

THE 1932 LEAGUE OF NATIONS DISARMAMENT CONFERENCE AT GENEVA

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Good morning, ladies and gentlemen, and welcome once again to the Imperial War Museum. Those of you who attended last year's conference may recall that on that occasion I delivered a talk outlining the history of the League of Nations and the Kellogg-Briand Pact to Outlaw War. Today, I have chosen for the subject of my talk the 1932 League of Nations Disarmament Conference that began like the League itself with such high hopes, but which again like the League ended in such dismal and disappointing failure.

Disarmament had been the subject of Point Four of President Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points for a just and lasting peace, that he had announced to the US Congress on 8th January 1918. It had called for "adequate guarantees given and taken that national armaments will be reduced to the lowest possible point consistent with domestic safety." And this was almost the exact same formula that would appear in Article 8 of the League of Nation's Covenant and which was approved by the Allied delegates at the Paris Peace Conference on 28th April 1919.

Exactly two months later, the Treaty of Versailles was signed in the same Hall of Mirrors where Bismarck had proclaimed the German Empire on 18th January 1871, towards the end of the Franco-Prussian War in which France had suffered such a humiliating defeat. Germany, under the terms of the Versailles Treaty, found herself effectively disarmed. Her army was reduced to 100,000 men and she was forbidden to have tanks, military aircraft, submarines or poison gas. Similar restrictions, in later peace treaties, were placed on Germany's wartime allies, Austria, Bulgaria, Hungary and Turkey.

As we now know, and indeed was strongly believed at the time, Germany, long before Hitler came to power, managed to circumvent or evade these terms of the Versailles Treaty, sometimes in collaboration with that other international "outcast", Lenin's Soviet Russia. But, theoretically at least, in 1932, Germany was the only major power to have disarmed, albeit under compulsion. This was and would remain a sore point with the German delegation at Geneva and one that was to bedevil the Disarmament Conference throughout its short and unhappy life.

That life began on 2nd February 1932 at Geneva, Switzerland and its opening was marked by a procession, predominantly made up of women wearing white armbands bearing the word "PAX"

and carrying petitions with the names of over eight million people from all over the world calling for an end to the arms race and with it the assurance of a lasting peace. Before the formal part of the conference began, a number of speeches were delivered from the floor. Mrs Mary Dingman , speaking on behalf of forty-five million women in worldwide peace organizations, told the audience that every twenty four hours, the nations of the world were spending a total of sixty-five million Swiss Francs on armaments. And on behalf of the youth of the world, an American student James Green, told the assembly that the ten million dead of the Great War were “victims of an illusion” and that the world’s young people demanded an end to the stockpiling of the weapons and armaments that would be used in a future war, and in which they would be the cannon fodder.

After these earnest and uncomplicated demands for disarmament had been delivered, the Conference was called to order by its President, the former British Labour Party Foreign Secretary, Arthur Henderson, known affectionately to all as “Uncle Arthur”. Henderson was decidedly what we would call today, “Old Labour”. He had left school at the age of twelve and had been apprenticed as a moulder at the Newcastle- Upon- Tyne locomotive and foundry works. A devout Christian, he had learnt to make speeches at his Wesleyan Methodist chapel. His Christianity led first to the trade union movement and then to the Labour Party. During the First World

War, in which his eldest son was killed, Henderson, unlike his party leader James Ramsay Macdonald, supported the British war effort and served in both the Asquith and Lloyd George coalition governments as the Labour Party representative.

In the first Macdonald Labour Government of 1924, Henderson served as Home Secretary, and five years later when Labour returned to power, he became Foreign Secretary. At the Foreign Office, Henderson's policy was to try and establish Britain's leadership in seeking to secure foundations for a lasting peace through the League of Nations. His straightforward and sincere personality won him many admirers at Geneva, where he was trusted by both German and French statesmen, quite an achievement in itself at that time. He and Macdonald had fallen out over domestic politics, and the prime minister, whose vanity knew no bounds and who was rapidly sinking into senility, was enormously jealous of his former friend and foreign secretary's stellar role at Geneva. Not that the presidency would prove to be a bed of roses. Scholar and historian Arnold Toynbee , compared Henderson's task with that of Alice In Wonderland during the croquet match in which she had to contrive to make mallets out of reluctant flamingos and balls out of hedgehogs that refused to stay nicely curled up in shape.

In the first place, it had taken seven long years of quite laborious preparation to even bring the

conference about. Back in 1925, the United States, Germany and the USSR had all been invited to join League members to prepare for a world disarmament conference. The Americans and Germans had accepted at once, but it was not until 1927, that Soviet delegates, led by the avuncular and Pickwickian Maxim Litvinoff, whose formula “Peace is Indivisible” became famous in the mid 1930s, took their seats at Geneva. Litvinoff, who had been the Soviets envoy in London after the Revolution, had married an Englishwoman Ivy Low, who now both amazed and delighted the other delegates by calling out to Lord Cushendun, the High Tory Head of the British delegation:

“ Oh’ Lord Cushendun, I am so glad to see you again. Do you remember me? My name’s Ivy . Last time we met I sat on your knee and you fed me chocolates.”

Cushendun, who had once thrown a book at Winston Churchill during a heated debate in the Commons on Irish Home Rule, maintained his *sang froid.*, He later told the assembled delegates that if they succeeded in their efforts, “war would no longer be a gallant adventure but a national dishonour.”

Cushendun and Litvinoff’s American colleague in these preparatory conferences was the suave veteran US diplomat Hugh Gibson. He was a personal friend

of President Herbert Hoover, and in October 1915 in German-occupied Brussels had played a great and gallant, but ultimately unsuccessful part, in trying to obtain a reprieve for Nurse Edith Cavell.

Less welcome Americans at these disarmament preliminaries were representatives of US armament manufacturers, including one William R Shearer, who, it was claimed, had attempted to bribe both US newsmen and correspondents in Geneva and junior members of Gibson's team in a plot to prevent the Disarmament Conference from ever getting off the ground. For his pains, Shearer received \$51,230, but thinking this insufficient, sued the three largest shipbuilding corporations in the USA for \$255,655, claiming this as the balance due to him for his services in preventing any effective naval disarmament resulting from the deliberations at Geneva. The facts only came to light when President Hoover instructed his Attorney General to investigate the case in September 1929.

The British military adviser at Geneva, Major General Arthur Temperley, in his fascinating book THE WHISPERING GALLERY OF EUROPE described these preliminary conferences as an "orgy of conciliation" with one nation stating a very firm position on disarmament only to retract it later, for the sake of international harmony. Thus, proposals were made at one time or another to totally abolish conscription, or to limit a nation's armed reserves, or

to place a ceiling on arms budgets. All were subsequently abandoned and, as a commentator sourly put it, “every such sacrifice was made mournfully, and heroically greeted with the warmest sympathy as the hallmark of a truly conciliatory spirit.” For example, Temperley noted that when the French gave up the hope of limiting nations’ military budgets, the news was “rapturously welcomed by the US delegate, who was again driven to ecstasies of enthusiasm when the French made the further sacrifice of giving up investigation on the spot by an international commission.” Of all the delegates, only Litvinoff of the Soviet Union called for general and complete disarmament down to and including rifles. But however socially acceptable he and Ivy may have been over cocktails in the bar of Hotel Beau Rivage, to the other delegates and diplomats, he remained a figure of suspicion, a Bolshevik outsider.

In all these preliminary meetings, security was the overriding concern of the French, who had seen their country invaded by Germans three times in the past hundred years; in 1814, 1870 and 1914. In 1929, an attempt to appease French demands for security before disarmament, was made in a move to give more teeth to the Article XVI of the League’s Covenant that dealt with the economic sanctions that could be imposed on an aggressor state. But this came to nothing, as did one other later and similar attempt in 1932. As the Disarmament Conference proper opened, the French obsessive concern with security was greater than ever, more so, in fact, in the light of

the rise of Hitler in Germany, where in the Reichstag elections of September 1930 his Nazi Party had acquired over 6,400,000 votes and 107 seats.

The German problem was probably uppermost in the minds of most delegates of the sixty nations that assembled in Geneva on 2nd February 1932, although it was Japanese aggression against China, which dominated the discussions during the ongoing sixty-sixth League Council session. The Japanese question caused a delay in the formal opening of the conference at which Henderson told the delegates, “I refuse to contemplate even the possibility of failure.”

Brave words, and ones to which all the delegations would pay lip service, with only the Japanese being undiplomatically yet brutally honest in insisting that the Disarmament Conference should firmly oppose any measures to disarm.

The Japanese had already caused great excitement in the British press with a story first reported in the Labour paper the “Daily Herald”. It seemed that a brothel had been specially dispatched from Paris to Geneva for the duration of the Disarmament Conference at the special request of the Japanese delegation. An allegation that was later hotly denied by Tokyo.

The British delegation was initially led by the Dominions Secretary, J H “Jimmy” Thomas. Thomas, a former railwayman and a decidedly “rough diamond” politician, was later forced to resign over leaking Budget secrets. He had trouble pronouncing his aitches and once said to Lord Birkenhead that he “’ad an ‘ell of an ‘eadache”, to which Birkenhead replied that he should take a couple of aspirates His cabinet colleague, Secretary of State for India Sir Samuel Hoare, was also present at the opening session of the Conference and penned the following sketch of the event for Ramsay Macdonald, recovering in hospital from an eye operation. With tongue firmly in cheek, Hoare wrote of Thomas,

“All was safe in Jim’s keeping. He was indeed tremendous. Metternich in Vienna and Dizzy in Berlin paled into insignificance beside him....”

More seriously, Hoare continued:

“ After a short interval we adjourned to the Batiment Electoral, the grim hall in which the Disarmament Conference was to take place...there are few more dismal buildings in Europe. There was little or no ventilation; and to cope with the bad acoustics, a kind of veil had been drawn over the ceilings and windows. The delegates sat in alphabetical order in the body of the hall, their technical advisers in the lowest tiers around them, and in the galleries an army of savage looking women, most of them representatives of

pacifist societies from the Middle West. To give the affair the atmosphere of an American presidential meeting, there was a veritable battery of cinema machines that enfiladed the platform, whilst Henderson was so much surrounded by loudspeakers that I could only see the top of his head.”

During Henderson’s opening speech, Sir Samuel observed that after a while few delegates were bothering to listen-copies of the speech in English and French had in any case already been distributed to delegates. He noticed too a delegation from Afghanistan:

“ We asked the Afghans why, Afghanistan not being a member of the League, they had come to the disarmament conference. They told us that they were short of arms, and that they thought at a Disarmament Conference there would be the chance of picking up secondhand munitions cheap!”

Hoare concluded by telling the prime minister:

“At last the meeting came to an end and we struggled out, dazed and weary into the fresh air...I nonetheless feel that this curious body, half Congress, half mass meeting, might rumble into some important action. In any case, if we cannot get on with it, we cannot get on without it.”

But in his memoirs of the period of 1931-1939 NINE TROUBLED YEARS, Hoare was later to recall:

“As soon as the discussions began, the old differences became even more apparent. I became so weary of the wrangle that I left Geneva as soon as I could. Plan after plan was proposed-according to Churchill there were no less than fifty-six plans-only to be rejected or submerged in technical arguments.”

One of those plans was already familiar to delegates , for in his opening speech, Litvinoff, now Soviet Commissar for Foreign Affairs, again repeated the call for total disarmament, a call which was met by incredulous laughter from the delegates, laughter in which Litvinoff himself joined in. In the event, only Turkey and Iran backed this Soviet proposal for complete disarmament.

Stealing, a march on the Anglo-Americans, who were to present their proposals on 8th February 1932, the French circulated their plans three days earlier. Security was, as ever, the cornerstone of the French proposals. Insisting that security must precede disarmament, the French called for a strengthening of the League of Nations, and in particular giving it control and command of all the world's tanks, bombing aircraft, and heavy artillery. These would be stockpiled in the country of manufacture, but would only be used in defence of national territory and only with the approval of the League. Further, the League

was to have its own police force, as had been advocated way back in 1919, and arbitration would be compulsory. Any nation which rejected such a peaceful formula would be subject to severe economic sanctions. The French delegate Andre Tardieu, who had been Clemenceau's right-hand man in 1917-1918, finished his address with a suitably Gallic flourish:

“Finally,” he declaimed, “ the present conference offers the greatest opportunity which has ever occurred for a definite choice between a League of Nations disposing an executive authority, and a League of Nations paralysed by the intransigency of national sovereignty. France has made her decision: she asks that other nations make theirs.”

In the general debate that followed and which began on 8th February, Hugh Gibson for the USA said that civilization was threatened by the burden and dangers of the gigantic machinery of warfare that was being maintained by nearly every nation. He recalled that by signing the Briand-Kellogg Pact that outlawed war as an instrument of national policy, practically all nations had pledged themselves not to wage aggressive war. Therefore, the conference should devote itself to the abolition of weapons designed primarily for offensive operations. Among the points advocated by Gibson were special restrictions for tanks and heavy mobile guns; computation of the number of armed forces on the basis of the numbers of men necessary for maintaining internal security,

plus a suitable contingent for defence; abolition of poison gases and bacteriological warfare; effective measures to protect civilian populations against aerial bombing; abolition of submarines; prolonging the existing 1922 Washington and 1930 London naval agreements, and finally, a proportional reduction from the figures laid down in those naval agreements.

This was more or less the British line too, favouring a “qualitative disarmament” which tried to make the distinction between “offensive” and “defensive weapons”. Unfortunately, both for Great Britain, and for the cause of international disarmament, her foreign policy in 1932 was in the hands of one of the most disastrous foreign secretaries of the Twentieth Century, Sir John Simon. Of him, Lloyd George once remarked, “Sir John Simon has sat on the fence so long that the iron has entered his soul” While another colleague said that, “His smile shines like the brass plate on a coffin.” And a verse went round Whitehall:

**Sir John Simon
Isn't like Timon
Timon hated Mankind
Sir John doesn't mind**

A brilliant lawyer, Asquith had nicknamed him “The Impeccable”, Simon was too legalistic to deal with the problems of international disarmament, which in any case, as he told his parliamentary private secretary, “bored him”. While his quickness in mastering a brief

as a KC was legendary, at Geneva he became notorious for laziness and lack of attention to detail. A subordinate of Simon's wrote to his wife:

“John Simon arrives tomorrow, but when he finds the amount of work awaiting him, and its complexity, I don't suppose he will stay long.”

Sir John's German opposite number at Geneva was the Reich Chancellor Heinrich Bruening, a devout Roman Catholic ascetic political scientist, who had fought in the Great War as a machine gunner in Flanders. On the domestic front, Bruening was in the unenviable position of being attacked by both the Nazis on the extreme right and the Communists on the extreme left. His standing with the Reich President Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg was also growing increasingly shaky. Bruening realized that to fend off the attacks and to maintain his waning authority, he would have to obtain at Geneva at least some form of acceptance of German “equality” in armaments. He delivered a speech, moderate yet firm, to this end, and received, as the first round of opening speeches concluded, qualified backing from both the British and the Italians

The “Manchester Guardian” delivered the following verdict on the opening of the conference:

“ After the opening bravura of the French ‘what might be’ theme, the Conference got down to business with the staid British, (and American), enunciation of ‘what could be.’

And the “Guardian” concluded that Dr Bruening’s proposals had “a slightly academic air-as of the lamb lecturing the wolves on the advantages of vegetarianism.”

This animal parable theme on the conference was also wittily used by the veteran Spanish statesman and diplomat Salvador de Madariaga in his speech :

“The lion, looking sideways at the eagle said, ‘wings must be abolished.’ The eagle looking at the bull, declared ‘Horns must be abolished.’ The bull looking at the tiger, said, ‘ Paws, especially claws, must be abolished.’ The bear in his turn, said, ‘All arms must be abolished; all that is necessary is a universal embrace.’ ”

After these verdicts were delivered, a committee headed by the Czech foreign minister, Eduard Benes, was tasked with developing an agenda which eventually ran to 104 items. These were approved by the Conference, which adjourned on 3rd March and again on 19th March causing the “Daily Herald to sourly comment, “ It is now five weeks since the Disarmament Conference first met, and people are

beginning to wonder when it is likely to finish. It is more urgent to ask when it is going to begin.”

This feeling was shared by millions of people all round the world who had placed such high hopes on the Conference achieving success. Their frustration was exemplified in a letter from an eleven year old New York schoolboy Thomas King who put forward his own suggestion on disarmament:

“I understand that the Disarmament Conference is not making any progress. I have of a good idea, if guns and firearms are taken away from people. If they want war let them fight with rotten eggs, tomatoes and maybe some grapefruit. If they want guns, give them popguns. If this is done nobody will be hurt.”

A more serious tone was taken in the “Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung”, Germany’s “Daily Telegraph”, which commented:

“Six weeks of the Conference and we realize that twelve years of work have prepared nothing at all...it is an unsuccessful Conference which only awaits the final blow to finish it off, and with it our hopes of equality of armaments.”

With this gloomy prediction in mind, Bruening, whose position was still precarious, despite Hindenburg's success against Hitler in the German presidential election, made further proposals. He asked for an army of 200,000-double the size permitted by Versailles-and to have all the other types of forbidden heavy weapons like tanks, but only in small "sample" quantities. The British, now represented by Ramsay Macdonald, the Prime Minister himself, and the Americans led by Secretary of State Henry Stimson, together with Italians were inclined to go along with this, but the French were adamant in their refusal, knowing full well that the Germans had long ago rearmed far beyond the levels permitted by Versailles.

This French refusal to compromise their idea of security, in which they looked in vain for a definite American and British guarantee such as had been given by Lloyd George and Wilson in 1919, only for it to be revoked forced the abandonment of further talks, and the statesmen left Geneva for home.

In Berlin, Bruening did not survive in power for long, and was replaced by the elegant, suave , ambitious but lightweight Franz von Papen. A Roman Catholic minor nobleman, Von Papen had achieved notoriety during the Great War when, as German military attaché in Washington DC, he had tried to organize sabotage in American factories and plants working for the Allies. This and the discovery of letters describing his American hosts as "Ridiculous

Yankees” led to his expulsion by the Wilson administration.

With his foreign minister, Constantin von Neurath, a more stolid individual but a moral coward who went on to serve under Hitler, Von Papen now had to deal not only with the Disarmament Conference at Geneva, but a Conference on Reparations at Lausanne . There, amidst further grave French misgivings, it was decided to effectively cancel the German payment of wartime reparations. At the same time the French, (and British) still had to pay off their war debt to the Americans. Hugh Gibson even intimated to the new French premier Edouard Herriot, an erudite and jovial gourmet, that the USA would not consider reducing that debt without a reduction in the French arms spending.

The Disarmament Conference seemed deadlocked and indeed in disarray, as a group of the smaller powers, led by Spain, made vocal their extreme disapproval of the behind the scenes wheeling and dealing by America, Britain, and the others. Then suddenly, on 20 June 1932, and with an eye firmly fixed on the US presidential election coming up in November, the domestically beleaguered President Herbert Hoover proposed a bold new plan. One third of all existing land forces, a third of naval tonnage and a third of the number of battleships were to be slashed. A quarter of all the world’s cruisers

and aircraft carriers were to go, and with them all tanks, heavy guns and bombers.

Hoover, sarcastically nicknamed “Wonder Boy” by his jealous predecessor Calvin Coolidge, was a millionaire Quaker mining engineer who had shot to international fame during the Great War when he headed the Food Relief Administration for Occupied Belgium. So great was his reputation and administrative skills that it was said that Lloyd George offered him a cabinet post if he would only take British citizenship. His bold disarmament plan seemed a harking back to those glory days, now so distant from his present trials and tribulations combating the effects of the Great Depression.

It drew instant and enthusiastic support from the smaller countries and from Litvinoff too. Mussolini gave it his backing, as did Von Papen, hoping to tag on to it Germany’s equality of armaments clause.

On the other hand, the Japanese, still fighting in Manchuria, rejected it almost out of hand, and the British too gave it a very cool reception. They had very strong reservations about anything that would reduce Britain’s fleet of capital ships and cruisers, at that time still the world’s largest, and her bomber squadrons which were in constant use policing, sometimes with the use of gas, rebellious tribesmen in far flung parts of the Empire.

And the French too, ever fearful of a resurgent Germany and desperately seeking security , gave it the cold shoulder. The new premier Joseph Paul-Boncour, a flamboyant dandyish first nighter, diplomatically called Hoover's scheme, "attractively simple", adding that it was "too simple". All very well for the Americans to preach disarmament three thousand miles away from Europe, but where was their guarantee to come to France's aid should she once again fall victim to aggression from across the Rhine? Certainly such a guarantee was hardly likely to come in a presidential election year, and one in which Hoover's defeat by the recently nominated charismatic Democratic Party candidate Franklin D Roosevelt was a distinct possibility.

The French press and public opinion, realizing that an American guarantee on the lines of the one promised by President Wilson and rejected by the US Senate in 1919, was simply not on the cards, were uniformly hostile to Hoover's plan. Most thought it a cheap publicity stunt by the US President to get desperately needed votes in November.

The debate on the Hoover plan dragged on throughout the rest of the summer of 1932, with Litvinoff trying again and again to save it by suggesting amendments, all of which were defeated. And the increasingly truculent German delegate Rudolf Naldony told the delegates,

“The German government must point out at once that it cannot undertake to continue its collaboration if a satisfactory solution on the question of equality, which for Germany is a decisive one , is not reached.”

And his words were reinforced in a radio broadcast by General Kurt von Schleicher, the German Defence Minister, in which the general said that , “ Germany would not put up with being treated as a second class nation any longer” and that she would rearm “in any case.” The French press seized upon this admission of intent: “Germany wishes to do in full light of day what she has been doing for secret for the past ten years,” was the opinion of an editorial in one Paris paper.

When it adjourned in July 1932, after over six months of seemingly pointless wrangling, the Disarmament Conference , now described by Italian delegate Italo Balbo as “that monstrous factory of delusions and traps for the ingenuous” seemed to be unravelling before the eyes of the world. Fruitless debates on whether or not a battleship was an offensive or defensive weapon were taking place as the Japanese consolidated their victory in Manchuria, and Hitler nudged ever closer to power in Germany.

On 14th September 1932, the Germans withdrew from the Disarmament Conference, once again stating that only the recognition of their equality of rights with the other great powers would get them back to the negotiating table.

To try and overcome the impasse, in November Paul-Boncour presented a revised version of the Tardieu Plan, and the following month, the new American delegate Norman Davis proposed a “Christmas present for the world” in the form of a resolution summing up progress made so far and a pledge to continue the Conference until at least 1936. Pursuant of this, Macdonald, Simon, Davis, Von Neurath and Italy’s representative Baron Aloisi met and came up with a face-saving formula that stated that Conference’s main objective was to secure the equality of rights within a system which offers security to all nations.” The formula met with the Germans’ approval, and they now agreed to return to the Conference at which a new and attractive figure had appeared to represent Britain.

Since 1956 and the Suez debacle , Anthony Eden has come in for more than his fair share of both reasoned criticism and unfair abuse, and has even been voted the worst British prime minister of the Twentieth Century. In more recent years there have been attempts by biographers, forlorn in most cases it must be admitted, to salvage his reputation. Suez has undoubtedly obscured his great achievements as

Foreign Secretary and as Churchill's loyal, if exasperated, lieutenant in the wartime coalition and in the 1951- -1955 government. It has also obscured how hard he fought for a just and lasting peace when he was Britain's representative at the League of Nations and the Disarmament Conference in the 1930s. Having lost two brothers in the Great War, Eden was determined to do all that he could when taking over as Britain's representative to prevent a new and even more disastrous world war. He very soon gained an enviable reputation at Geneva, where a colleague wrote to Stanley Baldwin that:

“The man who really has the international reputation here is Anthony Eden. Somehow or the other Anthony has got the confidence-nay the admiration of all these strange animals that live in this zoo. Simon can never get it. If there is a disarmament convention at all-and if there isn't Europe is back in the jungle not merely over armament but over everything else whatsoever, -it will be Anthony who will have got it.”

And the Manchester Guardian of 1st March 1933 wrote:

“Mr Eden...has won the esteem of everybody, and (his) sincerity and good faith nobody doubts for a moment. Next to Mr Henderson, he is the best representative Great Britain has had at Geneva for years.”

But not even Eden's patient diplomacy, sincerity and charm could get the conference back on the right track and it ground on and on. In his frustration he called it "a long-drawn agony", while Sir Robert Vanisttart, the Permanent Under Secretary at the Foreign Office recalled:

"I swallowed more print on the subject than on any other. It was all dreary, all ingenious and its vain details deserve no chronicle."

In March 1933, Eden made his first initiative to kick start the conference back into action . It provided for a 200,000 man ceiling on continental European armies, but allowed the French an additional 200,000 men overseas. The plan too would limit naval strengths and tanks, and Eden also wanted to outlaw bombers, but he met with strong opposition from the Air Ministry who pointed out the "useful" role they played in policing outlying areas of the Empire.

Ramsay Macdonald, in an attempt to steal the glory from his junior Foreign Office minister presented the plan to the Conference in an address that boarded on the incoherent. An observer thought him, " a tired and failing old man, straining for rhetorical effects which he could no longer achieve, and in places unable to hold the thread of what he was trying to

say.” Nonetheless, Macdonald took off for Rome to be met by Mussolini who proposed a four power pact, which promised equality to Germany if the Conference broke down, as well other provisions for a revision of Versailles. Macdonald accepted the pact, but it was never ratified and the prime minister had a difficult job defending it in the Commons, where Churchill described the Conference as “a solemn and prolonged farce.”

In reality, all such plans for disarmament were now doomed to failure, for on 30th January 1933, Hitler had come to power in Germany. Only four days later, the Fuehrer told a gathering of Germany’s top military leaders that the build up of her armed forces was the most important single factor in his central aim of the German Reich regaining its predominant position in Central Europe. General conscription had to be brought back, and preparations for the build up of the armed forces had to take place without delay. All traces of pacifism had to be eradicated from those young Germans now eligible for military service. The struggle at the Disarmament Conference in Geneva against Versailles for German equality , Hitler told the generals, was pointless, if the people were not indoctrinated with the will to fight.

And at a meeting of the Committee of Work Creation on 9th February 1933, Hitler told ministers and top civil servants that, “ Germany’s future depended exclusively and solely on rebuilding the armed forces. All other expenditure had to be subordinated to the

task of rearmament.” But, Hitler warned, such rearmament must be camouflaged and, “ special weight be placed on this camouflage in the immediate future since he was convinced that the period between the theoretical recognition of equal military rights of Germany and the attainment of a certain level of armament would be a most difficult and most dangerous one.”

In Geneva, and as reflection of his master’s warlike outlook, the German delegate had now taken to thumping the table, and on 1st May 1933, Eden wrote to Baldwin that the situation reminded him of the Third Battle of Ypres, the infamous Passchendaele campaign:

“One feels it is rather like the 1917 campaign in Flanders, we can only make progress as we may in the mud between the pillboxes...and as in Flanders the pillboxes are occupied by Germans.”

Two weeks later, the newly inaugurated President Franklin D Roosevelt tried to breathe new life into the fast-expiring conference in which he supported the British plan and called for the abolition of bombers, tanks and heavy guns. In his message to the heads of state of the 54 nations still attending the Disarmament Conference, FDR declared:

“If any strong nation refuses to join with genuine sincerity in these concerted efforts for political and economic peace....the civilized world will know where the responsibility lies.”

Hitler, in what we would now call a “charm offensive” gushed hypocritically:

“The proposal made by President Roosevelt....has earned the warm thanks of the German government....The President’s proposal is a ray of comfort for all who wish to cooperate in the maintenance of peace....Germany is entirely ready to renounce all offensive weapons if the armed nations, on their side, will destroy their offensive weapons....Germany is prepared to agree to any solemn pact of non-aggression, because she does not think of attacking, but only acquiring security.... The mentality of the last century, which led people to think that they would make Germans out of Poles and Frenchmen is alien to us.” “ War, “ the Fuehrer concluded, was “unlimited madness.”

Some, like the “The Times” were taken in by this apparent sincerity on Hitler’s part, but the French remained both unconvinced of both the Fuehrer’s supposed peaceable intentions, and also of President Roosevelt’s proposals.. The President himself remained entirely unconvinced of Hitler in the role of apostle of peace, and told Dr Schacht, President of the

Reichsbank so when the latter visited Washington on an official visit, adding that Germany was the “only possible obstacle to a disarmament treaty.”

Very soon, world attention was drawn away from Geneva and turned on the World Economic Conference in London called to solve the problems of the Great Depression. But the French, ever mindful of security, came up with a new idea that in effect would put Germany and a system of international controls on probation for four years. If things turned out satisfactorily after those four years, Germany would be granted equality with France, but under strict international supervision. Eden thought that the French were right to be suspicious of the Nazis, and urged British acceptance of the French proposals. But few at Geneva or elsewhere though, thought that the Germans would find the French plan acceptable.

That late summer, another new face appeared at Geneva. Born the same year as Anthony Eden, and equally fastidiously dressed, although without the same elegant figure to show his clothes to best advantage, Hitler’s Minister of Propaganda and Public Enlightenment Dr Paul Joseph Goebbels now joined foreign minister Von Neurath as a member of the German delegation. In public, Goebbels acted “perfectly calmly”, recorded his interpreter Dr Paul Schmidt of the German Foreign Office and “as though he had been a delegate to the League of

Nations for years.” Most of the other delegates, Schmidt noted, “ were almost all surprised as I to find not a raving tribune of the people but a perfectly normal delegate type, smiling engagingly from time to time, like dozens of others at the September sessions.” He also achieved a similar effect and gained “their admiration, however grudging” when addressing the foreign press correspondents at Geneva, especially when he spoke of the dangers of Bolshevism.

But in his diary, the real Goebbels revealed himself. The League, he thought, gave a “depressing impression”, it was, he wrote , “an assembly of the dead”. Among the delegates, he found Sir John Simon tall and imposing, but Chancellor Englebert Dollfuss of Austria, whom Austrian Nazis were to murder just a few months later on 25th July 1934 was “a dwarf, a dandy, a sly devil. Otherwise nothing special...How we Germans tower over these people. The whole thing completely without dignity, without style...This is no place for us. I’m annoyed with myself for even being here.” Before flying back to Berlin, Goebbels complained to Schmidt about the dreadful atmosphere of the Conference, the disorder, the intrigues and the dishonesty that he had seen at Geneva. And although as he elegantly phrased it, the German Foreign Office was “shitting in its pants with nervousness” over a possible German withdrawal, he would be recommending such a move to Hitler, who had in fact already made up his mind on the matter.

While at Geneva, Goebbels had had discussions with both Paul-Boncour and the French statesman Louis Barthou, soon to become foreign minister, and who was assassinated with King Alexander of Yugoslavia by a Croat terrorist just over year later. Neither Frenchman would budge an inch regarding parity of armaments, and this gave Hitler the excuse he had been looking for to leave both the Disarmament Conference and the League of Nations.

This was done on 14th October 1933. Six days later, Goebbels piously told a Berlin audience, “ If we have pulled out of the League of Nations and the Disarmament Conference, it wasn’t so we could prepare for war. Adolf Hitler rightly explained in his radio address that only a madman could want war. We pulled out to clear the air, to show the world that things can’t go on this way.”

The move was undoubtedly popular in Germany itself. Hitler held a plebiscite on 12th November 1933, in which it was claimed that 95% of voters approved of his move. Even allowing for coercion and the climate of fear that the Nazis had built up since January, that figure was probably an accurate reflection on what most Germans felt about the League and the Conference, both seen as offspring of the detested Versailles Treaty. Even in Dachau concentration camp it was claimed, 2154 prisoners out of 2,242 voted in favour of Germany’s withdrawal

Back at Geneva, despite the German withdrawal, the Disarmament Conference continued to meet, but without any substantial progress being made. Hitler had feared that France and her Polish and Czech allies might intervene militarily, but no such action was even contemplated, let alone put into action. French premier Edouard Daladier instead made a speech in which he said that France would be “deaf to no appeal, but blind to no act. If one sincerely wishes for understanding, why begin with ruptures?” And Henderson wrote to Hitler, “ I regret that this grave decision should have taken by your government for reasons which I am unable to accept as valid.”

Eden felt that Simon , as British Foreign Secretary, bore a large degree of responsibility for the breakdown of the Disarmament Conference. Eden wrote on the evening of 14th October 1933 that:

“It is very difficult to feel anything but contempt for the man at these times. It is not only nerves at the speech which we might all suffer or excuse, but I truly believe an utter lack of moral courage”

Eden continued, “ In the afternoon, news of the German departure. The conference was becoming a sham so that it is perhaps just as well now. All the same I should not like Simon’s conscience about the earlier part of last year when Bruening was still in power. We missed the bus then, and could never overtake it.”

This was of course only too true. Despite Eden's best efforts and those of other statesmen of goodwill like Benes at Geneva, the reality of Germany's determination to re-arm and Hitler coming to power determined to overthrow Versailles, had doomed the Conference to failure. But then British indecision, American indifference and isolationism and France's fears for its "security" also played their part.

For his valiant efforts, Arthur Henderson was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1934, but died a broken man a year later. The Conference over which he had presided continued to meet until May 1937, when it was finally wound up. In the words of the American statesman Henry L Stimson, the Conference had been, "like the unfolding of a great Greek tragedy, where we could see the march of events and know what ought to be done, but powerless to prevent its marching on to its grim conclusion."

Thank you very much.