

Conference on the Limitation of Military Expenditure

The Limitation of Military Expenditure

The special correspondent of the London Times at The Hague, writing under date of August 28, says:

The fourth plenary sitting of the conference under the presidency of M. Neldoff on Saturday afternoon was first occupied with the final adoption of the rules of land warfare and of naval bombardments submitted as the result of the debates of the second and third committees and the registration of reservations on the part of certain powers. Public interest, however, will turn to the proceedings which occupied the second half of the sitting when the British viceroy that the governments should resume the "series of studies" on the limitation of military expenditure was adopted by acclamation after impressive speeches by Sir Edward Fry and M. Neldoff, statements communicated to the president by Mr. Choate (United States of America) and Señor de Villa Urrutia (Spain), and a brief and forcible declaration by M. Bourgeois (France).

The body of the knights' hall was crowded with the delegates of all nations, and the galleries were crowded with spectators, who included many ladies. A new arrangement of seats had been adopted in order to improve the acoustics of the building. The president's chair had been shifted from the east end of the hall to the middle of the north wall, and the delegates mostly sat in longitudinal lines running the whole length of the building. The German and Turkish delegations, however, sat on the right and left hand of the chair with the American and a few other delegates behind them at right angles to the rest of the benches. The British delegation, facing the north, sat immediately in front of the president with the French delegation behind them.

It was about 4.15 when Sir Edward Fry rose and proceeded to a reading desk on the right of the chair. The sight of "the good grey head that all men know" is always when Sir Edward Fry rises to the chair. The president, however, found silence in the committee and the plenary sittings, and it has been remarked that although the first British delegate may not be so versed in the niceties of French procedure as many members of the conference he always commands the absolute attention and the willing respect of the illustrious assembly.

Sir Edward Fry's speech. Monsieur le President, I have the honor to submit to you on behalf of his Britannic Majesty's government a proposal of the highest importance. When his Imperial Majesty the Emperor of Russia convoked the first peace conference at The Hague he proposed as the first object of its labors to seek without delay the means of putting an end to the progressive increase of armaments on land and sea, a question the solution of which is manifestly becoming more and more urgent in view of the economic aspect of the question, and the mass of men who are compelled by these preparations for war to leave their occupations, and of the prejudicial effect of this state of things upon general prosperity. You know that the aspect of the question better than I do, and, therefore, quite sure that you will agree with me in the conclusion that the realization of the desire expressed by the Emperor of Russia and by the first conference would be a great blessing to the whole of humanity. Is this desire capable of being realized? This is a question to which I cannot supply a categorical answer. I can only assure you that my government is a convinced supporter of these high aspirations and that it charges me to invite you to work together for the realization of this noble desire.

In ancient times, Monsieur le President, men dreamed of an age of gold which had existed on earth in the distant past; but in all ages and among all nations, poets, sages, prophets, and all noble and inspired about have ever cherished the hope of the return of this golden age under the form of the reign of universal peace.

Ugna Cumeal venit jam carminis aetas, Magna integro sacrorum nascentur ordo, Jam redit et virgo, redeunt Saturnia regna.

Such was the dream of the Latin poets of the past; but today the sense of the solidarity of the human race has more than ever spread over the whole world. It is this sentiment that has rendered the convocation of the present conference, in the name of this sentiment that I request you not to separate without having agreed that the governments of the world should devote themselves earnestly to the question of the limitation of military charges.

My government recognizes that it behooves the duty of every country to protect itself against its enemies and against the dangers by which it may be threatened, and that every government has the right and the duty to do for its own country what it can for the purpose of the good will, the free will of each government, acting in its own right, for the welfare of its country, that the object of our desires can be realized.

The government of his Britannic Majesty, recognizing that several powers have restricted their military expenditure, and that the expenditure realized by the independent action of each power, has thought it to be its duty to inquire whether there are any means of limiting the military charges. My government has, therefore, formulated its proposal.

The government of Great Britain will be prepared to communicate annually to powers which would pursue the same course the programme for the construction of new ships of war designed in the course of this programme would entail. This programme of information would facilitate an exchange of views between the governments, the subject of the reductions which it has in mind, and the mutual agreement. The British government believes that in this way it

will be able to attain its object, and that the limitation of military charges will be a great blessing to the whole of humanity.

Count Muraviev, in his memorandum of August, 1893, addressed to Europe in the name of his Majesty the Emperor of Russia, said: "Financial burdens constantly on the increase affect public prosperity at its source; the intellectual and physical forces of the peoples, labor and capital, are to a large extent diverted from their natural application and are unproductively consumed. Hundreds of millions are devoted to acquiring terrible engines of destruction which, though regarded today as the last word of science, are destined tomorrow to lose all value in consequence of some fresh discovery in the same field. National culture, economic progress, the production of wealth, are thus retarded in their development. Moreover, the more the armaments of each power increase, the less do they fulfill the object which they were intended to achieve. The economic crises, due in great measure to the system of armaments a outrance, and the continual danger which lies in this materialist transformation of the armed power of our times into a crushing burden which the peoples have more and more difficulty in bearing. It therefore seems evident that, if this situation is prolonged, it would inevitably lead to the very catastrophe which it is desired to avert, and the horrors of which cause all humanity to shudder at the thought of it."

They were so eloquent and so true that they were first uttered, and today still more forcible and more true. For, Monsieur le President, since that date military expenditure upon armies as well as upon navies has considerably increased. Thus, according to the most exact information which I have received, this expenditure reached in 1898—this is to say in the year which immediately preceded the first conference at The Hague—a total of more than £251,000,000 for the countries of Europe, with the exception of Turkey and Persia, and exceeding which I have no information; and, while in the year 1906 the similar expenditure of the same countries exceeded a total of £232,000,000.

It will thus be seen that in the interval between the two conferences annual military expenditure has been augmented by the sum of £19,000,000, or more than 1.75 per cent, which is an enormous increase. Such is this excessive expenditure which might be employed for better ends; such, Monsieur le President, is the burden under which our populations are groaning; such is the Christian peace of the civilized world in the twentieth century. I will not speak of the economic aspect of the question, and the mass of men who are compelled by these preparations for war to leave their occupations, and of the prejudicial effect of this state of things upon general prosperity. You know that the aspect of the question better than I do, and, therefore, quite sure that you will agree with me in the conclusion that the realization of the desire expressed by the Emperor of Russia and by the first conference would be a great blessing to the whole of humanity. Is this desire capable of being realized? This is a question to which I cannot supply a categorical answer. I can only assure you that my government is a convinced supporter of these high aspirations and that it charges me to invite you to work together for the realization of this noble desire.

In conclusion, therefore, Monsieur le President, I have the honor to propose to you the adoption of the following resolution: "The conference confirms the resolution adopted by the conference of 1899 in regard to the limitation of military charges; and, in view of the fact that military charges have considerably increased in almost all countries, since that year, the conference declares that it is highly desirable that the governments should resume the serious study of this question (qu'il faut hautement desirable de voir les Gouvernements reprendre l'étude sérieuse de cette question)."

The first British delegate then bowed and returned to his place on the front bench amid cheers, which were taken up in the galleries. M. Neldoff at once followed, but he remained seated in the chair while reading the declaration which had been communicated in writing to him by Mr. Choate (America) as well as by Dr. Drago (Spain) and Señor Concha (Chile). He began by reading Mr. Choate's declaration: "In the course of the negotiations which preceded the present conference the government of the United States considered it to be its duty to reserve the right to bring forward here the important subject of the limitation of armaments, in the hope that that might advance in some small degree the lofty conception which inspired the Emperor of Russia in his first appeal."

While the speech of his excellency the first British delegate and the proposal with which it concluded, as well as the communications with which I have just acquainted you, cannot, it seems to me, fail to meet with a sympathetic reception on our part, the idea of diminishing the military charges which weigh upon the populations owing to the fact of wars, by seeking the means of putting an end to the progressive increase of armaments on land and sea, constituted the chief motive of the initiative taken by the Emperor of Russia in order to bring about the meeting of the Peace Conference. This thought was, so to speak, the starting-point of that action. It formed the starting-point of the Russian Circular of August 12 (24), 1898, and was placed at the head of the programme which the Russian delegation proposed to the powers in its circular of December 30, 1898 (January 11, 1899). All the governments gave their assent to this programme, and, in the outset, had to occupy itself with the proposal of the Russian delegation which aimed at preventing the increase of armaments.

Contact with reality, however, was not long in revealing all the practical difficulties which this generous thought involved when the question of applying it arose. In the committee, which was entrusted with the consideration of the subject very keen differences of opinion soon broke out, and the debates assumed such a character that, instead of a discussion of the question, there was a danger of a disagreement which might have proved fatal to the rest of the labors of the conference. It and to be acknowledged that the question was not ripe, that it required further study on the part of the different governments at home; and it was in this sense that the resolution was unanimously adopted after having unanimously adopted the resolution which had been submitted by the first delegate of Great Britain, the committee expressed the desire (vœu) that "the governments should resume the study of this question (qu'il faut hautement desirable de voir les Gouvernements reprendre l'étude sérieuse de cette question)."

But here once more practical experience was not destined to correspond with the ideal nature of the desire (vœu). As I have just intimated, only two States—Argentina and Chile—have been able to give effect to that vœu by concluding a convention of disarmament, which have had the honor of reading to you. The majority of the powers of Europe had other preoccupations, and the conference terminated its labors when the difficulties which arose in an empire of Eastern Asia obliged the governments to intervene with armed force. A short time afterwards one of the great European powers found itself engaged in South Africa in a struggle which necessitated on its part a great military effort. Finally, during the last years of the Far East, the theatre of a gigantic war, the liquidation of which is barely finished (dont la liquidation est à peine terminée). Need I also mention the economic structure of the world, the difficulties which may have temporarily compelled one power or another to increase its armaments? The fact is that the governments, far from having been able to occupy themselves, in conformity with the desire expressed by the conference, with the question of limiting armaments, had, in the contrary, increased their armaments to an extent which has just been shown you by the figures adduced by Sir Edward Fry.

It was in consideration of these circumstances, gentlemen, that the Russian government this time refrained from placing the limitation of armaments upon the programme of the conference. It was, however, to testify that this question was not ripe for being discussed with fruitful results. It was, however, to testify that this question was not ripe for being discussed with fruitful results. It was, however, to testify that this question was not ripe for being discussed with fruitful results.

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When the president sat down he hardly allowed the assembly a moment to rest, and was the first to express his appreciation of his own eloquent and impressive speech. He desired to make it clear that the British viceroy was at once carried, and he himself led off the general clapping of hands in order to testify that the conference assented unanimously to the recommendation conveyed in his own concluding sentence, and that the vœu was adopted by acclamation.

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might be possible to arrive at a understanding with regard to the expenditure which the States which should undertake to adopt this course would be justified in incorporating in their estimates.

In conclusion, therefore, Monsieur le President, I have the honor to propose to you the adoption of the following resolution: "The conference confirms the resolution adopted by the conference of 1899 in regard to the limitation of military charges; and, in view of the fact that military charges have considerably increased in almost all countries, since that year, the conference declares that it is highly desirable that the governments should resume the serious study of this question (qu'il faut hautement desirable de voir les Gouvernements reprendre l'étude sérieuse de cette question)."

The first British delegate then bowed and returned to his place on the front bench amid cheers, which were taken up in the galleries. M. Neldoff at once followed, but he remained seated in the chair while reading the declaration which had been communicated in writing to him by Mr. Choate (America) as well as by Dr. Drago (Spain) and Señor Concha (Chile). He began by reading Mr. Choate's declaration: "In the course of the negotiations which preceded the present conference the government of the United States considered it to be its duty to reserve the right to bring forward here the important subject of the limitation of armaments, in the hope that that might advance in some small degree the lofty conception which inspired the Emperor of Russia in his first appeal."

While the speech of his excellency the first British delegate and the proposal with which it concluded, as well as the communications with which I have just acquainted you, cannot, it seems to me, fail to meet with a sympathetic reception on our part, the idea of diminishing the military charges which weigh upon the populations owing to the fact of wars, by seeking the means of putting an end to the progressive increase of armaments on land and sea, constituted the chief motive of the initiative taken by the Emperor of Russia in order to bring about the meeting of the Peace Conference. This thought was, so to speak, the starting-point of that action. It formed the starting-point of the Russian Circular of August 12 (24), 1898, and was placed at the head of the programme which the Russian delegation proposed to the powers in its circular of December 30, 1898 (January 11, 1899). All the governments gave their assent to this programme, and, in the outset, had to occupy itself with the proposal of the Russian delegation which aimed at preventing the increase of armaments.

Contact with reality, however, was not long in revealing all the practical difficulties which this generous thought involved when the question of applying it arose. In the committee, which was entrusted with the consideration of the subject very keen differences of opinion soon broke out, and the debates assumed such a character that, instead of a discussion of the question, there was a danger of a disagreement which might have proved fatal to the rest of the labors of the conference. It and to be acknowledged that the question was not ripe, that it