

# Sport and international relations (1913-1939): the 1936 Popular Olympiad

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. The system of the period between wars

The changes that the map of Europe suffered after the Great War affected the structure of the international system, a multipolar balance system that was roughly maintained since the Peace of Westphalia of 1648.

The fall of the German and Austro-Hungarian central system left out two essential powers of the previous system. This dismantling caused the creation of new states lacking space in the new order. The Russian revolution also broke up the ideological unity of the eurocentric system that was then dominating: for the first time, a European state took up a political regime that did not respect the capitalist method of production. And outside of Europe, two new powers, United States and Japan, started to rise, even though they didn't play their corresponding roles in the international scenario.

The lack of participation of the United States and the Soviet Union in the system that was born in Versailles (neither nation was member of the Society of Nations) and the search for a new balance, made this period a transition stage. And transitions open up new frontiers and give new opportunities of action in international politics.

### 1.2. The situation of Spain in the international system

Spain, which was neutral during the war, had no particular separation from the past in 1928. The change of regime did not come until 1931 with the arrival of the 2nd Republic, although the time period that represents the Dictatorship of General Primo de Rivera has to be considered.

If transitions are useful to make internationalists fantasise, they also let us know up to what extent the nations' foreign policy is affected by a series of factors that go beyond the political system of that time, or, on the other hand, are the result of the domestic policy.

Not all nations have the same interests. An Olympic medal or winning an international championship, for example, don't have the same value for a small country than for a large one. Therefore, the nations can use sports for different goals, and this is why we need to know which role, which part a specific country wants to play or is able to play, to see which model of exploitation is more appropriate.

The spectrum of theoretic possibilities offered by the unstable international situation didn't seem to run out in real terms in the case of Spain. Neither the changes within the Monarchy nor the Republic result in any separation with the traditional Spanish foreign policy. According to M<sup>a</sup> de los Ángeles Egido:

"The Republic, regardless of its intentions, represented a continuity regarding the ideas of foreign policy of the previous period. In fact, the basic orientation towards the French-British block was maintained, although no alliance to ratify this was signed. Neutrality as an official policy remained untouched, as well as a desire of co-operation and altruistic friendship with all nations, in that moment within the Society of Nations, tactically co-operating with the neutral countries and paying special attention to

those countries with our language and culture"

(Egido, 1990, p. 611)

The possible changes that could have occurred in the Spanish foreign policy once the Republic was proclaimed were not materialised because of lack of definition of the politicians in charge, for the existence of a diplomatic body unfamiliar with the new regime, and also due to the lack of continuity of the decision makers. In the last twenty months before the coup d'état of 1936 there were five different ministers in charge of the foreign relations.

We must then debate the existence of a political desire to carry out a specific foreign policy. We must also try to see whether the strategic and economic situation and the military powers allowed any level of autonomy in this sense, that is, if Spain could afford its own foreign policy.

## **2. The 1936 Popular Olympiad of Barcelona**

### **2.1. Background**

Before Barcelona was nominated in 1986 to organise the Olympic Games of 1992, the city had been candidate many times before. In the period between wars, there were many attempts to hold the Olympics in Barcelona in 1924, 1936, and 1940. The series of failures that Barcelona suffered serve as a model to study the characteristics of Olympism in that time and also show how the Olympic Movement, for good or for bad, has progressively changed its role in the international setting, although, still maintaining some specific traits throughout its history.

The steps that Elias i Juncosa took to try to influence the Baron de Coubertin to choose Barcelona as the host city of 1920 have to be considered as another attempt. Andreu Marcé Varela talks about this first attempt. This time Spain succeeded in staying neutral during the war that had recently finished. This is why it had not been stirred by destruction like many other places in Europe. For the first time, the action was little more than an endeavour, it was a personal negotiation.

The case of 1924 was a more formal request, but the president of the IOC, Baron de Coubertin, had expressed his desire to preside over the Olympic Games once more in Paris after the 1900 failure. However, we must mention a series of events regarding the relations between sponsors of the candidature of Barcelona'24, the Catalan society that was governed by regionalists and the Spanish Olympic Committee (COE). In 1920, the president of the COE, Marquis de Villamejor sent a telegram to the sponsors which said:

"...the IOC unanimously vetoed the Catalan society's proposal of celebrating the next Olympiad in Barcelona. The Spanish Committee requested the Olympiad to be celebrated in Spain. This petition was taken into consideration to take the final decision, since Italy and the United States have made the same request"

(Santacana, 1990, p. 41)

After the relevant judgements, the IOC reminded that the Games were attributed to a city, never to a country. The candidature of Barcelona was finally accepted.

For the 1936 and 1940 games, the rebuff of the Barcelona candidature was due to two kinds of reasons. The first kind was related to the international situation. The increasing importance of Olympism due to the aforementioned reasons resulted in more and more competition when the time came to nominate an Olympic host city. Furthermore, there was a long waiting list. In 1931, Rome and Berlin also wanted to be host city when it was time to choose the place where the 1936 Games were to be held. In the case of Berlin, who finally took the games home, we must realise that it had already been chosen for the 1916 games, and that the new situation after the alliance between France and the Weimar Republic faced a new era of peace in Europe. Granting the games to Berlin was a gesture of obvious political tendencies to support the distension.

The second kind of reason has to be found in very curious coincidences. In Barcelona there should have been a session of the IOC in which the site of the 1936 Games should have been chosen. But the date set was towards the end of April. The proclamation of the Republic, although it was in an orderly manner, with few incidents, didn't stop the fathers of Olympism from worrying, the majority of which refused to come to Barcelona, so they sent their vote by mail.

During this session, the approval of the Barcelona candidature for the 1936 Official Olympic Games should have been made. According to Alfred Bosch, in his study about the evolution of Olympism in Barcelona:

"There was tension among the representatives of the Spanish Olympic Committee and the Republican head charges, which exploded when La Marseillaise was to be heard: the Baron de Güell himself seemed to contribute persistently to discredit his own project"

(Bosch, 1992, p. 36)

If this took place in 1931, we must think that the leftist victories in the 1936 elections would have alienated the Spanish sports executive charges even more from that moment's political reality, even though the composition of the Spanish Olympic Committee had slightly changed since the arrival of the Republic.

### **The framework of the Popular Olympiad of 1936**

The frustrated popular Olympiad that should have taken place in Barcelona in July of 1936 is one of the few sports events of an international sort, not only of a bilateral sort, that had a city of the Spanish Republic as a stage.

The Popular Olympiad of Barcelona was never opened, because the day planned for the opening ceremony was the day that the Spanish Civil War broke out. This results in not being able to base the later analysis on what would have happened, but only being able to consider the actors and factors implied in the preparation of this sports festival.

### **The legal framework: why in Barcelona?**

An article of the conservative Barcelona newspaper *La Veu de Catalunya* on July 15th of 1936, which accused the Popular Olympiad that was about to start for being communist, said that there were two reasons why Moscow chose Barcelona as the site for the sports encounters that was going to begin: for being the first sports city of the peninsula and because it had the best facilities. What the article did not mention was why there was a Popular Olympiad in Barcelona and not in another European city. Among the causes that can explain the reasons why a popular Olympiad was to be held in Barcelona are its tradition in sports, Olympics, working-class movements, nationalism and association.

### **The sports tradition**

The sports tradition in Barcelona had different characteristics from the rest of Spain. It is agreed that everywhere sports are born as a private activity, and that initially, the State has no voice in it. But when the Great War arrived, this activity was not a feud from the aristocracy anymore (we can think of boxing, fencing, and riding) and on the other hand there were sports that were linked to the industrialised bourgeoisie (for example, motor sports). The dedication to sports at the beginning of the century, whether it was aristocratic or bourgeois, was of an elitist kind. It is no surprise that this bourgeois sport precisely was most popular in Catalonia, the most industrialised zone of the peninsula.

It is interesting to see the difference among the sports practised in Madrid and in Barcelona before the war of 1914. While in Madrid there was a predominance of military-like sports such as shooting, fencing, and riding, in Barcelona there were sports like car racing, or maritime sports, (Barcelona is by the sea).

During this pre-war period there is no implantation of the king of sports: athletics, which will not have much repercussion until the 30's.

### **The working class movements and associative traditions**

In the period between wars there were two elements that were closely linked to each other that grew in importance: on one hand, the social changes, a better organisation of working class associations allowed an increase in free time, and sports was an important part. On the other hand, the intervention of the governments in sports was increased once they discovered the influence of sports.

Barcelona, head in working class struggles and in trade union movements since the 19<sup>th</sup> century was in a good condition to call the working population to a sports event such as the Popular Olympiad. However, regardless of the city's working class movement tradition and sports tradition and the industrial region that surrounds it, there was no implementation of the international working class sports. Maybe it had something to do with the existence of an anarchist working class movement, and with the fact that the practice of sports was carried out in the sports facilities of non-partisan popular cultural associations, even if they were working class.

Anarchism is considered as a significant element of Barcelona within the working class movement. However, there are no anarchist international sports competitions. A possible explanation is given by Santacana i Pujades (Santacana, 1990, p. 60) in believing that the anarchist leaders had neither interest in sports nor in physical education. Nonetheless, many of the popular cultural associations from Barcelona were formed by anarchists, as well as many of their components of their sports and gymnastic sections. Why wasn't this interest towards the sports of the anarchists as individuals exploited? We may find an explanation in the fact that the goal of the popular cultural associations was for leisure purpose and to obtain a larger cultural development of its members, and did not want to separate sports from the other activities. This means disregarding the competitive spirit that usually goes along with sports.

On the other hand, there have always been some sectors within the anarchist movement itself or in the leftist movements regardless if they were working class or not, that have believed that sports were a way of wasting time, time that could have been invested in the struggle to obtain the political and economic power (Steinberg 1978, p. 233).

Therefore, the bases of working class sport tradition that will make the organisation of the Popular Olympiad in 1936 possible are the popular cultural associations, the working class sports clubs and base sports associations. They are mainly of a basic sort, and they reached their highest point in times of the Republic.

### **Sports as a tool of national re-establishment**

Sports were also considered as a tool of social cohesion, of group identity. The perception of this possible instrumentalization of sports has not been as fast everywhere. The history of sports and Olympism is very linked to the fact of the governments', the political parties', and also of the economic powers' assumption of the possibilities that sports offer. We spoke earlier about the lack of perception, of the little "perspective" that the anarchists sports leaders had. They were not the only ones. The *Rapport Intermédier* already said that when Hitler came to power, "il n'a, de toute évidence, pas eu conscience de l'énorme potentiel politique de ces Jeux" (p. 79). The new German authorities would soon learn.

In the case of Spain and Catalonia, the public institutions and the political parties also learned that sports were a socialising element, in this case at national or state levels. And this meant the beginning of sports politics that made the number of participants increase during this period. The popularisation of sports was also provoked by Olympism and the sports press.

With the arrival of General Primo de Rivera's Dictatorship in 1924 and the suppression of the Catalan Society, sports are another element to strengthen the nationalist feeling. This can be seen from *La Rambla* newspaper. Sports, just like it would happen in the years during the other Spanish dictatorship, sports served as a substitute to the prohibited nationalist political activities.

With the proclamation of the Republic in 1931, the political parties (nationalists and others) declare as theirs the ideals of healthy life, companionship, mirrored in the example of the Czech sokols. This evidence favoured the creation of young associations, that some would think of as being too similar to the paramilitary youth organisations that existed in countries with a fascist or nazi government. This is why the *Juventuts d'Esquerra Republicana JERC* (Youths of Left Republicans) had to fight to prove that their ideal was Baden Powell's scout movement and not the tune of the "Giovinezza".

### **The state framework**

The spirit that made the organisation of the Popular Olympiad possible was very close to a political event of state significance: the victory of the left in the Spanish general elections in February 1920. The result of the elections represented a change in the Madrid government, but also the recuperation of the Catalan institutions that had been suspended after the October 1934 events. Among the winning parties there was also a novelty: the formation of a Popular Front, the same way as it had been done in France, and in which small left wing liberal parties, communist parties and socialists would also participate.

These three elements should have given confidence to the Barcelona organisers: national freedom was given back, and harmony with the state government was obtained. The leftists were united, and regardless of France's slow pace there was also a Popular Front victory in the elections held between April and May of 1936, which means that the relations between the Spanish and French governments should have theoretically been good.

### **The European framework**

The month of July of 1936 was decisive for the evolution of the security system that was designed just when the Great War had finished. The presence of the Negus in Geneva did not avoid the elimination of the sanctions imposed on Italy by the Society of Nations for being an aggressor power. The German occupation of the Rhineland and the impunity with which Italy had conquered Abyssinia showed during that July that the SDN, formerly considered as the answer to the dangers of a new war, did not have enough authority to keep the international order. The voices that believed that the bridles of international sports should go from the IOC to a more democratic institution, such as the SDN itself, remained behind. (And paradoxically, it seems that the IOC benefited from the weakness of the SDN, thus growing stronger.)

The fact that the occupations came from both fascist regimes implanted in Europe can explain the electoral coalitions formed the previous year by the socialist and communist parties of the democratic countries, which were formally against each other. The rise to power of the Popular Front after the February 1936 general elections puts Spain in the same level as its neighbour France, where the Popular Front parties

would soon later win the elections.

And among the fighting battlefields against fascist totalitarianism, there was one which was particularly appetising: the preparation of the Berlin Olympic Games, planned for the summer of 1936.

In 1936 there were some changes in relation to the previous games. Before, the government had supported the official Olympic Games, whereas the other working class sports events were only promoted by trade union organisations and leftist policies. With the Popular Front, the leftist thrust was much stronger, moreover, there were governments that had socialist and communist parties. What attitude towards the official Olympic Games will they take?

Will they act like state serving institutions or as institutions serving the class they represent? Barcelona's Popular Olympiad is a good example to see and understand the class relations and the limits of the European leftist union's supposed force. In the case of France, it seems that Blum's government saw the importance of sports creating a Council of Sports and Physical Education, including members of the FSGT (Fédération Sportive et Gymnique du Travail), a new organisation which had been the result of the merge of the communist and socialist sports associations. The Popular Front acted in its best behaviour, and this implied keeping the previous government's decision of not boycotting the Berlin games, a decision that had been taken on March 19<sup>th</sup> 1936, before the elections, but including a grant for France's participation in Barcelona's Popular Olympiad. (Santacana, 1990, p. 87).

### **The situation of the working class internationals**

The communist and socialist parties' policies of creating a Common Front against fascism with the name of Popular Front was also backed by their respective trade unions. And as a rebound, the international working class associations were also invited to work jointly, although they had been battling almost to death in the past. The degree of relation between the associations and the members of the former Red International and those of the Luzerna Socialist International varies from one place to another. In this present case regarding the Popular Olympiad, this situation of "official honeymoon" among the different working class sports groups was in theory a good sign for the Barcelona call.

## **2.2. The organisation of the Popular Olympiad**

### **The CCEP**

The idea of organising a Popular Olympiad in Barcelona started from the bottom, according to an idea of the Comité Català pro Esport Popular (CCEP) (Catalan Committee for Sports), a group of sports and cultural organisations from Barcelona, which was born shortly after the 1936 elections with the purpose of reinforcing sports among workers. The CCEP was born without any ties with the power, but was in tune with its anti-fascist tendency.

Its first initiative was the celebration of a sports festival as a sign of solidarity with Thaelman, a German athlete imprisoned for being communist. The Thaelman Cup was an act in favour of an athlete and against

a government in whose capital the Olympic Games were about to start. This can make us understand that there was a heated climate during the attempt to organise the parallel games, the Popular Olympiad in Barcelona. If we take into consideration the fact that the Games were planned to take place in August and that the Thaelman Cup took place in April, there were only three months left to prepare the Popular Olympiad.

The fact that the CCEP was able to take care of the organisation of such an important international event in such a short period can explain that in the tasks dealing with the Popular Games of Barcelona one must talk about other initiatives.

So Alfred Bosch mentions the possibility of the idea coming from the ambassador from the Soviet Union, Antonov Ovsenko, to which working class institutions summed themselves up.

Paul Martin considers the Spanish government as the sponsor of the Popular Olympiad:

“The Spanish Republican Government called for a demonstration against the Berlin Olympics by holding an alternative Popular Olympiad, at the sports stadium in Barcelona. This was done by appealing to worker’s sports groups throughout Europe and elsewhere in the world to send teams for the competition and in doing so, presaging the appeal for international volunteers – the International Brigades – for a more desperate cause in the imminent future”

(Martin, 1992, p. 8)

The international situation can explain that the call made by the CCEP had a rapid response in Europe, and especially in the other places where there was a government of the Popular Front. It would not have been possible without the European working class organisations, but the Barcelona Olympiad was not a Working Class Olympiad, and its purpose was not testing whether the translation of the agreements between communists and socialists in the field of sports were carried out without any problems. Here we can find a little bit of everything. From the participation as a support group of the Federación Cultural Deportiva Obrera (Working Class Cultural Sports Federation), with its headquarters in Madrid, to the rejection of the POUM, a communist party who considered the Olympiad as socialist.

The Popular Olympiad was not a Working Class Olympiad, like the one to be held the following year in Antwerp. This fact, the lack of specifications of the Barcelona games, lead to all sort of speculations.

### **Financing**

According to the local press of June and July of 1936, the financing of the Popular Olympiad came from four main sources.

- a) The most important amount of money came from the grant of the Popular Front government ... from France, who donated 600,000 pesetas, while it was also financing the stay of French athletes in Berlin.

The Barcelona press did not specify the advance payment of this amount, so they could not know if this money was meant to pay the expenses of the numerous French representation that had to come to Barcelona or if it was to be paid to the organisers of the Popular Olympiad.

- b) The Spanish central government, also formed by members of the Popular Front, decided during its Council of Ministers of July 3<sup>rd</sup> to follow the steps of its French equivalent, and decided to give a 250,000 pesetas grant for the Popular Olympiad “in favour of which the French government has made a reputable effort” the way the Spanish government considered it in a press release given when the grant was made public. Just like Blum’s cabinet had made, Madrid also authorised and financed the swimming team and a Modern Pentathlon team so they could participate in the Berlin Official Olympic Games as well. With this choice, it was obvious that, at least in Europe, there would be no boycott in the Berlin Games.
- c) The Autonomous government of the Generalitat de Catalunya also decided to help finance the Popular Olympiad with 100,000 pesetas. Precisely on Thursday, July 17<sup>th</sup> during the last session of the Catalan Parliament before war broke out, this matter was discussed.
- d) The Barcelona City Hall offered the sports facilities to the Organising Committee, and also decided to give a grant in cash. But no newspaper ever mentioned the amount donated.

### **Participation**

The delegations that had to participate in the Popular Olympiad could do so in three ways: nationally, regionally, and locally. Therefore, there was an Algerian delegation, and also one from Oran. The nationalisation of the Official Olympic Games was thus broken.

According to Santacana i Pujadas, 6,000 athletes were supposed to come, out of which half were the Spanish, Galician, Basque, and Catalan delegations. Of the other 3,000, half were from France.

The Popular Olympiad would have been practically European, if it had not been for the planned participation of a delegation from the United States and of a 6-athlete Canadian team. There were also athletes from Algeria and from the French and Spanish protectorates of Morocco who would have participated, as well as a Palestinian delegation. But in the case of the North African and the Palestinian athletes, they were of European origin, without participation of Arabic or Berber athletes.

### 2.3. Perception: Popular Olympiad or folklore week

The ambiguous characteristic of the call made by the Popular Olympiad had many types of different interpretations, both in the political and in the sports scenes, in Spain and abroad.

#### The organisers

The ambiguity starts from the organisers themselves. Thus, in the debate of the Parlament de Catalunya (Parliament of Catalonia) of July 17<sup>th</sup>, while the socialist deputy Fronjosa said that a Popular Olympiad was just about to be held, another deputy, Mr. Fontbernat talked about a Popular Sports Week.

A third name that would appear was the “Sports and Folklore Week”. Including the word folklore was not only a solution to avoid problems and to water down the characteristic of parallel Olympiad that some had given to the Barcelona sports festival, but it was reality. If we see the members of the different delegations, we can find musical groups and traditional dance groups.

#### The political groups

The organisers of the Popular Olympiad never hid their anti-fascist nature, although they never established clearly their socialist nor their communist nature. This is why the perception of the Popular Olympiad by the political parties and by the left-wing or right-wing press was naturally different.

##### a) The Left

The position of the left in Spain and in the rest of Europe was favourable to the celebration of the Popular Olympiad. The working class sports international also supported it, even though unlike other times, they did not organise it. The Barcelona games were a good occasion to show the working class protest for the games. The ambiguity of the goals made comfortable those who saw in Barcelona the chance to prove the strength of the working class power, of the ability of organisation of the working class, of the left wing parties, and those who believed that a sports celebration like the one planned in Barcelona was a good way to oppose the Berlin Games.

However, other minorities, like the POUM, unhappy with the alliance between the socialists and the communists, believed that popular sports were equal to bourgeois sports and opposed the Popular Olympiad.

##### b) The Right

The ideological burden of the Barcelona call was not well seen by the right wing. The division of the Spanish political spectrum, and in a certain way, the European one as well, in two opposed blocks made the press that was in favour of the right wing parties favour the European fascist points of view, and attack the Barcelona Games organised by the left. There are different types of complaints between the Barcelona and the Madrid right. In the capital, they spoke about a separatist Olympiad in Barcelona, and the right wing newspaper *La Veu de Catalunya* pointed out that the propaganda made for the Popular Olympiad was in Spanish and not in Catalan.

Besides these differences caused by the Catalan matter, the attacks made by the right to the Popular Olympiad coincide in many other subjects and were aimed at both the organisers and the participants.

c) The ideological axis regarding the organisers

The biggest reproach made to the Popular Olympiad was that it was work of the communists:

“Under this name that within itself constitutes a lack of correction, since according to the international Olympic canons, this name cannot be used without the proper authorisation, there are advertisements –in leaflets in Spanish that are given out to the public – which would better say Red Olympics. Because everything will be an exhibition of the colour red in all its senses, and its “last straw” will be the presentation of the Russian team. It is true that this presents a real legal type conflict to our home’s spirits with good faith who, appealed by the propoganda being made, will be willing to gather there”

“In sports, Russia, like in so many other things, lives outside any international relation, thus its Federations- the few ones that exist are not related to the international ones, and therefore the Russian athletes cannot be a part of any sports festival outside their country, neither can any athlete from other countries that are in possession of their rights as such cannot be a part of a contest with Russians – because they are out of the law in sports terms- under penalty of disqualification, that is, suspension of rights as such”

(*La Veu de Catalunya*, 2/7/72, p. 15)

Another name applied was International Jewish Olympiad. The reasons that the right-wing press had to give it this name were three:

1. The promised participation of a Palestine delegation exclusively made up of Jewish athletes, and another one made up of European Jewish immigrants.
2. The French Popular Front government that had given the largest grant for the Popular Olympiad was ruled by Leon Blum, who was criticised by *La Veu de Catalunya* the same day (July 2<sup>nd</sup>) for having “such a non-French name like Blum and for having such marked Semitic traits...”
3. The president of the organising committee had participated in Europe in protest acts for the bad treatment that the German Jews were receiving by the Berlin government.

**The name**

The name of Olympiad – regardless of its being popular – had all the characteristics of wanting to be a boycott or protest act against the official Olympic Games that were about to start in Berlin. For the League deputy Mr. Duran i Ventosa, the celebration of a parallel Olympiad represented an attack to Spain’s international commitments. For *La Veu de Catalunya*, it meant closing the doors and throwing away the key to any future possibility of organising the Olympic Games in Barcelona:

“Because of the leftists and the communists, disgrace will prevail over our city which will make it FOREVER impossible to ever be the city of the real Olympics. This is the effect of the sports comedy, which with the official grant of the Popular Front government is being prepared in our city.”

(*La Veu de Catalunya*, 8/7/36, p. 3)

### **The participants**

Another criticism that the Popular Olympiad received was saying that it would be a pathetic, second class Olympiad, with little participation of important athletes, who would have gone to Berlin. *La Veu* said that while the participants spend their time playing sports, they will not do any revolution. If this were to be read today, it will seem like there is a macabre foreseeing if we think that there was only one week left for the counter-revolutionary coup d'état that would lead to the civil war:

“While the communists and socialists from all the countries distract themselves playing ball, boxing, swimming, getting tired of running, we can be sure that they will not do the revolution. Because it would be an excess of evil that the red revolution would have to burst during the Great Week of the Olympic Comedy”

(*La Veu de Catalunya*, 7/7/36, p. 9)

### **2.4. The sports world**

The sports family's answer was varied in Spain as well as in Europe. The federations had three different attitudes. The International Federation of Walking Race was the only one to support the celebration of the Barcelona Popular Olympics. The International Amateur Athletics Federation said that it would not sanction the participating athletes, although it did not support this celebration. There were, however, some national federations in favour of it.

In Spain there were also the same divisions. According to Santacana i Pujades (Santacana, 1990), the only federation who openly opposed the Popular Olympiad was the athletics federation, whose president informed the international federations about the fact that the Spanish athletes were not authorised to participate in Barcelona's sports event.

The Spanish Olympic Committee (COE) was not favourable at the beginning. The Baron of Güell was not either. This posture cannot be surprising, since the IOC was interested in favouring the Berlin Games. Nevertheless, all the COE members showed to have a good political sense by not opposing frontally to the Popular Olympiad. This way, all those against the Berlin Games could dedicate themselves to prepare the Barcelona Games instead of boycotting the Berlin Games. Therefore, in the COE meeting held on July 1<sup>st</sup>, the following message was given:

“In relation to the numerous questions that have been made to the Committee about organising a popular sports competition in Barcelona, the COE considers in the case of making public that, regardless of all that could have had an appearance of antagonism with the significance and scope of the Olympic Games, according to the sense obtained from the authorised statements recently made public - only the competitions and events which due to their nature foster the development and diffusion of sports can be seen with satisfaction”

*(La Veu de Catalunya, 7/7/36, p. 25)*

### 3. Interpretations

#### 3.1. Berlin vs. Barcelona?

What were the goals of the Popular Olympiad? What relation did it have with the interest for Olympism in Catalonia?

The Barcelona Olympiad was not an answer to the interfering of politics in the world of sports, but an answer against the kind of politics that was favoured by the Berlin Olympiad. In this sense, it didn't use the double sense of the Olympic institutions, that is, it did not hide the ideological meaning of the Popular Games.

In a superficial level, the Popular Olympiad had many things in common with official Olympism: it shared the Olympic values of companionship, amateurism, and international solidarity. Besides, the majority of sports coincided, except for the introduction of rugby, chess or pelota, which were not Olympic sports.

But at a more abstract level, the Barcelona event reinforced the Eurocentric characteristic of both sports and participants, therefore, in this sense it did not break moulds with official Olympism, although the monopoly of state participation was broken with regional and local delegations.

Since the origins of the other European countries or from the United States had not been known, it is difficult to figure out up to which point the anti-fascist organisations from both sides of the Atlantic that were against the Berlin Games saw in Barcelona a serious opportunity to darken the success of Berlin. The organisers of the Popular Olympiad took advantage of the pro-boycott acts of the Olympic Games to obtain adhesions to the Barcelona event. But we do not have any proof to show up to what extent the sports delegations that were willing to come to Barcelona did so as a symbolic act of protest or with the goal to ruin the Berlin Games.

What we do know is that the Berlin Games were a success and on the other hand, the Popular Olympiad did not even start. Can we consider this fact as one more sign of the weakness –or lack of fore vision – of the European institutions, of the left in general, in front of the fascist danger? Was the Barcelona failure one more sign of the progress of the fascists who not being –or wanted to be- stopped would end up breaking up another war? There were too many speculations to be able to establish whether the case of

the Popular Olympiad had any significance in the world of international relations in periods between wars.

As we saw beforehand, the lack of belligerence of the Olympic authorities in regard to the Popular Olympiad can be interpreted as a way to protect the Berlin Games. A parallel celebration divided the energies, and made the opposition to Berlin worry about organising a sport festivity and not boycott the Official Games.

In any case, the effect that the Berlin Olympic Games had on the history of Olympism should be revised. Considered as a swallow that does not make a summer, their model has been to a great extent copied by the organisers of later Games.

### 3.2. The role of the Soviet Union

The absence of a Soviet Delegation in the participation of the Barcelona sports event is very significant. There are several interpretations. One can argue that the athletes did not come precisely as a sign of precaution of the Moscow sports authorities, who did not want to jeopardise the other participants. The fact that the Soviet athletes were not regulated by the international federations, could have caused problems.

However, this interpretation loses validity if we bear in mind that there was Soviet participation in the 1937 Working Class Olympics of Antwerp.

Nevertheless, there is a more political interpretation. With the entrance of the USSR in the SDN, there is an interest to participate in international institutions and bodies. Although their entrance to the Olympic family didn't take place until the fifties, right in the middle of the Cold War, the official Soviet posture was more and more favourable to Olympism, which at the beginning was considered an example of bourgeois sport. Thus, in 1939, an Olympic Day was celebrated in the USSR. (*Encyclopedia of the National Olympic Committees: The USSR*. Lausanne: CIO, 1979)

Not coming to Barcelona could respond to this interest in not confronting the Olympic movement, in the frame of a state policy which, for ideological reasons, is not used to being perceived as such, but as a partisan policy. The paradox of Stalin ready to defend state interests, interests of the international Communist movement as if they were only the working class has been much talked about.

The USSR's stand in relation to international sports is not very clear. Was Stalin interested in continuing to maintain the belief in proletarian sports and thus face it to the Official Games?

We should study whether if in the origins of the two working class Internationals there was the intention of opposing to bourgeoisie or the intention of obtaining hegemony within working class sports and thus confronting the other working class sports International. If the goal of the creation of the Red Sports International had this intention, then one can understand that in a moment when there was an interest in participating in the bourgeois sports competitions, the confrontation with the Socialist International would be senseless. This is why the goals of the Thorez Communists who went to Moscow in 1935 to ask for

Stalin's approval to their proposed alliance with the socialists, they received a yes for an answer.

There is still another subtle interpretation and which can probably be refuted: if the European social-democrat parties were considered bourgeois by the Communists, then the Popular Front politics from that moment represented an agreement with the bourgeois parties to confront fascism. And this tendency was to become more simple after considering the forced honeymoon with Germany to be over after the Von Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact. Thus, official Olympism as an expression of bourgeois sports was not an enemy anymore.

To the attempts of the socialist and communist organisations to make use of sports as a tool with which they could fight the class struggle, the USSR responded in an unenthusiastic manner. If from Moscow the official thesis had been the opposition to both bourgeois sports and to what was called social-democratic sports for such a long time, finally it decided to accept the rules of the game, the IOC or whichever name it was given. The sports popular front did not mean a union of both internationals against the IOC, but it meant its disappearance. The Barcelona failure is not only a sign of an anti-fascist romantic struggle, but also a revelation of the states' interests applied to sports. Once more, Olympic sports were useful to reinforce the state's role, but at the same time, no matter how cruel it may sound, shortly before a war, they were useful to strengthen the world order.

### **3.3. The international brigades**

Until now we have not spoken about the supposed relation between the Popular Olympiad athletes' stay in Barcelona and the forming of the International Brigades a few months after. According to the testimony of some participants, there were athletes who, instead of returning to their place of origin, they added themselves up to the lines of people who were heading towards the Aragon front. However, we have not found any data of the possible relation between the pressure of the athletes of the Popular Olympiad and the later recruitment of volunteers for the International Brigades. We will therefore need a further revision of the information about the participation of foreign volunteers in Barcelona as a direct or indirect result of the Barcelona Popular Olympiad.

### **3.4. Limitations to the influence of sports in international relations**

There are criticisms to the influence of politics into sports, but we cannot find a way to be able to measure this possible influence.

There are limitations to the importance of sports in politics, but this limit paradoxically makes it more important in the world of international relations. One cannot generalize when speaking of sports as a war substitute. In any case, sports would be a substitute of a type of war considered as a sport. This "global town" feeling is obvious when there is a team or an athlete liked by the audience, then, all the original preferences are forgotten.

Thus, *El Sol*, said, referring to the Italy-Spain game in the 1934 World Cup:

“The final admiration of the Italian audience was very significant when they waved goodbye to the Spanish players in a standing ovation when they walked back to the changing rooms after losing”

(*El Sol*, 6/6/34, p. 8)

Finally, other problems referred to the lack of indications that allow us to evaluate in an impartial way all the sports events. This deficiency has many explanations. One could be the lack of confidence with which the studies between sports and politics are seen. Naturally, the complaint shows a specific political tendency. For example, there is an article in the sports magazine *El Sport* in the April 24<sup>th</sup> issue titled “Politics and soccer” (p. 6) which says, among other things:

“This title will probably surprise the reader, who will curiously ask himself, ‘what does soccer have to do with politics?’ These two male manifestations should not really have any relation, furthermore, they should be antagonic, since sports are the exteriorisation of force and nobility, and politics is the easy way of making all the dirty tricks a crystal reality. Through sports, man grows stronger and grows accustomed to sacrifice, and through politics, man grows accustomed to corruption and badness. This is why they should be antagonic in these two aspects, however, it is not like so. Sportsmen, unawarely and due to complying too much, have allowed the entry into their societies of those who live off politics, who with smart tricks have managed to impose themselves and become the ‘masters’...”

(*El Sol*, 24/4/34, p. 6)

### 3. 5. Evolution of the nationalist overtaking of sports by the State

**This evolution has two paths:**

- 1) The more importance given to sports, the more the state government worries about creating state level structures, of regulating it. We can see an example in the cycling races. The journals articles seldom mentioned what countries the cyclists were from. But in 1935, a Vuelta Ciclista a España was celebrated, which had many years of preparation. But the Volta Ciclista a Catalunya had started before.
- 2) Sports can be used as a cohesion substitute of state nationalism. In Spain, nationalism was a factor of cohesion and of modernisation of the state, a state that was not created by the will of the nationalists elites, as the case of the Italian or German reunion, or revolutions such as the French one, but was created through a longer process. Spain was a bureaucratic and centralist institutional structure under the power of a group of forces lead by what historians named the new oligarchy.

Social cohesion was obtained traditionally through the emotional identification of the population with religion. The birth of the modern European states made this identification pass on to the monarch. But the French and American revolutions broke this dynastic or religious “patriotism”. New justifications to demand

loyalty to the State were needed.

On the other hand, the supposed peninsular monitilism was also questioned throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. With the arrival of the Second Republic, some of the theorists of this new state nationalism came to power, to whom sports could be useful. One of their representatives, Manuel Azaña, would later be president of the Spanish Republic. Azaña believed that the monarchy and the Church were precisely the causes of the denationalisation of Spain, two institutions that made up the basis of Balmes's and Donoso Cortés's conservative nationalist theories.

This nationalism tried to change the perception that the centre had of the peripheral nationalists. To the conservative authors, everything that remotely sounded like separatism was a consequence of foreign influences willing to give an end to the Spanish "national" unity, however, to the reformist nationalists, what mattered was the future, a common joint project that was not afraid of non-state nationalism, too worried about the past.

This double interpretation of nationalism could serve as a base of study to develop linked hypotheses with the evolution of sports in Spain and the intense sports life in Catalonia and the Basque Country at the beginning of the century.

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