

# GERMAN GYMNASTICS ASSOCIATION (DEUTSCHE TURNERSCHAFT) IN RELATION TO SPORT MOVEMENT IN GERMANY BEFORE THE WORLD WAR I

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**Abstract.** Modern physical culture was one of the many important processes that have taken over the political, social, and cultural life in Germany in the second half of the 19th century. At the turn of the 19th century in Germany, two big middle-class organizations have been formed to deal with physical activity affairs: the German Gymnastics Association (Deutsche Turnerschaft; the Turnverein) and dynamically-growing English sports. The paper demonstrates the relations between the Turnverein movement and the world of sport in Germany at the beginning of the 20th century. The German Gymnastics Association, an organization founded in the 60s of the 19th century, had long-time achievements initiated by the work of Friedrich Ludwig Jahn. Simultaneously, the world of sport in Germany was concentrated on the newly-founded in 1904 German Olympics Committee – primary organization bringing together several various federations of sport disciplines. It was an organization primarily brought into existence to coordinate the debut appearance of the German Empire in the restored by P. Coubertain Olympic Games.

**Key words:** German Gymnastics Association, Deutsche Turnerschaft, Turnverein movement, German sports, Olympic Games, II German Empire

## Introduction

Modern physical culture was one of the many important processes that have taken over the political, social, and cultural life in Germany in the second half of the 19th century. Meanwhile, the Second Reich started suffering from the consequences of rapid industrialization, urbanization and social migration. The changes were primarily visible in the sphere of physical culture and ways of spending free time. Apart from the usual, sedentary ways of spending leisure time (sitting around in various types of catering and commercial premises), new and more active forms were introduced, with the most popular various kinds of English and French-originating sport disciplines. The latter was popular both among youth and adults. In Germany, physical activity evolved in three different directions. The first group consisted of 'pedagogical exercises' such as gymnastics, athletics, and field games; the second included the German Gymnastic Association [Deutsche Turnerschaft – DT], and the third – the so-called 'English

sports'. The latter, similarly to rowing, lawn-tennis, or horse riding, was originally the domain of the elite. Sport in the modern world was not so much a compulsion or an escape, but just an active way of spending free time. It was also some kind of identification of an individual with the local and national community outside of work and church, which constituted its greatest advantage (Nipperdey 1993; Glockle 1987).

The following considerations are focused on brief characteristics of the relationship between the German Gymnastics movement and the world of sport in Germany at the beginning of the 20th century. The Turners were members of the German Gymnastics Association, an organization founded in the 1868 of the 19th century. The initiator of Deutsche Turnerschaft was Friedrich Ludwig Jahn who is considered a spiritual mentor of this organization. After his death the reign of the German Gymnastics Association was taken over by the younger generation, including Theodor Georgii and Ferdinand Goetz. At the same time, the world of sport in Germany was focused around the German Olympics Committee, primary organization bringing together several various federations of sport disciplines, formed in 1904 by the German Reich. It was an organization primarily brought into existence to coordinate the debut appearance of the German Empire in the Olympic Games restored by P. Coubertain. The main activists of the organization were: Victor v. Podbielski, Willibald Gerhardt and the youngest in its elite executives - Carl Diem. Both the organizations worked simultaneously and independently with some unsuccessful attempts in cooperation (Lämmer 1999). Deutsche Turnerschaft members boycotted for 40 years Olympic Movement. During first Olympic Games 11 German turners took part without permission from DT. When they came back to Germany they were commonly condemned by turner organizations (Młodzikowski 1984).

## Discussion

From the very beginning of its existence, the Turnverein movement, in addition to the physical culture, was also involved in political activism, which German historiography is in full compliance with. The development period of the Turnverein movement fell into the time of the Napoleonic occupation. Several years after the death of Jahn, Prussia defeated Austria at Sadowa (Königrätz) and few years later brought France to their knees. The German Gymnastics Association [Deutsche Turnerschaft] was involved, actively or passively, in all of these battles (Lipoński 2012). After the reunification of Germany, the Gymnastics Association identified themselves with the conservative and monarchist legal and ideological bases of the state, drawing on the experience of fighting the Napoleon ruling as well as the magnitude and visionary of their leaders. National traditions in the field of material, ideological, and aesthetic values were considered by the Turners as sacred, timeless, and independent from any social or cultural changes. The importance of German unification and the sanctity of national values were of greatest importance (DTZ 92 1879; John 1980). To defend the actions of the German Gymnastics Association, its members appealed to the power of tradition, conspicuously glorifying German nationalism, and discarding the tradition of enlightenment and the West. The Turnverein movement wanted their actions to be perceived as an important contribution to the cultural development of Germany. To consistently uphold the movement's 'purity' the tradition, members of the movement, and the statutes came in hand – established in July 1868, in Weimar (Jahrbuch der Turnkunst, Gasch 1907).

The sport movement was a more recent social and cultural phenomenon. Sport promoted values unacceptable for the Turnverein movement, that is, individualism and competition. While the Turnverein movement was mainly based on the hierarchical social structures, demanding complete compliance with the organization's rules from its members, at the same time, sport and its structures were based on a voluntary participation (Eisenberg 1996). The

German Gymnastics Association did not wish for the invasion of Western influences on the tradition, customs, and German culture. Unfortunately, the dynamic changes in the world of politics, culture, philosophy, and educational concepts forced the association to 'loosen up' on the content and form, and to widen the range of practiced sport disciplines. Gradually, new forms, based on athletics and team games, started to appear. Still, the Turnverein movement effectively protected itself from the full adoption of the main characteristics of sport for as long as the end of the Great War (Eichberg 1980; John 1980).

In 1907, Fritz Groh, the editor-in-chief of the leading periodical 'Deutsche Turnzeitung' (DTZ), published an extensive article on the dominance of the Turnverein movement over sport. He perceived this superiority in several aspects. Firstly, the turnverein exercises "allowed to enjoy free, unfettered mobility of the body and physical activity." Secondly, it ensured "moral and ethical upbringing" – moral and physical strength. Thirdly, physical exercises, conducted in a particular community, made it more integrated in the spirit of common purpose and values (DTZ 1, Groh 1907). Without a doubt, the Turnverein elite was convinced to the almost ideal model of symbiosis between the individual and the community, developed under the guidance of Jahn. According to this model, any competition in its deepest form should be developed solely in the national-related field and constitute a way to physical development. The Turners believed that if every nation had developed their own, native games, there would be no place for the international Olympic Games to take place (DTZ 25, Groh 1913; Eichberg 1980; Ueberhorst 1971).

The majority of Turners considered "Festival of the German Turnverein", celebrated every five years and gathering crowds of athletic young people, much superior to the Olympic Games. All the celebrations were held in different cities of Germany, and apart from physical exercise presentations, the Turners sang, danced and recited poems in honor of Jahn and the victory over France in the years 1815–1870/71 (Krüger 2009). The Turners publicly propagated the German cultural heritage, unveiling thousands of plates and monuments, as well as planting dozens of the so-called "oak trees of Jahn" (John 1976). The Turnverein activists developed strategies to popularize the Turnverein ideas more widely in Germany, and what follows – recruiting more young people. They planned to introduce individual exercise program and philosophy to schools and the army, as well as members of the ruling dynasty, the elites, and the educated.

A sense of uniqueness of the Turners had influenced their approach to the idea of establishing a German alternative to the Olympic Games. In 1896, Emil v. Schenckendorff, the leader of a founded in 1891 Central Committee for Promoting Folk and Youth Games, applied to F. Goetz with an idea of organizing 'German National Holidays' that were supposed to take place in Leipzig, Germany, at the Monument to the Battle of the Nations. The German Gymnastics Association cooperated quite actively with the E. v. Schenckendorff's organization in terms of propagating the notion of popular games and building playgrounds; the idea of 'German Olympic Games' however was not seized by F. Goetz (DTZ 29, Reinhardt 1918).

This topic was long-discussed within the German Gymnastics Association. Eventually, it was decided to refuse the complicity, stating, among other things, that the so-called 'German Olympics' do not originate from the needs of the nation and do not correspond to the philosophy of the natural development propagated by the German Gymnastics Association. The official position, rejecting the proposals of E. v. Schenckendorff, was presented in a slightly milder form during the Turnverein Congress in Naumburg in 1899 (Neuendorff 1936). In his jubilee memoirs, published in 1906, F. Goetz explained the reasons for the rejection of the idea of 'German National Holidays' (Eberhardt 1906) which happened to be a huge surprise for the Central Committee for Promoting Folk and Youth Games. The organization had put a lot of effort in the popularization of German alternative to the idea

of international Olympic movement of P. de Coubertin (Raydt 1896; Deutsche Nationalfeste. Mittheilungen und Schriften des Ausschusses 1897). Meanwhile, the Central Committee for Promoting Folk and Youth Games made a decision to organize 'National Olympic Games', and confirmed the participation of Germany in the International Olympics (Krüger 1975; Stadion-Kalender für das Deutsche Reich 1913).

The identification of the Turnverein movement with the conservative, imperialistic and monarchist state was not without foundation. In 1907, the DTZ's editor-in-chief, expressed his full criticism towards the actions of the Empire's elite, accusing them of the alleged abandonment of the Turnverein movement for sport. In his opinion, 'higher classes' used sport as some kind of expensive drug which allowed them to "separate themselves from the rabble", deepening the gap between different social classes. The obsession with sport, was in his opinion, waste of money and energy. The pursuit of great sporting achievements was ruining the health of young people. As an example of the harmful effects of Anglo-Saxon sports, he pointed to the so-called 'six-day runs' and the marathon runs organized in 1912 in Stockholm, "which, according to him, were the very opposite of the health effects of physical exercises"(DTZ 25, Groh 1913). Sport itself, instead of serving the physical culture of men, became 'the product of fashion', with men being its victims. It lacked any creative, ethical, or aesthetic strength, with no national-related importance (DTZ 1, Groh 1907). The Olympic disciplines themselves were also criticized. According to Groh, physical exercises introduced to the International Olympic Games were mostly Anglo-Saxon originated – a place where the first international sport events were organized (Sepp 1913). Also the newspapers that marginalized the work on the Turnverein movement, at the same time eagerly informing about the latest victories in all sports arenas where "individuals gave away their own health for a simple entertainment of the heartless spectators" were scrutinized (DTZ 1, Groh 1907). It is worth noting that the majority of newspapers at the time presented a liberal and modern point of view (Wehler 2008).

While analyzing the type of conflict between the Turnverein and sport movements, it is worth to quote one of the leaders of the German Gymnastics Association, Edmund Neuendorff (Neuendorff 1936):

"A lack of nationalism and tendency for individualism have put sport in conflict with the Turnverein movement. What the Turners found the most repulsive in sport was the ultimate pursuance for the absurdly high performance and the accompanying absolute desire of winning."

At the beginning of the 19th century, the Turners started to sense that their cooperation with the establishment of the German Empire and the Hohenzollern dynasty is deteriorating. Main factors responsible for this situation included the abovementioned modernist processes together with the increasing popularity of the aforementioned 'English' sports, which were not any longer the domain of the elites. The Turners started to notice the changing interests of the monarchy and their continuous absence at subsequent German Turnverein Festivals. They could also feel that their 'bourgeois mentality' was presented both in the media and press – which now have become a modern communication society. In the expanding world of illustrated press (newspapers and magazines), the Turnverein periodical started to become practically invisible. One of the first signals of the changing – towards sport and the Olympics- interests of the ruling elite, was the designation by the German Reich Chancellor of his own son, prince Philipp Ernst zu Hohenlohe-Schillingsfurst, for the position of the president of the German Olympics Committee, formed for *Germany's participation in the Olympic Games* in 1896 in Athens. This project was supported by the Emperor himself (Krüger 1980; Naul and Lämmer 2002). In December 1895, the Turners declined their participation in the Olympics Committee.

Despite constant antagonism between the sport and the Turnverein notions, the Olympics movement became a platform for restricted cooperation between the German Gymnastics Association and German Olympics Committee. It was in the Turners' interest, despite the aversion towards the notion of Olympics, to find a way of amicable coexistence with the monarch and the sport movement. Before the breakout of World War I, there had been three such occasions. The first opportunity took place during the common organization of the VI Olympic Games in 1916 in Berlin. The involvement of aristocratic and middle-class Olympics enthusiasts did not allow the Turners to remain in full opposition. The beginnings of the cooperation, however, were not so promising for the German Olympics Association as the Turners declined their participation in the very first Olympics in 1896 in Athens, claiming that "it was in opposition with the German honor" (Deutsche Turnerschaft 1896). This attitude, however, due to the abovementioned reasons, had changed into more liberal one with time. In 1907, the German Gymnastics Association joined the German Olympics Committee, accepted its membership in the International Olympics Committee, and allowed for the participation of a group of Turners in the Olympics in 1908 in London. The Olympic Games itself, however, happened to be a great disappointment to the Turners, and as a result, their support for participation in subsequent editions of the Olympics was slowly decreasing (DTZ 1, Goetz 1907). Still, DTZ had a wide coverage on the V Olympics, which took place in 1912 in Stockholm. The second opportunity for the Turners was their active and grant participation in the national opening ceremony of the German Stadium in Berlin on June 8, 1913 – the stadium which was built with the large support of the ruling dynasty (Ueberhorst 1971; DTZ 44 1913; Diem 1913; Lennartz 1978). For the Turners, the opening ceremony of the stadium was an opportunity to present before the Emperor the physical and moral strength of its members (Reinberg 1913). The athletes, in turn, treated the event as an important step towards the 'Berlin Olympics' and the culmination of the entire organizational work of the German Olympics Committee (Diem 1965). It is worth noting that the Turners did not consider the German Stadium in Berlin to be 'the biggest stadium in the world', but a Kampfbahn in Leipzig, where in 1913 the XIII edition of the German Turnverein Festival took place (DTZ 25, Groh 1913). The third important event was the participation of numerous delegations of the Turners during the unveiling ceremony of the Monument to the Battle of the Nations at Leipzig on October 18, 1913. Another example of cooperation with sports officials was the joint participation in the IOC Congress in June 1914, where they discussed the Olympic Games in Berlin. (DTZtg, Toeplitz 1914; Lennartz 2005). Earlier, in March 1913, the representatives of the German Gymnastics Association participated in extraordinary general meeting of the German Olympics Committee, dedicated to the actions towards the organization of VI Olympic Games and its popularization in the country. At the end of June 1914, the Turnverein planned on the participation in the so-called 'Pre-Olympic Games' which were to be held at the German Stadium (DTZ 28 1914). The state supported this initiative with its authority and a grant in the amount of 300,000 German Marks. Even though, just before the outbreak of World War I, you could feel 'the spirit of national consent', the attempts of C. Diem to reach a compromise between sport and Turnverein movements presented in his brochure "Friede zwischen Turnern und Sport", had been rejected by the president of the German Gymnastics Association. The Turners finally accepted the idea of the Olympic Games in Berlin, mainly due to the fact that they had seen it as a chance to promote the successes of the Third Reich in terms of its economy, science, culture and the vitality of the German nation (Court 2008; Wege 1914).

The outbreak of World War I, and, above all, the prolonged conflict and its escalation, interrupted German dream of the Berlin Olympics. The cancellation of the Olympic Games has been accepted with joy by almost all (except the German Olympics Committee) sport organizations. The chairman of the German Combat Games

Committee, W. Rolfs, wrote that “the international bubble had burst” (DTZ 23, Rolfs 1918). The German Turnverein movement was carried along by the spirit of war against the long-loathed England and France, which they had associated with the Olympics ideals and sport. The war propaganda and the hostility towards the Entente were fully present on the pages of DTZ (DTZ 50, Lissauer 1914; DTZ 35, Winckler 1914).

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