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Innovation: Arming the League with Air Power

At the turn of the decade, the editor of the LNU’s Headway (November 1930) lamented that:

the pace of the peace movement has slackened. The novelty of a great adventure no longer illumines the debates in the League’s Assembly. An acute economic crisis, together with the rapid growth of extreme nationalism in certain countries, makes public opinion in too many of its States Members far behind the standard of progress which their delegates and experts at Geneva agree upon.

However, the depressing outlook opened up liberal internationalism to radical, innovative solutions. These may not have been realised in the interwar years, but sowed seeds for Second World War germination. While some internationalists turned to isolationism, others developed an interest in international policing and can be said to have anticipated UN peacekeeping. All but neglected in the literature, the concept of an International Police Force (IPF) is the subject of this chapter. Britain’s vulnerability to, and horror of, air attack exercised internationalists long before the Spanish Civil War demonstrated the devastating physical and psychological impacts of air power. Internationalists campaigned from the early 1930s to establish some kind of collective aerial protection with an International Air Police Force (IAPF). An air police also promised to circumvent the disarmament deadlock – first, by enabling states to abolish national air forces as a prelude to more general disarmament, and second, by providing France with a military guarantee, which some internationalists began to regard sympathetically. The notion preceded serious consideration of non-military sanctions, promotion trespassed all over conventional politics.

Although there were international police advocates of long-standing,¹ the early thirties saw a remarkable upsurge of interest. During the
Disarmament Conference an IPF proposal formed the basic policy of a new liberal internationalist group – the New Commonwealth Society – led by David Davies, G.N. Barnes and Baron Henry Gladstone of Hawarden. Its vice-presidents included Cecil and the future Labour prime minister, Clement Attlee, who took it seriously enough to write a pamphlet. In 1933, the Labour Party endorsed Attlee’s concept; the following year the chancellor of the Exchequer, Neville Chamberlain, canvassed an IPF scheme in the cabinet; and in 1935 the Liberal Party endorsed peace-as-military-security. Organisations as diverse as the British Legion and the New Fabian Research Bureau accepted the need for an international police. The idea became the subject of prize-winning essays, led to an LNU conference attended by an air minister and a galaxy of experts, prompted Chatham House to launch a study of sanctions, and the Leverhulme Research Council to subsidise an investigation by Liddell Hart.

This evolution contributed to trespassing, creating a new consensus out of the old disarmament consensus. It also stimulated factionalism because, as previously observed about the UDC, many internationalists were not prepared for the League to possess or command instruments of war. Marxists labelled it a ‘capitalist force’. Nationalists thought it would drag Britain into war, though some, including Churchill, came to regard an IPF as a possible weapon against Germany – as indeed the Communist Party was to do after the Soviet Union joined the League in 1934. But in the first instance, the prospect of aerial warfare was the midwife of policing, for liberal internationalists sought to turn air power to the advantage of peace by making it a League monopoly.

The chapter begins with the fear of air war in the context of disarmament to explain the growth of interest in an IPF. Part two links the debate over air power to the disputes in international liberalism over League sanctions prior to their application during Italy’s war against Ethiopia. The third section links the IPF debate to the changing reactions noted in the previous chapter to French security proposals in the context of failure in the disarmament negotiations in Geneva. Analysis of the impact of these issues on liberal internationalism forms the fourth section and leads to a fifth, which focuses on the innovative proposals of David Davies and the New Commonwealth Society.

**Knock-out blow theory**

Well before November 1932 when Baldwin famously warned that ‘the bomber would always get through’, the public had reached a consensus about the seriousness of air attacks. Paradoxically, the Air Ministry