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Transnational Campaigning for Disarmament: Lessons from between the two World Wars

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Abstract: This paper explores the lessons for the present day of historical campaigning for disarmament. In particular, the paper assesses the experience of one of the largest transnational non-governmental campaigns ever to have been undertaken: the campaign for general and comprehensive disarmament that took place between the two World Wars which claimed to mobilize in support of its objectives up to half of the world's population at the time. With its conclusion that activist tactics were at least as important as external circumstances for the failure of the campaign, this paper suggests the pitfalls that contemporary movements should aim to avoid.

This paper looks back more than seventy years ago, to a period that was in many ways very different from the present day. The period between the First World War and the Second was before the invention of nuclear weaponry, and the international system was dominated by the states of Europe and North America, with much of Africa and Asia under colonial rule. Nevertheless, there are a number of reasons why insights from the period between the two World Wars may have relevance to the issue of transnational campaigning for disarmament in the twenty-first century.

As this paper will demonstrate, the period between the two World Wars witnessed arguably the most substantial transnational campaign for general and comprehensive disarmament that the world has witnessed.¹ The horrific experience of

¹ A comprehensive account of this campaign and its results, based on research into more than eighty governmental and non-governmental archives, is provided in Thomas Richard Davies, *The Possibilities of Transnational Activism: The Campaign for Disarmament between the Two World Wars* (Leiden and Boston, 2007).

the First World War ensured that the objective of general disarmament had wide popular appeal in many countries at the time. Furthermore, the period witnessed substantial growth of a wide variety of international non-governmental organizations that were able to channel this support for disarmament.² With the objective of reduction and limitation of armaments as a key component of the post-war peace settlements, a considerable volume of intergovernmental activity was devoted to the issue in the 1920s and early 1930s. This included both efforts towards limitation of individual categories of armament, especially naval armaments, as well as negotiations for general and comprehensive disarmament.

This paper will proceed in four sections. First, it will introduce the nature of the disarmament issue in the period between the two World Wars. Second, it will introduce the transnational non-governmental campaigns for disarmament of the period. The third section of this paper will assess the outcomes of the campaigns, while the final section will explore the possible lessons for the present day.

1. The Disarmament Issue after the First World War

The principal peace agreement at the end of the First World War, the Treaty of Versailles, advocated ‘the initiation of a general limitation of the armaments of all nations’ in exchange for the agreement’s imposition of extensive limitations on Germany’s armed forces. This commitment on the part of the victorious powers was reinforced by the eighth article of the Covenant of the new League of Nations, which echoed Woodrow Wilson’s Fourth Point in its allocation to the Council of the League the task of drawing up plans for ‘the reduction of national armaments to the lowest point consistent with national safety, and the enforcement by common action of international obligations.’³

On the initiative of the Norwegian delegation, it was the Assembly of the League of Nations that took the initiative in respect of these commitments, and a ‘Temporary Mixed Commission’ was established by the First Assembly in 1920 to prepare ‘reports and proposals for the reduction of armaments.’ However, the Commission was soon confronted by the key problem that hampered all negotiations towards general and comprehensive disarmament between the two World Wars: the

² Twice as many INGOs were founded in the 1920s as in the entire nineteenth century.

³ John W. Wheeler-Bennett, *Disarmament and Security since Locarno, 1925-1931* (London, 1932), 26.

competing approaches of Britain (and later also the United States) on the one hand, and of France on the other hand.

The Anglo-Saxons advocated the 'direct' approach to disarmament: 'the view that armaments provoked fear and suspicion, and so were themselves a cause of war. Nations should first disarm, and security would then ensue.'⁴ The 'indirect' approach advocated by France and her allies took the reverse view: that arms are the product of fear and insecurity and so additional security arrangements are necessary before disarmament is feasible. France adopted this position because - as a result of US failure to ratify the post-war peace settlement - she had been left without the multilateral security guarantees on the basis of which she had agreed to the disarmament clauses of the peace settlement.

Due to these competing approaches, the early efforts of the League of Nations towards disarmament concentrated on proposals that would - in exchange for a commitment to disarm - strengthen the organization's provisions for collective security, such as the Draft Treaty of Mutual Assistance and the Geneva Protocol. Although these proposals failed to acquire the British government's support, an Anglo-Italian guarantee of the Franco-German border made at Locarno in 1925 made possible the establishment in 1926 of a 'Preparatory Commission' to draw up a draft disarmament convention to be discussed at an envisaged World Disarmament Conference.

In addition to leading League members, the Preparatory Commission benefited from the participation of prominent non-members, including Germany, the Soviet Union, and the United States. However, the progress made by the Commission towards a draft disarmament convention was slow. In 1927, the Soviet Union put forward a proposal for immediate, complete and universal disarmament, which was viewed by all of other participants as a cheap propaganda stunt. As for the more modest draft conventions put forward by Britain and France that year, these revealed numerous divisions over the types of reductions to be made, and the issue of international supervision.

It was not until December 1930 that a draft convention was agreed upon, and even this left all figures for reductions blank. By this time, the international situation had deteriorated, with the world economy shattered by the Wall Street Crash and 107

⁴ W. M. Jordan, *Great Britain, France and the German Problem* (London, 1943), 154.

Nazis sitting in the Reichstag. Nevertheless, the first World Disarmament Conference was set to open in a specially created building in Geneva in February 1932.

The World Disarmament Conference that took place between February 1932 and October 1933 was at the time the largest international conference ever to have been held. Every country in the world participated, with the exception of Ecuador, Nicaragua, Paraguay and Salvador. At the conference Britain, France, and the United States each proposed ambitious plans for disarmament, reflecting the differing approaches of these countries. The first French proposal, the Tardieu Plan of February 1932, proposed the creation of an international police force and the setting aside of all of the heaviest weapons for use by the League to defend against aggressors. This proposal involved a transfer of sovereignty that was too considerable to be acceptable to the Anglo-Saxon countries, so the next plan to be put forward – by US President Herbert Hoover in June 1932 – proposed simply the abolition of all so-called ‘offensive’ weapons, and the reduction of all other defence expenditures by a third.⁵ With its lack of accompanying security commitments, this plan – and a similar proposal put forward by British Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald in March 1933 was unacceptable to the French. By the time that Britain, France and the United States had ironed out their differences in October 1933, it was too late – Hitler, who had become German Chancellor in January 1933, withdrew Germany from both the World Disarmament Conference and the League of Nations. His stated reason was the failure of the victorious powers of the First World War to stick to their commitment to reduce their armaments arguably on the basis of which Germany had been disarmed.

Although the collapse of the World Disarmament Conference marked the failure of the pursuit of general and comprehensive disarmament between the two World Wars, the period witnessed significant agreements in respect of the limitation of naval armaments. At the Washington Conference of 1921-2, the capital ship and aircraft carrier tonnages of the United States, Great Britain, and Japan were limited at a ratio of 5:5:3, and about 40% capital ships in commission or under construction were to be scrapped. A successor conference held in London in 1930 extended the Washington

⁵ ‘Offensive’ weapons included tanks, large guns, bombing aeroplanes, and chemical and biological weapons.

Treaty by six years, and also limited cruisers, destroyers and submarines according to fixed ratios between the United States, Britain, and Japan.⁶

2. The Transnational Campaign for Disarmament between the Two World Wars

One of the key reasons why a considerable volume of intergovernmental activity was dedicated to disarmament in the period between the two World Wars was the high level of public support for it, especially in Britain and the United States. This support was mediated by an unprecedented array of international non-governmental organizations.

Not unnaturally, international peace organizations were at the forefront of the movement. The most significant of these organizations were pacifist rather than pacifist in orientation.⁷ The International Federation of League of Nations Societies was the leading international peace organization of the period, and its British branch – the League of Nations Union – had a larger membership than any national peace organization before or since.⁸ International women's peace organizations, especially the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, also spearheaded the movement.

More notable, however, was the promotion of disarmament by a wide range of international NGOs whose primary objectives lay in other fields. Buoyed by their success in promoting the enfranchisement of women, organizations such as the International Alliance of Women for Suffrage and Equal Citizenship and the International Council of Women made the promotion of disarmament one of the key objectives for women's newly expanded role in politics. Temperance organizations such as the World Women's Christian Temperance Union also sought to build on their success in promoting their primary objective in the United States by turning to advocacy of general disarmament.

In addition, the principal labour organizations of the time – the Labour and Socialist International and the International Federation of Trade Unions joined forces during the World Disarmament Conference by creating a Joint Disarmament Commission. Nearly all the main international Christian INGOs – such as the world's YMCAs and YWCAs – also created their own joint committee to co-ordinate their

⁶ For a detailed account of the development of naval arms control between the two World Wars, see Robert Gordon Kaufman, *Arms Control during the Pre-Nuclear Era: The United States and Naval Limitation between the Two World Wars* (New York, 1990).

⁷ For the pacifist-pacifist distinction, see Martin Ceadel, *Thinking about Peace and War* (Oxford, 1987).

⁸ For a history of the League of Nations Union, see Donald S. Birn, *The League of Nations Union, 1918-1945* (Oxford, 1981). For a history of the IFLNS, see Thomas Davies, *The Possibilities of Transnationalism: The International Federation of League of Nations Societies and the International Peace Campaign, 1919-39* (MPhil thesis, University of Oxford, 2002), Part I.

promotion of disarmament, as did the principal international students' organizations of the time. Other significant organizations that participated in the movement included the International Co-operative Alliance, International PEN, Rotary International, and the International League for the Rights of Man.

One of the most remarkable aspects of the interwar disarmament campaign was the level of interorganizational co-operation that developed to promote the issue. The Disarmament Committee of Women's International Organizations, for example, co-ordinated the disarmament work of nearly all of the most significant women's INGOs of the time, with an estimated combined membership of 45 million. This organization participated in turn in the International Consultative Group for Peace and Disarmament, in which the world's leading peace, Christian, students', women's and ex-sevicemen's INGOs took part. Estimates of the combined membership of the INGOs that participated in the interwar disarmament campaign vary from between 200 million and a billion, or between one tenth and one half of the population of the world at the time. Comparable movements in the post-Cold War era, such as the International Campaign to Ban Landmines and the Global Call to Action against Poverty (known in the UK as 'Make Poverty History'), have failed to reproduce this scale of mobilization.

Similarly impressive is the scale of some of the campaigning activities carried out by these organizations. During the Washington Conference, for example, fourteen million items of correspondence were sent to the American Advisory Commission. In the year preceding the World Disarmament Conference, over 4000 demonstrations in favour of disarmament took place in Britain alone. And 'the largest international petition there has ever been' (in terms of the proportion of the world's population that signed it) was collated by the Disarmament Committee of Women's International Organizations between 1930 and 1932.⁹ This petition, however, also highlighted the important national variations in the popularity of the promotion of disarmament: whereas it acquired over two million signatures in Britain and a million signatures in the United States and Germany, in France only half a million signatures were acquired. Furthermore, much of the support for general disarmament in Germany was motivated by a desire either to bring the other great powers down to the German level of armaments, or failing this to provide justification for German rearmament.

⁹ It acquired over twelve million signatures. Quotation from Philip Noel-Baker, *The First World Disarmament Conference, 1932-1934, and Why it Failed* (Oxford, 1979), 68.

3. The Impact of the Interwar Transnational Disarmament Campaign

Given the scale of the interwar transnational disarmament campaign, it is unsurprising that it influenced government policy on the issue in a number of ways. One impact was the effort on the part of governments to create procedures for NGO input in decision-making. This came in several forms, including appointment of activists to governmental positions responsible for formulating disarmament policy, creation of NGO advisory committees on national arms policy, and opening the World Disarmament Conference with a special session for the presentation of NGO proposals and petitions.

NGO pressure was also one of the key reasons why the pursuit of general and comprehensive disarmament was near the top of the agenda of the League of Nations throughout the 1920s and early 1930s, despite the reluctance of the Council to carry out its task of formulating plans for disarmament in accordance with Article 8 of the Covenant. When the Preparatory Commission for the World Disarmament Conference appeared to have reached stalemate after four years of negotiations in 1929-30, the apparent impatience of public opinion - manifested in thousands of letters to the Commission's President - helped persuade the body to make progress towards the holding of a World Disarmament Conference in 1932.¹⁰

When this conference finally took place, the numerous non-governmental campaigns were important in contributing towards the decision of the British, French and US governments to put forward ambitious plans for general disarmament at the conference. As a British Foreign Office official noted at the time, these plans were put forward in order to avoid 'being held responsible by world opinion for the breakdown of the conference.'¹¹ However, as was noted in the first section of this paper, not one of these proposals contained substantial enough concessions to make possible agreement upon a general disarmament convention before the collapse of the conference in October 1933. So, the interwar transnational disarmament campaign had helped put general disarmament at the top of the international agenda in the 1920s and early 1930s, but it failed in its main objective of securing intergovernmental agreement to a convention for general and comprehensive disarmament.

The context within which the interwar transnational disarmament campaign operated provides a number of reasons why, despite its considerable scale, the campaign failed to achieve its main objective. The World Disarmament Conference, for example,

¹⁰ Davies, *Possibilities*, 79-82.

¹¹ Alan Leeper, quoted in Davies, *Possibilities*, 153.

was convened under particularly inauspicious circumstances: at the height of the Great Depression, after Japan's invasion of Manchuria, and during the transformation of the Weimar Republic into the Third Reich.

However, these circumstances alone are insufficient to explain the campaign's failure. Disarmament was perceived at the time by the treasuries of the principal powers to be a means for reducing government expenditure for combating the Great Depression; and up until January 1933, reduction in the armaments of Britain, France and the USA was seen by many policymakers in these countries as a means to inhibit Hitler's rise to power. In fact, conditions for the interwar disarmament campaigners were quite auspicious in several ways. For example, the principal states targeted – Britain, France, and the USA – were liberal democracies; and there were significant international agreements – the Versailles Treaty and the Covenant of the League of Nations – providing a legal basis for general disarmament.

In fact, much of the responsibility for the failure to achieve their objective of a general disarmament convention lay with the campaigners themselves. Although there was transnational unity amongst the campaigners that their common objective should be a general disarmament convention, when they promoted this objective in different countries they advocated different contents for the convention according to the national contexts in which they were campaigning. The result was that public opinion in each country was given the false expectation that a general disarmament convention was possible without substantial alterations to national policy. This caused considerable frustration among government members who were placed in the difficult situation of having to appear in favour of a disarmament convention without being able to provide the concessions that would make such a convention possible. This frustration is shown in British Foreign Secretary Sir John Simon's comment at the peak of the campaign: 'I wish sometimes that there had been more public education as to the methods of disarmament and less public eloquence about the ideal of disarmament.'¹²

4. Possible Lessons

It is necessary to be very cautious about drawing lessons from history. It is often more common to mislearn from past experience than to learn from it. Furthermore, as was noted at the start of this paper, there are considerable differences between the interwar

¹² Sir John Simon to Gilbert Murray, 24 May 1932, box 72, Sir John Simon papers, Bodleian Library, Oxford.

period and the present day. Nevertheless, in some respects – such as in its unpredictable multipolarity and the notable role of non-governmental organizations – the post-Cold War era is arguably more similar to the period before the Second World War than it is to the more recent Cold War era, and so the evidence of the earlier period may still be relevant to today's debates.

Given the relative success of the Washington and London Naval Conferences compared with the Geneva World Disarmament Conference, the experience of the period between the two World Wars appears to provide evidence in support of Hedley Bull's argument that efforts towards limitation of particular types of armament are more likely to lead to a successful outcome than efforts towards general and comprehensive disarmament.

The evidence of the interwar period also suggests that the accompaniment of the imposition of arms control measures on particular countries by commitments by other countries to disarm at a later date can lead to a considerable degree of resentment if these commitments remain unfulfilled. It was widely felt at the time that one of the major reasons for the popularity of the Nazis in interwar Germany was the failure of the victor states of the First World War to fulfill the commitments they had made to reduce their armaments.

As the previous section of this paper has argued, interwar disarmament activists were arguably partly responsible for this failure, due to their promotion of incompatible policies in different countries. The more recent and more successful International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL), by contrast, was much more careful to promote a consistent policy. As S. Neil MacFarlane has pointed out, in the case of the ICBL, 'members subordinated their differences to the pursuit of the central objective,' and this was arguably significant in contributing towards the campaign's success.¹³

One of the major problems of the interwar transnational disarmament campaign was its predominantly Anglo-Saxon composition. Organizations that claimed to represent 'world public opinion' in fact often represented the opinion of only a segment of international society. A similar degree of caution should arguably be exercised in the present day in respect of organizations that claim to represent 'global civil society.'¹⁴

¹³ 'Preface by S. Neil MacFarlane,' in Don Hubert, *The Landmine Ban: A Case Study in Humanitarian Advocacy* (Providence, RI, 2000), xii.

¹⁴ Three fifths of INGOs are headquartered in Europe; and transnational civil society remains underrepresentative of many important parts of the world, including much of the Middle East and East Asia.

Defencists in Britain, France and the United States at the time had a still more considerable criticism of the interwar transnational disarmament campaign than those mentioned so far. They felt that disarmament activism in these countries in the 1920s and early 1930s had tragic consequences in the years that followed. They argued that the persistence of pro-disarmament feeling in these countries after Hitler's rise to power in Germany was sufficiently extensive to inhibit the drive to rearm against the expansionist threat in the later 1930s. For instance, Winston Churchill claimed that disarmament activism in the remaining liberal countries arguably made them 'an easy prey' in the run-up to the Second World War.¹⁵

At the start of the World Disarmament Conference, Hugh Gibson, the chief US representative, made an appeal that arguably still has relevance in the present day: 'it is not enough that public opinion be aroused. It is first of all necessary that it should be informed, for an aroused and uninformed public opinion may do infinitely more harm than good.'¹⁶

¹⁵ Martin Gilbert, *Winston S. Churchill*, vol. 5 (London, 1976), 696.

¹⁶ League of Nations, *Documents of the Preparatory Commission, Series X: Minutes of the Sixth Session (Second Part) of the Preparatory Commission for the Disarmament Conference* (Geneva, 1931), p. 409.