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From Versailles to Geneva: The Many Forms of Interwar Disarmament

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ABSTRACT This article examines the six distinct varieties of disarmament pursued in the aftermath of the First World War, each of which had a meaningful impact upon international relations during the interwar period: the arms restrictions imposed upon the defeated powers; the unilateral cuts to armaments and military budgets made by the victors; the limitation of naval arms through 'private' treaties among the key maritime powers; the League's limited initiatives to establish regimes of control over armaments during 1920-25; the League's attempt to link arms reductions to the simultaneous creation of new systems of security during 1922-25; and the League's 'general disarmament' process of 1926-34, covering all nations and all spheres of armaments. It concludes that the success or failure of all these varieties was always ultimately determined by the political will and the self-interest of the major powers.

KEY WORDS: disarmament, League of Nations, Treaty of Versailles

One need only compare two documents, the League of Nations Covenant of 1919 and the United Nations Charter of 1945, to see at once how the experiences of the interwar period had affected thinking about disarmament. The Covenant enshrined disarmament as an integral part of the League’s very purpose: Article 8 laid down that ‘The Members of the League recognise that the maintenance of peace requires the reduction of national armaments to the lowest point consistent with national safety’ and stated that it was a key task of the League to formulate plans for such disarmament. In the aftermath of the experience of the Great War, there was a widespread belief on both sides of the Atlantic that the pre-war arms race had led directly to the catastrophe of 1914. Sir Edward Grey, the British foreign secretary before and during much of the war, famously wrote in his memoirs: ‘The enormous growth of armaments in Europe, the sense of insecurity and fear caused by them – it was these that made war
inevitable'.\textsuperscript{1} Disarmament was necessary, indeed essential, to create security. The lessons drawn after the Second World War were quite different. Article 11 of the Charter noted merely that the General Assembly ‘may consider the general principles of cooperation in the maintenance of international peace and security, including the principles governing disarmament and the regulation of armaments’. Disarmament was no longer a mandated imperative for the world’s paramount international body; the focus was instead upon the problem of security, with weapons treated as the result not as the cause of insecurity. Hans Morgenthau, for example, concluded in his influential study *Politics Among Nations*, one of the foundation texts of realist international relations theory: ‘Men do not fight because they have arms. They have arms because they deem it necessary to fight. Take away their arms, and they will either fight with their bare fists or get themselves new arms with which to fight.’\textsuperscript{2} Arms were once again considered, as they had been before 1914, as necessary to prevent war.

How had this come to pass? It was inevitable that questions regarding the control of armaments would be of great importance to public opinion and international negotiations in the aftermath of the struggle of 1914–18. During the two decades which followed, the course of discussions on disarmament was profoundly influenced by numerous factors, among them the contingency of international developments, domestic politics, national strategic self-interest, financial constraints and pressures from influential pacifist movements. The negotiations process itself became a critical element in the diplomacy of creating stability within an evolving international system. What emerged, between the Paris Peace Conference of 1919 and the final peacetime League Assembly in 1938, were six distinct varieties of disarmament. Each was pursued with vigour and varying degrees of belief, and, though success was mostly only temporary or marginal, each had a meaningful impact upon interwar international relations.

### The Disarmament of Germany

The first type of disarmament was initially the most prominent – the armaments restrictions imposed by the Allied powers upon Germany, the chief defeated power, in Part V of the Treaty of Versailles.\textsuperscript{3} Similar

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\textsuperscript{3}On the details of the restrictions imposed on Germany and their origins at the Paris Peace Conference, see David Stevenson’s article in this collection.
restrictions were also imposed upon the other defeated powers under their respective peace treaties, in Part V of the treaties of St. Germain (Austria), Trianon (Hungary) and Sévres (Turkey) and in Part IV of the Treaty of Neuilly (Bulgaria). From the very beginning, German society was united in its hatred for Versailles in all its aspects. Military planners, supported by political leaders across the spectrum, actively worked to evade the required disarmament provisions. Fearful also of the potential threat from Poland, they began secretly working to rebuild German military strength as early as 1921. The general staff was secretly reconstituted in a disguised form, a reserve of trained military pilots was created, numerical limits on armaments were systematically violated and budgets were falsified to hide the excessive military expenditures. Military collaboration with the Soviet Union, to pursue experiments with forbidden weapons such as aircraft and tanks, took place throughout the 1920s.

Until the early 1930s, the scope and military importance of these infractions remained relatively small in terms of the personnel and equipment involved, but what they nevertheless demonstrated was the problem of enforcement. The Inter-Allied Military Control Commission (IMCC), responsible for the oversight of Germany’s disarmament, could be effective only if backed by the political will of the major powers to make inspections meaningful by punishing detected violations. Such resolve simply did not exist, either for the enforcement of disarmament or indeed for the Versailles treaty as a whole. In spite of reports that Germany was not meeting its disarmament obligations, the IMCC was withdrawn on 31 January 1927 as part of the policy of post-war conciliation sparked by the signing of the Locarno treaty in October 1925. German disarmament may have been known to be incomplete, but successive Weimar governments were now able to

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4For example, the maximum figures for the defeated powers’ armies were: Germany, 100,000 officers and men; Austria, 30,000; Hungary, 35,000; Bulgaria, 20,000; Turkey, 50,000. For all the treaties, see The Treaties of Peace 1919–1923 (2 vols, New York: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace 1924).
proclaim their state to be ‘officially’ disarmed. General Wilhelm Groener, the German minister of defence, for instance, referred in a December 1929 interview to Germans as ‘a people who alone in the whole world are so much disarmed that one cannot ask them to be more so’.6

At the root of the difficulties over enforcement was the entrenched disagreement between Britain and France over how seriously to take the German infractions. In London, they were considered relatively insignificant and policy makers chose to ignore them as part of a wider policy aimed at post-war reconciliation with Germany. Harold Nicolson pointed out from Berlin in mid 1929 that ‘in every point there has been a consistent and widespread conspiracy of obstruction and concealment’. The French could, if they wished, ‘produce accumulated evidence of persistent bad faith on the part of the Germans of a nature which it would be quite impossible for us to deny, still less to disprove’.7 Yet, while conceding that Germany’s military preparations ‘are in many cases in contravention both of the spirit and the letter of the Treaty of Versailles’, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, General Sir George Milne, nonetheless concluded some months later that ‘I am still of the opinion that the present Reichswehr is not a menace to the peace of Europe’.8 Germany was not a threat and therefore inaction, although accompanied by vigilance, was the best policy. Paris, on the other hand, became increasingly agitated by the evidence of Berlin’s duplicity and the potential for military revival. A detailed study of the 1929–30 German military budget by the War Ministry concluded that, as with the budgets of the previous five years, the German government was hiding secret rearmament within its figures: ‘Like the previous budgets, it contains the same obscurities, the same lack of explanations for figures, the same inflation of credits, and, it follows, the same deceptions’.9 French military leaders argued that the German violations had to be illicit preparations for war. One prominent French general told the British military attaché that both he and the army’s chief of staff, Maxime Weygand, considered ‘a surprise attack by Germany against France possible under certain circumstances and feasible, notwithstanding the grave

political dangers to Germany of such an act. But, as the Quai d'Orsay insisted that diplomatic intervention ought to proceed only if it was done jointly with other powers, which the British steadfastly refused, no action was taken. This pattern would repeat itself consistently over subsequent years. All French attempts to bring the Germans to task were defeated by British reluctance to back them in any aggressive action to enforce German fulfilment. Indeed, the League never even so much as passed a resolution taking note of the well-known German non-compliance.

**Force Reductions and Budget Cuts**

The second form of interwar disarmament involved the cuts to armaments levels and military budgets made independently by each of the victor states following the war, undertaken on a completely individual basis, as they placed their military establishments onto a peacetime footing. In Britain, the Royal Navy scrapped massive amounts of tonnage to reduce the bloated fleet and emasculated its enormous wartime building programmes. Some 27 pre-dreadnought capital ships, now outclassed in size and gun calibre, along with 27 heavy cruisers and 48 light cruisers were struck off or scrapped within months of the war's end. Only two new surface warships of any kind were laid down before 1924. The army was cut from 2,600,000 officers and men in 1919 to a mere 170,800 in 1923; by 1933, the figure stood at 148,700. Successive governments similarly reduced budgetary expenditure on national defence, from total estimates for the armed services of £616,559,660 in 1919 to £122,011,000 in 1923 and finally to an interwar low of £104,364,300 in 1932. In France, the story was broadly similar. From 1921 to 1924, French governments reduced the

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army from 52 to 32 divisions and the armed forces overall from 837,500 to 674,000 total effectives. French military expenditure fell from 17,734 million francs in 1919 to 6,397 million in 1923, though with the inclusion of spending on the Maginot Line it had by 1933 risen again to 13,431 million francs. It should be noted that the cuts made to British and French forces still left the former with the world’s largest navy and the latter with a substantial numerical superiority on land over other European powers.

It was possible and convenient for each of the victor powers to portray their arms reductions as leadership in disarmament. Such an attitude was particularly prevalent in London. Sir Maurice Hankey, the secretary to the Cabinet and the CID, was typical in his claim that Britain by 1930 was far ahead of other powers in adopting a peace footing:

In this respect Great Britain, under successive governments, has advanced far beyond any other great power – for example, by naval limitation, by reducing the army to the bare minimum required for police purposes, by slowing down the completion of a comparatively modest air defence scheme, and by adopting the assumption that war is unlikely to break out within ten years of a date that advances from day to day. This lead has not yet been followed by continental nations.

Similarly, the Labour secretary of state for war, Tom Shaw, insisted mournfully to the Commons in 1931 that ‘the policy of unilateral disarmament has not achieved its object. It is impossible to examine the figures and, looking facts in the face, to conclude that any foreign country has followed the example set by this country.’ Britain had done her bit, the popular line went, and now the rest was up to others (and primarily up to France). There was real frustration in Paris at such criticism. Not unreasonably, French policy makers found it hard to understand why the British claim to naval supremacy was right and proper while their own claim to military preponderance on land was a dangerous pretension. As Prime Minister André Tardieu put it to the

Senate: ‘France, so far as land disarmament is concerned, is in the lead. She is in the same situation as is Britain with naval disarmament.’ Just as in London, French policy makers insisted that they had already made large reductions in their armed forces since the war. These involved not just numerical cuts to the size of the army but also reductions in the term of annual service for conscripts, significant from both a military and a symbolic angle, from three years in 1919 to 18 months in 1923 and finally to 12 months in 1928. In the defiant words of Minister of War André Maginot: ‘we have already gone very far, too far perhaps, on the road towards our disarmament. It is now the turn of other nations to show in this respect as much initiative and as much goodwill as we.’

Notwithstanding these various claims about ‘taking the lead’ on disarmament, no power based its disarmament policy on a spirit of altruism. Arms levels by the mid 1920s had in fact reached a state of rough equilibrium, as financial necessity drove each nation to reduce its military forces to approximately the lowest level it had decided was compatible with its national security. In doing so, each state retained what its policy makers considered to be sufficient armed forces to ensure national security. Despite the sometimes shrill protestations from anxious soldiers and politicians, no state reduced its forces below a level of safety. Only for the defeated powers was this not the case. But such reductions, undertaken independently of any organized international agreement, could not form the basis of the disarmament stipulated in Article 8; for what was done unilaterally could just as easily be undone unilaterally.

Naval Arms Limitation

Disarmament’s third form produced what is generally considered the most tangible and most well-known success of the interwar period: the naval arms limitation resulting from specific treaties among a limited number of key powers. At the Washington Naval Conference of 1921–22, negotiators among the five main maritime powers were able

to set limits on their respective numbers of capital ships and aircraft carriers, which led to actual reductions. Britain, the United States, Japan, France and Italy accepted ratios on their tonnage of capital ships (warships over 10,000 tons) of 5:5:3:1.75:1.75, respectively, and capped the maximum size of battleships at 35,000 tons with a maximum gun calibre of 406 mm. The threat of an Anglo-American naval race in the most expensive category of ships was thereby averted, but the seeds of future disputes had also been sown. The conference left unsettled the limitation of warships displacing less than 10,000 tons, primarily cruisers and submarines, the main weapons for attacking and defending maritime lines of communication. Furthermore, the granting to Italy of naval parity with France rankled French pride and infringed upon their desire for Mediterranean naval superiority.

The success at Washington was consequently followed by two failures to advance disarmament through private negotiations among the major powers: the 1927 Geneva Naval Conference and the 1928 Anglo-French ‘compromise’ on armaments. Anglo-American differences over the limitation of cruisers culminated in the collapse of the 1927 naval conference, which France and Italy refused even to attend. Although there was a common desire in London and Washington to heavily restrict or even entirely abolish submarines, Britain refused to accept equality with the US in cruisers. For the protection of their lengthy imperial sea routes and overseas trade, the British wanted a large number of light cruisers; American doctrine called for a smaller number of heavy cruisers to augment their main battlefleet. Attempts to settle this issue revolved around the search for a ‘yardstick’ to equate numbers of heavy and light vessels. American unhappiness was exacerbated by secret discussions in London and Paris during the spring and summer of 1928, which produced an abortive Anglo-French ‘compromise’ over armaments policy. The British agreed to concessions in other ongoing negotiations over the method of limiting the size of armies – specifically, they pledged to withdraw their insistence on counting a nation’s trained reserves as part of its total land forces – and in return the French agreed to support a naval proposal to limit only the heavy cruisers that the Americans favoured. The contents of the deal and the unfortunate manner in which it was made public enraged President Calvin Coolidge and opened the real possibility of an Anglo-American naval race. The issue was only resolved at the London Naval Conference of 1930, where the Americans were accorded a slight advantage in heavy cruisers, but Tokyo’s agreement was only bought in exchange for allowing Japan a 70 percent ratio in light cruisers and destroyers and parity in submarines. The London treaty was also concluded without French and Italian participation, for those two
powers were unable to resolve their competing aspirations for Mediterranean dominance. A final naval conference took place in London in 1935–36, but it effectively collapsed when Japan refused to accept any further continuation of the Washington ratios.

The success of naval disarmament was genuine yet imperfect. There were real problems in translating its achievements into the wider sphere of general disarmament. On the political level, the naval treaties were cases of ‘private’ disarmament among the major maritime powers, undertaken independently of any larger international framework. The limited number of states involved made agreement far more likely; domestic political pressures in each of the three main naval powers, arising from common fears of a naval arms race, had independently moved their respective policy makers to seek an agreement at the Washington conference. In this light, the failed Anglo-French ‘compromise’, a classic backroom deal between two great powers, can even be viewed as an example of a successful disarmament agreement – that is, a pragmatic bargain between a restricted number of states negotiated out of the public eye and allowing for mutual concessions. Significantly, when the League of Nations attempted to sponsor the extension of the Washington system of naval limitation to other maritime powers, the result was abject failure. The states chiefly affected included Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Denmark, Greece, the Netherlands, Norway, the Soviet Union and Turkey. The heterogeneity of maritime and political interests among such a disparate group made finding common ground predictably impossible when they met in Rome in February 1924. The amour-propre of these ‘lesser’ naval powers, most prominently the USSR, made them additionally unwilling to accept the strict upper limits demanded by the main maritime states.20

On the technical level, too, the problems involved in naval arms limitation were relatively straightforward to overcome. Within the single sphere of naval armaments, the single category of capital ships was to be limited by easily measurable, comparable and verifiable criteria (total numbers, tonnage and gun calibre). Oranges were being compared with oranges. Success was nevertheless hard-won, involving multiple conferences over 15 years to obtain agreement among first five and then only three powers.

League Disarmament I: The Limited Approach

Beyond these first three types of disarmament lay a broadly linked set of three further approaches, related through their common association

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with the League of Nations. The language in Article 8 of the Covenant that charged the League with pursuing the task of disarmament had been reinforced by two other prominent expressions of intent. The preamble to Part V of the Treaty of Versailles, and to the disarmament sections of the other peace treaties, stated explicitly that the stipulated disarmament measures were meant ‘to render possible the initiation of a general limitation of armaments of all nations’. Furthermore, in reply to complaints from the German delegation in Paris at the peace treaty’s severity, French Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau had reiterated that the arms restrictions outlined were but ‘the first steps towards that general reduction and limitation of armaments which they seek to bring about as one of the most fruitful preventives of war, and which it would be one of the first duties of the League to promote’.\textsuperscript{21} Though the binding legal force of these injunctions would be much disputed in the years that followed, their moral force was undeniable. Disarmament was installed as one of the League’s foremost tasks and became for many a litmus test for the very success or failure of the organization.

The League’s initial efforts to put into practice the pledges of 1919, the fourth form of interwar disarmament, focused upon a diverse group of initiatives pursued in parallel during the first five years of the peace. Narrowly drawn and modest in scope, these aimed to establish regimes of control over particular types of armaments. Not primarily focused upon obtaining numerical reductions in armaments, the intent was rather to secure acceptance at least of the principle that national arms could be subject to international limitation. The efforts comprised initiatives to control the international arms traffic and the private manufacture of armaments, to impose limits upon national budgetary expenditure on defence, to mandate the open publication of data on national armaments, and to prohibit the use of poison gas in wartime. While now almost entirely forgotten or ignored, it was in fact a partially successful approach. Several conventions were agreed and, though all save one remained unratified, they established a significant precedent in their common starting point: the principle of internationally negotiated arms agreements open to and applying to all states.\textsuperscript{22}


Negotiations in Paris resulted in the conclusion of a Convention for the Control of the Trade in Arms and Ammunition, signed by all the major powers in the suburb of St. Germain-en-Laye on 10 September 1919. It sought to control the export of arms via a system of openly published licences issued by national governments, with arms exports to be restricted to only those states that had signed the convention. Certain ‘prohibited areas’ of the world, including most of the African continent and much of the Middle East, were to be embargoed except under much stricter import controls. However, the refusal of the major powers, in particular the United States, to ratify the convention doomed it to die in diplomatic limbo. After several years of fruitless efforts to bring it into force, the League decided to begin anew. A Conference for the Supervision of the International Trade in Arms and Ammunition and in Implements of War was convened in Geneva during May and June 1925. There were 44 nations present, including the United States, Germany (its first attendance at an interwar disarmament conference) and Turkey, with the Soviet Union the only major power declining to attend. A new, somewhat modified convention was successfully adopted to regulate the global arms trade, though it still involved a system of public export licences and tight restrictions on certain ‘special zones’ in Africa and the Middle East. The 1925 convention would die the same death as its predecessor, however, as it too never garnered sufficient ratifications to come into force.23

Closely linked to the issue of the global arms trade was that of the private manufacture of armaments (by the so-called ‘merchants of death’). Its ‘evil effects’ were specifically criticized in the Covenant, yet despite annual Assembly resolutions during 1921–24 expressing the desirability of an international conference on the issue as soon as possible, the lack of American involvement and the failure to ratify the St. Germain convention held up all progress. In the absence of American participation, the main European powers felt that, as with the arms traffic, any agreement reached would be meaningless. All the major powers were in any case reluctant to do anything to undermine their domestic arms industries or to impair the effectiveness of their own armed services. While the pursuit of a convention did gain new momentum with the conclusion of the 1925 arms traffic treaty, four

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more years of fruitless meetings by special commissions resulted by 1929 only in a weak and disputed plan adopted by majority vote. At the behest of the major powers, the still unresolved problem was then simply put aside.\textsuperscript{24}

A League proposal to impose limits upon national military budgets was similarly unsuccessful. The 1920 Assembly recommended that, pending the execution of full disarmament, League members should accept a two-year freeze on their military estimates. Replies from most governments were roundly negative. Some states (Finland, Greece, Poland) rejected it by reason of their ‘exceptional’ circumstances; others (France, Spain) rejected it on the basis that it was a flawed method to control armaments; some (Bolivia, Britain, Denmark) simply insisted they were in practice already reducing their military estimates. Only a very few states accepted the proposal outright (China, Guatemala) or with crucial reservations attached (Belgium, Italy, Netherlands). Though a slightly modified version of the proposal was re-circulated by the 1923 Assembly, it met a similarly tepid reception. A mere 13 governments submitted observations on it, and all but one refused to make any commitment; only Liberia proclaimed its unreserved acceptance. The momentum for this effort had by now been exhausted and the proposal was not renewed.\textsuperscript{25}

More positively, the requirement in Article 8 for the ‘full and frank’ exchange of information by League members on the ‘scale of their armaments’ was fulfilled. The League’s Armaments Yearbook, published annually from 1924 to 1938, was a watershed in states openly declaring their armaments levels and defence expenditure and became an essential source of information throughout the interwar period. As one commentator noted, it was hoped that ‘even this modest element of publicity would do something to check Press scares regarding the armaments of possibly hostile nations’.\textsuperscript{26} It reflected an underlying internationalist belief that publicity and transparency could have a


\textsuperscript{26}H. Wilson Harris, What the League of Nations Is (London: Allen and Unwin 1927), 60. See, League of Nations, Armaments Year-Book: General and Statistical Information, First year (Geneva 1924), A.37.1924.IX.
powerful, confidence-building effect on diplomatic and military relations.

All the defeated states had been prohibited from possessing poison gas by their respective peace treaties. More broadly, in 1920 the League of Nations designated such weapons as ‘fundamentally cruel’, but it was not in a position to impose any ban and in fact arrangements were made by many powers to continue the study of gas warfare. The 1921 League Assembly did suggest a surprising approach to controlling poison gas: an appeal to the scientists of the world to publish publicly their discoveries in the field, so as to minimize the use of gas in future war. The rationale was essentially the same as later Cold War theories of nuclear deterrence through ‘mutually assured destruction’. As one of disarmament’s greatest champions, the British delegate Lord Robert Cecil, explained: ‘If one nation, tempted to use some horrible gas of this kind, knew that another nation could easily respond, and that if one set of the population was wiped out the other set would be wiped out also – it was hoped that, even in the madness of war, they might pause before entering upon such a terrible competition’.27 This approach was quickly discarded, but success eventually did come with the conclusion in June 1925 of the Protocol for the Prohibition of the Use in War of Asphyxiating, Poisonous or Other Gases, and of Bacteriological Methods of Warfare. This was not a complete ban on such weapons. As its lengthy title stated, it prohibited the use in war of poisonous gases but did not prohibit their study, production or storage, nor did the treaty include any provisions for verification or enforcement. In their ratifications of the protocol, several states (most notably Britain, France and the USSR) also attached two important reservations: they held themselves free to use such weapons in retaliation, and they only held the treaty’s prohibitions as binding in regards to other signatory states. Happily, by the end of 1932, the treaty had been ratified by 36 states, including France, Italy, the USSR, Germany and Britain though not the US or Japan.28

League Disarmament II: Disarmament for Security

When seen in their totality, the League’s efforts to control and reduce armaments through specific and limited measures constituted a surprisingly large proportion of its labours on disarmament during the years up to 1925. From 1922 onward, however, a parallel yet

radically different approach to League-sponsored disarmament was also at work. This, the fifth form of interwar disarmament, was an ambitious attempt to achieve extensive reductions to the military forces of all states worldwide by linking these cuts to the simultaneous implementation of new systems of international security. The ‘disarmament for security’ method of approach absorbed increasing amounts of the League’s attention between 1922 and 1925. One must acknowledge the fundamental importance in this of the role played by a single individual, Lord Robert Cecil, the incredibly outspoken Conservative politician, delegate to innumerable League meetings and conferences, and president of the influential League of Nations Union. He insistently brought his own conception of disarmament to the fore of the discussions on the critical League committee, the Temporary Mixed Commission for the Reduction of Armaments. In a political climate where states felt themselves secure, he believed, they would be willing to reduce their armed forces; the general reduction of national armaments could thus best be realized through the provision of new systems for international security.29

Along with the key French delegate on the commission, Colonel Edouard Réquin, Cecil first shunted aside a plan submitted earlier by another British delegate, Reginald Brett, Lord Esher. That plan sought to limit land armaments on the basis of the same ratio system that had been used successfully at the Washington naval conference.30 Cecil next put forward a series of propositions that would together (after some concessions to French demands) form the basis of the main resolution passed by the 1922 League Assembly’s disarmament committee. In essence, ‘Resolution XIV’ stated that no scheme for the reduction of armaments could be successful unless it were general, that governments could only carry out reductions of armaments if they received satisfactory guarantees for the safety of their respective countries, and that such guarantees of security could best be found in defensive agreements that provided immediate, effective and pre-arranged assistance.31 Competing draft treaties to put these principles into practical form came from Cecil and Réquin. In Réquin’s version,

reductions in arms were expressly reserved to the decision of governments and were based on the practical value of precise military conventions; in Cecil’s version, a general reduction of armaments would be the consequence of a general treaty of reciprocal security commitments. The result of an amalgamation of the two drafts was the rather vague Treaty of Mutual Assistance, presented to the Assembly in September 1923. Its principal provision was the agreement of all contracting parties to come to the assistance of anyone who was the victim of a ‘war of aggression’ (though ‘aggression’ remained undefined). In return for this assurance, the contracting parties merely agreed that, within two years, they would make arms reductions ‘which they considered proportionate to the security furnished by the general treaty’ and also to ‘cooperate’ in the preparation of a general plan for the reduction of armaments.\[32\]

While the French government quickly accepted the Treaty of Mutual Assistance, it was rejected by the new Labour government in Britain because of the potentially huge extension of international obligations it involved. When the League Assembly met in September 1924, a replacement was found in the triple formula of ‘security, arbitration, disarmament’. The Protocol for the Pacific Settlement of International Disputes, generally known as the Geneva Protocol, was negotiated by French and British representatives (not including Cecil) during a few feverish weeks in Geneva. It was not truly satisfactory to either power. The key point was the shift of emphasis to preventing conflict through a machinery of compulsory settlement of international disputes. A state which refused to submit a dispute to arbitration was to be considered the aggressor in any conflict, and assistance would be provided to any state victim of such aggression. Signatory states would participate in an international conference for the reduction of armaments set to meet on 15 June 1925, and the Protocol would be null and void if a disarmament treaty was not agreed at the conference and implemented within a fixed period. From October 1924, planning for this conference actually began with the creation of two preparatory bodies: the Committee of the Council and the Coordination Commission. Neither had much work to do. In Paris, military assessments of the Protocol’s security provisions concluded they were too imprecise to permit any significant disarmament. They disliked that disarmament appeared to be given priority over security, as shown by the timing of the proposed disarmament conference to precede the implementation of the Protocol. In London, a continuing unwillingness to accept military obligations of an indefinite and potentially unlimited nature led to the

Protocol’s rejection by a new Conservative government in early 1925.33

Most attention during 1925 was given to the negotiations between Britain, France and Germany for a Western security pact, which ultimately resulted in October’s Treaty of Locarno, while consideration of disarmament remained largely in abeyance until that autumn’s League Assembly. Many delegates continued to press for a disarmament conference, to replace the abortive June summit specified in the Geneva Protocol, yet they did not want to endanger the still ongoing security pact negotiations. A compromise resolution was ultimately agreed, which stated that the Council should make ‘a preparatory study’ for a general disarmament conference so that it could be convened ‘as soon as satisfactory conditions have been assured from the point of view of general security’.34 To put this into practice, the Coordination Commission was renamed the ‘Preparatory Commission for the Disarmament Conference’ in December 1925 and given an expanded membership including Germany, the US and the Soviet Union (none of which were League members).

League Disarmament III: General Disarmament

This brought to a close the ‘disarmament for security’ approach originally set in motion by Cecil in 1922. For both the Treaty of Mutual Assistance and the Geneva Protocol, the amounts of disarmament required had remained undefined, primarily up to each state to determine for itself and explicitly linked to the previous or simultaneous implementation of new security schemes. In contrast, the Preparatory Commission worked with the assumption that levels of national armaments could and should be set via international negotiations and that states had to justify before the League’s disarmament conference those force levels they wished to maintain. Furthermore, the commission’s mandate emphatically did not include drawing up any additional systems of security to accompany the disarmament plan it put forward. While the eventual disarmament conference technically had to await the achievement of undefined


‘satisfactory’ conditions of general security, according to the 1925 resolution, the questions of how and by whom such conditions would be determined were left unanswered. The link between disarmament and security had been cut as the process shifted to a sole focus upon ‘general disarmament’, meaning an agreement that would cover all nations and all spheres of armaments. This sixth form of interwar disarmament was a single-track path: for almost the next ten years, the only forum for discussion on disarmament was in practice the Preparatory Commission and the only disarmament format it sought was an all-encompassing one.35

The Preparatory Commission set to work early in 1926 with widespread expectations that the disarmament conference itself would meet about a year later. Sadly, the commission almost immediately became bogged down in technical and even philosophical debates as it sought the holy grail of general disarmament. Given the manifest difficulties of such an enormous task, it should have been no surprise that the commission only finally succeeded in drawing up a still-disputed draft disarmament convention in December 1930; the long-awaited World Disarmament Conference itself only opened in February 1932. No government wished to be blamed for disarmament’s ‘failure’ and so the process marched inexorably onward despite the consistent inability to achieve meaningful progress towards a realistic agreement.

There was no shortage of sidetracks, one of which took the concept of general disarmament to its furthest extreme: the complete and total abolition of all land, naval and air forces. This utopian vision, either the most idealistic or the most cynical approach of all, was first put to the commission in November 1927 at its fourth session by the Soviet delegate, Maxim Litvinov. His ‘Draft convention of immediate, complete and general disarmament’, submitted in complete form some months later, insisted that ‘the only true method which can contribute to the safeguarding of peace is the general and complete abolition of all armed forces’. Article 1 of the convention stated boldly: ‘All military units and formations, as well as all the effectives of the land, sea and air forces, whether of the home country or of its overseas possessions, shall

be disbanded within four years’. Such a plan, espoused as it was by a state which remained to large degree a pariah in the international community, had no chance of acceptance. Its motivations were hardly of the most innocent sort in any case. The Soviet Union remained militarily relatively weak. Its security concerns included the risk of a conflict with Poland, a struggle that could potentially involve the imperialist powers and prompt renewed invasions of the kind attempted during 1919–20. The theme of disarmament served as a calculated element of Soviet propaganda designed to appeal to international anti-militarist feeling. Ironically, because of the way that it tapped into such popular sentiments about the need for disarmament to create peace, and because of Litvinov’s mastery of the internationalist language of Geneva, it could not simply be rejected out of hand. Almost a year of the Preparatory Commission’s time was spent easing it aside.

The general disarmament approach culminated in the failed World Disarmament Conference of 1932–34. Its lengthy efforts amounted in the end to nothing more than repetitive discussions without real decisions. In his closing speech to the first session of the conference, in July 1932, French Prime Minister Edouard Herriot jibed at the lack of achievement: ‘There have been times when we may have wondered whether the verb “to disarm” was not in every language an irregular verb, with no first person, and only conjugated in the future tense’. On one level, it was simply too big and too ambitious: there were 59 nations represented, discussing land, sea and air armaments. From a technical point of view, there was no likelihood that the disparate demands and priorities of such a wide range of states could ever be accommodated in a single document. Even assuming that agreement among just the major powers would have been enough, the experience of the previous years had shown this to be nigh impossible. The conflicting theses of Britain and France alone on the question of how to limit national reserves were never resolved over almost ten years of discussion. The fundamental reason for the inability of major powers to reach any agreement, however, lay in the inability to resolve the underlying political problems, not technical

deadlocks over specific armaments. French policy makers rejected the idea that a disarmament agreement was the most direct route to European stability. On the contrary, they believed that the only way to ensure peace was to create a system which could, if necessary, enforce it. In contrast, British policy makers argued that with peace now restored to Europe, significant cuts to continental armies were possible and would in and of themselves create an even stronger ethos of peace and security. They dismissed all demands for such cuts to be matched by an extension of their obligations to Europe. This basic disagreement was aptly summarized by an official in the French War Ministry:

For us, disarmament can only be the consequence of security organized through a pacific system compulsory for all disagreements and an automatic mutual assistance, effective and immediate, against a future aggressor. It is the organization of security alone that permits disarmament. For our adversaries and notably for the Anglo-Saxons, disarmament in itself creates security ... But for them security is only a question of sentiment, of spiritual *detente*, sufficiently assured by agreements of a general type such as the Briand-Kellogg Pact and for which the sanctions required by our thesis are not merely useless, but harmful.38

But the French had become caught in the trap of the Preparatory Commission. They had acquiesced in 1925 to the idea of preparatory work for a disarmament conference, because they believed that any specific proposals would remain contingent upon ‘satisfactory’ security being assured, particularly as ultimate decisions were kept in the hands of the Council. Yet public expectations during the later 1920s meant the process acquired a life and momentum of its own. In the post-Locarno atmosphere, French demands for new security pacts in order to make arms reductions seemed like stalling or, even worse, militarism and hegemonic ambition. By the early 1930s, when the key issue seemed in London to be finding some sort of accommodation which would bring Germany voluntarily into a new armaments regime (replacing Part V of the Versailles treaty), French refusal to countenance any alterations to the Versailles restrictions on the German armed forces seemed to be based upon plain dishonesty. Re-establishing the explicit link of security to disarmament would in fact become the leitmotif of French disarmament policy, and it explains much of their backward-looking desire in the early 1930s to ‘return’ to the Geneva Protocol.

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38 MAE, SDN, Memo by Colonel Lucien, 30 Nov. 1929, Vol.723, pp.140–5.
The central issue over which this Anglo-French disagreement played out was how to deal with Germany. Until the creation of the Preparatory Commission, Germany’s exclusion from the League had meant that it took no part in most discussions on international disarmament, the 1925 Geneva conference on the global arms trade being the sole exception. But as a member of the commission, and from September 1926 a member of the League itself, Germany became an integral participant in the disarmament process. Such a revisionist power was never likely to accept any agreement that enshrined its military inferiority. The debates on the commission saw German delegates employ their status as the only ‘officially disarmed’ power as an effective political weapon. In making their claim to Gleichberechtigung (meaning variously ‘equality of status’ or ‘equality of rights’), they continually harped back to the ‘promises’ to disarm made in 1919 and insisted that these were legally binding. If the former Allied powers did not fulfil these obligations, German policy makers argued, then Germany would be free to rearm. The fact that German claims were in reality simply a political strategy, aimed at winning concessions to cover their ongoing illegal rearmament, made little difference to their propaganda value inside and beyond Germany. French policy makers believed that if Britain would stand firm alongside France against German demands, they would not have to accept any German rearmament at all. Their British counterparts remained willing to countenance a revision of Part V of the Versailles treaty in order to secure Germany’s acquiescence to a new European political and military settlement.

Conclusion

By the time war broke out again in 1939, the provisions for Germany’s enforced disarmament contained in the Treaty of Versailles were long since forgotten. The disarmament clauses in the League Covenant had similarly collapsed into irrelevancy, though there continued to be discussions on possible ways to restart the international disarmament process right through to the 1938 League Assembly. The success or failure of all six forms of disarmament during the interwar period had lain squarely in the hands of the great powers, and they had been loathe to surrender any ounce of their own independence in matters of their own defence and security. When they did reach agreement, it was over narrowly drawn issues where their own self-interest and security were safeguarded.

It is interesting to note that the difficulties today are much the same. Some of the defining characteristics of the interwar disarmament process are apparent in modern approaches: a multilateral process with
a central role played by international organizations; a focus upon a range of armaments, including conventional and chemical weapons; a debate over issues such as the enforcement of disarmament upon recalcitrant states and the implementation of international inspection and verification of agreements; and, finally, attempts to manage problems such as the international trade in arms. If we seek ‘lessons’ for the present, the range of approaches presented by interwar disarmament are worth considering again. They demonstrate the importance of political will to enable the effective enforcement of disarmament, that more limited efforts, focusing on specific weapons or problems, are likely to be more successful than over-ambitious and unfocused approaches, and that political considerations among the major states carry much greater weight than technical factors.

Ultimately, meaningful, lasting and effective disarmament can come only from consensus and not imposition.

References


