
The Exclusion of the Central Empires from the Olympic Games in 1920

Karl Lennartz

Deutsche Sporthochschule-Köln, Germany

It is common knowledge that Germany was excluded from participating in the Olympic Games in 1920, 1924 and 1948. The fact that Austria, Hungary, Bulgaria, and Turkey were also excluded from the Games in 1920, is less known. Together with Germany, these countries known as the so-called *Central Empires* were the infamous instigators and losers of *World War I*. The reasons that led to Germany's exclusion from the Games in 1948 in St. Moritz and London were obvious. There was no German state in 1948; neither was there a German National Olympic Committee. Germany was divided into four parts and governed by the Allies.¹

However, the reasons for the exclusion of the *Central Empires* from the Games of 1920 have, as a matter of fact, never been explored. Sport historians have been presented an explanation by Baron Pierre de Coubertin from his Olympic reminiscences as being a true representation of the exclusion scenario:

But a big Problem arose: the participation of the 'central empires', as they were still called. It was only a few months since the last German soldier had left Belgium soil and since the last cannon shot had been heard on the battlefield. Common sense suggested that it would hardly be wise for a German team to appear in the Olympic stadium before 1924. On the other hand, to ostracise any member country, even right after the conflict that tore Europe asunder, would create a rift in the Olympic constitution which had been so strong until then; and it might become a dangerous precedent. The solution however was very simple. At each Olympiad according to the custom introduced in 1896, it is the Organising Committee that sends out the invitations. In this way, the Organising Committee is in control of distribution, without the fundamental principle of universality having to suffer any direct infringement. The IOC had therefore no new decision to take. Nevertheless, despite the opinion of several of us, a middle way was chosen which consisted in enumerating the countries that would be invited, with the excuse that the others were not represented on the IOC. This was a double mistake, for while death in Germany and resignations elsewhere had left several empty spaces in our ranks, there remained the Hungarians who were neither dead nor on the point of resigning.²

In 1931 Coubertin compiled his memoirs concerning the Olympics. At first they were published as a sequel in the magazine *L'Auto*³ and were later printed in Lausanne⁴ in 1931. Twelve years had passed since the exclusion scenario occurred, which he described had taken place. As a result, he should have known the correct facts. Was everything he wrote in 1931 a truthful representation of fact?

From the 5th until the 8th of April, 1919, only five months after the war had ended, and even before the Peace Treaty of Versailles⁵ was signed, the 18th session of the IOC took place in Lausanne, which was the headquarters of the IOC since 1915. A high agenda priority was to determine the location of the Olympic Games in 1920. It was clear long beforehand that Antwerp was the strongest consideration. The details of this procedure are not further discussed here. German troops had attacked Belgium in 1914, not respecting its neutrality, and had largely destroyed Antwerp. It was apparent, that participation by the Central Empires, in particular Germany, was not palatable, neither to the hosts nor to Belgium citizens. According to the customs of the Olympic Movement every country should have been invited, particularly a country like Germany which had participated in all Olympic Games since 1896 with an official team nominated and sent by a National Olympic Committee (*NOC*). Coubertin was right in saying that an exclusion of countries would have set a nasty precedent. This would have been contradictory to the motto "all games, all nations" and to the Olympic peace policy. It would also be contradictory to Olympic equality in regard to political, racist, and religious issues. Coubertin would have turned his Olympic philosophy into a paradox.

Baron de Coubertin's assertion that the Organizing Committee was responsible for the selection and invitation of the participants is only partly correct. Since 1908, the Organizing Committee issued the invitations on behalf of the IOC. For example, at the 1907 session in Den Haag, it was agreed between the Organizing Committee and the IOC that nations which were not politically independent such as Bohemia, and Finland were to be invited if they possessed a National Olympic organization. In 1919 Germany, Austria, Hungary, Bulgaria, and Turkey existed. Not one of these countries had dissolved its *NOC*. In addition to this, there exists no evidence pointing to the resignation of an IOC member of one of these countries.

As far as Germany is concerned, one could argue that the *Deutsche Reichsausschu? für Olympische Spiele* had renamed itself as *Deutscher Reichsausschu? für Leibesübungen* in order to emphasize its disinterest in the Olympic Movement. Nevertheless, this organization should have been questioned in regard to German participation. The following citation proves that even in 1930 Coubertin in looking back to 1919, regarded the whole affair as rather unpleasant:

Nevertheless, despite the opinion of several of us, a middle way was chosen which consisted in enumerating the countries that would be invited, with the excuse that those left uninvited were not represented on the IOC.

In order to understand the meaning and intention of Coubertin's statement, it is necessary to study the protocol of the IOC session of 1919. Until a few years ago this was impossible since the record custodians in Lausanne prevented archive investigations which might possibly endanger the credibility of Baron de Coubertin.

After World War I the IOC consisted of 38 members. Eight of these assembled at the hotel Beau Sejour on 5th April. Apart from Coubertin, there were Great Britain's Robert de Courcy Laffan,⁶ Luxemburg's Jean-Maurice Pescatore,⁷ Belgium's Comte Henri de Baillet-Latour,⁸ Switzerland's Baron Godefroy de Blonay,⁹ Portugal's Comte Jose Penha-Garcia,¹⁰ Brasil's Raul de Rio Branco,¹¹ and Italy's Carlo Montu.¹² In addition to these members, Baron Hermelin from Sweden took his place as a guest without franchise vote. Of the eight participating IOC members, five were from nations which were involved in World War I. At the beginning of the session, the eight participants passed a resolution:

Due to the events of the last session (May 1914) only countries that are represented on the C.I.O. will have the right to participate in the next Olympic Games. However, the C.I.O. leaves it to the organizing committee of the 1920 Games, to invite participants from non-European countries, which are not represented on the committee.

The session minutes enumerate the members of the IOC in a long list containing 36 names. The German members Earl Adalbert von Sterstorpf¹³ and Earl Adolf von Arnim-Muskau,¹⁴ the Austrian members Earl Rudolf von Coloredo-Mansfield¹⁵ and Prince Otto von Windisch-Gratz,¹⁶ the Hungarian members Earl Geza Andrassy¹⁷ and Jules von Musza,¹⁸ the Bulgarian Dimitri Stancioff¹⁹ and the Turkish member Selim Sirri Bey Tarcan²⁰ were not listed. This neglect, expressed in a more cynical way, was that they were "overlooked." This depicted a blatant infringement of IOC

law, as it was customary since 1894 that membership was lifelong and unlimited as long as the member did not violate the Olympic rules and regulations. In this case proceedings would have had to be taken against the unlisted members. This did not occur with any of the above named members. Moreover, it is not known whether these members were invited to the session in Lausanne, as should have been the case. Even though Argentina, Chile, and South Africa did not have IOC members, the 1919 Lausanne Session statute made it possible for the Organizing Committee in Antwerp to invite such “non-European” countries to participate. On another note, the Russian Prince Leon de Ouroussoff²¹ remained a member of the IOC although the country did not exist any more and the successor state, the USSR, even rejected the Olympic Movement due to ideological reasons. Coubertin writes in the above cited passage of his Olympic reminiscences that:

This was a double mistake, for while death in Germany and resignations elsewhere, had left several empty spaces in our ranks, the Hungarians remained who were neither dead nor on the point of resigning.

In the year 1914 Germany had three IOC members. Only Baron Karl von Venningen-Ullner von Diepurg²² died in World War I (on 25th October, 1914). Earl von Sterstorpf died in 1922, Earl von Arnim-Muskau in 1931. Of these three, von Sierstorpf had even been violently against the change of the naming of the “Deutscher Reichsausschuss”. His stance on the matter demonstrated his loyalty towards the Olympic Movement. The members of Austria, Bulgaria, and Turkey were also still alive. At this point it should be added, that Coubertin attached great importance to the fact that an IOC member should not represent a country but should act as an IOC member in a country, a further reason that demonstrates that these persons should not have been suspended. Shortly after the 1919 session, Coubertin posted a circular letter, “a messieurs les membres du Comite international Olympique,” in which he informed both those who had been present, as well as those absent, about the minutes of the session. Coubertin added the statutes of the IOC to this circular letter which can be regarded as a sort of preliminary Olympic Charter. The sentence, “les membres du Comite sont elus pour une periode indeterminnee” (the members are elected for an indefinite time period) sounds like sheer mockery. Was that not formerly the case? The “periode indeterminnee” expression can be found in the first printed statutes, “Annuaire”, of 1908.

What about the events since the last session in May 1914 on which grounds the exclusion of countries was justified at the session in 1919? It can only be referring to events that occurred in June 1914 during the Olympic Congress in Paris, which, however, took place in June,²³ not in May. There was no IOC Session or meeting in May 1914.

What happened at the 1914 June congress? What was it that representatives of certain countries had done to Baron de Coubertin? Coubertin only gives a vague positive description of the session. He further emphasizes that the minutes of the session were never published.²⁴ Why not? Did the minutes contain unpleasant results for him which he did not want to be known after the war? Did he destroy the minutes? The IOC archives hold only the harmless²⁵ program of the Congress, which, according to Coubertin, was first printed after the war.²⁶ Luckily there exists a detailed account of the course of the 14th session which nearly can be regarded as an exact recording of the Congress proceedings. But before we go into detail, let us first analyse the previous political problem.

At the Olympic Congress in 1894 at the Sorbonne in Paris, Coubertin had made it possible for the Hungarian Ferenc Kemeny²⁷ and the Bohemian Jiri Guth²⁸ to become founding members of the IOC even though they were under the domination of Austria and did not exist as independent countries. Athletes of both sub-set regions of Austria took part in the Olympic Games. The whole affair turned into a political problem when the Olympic Games became more and more important and Austria founded a NOC, and named two IOC members. First, problems occurred in 1906 (Greek intercalary Games) and in 1908, (London) when the entry of the nations at the opening ceremony occurred. Baron de Coubertin tried to avoid these complications by achieving participation at the Games in London in 1908 for nations which did not have the status of a politically accepted state (Bohemia, Finland). During the preparations for the Olympics in Stockholm in 1912, the question of the entry of nations and the hoisting of the flags at the victory ceremony became a significant political issue. The Austrian Council of Ministers was of the opinion, that all athletes of the Dual Monarchy should march as one nation behind the Austrian flag.

Thereupon, the Hungarians threatened to boycott the Games, a demand which was acceded to by the officials. In turn, Austria demanded the exclusion of Bohemia, an appeal which was also supported by the Germans.²⁹ When the Russian government demanded the exclusion of Finland, the IOC at first refused. Loyal to his ideology that the sportive geography should be separated from the political geography,³⁰ Coubertin was of the opinion that both nations should participate in the Games. As far as the question of flags and national emblems was concerned, the IOC submitted to the demands of Austria. The entry of the athletes in Stockholm in 1912 witnessed the black and yellow flag of “Autriche”

followed by the Austrian team, behind which the “Autriche Tcheques” flag and Bohemian athletes followed. However, during the victory ceremonies, pennants with the Czech and Finnish colours³¹ were allowed to be hoisted next to the Austrian and Russian flags, respectively. Coubertin described the conciliatory behaviour in Stockholm as a protection for Bohemia and Finland as well as a personal victory of his own thinking on the issue. In reality one can perceive the first steps towards an eventual exclusion of these nations from the Olympic Movement.

A further step in this direction was the election of Berlin as the host for the Games in 1916. Austria and Germany were Allies and acted as such. The Olympic Jubilee Congress in Paris in 1914 was an occasion to become active. The German representatives held an exceptional position as the hosts of the future Games. Prior to the congress, it was decided how many delegates a NOC could nominate to attend. Great Britain and the USA were granted ten delegates each. Austria had six. The “Comites Olympiques Luxembourgeois, Monegasque, Tcheque et Finlandais” had to be content with two delegates each.³² Coubertin was ill during the congress³³ and was only able to participate sporadically. The Austrian Prince von Windisch-Graetz and the German Wilhelm Homing, as vice presidents, acted on behalf of Coubertin in his absence. Homing was a high-ranking Government official of the Reich’s Home Office. In regard to the negotiations and the election results during the individual sessions of the congress, there was sufficient information, even though Coubertin later concealed the existence of a record. The journalist Frantz Reichel³⁴ of *Le Figaro* in Paris reported daily. In addition to this, German sports magazines produced detailed articles on the congress.³⁵ Concerning the third session on Tuesday afternoon on 16th June the following can be read:

The third session of the congress on Tuesday afternoon was held under the chairmanship of either Baron de Coubertin or the Privy Councillor Homing (Germany). The German representatives have received great compliance (as far as their wishes were concerned) as well as a permanent majority. The German petition regarding the question of nationality in particular was granted due to which, as opposed to the former customs, only political nations could enter as a unit at the Olympic Games. Germany suggested the following nations: Egypt, Argentina, Australia, Belgium, Brasil, Bulgaria, Chile, China, Germany, Denmark, France, Greece, United Kingdom, Ireland, Holland, Italy, Japan, Canada, Luxemburgh, Mexico, Norway, Austria, Peru, Portugal, Rumania, Russia, Sweden, Switzerland, Serbia, Spain, South Africa, Turkey, Hungary, USA. Future political changes are to be considered. In accordance with this resolution the Czech and Finish can not perform as separate groups. This petition caused lively discussions, but was able of achieving a large majority much to the satisfaction of the Austrian representatives.³⁶

In its reporting The Viennese *Fremdenblatt* gives information on the voting:

Italy, Russia, Sweden, England and its colonies, France and Germany voted for the German proposal. The representatives of Czechoslovakia and the USA voted against the proposal.³⁷

Austria did not vote on the issue. It did not have to; Austrian alliance with Germany had achieved its goal. Since no problems were made for the British entering teams from Australia, Canada, and South Africa, there was no debate resistance from them. At the Olympic Games in Berlin in 1916 Czech athletes would have only been able to perform on the Austrian Team, and Finnish athletes on the Russian team. A national flag “Autriche Tcheques” during the entry of the athletes or an additional pennant at the victory ceremony would not have been possible. Coubertin and his sportive geography had failed. Due to the outbreak of World War I the whole affair lost its significance and did not become widely known. After the war, the states Czechoslovakia and Finland came into existence. Baron de Coubertin could afford not to have a record of the Congress of 1914. Moreover, he was “temporarily” capable of excluding the states that had destroyed his Olympic dream.

The Olympic Games in Antwerp in 1920 took place from 23th April until 12th September, 1920. Athletes from 29 nations participated. Logically the Central Empires were not present. Yet athletes from Iceland were permitted to participate. But, an IOC member of this country was first admitted only in 1928.³⁸

Following the Antwerp Games in 1920, the 20th IOC session took place in Lausanne from 2nd until 6th June, 1921. Without giving any clearly stated reasons, the resolution was passed that Earl Andrassy and von Muzsa (Hungary), Stancioff (Bulgaria) and Bey Tarcan (Turkey) were to be reinstated. The Austrian Prince von Windisch-Grätz had resigned earlier, as he did not live in Austria any more. Strangely enough, Earl von Colloredo-Mansfeld who lived to

1948 was not mentioned. At this point, at the very least, Baron de Coubertin should have realized that more than just the Hungarians were still alive.

In 1922 Baron de Coubertin resumed contact with Germany by writing to the general secretary of the *Deutscher Reichsausschuss*, Carl Diem. In his autobiography "*Ein Leben für den Sport*"³⁹ (a life for sports) Diem mentions that Coubertin even invited him to the session in Rome in 1923. Diem declined. Apparently the Parisian Organizing Committee invited Germany under the condition that Germany would secretly promise beforehand to refuse the invitation.

Respectable connections to the *Deutscher Reichsausschuss*, which led to the IOC membership of Theodor Lewald⁴⁰ and Oskar Ruperti⁴¹ were first cultivated during and after the Olympic Games in Paris in 1924. As a result Germany was able to participate in the Games in St. Moritz and Amsterdam in 1928. Before Coubertin passed the presidency to his successor Count Baillet-Latour in 1925, he was capable of bringing this shady affair in Olympic history to a somewhat tolerable ending. Nevertheless, one can not completely exonerate him from the violation of his personally sponsored rules.

Endnotes

- 1 Compare Nok für Deutschland (ed.), *Rückkehr nach Olympia* (Return to Olympia), München 1989, in particular: Buschmann, Jürgen / Lennartz, Karl, "Der vorläufige Deutsche Olympische Ausschuss" (The Preliminary German Olympic Commission), pp. 49-59, 68-99.
- 2 Coubertin, Pierre de, *Olympische Erinnerungen* (Olympic Memoirs), Frankfurt 1959, pp. 157-158.
- 3 25 sequels with the name "*Memoires Olympiques*" from 8th September, 1931 until 27th March 1932.
- 4 Edited by the "*Bureau Internationale de Pedagogique Sportive*", meanwhile there exist numerous translations.
- 5 28th June, 1919.
- 6 1853-1917, member of the IOC from 1897 until 1927, a close companion of Baron de Coubertin.
- 7 1870-1929, member of the IOC from 1910 until 1929.
- 8 1876-1942, member of the IOC from 1903 until 1942, successor of IOC president Baron de Coubertin since 1925.
- 9 1869-1937, member of the IOC from 1899 until 1937, acted as temporary president of the IOC during Baron Coubertin's absence whilst serving in the French army. A close friend of Baron de Coubertin.
- 10 1872-1940, member of the IOC from 1912 until 1940.
- 11 Born 1877, member of the IOC from 1913 until 1938.
- 12 1869-1949, member of the IOC from 1914 until 1939.
- 13 1856-1922, member of the IOC from 1910 until 1919.
- 14 1875-1931, member of the IOC from 1914 until 1919.
- 15 1876-1948, member of the IOC from 1911 until 1919.
- 16 1873-1952. member of the IOC from 1911 until 1919.
- 17 1856-1938, member of the IOC from 1907 until 1919 and 1921 until 1938.
- 18 1862-1946, member of the IOC from 1909 until 1919 and 1921 until 1946.

- 19 1863-1940, member of the IOC from 1913 until 1919 and 1921 until 1928.
- 20 1874-1957, member of the IOC from 1908 until 1919 and 1921 until 1929.
- 21 1877-1933, member of the IOC from 1910 until 1933. Prince de Ouroussoff went to Paris into exile after World War I.
- 22 1866-1914, member of the IOC from 1909 until 1914.
- 23 There were no IOC sessions in May. This must be a mix-up or misprint.
- 24 Coubertin, *Erinnerungen*, p. 148.
- 25 CIO (ed.), *Congres des Comites Olympiques Nationaux tenu a Paris en Juin 1914, Lausanne November 1914. (IOC Archive)*
- 26 Coubertin, *Erinnerungen*, p. 148.
- 27 1860-1944, member of the IOC from 1894 until 1907.
- 28 1861-1943, member of the IOC from 1894 until 1943.
- 29 For example the soccer team, Coubertin, *Erinnerungen*, pp. 123-126.
- 30 Coubertin, *Erinnerungen*, p. 126.
- 31 Coubertin, *Erinnerungen*, p. 126.
- 32 C.I.O. (ed.), *Programme et Reglements du Congres de Paris*, Paris 1914, p. 42.
- 33 Might it have been a tactical illness?
- 34 1871-1932, French delegate of congress, Olympic champion 1900, multiple sports functionary, general secretary of the Organizing Committee of the Olympic Games in Paris in 1924.
- 35 “Jubilee Congress of the International Olympic Committee”, in: *Deutsche Turn-Zeitung* 59 (1914) 26, pp. 485-486, 27, pp. 502-503, moreover in: *Rheinisch-Westf. Sportzeitung* 3 (1914) 26, pp. 3-6. Unfortunately Arndt KRÜGER did not make use of this protocol in his excellent piece of work “Forgotten Decisions: The IOC on the Eve of World War I” (in: *Olympika* 6 [1997], pp. 85-98).
- 36 *Rheinisch-Westf. Sportzeitung* 3 (1914) 26 p. 4.
- 37 Austrian Olympic Committee (ed.), *The Olympic Movement in Austria and Hungary from origins until 1918*, Vienna 1990, p. 42.
- 38 Frederik AKEL (1871-1941), member of the IOC from 1928 until 1932.
- 39 Ratingen 1974.
- 40 1860-1947, member of the IOC from 1924 until 1938.
- 41 1877-1958. member of the IOC from 1924 until 1928.