

Investigation of the Reasons for the Ottoman Empire's Limited Participation in the Modern Olympic Games

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Abstract:

The Olympic Games organised in the ancient Greek civilisation was a formation in which only Greeks and men could participate and individual competitions were held. Years later, the work carried out by archaeologists and researchers in Olympia attracted the attention of Baron Pierre De Coubertin. These studies sparked the idea of creating the modern Olympic Games, a modernised version of the ancient Greek games. Thoughts such as the modern Olympic Games, providing a peaceful and goodwill environment, and being open to the whole world affected the perspective of the Ottoman Empire on the Olympics, and in this sense, the Ottoman Empire was also involved in the process of participation in the modern Olympics, albeit limited. The aim of this study is to examine the Ottoman State's perspective on the modern Olympic Games, to analyse the process of participating in these Olympics and to determine the reasons for the limited participation considering the conditions of the period, which first started in Athens in 1896 and the date of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. In the study conducted for this purpose, the conditions of the period in question were analysed and a literature review covering various articles and academic books was conducted. During the relevant period, the Ottoman Empire could not participate in the first Olympic Games due to financial difficulties and the oppressive regime; afterwards, this participation was made possible through individual efforts. The oppressive regime of tyranny imposed on Turks paved the way for the participation to be realised through non-Turkish athletes. In this sense, the reasons for the limited participation of the Ottoman Empire in the modern Olympics can be considered as financial impossibilities, the oppressive regime imposed, distance, the outbreak of the World War and the attribution of the responsibility to the Allied States in which the Ottoman Empire was located.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Ottoman Empire, modern olympics, repressive regime, coubertin.

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INTRODUCTION

The first Olympic Games in history are considered to be the sports festivals held in Ancient Greece in 776 BC next to the religious ceremonies held to commemorate the God Zeus (Kaçay & Soyer, 2020.) The Olympic Games organised at these dates were accepted as one of the most important activities of the period. Participation in these games, which were seen as socialising and integrating, was provided with certain conditions. There were certain criteria for participation in the games. The first and primary conditions were not to be dishonoured, not to be a heathen or a murderer, to be born to a Greek married couple, and to be free and male (Yıldırım, 2014). According to the understanding in ancient Greece, a beautiful body meant a beautiful character and morals. For this reason, the races were held naked and women were forbidden to participate and watch. The sanction for breaking the prohibition was the death penalty and the only female priestess exempted from this prohibition was known as the priestess of Demeter (Yıldırım, 2014). The reason why only the priestess of Demeter was allowed to watch the games and other women were not allowed was that it was accepted that the priestess of Demeter witnessed the death of a god; and it was decided that she could watch the Olympic Games, which already had dominant religious symbols. Single women participated in running competitions at the Hera festivals organised every four years (Ece & Çetin, 2021). Except for the Hera festivals, no woman was allowed to enter the races. The competitors participating in the games entered the camp called Elis a few months before the games, both participated in the selection process and trained intensively with their competitors. In addition, only individual sports were held during these Olympics; team sports, that is, competitions were not included. At that time, winning the Olympic Games was considered the most important virtue for athletes. The games, which continued for hundreds of years, started to be accepted as a pagan belief as a result of the Romans' domination of the region where the games were held starting from 146 BC. In 393 AD, Emperor Theodosius I completely abolished this tradition and the Olympic tradition was ended in this way (As, 2016).

Transition to Modern Olympics

It is reported in the sources that the first scientific studies at Olympia were initiated by the French Expédition de Morée in 1829 (Bengtson, 1983). After this date, detailed reports were produced as a result of the investigations carried out by the famous German researchers of the period. The detailed reports had fuelled Frenchman Baron Pierre de Coubertin, who had long espoused the sporting ideals of Olympia, to the idea of reviving the ancient Olympic Games and to the conclusion that France, too, could be restored to its former glory through the Olympic Games. In this context, at the International Sports Congress convened in Paris in June 1894 under the leadership of French sportsman Baron de Coubertin, the idea of revising the Olympics was put forward, and it was decided to hold the first modern Olympics in Athens and the second Olympics in Paris. In addition, in this congress; principles such as the Olympic Games to be travelling, the application of amateurism principles, and competing only in the older age category were accepted. Considering these principles, it can be inferred that the Olympic Games were open to all athletes from all over the world, and that there was a thought that the Ancient Greek culture would not be completely adhered to. Considering that there were countries such as Germany and Italy that had just completed their unity and that there was a possibility of a world war, one of the benefits of the planned modern Olympics was to maintain peace by reducing tensions between countries. Thus, it can be said that it was thought that thanks to the Olympics, relations would be strengthened and friendships would be consolidated.

Participation of the Ottoman Empire in the Olympic Games

Starting in 1896 with the games held in Athens, the Modern Olympic Games is an organisation with a unifying and integrative structure that is open to all countries of the world, regardless of religion, language and race. Countless countries have participated in the modern Olympics and records have been broken in countless branches. Since the beginning of the modern Olympics coincided with the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the participation of Turkish athletes in the Olympic Games until the proclamation of the Republic was only possible through their own efforts (Özdemir, 2013). Newspapers were advertised and athletes who could cover their own travelling expenses were sought. This can be attributed to the fact that from 1896 Athens, the date of the organisation of the modern Olympics, until the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the participation in the Olympics was marked with the names of athletes. In addition, due to the oppressive regime of despotism in the aforementioned period, both modern sports entered the Ottoman Empire late and the people involved in sports were foreign nationals. This, in fact, led to the late introduction of modern sports to the Ottoman Empire, which led to the late participation in the modern Olympic Games and the foreign nationality of the participating athletes.

1896 Olympic Games in Athens

In 1896, the first of the modern Olympic Games was to be held in Greece, more precisely in Athens. Since the ancient Olympic Games were also held in Greece, Athens was chosen as the venue for the first Olympic Games. Before the Athens Olympic Games were held, Baron Pierre Coubertin, known as the founder of the modern Olympics, asked a friend living in Istanbul to help him find a representative who could carry the leadership of the International Olympic Committee in the Ottoman Empire and send athletes to the Olympic Games, and the name suggested by his friend was Selim Sırrı Tarcan (Çelik & Bulgu, 2010). Baron Pierre Coubertin, who met with Selim Sırrı Tarcan, requested to send athletes to the Olympic Games on behalf of the Ottoman Empire. However, this request was rejected due to the heavy regime of oppression imposed in the country. However, there were athletes who heard that the Olympic Games would be organised and wanted to represent their country. For example, the first representative of the Ottoman Empire in the Olympics was Selim Sırrı Tarcan (As, 2016). About Koç Mehmed, he mentions that he heard that the Athens Olympics would be held and went to Athens "as if he was going to a wedding wrestling match", but the members of the organisation did not accept this individual attempt of an athlete from a country that was not a member of the International Olympic Committee and he could not participate in the wrestling (Karayel, 1939). This initiative of Koç Mehmed in the wrestling branch, which he undertook at his own expense and with individual efforts, is actually a demonstration of how strong the desire of Turks to represent their own country in the international arena is. At the same time, the problem of financial difficulties, which would cause problems for the athletes in the 1896 Athens Olympic Games, which was the first modern Olympic Games to be organised, first emerged here.

1900 Paris and 1904 St Louis Olympic Games

997 athletes from 24 countries and 19 different sports branches participated in the Paris Olympics, which took place between 14 May and 28 October, and there was no participation from the Ottoman Empire (As, 2016). The 1904 St. Louis Olympics was an Olympics in which many countries from Europe could not participate due to distance. The St. Louis Games, in which only 12 countries participated, were organised as an Olympic Games in which athletes from American colleges competed against each other. It can be concluded that the 1904 St. Louis Olympic Games were not sufficient for the participation of all countries of the world.

1906 Athens Inter Olympic Games

After the decision to hold the first Olympic Games in Athens and the second in Paris, the Greeks started to put pressure on Baron Pierre De Coubertin. Seeing the impact of the Olympic Games on the world public opinion, he proposed that the next Olympics be held in Greece. Coubertin, who did not favour this proposal, offered a compromise idea and proposed to organise the "Pan-Hellenic Games" in Athens every four years (As, 2016). This initiative could not be implemented due to the war between the Ottoman Empire and Greece; the first implementation date was 1906. In the games organised in Athens in 1906 on the occasion of the 10th anniversary of the modern Olympics, which will go down in history as the "intermediate Olympics", it was stated that athletes could compete on behalf of their country (Çelik & Bulgu, 2010). Therefore, the Ottoman Empire, which had not yet established a national Olympic society, had an opportunity to participate in the Olympic Games. According to a study, 30 athletes from the Ottoman Empire participated in athletics, gymnastics, fencing, wrestling and football, including 8 Greeks from Istanbul, 1 Armenian from Izmir, 10 British, 1 Jewish and 10 Greeks (San, 1988).

At the 1906 Athens Intermediate Olympic Games, the most important achievement among the athletes from the Ottoman Empire was achieved by Yorgo Alibrantis from the Tatavla Heraklis club in Istanbul. Since the rope climbing competition was later removed from the Olympic Games, Yorgo Alibrantis still holds the world record. Although it was first reported that athletes competed on behalf of the Ottoman Empire in these games, the IOC (International Olympic Committee) announced that these games were not an official Olympiad (Koryürek, 2003: 18). The announcement that these Olympic Games were not official means that the Ottoman Empire did not officially participate in the Olympic Games. It can be argued that this situation occurred as a result of the second problem, the late establishment of the Ottoman National Olympic Association.

1908 London Olympic Games

A total of 2008 athletes, 1971 men and 37 women from 22 countries, participated in the Olympics held in London in 1908 (As, 2016). Sources generally mention only one athlete competing on behalf of the Ottoman Empire. The only athlete mentioned is Aleko Mullos. Aleko Mullos was a student of Galatasaray Mekteb-i Sultanisi, which was opened on the model of French schools at that time. When Baron Pierre de Coubertin met with Selim Sırrı Tarcan to propose the establishment of the Ottoman National Olympic Committee, Aleko Mullos was also present. Because Aleko Mullos was also fluent in French. Therefore, he translated Baron Pierre de Coubertin's French speeches to Selim Sırrı Tarcan in Turkish and conveyed the Turkish equivalents to Coubertin in French. Therefore, Aleko Mullos acted as Baron Pierre de Coubertin's guide and interpreter. Coubertin was very pleased with this situation, and when he learnt that the Ottoman National Olympic Committee could not be established, he asked Aleko Mullos to participate with a personal invitation. In response to this invitation, Aleko Mullos participates in the Olympic Games in London in the gymnastics branch. However, the fact that Aleko Mullos participated with a personal invitation means that the Ottoman Empire has still not participated in the Olympic Games.

1912 Olympic Games Stockholm

The games were held in Stockholm, Sweden between 5 May-27 July. Due to the war environment in which the Ottoman Empire was in, it was unable to meet the expenses of the athletes who would go to the Olympic Games. Seeking a solution for this, the Ottoman Empire saw the solution in finding athletes who could participate with individual means. For this purpose, athletes who could participate in the Olympic Games were sought through newspaper

advertisements. Hearing that the costs were too high, many athletes gave up to participate. Therefore, the inability of the Ottoman Empire to meet the expenses as a result of the economic situation it was in resulted in low participation. The Ottoman Empire participated in the 1912 Stockholm Olympic Games with two athletes from the Armenian minority in athletics, Mıgırdıç Mıgıryan and Vahram Papazyan, who had previously participated in the 1906 Athens Intermediate Olympics. These two Armenian athletes participated in the games on behalf of the Ottoman Empire with their own means (As, 2016). Mıgırdıç Mıgıryan competed in two-handed shot put, normal shot put, discus throw, pentathlon and decathlon.

Papazyan, who was not as well off financially as Mıgıryan and was the son of a newsagent living in Bebek, first applied to the Ardavast club, of which he was a member, in order to find financial support to participate in the Olympics. The club organised a night for Papazyan at the Greek Theatre in Arnavutköy, and with the income from this event, financial support was provided for participation in the Olympics (100 Years of the National Olympic Committee of Turkey 1908-2008). Papazyan participated in the 800 metres and 1500 metres races and was unable to complete both races. In addition, this Olympic Games was the first Olympic Games in which the Ottoman Empire officially participated. However, the fact that the participation was realised with two people can be said to be due to the inadequate financial situation of the Ottoman Empire.

1916 Berlin and 1920 Antwerp Olympic Games

In 1916, the city of Berlin was chosen as the host city for the Olympic Games. World War I, which broke out while Berlin was preparing for the Olympic Games, prevented the Olympic Games from being held. The 1916 Berlin Olympics was therefore the first Olympic Games to be cancelled due to war. The Olympic Games, held in Antwerp, Belgium in 1920, two years after the end of the war, were marked by the war process and the war criminals of the alliance states (Germany, Austria, Hungary, Bulgaria and the Ottoman Empire), which were the losers of the war, were accepted. Since the peaceful aspect of the Olympic Games was emphasised, 5 countries, including the Ottoman Empire, were not officially invited.

The Ottoman Empire originally participated in Stockholm in 1912 and planned to participate in the 1920 Antwerp Olympic Games. As a result of the 1st World War, it was not possible to participate in any Olympic Games until its collapse due to the fact that the war bill was cut to the Allied States. Thus, the Ottoman Empire's adventure of participating in the Olympic Games came to an end.

CONCLUSION

The Olympic Games organised in the ancient Greek civilisation were an individual sporting event in which only Greeks and men could participate. Years later, the work done by archaeologists and researchers in Olympia attracted the attention of Baron Pierre De Coubertin and sparked the idea of creating the modern Olympic Games, a modernised version of the ancient Greek games. Thoughts such as the modern Olympic Games being open to all countries of the world and providing a peaceful and goodwill environment influenced the Ottoman Empire's perspective on the Olympics, and in this context, the Ottoman Empire was also involved in the process of participation in the modern Olympics, albeit in a limited way. In 1896, a wrestler named Koç Mehmed travelled to Athens for the Olympic Games, but his application was rejected and he was sent back. In 1900 Paris and 1904 St. Louis Olympic Games, the Ottoman Empire did not participate. In 1906 Athens, the Ottoman Empire

participated with 30 athletes, but since it was not an official Olympic Games, the Ottoman Empire did not participate. In 1908 London Olympic Games, Aleko Mullos participated with a personal invitation as a result of Coubertin's guidance, which leads us to conclude that this Olympic Games also took place without the participation of the Ottoman Empire. 1912 Stockholm Olympic Games was the first and last modern Olympic Games in which Mıgırdıç Mıgıryan and Vahram Papazyan participated in the athletics branch and the Ottoman Empire participated for the first and last time. The World War I that broke out afterwards prevented the 1916 Berlin Olympic Games from being held. In the 1920 Antwerp Olympic Games, the Ottoman Empire, Austria, Hungary, Bulgaria and Germany were not invited because they were war criminals. When the periods are analysed, it is seen that the Ottoman Empire could not participate in the first Olympic Games due to the financial impossibilities and the oppressive regime it was in; afterwards, this participation was made possible through individual efforts. The oppressive regime of tyranny imposed on Turks paved the way for the participation to be realised through non-Turkish athletes. In this sense, the reasons for the limited participation of the Ottoman Empire in the modern Olympics are seen as financial impossibilities, the oppressive regime imposed, the late establishment of the Olympic Society, remoteness, the outbreak of the World War and the attribution of the responsibility to the Allied States in which the Ottoman Empire was located.

Ethical Text

In this article, research and publication ethics rules are followed. The responsibility of any violation regarding the article belongs to the author(s).

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