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Second phase of the Olympic Torch Relay between Parc Borély and the Palais du Pharo in Marseille, secured by police officers and gendarmes guarding the flame and escorted by a gendarmerie motorcyclist.

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“CITIUS, ALTIUS, FORTIUS”?

THE GENDARMERIE ENSURING THE OLYMPIC GAMES' SECURITY SINCE 1900

“Finally! After more than four years of intense preparation, France is about to host (...) the greatest global event that a country can organize: the Summer Olympic and Paralympic Games. The eyes of the world will be on you. I am counting on you—police officers, gendarmes, firefighters, bomb disposal experts, prefectural agents, intelligence services, municipal police officers, and private security agents—to uphold the honor of our country.” With this letter dated July 22, 2024, the Minister of the Interior underscored the scale of the challenge for the 45,000 men and women mobilized to secure the world's largest sporting gathering.

Whilst France has been chosen to host the Olympic Games several times since 1900, it faces multiple, sometimes unprecedented, security challenges for the 2024 edition. The expected 15 million visitors, both French and foreign, already provide an idea of the preparation efforts that were necessary. The National Gendarmerie is fully integrated into the security framework alongside other internal security forces.

But how have these military personnel been deployed in past Olympic Games, and to what extent? Were their missions different from those assigned to them today? What lessons have been learned from these past experiences? This article will first focus on the first Olympic Games and major sporting events of the early 20th century. The expertise gained during the Winter Olympics in 1968 and 1992 will be examined in the second part. Finally, the specific security arrangements for the 2024 Olympic Games concerning the Gendarmerie will be analyzed in the third part.

I) Learning to manage large sporting gatherings in the early 20th century

1) "The most important thing is to participate": What role for the Gendarmes in the 1900 and 1924 Olympic Games?

In terms of maintaining public order, the Maréchaussée, and later the Gendarmerie itself, had long been involved in overseeing large gatherings related to religious celebrations, fairs, and even horse races, much like the Seine Gendarmerie in the second half of the 19th century. However, at the dawn of the 20th century, the growing enthusiasm for major sporting events introduced new challenges for the gendarmes.

The first two Parisian editions of the modern Olympic Games, initiated by Baron Pierre de Coubertin, had relatively little impact on the gendarmes of the time. The 1900 Olympic Games, officially called the *"International Competitions of Physical Exercises and Sports"*, were overshadowed by the massive schedule of the Universal Exposition. Many athletes were barely aware that they were participating in the second edition of the modern Games!

By 1924, the responsibility for security primarily fell to the Paris Police Prefecture, which deployed a large number of police officers. These officers assisted numerous exhausted competitors who suffered from heatstroke during the cross-country race. During the marathon, archival footage reveals the presence of a few gendarmes stationed along the course.

At the time, authorities were less concerned about terrorist, anarchist, or “Bolshevik” threats than about pickpockets. “*Paris has arrested the world's greatest thieves*”, declared *La Liberté* on May 10, 1924, noting that these “champions” had come for the Olympic Games. Similarly, the problem of managing visitor flows, particularly from Paris to the Colombes stadium, is beginning to be clearly identified, although no effective solutions have yet been found. On-site, the minimal barriers separating the crowd from the field raised fears of chaos, especially during the rugby match between France and the United States on May 18, 1924. After a 17-3 defeat, 20,000 furious spectators nearly attacked the American players. Following this “Colombes riot”, rugby was banned from the Olympic Games.

2) The Tour de France and motor sports for provincial gendarmes

Although the gendarmes, historically dedicated to ‘policing the highways and byways’, had little impact on the Paris Olympics of 1920 and 1924, they did witness the popular craze for the exploits of the champions of asphalt and tarmac on their bicycles or in their racing cars.

Events such as Paris-Roubaix (since 1896), the Tour de France (since 1903), and Paris-Nice (since 1933) – as well as all their local variations – required gendarmerie brigades to adjust their service schedules when the races passed through their jurisdictions. Measures such as increasing personnel, eliminating night stages, shortening distances, and organizing finishes outside urban areas were introduced to minimize disruptions¹.

Historical images show the evolution of gendarme uniforms: during the first stage of the Tour de France in Montgeron in 1903, they wore hats and heavy boots, but by the late 1930s, they had adopted képis and gaiters. The creation of the Republican Guard motorcycle squadron in 1952 enabled gendarmes to escort cyclists more effectively.

The rise of motor sport in the Belle Époque led to even greater difficulties, as in the spectacular Paris-Madrid race organized in 1903. The 315 competitors, who set off from the capital, drove at more than 100 km/h on unpaved roads, so full of dust that ‘navigation’ was done by reference to the trees lining the tracks and in the midst of enthusiastic spectators totally unaware of the danger. Of the 315 vehicles lining up at the start, 75 didn't even make it to Bordeaux. A dozen people were killed in the accidents, including Marcel Renault, the brother of the famous carmaker. The *Petit Journal* reproduced the tragedy by drawing a gendarme helplessly watching the scene². Twenty years later, the gendarmes were more experienced when the 24 Hours of Le Mans were created.

II) The Winter Olympics in Grenoble (1968) and Albertville (1992): showcasing internationally the Gendarmerie's expertise

1) The 1968 Grenoble Olympics: "modern methods and resources for traditional missions"

Little involved in the 1st Winter Olympics in Chamonix in 1924, the gendarmes were more heavily mobilized for the 1968 Grenoble Olympics. This Xth edition took place in the Gaullian France of the ‘Trente glorieuses’, at the height of the leisure civilization, and just before the protest movement of May 68. Nearly 3,000 gendarmes converged from all over France. The Grenoble police headquarters, designed by the architect Kaminsky, served as the security headquarters³. The gendarmerie focused its attention on securing the flow of traffic from major cities to Grenoble and from the ‘capital of the Alps’ to the Olympic venues, at a time when the national motorway network did not exceed 1,000 km. The institution shows its modernity by communicating on the use of information technology to smooth traffic flow. A traffic PC was installed at the Grenoble Institute of Applied Mathematics, which had an IBM 7044 capable of calculating traffic time forecasts. Ten radio operators are on call to the 26 teams of two or three gendarmes stationed along the main routes to update traffic data. A total of 102 gendarmes were assigned to this task⁴. Calculations were based on measurements taken simultaneously and periodically (every quarter of an hour) on each stretch of road (entry flow, exit queues), and provided a forecast of traffic trends.

2) The 1992 Albertville Olympics: a logistical and organizational challenge

Albert Delmas, former commander of the Savoy Gendarmerie group entrusted with security at the Olympic Committee, remembers having to assess the natural, technical and human risks associated with the 16th Winter Olympics. Lieutenant-Colonel Buisson, in charge of the La Plagne sector, summed up the objectives quite succinctly: “*The Gendarmerie is responsible for carrying out a reinforced administrative policing mission, within a standard legal framework. It is*

1 OLIVIER, Jean-Paul. *Les anges bleus du Tour de France*. Paris : LBM éditions, 2009, 208 p.

2 La Course Paris-Madrid 1903 – Terrible accident automobile. *Le Petit Journal Supplément du Dimanche*, n° 655, 7 juin 1903, p. 184.

3 L'hôtel de police de Grenoble « centre nerveux » des jeux. *L'Écho de la gendarmerie nationale*, n° 4168, 10 mars 1968, p. 156.

4 CONTESSE, Jean (capitaine). Une expérience de régulation de la circulation à l'aide d'un ordinateur. *Revue d'études et d'informations*, n° 76, 2^e trimestre 1968, p. 23-28.

involved in road traffic control, general public safety (surveillance, maintenance of order, anti-terrorist measures), as well as the security of sporting events, Olympic venues and accommodation facilities”.

In 1992, 3,500 gendarmes were deployed under the command of General Charlot, representing 58% of the security forces. The mobile gendarmerie dispatched 34 squadrons. Judicial police duties were handled by the investigation sections of Lyon and Grenoble, Albertville, and the research team of Saint-Jean-de-Maurienne. Due to this law enforcement presence, crime in Savoy dropped by 40%.

The influx of nearly one million visitors to Albertville and the dispersion of events across 13 sites raised challenges in managing traffic flow. Benefiting from favorable weather conditions and new road infrastructures, the gendarmes could rely on assets such as office automation, the Saphir network, and the new Gendarmerie Operations Center (COG) in Chambéry. Additional efforts were made in terms of vehicles (200 Traffic 4x4s, 24 Yamaha snowmobiles, etc.) and uniforms, with the adoption of the "Daolio" outfit, named after an officer who died in an avalanche in 1989.

For foreign visitors, interpreters were assigned to the gendarmerie command center. Gendarmes also received an informational booklet, *La Marmotte*, containing road maps referencing the various sports venues, the competition schedule, and some useful phone numbers.

In an international context marked by the collapse of the USSR, the Yugoslav crisis, and the Algerian civil war, the gendarmerie was fully involved in protecting the 1,801 athletes from 64 nations. A former founding member of the GIGN, Christian Prouteau left the Presidential Security Group (GSPR) after six years of service to be appointed as a special prefect responsible for the security of the Olympic Games.

III) Paris 2024 Olympics: "an operational and logistical maneuver of unprecedented scale and duration in Île-de-France"

1) "Human force" and technological expertise against multifaceted threats

Despite the confidence expressed by the Minister of the Interior, who claims to have anticipated all potential risks and "*planned for the unpredictable*"⁵, law enforcement faces unprecedented security challenges due to a projected visitor turnout 7.5 times greater than at the Rio Olympics and an unparalleled dispersion of events across 70 sites.

"*The Olympic Games are not just taking place in the Paris region*", reminds Army Corps General Petillot, Major General, "and the gendarmes are mobilized everywhere to ensure security—on land, at sea, and in the air!" In Lille, 2,500 police officers and gendarmes are securing the Pierre Mauroy Stadium, where basketball and handball events are taking place. In Châteauroux, a 72-member marching company, a mobile gendarmerie squadron, a National Gendarmerie Intervention Group (GIGN) team, and canine units are mobilized for shooting competitions. In Marseille, sailing events are under the Gendarmerie's protection. In Polynesia, 275 gendarmes are deployed to ensure the safety of the Teahupo'o surfing competition. To secure public venues, the gendarmerie has a pool of 900 military personnel trained in NATO-certified Explosive Ordnance Recognition (EOR).

As in the past, the terrorist threat remains high due to a tense international climate and various internal protests ranging from the far right to the far left, including environmental activism. Acts of sabotage on the TGV network on July 26 demonstrate the reality of these threats.

New dangers also loom over the 2024 Olympics, including cyberattacks (with projections ten times higher than the 450 million recorded during the Beijing Olympics in 2021) and drone threats. To counter these risks, the institution relies on specialists, particularly within Comcyber-MI, and on specialized equipment, such as jamming rifles⁶.

Under the authority of the Paris police prefect and regional prefects, gendarmes are tasked with:

- Protecting Olympic sites, their surroundings, athletes, and the public;
- Securing public transportation and traffic routes;
- Escorting Olympic delegations, various authorities, and heads of state.

Deploying both active and reserve forces to fulfill these missions has required a remarkable planning effort. "Before being considered in terms of security, this maneuver was first approached from a logistical perspective," explains General Duceps, appointed Commander of the Gendarmerie Forces (COMFORGEND) for the Paris Olympics. This logistical dimension is a key feature of this extraordinary operation. An Advanced Logistics Base (BLA) in Paris and five logistical detachments (Melun, Beynes, Satory, Maisons-Alfort, and Dugny) provide field support in terms of accommodation,

5 Audition du 5 mars 2024 du ministre de l'Intérieur par la mission d'information sur l'application de la loi du 19 mai 2023 relative aux jeux Olympiques et Paralympiques de 2024.

6 GOINARD, Nicolas. Cybersécurité aux JO : la gendarmerie envoie un mail frauduleux, 10 % des militaires tombent dans le panneau [online]. *Le Parisien*, 16 mars 2024. Available at : <https://www.leparisien.fr/jo-paris-2024/cybersecurite-aux-jo-la-gendarmerie-envoie-un-mail-frauduleux-10-des-militaires-tombent-dans-le-panneau-16-03-2024-MCIHYHCH2FDDDHU2ZNA4A6DCV4.php>. PIGNOT, Marion. JO de Paris 2024 : 338 sites Internet frauduleux de revente de billets recensés par les cybergendarmes [online]. *20 Minutes*, 9 juin 2024. Available at : <https://www.20minutes.fr/societe/4095332-20240609-jo-paris-2024-338-sites-internet-frauduleux-revente-billets-recenses-cyber-gendarmes>

food, personnel assistance, vehicle maintenance, and communication systems. Another innovation is the Operations Center (CDO) in Maisons-Alfort, which relies on both Operational Crowd Control Groups (GOMO) and Tactical Gendarmerie Groups (GTG), combining the capabilities of the Departmental and Mobile Gendarmerie units. Training exercises take place close to competition sites, such as at the National Velodrome in Montigny-le-Bretonneux (Yvelines) on April 29, 2024, and at the Operational Command Training and Simulation Centre (CESCO) in Melun. Finally, 1,750 foreign law enforcement volunteers from 44 countries, including 26 European nations, have been recruited. Selected as patrollers or specialists without police authority, they are intended to facilitate interactions with visitors from their respective countries.

2) Torch relay and opening ceremony of the Games: two specific security challenges

“The intelligence services estimate that between 2,000 and 3,000 activists are capable of taking action under the red and black flag”⁷. This warning, just days before the Olympic flame arrives on mainland French soil, reflects the change in atmosphere compared to previous editions, when a handful of motorcyclists were enough to escort the torchbearers.

On January 22, 2024, the presentation to the press, at Place Beauvau, of the security measures for the two relays—Olympic (May 8 - July 26) and Paralympic (August 25-28)—demonstrated measures worthy of a head of state. The Olympic flame is protected by 100 police officers and gendarmes in a “security bubble” both upstream and downstream. Inside this bubble, 18 police officers and gendarmes form two columns to provide close protection for the torchbearer. The relay, which will pass through 400 cities and 6 overseas territories, presents an additional challenge.

“The main difficulty”, explains General Réty, “is that these Games will concern all of France, even Tahiti (...) Any incident related to a specific sector or athlete will have an impact and be interpreted as an attack on the Games as a whole.”⁸ Therefore, two teams of five members from the GIGN follow each convoy throughout the two and a half months of the torch relay. The arrival of the flame in Marseille on May 8, 2024, before 150,000 spectators, is considered a successful test, with maritime resources used to protect the Belem. A brief crowd movement that occurred that evening on the Old Port of Marseille, before a concert, had no notable consequences, as confirmed by the local press, which headlined: “Marseille overwhelmed by the crowd and swept away by the flame”.

Another gamble, which might have seemed like a “crazy bet”, was the first-ever organization of an opening ceremony outside a stadium. *“The central question for days, weeks, even years, was security”, according to Le Parisien⁹. “Criminal madness”, “irresponsibility” or “implausible ceremony”:* critics did not hold back in describing the risk of securing 12 km of banks along the Seine, especially since such an open environment presents a significant security challenge. The regulated access, with its “iron serpent” along the Seine in the days leading up to the event, also drew sharp comments. *“The most frequently heard words were ‘QR code,’ a pass that grants access to the banks of the Seine”, reported a Canadian newspaper¹⁰.*

On the big day, the preparations beforehand facilitated the deployment of 18,200 gendarmes to the capital. Despite the heavy rain that poured down on the City of Light, the images broadcasted showcased the professionalism of the law enforcement. Through this television display, the Republican Guard was particularly highlighted. *“Aya Nakamura and the Republican Guard marked the Olympic ceremony”, commented La Tribune de Genève. The HuffPost described it as a “magnificent duo”. Similarly, the procession of the flags of the delegations across the Trocadéro, preceded by two cavalymen of the Republican Guard, offered a striking tableau.*

Thus, the 2024 Paris Olympics are part of the ongoing efforts to secure major sporting events that the gendarmerie has had to manage throughout its history. However, this event surpasses all previous editions in scale, set against a difficult socio-political context. The same is true for the media overexposure of the men and women of the Gendarmerie, whether high-level athletes or not, especially through social media, which contributed to portraying an overall positive image of an institution perceived as both benevolent, friendly, and professional¹¹.

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8 TRAQUET, Alban. BRI, GIGN, RAID, comment les unités d'élite vont veiller sur Paris 2024. *L'Équipe*, 23 avril 2024.

9 DÉCUGIS, Jean-Michel, GOINARD, Nicolas, DELSENY, Damien. Paris 2024 : la soirée racontée depuis la « tour de contrôle » chargée de surveiller et sécuriser la cérémonie [online]. *Le Parisien*, 26 juillet 2024. Available at : <https://www.leparisien.fr/faits-divers/paris-2024-une-ceremonie-ultra-securisee-en-toute-discretion-26-07-2024-ZUY64XDDBRGWJJZAFLOZBLJ6Y.php>

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