

Turkey's Early Olympic Adventure: Foundation of the Turkish NOC (Part 2)

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On 29 January 1909, Selim Sırrı Bey thanked IOC President Pierre de Coubertin and accepted his invitation "with pleasure" to the Session in Berlin, where he was elected as a member.

Source: TOC Archive

ECOLE DE CULTURE
PHYSIQUE
Istanbul le 29 jan 1909

Monsieur le Président

C'est avec le plus grand plaisir
que j'ai reçu votre aimable
lettre dans laquelle vous m'avez
fait savoir l'honneur que vous
me faites en m'invitant à
participer à votre honorable
assemblée. Je ferai tout mon
possible pour assister à
votre invitation à Preslin.
La nouvelle Turquie est
apte de fournir beaucoup
de sportifs dont je tâcherai
d'en fournir plusieurs dans
mon Ecole suivant les

principes de la physiologie
et j'ai l'honneur de vous remercier
très respectueusement.
+ J'espère que vous voudrez
passer ma nomination
dans un journal à
Paris.

Tout à vous
Majari Selim Sırrı
Directeur et fondateur de
l'Ecole de Culture Physique
à Constantinople

The exact details of the foundation of the Turkish Olympic Committee still remain open to discussion. This paper tries to clarify the subject in the light of documents and sources which have so far come to light.

The Ottoman Empire first engaged with the Olympic Movement in 1905. It was invited to send representatives to the third Olympic Congress held in Brussels from 9 to 14 June 1905. In his letter of 27 February 1905, Pierre de Coubertin conveyed his sincere wishes for the Ottoman government to participate with an official delegate in this important event, to be held under the auspices of the King of Belgium.

In an invitation letter sent by the organising committee to Minister of Foreign Affairs Tevfik Pasha, dated 13 April 1905, the hope was also expressed that the Ottoman government would participate in the Congress (BOA, I.HR., 397-1323). The delegation was to be selected from those who had previously been sent to education congresses (BOA, MF. MKT., 853-42).

Instead of sending a delegate from Istanbul, budget constraints prompted the decision to send the Ottoman representative from Brussels, Mihran Kavafyan Efendi (BOA, BEO, 2621-196506; BOA, MF.MKT., 855-22). Mihran Kavafyan Efendi had earlier led the delegation to the Liège exhibition, which started in April 1905 (BOA, I.HR., 391-25; BOA, BEO, 2555-191584; Işıkılı, 2012).

Mihran Kavafyan Efendi attended the Brussels meeting as the Ottoman government delegate, among 192 representatives from 20 countries (IOC, 1905). Unfortunately, the Ottoman archives have no record of a post-congress report. It is not certain if Efendi even wrote such a document. In fact, he was dismissed from his duty at the Ottoman embassy two months after the Congress as a result of illness and negative actions at the end of August (BOA, BEO, 2656-199151).

The next Turkish contact with Olympism came on a more personal level in 1907. Coubertin was looking to recruit IOC representatives from all over the world. He told his Paris schoolfriend Monsieur Gouvery that he wanted to meet someone who was passionate about sports in Istanbul. Gouvery contacted Selim Sırrı Bey¹ (Tarcan, 1948; Selim Sırrı, 1910), who accepted the invitation to become the IOC representative in Turkey. In the environment of freedom that came with the declaration of the Second Constitutional Monarchy in Turkey, Sırrı Bey began work



The IOC Session in Berlin 1909 with Turkey's representative attending for the first time. Selim Sirri Bey is the ninth person from the left in the back row, wearing a military uniform and a fez.

Photo: OSC

on the foundation of a National Olympic Committee towards the end of 1908² (Tarcan, 1948; Yıldırım, 2009).

At that time, an article titled "Athlétisme Ottoman" appeared in *Revue Olympique*, the official publication of the IOC. The article describes the sports activities of foreigners living in Istanbul, sports life before the declaration of the constitutional monarchy, and the organisations and clubs which existed. It also stated that only a start had been made and more efforts were envisaged. Social restructuring, sports propaganda, and the plans of the Young Turks, who were great supporters of physical exercise and athletes, were also mentioned. "The adherence of the Ottomans to this truth too long unknown to them will be, for the future of their race, the starting point of the regeneration to which they have the right to claim" ("Athlétisme Ottoman," 1908).

The official report of the 1908 Olympics lists IOC Members but does not include a representative for Turkey (Cook, 1908). In the January issue of *Revue Olympique* in 1909, Selim Sirri Bey was mentioned as Turkey's first elected IOC representative after the election held on 15 December 1908. It described him as a soldier and athlete trying to restructure and popularise body training in his country (*Bulletin Officiel*, 1909). Selim Sirri Bey became the 59th member of the IOC and the first from the Asian continent (Buchanan & Lyberg, 2010; *Repertoire Olympique*, 1975). *İkdâm* reported that Selim Sirri Bey was the first representative from Turkey at the IOC. Furthermore, it noted that Turkey should be to participate at the Olympic Games every four years and have a permanent seat at the IOC ("Olimpiyad Oyunları," 1909a). Selim Sirri Bey wrote to Coubertin on 29 January 1909 that he accepted the invitation "with pleasure". He also told the IOC President that he would do his best to attend the meeting in Berlin (TOC Archive, 29 January 1909).

In 1909 the Ministry of War wanted to send Selim Sirri Bey to Paris. This came with a promotion to the rank of Major (Tarcan, 1948), because it would have been awkward to be under the same roof with the pashas who had sworn allegiance to the constitution under Captain Selim Sirri's supervision (Baltacıoğlu, 1944). He requested that he should undertake further studies on gymnastics in Stockholm (BOA, BE0, 3511-263276) rather than going to Paris with a promotion. The request was approved by the Turkish ministry of war (BOA, BE0, 3521-264073; Selim Sirri Bey, 1909b; Selim Sirri Bey, 1909c). Selim Sirri Bey, who was planning to go to Stockholm in the first week of April 1909, sent apologies for not being able to attend the IOC Session in Berlin. However, changes in his travel plans (TOC Archive, 20 April 1909), did, in fact, allow him to attend the Session in Berlin. (*Discussions et décisions*, 1909; Coubertin, 1977c). Thus, Turkish Olympism, born in 1908, enjoyed its most productive years in the Ottoman period until 1914 (Yıldırım, 2009).

Selim Sirri Bey continued to correspond with Coubertin during his one-year stay in Sweden and requested documentation related to the Olympic Movement (TOC Archive, 27 July 1909). Selim Sirri Bey, who continued to work on the official establishment of the Turkish Olympic Committee after his return in May 1910 (*Bulletin du Comité*, 1910), did not receive the support he had been hoping, because the Turkish authorities considered the Olympic Games to be an event made only for Greeks (Tarcan, Selim Sirri, 1923).

Meanwhile, the organising committee of the 1912 Games asked Selim Sirri Bey to complete the establishment of the NOC in his country before the Olympics (Riksarkivet, SE/RA/730226/E II/9). By the end of 1910, the formalities were not yet complete. In 1911, Selim Sirri Bey attended the IOC Session in Budapest (IOC Archive, 1911; La XIII réunion, 1911; Coubertin, 1977d), where

**Selim Sırrı Bey in
his official uniform
in 1909.**

Photo: Private Archive of
Azade-Fuat Kent



the IOC finally officially ratified Turkey as the 13th member nation (San, 1971; TOC, 2008).

Selim Sırrı Bey took part in IOC Sessions in Berlin (1909), Luxembourg (1910), Budapest (1911), Stockholm (1912), Lausanne (1913), Paris (1914 and 1924), Prague (1925), and Monaco (1927). He learned the ways and methods of developing and disseminating Olympic thoughts (Yıldıran, 2009). He made efforts to spread the philosophy of Olympism by frequently referring to the experiences he gained from Congresses in his articles and in his journal, *Terbiye ve Oyun* (Education et Jeux).³

The official founding date of Turkey's NOC remains a topic for discussion and still causes controversy. Fişek (1998) stated that the TOC was unable to finalise its legal establishment until 1922. Some researchers report that the committee was established in 1914, based on a document in the Ottoman Archives (Demircioğlu, 2009; Başar, 2019; As, 2016). Selim Sırrı Bey said that he established it after the constitutional monarchy, which was confirmed by an article by Ahmet İhsan Be, pointing to the end of September and the beginning of October 1908. As a result of his active duties after the declaration

of the constitutional monarchy, it seems implausible that he would have been able to establish the committee in the first weeks.

Selim Sırrı Bey was convinced that military and politics would be incompatible with his passions and resigned at the end of August 1908 to pursue his dream of developing physical education in his country. He opened the first private Physical Education School in Turkey on 20 December 1908 (Terbiye-i Bedeniye Mektebi, 1908; Tarcan, 1948). It is quite possible that he started his work on the Olympic Movement at that time and founded the Olympic Committee. In fact, the publication of an article titled "Athlétisme Ottoman" in the IOC publication in October 1908, two months before Selim Sırrı Bey was elected as an IOC Member, could well have been a precursor to establishing the committee. Related news published in the *Stamboul* newspaper on 21 December 1908 points to the same direction ("École de Culture Physique," 1909):

Upon invitation of IOC President Coubertin, Selim Sırrı Bey [...] will be representing Turkey, and the Olympic Movement trusts him regarding organisation and leadership for the National Olympic Committee.

Further arguments for an early foundation date of the NOC are given by Haluk San, who met Selim Sırrı Bey shortly before the latter's death in 1957:

After forming the administrative committee of OMOC [Ottoman National Olympic Committee], I applied to the Ministry of Internal Affairs. They said that this is a sports association and there is no need to register and issue regulations. (Fişek, 1998).

The fact that Selim Sırrı Bey went to Sweden shortly after the establishment might have only prolonged the process of gaining official approval for the committee from the government. As a result, taking into consideration the statements in the press and writings of Selim Sırrı Bey, it can be assumed that the TOC was established in 1908.⁴

Participation in the 1908 London Olympic Games

The 1908 Olympics were once again held in conjunction with an international exposition. The Games took place between 27 April and 31 October 1908, but the main events were held in the period from 13 to 25 July. At the same time, a constitutional monarchy was declared in the Ottoman Empire on 23 July 1908 as a historical milestone for the development of modern Turkey.

The *1908 Official Report* names two Turkish athletes, a Mr. Moullos (Aleko Mulos) in gymnastics and Kinan (Kenan) Bey in wrestling (Cook, 1908). *Sabah* newspaper reports the presence of Ottoman athletes at the opening ceremony:

The wrestler who went in front of the Ottoman delegation was holding the Ottoman banner. His clothes were made up of red and white coloured fabrics ... ("Londra' da Olimpiyat Oyunları," 1908).

The Times reported that 2,000 athletes attended the opening ceremony in the presence of King Edward VII. "First came the red and white stripes of Austria [...] and the red Turkish flag with its crescent." ("The King and," 1908). American newspapers also reported: "In all 21 countries were represented and among that gathering Turkey was represented with one competitor" ("King Edward VIII," 1908; "King Edward Opens," 1908; "Olympic Games in London," 1908; "Peace and Olympic Games," 1908). According to the American newspapers, only one Turkish athlete was present at the opening ceremony, while *Sabah* newspaper and British newspapers referred to a delegation, which would seem to indicate at least two people.

For a long time, it was believed that Turkey did not participate in the 1908 London Games. It was only after research, conducted at the London Embassy in 1956, that light was shed on the first Turkish participant, Aleko Mulos. Konstantin Devecis, one of the 1906 participants, remembered that Mulos was doing gymnastics at the Tatavla Club while a student at Galatasaray High School: "Now I remembered. Mulos was Baron Pierre de Coubertin's guide when he came to İstanbul." Also, Selim Sırrı Bey was reminded of Coubertin's guide and added: "So the Baron invited that gymnast to the London Olympics by using his personal means. This was a pleasant surprise for me (...)" (Atabeyoğlu, 2004). In contrast, the list of participants identified by Bill Mallon did not mention the name of Mulos (Mallon, 2000).

In the 1970s, the *Olympic Review* published a series of articles about National Olympic Committees. The section on Turkey, probably authored by members of its NOC, listed Aleko Mulos in 1908 as Turkey's first Olympian. ("Turkey and Olympism," 1975).

As late as July 2020, no official document had been discovered to corroborate the information in the official report. However the TOC recently discovered a note stating that Mulos finished equal 67th of 96 in the heptathlon gymnastic competition (individual all-around competition) which would seem to have finally proved his attendance at the 1908 Olympics (TOC Archive, 2020).

Less information is available about Kenan Bey, the other competitor. He taught European wrestling in the Physical Education School, which Selim Sırrı Bey opened on 20 December 1908 (Selim Sırrı Bey, 1909a). Kenan Bey conducted a comprehensive interview for *Spor Alemi* journal in 1920, but did not give any information about his participation in the Games ("Geçmiş zaman olurki," 1920). *The Times* of 23 July 1908 stated that Kenan Bey did not compete in freestyle 61 kg wrestling competitions

("The Olympic Games," 1908). Although his name was included in the *Official Report*, it is very probable that Kenan Bey ultimately did not compete in the 1908 Games.

Considering the difficulties of foreign travel at the time, just before the declaration of the constitutional monarchy in Turkey, and the fact that the NOC has not yet been established, it is possible that Mulos had taken part at Coubertin's personal invitation.⁵ But this new information returns us to the question of whether or not Coubertin had ever visited İstanbul.

First official participation in Stockholm 1912

Turkey was one of the 26 countries to be invited to Stockholm. The invitation letter for 1912 was sent to Selim Sırrı Bey on 18 November 1910 by the Swedish Olympic Committee. Documents about the programme, participation conditions, and the facilities followed in a letter in May 1911 (Riksarkivet, SE/RA/730226/E II/9).

Selim Sırrı Bey was appointed to represent the Turkish government (BOA, MV., 227-70; BOA, İ.MMS., 149-1330/R-06; BOA, BE0, 4025-301852). In his letter to the organising committee on 23 November 1911, he says that he distributed the relevant documents to the responsible bodies, but was not sure whether Ottoman athletes would be able to participate because of the Turkish-Italian War. He further told them that his application to the government had proven positive and that it was also planned to send five delegates to the Congress (Riksarkivet, SE/RA/730226/E II/9).

Selim Sırrı Bey made an open call through *İkdam* and *Sabah* newspapers to motivate athletes wishing to participate in the Olympics. He also wrote to the naval and war ministries, asking them for names of officers who were interested in the Games. The reply was unequivocal: "We consider the participation in the competitions unnecessary as it will not be of any benefit to the military service" (Tarcan, 1948).

The Times published a preliminary list two months before the Games, which mentioned that there would be four athletes from Turkey ("The Olympic Games," 1912). American newspapers put the participation of athletes at over 2,000 from all over the world, including China, Japan, Chile, and Turkey. They also mentioned that Turkey was proposing to hold a wrestling championship ("Olympic Games Will," 1912; "Over Three Thousand," 1912; "Olympic Games Open," 1912; "Preparations for Olympic," 1912).

Without the support of the army, Selim Sırrı Bey only received confirmation from two athletes of Armenian origin: Mıgırdıç Mıgıryan and Vahram Papazyan. As Selim Sırrı Bey was unable to guarantee the government's support, these two athletes were to travel to Sweden by their own means.



Vahram Papazyan in the sixth 800 m heat in a red jersey, with the Turkish crescent moon on his chest. At the head of the field is the American Harlan Holden, who still has two laps to cover on the 383 m track in Stockholm.

Photo: Swedish Sports Museum

very much that two venerable Armenians, Mıgıryan and Papazyan will save our faces by being included in the name of Ottomans in these competitions." (Selim Sırrı, 1912c). In his comprehensive article, he wrote:

The most distinguished of twenty-six different nations were there. There is no single trace of us. My tears are filled with my sorrow. There is no trace of the existence of the vast Ottoman Empire, which used to be accepted by the Europeans with the saying "as strong as the Turks". (Tarcan, Selim Sırrı, 1912d).

Savarş Krisyan, one of the pioneers of Armenian physical education and a colleague of Selim Sırrı Bey, wrote a severe riposte in his magazine *Marmnamarz*:

Let's keep it short. Two Armenians went to Stockholm at their own expense and with some support from the Armenian community, not as Armenians but as Ottomans. They wore the Ottoman crescent on their breasts, fought to promote Ottomanism in sports in Europe, and were applauded as Ottoman athletes, then Selim Sırrı Bey pretends to cry because there are still no Turks in the Stockholm Olympics, and he won't remember the two Ottoman Armenians [...]. It was the Ottoman homeland, not only the homeland of the Turks, as Selim Sırrı Bey thinks. The Armenians also defend the Ottoman homeland with their own weapons in their hands." (Krisyan, 1912).

Selim Sırrı Bey wrote different articles in the years to follow. In *Terbiye ve Oyun*, he implied the absence of the Ottoman athletes at the opening ceremony. That

is absolutely true as mentioned before. However, it is interesting that the article did not mention the Armenian competitors at all. In his articles in *Spor Alemi* and *Vatan* in 1923, he stated that there had been no one from Turkey at the Games. But in his book *Olimpiyat Oyunlarive Stadyumlar* (Olympic Games and Stadiums) written in 1914 and in further writings after 1923, he mentioned the participation of Armenian athletes.

This should be considered in terms of the social and political context surrounding Selim Sırrı Bey. If we look at his writings in a broader context, they become more comprehensible. From 1915 to the first years of the Turkish Republic, when minorities such as the Armenians were not welcome, he did not mention them. He did so in the years before and after, when this topic was less sensitive. Similarly, in the years that followed, Papazyan was to attribute his collapse in the 1,500 m when leading the field to more political reasons than simply the excitement of finding himself in the lead.

During the First World War, Selim Sırrı Tarcan continued his studies and made efforts to introduce Olympism and spread modern sports. As one of the defeated powers, Turkey had been expelled from the IOC in 1919 and excluded from the 1920 Games. But the close relationship that Selim Sırrı Tarcan enjoyed with Pierre de Coubertin saw Turkey return to the IOC's fold in 1921. The sportspeople of the new republic, established in 1923, would return to the international arena in 1924 under the leadership of Selim Sırrı Tarcan, with their modern clothes and a new nationality, leaving behind the days of the Ottomans. ■

- 1 In the study the word "communication" is used for any kind of contact between Selim Sırrı Tarcan and Coubertin. In some articles, Selim Sırrı Tarcan states that he met Coubertin, while in others that he wrote letters. No documents about Coubertin's visit were found in research carried out by this author at the French Consulate and the French Institute in İstanbul. After correspondence with the IOC on 15 April 2020, this author received the answer that IOC Archives have no record of a visit to İstanbul by Coubertin. Selim Sırrı Tarcan pointed out in his letter to Coubertin dated 20 April 1909, that he was going to Sweden soon, and "when he sets off, he will first come to Paris to meet him" (TOC Archive, 20 April 1909). This research contradicts the statement of Konstantin Devecis, who participated in the 1906 Intermediate Olympic Games, that Coubertin came to İstanbul independently of Selim Sırrı Tarcan (see Atabeyoğlu, 2004, p. 12). In addition, Aleko Mulos' attendance at the 1908 Games suggested that Coubertin did go to İstanbul. In summary, it is certain that Selim Sırrı Tarcan had contact with Coubertin for the first time in 1907, but it is not clear how the contact was made.
- 2 There is no official source regarding the establishment process of the NOC, which Selim Sırrı Tarcan mentioned in his memoirs. The most important reference comes from the first president of the committee, Ahmet İhsan (Tokgöz) Bey, on 22 September 1324 (5 October 1908. in the journal *Servet-i Fünun*, no. 889, 69 (San, 1985): "As it is known by our readers, Baron Pierre de Coubertin, one of the French nobles who revived the centuries-old Olympic Games, came to İstanbul in July last year and ordered our gymnastics master, Selim Sırrı, as a chief executive from Ottoman state. Selim Sırrı Bey fulfilled his promise with the announcement of the constitution and the establishment of the Ottoman National Olympic Committee and ordered me to be the head of this National Olympic Committee. He became the general secretary, Hasip Beyefendi and the brothers Asaf and Cevat Rüştü Bey were appointed as members of the board of directors. By submitting a request to the Ministry of Internal Affairs, they declare in a courteous letter that they are attempting to register the committee." This has been repeated in many publications written on this subject. However, the author examined copies of the *Servet-i Fünun* journal and *Servet-i Fünun* newspaper, which was first published on 26 July 1908. An examination of the publications from July 1908 to May 1909 did not reveal the article. The information about the article given by San is also incorrect. The number given belongs to an issue two months before the proclaiming of the Second Constitution, and the page only consists of an article about the French navy. The opinion of the researcher is that San saw the relevant article, based on the fact that the author made such a clear translation, but he gave incorrect information about the publication and the citation information in his book.
- 3 For some of his articles in the journal *Terbiye ve Oyun* (Education et Jeux), see: Selim Sırrı (Tarcan) (1912a). "Old and New Olympics," 1(14), 201-211; (1912b). "Olympic Games," 1(19), 297-300; (1912c). "Olympic Games," 1(21), 345-350; (1912d). "Olympic Games," 1(22-23-24), 369-375.
- 4 According to the IOC Archives, the recognition of the Turkish Olympic Committee took place in 1911. It seems that five delegates from Turkey were invited to the 1912 Session. This indicates that the committee had been established. One can find many National Olympic Committees which were recognised later, even though their representatives were IOC founding members in 1894. According to Coubertin (1977b), referring to 1909, some NOCs were still in the establishment phase.
- 5 In the IOC Archives there is no documentation on Turkey's participation at the 1908 Olympic Games. Mulos is mentioned in the list of athletes on the IOC website, but there is no information about Kenan.
- 6 Vahram Papazyan was a student of Robert College from 1907 to 1908 and graduated in 1913. His nationality is mentioned as Armenian in the school records and his father's profession appears as a civil servant (Yıldız, 2015).
- 7 According to the newspaper, Mıgıryan was 19 years old. However, he was already 29, while Papazyan was indeed 19. This mistake was frequently made in different sources, stating that both athletes were 19 years old.

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Advertising stamp with the poster of the Stockholm 1912 Olympic Games in Turkish. Visible in the bottom left corner is the flag of the Ottoman Empire. Source: Volker Kluge Archive

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