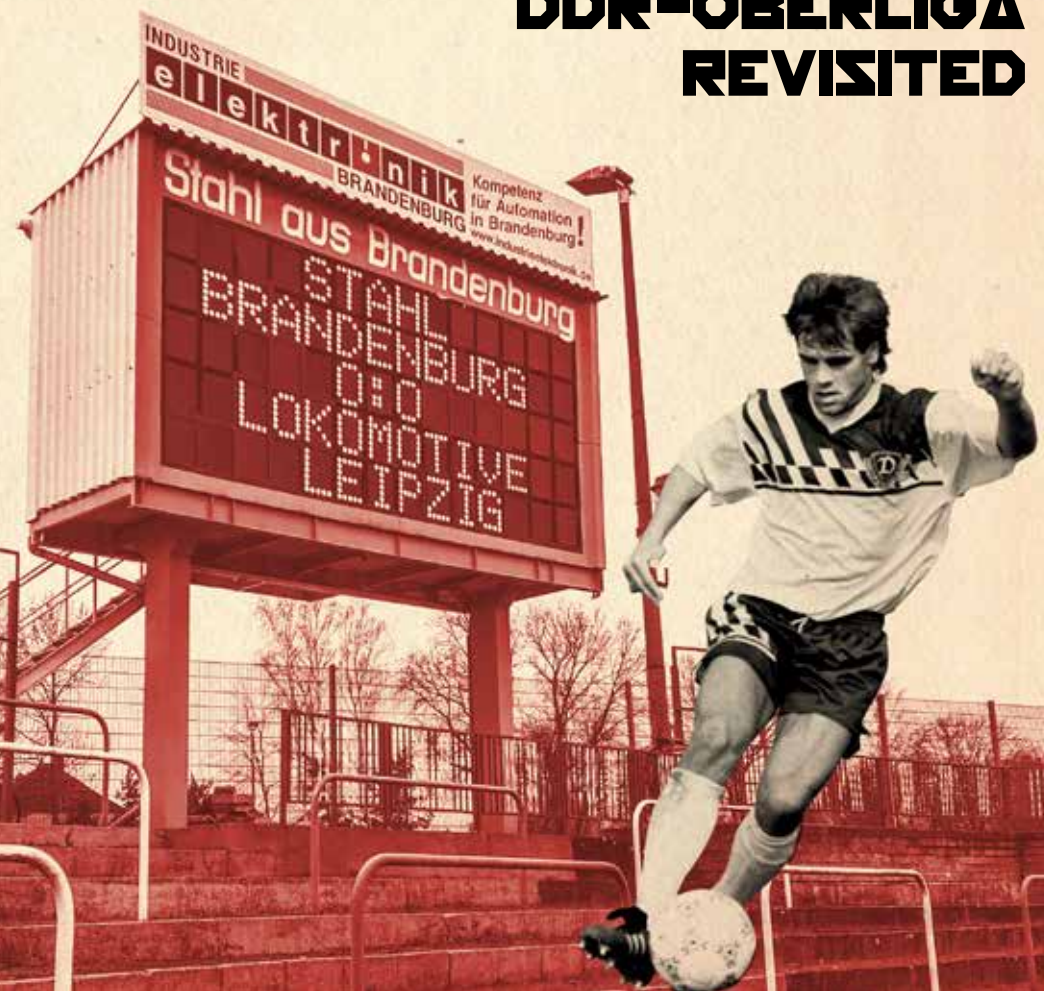


M I C H A E L W A G G

THE TURNING SEASON

DDR-OBERLIGA
REVISITED



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**THE
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Contents

Acknowledgements	11
Vorwort	12
A brief history of the Oberliga.	26
The magic of Mr Schmidt.	36
Jena Rules	44
Leaning	58
Halle: a tragedy	68
1966, and all that	76
Block F, Row 9	93
The violet revolution	104
A spy in Sonnenberg	116
Sparwasser shoots	130
Hinterland: a fiction.	148
Lauzi: singular.	171
The myth of Bischofswerda	183
The loss of Jörg Stübner	197
Blue Monday	219
Crossing the line	235
Appendices	244
Select bibliography	254
Notes	255
Picture credits	256

Vorwort

THERE'S A postcard on my wall that I picked up in a town called Hof. I took it from one of those stands you find near a pub doorway with a selection of cards advertising something or other. But this postcard isn't selling anything. It's fascinated me since I found it 17 years ago, niggling away at me like a missed sitter.

I can't remember much about Hof but I'm sure it's a lovely town and looking at a map now I see it's in the north-eastern corner of Bavaria where the old West meets Thuringia and Saxony in the old East. It's just seven miles from where the Inner German border once ran its course. In the top left-hand corner of the card is part of a pennant, the type exchanged before a match for sporting friendship, with a series of bold characters printed on it like a clue to a Cold War thriller:

WM74 DFV 22.6.1974 HAMBURG DDR-BRD

Then three images: in black and white a close-up of a footballer just about to strike the ball with some force, two other bodies sliding over each other to stop it happening. There's a colour picture of a section of football fans behind a high, metal fence with flags draped over it in black, red and gold. The third is another image in black and white, two players standing

shoulder to shoulder talking. It's after the match, the sweat picked out in dark patches on their shirts. One shirt is white with a black round-necked trim and a crest with an eagle on it. The other shirt is darker with a large V-neck and three thick letters above its crest: DDR. Then cutting straight through the middle of the card the words,

'Sparwasser schießt Kaiser kotzt'

I imagine the commentator's voice rising in volume and pitch as the far-reaching blow is struck. I imagine hushed, urgent conversations and the scribbling of notes. I imagine a ball kicked high over a wall that's never really come down.

The original, real commentary was simpler I think, something more like *'Sparwasser? ... und Tor!'* A tone of disbelief barely hidden. But I've stared at the words on the postcard for 17 years, fascinated by what this other, tabloid version might mean. I'm staring at them now on the S-Bahn from Leipzig-Halle airport at the start of my journey. I tucked the card into my notebook before I left London. There's alliteration in the German, the 'Kaiser Kotzt' kicking home the line; but the English translation is no less bold and in rhyme, *'Sparwasser shoots ... Kaiser pukes'*.

* * *

The Olympic Stadium, April 2018. The opening ceremony of PAM, Munich's three-month festival of free public art. The festival has the overall title 'Game Changers' and presents artists' responses to significant shifts in the city over the past 100 years. Starting at the declaration of the short-lived Bavarian Soviet Republic in 1919, the art works move through 'paradigmatic shifts' in the city's history, stopping to consider, among other turns of events, the inauguration of the Olympic

THE TURNING SEASON

Park and Stadium in 1972 and the welcoming of refugees at its central station in 2015, 'Visible game-changers in how societies reinvent themselves.'



Here at the festival opening the event chosen to kick things off is a piece of performance art called Re-enactment, or *Foot*. Its protagonist, its game-changer, is absent and will be played by an actor. The event being recreated tonight is a football match that took place in Hamburg in 1974, and the man at the centre of that match has said that on his gravestone just this word and date would be enough to explain who is buried beneath.

He is a man from a city 500km [311 miles] north of here which just 30 years ago was in another country, a country behind a wall that changed the game too. One game in Hamburg will be relived here in Munich, in that *other* other country, Germany, which now includes Halberstadt and Magdeburg and Aue and Zeitz among its towns again. Swiss-born artist Massimo Furlan, who has created the work, will

play the part of a goalkeeper and will change his jersey from black to green at half-time, just like Sepp Maier did.

In Hamburg in June '74, the game changed late on. It was the first and only time that West Germany met East Germany in a football match. At least in a proper football match with spectators and all. The national teams had competed against each other a couple of times before in behind-closed-doors games – known in Germany as *Geisterspiele* or 'ghost matches' – to determine which of the Germanys would send a team to the Olympic Games.

They had in fact played two more of these qualifiers in front of crowds; as well as facing each other in the 1972 Olympics itself (in the very Munich Olympiastadion where Furlan's performance is happening); the DDR won that one 3-2, but let's not let that get in the way of a good story. This was the real thing: a competitive, televised, tournament match in the group stage of the World Cup finals – in West Germany. It didn't matter that both teams were already through to the second round, nor that the losing team would turn out to have arguably the easier passage to the final (*West* Germany, who went on to win the cup). This was a battle of ideologies: communism v capitalism, East v West, a politically-charged *Bruderduell*. Well it wasn't, it was a football match, but the ball is round, and against all the odds *East* Germany won. DDR 1 – BRD 0. The goal in the 77th minute was scored by a man called Jürgen Sparwasser, the man absent in Munich tonight. He'll be played by the actor Franz Beil. And soon Beil will disappear too.

'As a child, Massimo Furlan used to play in his room for hours with a foam ball while listening to the running commentaries of the football games of the Italian championship on the radio. He would mime

THE TURNING SEASON

all the players' actions, and when the commentary was interrupted because of the poor quality of the transmission he would resume the thread and include his own name. Thus, he became a world champion, again and again, scoring countless goals.'

I was starting to really like Massimo Furlan.

Furlan the artist has moved from the bedroom to the stadium and has gone on to perform his *Foot* re-enactments all over Europe. He's played the role of Michel Platini in Paris, Zbigniew Boniek in Warsaw, and also given a Sparwasser himself in a previous version of this event ten years ago in Halle. His idea is to re-enact a football match from the past in its entirety with just one player on the pitch. The other 21 players are imagined, as are the referee and assistants, the coaches and subs, and the ball. There is a crowd there to cheer him on, or rather people assuming the role of a crowd to relive a match that has long since finished – listening on radios to the original commentary to the game – but apart from the one fully kitted-out player all else is invisible in green space.

For the version here in Munich, Furlan has decided to up the ante and use two performer-players, Sparwasser and the goalkeeper he scored past, Sepp Maier. Furlan and Beil have studied the movements and gestures of the two players through the full 90 minutes and play the game as it happened, with every twist and turn, jog, dash and curse. Two players and 20 ghosts; a dance in stadium space; football theatre.

* * *

I have another obsession beyond the Hof postcard which dates back to around the same time and my first visits to Germany. I fell in love with the country then and with one town in particular. I'm sure it's possible to fall for a place and not know

why, with all the stubbornness that comes from the resulting puzzled looks. The love digs in. *We'll always have Neustrelitz.*

Seventeen years ago I was on a European theatre tour and one leg of it was through the state of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern. Our show was an adaptation of George Orwell's *1984* and I spent much of the second half hanging upside-down with my head in a tin box where some rusty nails made the sound of scratching rats. I was Winston Smith in Room 101. That was the downside. The upside was that we played in some beautiful places.

On this particular leg we played Greifswald, Stralsund, Rostock, Schwerin and Schwedt, as I remember. Schwedt caused much amusement for the word sounding a bit like *sweat* in English and the fact that it sits on the banks of the Oder.

We also played Neustrelitz. I loved it there; an unremarkable town on the shore of the Zwierker See, drawn to its small pockets of faded grandeur, to its lake and ruined schloss and to its beautiful theatre. I now know that it wasn't really Neustrelitz I was drawn to, despite the fact that I told anyone who'd listen that one day I would live there, but to a wider territory and Neustrelitz became the emblem, a type of club crest, of a growing pull towards many of the towns of the former DDR.

On that first tour I also became beguiled by the words I saw, particularly in the football pages. There's a Dadaist delight in club names like Waggonbau Dessau, Motor Mitte Magdeburg, and Guts Muts Dresden. Imagine playing for Aktivist Schwarze Pumpe! It may be that the nightly hanging upside-down and imagined rats were playing with my mind, but I can distinctly remember repeating the phrase *Europapokal-der-Pokalsieger-Sieger* as I drifted off to sleep. I've since spent more time in many of those towns, usually working in theatres, but lately the draw has taken a different turn.

THE TURNING SEASON

I'm a lower-league football fan too, in awe of the unbearable beauty of the empty terrace, and I wanted to travel where these two worlds meet: the strange, shabby romance of the cities of a country disappeared, and a world where football and football clubs, however seemingly insignificant, kick and scream, and change. I also fancied touring eastern Germany without having my head in a tin box every night. It wasn't until towards the end of what became a series of journeys that I realised another reason I'd picked that particular time to look back to. I was 16 years old in 1989, and football-crazy.

I think football clubs can tell us something of the communities they're part of and at their best they sit at the heart of the places they play for. But I'm an outsider here too, an away day fan cheering for both sides. There's a German word referring to away trips, adopted in English but that's little used now in either language: *Bummel*. Jermone K. Jerome used it for the sequel to his *Three Men on a Boat*, the three men now on land and bummeling on bicycles to the Black Forest, while German football supporters of the past would travel to away matches as *Schlachtenbummler*. Theirs was a *battle bummel* while my odyssey, I hoped, would be an altogether more peaceful venture.

I started to describe my own journey as a bummel. But it was to be a bummel through a country that no longer exists, via its football league, a wander-plan of away days. I was heading for the 14 cities which had a football club in the DDR-Oberliga – the East German first division – in autumn 1989. Sadly a return to Neustrelitz wasn't on the list as its club was a third-division Bezirksliga outfit at the time, denying me a chance to visit the previously and fantastically named club BSG Mechanical Arithmetic Neustrelitz. The 1989/90 season wasn't the last round of competition in East Germany: the 1990/91 season started pre-German reunification and ran

its course, while it could be said that the last authentic season started in 1988. But I chose 1989 as my starting whistle, my *Anpfiff!* That was the year of the *Wende*, the turning point, and that was *the turning season*.

When the 1989 season kicked off the Berlin Wall was standing firm as it had done for nearly 30 years. By the end of the season it was gone. The people had pushed it over. Thirty years on, it has now been gone for longer than it stood and divided and I wanted to go back and trace some of its lines, through the lines on a football pitch, however faded. I don't know why I felt I had to, but as historian Alan McDougall has pointed out in his study of the game's relationship to state and society, 'Football's lack of importance, one might say, made it important.' (McDougall, 182)

Two years after the *Mauerfall* (the fall of the Wall), in the newly reunified Germany, the East German Oberliga was merged into the West German Bundesliga. To get a sense of that integration you need only glance at former East German representation in the German top league in the 29 seasons since. At the end of the 1990/91 season two eastern clubs were given a place in the Bundesliga, six in the second division, while the rest would play in the then-regional third tier. In terms of population or geography East Germany was roughly a quarter of the size of West Germany so the decision to place only two of its teams into a top league of 20 was disproportionate. The effects of that decision, based on an assessment that it would take the clubs of the DDR time to establish the economic foundations to survive in the new system, are still felt today. I saw them on my journey round every terrace curve.

In the years since German reunification there has never been more than two former DDR clubs playing in the top league at any one time, for much of the time only one, and for a long period none at all. At the time my journey started in

THE TURNING SEASON

early 2019, of the 14 clubs that competed in the 1989 season, three were playing in the second division, four in the third, five at the semi-professional and regional fourth level, one at the sixth and one at the seventh level, both amateur leagues. Thirty years ago all of these clubs played in the top flight. Like much of East German life the Oberliga was swallowed into an existing structure it had little chance of coping with.

Until Union Berlin were promoted to the Bundesliga in 2019, there had been no team from the east in the top division for ten years. To me the Leipzig-based club run by an Austrian energy drinks company doesn't count, and it won't be mentioned again. All of the clubs of 1989 are now playing at a lower level than they did then, most of them significantly so and many of them struggling to survive. But they play on in one form or another. *We'll always have Neustrelitz*. And give me the lower league over fizzy drinks football any day. I was looking for small stories not just big ones, a portrait of each club in miniature. The club was the starting point, and the year, 1989, the game changer.

Forty years earlier, in July 1949 when East Germany was yet to exist as a country, there was a football match between two neighbouring local teams. Sonneberg was in the state of Thuringia in the post-war Soviet administration zone, while Neustadt bei Coburg, just three miles away, was in the American zone in Bavaria. The border between these occupying zones, between what was to become just three months later East and West, was marked by the halfway line of the pitch. As Alan McDougall has described, the two towns had been connected for centuries by cultural and family ties (284); they were practically the same place, but now the people of each town had to watch from their own side of the line, while the players had been granted inter-zonal passes for the day to allow them to enter the opposing team's half during

the match. Otherwise it would have been a fairly dull affair and certainly a long-ball game.

After the match, which Sonneberg from the 'east' won 2-0, the authorities opened the border for the day. As the two teams walked towards each other (as McDougall notes referring to a photograph that marked the occasion) one held a banner reading 'We want the unification of Germany'. The other team's banner said 'and so do we'. But the border games were just beginning and it would take 40 years for the final whistle to blow, if it has at all.

Back in Munich, when the 77th minute comes and Sparwasser shoots the stadium floodlights will be cut and a single spotlight will pick out the Magdeburg man as he wheels away, one arm in the air, before tumbling into a tentative forward roll. That's what's in the script. East beats West. Game-changer.

But there's another ghostly turn here. In the middle of the first half Beil as Sparwasser tumbles to the ground holding his ankle. He waves an arm towards the ghosts on the bench while the crowd continue to cheer, now deep in their own roles at the strange spectacle. Some of the older fans might have checked back through their collective memory for an injury on that night 44 years ago, scrabbling to recall whether it really happened like that in Hamburg or if the artist has added some theatrical embellishment.

But there's no such artistry at play here. Beil's injury is real, adding another surreal layer to the phantom action, where fact already met fiction. And after the intervention of a stalker, who hugs Furlan before leaping into the long-jump pit, Beil is stretchered off and Furlan as goalkeeper continues on his own: a lone black, then green figure dancing round the empty penalty box on a Bavarian spring evening. The crowd cheer him on and their volume rises as one as the fateful moment

nears. The stadium lights are cut on cue and the spotlight picks out the goalkeeper first, sitting despondent in his goalmouth before cursing the absent defenders all around him. Then it refocuses to briefly scan the pitch, flitting nervously across empty grass like a searchlight, until it finds him. The light follows the invisible form of Jürgen Sparwasser and, in his impossible shadow, a country disappeared.

* * *

A note on the text:

Chasing Sparwasser's shadow, this book is a response to my own journey. I wanted to respond as quickly as possible to each of the places I visited. I'm not attempting a full history, nor writing about politics or politicians, and neither do I seek to analyse, condemn nor condone the social and political structures of the former DDR; that's for bigger brains than mine. I've attempted something simpler – to look around, watch a match and meet people – and my response is, I guess, as political as any concerned with people and the places they live.

By omission I'm not ignoring that there are other serious issues associated with football and society in this context – I say very little, for example, about the history of hooliganism or the contemporary presence of the far-right, associated with some of these clubs, and many others across Europe at the time. But that's not the book I've chosen to write. Similarly, for example, much has been written about BFC Dynamo, then and now, but my response was to make a fiction inspired by what I imagined as I walked the streets of Berlin.

I make no apology for the romanticised nature of this. I wanted to be selective and creative, linking my wandering with a football league that finished long ago. The result is impressionistic and personal; a patchwork. In his book *Tor! The*

story of German Football, Ulrich Hesse-Lichtenberger suggested that the four-decade history of East German football ‘may very well be one of the game’s most fascinating tales still waiting to be told properly’. (Hesse-Lichtenberger, 278). I make no claims to have done that, but I hope I have made a start.

I set off in February 2019 and finished the journey in March 2020, and wanted to respond within the 2019/20 football season, 30 years on from 1989/90. I soon realised how complicated it all is, and that I could easily spend the next 30 years trying to shape this book. One day maybe I’ll go back and do it properly! But the timeframe felt important. Coincidentally I was in mainland Europe, watching football and meeting people, during much of my own country’s process of trying to remove itself from the EU. I am European and remain so, and am glad I could be in Germany to say so.

I refer throughout the book to the *Wende*. Die Wende, which translates as the ‘turning point’ or ‘turnaround’, was the period of sociopolitical change in Germany around 1989–90. The word has been used variously: to refer to the time of the fall of the Berlin Wall; or to the events of autumn 1989 which led to the fall of the Wall; or to a broader period of political and social change which includes the subsequent reunification of Germany and encompasses all of this. For the most part I use it to mean this broader period of change and which I’ve connected to East German football’s *turning season* of 1989/90.

A few other items: I have changed some of the names of the people I met, to respect their privacy. Occasionally I’ve merged aspects of one personal story into another. I have left many other things out – facts and stories that would be part of a more conventional history of a football league. I’m writing here about the men’s game, and don’t cover women’s football. There

is so much that should be written about the women's game in this context, once a national league was finally established far too late in 1987, and elsewhere in other contexts, but that's for other books. I hope I might write one of them.

In relation to language, for the most part I use the German acronym DDR (*Deutsche Demokratische Republik*) when referring to the country from 1949 to 1990 rather than the English GDR (*German Democratic Republic*). I also use East Germany for the country in that period, and east or eastern Germany for the area of Germany today. I've also tried, wherever possible, to use simplified versions of the names of football clubs. These club names, name changes and additional acronyms are complicated, albeit full of wonder, and warrant a book of their own at least as niche as this one.

But I've tried to keep it simple. As examples, I mostly refer to Dynamo Berlin, rather than Berliner FC Dynamo; to Lokomotive Leipzig, rather than 1. FC Lokomotive Leipzig; or to Stahl Brandenburg, rather than BSG Stahl Brandenburg; etc. And further into a story I'm likely to use just 'Stahl' or 'Brandenburg' or 'Dynamo' or 'Leipzig', if I think you'll know which club I'm talking about. Apologies if you don't. Sometimes I've veered from this plan, and that is either my choice or my fault.

To add to the name game, there are numerous FCs, SCs, FVs, SGs, BSGs and more, used in the East German game. For the most part I've ignored them, though have occasionally explored them along the way. It's not that I don't think they're important, I've just tried to keep things moving and occasionally lost the will to live!

I set off on this journey knowing very little – as well as speaking nowhere near good enough German. I've made lots of mistakes along the way and some of them, I'm sure, are here for you to read. All faults are my own, but then that's all

VORWORT

part of the journey. So before we set off, and to help us on our way, here's a brief history – of the brief, strange history – of the *DDR-Oberliga*:

