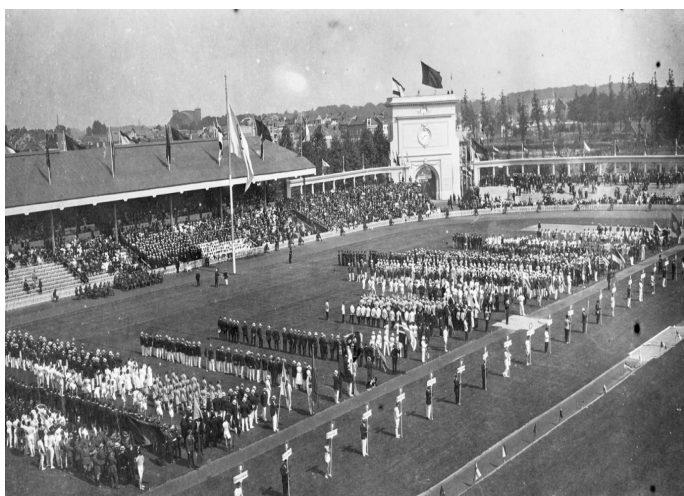


The Interplay of Conflict and Unity: Exploring the Relationship between Wars, Olympics, and Global Sports Development

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“The delegations gathered in the Olympic stadium during the opening ceremony.” International Olympic Committee (IOC), 1920. This image shows the overview of participants of the Olympic of 1920 at Antwerp. WWI had just ended, and this image shows people’s passion and determination to recover.

The ancient games began in Greece in 776 B.C. However, many differences exist between the ancient Olympics and the modern revival first held in Athens’ Panathenaic Arena in 1896. For example, the ancient games only allowed participants who spoke Greek and originated in Greece. Additionally, there were fewer events than in the modern Olympic games.¹ Accepting these differences, this paper will only address the modern Olympics. The question I will research is the following: How were the modern Olympics affected by war? As mentioned above, the modern Olympics are more versatile; as a result, they have become an effective way for participating countries to raise their international reputations and develop their sporting infrastructures. At the same time, the Olympic games reflect the relationships between each country, especially during the post-war period. Because war always influences the development of a country, it affects the Olympics and the development of sports overall. The planned Olympics of 1916 were canceled due to WWI. As WWI ended, the Olympics resumed in Antwerp, Belgium in 1920. The Olympics are not simply a worldwide sporting event that provides a platform for countries to compete with

1 “Ancient Olympic Events.” The ancient olympics, August 13, 2004.

each other; it is also a symbol that illustrates the development of sports and international relationships. The games of 1920 reflected people’s attitude towards war and symbolized people’s desire for peace after the trauma of WWI, which had caused millions of casualties. It affected the development of sports dramatically, both positively and negatively, a fact that is reflected in post-war infrastructural improvements. However, when the tension between countries intensified during and after wars, sports events like the Olympics, a stage that should belong to athletes, became a place where countries showcased their power and conflicted with each other as they competed unfairly by manipulation.

Firstly, the Olympics reflect people’s attitudes towards war, which include attitudes such as detest and the determination to end the war and recover from it. After the trauma of WWI, people realized the importance of peace. A lot of people died and were tortured in the war, and those who survived really needed full recovery, even if that recovery was symbolic. In *Cenotaph*, a poem written in 1919, Charlotte Mew captured people’s attitude towards the war by depicting the war-torn landscapes: “Not yet will those measureless fields be green again/ Where only yesterday the wild sweet blood of wonderful youth was shed;/ There is a grave whose earth must hold too long, too deep a stain,/ Though for ever over it we may speak as proudly as we may tread.”² These lines describe the land after the war, saturated with warriors’ blood. It would take a long time for the fields to be green again due to the attacks and bombardments. The resumption of the Olympics was one attempt that governments made to recover pre-war peace. Sports allowed countries to compete on the playing field and not the battlefield. The Antwerp Olympics of 1920 was not only the first Olympics after WWI but it was also known as the most ill-prepared Olympics. In *American Preparations for the First Post World War Olympic Games, 1919-1920*, John Lucas writes that the games showed the poor conditions athletes faced, including poor travel to and living conditions in Antwerp. Daniel J. Ferris, AAU, and Olympic official, described the conditions the athletes faced on the passage to Antwerp: “The government gave us this great rusty old army transport, the ‘Princess Matoika.’ Oh,

2 Charlotte Mew. “The Cenotaph by Charlotte Mew.” Poetry Foundation. Accessed March 24, 2024.

it was a terrible, terrible ship. When we arrived on board, they had just taken off the bodies of 1,800 war dead from Europe. When the team filed up the gangplank, the caskets were sitting there on the docks, and lines of coffins. It was a shocking way to start”³. Nevertheless, these hardships did not diminish the passion that the athletes had for games. “Nearly 200 athletes signed the resolution. The bottom line was, finally, that they would compete in Antwerp ‘no matter what’ and in spite of hard bunks and decks, endless rain, poor ventilation, and ‘evil-smelling holds overrun by rats’”⁴. This quotation depicts the harsh conditions that the athletes needed to endure. However, there were still “nearly 200 athletes” who committed to finishing the Olympics, regardless of external conditions. This shows the attitude and determination of athletes to participate in something that meant more than merely sports. The effort of these passionate athletes reflects the anti-war resolution. The host location, Antwerp, was also relevant. According to Olympics.com, *Antwerp 1920: a symbol of peace and unity 100 years after the Games*, “Antwerp was chosen to host the Games as a tribute to the war-stricken Belgium, and today the Games are recognised as a symbol of hope, strength and peace.”⁵ People in the post-war period realized the devastation of the war; thus, they chose a place that really needed the recovery of peace and hope to host the first Olympics since WWI. This shows the determination that people had to recover from the war. The event symbolized the recovery of and peace was hosted in a place that needed most to recover – Belgium.

WWI dramatically affected the development of sports. As Lucas notes, “All of this was compounded by slow, painful progress by the Belgians. Coubertin was responsible for all this precipitation. ‘Everything had to be created from scratch,’ he admitted and was hardly comparable to the London and Stockholm games of 1908 and 1912. All 71 countries had trouble getting to Antwerp none more so than the British - and they had only a short trip across the lowest portion of the North Sea to the Olympic”⁶. This quotation shows that the war affected sports enormously from the perspective of transportation. Every country encountered difficulties arriving in Antwerp. Furthermore, the Olympics changed the ascendancy of each participating country. Before WWI, America used to have an advantage in the Olympics, especially in track and field. But, after the war, America was affected negatively. They had lost their international leadership in the Olympics.

3 John Lucas, “American Preparations for the First Post World War Olympic Games, 1919-1920.” *Journal of Sport History*10, no. 2 (1983): 37.

4 John Lucas, “American Preparations for the First Post World War Olympic Games, 1919-1920.” *Journal of Sport History*10, no. 2 (1983): 39.

5 Olympics.Com. 2020. “Antwerp 1920: A Symbol of Peace and Unity 100 Years After the Games,” August 14, 2020.

6 John Lucas, “American Preparations for the First Post World War Olympic Games, 1919-1920.” *Journal of Sport History*10, no. 2 (1983): 43.

At the same time, WWI promoted the development of football, boxing, and wrestling. This is the positive side of the war in terms of sports developments. These sports became more popular after the war. People thought that sports like boxing and wrestling could strengthen men’s muscles, which would be beneficial for them in terms of war. After the war, a climate of fear and anticipation elevated these sports to popularity. The article *Football and WWI* published by The National WWI Museum and Memorial, states the importance of participating in sports and the advantages it could bring to soldiers. “Sports, including football, had an important role in preparing U.S. soldiers for combat in World War I. Competitive team sports were used in training camps to get soldiers physically fit and ready for the rigors of life on the battlefield, as well as a leisure-time activity.”⁷ Playing sports is an interesting way to help soldiers build better bodies; thus, it became popular soon after the war ended. The rising popularity of football promoted the foundation of the National Football League (NFL). Soldiers are generally outstanding football players. As they returned from the war, football’s popularity skyrocketed, and it became easy to establish a football league. The founders did not need to spend a lot of resources to find the rosters and create an audience.

The popularity of baseball can be also shown in a poem written by William Carlos Williams *The Crowd at the Ball Game* written in 1920, vividly depicts the audience at a baseball game: “The crowd at the ball game/ is moved uniformly/ by a spirit of uselessness/ which delights them—/ all the exciting detail of the chase/ and the escape, the error.”⁸ Through this description of the game, we feel coherence and unity. People are moved uniformly. The things that really excited people—the escape, the chase, the error—are things that promoted the development of the game and increased its popularity. The development of the sport was beneficial economically, but it was also socially beneficial because it brought people together after the war. In the poem, Williams describes people’s movement as a spirit of uselessness, a spirit of cohesiveness, that was helpful during the post-war period when people were still drowning in the pain of losing their country, land, family, or friends. Additionally, the development of the sport allowed people to forget the pain of the war. The poem also depicts people’s feelings during the baseball game: “the crowd is Cheering/ the crowd is laughing/ in detail/ permanently, seriously/ without thought.”⁹ Sport provides a space where people can release their stress and cure the pain. They can indulge in the game for a few hours, which makes their lives better.

7 “Football and WWI.” n.d. National WWI Museum and Memorial.

8 Williams Carlos William. “Localhost.” Poet William Carlos Williams Describes the Crowd at the Ballpark. Accessed March 25, 2024.. Line 1 - 4.

9 Williams Carlos William. “Localhost.” Poet William Carlos Williams Describes the Crowd at the Ballpark. Accessed March 25, 2024. Line 32 - 36.

Sports spread positive ideas and promote post-war recovery. They can become a tool for politicians to spread their ideology and even induce war. WWII started 21 years after WWI ended. Nazism was the dominant ideology and power that stirred up the war. The Olympics of 1936 were held in Berlin and showcased Hitler's racism towards Jews and his ideology of antisemitic. It was the time when the Olympics really got connected with politics. That created a lot of controversy. Several countries boycotted. Jews and individuals with Jewish or Roma (Gypsies) parents were excluded from participating in sports events since 1933; and a top-ranked German tennis player, Daniel Prenn, was expelled from Germany's Davis Cup Team because he was Jewish.

People were upset by the Olympics, and the movement of boycotting this Olympics started in different countries, including the United States and Poland. The United States initially opposed the racism of the Olympics and was hesitant about whether to participate or not. There was a boycott debate in the United States. Avery Brundage, who served as the fifth president of the International Olympic Committee from 1952 to 1972, claimed that "The Olympic Games belong to the athletes and not to the politicians."¹⁰ He also stated that Americans should not become involved in the present "Jew-Nazi altercation."¹¹ as a clear refusal to participate in this Olympics. But, this oral boycott didn't last long. Even though the decision of the racist Olympics did upset people and athletes, it did cause some of the athletes to voluntarily be absent from the Olympics. The United States eventually compromised and participated. In total, 49 countries attended. This gave Hitler an extraordinary stage for him to showcase his ideology of antisemitism, and the German expansion in the following might've also started because of this Olympics.

The Olympics also provide a platform for countries to compete with each other without using weapons and causing casualties. A typical example would be the Olympics that was hosted during the Cold War, when the United States and Russia ceased their fire on each other and competed from another perspective, where the Olympics became a perfect stage for them to gain triumph over the other. According to the Washington Post, *A not-so-brief history of politics and the Olympics*, Jaime Fuller states that "For the United States and the Soviet Union, this was the only battlefield they could engage on without threatening mutually assured destruction."¹² There are famous events that happened in this Olympics such as the 1972 basketball game between the Soviet Union and The United States. The Soviet Union won the basketball game by one point and it was the first time

that The United States ever got defeated by other countries in this event. The Soviet Union used a lot of finesse in this game to be advantaged at it, which included faking the identity of their basketball players since they were not college players but experienced basketball players. Besides, the 'last two seconds' of the game was also controversial as it basically gave the Soviet Union a second chance to make the buzzer for the triumph over The United States. All those events proved the importance of sports events as the alternate platform for countries to compete with each other without damaging constructions and killing. It's also shown in the paper *The Cold War and the Olympics* written by Allen Guttman which discussed the details of the Olympics of 1972 and the connections between the Olympics and the Cold War. In the paper, Guttman mentioned a quote from the president of the IOC, the International Olympic Committee, talking about whether to let the USSR participate in the Olympics or not. This quote reflected the USSR's tendency to violate the rules, which foreshadows its manipulation of the match against the United States later. "As Brundage commented as early as 1944: 'If the Russians would agree to live up to the rules and regulations of the [International Sports] Federations and the International Olympic Committee there is no reason why they should not be members.'¹³ The flaw of rule violation was getting extensively conspicuous when it came to the competition with the United States during the Cold War when both of them could only 'fight' on the international stage like the Olympics rather than the battlefield. The basketball game that mentioned before would be a great example of the USSR's manipulation of the game.

Besides, Cold War was also a competition between ideologies, which is the conflict due to the different ideologies of communism represented by the USSR, and capitalism that was represented by the US. Part of the reason why USSR took the triumphed over the sportsmanship was also due to their urge of proving superiority of communism over capitalism. Guttman claims that "On the Soviet side, however, athletic triumphs over the 'capitalist' nations were an officially recognized goal, and every victory by a Soviet or Hungarian or Czech athlete was heralded as a sign of ideological superiority."¹⁴ Additionally, boycotting became a political tool to resist the behavior of a country on the battlefield. This could be shown during the boycott of the Olympics of 1980 that was hosted in Moscow. At the time, the USSR was in the middle of the invasion of Afghanistan. The boycott involved the American, Canadian, German, and Japanese teams in the wish to force the Soviet Union to withdraw troops from Afghanistan.

"Although the Soviet Union and its allies minimized the impact of the boycott and the protests made at the games, where many nations eschewed national flags and anthems and availed themselves of Olympic symbolism, Moscow

13 Allen Guttman. "The Cold War and the Olympics." *International Journal* 43, no. 4 (1988): 554-68.

14 Allen Guttman. "The Cold War and the Olympics." *International Journal* 43, no. 4 (1988): 554-68. Page 5

10 United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. "The Nazi Olympics: Berlin 1936 | in Favor of Participation." n.d. Line 2

11 United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. "The Nazi Olympics: Berlin 1936 | in Favor of Participation." n.d. Line 3

12 Jaime, Fuller. "A Not-so-Brief History of Politics and the Olympics - The Washington Post." *The Washington Post*, February 5, 2014.

proclaimed the 1980 games the most glorious of all. Despite the brave words, it was obvious to everyone that the games were seriously diminished by the absence of the American, Canadian, German, and Japanese teams.”¹⁵

In conclusion, the Olympics and wars are closely related; they can mutually affect each other. International relationships and people’s attitudes can be reflected through the hosting of the Olympics after the war as well. When WWI just ended, people were covered in the emotion of misery and dread, and they needed a spiritual cure like the Olympics to symbolize the beginning of the recovery from the war. While the majority of places and constructions were destroyed and bombarded during the war and those constructions could not be fixed in a short time period, the symbolization of hope and unity that the Olympics could bring became critical, and the power that brought people together through sports was powerful and shocking. On the other hand, the Olympics can also become a tool for people to spread their political ideology, which happened during the Olympics of 1936 in Berlin when Adolf Hitler announced his antisemitic ideology to the rest of the world and introduced a series of policies to prevent Jewish people from participating in the Olympics. Even though the traumatization that the war brought is enormous, peoples’ moralities and the motivation for the common goal of peace could recover the wounds effectively. Countries collaborate to fix the errors and show solicitude, the Olympics symbolize the new start of a better future where there’s no war and smoke.

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¹⁵ Guttman, 10.

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