

Analysis of the Ten-year Rule Influence on the British Navy

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Abstract: The Ten-year Rule was the overall national defense strategy formulated by the British government after World War I. It was made according to the strategic analysis of "no war within ten years"¹, and also a reflection of its declining economic power. This policy has led to a great armament reduction of the British government, especially the British navy. Britain rose from the sea, and its decline also began with the decline of its naval power.

Sea power generally refers to the control of the maritime traffic route. In the late 19th century, U.S. rear admiral William Mahan proposed "the theory of sea power" and defined it as "everything that can make a nation great by or through the sea." He believes that the mission of the navy is to protect overseas trade, and its function ranges from peacetime to wars. The strong naval force controls the maritime transportation hubs and escorts merchant ships, which is the reflection of the national comprehensive ability.²

The British navy has dominated the sea for over 100 years and has built an empire with a population of 400 million and an area of 33.5 million square kilometers. Overseas trade has accelerated the British economy, colonies have provided huge markets and industrial raw materials, and the strong navy has protected its maritime trade, which are the three pillars of building an empire that never sets. Britain has developed a navy to control the sea and ensure its own security and its colonies. Meanwhile, it has ensured its trade routes safety and exploited colonial markets.³

Concerning the "Ten-year Rule", there have been specific studies in China, but the research on the navy is still slightly inadequate. Ding Yingsheng analyzed the impact of this policy on national defense construction in "British Military Construction in the Period of Ten-year Rule".⁴GengZhi analyzed the impact of "Ten-year Rule" from the perspective of changes in the international situation in "A study of Implementation and Effect of Ten-year Rule".⁵BaiLaixi analyzed the development process of the British navy and reasons for its power changes in his master's thesis "An Analysis of the Evolution of British Naval Power between the Two World Wars".⁶

The financial crisis caused by World War I forced Britain to compress its defense policy to a very low standard, and it still affected its defense policy after the end of the Ten-year Rule. This was reflected in the era of a small-scale professional army before World War I, in which the navy defended the British Empire, the air force monitored the vast colonies, and the army only acted as the colonial armed police.⁷ Britain did not have a large budget to defend its global sphere of influence. Its power could only defend strategic fulcrum and other core areas, and also had no absolute strength to deal with the challenges of emerging countries.

¹Qi Shirong.Britain's Armament Reorganization and Appeasement Diplomacy in the 1930s[J]. Historical Research,1984(02):190-206.

² Zhang Xiaolin et al.Mahan's Theory of Sea Power[M].Nanjing: Jiangsu Phoenix Literature and Art Publishing House, 2020: 43, 115.

³ Cong Shengli et al.British Maritime Power: The Originator of Sea Power[M].Beijing: Ocean Press, 1999: 1, 2, 8.

⁴ Ding Yingsheng. British Military Construction in the Period of Ten-year Rule[J].Journal of AnqingTeachers College (Social Science), 2010,29(08):75-79.

⁵GengZhi.A study of Implementation and Effect of Ten-year Rule[J].Journal of Qinghai University for Nationalities (Educational Science),2011,31(01):112-116.

⁶BaiLaixi.An Analysis of the Evolution of British Naval Power between the Two World Wars[D].Central China Normal University,2005.

⁷Zhang Yunjing.On Britain's Rearmament from 1935 to 1940[J]. Journal of Liaocheng University (Social Science),2006(04):59-62.

1. Reasons for the Ten-year Rule

World War I transformed Britain from a pre-war creditor to a post-war debtor, costing it 9 billion pounds. Before the war, the United States owed Britain about 400 million pounds, but after the war, Britain owed the United States 842 million pounds.⁸ After the world economic crisis in 1929, the textile production, which accounted for more than 40% of British exports, fell by two-thirds; Coal, which accounted for 10% of exports, fell by a fifth; The shipbuilding industry was seriously hit, whose production dropped to 7% of the pre-war level in 1933, and 62% of the labor force was unemployed; Steel production fell by 45% within three years (1929-1932), while pig iron production fell by 53% in the same period.

During the economic crisis, British exports fell by 50%. Among them, exports of manufactured goods fell by 52.4%, with the export value sharply dropping from 729.3 million in 1929 to 365 million.⁹ Then, Britain's share of world trade continued to decline, from 14.15% in 1913 to 10.75% in 1929, and to 9.8% in 1937.¹⁰

Because of the financial and economic impact of the war, the post-war British government has been working to restore its fiscal balance and pound's financial hegemony. This not only reflected its national strength and international status, but also symbolized whether it was strong. While achieving the strategic goal of maintaining national strength, Britain reduced the strength of the three services by tightening defense expenditure. In particular, the navy stopped building new main battleships, which prevented Britain from using all its forces to take military means to confront the challenges of emerging powers.

2. The Implementation and Final Abolition of the "Ten-year Rule"

2.1 The Formulation of the "Ten-year Rule"

After World War I, the British government proposed that "Britain would not be involved in any foreign wars in the next 10 years".¹¹ This idea discussed the issue of disarmament and sought to reduce the overall defense policy and budget in peacetime. In the two months of spring and summer of 1917, the Admiralty proposed a new budget of 170 million pounds. Then, the chancellor of the exchequer Austen Chamberlain proposed to reduce the total military expenditure for the next year from 502 million pounds in 1919-1920 to 350 million pounds while considering this proposal. Churchill then suggested that some policy guidance covering the next five or ten years should be formulated and approved by the Cabinet. Various services should formulate a memorandum so that the Cabinet as a whole could make a comprehensive view of the defense responsibilities during the period initially proposed by the prime minister.¹²

On August 15, 1919, the Cabinet did not adopt the memorandum submitted by the Admiralty on August 13 concerning the reduction of naval armaments. It formally proposed the following principles as a guiding document for the development of various services in the future:

To formulate the revised budget, we can assume that the British Empire will not be engaged in any world wars in the next 10 years, and that no expeditionary forces are needed to achieve this goal.

Without the authorization of the Cabinet, the standard of the size of the pre-war navy cannot be changed.

No new naval vessels should be built. The Admiralty should try to stop the ship construction with no commercial values. This decision is not only from the economic perspective, but also from the perspective of improving the output of commercial construction.

⁸ [British]W.N.Medlicott.ContemporaryEngland(1914—1964)[M].Beijing: Commercial Press, 1990: 81.

⁹ Chen Jianlan, Zhang Jianming. The Features of the British Economy between the Two World Wars[J].Journal of Suzhou Railway Teachers College,2000(03):96-101.

¹⁰ [British]Kennedy Paul. The Rise and Fall of British Naval Master[M]. London1983, P.269.

¹¹GengZhi.Historical Investigation of British and American Military Strategy from1919 to 1945.China Excellent Doctoral Thesis,2007. 31.

¹² [British]N .H. Gibbs.Grand Strategy, Vol.1[M].London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1976:4, 5.

The main functions of the army and air force are to provide garrisons for India, Egypt, new mandates, and all territories under British control (except for autonomy), and to provide necessary support for the power of domestic non-military departments.

As for Ireland, the present situation may require more garrisons than normal, but within 12 months, a normal garrison is enough to complete this task.

To save manpower, mechanical devices are used as much as possible, which should be seen as a means to reduce the budget.

In preparing the budget, the following maximum figures should be targeted:

Royal Navy is 60 million pounds; Army and Royal Air Force are 75 million pounds.¹³

In November 1924, after the implementation of the "Ten-year Rule", the diplomatic situation and financial pressure of the British navy gradually reduced the budget and expenditure, and reduced its vessel sizes.

2.2 The "Ten-year Rule" in Question

In November 1924, Winston Churchill, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, proposed to hold down weapons between 1925 and 1926. He suggested that the Admiralty should be asked about the development pace of Singapore base and the cruisers construction under the premise of meeting the British financial situation and political perspective. He further suggested that the British defense situation and the feasibility and desirability of the "Ten-year Rule" of August 1919 should be reviewed every three years. If the situation did not change much, the "Ten-year rule" would continue.¹⁴

In June 1928, however, doubts about the "Ten-year Rule" continued to arise. Balfour, the Privy Council minister, thought that whatever the situation was, British military force was inadequate to meet the challenge. Only by maintaining the "most perfect state", could they play their greatest responsibilities. Sir Marden, the chief of the naval staff, stressed that reducing military expenditure would weaken efficiency.¹⁵

Concerning these doubts, the Imperial Defence Council recommended to the Cabinet that "there would be no major wars within ten years" should be reviewed annually. When the national defense situation changed, any government departments had the responsibility to question this assumption.¹⁶ This change could lead to a change in defense policy. After the great changes in the international situation, Britain could implement the policy to increase military expenditure.

2.3 The Formal Abolition of the "Ten-year Rule"

In 1929, the capitalist world economic crisis broke out, and British national defense situation was constantly threatened by Germany and Japan. With Hitler becoming the Chancellor of Germany in January 1933, and Japan's withdrawal from the League of Nations in February, the two sources of war in Europe and Asia began to form. With the continuous failure of the International Conference on disarmament, the call for the abolition of the "Ten-year Rule" grew louder. On November 9, 1933, the Imperial National Defense Council discussed the report of the chiefs of staff of the three services on stopping disarmament and rebuilding armaments, and proposed to avoid simultaneous wars with Germany and Japan, and made the following suggestions:

Now, expenditures of the Department of Defense should be governed by the reports of the subcommittees of the chiefs of staff and consider the priority personnel within them: to defend our property and interests in the Far East; Europe's commitment; to defend India; (2) The present expenditures should not be made on defensive measures required only for attacks against the United States, France, or Italy; (3) The above conclusions must be carefully checked by relevant government departments. Anyway, it should be reviewed annually by the Imperial Defense Council.¹⁷

¹³British Cabinet Memorandum. The National Archives[B]. CAB23/15, W.C.616A.

¹⁴ [British]N.H. Gibbs. Grand Strategy, Vol.1[M]. London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1976, pp.50-51.

¹⁵ [British]N.H. Gibbs. Grand Strategy, Vol.1[M]. London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1976, pp.57.

¹⁶ [British]N.H. Gibbs. Grand Strategy, Vol.1[M]. London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1976, pp.58.

¹⁷[British] N.H. Gibbs. Grand Strategy, Vol.1[M]. London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1976, pp.87.

In October 1933, the British government abolished the "Ten-year Rule" of reducing military expenditure, which lasted for over ten years.¹⁸ However, its influence has been difficult to change for a long time. Though there were doubts in the government and the army, under the financial and pacifist pressure, the disarmament policy lasted until 1933. Under the changes of international situation and the intensification of wars, though Britain abolished this policy, it still did not immediately enter the stage of armament construction. Because of the impact of the economic crisis and the difficulty of rapidly building armaments during disarmament, British national defense has experienced three years of preparation.

3. The Influence of the "Ten-year Rule" on the British Navy

After World War I in 1919, the British navy had 438000 soldiers, with a total number of 751 vessels, including 58 main warships, 103 cruisers, 12 aircraft carriers, 456 destroyers and 122 submarines.¹⁹ From 1918 to April 1921, it dismantled no less than 38 battleships, 2 battle-cruisers, 87 cruisers, 300 destroyers and 106 submarines.²⁰

The introduction of the Ten-year Rule has limited the military expenditure of the British navy to a maximum of 60 million pounds a year. From 1918 to 1923, the actual naval appropriations have been decreasing every year. Within six years, it was 356 million pounds from 1918 to 1919, 188 million pounds from 1919 to 1920 and 112 million pounds from 1920 to 1921. In the following three years, it was 80 million, 56 million and 52 million respectively.²¹

The continued reduction of military expenditure by the British government has made it difficult for the British navy to add new vessels. When the British navy planned to purchase new vessels, Britain no longer had the production capacity to meet these urgent orders, which made it difficult for Britain to quickly obtain vessels of better quality than other naval powers. In Britain, it took four to five years to design and build a warship. In the U.S., however, it took only three and a half years in the same period. The newly designed George V-class battleship followed the guidelines of the naval treaty and was only equipped with 14-inch guns; German, French, and Italian vessels were equipped with 15-inch guns, the U.S. guns were 16 inches, and the Japanese Yamato class guns were 18.1 inches.²²

During the implementation of the "Ten-year Rule", due to the decline of overseas trade, the strength of the British navy also declined, which led to the gradual decline of its maritime rights. Meanwhile, the decline of maritime rights has made it difficult for Britain to face the emerging maritime powers and protect its maritime trade routes and colonies. This led to the gradual decline of its trade, which in turn caused the further decline of British maritime rights.

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¹⁸GengZhi. On the British Royal Navy Recovering Two Power Standard Between the two World Wars[J]. Historical Teaching (The Second Issue of the Month), 2012(02): 46-51.

¹⁹ [British]Kennedy Paul. The Rise and Fall of British Naval Master[M], London, 1983, P.286.

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