

## Difficult Times: Baillet-Latour and Germany, 1931-1942

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Of all IOC presidents whose tenure of office endured for at least a full term of eight years, Count Henri Baillet-Latour has received the least amount of scholarly investigation. The following notations address such a shortcoming, particularly within the context of the Count's trying relationship with neutral Belgium's belligerent neighbor of the 1930s-National Socialist Germany.

Coubertin's refusal to stand for another term as President of the IOC in 1925, despite the urging of a number of members, left that august organization facing the problem of finding a successor to the man who had been the driving force behind and the representative of the Olympic Movement since the founding of the Committee in 1894. The election, which featured on the agenda of the 24th IOC Session in Prague, was scheduled for the afternoon of 28 May 1925. Postal votes of absent members were counted in the first round, and given that many of those members had obviously assumed that Coubertin would stand again, had voted for him. On the first round of balloting, none of the candidates received an adequate majority. Of the 40 votes cast, Baillet-Latour received 17, Coubertin 11, Blonay 6, Justinien de Clary 4, Melchior de Polignac 1, and one was invalid. In the second round, in which plainly only those present could take part, Baillet-Latour received 19 of the 27 votes cast and was thus elected as the third President of the IOC.

In view of a strong tendency in favour of the Belgian candidate apparent in the first round, it can be assumed that certain agreements had been reached among the IOC members present in Prague, but one can only speculate as to why Baillet-Latour was ultimately chosen. Admittedly, the members of the Executive Committee, which had existed since 1921, were the most obvious candidates, as they already occupied prominent positions within the IOC. Foremost among them was the Executive Committee's Chairman, the Swiss member Blonay, who had occupied the office of IOC President on an interim basis in 1915 while Coubertin was serving France in World War I as a non-combatant. An usually excellent relationship with Coubertin had suffered after the World War, so there may have been a reluctance to elect Blonay for fear of offending the Baron. In contrast, Baillet-Latour had always remained loyal to his predecessor. He had occupied the office of Vice Chairman of the Executive Committee, a position tantamount to third place in the hierarchy, and had the advantage over the remaining three members of the Committee of having belonged to the IOC for at least ten years longer than any one of them.

Born on 1 March 1876, the son of Count Ferdinand de Baillet-Latour, the former

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Governor of the Province of Antwerp, and Countess Caroline d'Oultremont de Duras, the young Henri de Baillet-Latour was reared in an environment which included the boy who was to become Albert I, King of the Belgians (1875-1935). After studying at the University of Louvain, he joined the diplomatic service, carrying out assignments on behalf of the Belgian government. From an early age, he was a passionate and versatile horseman, becoming President of the Jockey Club de Belgique, an office that meant almost as much to him as that of IOC President and which he held until he died.

In 1903 Henri de Baillet-Latour became the IOC member for Belgium, and Coubertin had this to say about him in the Revue *Olympique*:

Count Henri de Baillet-Latour, the new member for Belgium, is an outstanding sportsman, whose enthusiasm and competence will ensure that Belgium's participation in the Olympic Games is a credit to his country and his sovereign.<sup>1</sup>

There appeared to be an ulterior motive behind Baillet-Latour's election to the IOC. Coubertin hoped that Baillet-Latour could organize the Olympic Congress in Brussels, which had been postponed from 1903 to 1905 following the departure from the IOC of the previous Belgian member Reytiens. Fulfilling Coubertin's expectations, Baillet-Latour did indeed organize the Brussels Congress of 1905. As a result he came front and center before the attention of all IOC members. Baillet-Latour became a co-founder of the Belgian Olympic Committee, the paramount aim of which was to ensure the regular participation of a Belgian team in the Olympic Games. He served as Chef de Mission of the Belgian team in London in 1908 and Stockholm in 1912.

In 1912 the Belgians proposed their capital, Brussels, as the host city for the 1920 Games, but two years later, Antwerp was proposed instead. The decision, postponed by the IOC until 1915, could not be taken after all because of the war, but Belgian sports leaders, in contact with Coubertin during the German occupation of their homeland, maintained their desire to organize the Games once the war was over. In Lausanne in 1919, at the first IOC Session after the First World War, the 1920 Games were awarded to the Flemish city of Antwerp, a major risk in view of the short time available for the preparations - only one and a half years for a city which had been partially destroyed. The selection of Antwerp was undoubtedly due to the influence of Baillet-Latour. Almost immediately, he assumed the presidency of the Organizing Committee and thus played an important role in the successful staging of the event, an achievement which constituted a great satisfaction for him.<sup>2</sup>

In 1923 Baillet-Latour was elected President of the NOC of Belgium, an office he was to hold until his death. By the time Baillet-Latour ascended to the highest office in the International Olympic Movement, he was able to look back on 22 years of Olympic service, including four years on the Executive Committee, to which he had belonged since its creation. His first term of office was eight years. They were anything but peaceful. The shape of the programme of the Games, the wrangles over the staging of women's events at the Olympics, and, above all, the problem of the definition of an amateur (although the premises which underlay amateur problems in the 1920s tend to raise a smile today) constituted the chief claim on Baillet-Latour's

abundant energy. The amateur issue, in particular, gave rise to the most vehement differences between the IOC and the International Sports Federations, particularly those responsible for football, tennis and skiing.

Whereas Coubertin deplored the great importance which had come to be ascribed to technical issues within the IOC, for his successors, these were bound to constitute the very heart of the business. Unlike the Baron, Baillet-Latour was neither pedagogue nor philosopher. Nor was he a writer. Coubertin had communicated his thoughts and ideas to the public again and again. This was beyond Baillet-Latour's experience and capability. Only the Belgian's speeches, which he delivered at the opening of each IOC Session, opening remarks at meetings of the IOC Executive Committee, and talks at Sports Federation Congresses, were published.<sup>3</sup> On most of those occasions he had to speak predominantly of the business of the day and, in particular, the amateur problem, which came up time and again. It was on this matter in particular that his intention of preserving faithfully the legacy bequeathed to him was most clearly apparent.

Whereas Coubertin had tried to break new ground in several directions, Baillet-Latour concentrated essentially on defending the Olympic Regulations. And, whereas the Baron corresponded with the proponents of workers' sport and took an avid interest, devoid of ideological reservations, in sport in the USSR, his successor flatly rejected anything that smacked of "Bolshevism." In his strict adherence to the Olympic status quo, the Belgian IOC President often adopted an inflexible position which cost him a number of defeats, for instance in the cases of the Olympic football tournament in Amsterdam and women's athletics events (track and field), introduced in the teeth of his resistance in 1928. Though he accepted defeat at the ballot-box with a better grace than his predecessor, his obduracy in matters of regulations contrasted markedly with his style of leadership within the IOC, which was more cooperative and tolerant than that of the autocratic Coubertin, and characterized by thorough preparation of all the meetings he was to chair, in terms of both organization and content.<sup>4</sup>

At all events, IOC members appear to have been well satisfied with the way he carried out the duties of his office for his first eight years as President. When the next presidential election occurred at the Session in Vienna in 1933, Baillet-Latour was re-elected by a large majority for a further eight-year term. The ballot had been secret; he himself had insisted on this procedure. One may wonder whether he would have accepted the presidency had he had an inkling that, in the years that followed, the Olympic Movement would be drawn into the maelstrom of interests not germane to sport to an extent which would make the internal wranglings of the preceding years appear, in hindsight, mere child's play in comparison.

The Olympic Games for 1936 had been awarded to Berlin in 1931, and things could have followed their usual course, that is, habitual disputes over amateur status and expansion of the programme, had not the year of Baillet-Latour's re-election seen the seizure of power in Germany by the National Socialists, an event which was to pose the question of political influence on the Games for the first time. It is idle to speculate in this context whether the traditional neutral position supported by the majority of the IOC was really an option, but Baillet-Latour can at least be given credit for having insisted on an assurance that the Olympic Charter be upheld, which,

among other things, forbade discrimination against Jews in the forming of national teams. Given the situation of the Jews in Germany, the Reich's assurance on this matter was merely a polite but fiction gesture, something of which the IOC President can be supposed to have been unaware. That Hitler ultimately found a way of turning the Games into a propaganda victory for himself, is part of another story.

Whereas the Nazi regime showed itself relatively well behaved in the days prior to and during the Berlin Games, it sought immediately afterwards to extend systematically its influence over the Olympic Movement, not altogether unsuccessfully, as borne out, for example, by the following: (1) the founding of the International Olympic Institute in Berlin (it was financed by the Ministry of the Interior and placed under the authority of the Reichssportführer), (2) the incorporation of the IOC's official bulletin into Carl Diem's *Olympische Rundschau*, (3) the award of the Olympic Cup to the *Kruft durch Freude* association, (4) the presentation of the Olympic Diploma to Leni Riefenstahl for her film on the 1936 Games, and (5) Werner Klingenberg's assumption of the position of IOC Secretary General. The IOC was obliged to look on helplessly as the half-Jewish Theodore Lewald, whose prestige within the Committee had reached its apogee with the splendour of the Berlin Games, was forced to resign on the instructions of the National Socialists in order to make way for a party member, Walter von Reichenau, who, by an irony of fate, became a "resident" of Baillet-Latour's country in May 1940 as Commander of the Germany's VI Army. Lewald's successor on the IOC's Executive Committee was the convinced National Socialist Karl Ritter von Halt.

The fact that in early 1939 the 1940 Winter Games were withdrawn from St. Moritz owing to disagreements over the skiing competitions and the amateur status of ski instructors and, despite the annexation of Bohemia and Moravia by the German Reich and the events of the so-called Kristallnacht in 1938, the IOC again entrusted Garmisch-Partenkirchen with their organization. During that decision-making process, Baillet-Latour had not mentioned the principle of non-discrimination against Jews which he had raised before Berlin. By all this, one is tempted to conclude that the staging of the Games at any price was seen as a primary objective, while the defence of general humanitarian principles was pursued with lesser zeal. Even after Hitler's attack on Poland and the resulting declarations of war on Germany, there was at first no question of the IOC calling off the 1940 Games.

However, the extension of the war to the whole of Europe soon prompted action concerning the organization of the 1940 Games. On 22 November 1939 von Halt informed Baillet-Latour that Germany was withdrawing its agreement to organize the Winter Games. Baillet-Latour replied in these terms:

How sad it is to think that the wonderful work you have done to give the V Olympic Winter Games an even more impressive character than was the case in 1936 has now been in vain.<sup>5</sup>

In view of the fact that the IOC President was fully aware of the plans for the Garmisch-Partenkirchen Games, which included a "Skiing Day" with 10,000 participants, the "high point" of which was to have been a 12-minute speech by Hitler - a flagrant breach of the Olympic regulations - Baillet-Latour's remark must come as something of a surprise. The records show no protest against the irregular intent.

Indeed, the President, in his reply, added that: "The "Skiing Day" would have been an unforgettable experience for all those fortunate enough to be present."<sup>6</sup>

By 1940 Tokyo had withdrawn as host of the 1940 Summer Games. So, too, had the Finns, who, in spite of the war, had magnanimously agreed to replace Tokyo as host. In July 1940, too, Diem visited the IOC President in occupied Brussels on the instructions of the Reichssportführer Hans von Tschammer und Osten, who had obtained Hitler's blessing for negotiations with Baillet-Latour on the "reorganization of the International Olympic Committee." Baillet-Latour complained to Diem, in his capacity as President of the Belgian Jockey Club, on the requisitioning of all thoroughbreds by German occupying authorities. The "takeover by the Germans," as Diem noted in his diary, seems to have met with little resistance on Baillet-Latour's part:

On the Olympic issues, he approved my draft, he found it excellent. He only amended the paragraph on the membership. His formulation will be very useful for the subsequent negotiations.<sup>7</sup>

The National Socialists' objective (the first scenario of which concerned the case of Theodore Lewald relative to the organization of the 1936 Games) was to expand German influence within the IOC. In the centralized system of German sport, which had now come under the aegis of the NSDAP (National Socialist Union for Physical Exercises of the Reich) Germany wished to ensure that there was no representative of an international body over whose appointment the regime did not itself have control. In mid-November, von Tschammer und Osten, von Halt and Diem travelled to Brussels for further talks with the IOC President. Conclusions as to the contents of the visit may be drawn from two sources. Diem wrote in his diary:

V. Tschammer expressed the hope that Baillet would remain President, he conceded that changes in the membership were a matter for the individual countries and wished to see the IOC rejuvenated - something that has been going on for many years. (If he, v. Tsch. were to be elected as a 55-year old, he would declare himself to be a rejuvenation).<sup>8</sup>

Upon his return to Berlin, von Tschammer und Osten reported to the German Foreign Minister that Baillet-Latour was in agreement with a reform which stated that:

the wishes of the authoritarian States should be respected; firstly, a radical rejuvenation of the Committee, and secondly, recognition of the principle that, in the authoritarian States, the representatives proposed by them should be appointed members.

He continued:

I for my part requested that he introduce this reform himself in his capacity as President and assume the leadership until the reorganization.<sup>9</sup>

IOC President Baillet-Latour was the most obvious lever for the National Socialists to employ in their quest to assert control of the IOC, but it is nevertheless striking that he should have been invited to act as a puppet of Hitler's Germany in bringing about the desired "reorganization," the obvious upshot of which would have been that the authoritarian States would have delegated their own IOC members who in turn would have decided on the admission of the representatives for the other countries. At first glance, it may seem regrettable that the President did not reject this proposition out of hand, but he was at least far-sighted enough to refuse to convene an IOC Session. This act delayed any possible amendments to the Statutes until after the end of the war. Nothing could thus be done until the war was over. Had the National Socialists emerged victorious, they would, in any case, have done as they wished.

Baillet-Latour died during the night of 6 January 1942. Olympic authorities in Berlin were informed of his passing. Hitler, the German Foreign Office and a number of IOC members were sent informatory telegrams from Berlin. Hitler immediately sent a telegram of condolence to Baillet-Latour's widow, who lived with her brother in Schloss Teplitz-Schönau (Bohemia). On her way to her husband's funeral in Brussels, she stopped briefly in Berlin, where she was joined by von Halt and Diem for the trip to Belgium's capital. At the memorial service held in Baillet-Latour's house, only three IOC members were present, each of them from the German sphere of influence. They were: von Halt, the Belgian Edouard-Emile de Lavelaye and the Dutchman Alphert Schimmelpenninck van der Oye, who presented an IOC wreath and spoke a few words of remembrance. Diem, who was officially representing the International Olympic Institute, described in his diary the mood of the members of the Belgian NOC in their discussions with the German delegation concerning the arrangements for and form of the memorial service. Wrote Diem: "We sensed their concern that that we were making ourselves too obvious and seeking to make some kind of propaganda."<sup>10</sup>

Since the occupation of his homeland, Baillet-Latour had left the job of keeping up contacts among IOC members to the IOC's vice-president, Sigfrid Edstrom, in neutral Sweden. This demeanor on the part of Baillet-Latour, in itself, may perhaps be interpreted as an attitude of rejection towards the National Socialists. By the early 1940s, Edström had assumed *de jure* leadership of the IOC.

## Notes

1. *Revue Olympique* 3 (1903) 1, p. 15.
2. Cf. William B. Mallon, *The Unofficial report of the 1920 Olympics*, Durham, 1992.
3. Most were reprinted in the *Bulletin Officiel du C.I.O.* 1 ff. (1926 ff.)
4. Reprinted in: K. Lennartz, et al., *Dokumente zum Aufbau des deutschen Sports*, Sankt Augustin, 1984, p. 191.
5. Carl Diem, Tage-Böcher, Typescript (Diem-Archiv).
6. *Ibid.*

7. See Tschammer an Ribbentrop, 03.12.1940 (copy Diem-Archiv). Cf. also H. J. Teichler, *Internationale Sportpolitik im Dritten Reich*, Schomdorf, 1991, p. 291 ff.

8. Carl Diem, Tage-Böcher, Typescript (Diem-Archiv). Cf. *Olympische Rundschau* 5(1942) 17, p. 1-27.

9. See Tschammer an Ribbentrop, op. cit.

10. See Carl Diem, Tage-Böcher, op. cit.