



Russia's Pearl Harbor

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NIKOLAY ALEXANDROVICH ROMANOV wrote a surprising letter. Or, rather, his Foreign Office did. Tsar Nicholas II, as he was better known, had already reigned in Russia for almost four years. It was August 24, 1898.

“In the course of the last twenty years,” it read, “the longings for a general appeasement have become especially pronounced in the consciences of civilized nations.” Then, unexpectedly, it went on to attack the emerging arms race.

“The economic crises . . . and the continual danger which lies in this massing of war material, are transforming the armed peace of our days into a crushing burden, which the peoples have more and more difficulty in bearing.” This was before Nicholas’s Imperial Guard would gun down 1,000 peaceful protestors outside the Winter Palace in St. Petersburg, before the Black Sea Fleet would mutiny, before the Tsar would be tossed from his throne by the Communists and he and his family slaughtered.

The letter invited the Great Powers to a conference to deal, once and for all, with the problem of disarmament. He hoped that it would be, “by the help of God, a happy presage for the century which is about to open.”

The meeting began on a perfect spring morning, May 18, 1899 — which also happened to be the Tsar’s thirty-first birthday — at The Hague in the Netherlands. The city had spared no expense. Flags from each of the participating nations flew from civic buildings and embassies, hotels and houses. Before half past nine the diplomatic quarter was abuzz with traffic.

It all went downhill from there. The Tsar himself may have been sincere. But before long many of the plenipotentiaries began to suspect that the Russian government had only proposed the disarmament talks out of fear. Britain and Germany were arming rapidly, and Russia, preoccupied with expanding her sphere of control into the Far East, couldn’t keep up, especially when it came outfitting their army with rapid-fire artillery. The first Hague Peace Conference set in motion some important long-term trends, such as creating a court for the voluntary arbitration of international disputes — an idea that gathered major public support in America — but the disarmament talks went nowhere.

Then, just four years later, the Imperial Japanese Navy under Admiral Togo launched a surprise attack against Russia's Far East Fleet at Port Arthur, in Manchuria, three hours before making a declaration of war. The Tsar was stunned at such behavior, and sent armies across the Trans-Siberian Railway to reassert his power. The war raged on land and sea for more than a year, sending more than 150,000 men to their deaths. Finally, the unsung Japanese smashed Russia's mighty Baltic Fleet at the Tsushima Straits, south of Vladivostok, on the night of May 27, 1905.

Shortly afterwards in 'Akká, a group of European visitors asked 'Abdu'l-Bahá if Russia could have avoided the calamitous war. Yes, they could have, he said. Russia's peace initiative at The Hague had generated substantial goodwill, but they had failed to leverage it. 'Abdu'l-Bahá took out a world map and described the Russian frontiers, the movements of the naval battle groups, and the roles of the ships in each, pointing out how Russia could have retreated while buying time to coordinate international pressure on Japan for a ceasefire. He then laid out for his visitors how a comprehensive peace plan could have been put in place.

The Second Hague Peace Conference convened at President Roosevelt's instigation in 1907. The International Council of Women submitted a petition signed by two million women from twenty countries, and American peace societies made their voices heard. But the Tsar, having survived the Revolution of 1905, was no longer interested in disarmament. The optimistic Americans were still small fish in the ocean of global power, and the conference failed again to address the critical questions.

But there's still room for optimism. The next Hague Conference is scheduled for two years from now, in 1914. Let's see how that turns out.

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FOOTNOTE / ENDNOTE:

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