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Militarism and the Modern Olympic Games

The century of the modern Olympic Games has coincided with a rapid increase in militarism and nationalism. In the early years, the Austro-Hungarian, British, Chinese, German, Italian, Japanese, Spanish and Russian empires, the American and French republics and the Dutch and Portuguese monarchies governed most of the world. All of these powers participated in the commercial and military expansion that characterized imperial powers. The commercial and military and political control of foreign lands required investments in military forces and a commitment to military operations to maintain control of their possessions. Veterans associations, paramilitary youth groups, and patriotic lobbying organizations were enthusiastic supporters of both military programs and sports. The Russian revolution and the Communist uprisings in Europe fueled a new wave of paranoiac nationalism and militarism. In the 1920s and 1930s democratic political groups were caught between the leftist revolutionaries, who believed that the new millennium would be achieved only through armed struggle, and the reactionary right, who regarded warfare as necessary. After World War II, nuclear deterrence replaced large standing armies and military alliances replaced the wartime spirit of cooperation. At the end of the century, wars for the control of industrial resources and “ethnic cleansing” guaranteed the continued survival of militarism.

The Olympic movement promoted athletic competition and physical fitness through quadrennial international festivals. The 1920 Olympics reflected the global militarization of World War I. A quarter of the American team were military personnel and the Army and Navy provided transportation. In 1928, the American Olympic Committee president, Major General Douglas MacArthur, employed a military organization chart, two military aides and military staff to achieve an efficient and successful campaign. International Olympic Committee presidents sought to promote international peace, while recognizing that politics and nationalism tended to promote wars. Before World War II, 20 percent of the I.O.C. membership were military men. The

proportion dropped to 12 percent after the war, but national Olympic Committees included many military officers.

Militarism and Olympic sports each had a strong appeal to youth. Wars and the accounts and images of wars were part of national cultures and literatures. Xenophobic nationalist propaganda and demonizing of the potential enemy that preceded and followed wars played a major role in setting the stage for conflicts. National and international organizations formed for cultural, educational, political, recreational and social purposes adopted military techniques in promoting humanitarian goals. The Boy Scouts, American Legion, Civilian Conservation Corps. Labor and Socialist International, German National Socialist groups and European youth organizations were involved in military or paramilitary activities.

Nationalism and militarism were triumphant as totalitarian states and superpowers resorted to military actions to protect their political and economic interests. Both liberals and reactionaries opposed armaments and conscription, but they were unable to prevent unilateral actions by major powers and alliances. The Olympic athletic competitions and appeals to ‘justifiable national pride’ enabled the movement to survive a tumultuous century. Militarism, wars, boycotts and political pressures for exclusions were problems for the Olympic movement, but it has included athletes from nearly every nation.
