

# Great Britain's failure to innovate during the interwar years



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Despite being the leader in military innovation at the end of World War I, Great Britain failed to maintain this status during the interwar years. In 1918, Great Britain led the world in armored equipment and doctrine. Also, they were clearly the most innovative nation with regard to naval aviation. Their willingness to devote the resources to these programs and their desire to create a strategic advantage over the Germans pushed them ahead of other major powers. However, Britain lost their innovative lead in armored warfare and naval aviation between World War I and World War II due to organizational design, doctrinal issues and fiscal constraints.

British military organizational design failed to create an environment of cooperation and equitable status among the services necessary for innovation. The Royal Air Force (RAF) and Royal Navy held a higher priority than the British Army but they experienced difficulty in working together. British Army leaders resisted changes within the regimental design. These organizational flaws degraded innovation in armored and naval aircraft warfare.

The regimental system of the British hampered improvement in armored capabilities. Disagreement among mechanization proponents often led to a lack of enthusiasm among senior military leaders. Despite the attempts of some leaders during the interwar period, the British lacked an ability to understand operations above battalion level. The British officer education system contributed to this inability because it was deeply rooted in the regimental mindset. Additionally, the army was responsible for imperial defense. Most ground units rotated to colonial constabulary duty where

motorization or mechanization was either unneeded or logistically unsupportable.

Dual control of British naval aviation by the RAF and the Royal Navy led to overwhelming problems for the Fleet Air Arm. The navy had suffered a tremendous loss of experienced personnel when the RAF was formed. After the Fleet Air Arm was established, the lack of experienced officers at the key grades in profoundly affected British naval aviation straight through WWII. Dual control also slowed recruiting efforts in the Fleet Air Arm. The navy failed to develop a flag officer path for naval aviators which indicated a lack of commitment to the Fleet Air Arm. Additionally, Great Britain neglected to establish any organization of executive level leadership of the Royal Navy in contrast to the U. S. Navy's creation of a Bureau of Aeronautics.

The debate over combined arms operations and terms of the Versailles Treaty shaped doctrinal issues for the British military. Disagreement over combined arms operations created confusion concerning a suitable role for the tank. Some proponents of armor favored a combined arms force while others were more interested in a pure-tank role, in part because they experienced difficulty cooperating with the other services. Despite the success of an experimental combined arms force during maneuvers in 1927, the senior leader in charge disbanded the newly created armored force. He cited a negative impact on the traditional forces because of this success. The British Government had also passed a rule in 1919, which directed the military to assume that Britain would not be in a major war or need a large conventional force for at least ten years. This "Ten Year Rule" prevented the

British from examining lessons learned and exploring a combined arms doctrine.

Naval aircraft aviation suffered because of an artificial sense of security gained by the British as a result of Versailles. After being the preeminent naval power at the end of World War I, Britain felt the limitations of the treaty wouldn't be of any consequence. It only took three years for Japan and the United States to catch up. The British previously relied on continental allies to fight continental opponents while they focused on more traditional platforms such as aircraft for strategic bombing. Their lead in existing carrier tonnage effectively prevented the British from pursuing the development of new carriers. Because Britain didn't face a potential naval enemy in home waters and as a result of the sense of security induced by Versailles, the Royal Navy continued its World War I attitudes and precepts.

Fiscal restraints during the interwar years hindered Britain's ability to maintain the innovative pace of other nations. The Royal Tank Corps experienced numerous problems with existing equipment and a lack of new platforms. The Royal Tank Corps had to make do with the same equipment from 1922 until 1938. For example, complexity and expense of new equipment made distribution of radios down to individual tanks very slow. Some leaders who were opposed to using armor in a combined arms configuration frequently used the funding shortfalls as excuses. These factors indirectly thwarted further innovation.

The British effort to combine naval operations and aviation proved to be expensive. Great Britain's industrial decline combined with national financial problems further hampered any improvement in regard to carrier aviation.

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The admiralty could not justify any new spending on carriers due to the tonnage limitations imposed by the treaties. Consequently, they were forced to accept small incremental improvements that prevented them from keeping pace with Japan and the United States. The RAF bought aircraft for their traditional role of strategic bombing missions in order to justify its existence and had little capital left to purchase naval aircraft.

The British military lost their status as leader in armored warfare and naval aviation because of organizational design, doctrinal issues and fiscal restraints between World War I and World War II. These are considerations discussed at great length by many leaders and innovators in Great Britain during the interwar period. Nevertheless, failure to apply these considerations to the changing operational environment yielded a missed opportunity at continued innovation. In any age of transformation, military organizations must adapt their formations and doctrine to the changing world around them. Cultural and political establishments must also commit to funding those organizational changes as well as investing in new technology.