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Challenging the ‘Merchants of Death’

In the aftermath of the World War I, many blamed the carnage on the greed of the munitions makers and the influence of big navy lobbying groups in Washington, Paris, London, Tokyo, and Berlin. The critique of the prewar arms race came not just from pacifists but from senior government officials. The former British Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey wrote, “Great armaments lead inevitably to war.”ⁱ Admiral of the Fleet Lord Wester Wemyss said in a memorandum to the Admiralty in 1919: “Every firm engaged in the production of armaments and munitions . . . naturally wants the largest output” and has “a direct interest in the inflation of the Navy and Army Estimates and in war scares. . . . So long as this subterranean conspiracy against peace is allowed to continue, the possibility of any serious concerted reduction of armaments will be remote.”ⁱⁱ Lord Welby, Britain’s principal Permanent Secretary to the Treasury, was especially harsh in condemning the arms complex to the House of Commons in March of 1914: “We are in the hands of an organisation of crooks. They are politicians, generals, manufacturers of armaments and journalists. All of them are anxious for unlimited expenditure, and go on inventing scares to terrify the public.”ⁱⁱⁱ The same sentiment was expressed more than a decade later by President Franklin Roosevelt in a 1934 message to Congress: “The peoples of many countries are being taxed to the point of poverty and starvation . . . to enable government to engage in a mad race in armaments. . . . This grave menace to the peace of the world is due in no small

measure to the uncontrolled activities of the manufacturers and merchants of engines of destruction.”^{iv}

Such condemnation of arms manufacturers was reinforced in the early 1920s by a League of Nations inquiry into the origins of the war. The League report confirmed that private weapons firms had “fomented war scares, bribed government officials, and circulated false, inflammatory reports on various nations’ military strength, to stimulate arms spending.”^v Animosity against the arms industry was raised further in the 1930s by the Nye Committee hearings in the US Senate and the report of the Royal Commission in Great Britain in 1935, which provided further evidence of profiteering, bribery, and price fixing. These reports convinced many that the war benefited only the arms manufacturers. They deepened an already pervasive public distrust of the motivations for war.

Officially known as the Senate Hearings on the Munitions Industry, the Nye committee hearings caused what Charles DeBenedetti termed “a national sensation” in the United States.^{vi} When the proceedings opened in September 1934, journalists were already calling them “historic.” The investigation continued for eighteen months, through ninety-three hearings and testimony from more than 200 witnesses.^{vii} Arms manufacturers were grilled about the enormous profits they reaped in a war that left more than 50,000 American troops dead. The proceedings were widely publicized by an American press corps eager to believe the worst about the perfidy of major industrialists. The hearings came in the depths of the Great Depression and were fed by and helped to nourish an unprecedented wave of anticorporate sentiment.

The Nye Committee hearings were largely a peace movement initiative. Dorothy Detzer of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom played the pivotal role in convincing Gerald P. Nye, the Republican Senator from North Dakota, to chair an investigation into the arms industry. Detzer was a skilled lobbyist and a key organizer in the international disarmament movement during the 1920s and 30s. Detzer and pacifist leaders Frederick Libby and Nevin Sayre provided major support for the hearings. They uncovered evidence for the committee and publicized its findings. They made sure that the committee fully investigated the arms industry and that its findings were widely communicated to journalists throughout the country. The Nye committee hearings documented price fixing, the bribing of public officials, collusion between US and British firms, and excess profits from the sale of arms to both sides in the war.^{viii} The hearings did not provide definitive proof of a conspiracy to foment war, but they conveyed the impression of a private munitions industry that dragged the nation into war for the sake of private profit. The investigation also revealed violations of US neutrality law, which motivated congressional efforts to enact the 1935 Neutrality Act and tighten restrictions on arms sales to belligerent nations.

ⁱ Viscount Grey of Fallodon, K.G., *Twenty-Five Years 1892-1916*, vol. 1 (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Co., 1925), 89.

ⁱⁱ Quoted in Aldous Huxley, ed., *An Encyclopædia of Pacifism* (New York, Harper & Brothers 1937), 2.

ⁱⁱⁱ Philip Noel-Baker, *The Private Manufacture of Armaments* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1937), 445.

^{iv} Quoted in Norman Cousins, *The Pathology of Power* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1987), 84.

^v Ibid., 84.

^{vi} Charles DeBenedetti, *The Peace Reform in American History* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1980), 126.

^{vii} U.S. Senate, *1921-1940, September 4, 1934, "Merchants of Death"*
<http://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/minute/merchants_of_death.htm> (accessed 2 June 2006). Quoted from Arthur M., Schlesinger, Jr., and Roger Bruns, eds. *Congress Investigates: A Documented History, 1792-1974* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1975.)

^{viii} Charles Chatfield, *The American Peace Movement: Ideals and Activism* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1992), 63-64.