

by Michel Clare*

Throughout the twentieth century, the Olympic Movement has been threatened by escalating dangers, the two World Wars, the Cold War and boycotts of the Games. It has survived, sometimes by the skin of its teeth, thanks to the intelligence and the energy of the IOC Presidents.

1914: within a matter of weeks, the world was thrown into turmoil. On 28 June, Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria was assassinated in Sarajevo. On 28 July Austria declared war on Serbia. On 3 August Germany rose up against France, and on the 4th Great Britain joined France in the fighting, along with [...] Russia, and Belgium, whose neutrality had been violated.

What would become of Olympism and its ideal of peace within this tempest? In mid-June the IOC Session and Congress were held in Paris to commemorate with pomp and ceremony the twentieth anniversary of the revival of the Olympic Games by Baron Pierre de Coubertin, who had dreamed of strengthening human fellowship by taking inspiration from the Olympic truce of ancient Greece. "Let us export rowers, runners and fencers," he said. "This is the free trade of the future, and the day it becomes one of the customs of old Europe, the cause of peace will have gained new and powerful support." In the spring of 1914 "old Europe" was ailing, and many feared the worst for its culture. Coubertin had predicted an impending apocalypse. However, his struggles had been fruitful in recent years. The 1912 Olympic Games in Stockholm were an unprecedented triumph in a country that had given a

fantastic boost to modern sport. The 1913 Congress in Lausanne had highlighted the cultural aspects of Olympism, a philosophy which seeks a balance between body and mind. Congratulations were in order, but there was a general feeling of anxiety among the officials. Relaxing at the Athletes' College in Reims, Champagne, after the Congress, Coubertin noted down the dream he had had on the night the Archduke was assassinated:

"Splendid weather," he wrote in his notebook, "a marvellously pure summer evening.. I had asked for a small camping tent to be set up for me on the terrace, near the swimming pool. And I was greatly looking forward to spending a delightful evening, in the semi-open air, in an lovely setting. But most of the night [and into the morning], I was unable to sleep and [paced] anxiously in the solitude of the gardens. Visions of fire and catastrophe haunted me, and I could not draw my eyes away from the enormous [shadow] of the cathedral [looming] above the houses. Across the horizon, so pure and calm withal, I thought I saw streaks of flame. All of this was so confused and troubled that it seemed like a feverish nightmare... The following day at the [railway] station I learned from the newspapers of the assassination in Sarajevo of Archduke Franz Ferdinand and the Duchess of Hohenberg."

Thereafter, Coubertin could stop at nothing to save his fledgling creation. He would need the full power of his wits, energy and authority to succeed.

Dispelling doubt

Many of Olympism's supporters believed that the Games would not sur-



Coubertin in uniform in 1914.

NIGHTMARE

1914

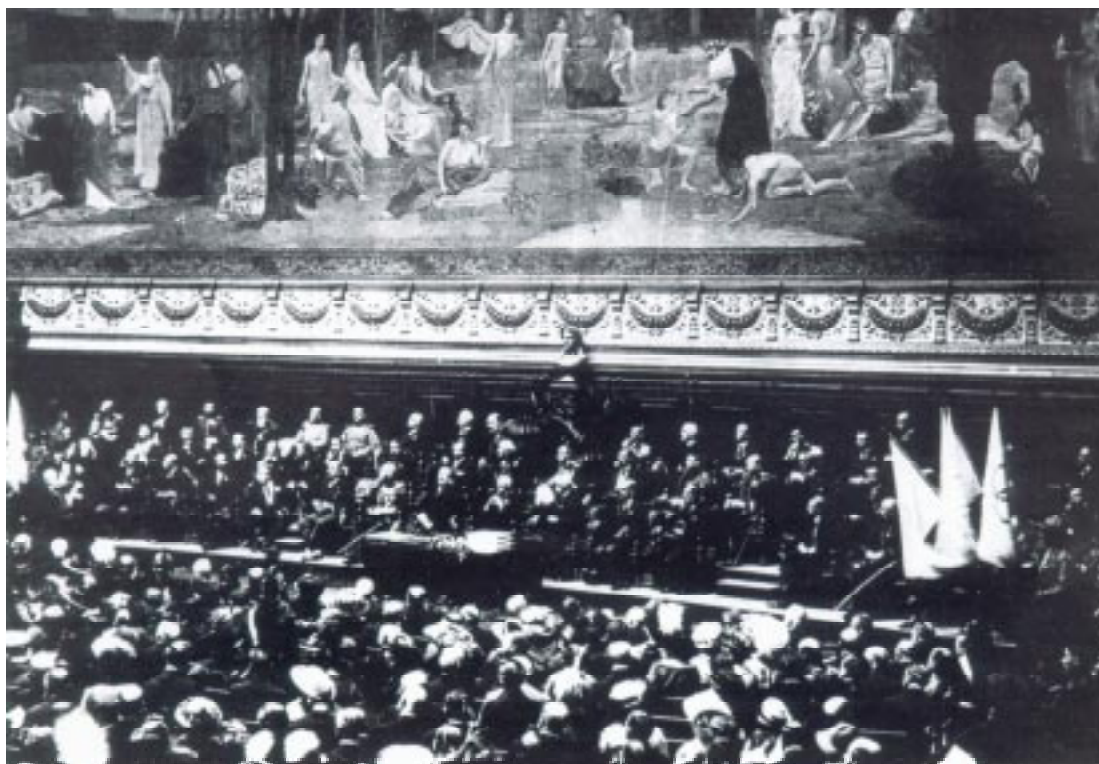
vive the War or Europe's suicidal act in Sarajevo. The IOC had to resist not only the conflict that was eroding the unity of the Olympic Movement, but also the growing pressure from the International Federations, who were challenging its leadership. It is amusing to note that the International Federations' fight for independence was led by the president of the International Amateur Athletic Federation, Sigfrid Edström, an eminent member

bers came from countries that were at war with Germany. The city of Berlin was organizing the 1916 Games of the VI Olympiad, and Germany had no intention of relinquishing this honour, for it believed that the war would soon be over. Moreover, taking advantage of a grey area in the regulations, the Germans claimed that the IOC headquarters should, for the duration of the Olympiad, be located in the host city of Berlin.

and in some cases he called on a group of friends for advice. Generally, however, he made major decisions alone - which is advisable in a period of acute crisis.

Lausanne is chosen

Now, Coubertin faced two moral obligations: to continue his role as the guardian of Olympism, which transcends national boundaries (the flag with its five rings, a symbol of universality, dates from 1914), and to fulfil his duty to his country. At the age of 51 he enlisted in the French army, and the government appointed him to a teaching post. He knew that he could not officially remain President of the IOC (*"I consider it improper for our committee to be presided over by a soldier"*) but he continued his activities through personal contacts. First of all he opposed repeated demands from delegates of the British



Celebration of the twentieth anniversary of the revival of the Olympic Games, on 17 June 1914 in the grand amphitheatre of the Sorbonne.

of the Stockholm organizing committee who became IOC president during the Second World War. Coubertin had the foresight to ask him to lead the IOC as early as 1920. But the German problem was much more delicate. The great majority of IOC mem-

In fact the question of the headquarters was not addressed with satisfactory clarity. Tradition dictated that the headquarters, archives and minutes should be kept in the city that was organizing the Olympic Games. But in reality, headquarters were wherever the President (then Pierre de Coubertin) was. Running the IOC was a full-time occupation for Coubertin,

from the IOC. He also refused to replace Berlin as host city of the 1916 Games which, as matters stood, could not take place anyway. It was his idea that, despite the adverse circumstances, references to the VI Olympiad should remain in the books, without any mention of the city. *"Whether or not an Olympiad is celebrated, its figure 'stands,'"* he decreed.

1914 COUBERTIN'S NIGHTMARE

Finally, in a tour de force of authority and wisdom, he settled the matter of the headquarters. Switzerland was a neutral country, and Coubertin deeply admired it as a free nation and “*model of democracy*”, especially the Lake Léman waterfront (“*balance and beauty*”) and the city of Lausanne, for his most memorable sporting experiences in skiing and rowing were situated in the canton of Vaud. He also had some great friends there, including Baron Godefroy de Blonay, whom in 1910 he began to consider as a possible successor, and Dr F. M. Messerli, the president of a Greco-Swiss association in Lausanne (“*the new Olympia...*”).

Coubertin decided unilaterally to transfer the IOC headquarters to Lausanne, without telling Baron de Blonay in advance. He excused himself in writing to his “*beir apparent*” for this “*coup d'état*”. The Swiss people,

who had been warmed to the idea by Coubertin's network of friends, required little convincing. The official ceremony took place on 10 April 1915 at the town hall in Lausanne, where an exchange of signatures established “the world administrative centre and the archives of [modern day] Olympism” in the city of Lausanne. The dictates of the mind thus coincided with the dictates of the heart. In order to settle matters and bring the general state of scepticism to an end, Coubertin resigned from the IOC presidency, appointing Baron Godefroy de Blonay as acting president from 1915 to 1919. Baron de Blonay played an important role in helping Olympism to survive, wisely promoting the characteristics and spirit of the ideal athlete. He increased the role of the Executive Commission, whose views did not always coincide with those of Coubertin. De Blonay gradually withdrew

from the foreground after acting as the kingpin at Sessions in Lausanne in 1919, when peace had returned to Europe, and 1921, when the choice of Lausanne as home to the IOC headquarters was officially approved, winter sports were brought in to the Olympic fold, and Coubertin awarded the Games of the VIII Olympiad to the city of Paris. This was one of the proudest moments for the father of the modern Games. Thanks to his work, the IOC had grown even stronger after the storm. He had won a thirty-year battle, and at the Session in Prague in 1925, he announced his retirement. He had given everything; after the War he was virtually ruined, and was obliged to sell his family property. Switzerland welcomed him with open arms and he lived there until the end of his life.

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Coubertin with the Congress participants, photographed in front of the Sorbonne.

