
The First Modern Olympic Games at Athens, 1896 in the European Context

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This paper is analyzing the revival of the Olympic Games and their celebration in Athens (1896) not within the context of a continuity from ancient times to the nineteenth century, but, on the contrary, within the framework of the great changes – economic, social, ideological, cultural – which took place in Western societies from the eighteenth century on. I will try to show why Olympism was successful both in Europe and in Greece in late 19th century and to interpret the revival of an ancient institution and the first Olympic Games in the light of concurrence of internationalism and nationalism.

I. Events and personalities

a. The idea of revival of the Olympic Games

The transition from traditional to modern society, as signified by a series of economic, social and cultural changes, is the period when gymnastics and athletics reappeared on the stage of history. Thanks to this reappearance, the idea of revival of the Olympic Games did not remain marginal – as it had been until then –, but appeared more and more frequently and in more and more countries, until it was finally instituted in 1894. Thus, in order to trace the path to revival – both in Greece and internationally – we have to follow two axes: a) the establishment of physical exercise as part of the educational process, and b) Antiquarianism (i.e. cult of antiquity).

During the eighteenth century the renewal of interest in Ancient Greece, the enhancement of the need for education, the care of health and the rational analysis of human nature are encountered. Thus the high esteem accorded to games and athletics as elements of the ancient world met with developments concerning the role of physical exercise as part of the educational process. Physical education was introduced by the philanthropists into the school curriculum as an independent lesson, with specific analytical or synthetic exercises, in the late eighteenth century¹.

1 Johann Bernardt Basedow pioneered a program of gymnastics and military training that was applied in the Dessau educational foundation (1774), which offered the child movement, as its nature demands, and aimed at health, self-confidence and courage. Johann Christoph Guts Muths, also headmaster at Dessau and author of the book *Gymnastics for the Young* (1793), drafted a gymnastics program, the “Turnkunst”, which included hygiene, body care, movement, exercises in the open air and diet. D. Laty, *Histoire de la gymnastique en Europe de l’antiquité à nos jours*, PUF, Paris 1996, pp. 180-186.

On the other hand, from the seventeenth century, in many European countries but primarily England, athletics festivals were held that were called “Olympic Games”. In all these cases these were national games that included contemporary sports. Even before the founding of the Greek State (since late 18th century), the idea of reviving ancient games was expressed in specific proposals in Greek milieus too. Consequently, the idea of reviving the ancient games enjoyed wide currency in Greece and in the other countries of Europe. The revival of the Olympic Games in the nineteenth century and their celebration in Athens was not an oddity or an impressive innovation that was due solely to one man (Pierre de Coubertin), but was inscribed in the dominant ideological currents of all European societies, including that of Greece.

b. Pierre de Coubertin

Born in 1863, Coubertin grew up in the climate of “Revanche”, which prevailed after the defeat of France by Germany in 1870. Within this climate, criticism of the French educational system and the attribution of the defeat to the superiority of German education were commonplaces. So Coubertin, like many others of his contemporaries, sought ways and methods of improving the upbringing of French youth and, by extension, of strengthening the French nation. Coubertin’s path of patriotism was the path of sports and physical education. He himself articulated the idea of internationalization with the need for French sports to get to know the competition of the more advanced countries in the domain of sport, a need of which he became aware through his contact with England.

c. Greece and the Zappas Olympic Games (1859-1889)

The Zappas Olympic Games (called “Olympia” in Greece) were the Greek attempt of revival before Coubertin². Named after the Greek merchant and benefactor Evangelis Zappas, who in his will left his immense fortune for the revival of the ancient Olympics, the Zappas Olympiads were held in Athens in 1859, 1870, 1875 and 1888³. They were mainly agro-industrial and cultural contests, with a few athletic events – albeit marginal and badly organized. The Olympia of Zappas were not contests of the body but of the mind. However, the “Olympia” inaugurated athletic events as a mass spectacle (25,000 to 30,000 spectators in 1870) and established a competition code for athletic contests, which combined ancient inspiration and modern practise. They were an expression of modern sports, including later

2 For a detailed account of the events related to the revival, see Konstantinos Georgiadis, *Olympic Revival: The Revival of the Olympic Games in Modern Times*, Athens: Ekdotike Athenon S.A., 2003.

3 The Olympia of 1888 did not include any athletics contests; these were held only the following year, on the initiative of Ioannis Fokianos (1845-1896), director of the two first short-lived schools for gymnasts in Athens (1882 and 1884). This is why, when we refer to the athletic events of the Zappas Olympic Games, we refer to year 1889.

events that did not exist in Antiquity and introducing the concept of amateurism. During the second “Olympia” (1870) the question of athleticism and gymnastics in Greece was for the first time seriously discussed by the organizing committee.

Besides, the organization of the games took place in the context of a public symbolic discourse that was formulated experimentally at first and was, over time, institutionalized and inspired almost exclusively by Antiquity. The combination of athletics games with religious rituals was one of the new traits of the sports festival. In this way, the ceremonial element became a component of the conduct of the Olympic Games. Consequently, the Zappas Olympic Games created a kind of sports tradition in modern Greece so that in 1896 Greek society was not unprepared to receive the modern international Olympic Games.

d. The Sorbonne Congress, 1894

The beginning of the revival of the Olympic Games in the form we know them today can be traced back to 25 November 1892, when Coubertin first proposed their revival, at a festive event organized by the “Union des Sociétés Françaises des Sports Athlétiques” at the Sorbonne in Paris. The second and decisive step was again taken at the Sorbonne, in July 1894. Amateurism was presented as principal subject of the congress, but the discussion on the revival of the Olympic Games was included too, as an individual issue. The congress changed its title from “International Congress of Amateurs” to “International Congress for the Re-establishment of the Olympic Games”⁴. In the session of 23 June 1894 Athens was chosen by acclamation as the first city to hold the modern Olympic Games, and that decision was greeted with enthusiastic applause.

e. Demetrius Vikelas

At the Sorbonne Congress, the issue of the revival of the Olympic Games was discussed by one of the two committees that were set up – the other discussed the issue of amateurism. President of the committee was D. Vikelas, a well-known Greek intellectual living in Paris⁵. Vikelas was not a sportsman but he became involved in the Olympic Games after his election as first president of the International Olympic Committee, and worked very hard for the Athens Games because of his love of Greece, his classical education and his recognition of the “national interest” in the revival issue.

4 D.C. Young, *The Modern Olympics. A Struggle for Revival*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore/London 1996, pp. 90-92.

5 Vikelas was born in Syros (Greece) in 1835. In 1848 he migrated with his family to Odessa (Russia) and in 1852 he went to London to continue his studies. He was meant to follow his father’s business in commerce but he was more attracted by literature. In 1872 he abandoned commerce and London and went to live in Paris. He wrote novels mostly of historical content and translated Shakespeare, Racine and Andersen in Greek. He died in Athens in 1908.

f. The debate over the revival

The history of the revival tends to be confined to being a British, French, and Greek affair. The latent or apparent confrontation concerns the originality of Coubertin's idea. The attempts at revival which had gone before – more specifically those of the English physician William Penny Brookes and of the Zappas Olympiads in Athens, although these were not the only ones⁶ – are put forward as the basic arguments to show that Coubertin had taken his inspiration for many of the features of his own initiative from others, whose contribution has been deliberately played down. The debate over who was first to conceive the idea of the revival and what exactly was the role of Coubertin neglects the various parameters and consequences of this innovation as such and is, albeit indirectly, itself of an ethnocentric character in describing it as a British, French, or Greek initiative, as the case may be.

Actually, in parallel and without necessarily the one copying the other, various educationalists, politicians and intellectuals conceived and sometimes implemented the idea of reviving the Olympic Games. As Coubertin himself wrote, “from time to time ideas move around the world, spreading like an epidemic. It is very difficult to credit them all to a single individual. Generally one finds that, without coming to an explicit understanding or reaching an agreement among themselves, several men were working on the same task at the same time, in different places”⁷.

As a result of the arguments already presented, I would sustain that:

1. The Olympic Games is a modern phenomenon, a creation of the modern world and not a continuation of games and physical exercise since Antiquity.
2. Coubertin or Vikelas could not be successful if Western societies were not ready to accept this kind of celebration and if sports activities had not been already spread and propagated by European middle classes.
3. The Greek case cannot be understood independently but in the context of history of Western sports.

6 In England are recorded the Olympian Games of Robert Dover (from 1612), as well as at Much Wenlock (from 1860), Shropshire (1860-1862, 1864), Liverpool (1862-1867), the Olympic Games at Morpeth in Northumberland, with participation of professionals (1870-1958) and the National Olympian Games (1866-1868, 1874, 1877, 1883) of the National Olympian Association. In Germany, Olympic Games were held in Drehberg (1776-1799, 1840-1842) near Dessau, which was the centre of physical education, as has been mentioned. Olympic Games are also recorded in France (in the Catholic school at Rondeau, 1832-1954), Sweden (Ramlösa 1834, 1836), Canada (Montreal 1844), the USA (New York 1853) and Hungary (Palic 1880-1914). See J.K. Rühl, “The Olympian Games at Athens in the Year 1877”, *Journal of Olympic History*, Fall 1997, pp. 28-31 and W. Decker, G. Dolianitis, and K. Lennartz (eds), *100 Jahre Olympische Spiele. Der Neugriechische Ursprung*, Ergon, Würzburg 1996, pp. 60-79.

7 N. Müller (ed.), *Pierre de Coubertin 1863-1937. Olympism. Selected Writings*, Lausanne : IOC, 2000, p. 283.

II. Greece and Europe

The emergence of sports in Greece in the nineteenth century mainly reflected the dynamic of broader cultural and social changes. It seems that the advent and the subsequent proliferation of sports as a leisure activity related to the development of the Greek bourgeoisie and to urbanization as well as to a sequence of ideological transformations concerning the value of human body. On the other hand, the revival of the Olympic Games cannot be understood if we do not analyze the mutual relations between Europe and Greece.

Nineteenth-century Greece had a particular relation to Western Europe: Europe was at the same time a threat, a model, and a judge⁸.

a. Europe as a model of development

Even before the Greek War of Independence (1821) Greeks had considered Europe as their economic, political, social, and intellectual model⁹. The ideal state they were envisioning was a modern European state. Actually, Greeks had not doubt about their belonging to the European family. Having adopted the European assumption that ancient Greece had been modern Europe's ancestor, modern Greeks got *de jure* their place in Europe's past. In European self-definition, Greek and Roman civilization was an integral part of Europe's cultural identity.

Modern Greeks developed their European-ness also through their opposition to Ottoman "Oriental" identity. Their struggle for independence against the Ottomans was equally a symbolic one: the Turk was the "other" – both different and enemy – whose characteristics could be considered as the negative facet of Greek identity. Religion, language, culture, institutions, political life were all thought as fields of opposition. This opposition between Greeks and Turks symbolized the general contradiction between Europe and Asia, West and East, where Asia was synonymous to "barbarism" and "backwardness" while Europe referred to "civilization". Since the 18th century, the idea of Europe had gained coherence in association to the concept of civilization. According to Larry Wolff, "the construct of civilization was so fundamental an aspect of identity, for those who claimed to possess it, that it found its most satisfying modern expression as a standard for others – for other classes, for other nations"¹⁰.

8 Cf. Elli Skopetea, *The « ideal kingdom » and the Great Idea. Aspects of the national question in Greece (1830-1880)*, Athens 1988 (in Greek). "Great Idea" was the term describing 19th-century mainly irredentist nationalism in Greece.

9 Greek social and intellectual elites who led a national movement against the Ottoman Empire were inspired mainly by the principles of the French Revolution and by the ideas of Enlightenment. Besides, Greek merchants and intellectuals (a large Greek Diaspora) were installed in Western cities being directly influenced by Western ideas, models and behaviours.

10 Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe. The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment*, Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1994, p.14.

In 1829, the Greek governor of the island of Samos was saying: “*Let’s think, brothers, that today Greece is forming a new family in Europe and that from now on our being will be judged by civilized Europeans and not by barbarous Turks. Our private and public behavior has to be accommodated to Europeans’ example. It is about time that we learn to live as Europeans*”¹¹. It is obvious that Greeks were not only seeking to imitate the European model of development; they were also anxious how Europeans would assess their “progress”.

b. Europe as a judge

In the 19th century, Europe was thought to watch Greek progress and judge if Greece did really deserve to belong to European family. The Greek war of independence was a sort of “entrance examination” for Greeks to be accepted in the European world¹² but thereafter, comparison between Europe and Greece was, for understandable reasons, not favorable to the newly founded small state. In the age of “progress” and of strong European self-confidence, it was very difficult to prove that a poor and weak state in Southeastern Europe was really “European”. Reference to its glorious past was not enough. Besides, European travelers, politicians and intellectuals were constantly comparing modern to ancient Greece, trying to show – in most cases – that there was no link between them. This comparison was often ending in denying the ancient origins of modern Greeks. Actually, Greece appeared in two faces: the “ideal” Greece of Western classical education and the “real” Greece visited by romantic Western minded adventurers. The trip to Greece was experienced as a travel back to one’s intellectual origins, a journey to Ithaca, to the home of European civilization¹³.

c. Europe of “Great Powers”

Europe’s role as a judge was depending on the balance of power between “strong” and “weak” nations at that time. In the course of nineteenth-century international relations, Britain, France, and Russia¹⁴ decided more or less about the fate of small states such as Greece. The so-called “Eastern Question” was at the top of diplomatic agendas, encompassing an effort to reconcile the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire with the European balance of power. Given the fear of a European war, European powers were determined to preserve the status quo. Consequently, they opposed to national aspirations and irredentist plans of Balkan

¹¹ The reference in Alexis Politis, *Romantic years. Ideologies and mentalities in Greece, 1830-1880*, Athens: EMNE, 1998, p.90 (in Greek).

¹² Skopetea, *op.cit.*, p.225.

¹³ There is a long list of books on travelling literature and the perception of Greece from the 17th to the 19th century. See, among others, R. Stoneman, *Land of Lost Gods. The Search for Classical Greece*, Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987; J.-C. Berchet, *Le voyage en Orient. Anthologie des voyageurs français dans le Levant au XIXe siècle*, Paris: Robert Laffont, 1985.

peoples. This was causing crises and reactions in Greece, which was unanimously aspiring at the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, considering itself its legal heir. Each time the “Great Powers” were not by Greece’s side in the diplomatic field, the feeling of “injustice” was propagated in Greek society. As a result, anti-Europeanist ideological movements emerged, questioning Greece’s belonging to the West.

d. Greece as the cradle of European civilization

The feeling of “injustice” towards Greece was generated by the widespread assumption that Europe had an intellectual debt to Greece that should be redeemed in the political realm. Greeks thought that, since European civilization was recognized as having descended from Greek civilization, they had precedence over Ottomans and Slav nations regarding the solution of the Eastern Question.

It is not by accident that Coubertin referred constantly to the shared roots of European civilization in order to support his idea of revival of the ancient Olympic Games. The references to antiquity were made, of course, because of the prevailing climate of the cult of the ancient world, but they were also deliberate, in order to endow with authority an idea which was looked upon with a certain distrust in the circles of the learned, whose attitude to athletic activity ranged from alienation to hostility. Coubertin’s reference, moreover, intended, in an age of nationalisms, to safeguard his idea from identification with one nation only – in this instance, the French¹⁵. At the Sorbonne Congress, at which the reconstitution of the Olympic Games was resolved upon, Demetrius Vikelas expressed clearly the shared idea that Greece was the cradle of European civilization: “*There are no strangers here; I see around me grandchildren of the ancient Greeks, cousins who have come together with the memory and in the name of shared grandfathers*”¹⁶.

e. Antiquity and antiquarianism

Actually, as we have already noticed, the revival of an ancient institution, namely the Olympic Games, should be interpreted in the light of the encounter in the nineteenth century of two

¹⁴ Russia was belonging to the concept of “strong” Europe but was placed at the frontier between civilization and barbarism. See Wolff, *op.cit.* In Southeast Europe, Russia was playing a crucial role during the 19th century, as protector of Orthodox – and Slav – nations. In Greece, because of common religious faith, there was a strong pro-Russian political trend. About Greek political parties after the creation of the state, see John A. Petropoulos, *Politics and Statecraft in the Kingdom of Greece 1833-1843*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968, and Gunnar Hering, *Die politischen Parteien in Griechenland 1821-1936*, Munich: R.Oldenbourg Verlag, 1992.

¹⁵ N. Müller (ed.), *Pierre de Coubertin. Textes choisis, vol. 2: Olympisme*, Comité International Olympique, Weidmann, Zurich/Hildesheim/New York 1986, p. 7.

¹⁶ *Bulletin du Comité International des Jeux Olympiques* 1 (July 1894), p. 1.

factors: the cult of antiquity, on the one hand, and the re-introduction of gymnastics as a part of the educational process, on the other.

Antiquarianism has many facets, which proliferated with the renewal of interest in Ancient Greece in the second half of the eighteenth century. The teaching of ancient Greek in secondary education in Western Europe, Joachim Winckelmann's work on ancient Greek art, the fashion for travel and the Grand Tour to Classical lands, the archaeological missions to Greece and the resultant publications of Greek antiquities, and the movement of Philhellenism, are manifestations of precisely this "discovery" of Greece by the West in the Age of Enlightenment. Besides, the excavation of ancient Olympia by Ernst Curtius (1874-1881), which was to bring to light the centre of ancient Olympic competition and one of the most important *loci* in Classical civilization, was another milestone on the path towards revival¹⁷.

In Greece, imitation of the ancient ancestors was considered an essential precondition for the progress of their modern Greek descendants, the most characteristic example being the imposition of purist Greek (*katharevousa*), an artificial language that imitated ancient Greek¹⁸. The idea of reviving the ancient games, inextricable element of Classical civilization, should be included in precisely this framework of imitation of the ancient paradigm.

The revival of the Olympic Games in the 19th century affirmed in a very concrete way and even perpetuated the presence of Antiquity in the modern world. The ancient Olympic Games inspired a modern institution which cannot be understood as a natural evolution of the ancient prototype: they were created under the influence of bourgeois values which gradually conquered nineteenth-century Europe. And as an «invention» of the modern world¹⁹ they can contribute to its understanding and interpretation.

17 Christina Koulouri, "On the Path to the Revival" in *Athens in the Late Nineteenth Century. The First International Olympic Games*, Athens: Historical and Ethnological Society of Greece, 2004, pp. 13-43.

18 The so-called "language question" was a major issue in Greece until the 1970s when the spoken language ("demotiki"=language of the people) was finally recognized as official language. For more than a century, two opposite trends, one supporting the artificial language and the other fighting for the spoken one, were in conflict. This conflict embodied actually major social, political and ideological differences.

19 About the invention of mass-producing traditions in nineteenth-century Europe, see E. Hobsbawm and T. Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985, especially pp. 263-307.

III. Internationalism and nationalism

The concurrence of internationalism and nationalism characterized the modern Olympic Games from the moment of their revival. The organization and celebration of all the Olympic Games since 1896 have been marked by the co-existence and the interaction of the international, the national and the local element at a political, ideological and cultural level. In fact, in a strange way, the first consequence of the internationalization of the Olympic Games was the close association of athleticism with nationalism. The Olympic Games became, from the moment of their revival, a further field for national confrontation, albeit symbolic.

a. Olympism as an internationalist project

For Coubertin the international exhibitions, the new opportunities for global communication that had emerged from the railways and the telegraph, and the sports contests between athletes coming from different countries, constituted parts of a wider movement which led as logical outcome to the internationalization of sport. Aim of this internationalization through the revival of the Olympic Games was the ‘unification’ and the ‘purification’ of sport, so that it fulfilled its educational mission in the modern world²⁰.

The international character of the Olympic Games is underscored by the rituals and symbols which have been selected and gradually established. Olympic internationalism, both realistic and reformist, used the language of symbols in order to promote the ideals of international co-operation and peaceful co-existence of the world’s peoples. Such symbols are the Olympic circles and the Olympic flag, the Olympic anthem, and the Olympic oath, while ceremonies such as the torch relay, the opening and closing ceremonies of the Games, and the parade of athletes incorporated into these play a similar role.

The internationalization of sport was made possible in an age when the speed of transport and communication between people increased, communication which led to a knowledge of other peoples and the comparison of achievements, through international exhibitions. Knowledge increased rivalry and competition – now at an international level.

1. International exhibitions

International exhibitions were festivals of “progress” and of trade, reflecting the internationalization of the economy and promoting the idea of competition. The internationalization of the economy in the nineteenth century through the expansion of industrialization, public transport, and communications, movements of people, capital, and

²⁰ Müller, *Pierre de Coubertin*, pp.124-126 (text 7/19 April 1896).

goods, and of the quest for markets and raw materials created the conditions for the establishment of permanent international institutions and organizations. Between 1851, when the first international exhibition was held in London, and 1914, 42 similar exhibitions were held in 30 different cities throughout the world²¹. These exhibitions were a magnet which attracted a large number of visitors and were at the starting-point of mass tourism. The renowned Thomas Cook, who had organized his first tourist trip in 1841, set up his company in 1851 and in the same year brought 165,000 people to the Great Exhibition in London²².

These festivals of “progress” and of trade had their roots in the tradition of the Enlightenment, which – at the time of the French Revolution – introduced, on the one hand, a new type of festival which served as a means of social cohesion and instruction and, on the other, promoted faith in the global nature of knowledge and the “unity of human kind”²³. From 1867, when Paris hosted the international industrial exhibition, these exhibitions also included athletic events²⁴. Nor is it any accident that, apart from the Athens Olympics, all the first Olympiads (1900, 1904, and 1908) were connected with the world exhibitions held in the same years in the same cities. A similar co-existence of industrial exhibitions with sporting and artistic competitions had been observable at national level in various countries, among which we can quote the example of the Zappas Olympiads.

The idea of competition was integral part of international exhibitions and found easily its echo in the realm of sports. Athletic achievement through competition – precisely what is meant by the motto ‘*citius, altius, fortius*’²⁵ – symbolises the whole of the values of modernity, which also mark creativity and innovation in industry, science, and art²⁶.

The cult of achievement, the quest for records and quantification became core features of modern sports²⁷. The setting down of the records was from the very beginning a constituent element of the Olympic Games and led to specialization on the part of the athletes, the cult of achievement in the Olympic stadiums, and the use of any means of breaking a record (even doping).

21 F.S.L. Lyons, *Internationalism in Europe 1815-1914*, London: A.W. Sythoff, 1963, p. 16.

22 André Rauch, *Vacances en France de 1830 à nos jours*, Paris : Hachette, 2001, pp. 292-293.

23 Otto Schantz, «Französische Festkultur als Wegbereiter der Modernen Olympischen Spiele», *Stadion* 21-22 (1995-96), p. 69.

24 See Walter Borgers, “From the Temple of Industry to Olympic Arena. The Exhibition Tradition of the Olympic Games”, *Journal of Olympic History* 11/1, January 2003, pp. 7-21.

25 The famous Olympic motto ‘*citius, altius, fortius*’ (faster, higher, stronger) was introduced by the Dominican priest Henri Didon in 1891 and adopted by Coubertin in 1894.

26 Cf. Arne Martin Klausen, ‘Introduction’ in Arne Martin Klausen (ed.), *Olympic Games as a Performance and Public Event. The Case of the XVII Winter Olympic Games in Norway*, Berghahn, New York - Oxford 1999, p. 5.

27 Cf. Allen Guttman, *From Ritual to Record. The Nature of Modern Sports*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1978.

2. Idealistic internationalisms

Olympism met up with other fin-de-siècle “idealistic internationalisms” with which it shared a totality of common values and behaviors, as well as overlapping clientèles²⁸. “Idealistic internationalisms”, heirs to the cosmopolitanism of the Enlightenment, proclaimed that they could transform the modern world by “training” the younger generations. Such, for example, was the nature of the Boy Scouts movement, which had much in common with Olympism: it was worldwide, apolitical, classless, non racial. Olympism was, moreover, put forward as a, politically neutral, internationalist movement, with the promotion of world peace as its aim, particularly after the First World War.

Idealistic internationalisms shared a set of common features such as the idea of reform through education, political neutrality, and the aim of international co-operation and peace.

• *The idea of reform through education*

Idealistic internationalisms, inspired by the pedagogical optimism of the Enlightenment, were seeking to change the world through education. Olympism, as initially conceived by Coubertin, was mainly an educational system.

Already in a speech in 1889 Coubertin had defined ‘sports education’ as a pedagogical system with specific subject, method and rules. In this system the moral dimension was particularly important, because sports led, according to him, to the victory of the will and the fulfillment of the human ideal²⁹.

Olympism has both a philosophical and an educational dimension. It is, on the one hand, a spiritual and moral stance, a ‘*religio athletae*’, which includes the “advance to an ideal of a higher life and a pursuit of perfection”, the moral qualities of ‘chivalry’ – belonging to an élite of ‘equal origins’ – and an aesthetic which glorifies beauty. For both amateurism³⁰ and Olympism, the ‘gentleman’ is the model for behavior. On the other hand, Olympism takes the form of Olympic education, which is based on “the cultivation of effort and the cultivation of bodily harmony – and so on the combination of the desire for pre-eminence and the desire

²⁸ Four movements are identified as “idealistic internationalisms”: the Red Cross (1863), the Esperando movement (1887), the Olympic movement (1894), and the Scouting movement (1908). John Hoberman, ‘Toward a Theory of Olympic Internationalism’, *Journal of Sport History* 22/1 (Spring 1995), p.6.

²⁹ G. Rioux (ed.), *Pierre de Coubertin. Textes choisis*, vol. 1: *Révélation*, Weidmann, Zurich/ Hildersheim/New York, pp. 13-14.

³⁰ The first principle of amateurism is that sport is practiced as ‘recreation’, is an end in itself, and involvement in it is far removed from any practical usefulness. The second feature of amateurism is so-called ‘fair play’, that is, ‘civilized’ competition, governed by rules voluntarily accepted by those taking part. Therefore, its basic elements were the game ‘for entertainment’, the voluntary acceptance of rules and participation without monetary remuneration. Its application to the holding of the Olympic Games, as a criterion and condition of taking part, determined from the very start the bounds of social discrimination and social exclusion for the newly-constructed institution.

for the measure”³¹.

• *Political neutrality*

Political neutrality in particular was projected equally by all the non-socialist internationalist enterprises of the second half of the nineteenth century (such as, for example, the Red Cross, founded in 1863) as absolutely necessary for their success. It was, nevertheless, obvious that no internationalist project could succeed without powerful social and political underpinning. The athletic internationalism of Coubertin made use, in its first phase, of the relations of its inspirer with the European aristocracy³² and the support of royal houses. The most fervent support, of course, was forthcoming from the Greek dynasty, which saw in the revival of the Olympic Games an opportunity to reinforce its prestige and power on the domestic political scene. However, Edward VII was also present at the London Olympics of 1908 and performed the official opening, while Gustav V, King of Sweden, attended the Stockholm Games in 1912.

• *International co-operation and peace*

In 1918, Coubertin determined that the role of Olympism was “to maintain and spread social peace”³³. However, as early as the time when the idea of reviving the Olympic Games was born in Coubertin, there was an ideological affinity with the International Peace Movement, which was represented by important members at the Sorbonne Congress³⁴. In fact, the balance between internationalism and patriotism which we find in Coubertin’s writings reflects basic principles of the Peace Movement of the time, which, though recognizing the variety of nations and the concept of conflict as being interwoven with human action, promoted the need for ‘civilized’ solutions instead of war. Peace was, then, advanced through “enlightened patriotism” and not through “utopian and superficial cosmopolitanism”, while a love for one’s country was balanced by a love for mankind³⁵.

31 Lettres Olympiques V, *Gazette de Lausanne*, 28 Nov. 1918, No. 325, pp. 1-2, in N. Müller (ed.), *Pierre de Coubertin*, vol. 2, p. 15.

32 In 1908, 68% of the members of the IOC were of aristocratic origin, a figure which fell to 41% in 1924. Hoberman, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

33 N. Müller (ed.), *Pierre de Coubertin*, vol. II, p. 396.

34 According to Dietrich R. Quanz, the International Peace Movement was strongly represented among the honorary members of the Sorbonne Congress: “Civic Pacifism and Sports-Based Internationalism: Framework for the Founding of the International Olympic Committee”, *Olympika: The International Journal of Olympic Studies* 2 (1993), pp. 9 - 10.

35 *Ibid.*

b. Nationalism

Despite Olympism's proclaimed strategy in favor of a politically neutral internationalism, the Olympic Games, as a modern global institution, could not remain immune from nationalist conflicts and major international clashes, namely the two world wars, in the 20th century. Besides, in the 19th century, physical education, primarily aimed at training eventual soldiers who would defend their country at the battlefields, was closely associated with nationalist movements. The history of the modern Olympic Games goes hand in hand with modern political, economic and cultural history, and is linked as much with the spirit of conciliation of peoples and international peace as with – on the contrary – national and political rivalries.

1. The Olympic Games as field for national confrontation

Since the first modern Olympiad, the organization of the Games and of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) was based on the national criterion. The nation did not always coincide with the state, and usually took precedence. On the choice of Coubertin himself, there was, as to the composition of the national teams and their representation at the Olympic Games, an “athletics geography” which was not necessarily identical with the political geography. Thus nations which were not autonomous states, such as Bohemia and Finland, had the right of autonomous representation at the Games, while the same right had not been granted to Ireland, Catalonia, and the Basques.

On several occasions, moreover, victories in the stadiums and pitches have been used to redress the balance in rivalries between nations. Mainly on the pitch, but also in the stadium, ‘small’ nations can conquer the ‘great’, or a nation can humiliate its historic ‘enemy’.

2. The nations in the stadium

In the stadium in which the Games are held, the nations are present. The parade of athletes during the opening ceremony is held on the basis of nationhood, while the flag comes first in each national team. The victories of the athletes are also classified on the basis of nations (states). The playing of the national anthem and the raising of the flag at the award of the medals is also a reminder that the athletes do not compete as individuals but as members of a nation – precisely as the decisions taken at the Sorbonne Congress provided.

On the Olympic track, national competition used a shared international language, that of the quantitative measurement of achievements. The codification of the athletic contest, through a system of international operating rules of athletic institutions and the holding of the Games ensured the ‘objective’ documentation of national superiority. The prestige of a nation was, then, measurable: it depended on the number of its Olympic champions, with the records which they had achieved and – where a particular country had undertaken to host the Games – on its success in this undertaking.

3. Olympic champions as national heroes

Olympic champions represent the “glory” of a nation and are treated as national heroes. Actually, at the Olympic Games at Athens in 1896 a new model of national hero appeared for the first time – the Olympic champion (and, in general, the sport champion). At the same time, sport spectacle was connected with national sentiment and belonging-ness. At the Olympic Games, spectators have been characteristically positioned as patriotic partisan objects³⁶.

At Athens in 1896, the spectators’ behavior illustrated identification with one’s “own” competitors. The reactions of the Greek public ranged from joy to disappointment, depending on Greek athletes’ performance. It is interesting to read the description of the first Greek victory in the Stadium: *“A few moments later the number of Mitropoulos is put up and the Greek flag is hoisted. He is the first Greek Olympic winner in the stadium. The enthusiasm bursts forth beyond control; tears damp the eyes, hats are hurled into the air and handkerchiefs are waved frenziedly. The cheers and the endless applause of which the signal is given by the Royal Family constitute an indescribable composite sound”*³⁷.

However, the first Greek athlete who became a national hero was Spyridon Louis, the winner of the Marathon race in 1896. This event was the only one that had neither an ancient origin nor a modern equivalent. It was created especially for the first modern Olympic Games after Michel Breal’s idea who also offered a silver cup for the winner³⁸. Even before the Games, the Marathon race took a national character, and in Greece it was widely accepted that the winner should be a Greek. This is why when Louis entered the Stadium as the winner, Greece recognized in his face its national hero. Louis’s appearance in the local costume (“foustanella”) to receive his medal enhanced the symbolic weight of the new type of national hero.

On the other hand, Louis’s victory was experienced beyond its national borders, as a European victory. It made people who were present feel that all nations coexisted in an Olympic celebration that confirmed the values of western civilization. The Marathon race symbolised the victory of the Greeks against the Persians in the 5th century B.C., victory of European civilization over “Asiatic barbarism”. The description of Hugues le Roux, correspondent of the French newspaper *Figaro*, was very eloquent: *“Yet, when we saw at the end of the stadium, that peasant appear who was arriving first, there was not one of us, of whatever nation he may happen belong, who did not thrill with joy. We felt that the Greek earth had run below its son to bring him victory. It had to be that it was a Greek who might come and say: ‘Forget that which divided you. The barbarians have been repulsed. Civilisation triumphs for a second time’”*³⁹.

³⁶ John Horne-Alan Tomlinson-Garry Whannel (eds.), *Understanding sport. An introduction to the sociological and cultural analysis of sport*, London and New York: Spon Press, 1999, pp.177-178.

³⁷ *The Olympic Games 776 BC – 1896. Part II. The 1896 Olympic Games*, by de Coubertin, T. Philimon, N. Politis and Ch. Anninos (translation of 1966), C. Beck (ed.), Athens 1896, p.140.

³⁸ Michel Breal was a French philosopher and academic, close friend of Coubertin’s.

³⁹ *The Olympic Games 776 BC – 1896*, op.cit., p.153.

4. Sport and politics

The whole history of the Olympic movement reveals the close connection between sport and politics⁴⁰. Exclusions – voluntary or imposed – and boycotting of the Olympic Games run through all the period from the First World War to the war in Yugoslavia⁴¹. A ban on a nation taking part in the Olympic Games is a ‘sanction’ in the language of world politics. The case of Germany which was banned after the two world wars and did not participate in the Games of 1920, 1924 and 1948, is the most illustrative of this kind of international “sanctions”⁴². Conversely, to take part in the Games is a legitimation comparable to that conferred by belonging to the UNO.

During the Cold War, moreover, countries of the Eastern bloc – chiefly the Soviet Union and the German Democratic Republic – supported the Olympic events so that they could gain first place in the Olympic Games. These victories had great symbolic force in the interior of each country – but also internationally – as victories of communism over the capitalist world. Athletic competition became yet another Cold War substitute for war.

5. Greek nationalism and the Olympic Games in late 19th century

The revival of the Olympic Games was integrated into an already existent ideological system which was determined by Greek nationalism. The linking of sport culture with the national ideal, the “biologizing” approach to athleticism, and the mandates of eugenics, the conjoining of sport with masculinity and the male model of beauty, the spread of physical exercise as a reflection of the dominance of bourgeois values, the legitimation of gymnastics and sport as a means of military preparation of the nation were constituent features of the European and of the Greek ideological environment at the turn of the nineteenth century. Greek intelligentsia shared a common approach which could schematically be summarised under three headings: the genealogical linkage of ancient and modern athleticism, the use of the Olympic Games as evidence of the descent from ancient Greece and of the cultural progress of modern Greece, and the use of the Olympic Games as a political tool⁴³.

⁴⁰ See Arnd Krüger - James Riordan (eds.), *The International Politics of Sport in the Twentieth Century*, London and New York: E & FN Spon, 1999.

⁴¹ 30 countries boycotted the Moscow Olympic Games in order to denounce Soviet invasion in Afghanistan (1979) while another 14 countries of the communist block (except for Romania and Yugoslavia) boycotted the next Los Angeles Olympic Games (1984).

⁴² South Africa was also banned from the Olympic Games from 1970 to 1992 because of apartheid. At the Montreal Olympic Games in 1976, 35 African countries did not participate in order to denounce the South African regime.

⁴³ Giorgos Kokkinos, “The Greek intellectual world and the Olympic Games (1896, 1906)”, in Christina Koulouri (ed.), *Athens, Olympic city, 1896-1906*, Athens: International Olympic Academy, 2004, pp.125-186.

The revival of the Olympic Games did not allude exclusively to Greek Antiquity; it acquired a dual symbolic significance for Greece, through the choice of the starting date for the Games (25th of March⁴⁴, Easter Sunday). The fact that Easter coincided with the national anniversary of the War of Independence endowed the event with an additional festive character and linked Christian with ancient Greek tradition. The feast of Easter itself, moreover, refers to the concept of resurrection and, consequently, of revival. Last, the national anniversary of 25 March commemorates the “resurrection” of the Nation, after centuries of “slavery”, completing the triptych of symbolisms. Orthodox Easter, the Greek Revolution of 1821 and the revival of an ancient Greek institution are fused together in 1896, in the single alloy of the Greek national identity.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the schema of national regeneration whereby the Greek nation had been reborn after a “lethargy” of centuries (the Byzantine and Ottoman periods) had largely given place to the schema of unbroken continuity, according to which the Greek nation had always played a living and active part in history. The “re-establishment”⁴⁵ of 1896 and the history of Greek athletics were fitted into this scheme of things. At the same time, the Olympic Games were presented as a milestone in the assessment of modern Greece, of the ‘progress’ which had been achieved on the Western model of development.

It is typical that women’s discourse of the same period also attempted precisely to project the “European face” of the Greek woman and to confirm that the whole nation shared the values which the West represented⁴⁶. Women were of course excluded from the first Olympic Games because of the widely spread assumption that there is a special female “nature” which justifies restrictions in the access of women to competitive sport. Women’s presence at the Olympic Games however was not identified with their competitive participation but was blended with activities more compatible with moderate feminism of “equality in difference”. Consequently, Greek women’s discourse on the Olympic Games went along harmoniously with the dominant nationalist discourse in which the nation was represented as organically united regardless of distinctions of social class and gender. The Olympic Games thus became a milestone in collective self-knowledge and a stimulus for the awakening of patriotism.

Apart from their evident association with patriotism, the Athens Olympic Games were used as a tool of foreign policy in order to serve the so-called “national interest”. Initially the Games were not thought as likely to be exploited in the diplomatic field. On the contrary, the organization of the Games was caught in the local conflict between government and

44 The 25th of March is the Greek national holiday, which celebrates the beginning of the War of Independence in 1821. It was officially instituted as national holiday in 1838.

45 The term which was mainly used at that period was precisely ‘*anasystasis*’ (re-establishment) of the Olympic Games, translating the French term ‘*rétablissement*’, which clearly has a different ideological content from the term ‘revival’.

46 Eleni Fournaraki, “The Olympism of the ladies”, in Koulouri (ed.), *Athens, Olympic city*, pp.333-376.

opposition. The 1890s being a period of political instability, the Olympic Games issue was rather marginalized compared to major political and financial problems of the country. In 1893, prime minister Charilaos Trikoupis declared the effective bankruptcy of the state. This explains why he was reluctant to materialize the decision of the Sorbonne congress one year later. However, the opposition and the dynasty saw in that celebration an opportunity to reinforce their own position in local affairs. It was actually after the successful holding of the Games that the Olympic celebration was linked with Greek foreign policy and strategy in the framework of resolving the Eastern Question. Because of their indisputable success the Olympic Games boosted the prestige of the dynasty and especially of the heir to the throne, but also strengthened national self-confidence and irredentist visions. It is a kind of irony of history that one year later, in 1897, this national self-confidence would be crushed on the front of the Greek-Turkish War.

Consequently, the first modern Olympic Games had many meanings and many consequences for Greece: first as a tool of foreign policy in the context of irredentist aspirations, second as a support of national self-confidence especially towards Europe, and third as a component of national mythology.

CHRONOLOGY

1796	In the Ionian Islands, then under Napoleon's rule, the abolition of Christianity and the revival of the Olympic Games are suggested
1821-1828	Greek War of Independence against the Ottoman Empire
1830	Foundation of the Greek State
1835	Greek Minister Colettis suggests to King Otto the revival of ancient games to celebrate Greek independence
1837	First Greek treatise on gymnastics, <i>Summary of Gymnastics</i> by G. Pagon
1851	First international exhibition in London
1859	First Zappas "Olympia"
1860	Olympic Games at Much Wenlock (Britain) by Penny Brookes
1869	The first Greek sport club, <i>Kerkyraikos Syllogos Ripsis</i> (Corfu Shooting Society) is founded in Corfu

1870	Second Zappas “Olympia” Defeat of the French army in the French-German war
1875	Third Zappas “Olympia”
1888	Fourth Zappas “Olympia”
1891	<i>Panellinios Gymnastikos Syllogos</i> (Panhellenic Gymnastics Society) is founded in Athens
1892	Coubertin first proposes the revival of the Olympic Games
1894	Sorbonne Congress (Paris)
1896	First modern Olympic Games in Athens
1897	Defeat of the Greek army in the Greek-Turkish War
1900	Second Olympic Games in Paris
1906	Intermediate Olympic Games in Athens
1908	Third Olympic Games in London
1912-1913	Balkan Wars. Greece doubles its territory
1914-1918	First World War
1922	Defeat of the Greek army in Asia Minor expedition