

"Peace and War" at the Olympics

By Christian Wacker



"The kiss" between Nino Salukvadze (Georgia/right) and Natalia Paderina (Russia)

Photo: picture-alliance

"This gesture will go down in the annals of Olympic history. After the women's air pistol medal ceremony, two women, whose countries had just started a bloody war in the Caucasus, hugged and kissed each other right in the middle of the peace-promotional Olympic Games", said the German newspaper *Tagesspiegel*.¹ The photo of Russian shooter Natalia Paderina embracing Georgian Nino Salukvadze on the victory rostrum was wired around the world and became a symbol of reconciliation on the second day of the 2008 Beijing Olympics. The day before, a stupendous opening ceremony heralded the opening of the Summer Olympics, almost at the very moment the Russian army was invading Georgia. The Russian President Vladimir Putin was even present in the Beijing stadium, when his troops mobilised in contravention of the Olympic ideals and appeals for an Olympic Truce.

For the world press, this gesture of reconciliation could not have come at a better time, however, according to the two women, it should not be misconstrued, as, after all, sport transcends politics said Paderina. Back in 1988, Salukvadze had competed for the USSR at the Seoul Games. A kiss on the cheek is considered to be a normal sign of greeting in Eastern Europe, particularly since both women knew each other well as they had for a long time competed at the same sporting level.

Moreover, this kiss should not be accorded any political significance, as according to the Olympic Charter athletes are forbidden to make political statements. Thus, Salukvadze comments on the Russian invasion in her native country were ostensibly diplomatic: "In the 21st century there should be no wars and no hatred between peoples. It is high time that politicians resolve such problems politically."²

Politics on the one hand, sport on the other. This was also the position held by the IOC in its extremely restrained statements in keeping with the motto, "Better to say nothing than something wrong". Certainly, from a tactical point of view it would have been inadvisable to condemn Russia's invasion of Georgia whilst in China. By awarding the Olympic Games to Beijing 2008 and Sochi 2014, the IOC had chosen partners who were hardly able to follow the western Code of Ethics as set out in the Olympic Charter.

Thus, it should be the IOC's particular concern to adhere

to its declared objectives and not to shirk its political responsibility, as "the goal of Olympism is to place sport at the disposal of the harmonious development of mankind, with a view to promoting a peaceful society dedicated to the preservation of human dignity".³ This second Olympic principle is closely aligned to the ideas of Pierre de Coubertin and to be found in various documents. Thus, internationalism does not mean placing demands on "less-developed cultures and minor countries", but treating them with respect.⁴

As early as the late 19th century, Coubertin repeatedly expressed his dream for international understanding through the world sports festival of the Olympic Games, in which the athletes should serve as role models in head-to-head competitions. Although these ideals are still based on a very romantic peace ethic, they are embodied in the regulations governing international sporting events, as German Bishop Wolfgang Huber said some 100 years later. "Sport in its modern forms is directed towards the goal of achieving international understanding. The international status of its rules is [...] an important element of this understanding. It demonstrates that, in a specific field, it is possible to organise the co-existence and staging of competitions based on rules, which are mutually accepted as binding."⁵

In general, the principles of Western democratic peace ethics are also internationally binding and are accepted by global institutions such as the United Nations. Four of these principles can be defined as follows.

1. The preservation of nature, social justice, prevention of violence and promotion of freedom are fundamental elements of peace and are closely interrelated.

2. Political and social conflicts should only be resolved by communication. The use of violence signals the end of communication and the use of the ultimate emergency solution (ultima ratio).

3. The use of violence means that conflicts can only be resolved in favour of one party at the expense of the interests of another and not to the mutual benefit of both parties. This presupposes the other party to be an enemy, which is contrary to basic democratic thinking.

4. Peace can only result from relationships of mutual respect and a practice of common and collective security.

During the Cold War, there was a vision of peace coloured political thinking, which demanded more

than the opposite of military violence, but was still locked in the East–West Conflict. During this period, sport ethics relied on political neutrality a position which has endured to this day. Nevertheless, sport has been repeatedly exploited for political ends, as indeed in the boycott of the 1980 and 1984 Olympic Games. “Athletes United for Peace”, for example, have actively campaigned against military conflicts or threats such as the arms race. From the 90s to the present, the tasks facing sports ethics have hardly changed, but the locations certainly have. The Gulf War or the conflicts in former Yugoslavia showed that the issue of peace in sport needed to be regionalised.⁶

To this day, the subject of peace plays a central role in sport. It has been present since the introduction of the Modern Olympic Games in 1896. During the Games, more or less populist literature is regularly published, in which the idea of “peace” is applauded as a Greek concept and is described as a key ingredient for sport festivals for more than 2500 years. The selection of the following examples will show that in ancient Greece a moral term for “peace” did not exist and therefore our modern concepts cannot be mirrored back to antiquity.

Ancient Greece was characterised by a complex landscape of high mountains, straight narrow valleys and innumerable bays. There were but a few fertile plains, only some of which had direct access to the sea. Greece was subdivided into a multitude of independent city-states, called “Poleis” in Antiquity. In the 5th and 4th centuries BCE, there were more than 300 such urban states, which, depending on need, formed alliances, yet nevertheless attacked their neighbours to acquire territory or control borders. Thus, conflicts, border disputes and wars were the order of the day, which is why ancient history is more or less a series of war stories.

Against this background, it is not surprising that festivals such as the famous festival in honour of Zeus in Olympia required a mechanism to enable all Greeks, even from the most remote city-states, to participate. The aim was to make sure that the pilgrims, who sometimes had to pass through dozens of city-states, could at the very least travel safely to Olympia where they would stay during the Olympic festival. As a rule, in Antiquity, such political challenges were explained with the help of mythical metaphors. In our case, the kings Iphitos of Elis, Kleosthenes of Pisa and Lykurgos of Sparta set off to consult the oracle at Delphi to find a solution for the athletes and their retinues. The oracle suggested an *Ekecheiria*, a kind of truce for the duration of the Olympic festival, even though wars went on and conflicts were only suspended.⁷ To date, we know of no other historical precedent for this mythological explanation.

According to Phlegon of Tralles, the games soon faded into oblivion, which is why the Greeks living on

the Peloponnesia appointed the Polis of Elis to host the Games. Later, Elis wanted to support the Spartans in a war and again consulted the oracle at Delphi. The oracle delivered the following answer to Elis: “Leaders of the Eleans, reigning according to your fathers’ rules, protect your own country and avoid war! Be leaders of the Hellenes in an all-embracing friendship, as the time of joy recurs every five year.”⁸ Obviously, Elis was to avoid conflicts of any kind, since, hosting the Olympic festival, it should set an example for other Greek city-states. In this passage, it was explicitly emphasised that this agreement should only be valid during the Olympic festival.



The ancient Greek term *Ekecheiria*, used in this and the following texts, can best be translated as “holding away the hands”, which can be explained in more detail with the aid of a quotation from Plutarch. An *Ekecheiria* existed not only in Olympia but also during other festivals in Ancient Greece. The following example describes a violation of an *Ekecheiria*. It is reported that, during the games in Nemea, the neighbouring tribe of the Achaeans treated all athletes participating in the competitions, who travelled their territory as enemies and so enslaved them.⁹ It should be mentioned here that even in Antiquity free unhindered travel was not to be taken for granted and it was only *Ekecheiria* that ensured safe arrival and departure, i.e. a kind of transit visa.

“Elis is sacred to Zeus. Those who enter this country with weapons should be cursed. This also applies to those who fail to make every effort to oppose such attempts. Thus, in later times, the builders of Elis made no attempt to fortify the city, and those who passed through the country with an army first handed over their weapons and had them returned on leaving the country.”¹⁰ Elis owed its special status to its responsibility for staging the Olympic Games, thus its territory was inviolable. Nevertheless, this did not always ward off

A view from Kronos hill to the Sacred Grove of Olympia

Photo: Christian Wacker

enemies. In 365 BCE, the Arcadians occupied Olympia and organised the Olympic Games. During the festival, the Eleians attacked the Arcadians with the aim of recapturing the city of Olympia and challenged the Arcadians to a battle in the sacred domain itself. The latter occupied the roofs of the temples and defeated the Eleians.¹ Not only was this violation of *Ekecheiria* regarded as an affront, the looting of the shrine by the Arcadians was an outrage.

What politics cannot achieve, sometimes sport can. The Olympic teams of North and South Korea marched behind a common flag at the opening of the 2000 Games in Sydney.



Photo: picture-alliance

In general, there is no written evidence of *Ekecheiria*, only written references to its violations have been recorded. In 420 BC, for example, Sparta was excluded from the Olympic Games, because it had not paid its fine for breaking the *Ekecheiria*. Although Sparta stopped all military operations, it failed to pay the fine imposed.² These examples clearly show that *Ekecheiria* did not mean peace, and certainly not an Olympic Truce. It was simply a mechanism based on which disputes and attacks were suspended in order to celebrate the festival in Olympia. For the Greeks in ancient times, this was the only way to organise all competitions and festivals with the participation of the various city-states from Sicily to the Black Sea. It should not be forgotten that *Ekecheiria* was not just confined to the Olympic Games but was a general mechanism for Ancient Greece, the contents of which was determined by four factors:

1. The inviolability of the sanctuary at Olympia as well as the Polis of Elis was guaranteed.
2. In order to stage the festivals and competitions, an armistice was agreed for the sanctuary itself as well as for the inward journey and departure of athletes and festival participants.
3. *Ekecheiria* was more a divine command than a man-made set of rules. It was not an ideal but an agreement in order to organise games despite permanent wars. The main point is not the prevention of war but to find pragmatic solutions within conflict-ridden societies.
4. *Ekecheiria* was not just a Greek and generally binding armistice, as it could also be found in other regional sanctuaries.

The term 'peace' is not used in the context of the ancient Olympic Games. In Greek, it is translated by *Eirene*, the name of the daughter of Zeus in mythology. No cult is known in ancient Olympia for the demi-goddess *Eirene*. Thus, there is no Olympic Truce in Antiquity!

The 'Olympic Truce' is an invention of Pierre de Coubertin and is a central paradigm of the Olympic Movement. In line with the Olympic Charter, the fundamental principles of Olympism are related to the peace ideology. They are essential as a fundamental element of the Olympic Movement and as a means of creating a 'better world' with fewer conflicts and wars.

As a child, Pierre de Coubertin was already strongly influenced by religion, primarily from his mother's side, and developed an ethical awareness that ultimately contributed to promoting his peace ideals. He always did his utmost to relate his ideas of peace to Antiquity. However, it should be acknowledged that ancient athletes were not "ambassadors of peace". With this misunderstanding by Coubertin, one of the direct lines from ancient to modern Olympic Games should be cut.³ Humanism and, in this case, Coubertin's neo-humanistic ideas have as little to do with ancient reality as the Russian-Georgian sororal kiss has with promoting peace.⁴

In the light of this interpretation of ancient *Ekecheiria*, one could also interpret the gesture by Natalia Paderina and Nino Salukvadze pragmatically, however a cynical after-taste remains. Was the kiss on the cheek perhaps given despise to the invasion of the Russian troops in Georgia? After all, both women demonstrated more or less combatively their points of view. Salukvadze regarded her bronze medal as a small victory for her beleaguered people yet the Russian online newspaper gazeta.ru of 12th August 2008 printed a photo of Paderina holding a pistol in her outstretched arm with the caption "Russia shot Georgia". ■

1 Note from *Tagesspiegel*, Berlin, 9 August 2008 entitled: "Great sportive gesture between Russian and Georgian Athletes".

2 Ibid.

3 *Olympic Charter*, Second Olympic principle.

4 Pierre de Coubertin, *Le Néo-olympisme*. Appel à l'opinion athlétique. In: *Le Messager d'Athènes* 39, 1894, pp. 287-288.

5 Wolfgang Huber, s.v. Peace, in: O. Gruppe / D. Mieth (Eds.), *Lexicon of Ethics in Sports*, Cologne 1998, p. 184.

6 Ibid, pp. 180-182.

7 Phlegon of Tralles, *Fragments of Greek History* 257,3.

8 Ibid, 257,8.

9 Plutarchos, *Aratos* 28, 3-4.

10 Strabon 8, 358.

11 Xenophon, *Hellenica* 7, 4, 28-35.

12 Thucydides 5, 29.

13 Pierre de Coubertin, in: *The Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine*, vol. LIII, new series, vol. XXXI, Nov. 1896 to April 1897, p. 53.

14 Coubertin's neo-humanistic thinking becomes clear in the following article: Pierre de Coubertin, *Olympie*, in: *Le Sport Suisse*, 25, p. 1929.