor, who had taken out his healthy appendix. [...] That was three month’s sick leave and then off to France. No more Russia, but France. [...] So that was the only time really

²¹ DÖW 20.360, anonymous handwritten note to Vienna Military District Command, 9 August 1943.

²² WStLA G 103-5/1-6, Provincial Court Vienna Vg 6e Vr 196/51 Karl Everts, examination of witnesses, Ing. Kurt Reinisch, 19 January 1946. Cf. Forster 2997, 50.

²³ DÖW 20.100/9450, KZ-Verbands-Akt Ing. Kurt Reinisch.

²⁴ DÖW 8.393, “Factual findings” report for former members of the Austrian civil and military resistance.

where someone helped him; where the doctor said, ‘Well, you’re not going to Russia anymore’ (ibid.).

In an affidavit from 1946, Binder described the course of events himself: “[In] November 1943, I came to Vienna on leave; during this time in Vienna I had to undergo an appendectomy to not go right back to the front again. This operation was carried out in the Res[erve] Hospital 1a.”²⁵ It is striking that three additional Rapid players – Rafil (December 1941), Johann Hofstätter (November 1943) and Franz Knor (July 1944) – underwent an appendectomy during the war years (Das Kleine Blatt, December 9, 1941; July 11, 1944; Wiener Neueste Nachrichten, November 26, 1943, 6). Whether this was potentially done in an attempt to keep these players from the front is speculative, however.

Notes pertaining to cases of “undermining military strength” in Rapid can also be found in the denazification files after 1945. The player Hermann Dvoracek testified that coach Leopold Nitsch had “used membership [in the Nazi party] to help the other players and keep them away from service in the front.”²⁶ The Nazi victim Eugen G. exonerated Nitsch in the denazification proceedings by saying the latter had performed “actions undermining military strength in favor of his many teammates.”²⁷ Nitsch and club secretary Dworak further attempted to exonerate the Nazi party member Karl Kochmann, head of the Rapid bike section, with the following statement:

We declare that, with the help of friendly doctors, we have procured fake certificates for the Rapid players so that they could either be exempted from military service entirely, or to at least achieve that they were classified as replacement troops and were thus withdrawn from the front and could remain with their families. In this operation of undermining the war effort, Herr Karl Kochmann was also co-active and had the task of receiving the telephone calls and messages of various helpers in this service and passing them on to us. This activity was of course associated with great risk and had to be carried out with caution, because blowing the cover on this business of undermining the war effort would have had the worst consequences for everyone involved.²⁸

These kinds of declarations, which had the purpose of achieving a deletion from the Nazi registry (involving a denazification certificate), were often made with the intention of “whitewashing” a person’s Nazi past.

²⁵ Private archive of Franz Binder jr., Franz Binder collection, sworn statement of Franz Binder, 3 December 1946.

²⁶ WStLA, 1.3.2.119.A42 – NS registration (45-57), reporting office for the 15th district, M.Nr. 2465 Leopold Nitsch, Dvoracek declaration, 22 August 1945.

²⁷ Ibid., Gangl declaration, 30 August 1945., cf. Rosenberg and Spitaler (2011, 253-7).

²⁸ WStLA, 1.3.2.119.A42 – NS registration (45-57), reporting office for the 15th district, M.Nr. 2338 Karl Kochmann, declaration, 29 June 1945.

6. Football and Manhunts

One of the men who helped *Oberfeldrichter* Dr. Karl Everts pursue self-mutilators and other “underminers of military strength” was a football player: Rapid defender Fritz Durlach, born in 1916 in Vienna (Forster 2007, 48-50). A career soldier, he was transferred in October 1943 to the Wehrmacht headquarters in Vienna and had also been serving on the patrol from mid-November (Deutsche Dienststelle 2008); he first played for SK Rapid in April 1944 (Pichler 2010). Georg Schors, a prominent teammate of Durlach’s and one of Rapid’s “greater German” championship players in 1941, was also on the patrol service since August 1942 (Deutsche Dienststelle 2005).²⁹ On 14 February 1945, Sergeant Durlach was assigned to the Investigation Department of the Greater Vienna Army Patrol Service, a squad that was responsible for searching for suspects in hospitals and for interrogating prisoners on remand. Since *Oberfeldrichter* Everts had to rely on confessions for the conviction of self-mutilators,³⁰ he allowed an interrogation room – called the “funhouse” – to be set up in the Roßauer Barracks, headquarters of the army patrol, and gave his investigators the command to use torture in their interrogations.³¹ Durlach’s interrogation methods are documented in the 1947 indictment against members of the army patrol service. Regarding the interrogation of Josef K., who had been arrested in February 1945 on charges of “undermining military strength,” it states:

In the interrogation room, Durlach took from a box a rubber truncheon and a wire cable and led Josef K. into the funhouse. Durlach bound him and Dr. Dittrich [NCO Dr. Leopold Dittrich] told him to make a confession. Because this was not successful, Dr. Dittrich struck Josef K. in the face while Durlach from one side and an unidentified soldier from the other side battered K. with fists. Dr. Dittrich then said ‘Do with him what you want; kill him for all I care’ and walked away. Durlach then worked on K.’s back with the rubber truncheon, and the stranger with the wire rope. After each blow, Durlach asked if K. wanted to confess. Then K. was placed on a bench and worked on with the wire rope again. Then Durlach tied him to the stove and ordered him to go ‘up and down’ quickly. When Josef K. could not follow this command because of the pain caused by the restraint, Durlach seized K.’s ailing foot and pulled on it, so that K.’s arms were almost dislocated. He pulled until the blood ran out of his slippers and K. fainted. Now he was brought back to consciousness with kicks and confessed.

²⁹ No records can be found on Schors’s participation in Nazi crimes.

³⁰ ÖSta/AdR, DWM 135/5, court of Division 177, III 78/1944, preliminary investigation report of Sergeant Kurt Feigel, 30 September 1944.

³¹ The torture command is documented in numerous records from the Nazi era and in the cases against Everts and his assistants after 1945. Cf. for example ÖSta/AdR, DWM 135/5, court of Division 177, III 78/1944 Rudolf Sobotka proceedings; WStLA G 103-5/1-6, Provincial Court Vienna Vg 6e Vr 196/51 Karl Everts; DÖW V11/1-73, Mikrofilm 1004 u. 1005 [D], Vg 7c Vr 915/46 u. Vg 11 Vr 7188/46, “Heeresstreifenprozess”; Forster (2007).

Shortly before the liberation of Vienna, Durlach commented to the self-mutilator Josef D., whom he had abused with blows and kicks: “Do not believe that we are toppled, because we still have plenty of hand grenades and revolvers to send you into kingdom come. You’ll be decapitated like so.”³²

After the end of Nazi rule, Durlach initially continued his career with Rapid. In the fall of 1945, he played four matches with the team, the last on October 14, a 5-1 victory over the Wiener Sportclub. Ten days later he was taken into custody; according to the *Weltpresse* (February 21, 1948, 1), one of his victims had “recognized [him] on the Rapid pitch and had [him] arrested.” Durlach experienced his team’s first championship in the Second Austrian Republic from behind bars, and remained in detention until September 1946. Under questioning, Durlach denied his alleged crimes and stated that the soldiers “uncovered” by his department had largely also been criminals. In addition, he claimed to have been severely mistreated in the state police lineup by his former victims.³³ In May 1947, he was charged in front of the Austrian People’s Court, together with seven other members of the Investigation Department. During the so-called Army Patrol proceedings, he spent another month on remand. As a witness to the assertion that he had never tortured prisoners, Durlach called the First Vienna FC goalkeeper Stefan Ploc. Ploc had been arrested and detained in the Rossauer barracks – probably on suspicion of “undermining military strength” – in March 1945. In the trial, he testified:

I found myself [...] in the Rossauer barracks until the end of March 1945, but did not notice during my detention that detainees were mistreated. I did not even receive any punches myself. When I was arrested, Durlach, who was also a footballer and knew me from before, saw me. He asked why I was there, and when I told him my evidence was not in order he thought that this was nonsense; he would see to it that I get out again.³⁴

The communist *Volksstimme* (March 18, 1948, 3) reported that Durlach had asserted to the court “to have only given a single slap to the face.” The court concluded that Durlach had “put prisoners in a painful state and severely abused them by the application of beatings, especially with rubber clubs, by kicks and the like,” “thereby committing the crimes of torture and mistreatment in accordance with § 3 of the KVG [War Crimes Act].” Moreover, “the frequency of the ill-treatment, and the fact that he allowed this abuse to be used as a tool by the other members of the investigations unit” were viewed as aggravating factors. Fritz Durlach was sentenced on March 25, 1948 to one year of

³² DÖW V11/1-73, microfilm 1005 [D], Vg 6a Vr 7188/46, indictment 14 May 1947.

³³ DÖW V11/1-73, microfilm 1004 [D] Vg 7c Vr 915/46, hearings 15 January 1946 and 4 October 1946.

³⁴ DÖW V11/1-73, microfilm 1005 [D], Vg 11f Vr 7188/46 Hv 1053/47, Stefan Ploc testimony, 24 February 1948.

hard labor, to include his pre-trial detention.³⁵ The assessment of this judgment in the Austrian daily newspapers differed: while the *Weltpresse* (March 26, 1948, 3) saw “severe punishment in the trial of the Army Patrol,” the *Volksstimme* (March 28, 1948, 3) headlined “appalling judgment against the Army Patrol” and summed up that the verdict had come out “to the Nazis’ liking.” The Social Democrats’ *Arbeiter-Zeitung* (March 26, 1948, 3) concluded: “On the grounds of the rather mild judgment, the Chairman stated that the main guilty party for this abuse, *Oberfeldrichter* Dr. Everts, was unreachable by the Austrian courts.” In fact, the two main leaders of the criminal prosecution of “underminers of military strength” were never ultimately prosecuted in Austria or in the Federal Republic of Germany: Dr. Breitler was in custody for about a month in 1946.³⁶ He practiced as a lawyer in Vienna until his retirement in 1964, representing “Aryanizers,” among others, in restitution proceedings.³⁷ He died in 1966.³⁸ A warrant for the arrest of Dr. Everts was indeed issued in Austria, and he appeared on the “first Austrian list of war criminals” (*Das Kleine Volksblatt*, December 4, 1945, 4; Forster 2007), but he lived unmolested in Germany, where he even served as mayor of his hometown of Runderoth, and worked in the judicial service until his death in 1952 (Baumann et al. 2008, 217).

7. Conclusion: Claims of Victimhood and the “Viennese Epidemic”

Comparing the history of football in Vienna during World War II with other regions of the Third Reich, similarities initially become visible. These include the strategies of the clubs and the local sports officials to maintain strong teams as long as possible, despite the war conditions. This is also true for the effects of the war on sports operations. Although some prominent Viennese clubs at first appear to have retained their “peacetime lineup” for a relatively long time, after the beginning of the war of annihilation against the Soviet Union the situation in terms of the conscription and front-line deployment of players was probably similar to that of the *Altreich*. Some Viennese clubs, such as First

³⁵ DÖW V11/1-73, microfilm 1005 [D], Vg 11f Vr 7188/46 Hv 1053/47, Judgment of the Provincial Court for Criminal Matters Vienna, 25 March 1948.

³⁶ WStLA G 103-5/1-6, Provincial Court Vienna Vg 6e Vr 196/51 Karl Everts, Leopold Breitler hearing, 19 April 1946, 2 May 1946, 20 May 1946.

³⁷ Cf. for example Fünfhaus district court, Rudolfsheim land registry, EZ 1505, restitution matter, Jewish Community Vienna vs. R. family, 1948; Döbling district court, Unterdöbling land registry, EZ 262, restitution matter, Association for the Care of Needy Orphans vs. B. company, 1949; Hietzing district court, Hacking land registry, EZ 66, restitution matter, IKG Vienna vs. Eleonore H., 1952.

³⁸ WStLA Vienna XIII district court, 3A 855/66, estate of Leopold Breitler.

Vienna FC, were subsequently more successful than others in assembling teams and, as a consequence, in victories on the field.

After the war, in contrast to the Federal Republic of Germany, Viennese football integrated the years 1938 to 1945 into a national victim narrative: Football's sites of memory offered building blocks of Austrian victimhood. Unlike the political doctrine of victimhood, however, popular sports memory sometimes circumvented the "externalization" of National Socialism. This is evidenced by the football-related view that the war itself, more than the *Anschluss* – and the end of Austrian sovereignty – was the real break in Austrian sporting activities (Spitaler 2008, 554).

The example of the "Viennese self-mutilation epidemic" that had "infected" local football suggests that the Viennese footballers who came largely from the proletarian milieu, and who were socialized until 1934 in Social Democratic "Red Vienna," were sometimes lacking in military zeal. The facts put the assertion of the punishment or unfavorable treatment of Vienna footballers with regard to the maintenance of sporting operations into perspective, however. On the contrary, in the early war years, a preferential treatment or protection of Viennese players by local Nazis seems to have actually taken place. The discussion of such issues was already a topic during the war, but became locally patriotic in the Austrian memory: possible preferential treatment became possible discrimination.

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