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Olympic Games 1920

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The 1920 Olympic Games in Antwerp, Belgium were the first instalment of the Games since before the war. The planned 1916 Games awarded to Berlin had been cancelled.

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Introduction

Sports as a battleground has only recently emerged as an area of scholarly interest. The Cold War Olympics and the boycotts and rivalry that characterized them, challenged the large-spread myth that sports are located in the realm of play and fair play, untainted by political concerns and interventions. This opened the way for new research at the intersection of sports, politics and conflict. The few publications available on the 1920 Olympic Games have nonetheless been written by sport historians and do not particularly engage either with the history of the war or with the concepts that war historians use.

At the 1920 Olympic Games, the Olympic movement's ideal that sport can contribute to a more peaceful society was explicitly expressed through the release of doves. These Games demonstrated at the same time a continuation of the "culture of war", a set of representations and practices created by the belligerents to support the war and give it meaning, in peacetime society.

[1] Both the choice for Antwerp as host city and the exclusion of the Central Powers revealed a refusal to demobilize wartime attitudes.

The Choice for Antwerp as Host City

The Belgian Olympic Committee expressed interest in organizing the 1920 Olympic Games as early as 1912. An organizing committee was founded in Antwerp on 9 August 1913, and an official bid to host the 7th Olympiad was sent the same day to [Pierre de Coubertin \(1863-1937\)](#), the founder and president of the International Olympic Committee (IOC). Despite having been sent a propaganda brochure that promoted Antwerp as Olympic host city, the participants of the 1914 IOC session in Paris showed a slight preference for Budapest. But Budapest quickly lost its appeal once the war started and [Austria-Hungary](#) had backed its ally [Germany](#).

Even though the city of Antwerp was besieged by the German army from 28 September until 10 October 1914, and [occupied](#) until the signing of the Armistice in 1918, the organizing committee remained confident that Antwerp could host the 1920 Olympic Games. When the French city of Lyon made a bid in 1915, the two cities managed to come to an agreement: Lyon would only host the Games if Antwerp were unable to do it. After the war had ended, at the 1919 IOC session in Lausanne, all members supported the Antwerp bid “in a unanimous homage to Belgium”^[2] and to honor the country’s war heroism.^[3]

The Exclusion of the Central Powers

In the run up to the 1920 Games, Pierre de Coubertin was confronted with the problem of the participation of the Central Powers. On the one hand, he thought it too soon to allow them to participate:

Only a few months had passed since the last German soldier had left Belgium and since the last canon had been fired at the front. Common sense dictated that the German teams could not, without imprudence, aspire to show up at the Olympic stadium before 1924.”^[4]

On the other hand, he was afraid to create a precedent that might result in a disrespect of the Olympic movement’s pacifist ideals. He eventually let the local organizing committee decide.

Since anti-German feelings in Antwerp at that time were still virulent – an anti-German march took place in the city center on 13 June 1920^[5] – the organizing committee did not extend invitations to any of the Central Powers. Officially, it only invited those nations that were represented in the IOC, but its membership list had suddenly become shorter than it was before the war. It would take until the 1928 Olympic Games in Amsterdam before Germany was once again a welcome participant.

The Opening Ceremony

The Opening Ceremony of the Antwerp Games took place on 14 August 1920. In the morning, a Requiem Mass commemorated those athletes that had been [killed during the war](#). During the sermon, Cardinal [Désiré-Joseph Mercier \(1851-1926\)](#), a well-known symbol of the Belgian war resistance, stressed the importance of the Games as “a preparation for peace and... for the awful possibilities which are still lowering on the horizon.”^[6] In the afternoon, [Albert I, King of the Belgians \(1875-1934\)](#) and symbol of the military resistance, officially opened the games, dressed in his wartime uniform of commander-in-chief of the Belgian army.^[7]

During the ceremony, the IOC introduced three Olympic symbols that are still well-known today. It was the first time ever that the Olympic flag was raised. Its five interlocking rings symbolize the unity between the five world continents. The release of doves, a sign of peace, also took place for the first time that year. And it was the first time in the history of Olympism that the oath was taken. The 1920 Olympic Games thus symbolically stressed international unity, peace and fair-play, while its logistics demonstrates that cultural demobilization is not an automatic and straightforward process.

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Notes

1. ↑ [Audoin-Rouzeau, Stéphane / Becker, Annette: 14-18. Retrouver la guerre, Paris 2000.](#)
2. ↑ [„dans un hommage unanime à la Belgique“ \[English translation by author\], Olympic Studies Centre, Lausanne, IOC Archives, minutes of the 1919 IOC session in Lausanne, first resolution.](#)
3. ↑ [Olympic Studies Centre, Lausanne, IOC Archives, JO-1920S-RAPOF, Rapport officiel, p. 8.](#)
4. ↑ [„Or quelques mois à peine s'étaient écoulés depuis que le dernier soldat allemand avait évacué la Belgique et que, sur le front de guerre, le dernier coup de canon avait retenti. Le bon sens indiquait que des équipes allemandes ne pouvaient, sans imprudence, prétendre à se montrer dans le stade olympique avant 1924“ \[English translation by author\], de Coubertin, Pierre: Mémoires olympiques, Lausanne 1931, p. 156.](#)
5. ↑ [Vrints, Antoon: De Klippen des Nationalismus. De Erste Wereldoorlog en de ondergang van de Duitse kolonie in Antwerpen \[The First World War and the Demise of the German Colony in Antwerp\], in: Bijdragen tot de Eigentijdse Geschiedenis, 10, 2002, pp. 37 and 39.](#)
6. ↑ [Mercier, Désiré-Joseph: Aux athletes. To the athletes, 1920, p. 6.](#)
7. ↑ [Gazet van Antwerpen, 16 August 1920, p. 1.](#)

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