

#39 Fate of the Olympic Games

“The Olympics are called off for the present. The world is too serious. Nothing doing anywhere until the Prussian savages are beaten.” January 25, 1918, *Kinsley Graphic*

With the 2018 Winter Olympics coming up in South Korea, this little item caught my attention. I knew that the 1940 and 1944 Olympic Games had been cancelled because of World War II. I did not know what happened to the Olympics during World War I. After doing a little research, I discovered that the 1912 games had been played in Stockholm, Sweden. Before the outbreak of war, Berlin’s bid had been selected to host the 1916 games. Construction on a new stadium was begun and continued during the war as no one expected the war would last very long. But eventually the 1916 games had to be cancelled.

At this time there were only what we would call today the “Summer Games”. Winter Olympic Games had never been held. The Swedes had held the first Nordic Games in February, 1901. The Nordic Games were played about every fourth year until 1926. There was a movement to add some winter sports to the Olympic Games held in the summer. Figure skating was added to the program at the 1908 London Olympic Games held from April 27 to October 31, 1908

In 1911 it was proposed that the International Olympic Committee stage a week of winter sports included as part of the 1912 Summer Olympics in Stockholm, Sweden from May 5 – July 22. Sweden opposed this idea because they wanted to protect the integrity of their Nordic Games, and they were also concerned with a lack of facilities for winter sports during the summer. Plans were made at this time to add speed skating, figure skating, ice hockey and Nordic skiing to the 1916 Berlin Summer Games, but these Games would be cancelled due to the war.

Digging further, I think the *Graphic* news item above probably refers to a controversy going on even as the war raged. People were looking ahead to 1920 and some thought there could not be another set of Olympic Games for a great many years, certainly not within the present generations because it would require time to heal the wounds caused by the war between Germany and England.

Edward R. Bushnell wrote the following for the *Pittsburgh Press* on January 6, 1918:

“This sort of reasoning will not appeal very strongly to Americans for the simple reason that most persons in this country believe that when peace comes it will have wrought such radical and revolutionary changes in all the European governments that there will be more good feeling between the people themselves than most persons cannot appreciate. It seems to be the best thought of American statesmen that the time is not far distant when Germany will be something approaching a republic that the peoples will throw off the rule of the Kaiser. Assuming that something like this does occur the common people of all the governments now at war will undoubtedly discover that they have many things in common and that there is no reason to cherish the animosities for which Prussianism is entirely to blame, particularly if this Prussianism is completely crushed.”

The aftermath of the war and the Paris Peace Conference in 1919 affected the Olympic Games because of the new states that were created and because of the sanctions that were placed on the nations that lost the war and were blamed for starting it. The 1920 Olympic Games were held in Antwerp, Belgium, and Hungary, Germany, Austria, Bulgaria, and the Ottoman Empire were banned from competing in the Games.

Germany did not return to Olympic competition until 1928. Instead the Germans hosted their own series of games called *Deutsche Kampfspiele* beginning with the winter of 1922. This was two years before the first Winter Olympics Games were held from January 25 to February 5, 1924 in Chamonix in the French Alps. Berlin would eventually host the Olympics in the summer of 1936, twenty years after the 1916 Olympic Games were cancelled and on the brink of World War II.

