

WOMEN TAKE ON THE WORLD DISARMAMENT CONFERENCE ***Women's International League for Peace & Freedom 1932-1934***

In preparation for the conference that was to pose a great threat to its existence, the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) gathered the signatures of six million anti-war women.¹

Disarmament Petition

WILPF used the disarmament petition - 'one of the most important pieces of work' they had undertaken² - as an excuse to lobby government officials and sponsor demonstrations.³ The organisation forwarded a plethora of signatures and letters to the World Disarmament Conference President Arthur Henderson. He replied, 'I venture to express the hope that you and your friends who are in favour of success will not relax your efforts until it has brought its work to a successful conclusion'.⁴ Although WILPF proved that millions craved disarmament (in North Wales the response was particularly strong) there was concern that if delegates 'should begin with the discussion of all sorts of technical details [about weapons] there would be no possibility of creating a much needed psychology of peace.'⁵ Sadly, their fears were realised.

February 1932 - July 1932

The first phase of the World Disarmament Conference opened on 2nd February with delegates from 60 countries.⁶ Olga Miser of the Austrian section of WILPF commented, 'I feel the delegates there treat us contemptuously.'⁷ WILPF had lobbied heavily for a female delegate to be present at the conference; Mary Emma Woolley was chosen to represent and remain in direct contact with WILPF throughout.⁸ WILPF's efforts were once again hampered by women's inequality and lack of political influence in many nations.

The opening session was marred by conflicting national interests, especially the polarisation of France and Germany. The USA delegation called for the abolition of all offensive weapons as the basis for the negotiations. But, France insisted security

¹ Karen Offen, "The Women's Peace Petition at the World Disarmament Conference, Geneva, 1932," *International Museum for Women*, October 28, 2008, <http://www.imow.org/community/blog/viewEntry?id=32>.

² Leila J. Rupp, *World of Women: The Making of an International Women's Movement* (New Jersey, 1997), 218.

³ Charles Chatfield, *For Peace and Justice: Pacifism in America 1914-1941* (Knoxville, 1971), 161.

⁴ Gertrude Bussey and Margaret Tims, *Women's International League for Peace and Freedom: 1915-1965 a Record of Fifty Year's Work* (London, 1965), p. 102.

⁵ Minutes of Executive Committee Meeting 1932, Member of Executive Committee of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, Executive Committee Records 1915-1976, Reel 10, MS WILPF-Northumbria.

⁶ Bussey and Tims, *Women's International League for Peace and Freedom*, 101.

⁷ Olga Miser, Letter to Executive Committee, September 13, 1932, Executive Committee Records 1915-1976, Reel 10, MS WILPF-Northumbria.

⁸ Bussey and Tims, *Women's International League for Peace and Freedom*, 149.

must precede disarmament and asked for an international police force to strengthen the League of Nations and for the implementation of an arbitration process.⁹ The French plan was doomed when Germany, Britain, Japan and the USA all asserted that the League lacked authority to command an international force.¹⁰

The Germans demanded equality as the basis for peace. They proposed a prohibition on the use and manufacture of chemical and bacteriological weapons, as well as the abolition of tanks, heavy artillery and conscription. Germany's proposal for qualitative disarmament was not favourable towards France, but gained a favourable response from the USA and Britain.

Another stumbling block was that nobody could agree what constituted 'offensive' and what constituted 'defensive' weapons. This question, like at previous international negotiations, was diverted to a sub-committee for yet more fruitless discussion.¹¹

The conference at this point abandoned open sessions and productive discussion had stopped when the conference broke for Easter. WILPF's fear of a deadlock was realised. Disarmament groups had grown disillusioned with the lack of progress and realised 'that the present social, political and economic conditions of the world are the consequences of an outworn system.'¹²

The lack of progress also caused internal strife within WILPF. Several WILPF members questioned the efforts and performance of Mary Woolley. She was accused of being afraid to antagonise delegates for disarmament concessions and for not making her feminist position known.¹³ Public statements from Woolley's peers confirmed the belief 'that her business was to antagonise and thus to establish women's place on official commissions'.¹⁴ WILPF's leading members were also conflicted on the arms reduction issue. Emily Greene Balch believed pursuing complete disarmament was unrealistic, whereas arms reduction was achievable. Both Dorothy Detzer and Hannah Hull believed only in universal disarmament and thought pursuing a policy of arms reduction made WILPF ineffective.¹⁵

WILPF became convinced that as long as there is profit in war, the international trade in munitions would continue to flourish.¹⁶ 'Women everywhere watch with horrors and

⁹ University of Indiana, "The Monthly Summary of the League of Nations from 1918 to 1946," n.d., <http://www.indiana.edu/~league/MonthlySummary/timelines.php?yearInput=1932>.

¹⁰ Carolyn J. Kitching, *Britain and the Geneva Disarmament Conference* (New York, 2003), 56.

¹¹ Philip N. Baker, *The First World Disarmament Conference 1932-33 and Why it Failed* (Oxford, 1979), 79.

¹² Minutes of Executive Committee Meeting 1932, International Executive Committee Correspondence 1915-78, Reel 2, MS WILPF-Northumbria.

¹³ Harriet H. Alonso, *Peace as a Women's Issue: A History of the U.S. Movement for World Peace and Women's Rights* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1993), 121.

¹⁴ Catherine Foster, *Women for all Seasons: The Story of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom* (London: University of Georgia Press, 1989), 107.

¹⁵ Linda K. Schott, *Reconstructing Women's Thoughts: The Women's International League for Peace and Freedom Before World War II* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 108.

¹⁶ Peter Brock and Nigel Young, *Pacifism in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1999), 113.

fear the increasing of armaments, fully convinced that they cannot but lead to new wars'.¹⁷ In April 1932, the organisation began the process of obtaining a congressional investigation into the munitions industry in the USA, which came to fruition in the Nye Committee.¹⁸ This stimulated the British to investigate the private arms industry too.

February 1933 – June 1934

WILPF alongside other pacifist groups created a transnational collaborative body called the International Consultative Group for Peace and Disarmament (ICG), in order to propound a unified line of policy.¹⁹ Under the ICG banner rallied 'all the forces of peace, the communists, socialists, churches and pacifists against the militarists, governments and profiteers.'²⁰ Cooperation between disarmament groups stood in stark contrast to the behaviour of government delegates.

Adolf Hitler, Germany's new Führer, opposed the disarmament plan presented by French President Edouard Herriot. Hitler refused to accept any reductions in armed forces and claimed that since Germany was already disarmed, the other countries should follow its lead. British Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald offered a plan in March 1933 to reduce European armies by almost 500 thousand men, with France and Germany enjoying military equality. The equality of rights for Germany was a major disappointment for WILPF as it threatened their vision of a new international order.²¹ While the USA supported MacDonald's proposal, the plan collapsed when the Germans insisted that Storm Troopers should not be counted as soldiers!

The conference adjourned between June and October and during the interval desperate attempts were made to reach an agreement. In the final negotiations, Britain, France, Italy, and the USA offered not to increase their armaments for four years and at the end of that time Germany would be allowed to rearm to the same level as the other four powers. In response, the Germans demanded immediate equality in 'defensive weapons.'

Melanie Vambery of WILPF's Hungarian section lamented that 'many international organisations are on the verge of annihilation.'²² Monetary issues were very pressing for WILPF, which relied solely on public donations and charitable giving to stay at the conference.

WILPF staged a mass demonstration on 19th March and presented eight million signatures to Arthur Henderson. In April it ran a study conference on the obstacles to

¹⁷ Dutch Section Executive Committee Proposal 1932, Executive Committee Records 1915-1976, Reel 10, MS WILPF-Northumbria.

¹⁸ Chatfield, *For Peace and Justice*, 165.

¹⁹ Joint Statement by International Consultative Group on Disarmament, September 28, 1932, Topics 1918-1975 Disarmament, Reel 99, MS WILPF-Northumbria.

²⁰ Olga Miser, Letter to Executive Committee, September 13, 1932, Executive Committee Records 1915-1976, Reel 10, MS WILPF-Northumbria.

²¹ Christine Bolt, *Sisterhood Question? Race, Class and Internationalism in the American and British Women's Movements, c. 1880s-1970's* (London, 2004), 142.

²² M. Vambery, Letter to International Executive Committee, March 20, 1933, International Executive Committee Correspondence 1915-1978, Reel 2, MS WILPF-Northumbria .

disarmament in Geneva in a desperate push to revive the conference.²³ In the late summer of 1933, national branches of WILPF were told to press their respective governments and to support a six-point resolution advocating no rearmament, qualitative disarmament, budgetary limitation, strict supervision and a permanent supervisory organisation. A further demonstration was also scheduled for 15th October in Geneva with meetings and messages of support being sent to WILPF and other pacifist groups.²⁴

Despite the pacifist movement's best efforts, on 14th October 1933 negotiations collapsed. The German foreign minister announced that he felt 'compelled to leave.'²⁵ The World Disarmament Conference limped on until June the following year, but WILPF recognised all hopes for a peaceful political settlement in Europe were thwarted. Without German participation, the conference was meaningless.²⁶

Impact on WILPF

The collapse of the World Disarmament Conference was an unparalleled blow for WILPF and the peace movement.²⁷ WILPF blamed negligible governments and a conference was convened to educate 'public opinion...to understand the nature of the protest Germany had made'.²⁸ A significant weight of expectation had been placed upon the conference and the growing climate of war had made organisation difficult, memberships drop and placed a significant economic burden upon WILPF.²⁹

The failure of 1932 did not end WILPF's efforts to rein in the arms trade and end war.³⁰ External pressures forced WILPF to re-evaluate and refocus their efforts, ushering in a new forward thinking generation.³¹ The diversity of members included men and more liberated women, who at one point even considered dropping 'Women's' from their title.³² WILPF became increasingly less dependent on the older suffrage personalities and networks to forward the group. However, Jane Addams still promised 'to defend those at the bottom of society who, irrespective of the victory or defeat of any army, are ever oppressed and overburdened'.³³

²³ G. Baer and E. Pye, Letter to the Joint Chairman, April 1933, International Executive Committee Correspondence 1915-1978, Reel 2, MS WILPF-Northumbria.

²⁴ Thomas Richard Davies, *The Possibilities of Transnational Activism: The Campaign for Disarmament between the Two World Wars*, History of International Relations, Diplomacy, and Intelligence, v. 2 (Leiden ; Boston: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 2007), 146.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 148.

²⁶ Baker, *First World Disarmament Conference*, 133.

²⁷ Letter from Women's International League for Peace and Freedom Chairman, October 1933, Series 4, MS Colorado.

²⁸ Martin Ceadel, *Pacifism in Britain 1914-1945: The Defining of a Faith* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 134.

²⁹ Cynthia Cockburn, *From Where We Stand: War, Women's Activism & Feminist Analysis* (London: Zed Books, 2007), 183.

³⁰ Melinda Plastas, *A Band of Noble Women: Racial Politics in the Women's Peace Movement* (New York, 2011), 178.

³¹ Foster, *Women for all Seasons*, 17.

³² Foster, *Women for all Seasons*, 18.

³³ Melissa A. Hensley, "Feminine Virtue and Feminist Fervor: The Impact of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom in the 1930s," *Journal of Women and Social Work* 21 (2006): 147.

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