

From Symbol of Idealism to Money-Spinner

By Karl Lennartz¹



The traditional flag ceremonial at the Opening of the XXII Olympic Winter Games. The banner was carried among others by the ice hockey legend Vyacheslav Fetisov (far left), the six times Olympic speed skating champion Lidiya Skoblikova and by the first woman in space, Valentina Tereshkova.

Photo: picture-alliance

It was one of the most significant articles Coubertin ever wrote. It appeared in the August 1913 volume of the *Revue Olympique*, a publication he had edited since 1901 and introduced his great symbol for the Olympic Movement. "L'emblème et le drapeau de 1914"² unveiled the five coloured rings as the Olympic emblem and flag. He had designed them for the 20th anniversary of the Olympic Movement, which was to be solemnly celebrated in Paris in 1914.

Coubertin interpreted the five rings as the five parts of the world: "les cinq parties du monde"³ By this he could only have meant the continents of Africa, America, Asia, Australia and Europe, for in 1912 in Stockholm, the participation of two Japanese competitors meant that all five were represented for the first time.

The late David Young, a distinguished sports historian during his lifetime and his fellow-countryman Robert Barney, who now teaches in Canada, both doubted this theory. Young in particular thought it was possible that the rings represented the cities which had held Olympic Games up to the jubilee congress of 1914.

To back up his theory, he looked at the list of countries in Coubertin's article: Sweden (for 1912), Greece (1896), France (1900), Great Britain (1908) and America (1904). There followed Germany (1916), Belgium (1920), and finally Italy, Hungary, Spain, Brazil, Australia, Japan and China.⁴

Young's hypothesis provokes questions, in particular why Coubertin did not use the correct chronological order, i.e. Athens, Paris, St. Louis, London and Stockholm? How did Coubertin know, at the time of the publication of his article, where the 1920 Games would take place, for after all at the time of the Olympic Congress of 1914 there were still two applicants, Budapest and Antwerp, and the Hungarian capital was considered to be more likely to succeed.

What could be meant by "les cinq parties du monde" but the five continents? Should he not otherwise have written "état"? In contrast to Young most Europeans regard America as a continent. Young notes that Coubertin did not use the word "cercles", but "anneaux" which he translates as "chain".⁵ He even thinks that after

L'emblème et le drapeau de 1914.

L'emblème choisi pour illustrer et représenter ce Congrès mondial de 1914 qui mettra le sceau définitif à la rénovation olympique a commencé d'apparaître sur divers documents préliminaires : cinq anneaux régulièrement enlacés dont les couleurs différentes – bleu, jaune, noir, vert, rouge – se détachent sur le fond blanc du papier. Ces cinq anneaux représentent les cinq parties du monde désormais acquises à l'Olympisme et prêtes à en accepter les fécondes rivalités. De plus les six couleurs ainsi combinées reproduisent celles de toutes les nations sans exception. Le bleu et jaune de Suède, le bleu et blanc de Grèce, les tricolores français, anglais, américain, allemand, belge, italien, hongrois, le jaune et rouge d'Espagne voisinent avec les innovations brésilienne ou australienne, avec le vieux Japon et la jeune Chine. Voilà vraiment un emblème international. Il était tout indiqué d'en faire un drapeau, et l'esthétique en sera parfaite. Un pareil drapeau est léger, chatoyant, spirituel à voir flotter; il a un sens largement symbolique. Son succès est assuré: si assuré même qu'après le Congrès, on pourrait bien le maintenir en usage et l'arborer aux solennités olympiques. Quoiqu'il en soit, les fêtes de 1914 ont été à présent, pour les annoncer, les messages eurythmiques qui convenaient. La grande affiche dont les premiers exemplaires ont été offerts aux Comités Olympiques nationaux et qui reste à leur disposition a soulevé, dès son apparition, l'admiration générale. La réduction en cartes postales n'est pas moins réussie dans son genre. On appréciera de même les cinq anneaux et leurs applications variées.

Sont-ils solidement rivés l'un à l'autre, ces cinq anneaux? La guerre ne risque-t-elle pas quelque jour de briser l'armature olympique? Voilà une question qui déjà nous fut posée et à laquelle, puisque l'occasion s'en présente, nous ne sommes pas fâchés de répondre. L'Olympisme n'a pas reparu au sein de la civilisation moderne pour y jouer un rôle local ou passager. La mission qui lui est confiée est universelle et séculaire. Il est ambitieux; il lui faut tout l'espace et tout le temps. On reconnaîtra que ses premiers pas l'ont de suite marqué pour une telle carrière. Cela étant, une guerre ne saurait que contrarier et non pas arrêter sa marche. Comme l'indique le préambule des Règlements du Congrès prochain « on peut ne pas célébrer une Olympiade mais ni l'ordre ni les intervalles ne peuvent en être changés ». Si, ce qu'à Dieu ne plaise, la VII^{ème} ou la VIII^{ème} Olympiades venaient à ne pouvoir être célébrées, la IX^{ème} le serait. Si des souvenirs sanglants et trop récents encore interdisaient d'organiser en quelque partie du monde les fêtes nécessaires, il y aurait de l'autre côté de la terre des peuples prêts à honorer l'éternelle jeunesse humaine.

Aussi bien une conception de la guerre plus sportive — le mot n'est pas déplacé — tend à prédominer qui ne rendra point la passe d'armes moins dure mais en fera sans doute les lendemains plus supportables. Les peuples apprendront la grande leçon du sportif : à savoir que la haine sans bataille est peu digne de l'homme et que l'injure sans coups en est tout à fait indigne.

Nous voici peut être un peu loin de notre sujet. Revenons y en répétant que le cas de guerre ne saurait influer sur l'avenir olympique et que la paix rétablie trouverait le Comité International à son poste prêt à continuer l'œuvre mondiale. Voilà pourquoi le nouvel emblème dans son éloquent langage n'évoque pas seulement l'espace conquis mais aussi la durée assurée.

Revue Olympique 13 [1913]8, pp. 119-120

every Olympiad the flag should be enlarged by a further ring. Would it not have been more practical to present the symbol as a chain? And which further colours would have been available as a choice?

The Canadian sports historian Fernand Landry counters Young's arguments by referring to an article by Coubertin which appeared on 5th April 1927 in the *Messenger d'Athènes*:

The great Olympic flag should then be mounted to the mast where it should float for the duration of

The Emblem and the Flag of 1914

The emblem selected to illustrate and represent the 1914 world congress which was to place the final seal on the restoration of the Olympics began to appear on various preliminary documents: five rings linked at regular intervals, their various colors – blue, yellow, black, green and red – standing out against the white of the paper. These five rings represent the five parts of the world now won over to Olympism, ready to accept its fruitful rivalries. In addition, the six colors combined in this way reproduce the colors of every country without exception. The blue and yellow of Sweden, the blue and white of Greece, the tricolor flags of France, England, the United States, Germany, Belgium, Italy and Hungary, and the yellow and red of Spain are included, as are the innovative flags of Brazil and Australia, and those of ancient Japan and modern China. This, truly, is an international emblem. It was made to be turned into a flag, and the look of the flag would be perfect. It is a light, appealing flag, a delight to see fluttering in the wind. Its meaning is largely symbolic. Its success is assured, to the point that after the Congress it can continue to be raised on solemn Olympic occasions. However this may turn out, the celebrations of 1914 now have the eurythmic messengers they needed to announce them. The great poster, the first copies of which have been given to the national Olympic Committees and which continues to be available to them, met with immediate general admiration. The reduction to post card format is equally successful for that medium. The five rings and their various applications will also be deeply appreciated.

Are these five rings solidly riveted together? Will war some day shatter the Olympic framework? This is an issue we have been asked about before, and since the occasion presents itself, we are pleased to respond. Olympism did not reappear within the context of modern civilization in order to play a local or temporary role. The mission entrusted to it is universal and timeless. It is ambitious. It requires all space and all time. One must acknowledge that its initial steps immediately marked it out for that future. That being the case, war can merely delay, not stop, its advancement. As the preamble of the Regulations for the next Congress state, "an Olympiad may fail to be celebrated, but neither the order nor the interval may be changed". If, God forbid, the Seventh or Eighth Olympiads were unable to be celebrated, the Ninth Olympiad would be held. If bloody memories, still too fresh, made it impossible to hold the necessary celebrations in one part of the world, there will be people on the other side of the world ready to honor the eternal youth of humanity.

In addition, a more sporting conception of war – the world is not inappropriately – is becoming predominant. This is not to make the heated exchange any less harsh, but it will make the aftermath somewhat more easily tolerated. People will learn a great lesson from the athlete: hatred without battle is not worthy of man, and insult without blows is utterly unbecoming.

Perhaps we have strayed from our topic. Let us return to it, repeating that war cannot influence the future of the Olympics. Once peace is restored, the International Committee will be at its post ready to continue its worldwide work. That is why the new emblem eloquently evokes both conquered terrain and guaranteed endurance.

Müller, Norbert (Ed.), Pierre de Coubertin, Olympism.

Selected Writings, Lausanne 2000, p. 595

the Games. It was criticised when I drew it.⁶ Today its popularity is asserted everywhere. It is white, as you know, with five year rings painted in blue, yellow, black, green and red, representing the five parts of the world united by Olympism.⁷

It is astonishing how great a significance Coubertin assigned to the rings in his essay in the *Revue Olympique*. He recognised their symbolic value as an element to unite peoples and was certain of their success. He also spoke about the coming of war and the possibility that the Games would be cancelled. His remarks seemed prophetic.

Why did Coubertin need in modern parlance a "logo", expressly for the VI Olympic Congress in 1914 in Paris? The answer is obvious, since at that time the development of national flags, many of which had originated from national nautical ensigns, had been essentially agreed. Even important institutions, firms and sports organisers had long recognised the significance of a symbol which could be recognised at a glance and foster a feeling of association.

Let us take four examples: firstly the American flag. The seven red and six white stripes stand for the 13 founding states, and the white stars on a blue background symbolise the individual states of the Union.



Secondly, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) founded by five Swiss citizens in 1863.⁸ It has its headquarters in Geneva and took as its symbol a red cross on a white background – a reversal of the Swiss federal colours.

Thirdly, there is the company device of the Bénédictine liqueur factory, which advertised in Coubertin's day in the *Revue Olympique* and thus contributed to the financing of the magazine.

And finally, as an example of a national symbol, the "Kaiseradler" (Imperial Eagle) worn for Germany's first international football match against Switzerland in 1908: black and white stood for the Prussians, red for Brandenburg.⁹

Did the IOC not already possess a logo before 1914?

In 1957 Otto Mayer came across a blue, circular vignette showing the year "1894", enclosed by a wreath of two olive branches and the appellation "Comité International Olympique". This he found in the Olympic archive at the Villa Mon Repos. In the Italian magazine *Sport-Phila* Mayer who was then IOC Treasurer wrote: "I wish to inform you that this vignette was conceived by the reviver of the Olympic Games, Pierre de Coubertin himself. It must have been printed immediately after the foundation of the International Olympic Committee, that is to say, between 1894 and 1896."¹⁰

The adhesive label, which may have been used to seal postal items, is considered to be the oldest philatelic object in the history of the IOC. Nonetheless, Otto Mayer was mistaken, for in the period he referred to, the IOC was still known as the "Comité International des Jeux Olympiques". It was not until after the meeting of the committee in 1901 in Paris that the now familiar French

designation came into use. Similarly, a meeting of the IOC was from that date first referred to as a "session".

This vignette was probably designed by Coubertin around 1901/02, for the same wreath decorated the title page of the April edition of the 1902 *Revue Olympique* but this symbol was not dated. Beneath it as a second symbol was a mixture of various items of sports equipment, a rugby ball, a sword, a golf club and a stirrup are prominent. Starting from the June edition the magazine displayed a rather tighter wreath, to which was added the Olympic motto, introduced in 1894, "Citius. Altius. Fortius". In the January 1911 edition these symbols are extended and now combined with the Olympic motto.

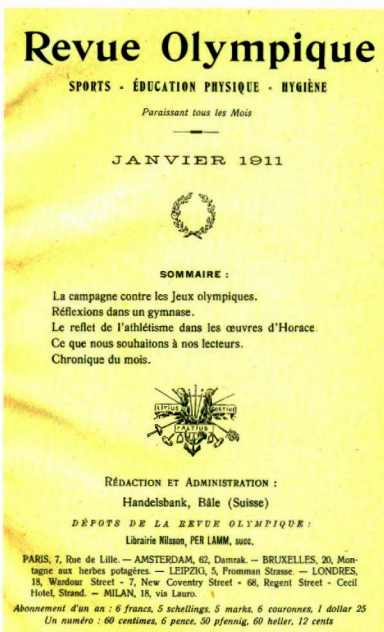
The motto and the year of foundation of the Olympic Movement can also be seen on the diploma for participants in the Paris Congress, additionally surrounded by a garland.

Why were wreaths and branches so important? To find the answer, we have to go back into Greek history, in which wreaths or branches of certain plants and trees were customary as victory prizes at sporting and musical competitions. Thus there was for instance a laurel wreath at the Pythian Games in Delphi, an elder – later a pine branch – at the Isthmian Games. The victor at the Nemean Games was decorated with a wreath of celery leaves, while the olive wreath was the only award at the Olympian Games.



An IOC sticker, probably used to seal posted items. The former IOC Chancellor Otto Mayer succumbed, however, to the error of dating it to the period 1894 to 1896, when name of the IOC was still "Comité International des Jeux Olympiques". The label was in fact not used until the name change of 1901. Left: an ancient bowl with the representation of an athlete with wreath and ribbons.

Photos: Karl Lennartz Archive, Walker Kluge Archive



An open wreath was the first symbol of the IOC. It had adorned the magazine *Revue Olympique* since the April edition of 1902. In the centre of the title page (in this case from January 1911) the Olympic motto "Citius. Altius. Fortius" can be seen, as well as various items of sports equipment, which were probably intended to stand for the multiplicity of the Games.

Photo: Walker Kluge Archive

Mosaic from the first half of the 6th century on the grave of Bishop Stephan in the church in Sparta.

Photos: Karl Lennartz Archive



At Olympia the victor received firstly a palm branch, a headband and then a wreath from branches of the wild olive tree which grew near the temple of Zeus. The athletes took these symbols of victory back to their home cities. Now and again wreath decorations can be found. The Romans too admired the wreath, which was awarded by them as a military decoration. From this sign of distinction there developed an official symbol of the rulers, which later developed into a crown.

Wreaths played an important role in victory ceremonies at the Olympic Games in Greece and those held in the English village of Much Wenlock.

From beginning of the modern Olympic Games, the medal became the symbol of victory. In the early days the victors also received branches or wreaths as supplementary prizes. In that way the individual winners in 1896 in Athens were awarded a wreath of olive branches in addition to the silver medal and diploma. For the second placed athlete there were laurel branches.

On the plaquettes of 1900 and the medals of the following Games there are branch and wreath motifs. As at the 1896 Games, winners in 1906 also received a garland of olive branches. In 1908 there was a bouquet of oak leaves, from which in 1912 a victor's wreath was woven, which was placed on the Olympic winner's head by the Swedish king.

The medallists of 1936 in Berlin were honoured with an oak wreath; the victor was also presented with a small oak tree.

A self-aware IOC shows its colours

The IOC emerged strengthened from the Olympic Games of 1908 and 1912. For the first time Coubertin saw the significance of the committee appropriately recognised, so it had now become much more important to give the

IOC a specific symbol. During the 12th Session in 1910 in Luxembourg the introduction of a flag was discussed for the first time.

The Briton, Theodore Cook, had been a co-organiser of the 1908 Olympic Games in London, had looked after its artistic presentation and also been responsible for an exemplary Official Report. He presented a prototype design for a flag, although we do not know what this looked like.

The concept for the flag and various prototypes of medals¹¹ were passed to a commission, on which Cook was joined by Godefroy de Blonay (SUI), Jules de Musza (HUN), Clarence von Rosen (SWE) and Eugenio Brunetta d'Usseaux (ITA). The group met and also presented the result of its deliberations, but these did not receive the agreement. A decision was postponed to the following year.¹²

It seems that the matter was not discussed further, either in 1911 in Budapest or at the next opportunity in 1912 in Stockholm. It was not until 1913, at the 15th Session in Lausanne that a sketch presented by Cook was discussed. But the "new insignia" for the IOC Members was clearly not a flag but rather a "permanent" badge, which guaranteed IOC Members entry to all events.¹³

In Otto Mayer's 1960 history of the IOC, he wrote that apart from the festivities and disqualification of Jim Thorpe, the native American who won the Olympic pentathlon and decathlon, there was "absolutely nothing" to report from this meeting. And he said somewhat mockingly:

It is surprising to realise what value Coubertin placed on receptions, banquets and other festivities during the meeting. One might almost believe that he wished to detain the members from their work to enable him to steer the Olympic ship as he thought best."¹⁴

A few months after the IOC Session in Luxembourg, Coubertin presented his own concept, for which he gave an extensive explanation in the August edition of the 1913 *Revue Olympique*.

Railway wheels, car and bicycle tyres

How did Coubertin arrive at his great idea? Were there already patterns with several rings that were interconnected?

Five rings which closely resemble the Olympic symbol can be seen as a decorative element in the lower right hand corner of an eighteenth century Chinese folding screen (size 210 x 320cm) on which a festive company of women and children is represented in an extensive palace setting. The screen was produced around 1710 and is today in the museum of lacquerware in Münster.¹⁵

A brochure with the title "Five Rings" appeared in Japan during the 16th century, and this has reproduced on many occasions. However the title does not refer to a graphic symbol, but to characteristics. An edition of Pindar from the 17th century, in which the masthead shows three interlinked rings could also be mentioned.¹⁶

At an editorial conference with the authors of the three-volume edition of "The International Olympic Committee. One Hundred Years" the former General Secretary and then Administrateur Délégué of the IOC, Raymond Gafner, presented two lamps, which showed the description "Lampe Olympe" as well as the figure "1860" and five rings – two above and three below. Did a light perhaps go on in Coubertin's mind?

Gafner soon removed the lamps from consideration after a short inspection in order not to imply that the IOC's founder was guilty of plagiarism, which was in fact not very sensible. For why should Coubertin not have taken an idea from such a model?

Fortunately, one of the lamps came into the possession of the former director of the philately section, Manfred Bergman. The author was then able to photograph it.

The logos of several large companies make use of rings. The German firm Krupp has used three stylised and linked railway wheels for over 140 years. They were first registered on 9 December 1875 with the royal regional court of Essen as the trademark of the firm of Friedr. Krupp "for steel and iron as well as steel and iron goods". Krupp were exhibitors at the World Exhibitions of 1889 and 1900 in Paris and received numerous distinctions.

The German car giant AUDI uses four rings until now. They stand for a quartet of the originally Saxon firms Audi, DKW, Horch and Wanderer, which in 1932 combined as "Auto Union". It may well be a coincidence, but the imitation of the Olympic symbol in the case of the Greek airline Olympic Airlines is obvious. When its predecessor company Olympic Airways was bought by

Aristoteles Onassis in 1956, the shipowner decided on the five rings as a corporate design. However after a protest from the IOC, Onassis had a sixth ring added to the "five continents", which by his interpretation symbolised Greece. In order to make certain there would be no legal action the rings were also arranged vertically.

In some 1896 editions of the German magazine *Radfahr-Chronik* the author has also found a series of advertisements for Dunlop. The Dunlop Pneumatic Tyre Company with its headquarters in Hanau advertised bicycle tyres with differing texts.¹⁷

In the centre of the whole page advertisement can be seen four flying angels holding a ribbon with the inscriptions "Africa", "America", "Asia" and "Europe" as well as five linked bicycle tyres. At that time, the fifth continent Australasia clearly had no role in the company.¹⁸ Did Coubertin, who himself went cycling at the beginning of the 20th century, perhaps see this advertising when he was designing the Olympic symbol? It can certainly not be discounted.

In the magazine there is a further advertisement in which a bicycle by the Acatène company was advertised. 33 personalities from across the world were named. Most of them were aristocratic and the names included a certain Baron de Coubertin. Since all the names, even those of the German aristocrats, were listed in the French style and the firm was based in France, it is most likely that the advertising was adopted from a publication there. The Dunlop Company also advertised in French technical journals.



Did Coubertin see the light when looking at the "Lampe Olympe"? Or was it a joke on the part of an inventive amateur craftsman?

Photos: Kall Lennarz



Coubertin, as is well known, began his sporting career as General Secretary of the Jules Simon Committee, founded by him in 1888. In 1890 he became General Secretary of the Union des Sociétés Françaises des Sports Athlétiques (USFSA). The logo of this federation consisted of two superimposed rings, which were intended to represent the two federations which had united. Above them was a ribbon with the inscription "Ludus pro Patria" – "Competing for the fatherland".



Cyclists from all the continents unite! An advertisement for tyre manufacturers Dunlop in 1896, by which time Australia had already been written off as a market.

The USFSA was a combination of several smaller and older sports organisations or sports clubs which were active in all manner of athletic sports. The two rings stood for the Racing Club de France and Club Stade Français, both founded in 1882. When in late 1897 they merged, they initially described themselves as the Union des Sociétés Françaises de Courses à Pied. At the suggestion of their President, Georges de Saint-Clair, the members changed the name to Union des Sociétés Françaises des Sports Athlétiques on 29 November 1889.¹⁹

Some sports such as football and rugby went their own way before the USFSA dissolved in 1919/20.

USFSA members wore the two rings on their vests. The same badge can also be seen on the vests worn by French athletes at the Olympic Games from 1896 to 1912. One of the best known images shows the USFSA rugby team in its game against a German team on 14 October 1900 in Paris.

Coubertin's grand-nephew Geoffrey de Navacelle believes the badge was designed by his ancestor around 1890.²⁰ It is thus reasonable to assume that Coubertin drew inspiration from that badge when designing his Olympic symbol.

The "Dress Rehearsal" of Alexandria for Paris

Coubertin is known to have devised the emblem and the flag for the Olympic Jubilee Congress in 1914 in Paris. It is impossible now to establish when his creative process started. It may have been shortly after the session in Lausanne, which took place in April 1913. The subject had not been the topic of debate on that occasion.

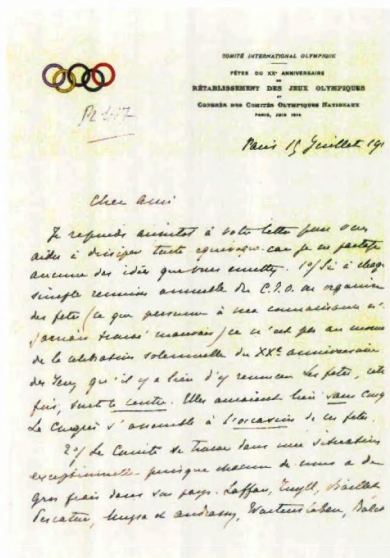
Remarkably, Coubertin did not make any statement until August 1913 in the *Revue Olympique*, but he did not illustrate his article at this time. By this time he had already started to use the Olympic rings as a letterhead. The oldest document with this logo that can be found in the IOC archives is a letter to Godefroy de Blonay dated "Paris, 15 July 1913". The rings are imprinted on the top left: and the reproduction of the colours is not of a particularly high quality. A second letter was sent by Coubertin to Godefroy de Blonay on 6 August 1913, when he was staying in the Hotel Quellenhof in Ragaz (Switzerland). The content does not refer to the Olympic rings, which may possibly have figured in an earlier letter which has not survived. Moreover another hand has attempted to rearrange the rings in pencil under the letterhead.

The new symbol awakened great interest. The Egyptian IOC Member Angelo Bolanaki was the first to show enthusiasm for using it. He received permission from Coubertin to display the Olympic flag on 5 April 1914, in other words at Easter, at the opening of the Chatby Stadium in Alexandria as part of the first Pan-Egyptian Games.²¹

The last Khedive took part in the inauguration ceremony but unfortunately no photograph of this event has so far come to light. Even Bolanaki, in his "Histoire du Sport en Egypte" mentions only that the flag was raised in Egypt to mark the 20th anniversary of the revival of the Olympic Games.²² In 1959, by now doyen of the IOC, he presented large parts of his archive to the Olympic Museum, among them his correspondence with

Right: The earliest evidence of the Olympic symbol is a letter from Coubertin dated 15 July 1913, which he sent to the Swiss Godefroy de Blonay.

Photos: IOC Archives, Karl Lennartz



Coubertin and the following year he also made a gift of the flag which he had kept for 46 years to the Museum.²³

The 20th anniversary of the founding of the IOC was celebrated with much pomp. The festivities lasted from 13 to 23 June 1914. The costs, including the production of 500 banners, were to a great extent covered by Coubertin.

Officially, the Olympic flag was first shown at an event hosted by his relative Count Albert Bertier de Sauvigny on 14 June 1914 in the Bois de Boulogne. On the next day the flag was to be seen at the opening of the Congress at the Sorbonne, then again on 17 June at the same place at the actual celebration in the presence of state president Raymond Poincaré and almost 2000 guests.

There are no photos showing the Olympic rings at these events either so we have to be satisfied with an invitation to the "Fête Nautique du 20 Juin 1914", which shows a flagpole at from which flutters the Olympic flag. On the programme for the 14 June we even find the rings upside down – perhaps a mistake by the typesetter, who did not know which way up to print the picture.

In the light of such mistakes, it is possible that Coubertin was not yet quite satisfied with his work. On the other hand, he would hardly have provided the emblem that decorated the congress invitation with all its accoutrements. Behind the rings, three laurel wreaths are visible and beneath them a ribbon with the Olympic motto. The olive branches resemble the bouquet that Coubertin had previously had engraved on the souvenir medal for the foundation congress of 1894. Another design shows an olive branch and the Olympic



motto on the decorative ribbon, which resembles that on the USFSA badge.

In his programmatic essay in the *Revue Olympique* Coubertin also mentions the possibility of raising the Olympic Flag after 1914.²⁴ We do not however, know which occasions he contemplated and if a resolution about it existed.

In any case, this question was not central to the sometimes very controversial discussions, which turned basically on the competitive programme, the entry regulations and the future participation of Bohemian and Finnish teams.²⁵ The minutes of the meeting, which ran to nine pages, only appeared in 1919. Coubertin put the delay down to the outbreak of the First World War.²⁶ In the *Revue Olympique* only the festivities were reported on.²⁷

There are, however, extensive descriptions in *Le Figaro* and in various German sports periodicals which refer mostly to the discussion about the programme. Of Coubertin's role, the following detail can be found in one of the contributions:

*On Monday the first session of the International Olympic Congress was opened in the festively decorated hall of the Sorbonne, at which all nations were represented. The International Olympic Committee too was almost entirely present. As Baron de Coubertin had unfortunately suddenly fallen ill, the congress was presided over by Prince Windischgrätz, the Austrian representative.*²⁸

It is most likely that the intention was to fly the Olympic flag in the stadium for the first time at the Games of the VI Olympiad in 1916 in Berlin, but the First World War prevented that. And so the premiere had to be postponed until Antwerp 1920. In a famous photograph of the Opening Ceremony on 14 August 1920 the Olympic flag flutters at the masthead. The dimensions of the flag are three metres by six metres.²⁹

The original of the Olympic flag, which blew in the breeze on 5 April 1914 at the opening of the Chatby Stadium in Alexandria as part of the first Pan-Egyptian Games. Afterwards IOC Member Angelo Bolanaki stored the flag in his private archive. In 1960 he presented it to the Olympic Museum in Lausanne.

Left: the flag with the five rings at the masthead depicted in a programme for the festival to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the revival of the Olympic Games in June 1914, in Paris.

Photo: Olympic Museum, Karl Jenatz



The emblem for the 1914 Olympic Congress in Paris: the five rings – the blue clearly dominates the yellow – combined with the Olympic motto and laurel branches.

Photos: Volker Kluge Archives



Later, the Belgian Olympic Committee also had a flag made embroidered with brocade and satin, which was handed over from city to city until 1984.³⁰

Big business takes over the Olympic insignia

To judge from Olympic posters of the twenties, it can be inferred that organising committees did not yet regard the Olympic rings and flag as a dominant element. The symbol does not appear at all on the 1924 Paris poster. In 1928 the Portuguese post office issued a stamp, on which was depicted the Olympic rings, partly hidden behind a hurdler. It was an extra franking which appeared on all items despatched between 22 and 24 May 1928. The profits went to the Portuguese NOC.³¹

At that time the IOC was not yet concerned with copyright protection for the Olympic symbols. The members were probably just pleased that the rings were displayed at all. Their greater concern was what they saw as the misuse of the words "Olympic" and "Olympiad", terms which by the early 1920s had been enthusiastically taken up by sporting women, students and working-class athletes.³²

Meantime, a souvenir industry blossomed in the countries in which Olympic Games took place. It took over the Olympic symbols, setting no limits to the imagination of the designers and producers. Some valuable souvenirs were produced but also many amount of kitsch. The souvenir trade was first regulated in 1936 where an organising committee concerned itself with such matters as never before. It was hardly a surprise that this should occur in National Socialist Germany which had the extensive political apparatus of a totalitarian state.

This "Gleichschaltung" of public life also led to a decision by the president of the advertising council of German industry, announced in the *Olympia-Pressedienst* No. 8 of 30 July 1934 with following justification:

The Olympic five rings under legal protection Olympic Games as a global sporting festival are supposed to express the ideal recognised by the youth of the entire world: comradeship, the joy of competition, chivalry and patriotism. As a celebration of ideals they must not be made the object of

commercial interests. To keep control of this so that the symbol of the Olympic Games does not become distorted in a way contrary to the spirit of the Games by industry, the president of the advertising council of German industry has announced the following order, published with date of 28 June in the "Reichs- und Staatsanzeiger Nr. 14,8" ...³³

This order, which also covered the word "Olympia" in all its forms, was quite in the spirit of the IOC, which started to seriously concern itself with the protection of "Olympic" insignia for the first time at its session in Garmisch-Partenkirchen in 1936.³⁴ The German advertising council, an agency of the Reich propaganda ministry, did not only place the usage of the Olympic rings for purposes of commercial advertising under legal protection, it also took far-reaching measures to steer consumer behaviour in Germany, which lacked foreign currency, in a favourable direction. The principles did not only apply to the articles advertised and offered for sale, but also to the layout of the shop windows. Individual commercial advertising linked to the Olympic symbols was generally forbidden for groceries and semi-luxury food like alcohol, nicotine and chocolate. In order to use the rings and Olympic bell as emblems of the 1936 Games, written permission was needed. This was to be obtained from the propaganda committee of the organising committee chaired by Carl Diem.³⁵ The permission was granted for a limited period ending on 31 December 1936. The Reich patent office had refused to register the Olympic rings as a patent on 26 June 1935.

In parallel with the restrictions, public fascination with the Olympic rings grew and even Carl Diem was to be no means clear on their origin. How else can Coubertin's letter of 9 October 1935 to the secretary of the IOC, Colonel Albert Berdez be explained? It ended with the request to pass on the content of the letter to Diem? The letter reads:

Dear Colonel Berdez,
the five coloured rings, which represent the colours of all nations on a white background (only the red of Poland disturbed this unity for a while after the War) could not take on all the significance given to them in my mind until the flag conflicted with the ideas of the parade, the oath, the formulae and scarcely since Stockholm trying to win people over to these ideas would have made them protest it was just a "gymnastics club". They hated all demonstrations of this type. I arranged for Brunetta, who in this respect was an exception, to present a flag which was completely overloaded and complicated. It was accepted without discussion.

At the beginning of 1914 I presented my own highly symbolic attempt (the five continents united by

Olympism and the colours of all nations) after careful working out of the proportions of the rings to the sums of money at my disposal. I had the flag produced in Bon Marché (for its production a machine had to be specially installed) and I think around 500 flags were produced. I covered most of the costs from the festivities in Paris, for I had a free hand in the choice of how I could use the money. Only with the festivities in the Trocadéro did the IOC retain the right to a say.

The flag appeared for the first time two days before the start of the festivities at the ceremony organised by Count de Bertier and his spouse in the Bois de Boulogne on Saturday 13 June 1914.

On Monday morning, 15 June, a large number of people could [...] observe the flag in the Richelieu amphitheatre. On 17 June it accompanied President Poincaré on the 20th anniversary carried by six boy scouts. They decorated the locomotive and the railway station [...] for an excursion on 19 June, in short, it was everywhere and many participants in the congress took one home.

In 1915 it hung in the Lausanne Town Hall at the establishment of the [IOC] headquarters and in 1916 at the "IOC Day" it had a central place of honour at the exhibition in San Francisco. So it was certainly not inaugurated in Antwerp, as de Blonay wrote in 1928, a strange error, which I have seen several times.

I think these details will reappear in my Olympic memoirs, but I believe it is good to send you a detailed summary, which I would be grateful if you would pass on Diem, as always delicately and discreetly.³⁶

The letter served as the basis for an article under the title "How old are the five Olympic rings?", which Diem published in the *Olympia-Pressdienst* of 15 November 1935, but without acknowledging Coubertin as his source. Diem, who probably edited the letter himself, had removed some offensive passages – for instance references to the "red of Poland", which could be interpreted not only as anti-Polish but also as a criticism of the Nazi "blood flag". It also contained jibes directed against Godefroy de Blonay. The relationship between Coubertin and de Blonay had become distinctly cool.

Some details – such as the summer party of Count Bertier, which had taken place not on the 13 but 14 June – were corrected by Diem, though not all. Coubertin talked of Saturday 14th June at one point. In fact this was a Sunday in 1914. Directly after that another mistake was also put in, for the ceremony at which Poincaré had appeared in fact took place on the 17 June and not on the 14, as stated in the *Olympia-Pressdienst*.³⁷

It was another decade and a half before the IOC became truly aware of the value of its symbol. Until then their existence had not even been acknowledged in the Olympic Charter. To begin with, the discussions were

restricted to public display. In Vienna in 1951, the Greek Jean Ketsseas became very agitated that at the opening of the Panamerican Games in Buenos Aires an oath was sworn on behalf of the participants and a flame burned which had not been kindled previously on the Acropolis in Athens.³⁸

The President of the Organising Committee of the 1952 Winter Games in Oslo, Olaf Ditlev-Simonsen, wanted to know if the Olympic flag should be hung vertically or horizontally.³⁹ The decision fell in favour of the horizontal, a feature of the "Oslo flag" which the Norwegians presented three years later in Athens as the winter equivalent of the "Antwerp flag". But hardly anyone noticed that the Olympic emblem was wrongly placed on one side.

At the 1952 Session in Oslo a lawyer from Geneva called Antoine Hafner was introduced to the IOC, who submitted a proposal to the committee to call a conference at government level in Geneva to take the necessary measures to protect the Olympic symbols. In this respect Hafner, who was also a member of the Swiss Olympic Committee, was thinking about a similar agreement to that concluded by the International Red Cross.⁴⁰

Thereafter Hafner required three years to identify all the difficulties which would stand in the way of the



While the 1914 version of the Olympic rings is to be found on the programmes of the 1932 Winter Games in Lake Placid, the flags at the Summer Games in Los Angeles already showed the symbol as used today, on which the yellow ring dominates the blue.

Photo: X Olympiad Los Angeles 1932, Official Report

conclusion of an agreement that would be recognised worldwide. His main reservation was clothed in the question:

*Does the Olympic Movement play a sufficiently important part in the world to justify such an International convention?*⁴²

Handover of the Antwerp flag by IOC President Avery Brundage to the Mayor of Melbourne. This photo shows that in 1956 the authorities were not so concerned about the design: the traditional flag shows the rings in the present day form, on the speaker's stand is the version as created by Coubertin.

Photo: The Official Report of the Organizing Committee for the Games of the XVI Olympiad Melbourne 1956



In the next two years the files collected by Mr. Hafner increased daily. But unfortunately, wrote IOC Treasurer Otto Mayer, the calling of a conference did not happen, primarily because the government of Switzerland was no longer interested, which Mayer explained by the decision to award the 1960 Olympics to Rome rather than Lausanne. "Sometimes the politicians just don't have the spirit of sport", he wrote.⁴²

Nonetheless, what Otto Mayer described as a "powerful amount of work" done by Mr. Hafner had a good effect. The IOC acknowledged its symbols and in Rule 56 forbade commercial exploitation:

Flag and Emblem

*56. ... The Olympic Flag has a white background with no border; in the centre it has five interlaced rings (blue, yellow, black, green, red). The blue ring is high on the left nearest the flagpole. The flag presented by Baron de Coubertin at the Olympic Congress in Paris 1914 is the regulation model. These rings together with the motto: 'Citius, Altius, Fortius' constitute the Olympic Emblem, which is the exclusive property of the International Olympic Committee and its use by commercial enterprises, as trade marks, or for similar purposes is strictly forbidden.*⁴³

The following year the IOC issued instructions to make its members aware once again just how the Olympic rings were to be set out. At the time there was still considerable confusion, it was not simply a question of "right" and "wrong".

By comparison with today's Olympic symbol, the rings designed by Coubertin are not only larger but interlaced in a different way. When and why the IOC decided on a "flag change" was impossible to find out. It must have been around 1932, for on the Olympic poster for Lake Placid the blue ring still dominated the yellow one, which resulted in a completely different sequence. Certainly it corresponded to the emblem of Los Angeles, yet the flags raised there already looked like those used today.

Even at the Melbourne Olympic Games in 1956 the uncertainty continued. There was further confusion at the appearance of the "Antwerp flag" handed over at the closing ceremony. Perhaps as a result of a mistake or even a whim of the manufacturers, these rings are interlaced in a different fashion, the arrangement is in use today.

Coubertin's question remains topical: "Market or temple?"

Antoine Hafner had correctly predicted that the protection of the Olympic symbols would be a marathon not a sprint. It is quite possible that hundreds of lawyers have considered the question of the ownership of the Olympic rings. Do they belong to the IOC, their creator, or to the whole world?

If it had been Coubertin, then the copyright protection would have elapsed 70 years after his death, in 2007. On the other hand it might be proved that the copyright was passed to the IOC, for which, as far as the author is aware, there is no written evidence. Far more complicated is the problem of protecting Olympic terminology, for concepts like "Olympic" have long since been part of everyday speech. The term "Olympia" is not just a synonym for "Olympics" but a Greek settlement in the Peloponnese.

The "Nairobi Treaty on the Protection of the Olympic Symbol" of 26 September 1981 was a milestone in creating some legal certainty in this respect. It obliges member states to reject or declare invalid the registration of any trademark which consists of the Olympic symbol without IOC authority. The problem of legal enforcement is demonstrated by the figures. By 2012 only 50 countries had signed up to the Nairobi Treaty.

Some significant nations are missing from this list, including Germany. Some have introduced special legal protection for Olympic symbols. This is not completely altruistic legislation for only countries with such legislation in place can hope to stage the Olympic Games.

The marketing of the five rings must be guaranteed exclusively through the IOC and the relevant NOC.⁴⁴

While Coubertin had to make great efforts to help his creation achieve a breakthrough, the Olympic rings today are among the most valuable assets of the IOC. That is reflected in the present-day Olympic Charter, in which the "Rights over the Olympic Games and Olympic properties" occupy no fewer than eight paragraphs over nine pages. In this, the IOC asserts its right to the rings and also the flag, motto, emblems, hymn, flame, torches and Olympic designations.⁴⁵

Nowadays there very few trademarks across the world with a higher degree of recognition than the Olympic rings. Over the last thirty years their exclusive marketing has become a major economic card from which the Olympic Movement has profited after many years of struggling for financial survival. Even so, there are dangers concealed in such a development. Today the interlaced rings are viewed by many people not so much as a symbol of Coubertin's idea to unite the nations in Coubertin's idea, but as the trademark of a permanently running machine to print money. This is certainly not just a problem of image. ■

1 On the occasion of 100 years of Olympic rings the contribution by Karl Lennartz was checked over and enlarged, "The Story of the Rings", in: *Journal of Olympic History* 10 (December 2001/January 2002), pp. 29–61; *ibid.*, "Story of the Rings – Part II", in: *Journal of Olympic History* 11 (2003) 2, pp. 33–37, also as a special printing; in addition numerous further articles in German and English.

2 The article is unsigned. It is however known that all articles which bear no author's name were written by Coubertin.

3 Pierre de Coubertin, "L'emblème et le drapeau de 1914", in: *Revue Olympique*, August 13 (1913) 8, p. 119.

4 David C. Young, "Coubertin and the Olympic Logo", in: J. A. Mangan (ed.), *Proceedings of the XIth HISPA International Congress*, Glasgow 1985, pp. 326–327. Extensively presented in: "The Riddle of the Rings", in: Susan Bandy, *Coroebus Triumphs*, San Diego 1998, pp. 257–289, especially pp. 268–272, also Robert Barney, "This Great Symbol", in: *Revue Olympique* 23 (1992) 301, p. 629.

5 In dictionaries "anneau" is translated as "ring", "cercler" with "circle" and "chaîner" with "chain".

6 There is no reference to this anywhere.

7 Pierre de Coubertin, "L'oeuvre de l'Union Pédagogique Universelle. La renaissance du gymnase hellénique. La conférence de M. de Coubertin au Parnassos (jeudi, 31 mars 1928)", in: *Le Messager d'Athènes* (05.04.1927), p. 3. Cf. Pierre de Coubertin, "La valeur pédagogique du cérémonial olympique", in: *Bulletin du bureau International de Pédagogie Sportive* (1931) 7, p. 5.

8 Until 1986 described as the International Red Cross (IRC).

9 Volker Kluge, "Black and white Imperial Eagle with a tamed eagle", in: Kristin Otto/Heinz Florian Oertel (Ed.), *Sydney 2000. Unser Olympiabuch*, Das Neue Berlin 2000, pp. 125–130.

10 Giuseppe Sabelli Fioretti/José M. Soler Vila, Post, Philately and Olympism, IOC Lausanne 1984, pp. 63–64.

11 It was a matter of creating a permanent medal. It took until 1927 until a permanent medal was found.

12 Minutes 13th IOC Session 1910, pp. 9–10, IOC Archives.

13 Minutes, 15th IOC Session 1912, p. 26, 16th IOC Session 1913 in: *Revue Olympique* 13 (1913) 6, p. 98.

14 Otto Mayer, A travers les anneaux olympiques, Gailler, Genève 1960, p. 73.

15 Monika Koppin, East Asian Lacquer works. Selected works, Münster n. d., Kat. No. 13, Image pp. 105–106. Walter Borgers drew the attention of creators to this umbrella.

16 Thomas Zawadzki found the book in a shop in Athens for esoteric literature.

17 *Radfahr-Chronik* 9 (7 March 1896) 46, p. 646, then (4 April 1896) 54, 3. Title page (11 April 1896) 56, 3. Title page (18 April 1896) 58, p. 862 (25 April 1896) 60, p. 906 (2 May 1896) 62, p. 946 (13 June 1896) 76, p. 1192 (20 June 1896) 76, p. 1236 (26 June 1896) 78, p. 1276.

18 *Ibid.*, 9 (1896) 2, No. 53, p. 104.

19 Otto Schantz, "Organisation et institutionnalisation du sport en France au XIX^e siècle (1815–1914)", in: Centre National d'Enseignement à Distance (ed.), *Cours et documents d'accompagnement, Agrégation EPS, écrit I*, Grenoble 1999, pp. 12–13.

20 Coubertin, *Olympism*, p. 595.

21 A correspondence referring to this question does not exist in the IOC Archives.

22 Angelo Bolonaki, *Histoire du Sport en Egypte*, n. d. 1957, p. 6.

23 Angelo Bolonaki, in: *Bulletin du CID* 18 (1963) 84, pp. 9–10.

24 Coubertin, "L'emblème et le drapeau de 1914", *Revue Olympique* 13 (1913) 8, p. 119.

25 Karl Lennartz, "The Exclusion of the Central Empires from the Olympic Games in 1920", in: Robert Barney et al. (Hg.), *Global and Cultural Critique: Problematising the Olympic Games*. Fourth International Symposium for Olympic Research, London, Ontario 1998, pp. 69–74. Karl Lennartz, "Der Ausschluss der Mittelmeerwelt von den Olympischen Spielen 1920", in: *Ommo Gruppe* (Hg.), *Einblicke. Aspekte olympischer Sportentwicklung* (Festschrift für Walther Träger zum 70. Geburtstag), Schorndorf 1999, pp. 90–94.

26 Congrès des Comités Olympiques Nationaux tenu à Paris en Juin 1914, Lausanne, November 1919, IOC Archives.

27 *Revue Olympique* (1914), No. 7, pp. 100–110.

28 "Jubilee Congress of the International Olympic Committee" in: *Rheinisch-Westfälische Sportzeitung* 3(1914)26, p. 3, also in: *Deutsche Turn-Zeitung* 59(1914)26, p. 485.

29 Probably first printed in in: Erik Bergvall, VII Olympiaden, Stockholm 1920, issue 2, p. 74. The photo was also sold as a postcard. Two further photos, taken from a slightly different viewpoint are to be found in: *American Olympic Committee* (ed.), *Report. Seventh Olympic Games Antwerp, Belgium 1920*, Greenwich 1920, pp. 34, 41.

30 Because the flag was allegedly worn, the Korean NOC presented a new flag in 1985. ("The Seoul Flag Becomes the New Olympic Standard", in: *Revue Olympique*, September 1985, No. 215, p. 551).

31 Post, Philately and Olympism, p. 177. For the first time the Olympic rings were used in a special postmark on occasion of the Olympic Congress in 1925 in Prague.

32 The misuse of Olympic terminology was several times on the agenda of the Session: in 1921 the IOC turned against the idea of "Catalonian Olympics", in 1922 and 1926 against the abuse of the word "Olympics". See: Minutes IOC Sessions, IOC Archives.

33 *Olympia-Pressedienst*, No. 8, 30 July 1934, p. 3.

34 Minutes, 35th IOC Session, 11 February 1936, p. 2. Besides Germany Italy and Austria were included as countries in which in the view of the IOC the Olympic symbol was protected.

35 *Reichsgesetzblatt (RGBl)* 1933, part 1, pp. 625, 791.

36 Letter from Coubertin to Berdez, 9th October 1935, IOC Archives. The mentioned "Olympic Memoirs" had appeared in 1932, but the abundance of information about the origins of the Olympic flag was hardly mentioned.

37 *Olympia-Pressedienst*, No. 25, 15 November 1935, p. 3.

38 The real Olympic flame should have come not from the Acropolis but from Olympia.

39 Minutes, 46th IOC Session, Vienna, 9 May 1951, p. 26.

40 *Ibid.*, 47th IOC Session, 13 February 1952, p. 4.

41 *Ibid.*, 51st Session, 14 June 1955.

42 Mayer, p. 279.

43 IOC, *The Olympic Games. Fundamental Principles, Rules and Regulations, General Information*, Lausanne 1956, pp. 30–31.

44 As part of the IOC application of the City of Leipzig for the 2012 Games, the German Parliament passed on 23 January 2004 after five months of consultation an "Olympic protection law", which prohibited use of Olympic symbols without the agreement of the IOC and the German Olympic Sports Federation (DOSB) and set narrow limits. Exempted from these are protected works and the advertising for these "if the work is concerned in the widest sense with the Olympic Games and the Olympic Movement".

45 IOC, *Olympic Charter of 9 September 2013*, Rules 7–14, pp. 21–29.