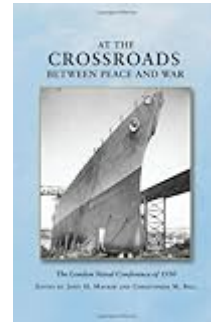


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**John H. Maurer, Christopher M. Bell, eds.** *At the Crossroads between Peace and War: The London Naval Conference in 1930.* Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2014. 288 pp. \$59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-61251-326-3.



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For students of the interwar period, the London Naval Conference of 1930 stands as one of the pivotal events in international diplomacy and naval policy. Alongside the 1922 Washington Naval Treaty and the 1932 Conference for the Reduction and Limitation of Armaments, the London Naval Conference created a conflicted legacy of idealism, measured success, and devastating failure. It is this confused legacy that prompted John H. Maurer, a professor at the U.S. Naval War College, and Christopher M. Bell, a professor at Dalhousie University, to assemble the present collection of essays, the first book-length examination of the London Naval Conference in over fifty years. Together with five other distinguished contributors, Bell and Maurer have produced a volume that successfully analyzes the conference from the perspective of all major participants. These historians argue that the London Naval Conference was the turning point of the interwar period. It marked the end of world leaders' efforts to create a new international order based on a liberal worldview of cooperation and mutual security, to reduce the danger of war by controlling arms (p. 3). Although the conference limited naval armaments of the three largest naval powers for a time, its failure to prevent even more devastating subsequent conflicts between these powers tarnished its success. *At the Cross-*

*roads between Peace and War* identifies the forces at work throughout the conference and seeks to understand why this effort at arms limitation ultimately failed to preserve peace.

Each essay in the collection analyzes a different nation, organization, or theme in the outcome of the conference. A large amount of the text is devoted to the exchanges between the three powers that eventually signed the treaty, Great Britain, Japan, and the United States, but the positions of France and Italy are also given close attention. With remarkably little overlap, these essays present a balanced picture of the role of people, institutions, intelligence, politics, and strategy. Although each historian emphasizes these factors to a different degree, the overall effect is one that highlights the great plurality of influences that decided the conference's outcome.

Professor John Kuehn of the United States Army Command and General Staff College contributes the first essay, "A Turning Point in Anglo-American Relations? The General Board of the Navy and the London Naval Treaty." Kuehn attempts to correct the notion that the US Navy played a negative role in interwar diplomacy by hindering Anglo-American cooperation. He examines the genesis of the US Navy General Board and ar-

gues that the creation of a cruiser formula that accounted for age, armament, and tonnage while exempting flying-deck cruisers proved decisive in reaching a compromise and reconciling the United States and Great Britain. Instead, Kuehn sees the US Navy's determination to keep building in order to remain superior to Japan as the greatest source of tension.

In the second essay, "Great Britain and the London Naval Conference," Bell explains how the British prime minister, Ramsay MacDonald, tried to juggle the conflicting demands of public opinion, the Admiralty, HM Treasury, and the Foreign Office in an effort to come to an agreement with the other powers. Bell concludes that the London Conference was a success for Great Britain and MacDonald in that it improved Anglo-American relations and virtually eliminated naval rivalry as a source of friction with the United States (p. 75). Simultaneously Bell concedes that the conference failed to reduce international tension or to encourage international disarmament.

Sadao Asada, professor emeritus at Doshisha University, contributes the third essay on the role of the Japanese Navy at the London Conference and the effects on that institution in its wake. Titled "The London Conference and the Tragedy of the Imperial Japanese Navy," this essay examines decision making within the Japanese delegation. Focusing on the Japanese leaders' diverse personalities, Asada concludes that the moderate Navy Ministry leaders succeeded in pushing the London Conference to its successful conclusion, but their victory proved hollow as enemies of the treaty gained control of the navy in the aftermath of 1930. Asada therefore sees the London Conference as one of the remote causes of World War II in the Pacific. Asada's Japanese sources show how, even though the public supported the treaty, its aftermath changed the dynamics among Japanese naval leaders and gave control to those who favored aggressive policies.

Florida University Professor Emeritus contributes the fourth essay, "The French and Italian Navies." France and Italy's inability to reach agreement forced the final treaty to be divided into two parts with only Britain, Japan, and the United States adhering to the all-important ship ratios. Halpern recounts how the conduct of World War I left considerable resentment between France and Italy and resulted in a rivalry that threatened peace in the Mediterranean. This rivalry was of great importance to Great Britain, which tried in vain to mediate between the powers. Feeling humiliated in the wake of the Washing-

ton Treaty, France refused to accept parity with Italy. Unfortunately, Benito Mussolini's Fascist Italy refused to accept anything less than parity with France. This essay underlines the legacy of earlier arms limitation agreements at London and explains the failure to achieve a more far-reaching accord.

The fifth essay, "Information Superiority: British Intelligence at London," argues that Britain's ability to decipher both American and Japanese codes enabled British leaders to press Japan to settle for its minimum requirements. Author John Ferris, a professor at the University of Calgary, believes that Britain's superb intelligence apparatus gave its delegates a crucial advantage. Owing to the conference's location in London, British code breakers had access to all telegrams entering the country and therefore read the telegrams of the major delegations in real time. The British success at intelligence use contrasted greatly with the failure of other nations' intelligence services to provide their delegates with useful information. Still, Ferris notes that Japan was the big winner at the conference. The Japanese Navy retained all its ships while Britain and the United States scrapped as many as the entire Imperial Japanese Navy possessed.

In chapter 6, strategist and historian Norman Friedman examines the goals of the respective signatories to the treaty and its potential for success. In "Naval Strategy and Force Structure," he finds that despite rhetoric in the United States and Great Britain, the main strategic preoccupation in those countries with the threat of war with Japan encouraged them to reach an agreement without France or Italy. Friedman also asserts that the treaty's provisions largely stemmed from ideas about force structure in the respective navies. The signatory powers agreed to extend the building holiday on capital ships to save money but faced the greatest obstacle to agreement on cruisers because their navies envisioned different strategic roles for these ships. Regrettably, the focus on arms limitation failed to address the underlying tension between Japan and the other powers.

Maurer provides the seventh and final essay in the volume, "The London Conference: A Strategic Reassessment." This fitting conclusion to the collection assesses whether the London conference was a successful attempt at arms control, dampening international rivalries if only for a short while, or a dangerous illusion that contributed to coming troubles (p. 230). Maurer concludes that the conference succeeded in alleviating the Anglo-American naval rivalry by showing the determination of various politicians to reach an accord. Yet events in Lon-

don also weakened the United States and United Kingdom and contributed to the radicalization of Japanese politics. While the London Conference revealed that the United States and United Kingdom would not continue building their navies for the sake of rivalry, it gave Japan an unquestioned dominance in the western Pacific, removing the threat of a surprise attack on Japan or its possessions. In the end, the London Naval Conference had a measured success at codifying trends already underway, but it failed to stop all naval competition or advances. In many ways, the conference epitomized the era and the dreams of men, such as Osachi Hamaguchi, the Japanese prime minister; American president Herbert Hoover; and MacDonald, the British prime minister. According to Maurer, the lesson of the conference should be that arms control reflects the larger international envi-

ronment more than it shapes that environmentâ (p. 251).

The in-depth analyses and straightforward prose of the contributors recommends this volume to anyone interested in a deeper understanding of the interwar period, arms control, and international relations. Relying on primary sources from archives in all of the participating countries, this collection fully accomplishes its stated aim of providing a new assessment of the London Naval Conference. Though new readers would have benefited from an introductory overview of the conferenceâs basic timeline and participants, the volume actually goes beyond the scope indicated in the title because each author takes the long view of events leading up to the conference. It is difficult to imagine a more comprehensive, balanced treatment of the conference and the many actors and influences that led to its outcome.

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