

THE GENESIS OF LEGENDS

BY KARL LENNARTZ

In comparison to “normal” historiography and special sections such as the history of literature, music and the arts, sport historiography is still in its infancy. We still have too many authors who think that they are able to deal with sport history topics without really going back to the sources in a scholarly manner.

An interesting case happened in the summer of 1996.

After having consulted the relevant sources properly and intensively, Walter Borgers, member of the Diem-Archives in Cologne, published a documentation on the torch relay on behalf of the IOC (Olympic Torch Relays, Kassel, Fuhr 1996). He was able to prove in detail that the idea had been developed by Carl Diem in the 1920s and that it had become consolidated since 1934. On the occasion of the IOC-Session 1934 in Athens, Lewald in his office as president of the Berlin organizing committee and IOC-member, proposed to stage a torch relay from Greece to Berlin. The IOC agreed to this proposal. After this session, on a trip of the IOC from Athens to Olympia, this plan was discussed during a siesta in Tegea on 22 May:

“Idea and Planning

The first torch relay to be found in connection with Carl Diem was staged by students of the Deutsche Hochschule für Leibesübungen in 1922 to commemorate his 40th birthday and simultaneously the beginning of the Deutsche Kampfspiele which were a kind of national Olympics. (37) In Diem’s estate there are various documents relating to the beginning of the planning for an Olympia-Berlin torch relay. The earliest date can be found in the guest book of his friend, Walther F. Kleffel, in which the comment is written: ‘On the birthday of a new plan’ (38) on 25 August 1931, and which is signed by Carl Diem. In a text of Carl Diem’s from 1956 the idea is connected with the 1932 Los Angeles Olympic Games and historical studies are referred to. The references to Coubertin’s ‘full approval’ in a conversation on 31 July 1933 and Baillet-Latour’s ‘warm approval’ can also be found here and are designated as the basis on which the proposal was introduced at the meeting of the International Olympic Committee on May 18th, 1934 in Athens. Diem personally informed Coubertin of the results

of the Athens meeting. (39) In December 1933, Diem had already heard about a torch relay in Bulgaria, as he wrote in his diary on 3 December 1933:

‘We have been told of a pleasant relay that was run for patriotic reasons: for the 1,000th anniversary of its greatness, fire was brought from the former capitol city, Prjeslaw, to the present capital, Sofia, by three routes and used to light a sacred flame in the castle chapel which is stilt burning today.’ (40)

In the ‘Official Report’ on the Berlin Olympic Games there is the following unclear presentation of the discussion of the torch relay plan during a meeting of the propaganda committee under the chairmanship of Ministerialrat Haegert on 8 February 1934:

‘From Ministerialrat Haegert’s proposal to organize an Olympic Relay, the Secretary-General’s plan to have a torch relay from Olympia to Berlin was developed, based on the recollection of an ancient relief in the Palazzo Colonna in Rome which shows the torch relay of Eros figures.’ (41)

While disregarding other sources, this passage has served several sport historians as proof that the torch relay was a production of the Propaganda Ministry. (42) This is contradicted not only by the aforementioned documents, but also by the reception given to the event by the press as Diem’s achievement and by many of Diem’s correspondences referring to his authorship. (43)

In correspondence shortly before the Olympic Games between the President of the Organizing Committee, Theodor Lewald, and Coubertin there was some discussion about the authorship, among other things, in connection with Coubertin’s message to the torch relay runners. On June 30th, Lewald complains to Coubertin that his planned message does not refer to the German origin of the idea (‘I am obliged to object to that’) and he insists:

‘I am pleased that you want to present this German idea and organization to the participants with all the authority and admiration which you possess, but it is necessary to say emphatically that the idea and the organization are German.’ (44)

On 5 July Coubertin reacted to this and to the information concerning Diem’s authorship with a rather surprising query:

‘You reproach me with not having designated Diem as the

author of the idea; but how could I know this when an Athenian newspaper has announced that the author of the idea was the Greek archaeologist Philadelphus.' (45)

Coubertin had clearly omitted, in the first version of his message, to draw attention to the origin of the idea, as he felt open to the criticism of acting in a manner that was 'too pro-German' ('trop pro-allemand'). Lewald reacted to a communication which related to this with a lack of understanding:

I tell you frankly that I find it incomprehensible that the plan of your message should have been found too pro-German; for Germany is not mentioned at all.' (46)

On the eve of the Games all differences had clearly been sorted out and Lewald sent Coubertin a torchholder, but not without referring once more to Diem's idea and the magnificent way in which it was being put into effect, which 'the great film director Leni Riefenstahl' had also told him about on her return from Athens. (47)

Exactly what happened at the passing of the resolution by the IOC has become, in retrospect, the subject of a discussion which was sparked off by a commemorative plaque in Tegea. This plaque had been set up on 17 August 1936 by the circle of the people of Tegea to commemorate the founding

of the torch relay and had later fallen into oblivion. Diem had already heard about the setting up of the plaque from the archaeologist Wrede in a letter dated 16 August 1936:

I have thought about you a lot recently, especially when I, with the film expedition, accompanied the torch relay from Olympia to Delphi. What we experienced there, in the Arcadian mountains and at Parnassus, among the peasants and shepherds was simply touching. Tomorrow a commemorative plaque is to be set up at the birthplace of the idea, at Tegea. The secretary has been invited to it.' (48)

On 8 October 1936 Diem visited Tegea while on his journey through Greece following the Olympic Games. In his diary he describes the plaque there, which 'carries the five rings with a torch passed through', and he repeats the text. His commentary gives information on how the setting up of the commemorative plaque came about:

'On May 22nd, 1934 the IOC ate lunch here, in the shade of old plane-trees, with lots of good wine. In festive mood they also talked about the torch relay. The people of Tegea now thought that the torch relay was first thought up here and so, on August 17th, they set up a marble plaque on the wall of the very grotto where we ate (...). I was extremely pleased, in peace and unrecognized, to see the plaque of my work there and to take a photo of it.' (49)

In 1961, the chancellor of the IOC heard about the

'commemorative plaque' from Jean Ketseas and published the supposed new discovery in the Official Bulletin of the IOC. (50) With the help of Diem and of the IOC member Karl Ritter von Halt, the exact details were then cleared up by means of correspondence. They appear to have been as follows: the actual approval of the proposal took place at the meeting in Athens on 18 May 1934, when questions concerning the dedication ceremonies as a means of regulating the time were discussed, too. On 22 May, in Tegea, the enthusiastic Olympic Committee talked over the plan and on 23 May, at the banquet at Olympia, details of its implementation were resolved, especially with the Hellenic

Olympic Committee. (51) The course of events presented here was also published by Henri Pouret in 1974 in the Revue Olympique, using the documents that were available to him. (52)

At the evening banquet of the IOC members in Olympia the approval of the Greeks was also certain. The IOC President handed over an olive branch with a blue and white ribbon to the mayor of Olympia, which was to be sent with a relay to Berlin in 1936 'as a dedication of these Games from their home country'. (53) According to the first edition of the 1934 announcement, the olive branch was to be transported in a 'specially adapted

case [...] to be carried on the back and passed on from man to man.' (54) This plan was changed and the branch was transported by a Lufthansa aeroplane. Spiridon Louis, the legendary winner of the 1896 Athens marathon who, according to an early plan (55), should also have been the first torch-bearer to receive the Olympic Flame from the hands of Coubertin, handed the branch to the 'Führer' in Berlin on 1.8.36 at 17.25.56

REFERENCES:

37 ENGLERT, Ludwig: 'Erinnerungen eines ehemaligen Studenten an die ersten Jahre der Hochschule'. In: SCHIFF, Alfred (ed.): Die Deutsche Hochschule für Leibesübungen 1920-1930. Berlin 1930, p. 117.

38 Walther Kleffel's guest book, 25 August 1931, copy with a handwritten addition by Kleffel 'Olympis. Fackellauf', DIEM Archives Cologne. Cf. also: KAHLE, Manfred: Der Fackelstaffellauf bei den modernen Olympischen Spielen. Degree dissertation, Deutsche Sporthochschule Cologne, WS 1966/67. Kleffel had also made a copy available to the student, see letter of March 6th, 1967 to Liselott DIEM with enclosed copy, DIEM Archives Cologne.

39 Letter from Carl DIEM to Pierre de COUBERTIN June 12th, 1934, IOC Archives, Lausanne.

THE FIRST TORCH RELAY
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BY STUDENTS IN 1922
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HIS BIRTHDAY AND THE
BEGINNING OF THE
DEUTSCHE KAMPFSPIELE.

40 Tagebücher Carl DIEM, ref. no. 0253304, p. 239, from 3 December 1933, DIEM Archives Cologne.

41 XI. Olympiade Berlin 1936, Amtlicher Bericht, Vol. 1, ed. by Organisationskomitee für die XI. Olympiade Berlin 1936 e.V., Berlin 1937, p. 58.

42 Cf. KRUGER, Arnd: 'The 1936 Berlin Olympic Games'. In: GRAHAM, Peter J./UEBERHORST, Horst (ed.): The Modern Olympics. Cornwall (N.Y.) n.d., p.170: 'Mr. Haegert, a civil servant in Goebbel's Propaganda Ministry invented the Olympic Torch lighting and its international relay from Olympia to the site of the games.' Cf. in contrast to this MANDELL, Richard D.: The Nazi Olympics. New York 1971, p. 130: 'The idea was entirely Dr. Carl DIEM's'.

43 It is possible that the Propaganda Ministry made claims concerning the origin of the torch relay afterwards. In April 1943, HAEGERT, the head of a ministry department, is mentioned, in Carl DIEM's diaries: 'My adversary with regard to the Olympic Games, in the Propaganda Ministry. Tagebücher Carl DIEM, ref. no. 1744305, April 1943, DIEM Archives Cologne.

44 Letter from LEWALD to COUBERTIN, 30 June 1936, IOC Archives Lausanne.

45 The passage is quoted in LEWALD's letter of 8 July 1936, see note 46.

46 Letter from LEWALD to COUBERTIN, 8 July 1936, IOC Archives Lausanne.

47 Letter from LEWALD to COUBERTIN, 26 July 1936, IOC Archives Lausanne.

48 Letter from WREDE to DIEM, 16 August 1936, DIEM Archives Cologne.

49 Tagebücher Carl DIEM, ref. no. 0733613 from 10 October 1936, DIEM Archives Cologne.

50 'Une Plaque Commemorative Olympique méconnue en Grèce'. Bulletin Officiel du CIO, No. 77, 1961, p. 15f., 'A propos de la plaque commemorative de Teghea (Grèce)', Bulletin Officiel du CIO, No. 78, 1962, pp. 34ff.

51 Cf. correspondence between Otto MAYER and Carl DIEM 10 October 1961-2 February 1962.

52 Cf. POURET, Henri: 'La Flamme Olympique'. In: Revue Olympique, No. 85/86, 1974, pp. 611-616.

53 Tagebücher Carl DIEM, ref. no. 0263400, p. 68, from 23 May 1934, DIEM Archives Cologne.

54 Cf. Fackel-Staffel-Lauf Olympia-Berlin 1936, 1st ed., Berlin n.d. (1934), p. 6.

55 Cf. DIEM's letter to COUBERTIN, 24 April 1936, also cf. KLINGEBERG, W.: Fackel-Staffel-Lauf Olympia - Berlin 20. Juli bis 1. August 1936. Report on the state of the organizational preliminary work following the journey over the entire route in September 1935, Berlin, 1 October 1935. DIEM Archives Cologne, p.17. Here, COUBERTIN's participation in Olympia is not mentioned.

56 Cf. Olympia-Zeitung, No. 14, 3 August 1936, p. 244." (pp. 16-20, 39-40.)

Walter Borgers attended the International Olympic Academy in Olympia in the summer of 1996 and read a paper there on the torch relay dealing with the history of its genesis. On the same occasion Athanassios Kritsinelis also dealt with the torch relay dealing with the event in Tegea ("Lighting Ceremony of the Olympic Flame. Technical Specifications of the Olympic Torch Relay"). His source had most probably been a newspaper report.

'The Lighting of the Flame and the Flame Relay at the Modern Games of the Olympiad

On May 22, 1934, the members of the International Olympic Committee with President Count Baillet-Latour, on their way back from Olympia, where they had attended a meeting, stopped at Tripolis (a large city in the center of the Peloponnesus) to take part in a local festival in honor of the patron saints. The mayor of Tripolis, Th. Petrinos, gave a dinner in honor of the IOC officials at Episkopi of Tegea, a beautiful park, 8 km outside Tripolis. There, under the shadow of old plane trees, fascinated by the landscape and the hospitality of the Greeks, the participants were expressing their enthusiasm in every possible way. Toasts were made by the mayor of Tripolis and, on behalf of the IOC by the President, Count Baillet-Latour, the Japanese Zikoro Kano [correct: Jigoro Kano], the Dutch Saro [correct: Scharroo], the Hungarian Mouza [correct: de Muzsal, the Swede Engstro'm [correct: Edström], the Austrian Schmidt, the English Lord Averball [correct: Lord Aberdare], the Spanish Baron De Gel [correct: de Guell] and the Serb Prokop [correct: Djoukitch or Bucar from Yugoslavia]. Two great men of the Olympic Movement were also present, the German Dr. Carl Diem and the Greek Ioannis Ketseas. The two people, however, who made a lasting impression on participants were the German participant Duke of Magdeburg and the Councillor of State Carl Ritter von Halt. His words are worth quoting:

"Gentlemen,

One hundred years ago, a member of my family came to Greece and died fighting for its freedom. I, who have come here one hundred years later, after getting to know the place and its people can truly say that any sacrifice would be justified for such a nation.

Participants,

A thought has just come to my mind and I swear before you that I shall implement it before the beginning of the next 11th Olympiad to be celebrated, in 1936, in my hometown, Berlin. I want to organize a grandiose relay race between adjacent states during which athletes from these countries will carry to our Stadium the Olympic Light from the sanctuary of Olympia. It is only right that Greece should once again bring the light to the West."

The Duke's words were received with boisterous applause and the IOC, after discussing the matter in detail, accepted the proposal which it saw as highly symbolic for

the fraternization of nations under one symbol, the Olympic Flame.

In memory of that day, the Tegea Association built a marble plaque at the site where the participants had gathered with an inscription recalling the event.” (pp. 3-4)

Kritsinelis is not too familiar with the personalities of the International Olympic Committee for nearly everyone got “distorted” to near unrecognizableness. Two German IOC-members are mentioned for example: “*Duke of Magdeburg*” and “*Councillor of State Carl Ritter von Halt*.” The first one could be the Herzog of Mecklenburg. Mecklenburg is a former Duchy at that time part of the German Reich north of Berlin.

Magdeburg is a town in the southwest of Berlin “Carl”, correctly spelt “Karl” Ritter von Halt was also a German IOC-member, but a banker by profession. “*Councillor of State*” may hint at the third German IOC-member Theodor Lewald who had been Secretary of State for some time. However, the speech printed thereafter which the Herzog is supposed to have given, mentions a home town Berlin. This again would hint at Lewald. Lewald sprang from a Jewish family. His ancestors have definitely not fought in Greece. Therefore this speech cannot have been delivered by him.

Another participant at the same IOA session in Olympia 1996 was Elizabeth A. Hanley from the USA. She was able to listen to both papers. Several months later, at the 3rd International Symposium for Olympic Research in London/Ontario, Canada, she gave a paper on “Aesthetics and Sport in the Olympic Flame Torch Relay: An Historical Analysis from 1936-1996” (in: *Olympic Perspectives*, London, Ontario 1996, pp. 227-235). She dealt with W. Borgers’ findings that Carl Diem had been the first one who had had the idea of staging the Olympic torch relay. After that she had her doubts:

“It is interesting that, according to German archivist Borgers, ‘The first torch relay to be found in connection with Carl Diem was staged by students of the Deutsche Sporthochschule für Leibesübungen in 1922 to commemorate his 40th birthday and simultaneously the beginning of the Deutsche Kampfspiele, a kind of national Olympics’ Were Diem’s students, therefore, his inspiration for what was to become his legacy to the modern Olympic Games?

“But was it, in reality, Carl Diem who should be credited with the idea for the Olympic Flame Torch Relay? Have historians ignored, or been oblivious to, words recorded in the visitors’ book of a 1934 International Olympic

Committee meeting in the Greek village of Tegea? According to Kritsinelis, the visitors’ book in Tegea is the only authentic text and the first person to speak in favor of the ‘Kindling and relay’ for the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games was the Duke of Magdeburg and not Carl Diem. This conversation took place on 22 May 1934 in the village of Tegea, eight kilometers from Tripolis in the Peloponnesus. Members of the IOC, with President Count Baillet-Latour, had attended a meeting in Olympia and stopped at Tripolis to take part in a local festival in honor of the town’s patron saints. The mayor of Tripolis gave a dinner for the IOC officials in Tegea and among the group were the Germans Carl Diem and the Duke of Magdeburg. The Duke is quoted:

‘Gentlemen, one hundred years ago, a member of my family came to Greece and died fighting for its freedom. [...] West.’

“The Duke’s words were enthusiastically received and the IOC accepted the proposal. The Tegea Association built a marble plaque at the site of this auspicious gathering to commemorate the day. Will this historical note alter future opinion regarding Diem’s role in the creation of the Olympic Flame Torch Relay?” (p. 228-229)

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If the two authors Kritsinelis and Hanley had taken the pains of consulting the minutes of the relevant

session (18 May 1934) and of checking the list of IOC-members, they would have realized what sort of nonsense they had written:

“S.E. le Dr. Lewald fait part d’un plan formé par le Comité Organisateur, qui consisterait à allumer la torche de la tour de Marathon par un feu transmis de Marathon [mis-print?] à Berlin. Avant de demander leur concours aux Comités Olympiques de Grèce, de Yougoslavie, de Roumanie, de Hongrie, d’Autriche et de Tchécoslovaquie, qui organiseraient le transport par leurs athlètes de la flamme sacrée sur le territoire. S.E. le Dr. Lewald tenait à exposer ce projet au Comité. Le C.I.O. lui donne son entière approbation.” (IOC-Archive)

However, in the meantime the proceedings of the 3rd International Symposium for Olympic Research have been published and the report of the IOA session 1996 will follow in the near future no doubt.

How many “historians” will then base their publications on those two papers, quote them extensively and go on producing similar nonsense.

In the way described above many Olympic legends have been produced.
