

Far From Quiescent: The International Olympic Committee During the World Wars

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The image most people have of life during the first and second World Wars is one of a total response to the battles that raged. That is, most of everyday life was circumscribed by the need to hide, fight, or change from the normal routines of existence. This was especially so for those not living in the war zones. Our knowledge of the wars was contained in radio, television, magazine, and book renditions where the war seemed to be total: both in its cataclysm and in the suspension of everyday life. In fact, much of the normalcy of life took place with various interventions of the wars. Even in the most devastating results of the war, people were able to adapt or re-build in relatively quick order to resume a more normal life. This adaptation and re-building also surrounded sport activities. There were a number of events that took place during the war. Likewise, the expansion and continuation of the international sport system is evident from historical documents.

This paper ties together the organizational efforts of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) during the World Wars to show that considerable activity took place. This activity included seeking sites for future Games of the Olympiad, travel by IOC members to different business and official functions, and daily operational activities of the Olympic Movement. Through the use of official IOC documents, IOC member correspondence, and summaries of these materials, it is possible to trace the above activities to show that sport and the elite sport system did not stop operating during the wars, even though the Olympic Games were suspended at this time.

In terms of the Olympic Movement, we witness a contradiction here. Since the ancient Games a model for international peace and understanding, the suspension of the Olympic Games during the wars was the opposite of what occurred during the ancient period (where, apparently, war was suspended for the Games). It would have been simple for the Olympic Movement to disappear during the wars, especially with this contradiction, but this was not the case. It is important that more of the record of sport and the sport system during the World Wars be written as sport can still be seen as important social activities of both sporting publics and sporting elites during these dismal events.