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The Brüning and Hoover Plans: ‘April Tragedy’ and Betrayal by the Hawks?

Awareness of events outside the Conference was undoubtedly having an impact on the perceived urgency of the proceedings. On 24 April, at provincial elections in Prussia, Bavaria, Württemburg, Anhalt and Hamburg (an area representing four-fifths of Germany), the Nazis made considerable gains. Brüning’s position as Chancellor was seriously weakened by these results, and he determined to steal the Nazi thunder by returning to Berlin with an agreement securing equality of rights for Germany.

Brüning and the German Foreign Ministry had sought over recent months to come to some private arrangement with the French over the issues of both reparations and disarmament, but without ever being able to bridge the gulf between them.1 However, there seemed to be a moment of optimism, around 20 April, when senior statesmen from the five major powers were all gathered in Geneva. Although the United States had been invited to participate in the Disarmament Conference, the Secretary of State, Henry Stimson, was actually in Geneva to discuss the situation in the Far East. However, the opportunity for the major powers to meet to discuss disarmament appeared too good to miss. Tardieu had actually left Geneva on 22 April, having separately told Brüning and Stimson that he planned to return on 26 April. It was MacDonald who suggested that Tardieu be asked to return to Geneva earlier than this, so that discussions could take place outside the Conference itself at Stimson’s villa at Bessinge.

In the event, Tardieu did not return on 26 April as originally planned; his commitments in the French election campaign were of a higher priority. However, Stimson, MacDonald, Brüning, and the Italian For-
eign Minister, Grandi, gathered at Stimson’s villa, as arranged. Brüning chose this meeting to present Germany’s disarmament proposals. He certainly hoped that a meeting in the presence of senior British and American statesmen would facilitate at least some kind of compromise which he could take back to Berlin.

The Brüning Plan

Brüning’s proposals appeared very moderate. He declared that Germany would be satisfied with a reduction in the period of service of the Reichswehr from twelve years to six and a reduction in the armed forces of France, though not to the German level, through the abolition or restriction of ‘particularly aggressive’ weapons. Germany’s claim to equality of rights would be addressed by the transfer of her disarmament obligations under Part V of the Treaty of Versailles to a new disarmament convention, which might last for ten years. In return for these concessions, Brüning would consider an agreement along the lines of Tardieu’s proposals for an international force, although the ultimate objective would be to abolish the weapons under its control rather than retain them as a fighting force for the League.

These proposals would have secured French military superiority, and would appear to meet Germany’s claim for equality, for at least the 10-year period of the convention. Evidence suggests that they did, in fact, receive some support from MacDonald and Stimson. They fit in with the British suggestion that a new convention would replace Part V, and were considered to have helped ‘towards immediately clearing away some of the fundamental obstacles towards ultimate agreement’. However, without French agreement they could go no further, and this agreement was not forthcoming. Tardieu, deep in an election campaign and suffering from a severe attack of laryngitis (real or diplomatic, depending on the source consulted), declared he could not travel to Geneva for the planned meeting with Brüning on 29 April. The Brüning Plan went no further.

The failure of Britain and the United States to support these proposals was seen by many at the time as the ‘April Tragedy’. Further analysis will demonstrate that this was, in fact, very far from the truth. Amongst those who criticized MacDonald and Stimson for not putting pressure on Tardieu to keep his appointment with Brüning, was John Wheeler-Bennett. In The Pipe Dream of Peace he maintained that whilst MacDonald and Stimson emphasized the fact that the replacement of Part V by any new convention must be made by the general consent of the