

Carl Diem – Still Controversial 50 Years On

By Karl Lennartz and Jürgen Buschmann

Fifty years ago, on the 17th December 1962, Carl Diem died in Cologne. Who was he?

Carl Diem was probably the most significant German sports official as a source of ideas, as organizer and researcher. He was respected, admired, but he was always also a controversial figure.

Diem was born in 1882 in Augsburg and grew up in Berlin. He came from a petit-bourgeois background. When his father, an unsuccessful merchant, fled more or less overnight to America, Carl Diem had to leave the high school he attended. He became a cloth salesman and began to work his way up.

While still a young man he founded sports clubs and organized sports meetings. Georg Demmler, one of the pioneers of German sport and the founder and first President of the German Sports Authority for Athletics (DSBfA), made him his minute secretary in 1904. The DSBfA, predecessor of today's Deutsche Leichtathletik-Verband (DLV), was at that time an organization with only a few thousand members.

But Diem's real career began in 1906, when he was able to report for three newspapers on the II International Olympic Games in Athens. In doing so, he was among the first Germans to make a career out of sports journalism.

In the evenings Diem attended Berlin University as a guest student to improve his education. At the same time, his sporting career took a steep upward curve. By 1909 he had become President of the DSBfA, organizer of the first German indoor sports meeting. By 1912 he had been appointed General Secretary of the Organizing Committee for the 1916 Games in Berlin (These Games did not ultimately take place because of the war). In 1914, he took on the job of General Secretary of the German Reichs Committee for Olympic Games (from 1917 Reichs Committee for Physical Education). He met Pierre de Coubertin for the first time in 1913 at the Olympic Congress in Lausanne. From then on they enjoyed a lifelong friendship.

It was during the period of the Weimar Republic that he enjoyed his greatest successes. He had the idea of founding the Deutsche Hochschule für Leibesübungen (German College of Physical Education) in Berlin. It was the first sports university in the world and Diem was its Prorector for 13 years.

He was General Secretary of the German Olympic Committee and Chef de Mission of the German Olympic



teams in 1928 in St. Moritz and Amsterdam, and in 1932 in Los Angeles. He undertook expeditions to the USA and Japan, organized conferences and wrote numerous books, in total over 50 on various types of sport as well as over 3000 other publications.

A few days before the "Machtergreifung" when the Nazis seized power in 1933, an Organizing Committee for the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games was formed. Theodor Lewald became President and Carl Diem General Secretary. Diem was derided by the National Socialists as a "white Jew"¹ – the background being that numerous Jews studied and taught at the College of Physical Education. Liselott Bail, whom he married in 1930 and with whom he had four children, also had a Jewish grandmother.

In the spring of 1933 Diem lost his posts. The Nazis left him only as General Secretary of the Organizing Committee, after Lewald, who was also being attacked as he had a Jewish father and in the phraseology of the Nazis was considered a "half-Jew", had made it clear to Hitler

that Germany ran the risk of losing the Olympic Games otherwise. Thereupon Hitler ordered that he attacks on Lewald and Diem to cease.²

As General Secretary Diem sparked with ideas, together with Coubertin he conceived the ceremonies for the opening of the Games. His most enduring "invention" was the Olympic torch relay, carried out for the first time, with the lighting of the Olympic flame at Olympia.

It was the first time that a totalitarian regime had used all its political and financial means to ensure that the biggest Olympic Games until that date were carried out. However it was due to Lewald and Diem that the Games complied with the Olympic Charter. Like many crowned heads previously, the leading Nazis exploited the Games to portray themselves in a pompous way. Hitler, who liked to be worshipped as "the Peace Chancellor", and his ministers were to be seen daily in the stadia.

Hitler was so pleased with the propaganda success of these Games that Diem was able also to persuade him to allocate money for excavations at Olympia. Digging went on there almost to the end of the war but the stadium remained undiscovered. After the war, Diem asked the German Sports Federation (DSB) for an unusual present to mark his 75th birthday. It was the financial backing for the excavation of the stadium, inaugurated in 1961 in the presence of the entire IOC.

In 1938 Diem had become Director of the International Olympic Institute (IOI), which was financed by the German Reich and supported by the IOC. To this organization Coubertin left his entire written estate, which went up in flames during a 1944 bombing raid on Berlin. As early as 1938, Diem had expressed the idea of creating an International Olympic Academy in Olympia but this did not become a reality until 1961. Then with the help of Greek IOC Member Jean Ketseas, the first session of the IOA was able to take place in modest accommodation. Today almost 300 Young Participants from nearly 100 countries take part in the annual sessions.

When in 1939 the IOC allocated the Winter Olympics again to Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Diem was once more General Secretary of the Organizing Committee, although it soon had to cease its activities during the war. At the same time the regime made use of Diem's good reputation abroad.

The German sports supremo ("Reichssportführer") Hans von Tschammer und Osten nominated him as leader of the "Sportgau Ausland" (sport in foreign countries). That did not prevent the Nazis from denouncing him in the same breath as a "friend of the Jews", which was in fact the case: in the 1936 Organizing Committee Diem employed several Jewish colleagues including the archaeologist Alfred Schiff.

In 1947 Diem, who had not been a Nazi party member, founded the Deutsche Sporthochschule in Cologne, remaining its Rector until his death. He tried in vain to

create a National Olympic Committee to enable German athletes to compete in the 1948 Olympic Games.

The IOC however thought it was still too early for this, and Diem was only invited as a guest to London by IOC President J. Sigfrid Edström. The celebrated "Mr. Olympia" was also present in Helsinki (1952), Cortina and Melbourne (1956) and Rome (1960). By this time he had also been awarded the Olympic Order.

Diem became Secretary of the German NOC on its re-establishment in 1949, but he remained the target for increasingly violent criticism. The German Social Democrats took him to task for what they saw as his "collaboration" with the Nazi regime. In the fifties he was the target of East German propaganda. In the seventies the left wing student movement set their sights on him and this was repeated in the nineties.

To this day, opinions are divided, and his writings are offered up by both sides as justification for their positions. They are still irreconcilably opposed. With painstaking precision Diem's writings are examined sentence by sentence to track down incriminating material. But no sensations have emerged. The only matter for conflict is offered by a Diem speech delivered on 18 March 1945 to the "Hitler Youth" (HJ) called up for military service and to the men of the "Volkssturm", who were supposed to stop the Red Army outside Berlin. However accounts of the content of the speech are essentially based on often contradictory contemporary statements.

The actual speech has however not been handed down. All that survive are three yellowed and barely legible sheets of paper with brief headings, including a quotation by the Greek poet Tyrtaios, who lived in the 7th century BC and in his "calls to battle" summoned the Spartans to a sacrificial death.

While Diem's critics on this account accuse him of being an accomplice in the death of young people. Those who speak in his defence his defenders believe that he was forced to make this "keep on to the end" speech. In order not to use Hitler as a model for the young men, he took refuge in antiquity. That was Diem's explanation anyway, expressed to his doctor, Professor Wildor Hollman, later famous as a researcher in the heart and circulation.

The Carl Diem Institute, later the Carl and Liselott Diem Archiv was founded at the Deutsche Sporthochschule in Cologne in 1964 to preserve his estate and promote further research in the Olympic field. Karl Lennartz led it from 1989 until his retirement in 2005. His successor as director of today's Olympic Studies Centre is Jürgen Buschmann. ■

1 Die Deutsche Sportjugend fordert: Neue Männer an die Spitze!, in: Völkischer Beobachter, 1 April 1933.

2 Bundesarchiv (Barch) R 43 II 729, Notiz Chef der Reichskanzlei Lammers, 4 April 1933.