

# Troubled Times: Coubertin and the 1916 Olympic Games

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This paper details little known events surrounding the award of Olympic Games to Berlin, originally in 1901 (for 1908), then in 1908 (for 1912), and lastly in 1912 (for 1916). Shortly following the assassination of Arch Duke Ferdinand in late June 1914 and the subsequent outbreak of World War I on August 1, scarcely a month later, pressure to change the venue of the 1916 Games from Berlin to an American city began to be exerted on Pierre de Coubertin, President of the International Olympic Committee. Despite overtures from several American cities to host the 1916 Games, the Baron de Coubertin remained adamant that they would be celebrated in Germany, or not at all. His stance in this matter was aided considerably by the untimely death of the eminent American amateur sports czar, James E. Sullivan, a vigorous exponent of having Olympic Games in America. Sullivan died in a New York hospital in mid-September 1914. His death eliminated serious American quests for hosting the ill-fated 1916 Games.

This paper also details a potentially severe schism within the ranks of the International Olympic Committee, a schism drawn along lines formed by IOC members from countries of the Grand Alliance and those from the Central Powers. Such a schism threatened to obliterate the IOC. The potential damage, in that sense, was instigated by British IOC members, particularly Sir Theodore Cook. His resignation, prompted by a censure of Germany for having started the Great War which had wreaked the havoc that it had, prompted, in short order, the resignation of a fellow British IOC colleague, the Duke of Somerset, but failed to move others of the IOC to resign, including members from countries allied against Germany as well as the Reverend Courcy de Laffan of his own country.

In all three scenarios (the transfer of the threatened 1916 Games from Berlin to America, the potentially damaging disruptions within the IOC itself, and the eventual cancellation of the Berlin Games) the Baron Pierre de Coubertin must be given full marks for his tenacity, diplomacy and shrewdness in perserving the IOC as a viable international sports body and the Olympic Games as the world's premier international sport festival.