A Scientific or Regimental Staff
The Reform of Staff College Selection in the British Army, 1927–31

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Abstract: This article explores a key debate within the British Army of the power of the regimental system over the structure of the army. It will do so by focusing on the discussions undertaken between 1927 and 1931 on the issue of allocating vacancies to the two Staff Colleges at Camberley and Quetta. It will demonstrate that the regimental system of the British Army was so ingrained as to effect the reform of a structure that had stood outside the scope of regimental influence since its formalization in 1905. In doing so, it will be argued that the existence of the attitudes created by the regimental system in senior British officers had a significant impact on the British Army's ability to recognize the need for the reform of Staff College entry process despite the increased importance and technicalization of staff duties as a result of the First World War.

Keywords: Staff College, British Army, education, interwar period, regimental system, Army Council

In the interwar period, the British Army faced a series of circumstances that would test its ability to adapt, reform, and develop, while simultaneously maintaining its commitment to an increased number of manpower-intensive deployments across the empire. Historians have long discussed how these increased territorial responsibilities—combined with revulsion at the casualties suffered during the First World War and the desire of ordinary soldiers to be de-

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mobilized—contributed to a significant weakening of the British Army in this period.[1] Furthermore, much has been made of the fact that while other European nations maintained large standing armies through a system of compulsion, Britain rapidly reverted to its prewar roots in the form of a small, professional army, backed up by a reserve of volunteer units.[2] In this context, the efficient use of manpower, particularly the limited peacetime supply of officers, was crucial to ensuring that the British Army was able to meet its many commitments in the interwar period. While some recent scholarship acknowledges the failure of the British Army to make the best use of its resources in general terms, the narratives have focused principally on the initial allocation of personnel to arms of service.[3] This article will argue that the failure to manage manpower resources, arguably a relatively new phenomenon in the technologically dominated battlefields of the post-1918 world, was also a problem for that part of the British Army generally referred to as "the brain of the army"—the staff.

At a time of disarmament and social disquiet over the perceived aggressive nature of the British Army, when young men were deterred from an army career due to slow promotion and a lack of opportunity to learn skills useful in civilian employment, the British Army failed to move away from the historical conservative dogma of the officer corps. As a result, despite evidence that supported open competition to the staff colleges at Camberley and Quetta and the subsequent increase in technical corps officers obtaining vacancies, the Army Council continued to put its faith in the traditional arms and restricted entry of those officers who could have improved the quality of the staff through their appreciation and understanding of modern methods of war.

The importance of issues relating to staff training through the interwar army should not be underestimated. While the Haldane reforms of the early twentieth century had established the principles of the general staff and resulted in the creation of *Field Service Regulations*, it must be remembered that throughout the period discussed in this article, the British Army and regimental commanders in particular remained suspicious of officers who wished to apply to Staff College.[4] Indeed, even into the later years of the interwar period, regiments boasted that none of their officers had been encouraged to apply.[5] In addition to this, the majority of deployments and engagements undertaken by the British Army in this period were relatively small in scale.[6] In many cases, troop concentrations did not exceed a reinforced battalion and, as a result, no formal staff was required (the lowest level at which an organized staff was required was the brigade). Thus, any staff work was undertaken by regimental officers assigned staff responsibilities in addition to their normal regimental duties. For example, while Palestine, Ireland, and Burma represented significant drains on imperial manpower in the 1920s and early 1930s, operations largely consisted of small motorized flying columns or platoon patrols to maintain discipline and order or to undertake surgical strikes against key hostile leaders.[7] As a result, for many officers in the British and Indian armies, their first experience of staff training was based not on the centralized training made available at Staff College but on the administrative training provided by their regimental commanders.[8] In this context, the centralized staff training provided at Staff College was, in practice, unexploited. However, in the wider context of the period in which the British Army found itself scrapping with the Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force to define a role for itself in imperial defense planning, such centralized training was of prime importance. It was only by ensuring that the British Army had a modern, efficient planning staff in place that it could be sure of setting out realistic plans to "suit the special requirements of any particular campaign and of rapid expansion to meet the case of a grave emergency."[9] While its organizational doctrine emphasized flexibility of approach, as an addendum to this, its operational doctrine emphasized that "the instructions laid down herein cover a war of the first magnitude, but can be modified in their application to other forms of warfare."[10] Thus, while still emphasizing the importance of flexibility in the context of imperial defense and low-intensity warfare, *Field Service Regulations* also recognized the possibility of the British Army needing to deploy in greatly expanded form to meet an organized, well-equipped enemy. As will be demonstrated below, with the imposition of a quota system for competitive vacancies to Staff College, the Army Council effectively impeded its own ability to create flexible and coordinated defense plans, in favor of a commitment to regimental soldiering.

Background to the Quota System

The quota system for allocating vacancies to the staff colleges came about as the result of wider problems surrounding the recruitment of officers for the army. This problem would plague the British Army throughout the interwar period and would plant its roots firmly in the changed social and political attitudes toward the army as a result of the experiences of the First World War and the early years of the interwar period. Of particular consequence for the British Army was the growing belief, "particularly in the upper and educated classes . . . that little separated the lot of the victors from that of the defeated."[11] The growing distaste for war that these feelings engendered was particularly damaging for the British officer corps as it was these two groups, the upper classes in particular, who continued to supply the bulk of candidates for commissions. Antimilitary attitudes were strengthened with the formation of the League of Nations and led to the erroneous belief that military action on the scale of the First World War was a thing of the past and that "all international conflicts were amenable to negotiation and discussion."[12] As a result, the general political mood toward disarmament and the rapid reductions in British Army strength in the early part of the interwar period were praised and supported by the sections of the population most needed to fill positions of leadership.

In addition to this general desire for disarmament, the army retained its public perception as being an aggressive force, designed for destructive offensive action, in support of a wealthy, industrial elite, rather than to serve as the defensive bastion of the empire and its people. Indeed, the most stark example of this was the Amritsar massacre in 1919, in which approximately 380 unarmed Indian civilians were killed by Ghurkas under the command of British Brigadier General Reginald Dyer while attending a political rally.[13] Less deadly, but far more impactful to the civilian population, was the deployment of 36 battalions called out on emergency duty to aid the police and civil authorities during the 1926 General Strike.[14] Combined with the significant deployment to peacekeeping duties in Ireland, this relatively aggressive use of the British Army in this period did much to dissuade a war-weary population of the positive benefits of service in the army. Furthermore, the near constant reduction in military strength in the years immediately following the end of the First World War did little to encourage those wishing to commit to a long-term career to join the army. Ultimately this came down to two factors, the first of which was slow promotion within the regiment. With the abolition of purchase, promotion within the individual regiment was governed by seniority. For the corps regiments (Royal Artillery, Royal Engineers, Signal Corps, and the Royal Army Service Corps), each had one list for all the officers within the corps, further reducing the frequency of promotion. The result was a blockage of the promotion of junior officers, "taking perhaps twelve or more years before a Subaltern could become a Captain."[15] As well as discouraging recruitment, it left many junior officers living "in hopes of another war or the recurrence of the Black Plague."[16]

In addition to these internal factors, the British Army faced stiff competition from the Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force for its officer recruits. In the interwar period, all three Services were attempting to recruit from the same pool of public school–educated young men. Indeed, in a report on the education of potential candidates for Royal Air Force commissions, it was noted that "this qualification depends upon a certain moral temper as much or as more than upon any purely intellectual proficiency. It is often described as the quality of a gentleman."[17] Furthermore, as the Royal Air Force and the army shared admission papers, with candidates selecting their order of preference, these two Services were in direct competition for officer cadets.[18] In addition to this competition, the civil service commissioners who set the relative pass marks required for each college tended to ensure that the most academically gifted gained entry to Cranwell by setting the required pass grades at "41% for Cranwell, 38% for Woolwich and 36% for Sandhurst."[19] As a result, not only was the army facing a significant public relations problem in its attempts to secure suitable candidates for commissions, but the most academically able of those seeking to join the Services were being skimmed off by either the Royal Navy or the Royal Air Force.

The result was a decline in quality within the officer corps of the British Army, which led Major General Sir Hugh J. Elles to note, "We are now unable to fill the cadet colleges . . . the quality is not high."[20] This in turn resulted in a dip in quality of officers applying for and gaining places at the staff colleges. As noted above, while the operational commitments of the army did not necessarily require a high-quality staff, the doctrinal requirement for flexibility in planning that had been enshrined in *Field Service Regulations* established a crucial precedence for creating such a staff at the War Office to aid operational planning for possible conflicts. The ability of the staff in the 1920s to do this was called into question by Chief of the Imperial Staff Sir George F. Milne, who stated, "It is a positive danger to the Army and a crime to the nation that some of the officers are allowed by their commanding officers to be put on the Staff College list."[21] In an attempt to improve the quality of officers on the staff as well as the attractiveness of the army to those seeking a challenging career, in 1926, it was proposed to remove the original quota for competitive vacancies for places at the staff colleges. Before examining the impact of this change, it is worth describing the process of entry to the staff colleges in this period.

Staff College Entry in the Interwar Period

During the interwar period, the principle method of entry to the Staff College was via competitive examination, held once a year in February or March in various locations across the empire, including London and Delhi. The examination was divided into two sections—obligatory and voluntary subjects—with each section being designed to test the skills deemed necessary to succeed as a staff officer. Those subjects rated as obligatory were: Training for War, Organization and Administration, and Imperial Organization.[22] These papers were to serve as a litmus test for potential staff officers, and they ensured that "the percentage of marks allotted to military subjects was eighty per cent [*sic*]."[23] The optional subjects included a wide variety of languages, physics, chemistry, political economy, and the history of British India and thus, while covering a wide array of subjects, still retained an element of military knowledge.[24] Until 1926, a prewar quota system was in force that assigned a specific number of vacancies to each arm of Service taking the competitive examination. While in the post–Boer War period the curriculum of the college had undergone significant change, the allocation of vacancies had not. As a result, the number of vacancies offered was broadly the same as that of the late 1880s, namely, "Cavalry and Infantry 18, Royal Artillery and Royal Engineers 6, Indian Army 3, Royal Marines 1, Nominations 4."[25] Given the significant changes in warfare during the course of the First World War, with the increased focus on field fortifications, the growing dominance of artillery and defensive firepower, the subsequent relegation of cavalry to a supporting role, and the introduction of aircraft and tanks, such a division of vacancies was clearly unsuited to the demands of modern warfare.[26] However, this allocation, heavily favoring the "teeth arms," traditionally seen as comprising the infantry and cavalry, was ideally suited to the demands of an army focused on imperial policing and tied to the Cardwell system of linked battalions. As a result, while British Army doctrine expressed the need for flexibility, the reality of the situation, including for the provision of staff officers, was that "the greater portion of the British Army is regulated by the conditions prevailing on a portion of one of the frontiers."[27]

To be eligible for one of the nominated places on offer, they had to have achieved the minimum pass mark on the competitive examination as well as "(i) Good service in the field. (ii) Three years' service as Adjutant. (iii) Good service on the Staff or as an instructor for two years."[28] These additional conditions aimed at not only ensuring a minimum standard of competency had been achieved but also that those who did not qualify high enough in the examination to gain a competitive place gained practical experience to compensate for this lack of academic standing. While principally serving as a reward for those who had already demonstrated their competency in peacetime staff roles, nomination had allowed "distinguished field officers to supplement their battlefield experience with formal, theoretical training in staff matters."[29] As the interwar period progressed, the former became more prominent as war experience among junior officers gradually decreased.

Recent scholarship has been highly critical of the British Army's process of nomination to the Staff College with Edward Smalley arguing that "the initially sound use of nominations to utilize Great War talent reduced in value . . . until it reached the point of undermining the credibility of the Staff College."[30] In support of the process of nomination, statistics presented by the commandant of Camberley in the late 1920s, Major General Sir Charles W. Gwynn, demonstrated that in the majority of cases, nominated officers were equal to those who had gained entry via the competitive examination. He showed that, in the class passing out of the Staff College in December 1927, "in the top half there were 25 British Service officers of whom 14 were nominated and 11 entered by competition. In the bottom half of 29 . . . 9 were nominated, 12 [entered] by competition."[31] Consequently, not only were those officers nominated to a place as capable of performing as those gaining entry via competitive examination, the 1927 figures suggest that nominated officers were actually outperforming those entering by competition. In large part, this can be attributed to the additional practical experience gained by those officers nominated, because although the numbers of those who entered by competition in both groups was relatively even, the disparity between nominated candidates, 14:9, suggests that prior experience of staff responsibilities gave nominated students a boost during the various schemes and questions posed over the duration of the course. As a result, until 1927, the British Army had a system of entry to the Staff College that was broadly suited to the demands of the army in this period. The combination of competitive examination coupled with nomination theoretically ensured that a mix of academically capable officers and those with practical experience of staff duties gained access to the ranks of the army staff. Furthermore, the structure of the exam papers allowed the varied requirements of British service to be represented. Given the requirements for operational planning within the British Army, this combination seems to have been ideally suited for the task at hand, able to both plan for multiple eventualities while also retaining a practical sense of the limitations and requirements of the British Army.

In practice, however, this system of entry was open to significant abuse, which ultimately impacted the ability of the colleges to ensure they were obtaining the best candidates for the staff. As noted above, the interwar army had a noteworthy problem recruiting the most academically able candidates due to competition from the other Services, who did not suffer from the tarnished reputation of the army post-First World War. In addition, the ethos and attitude of the officer corps mitigated against the academic study of their profession that the type of flexible planning set out in British doctrine required. Indeed, British officers of all Services clung to their amateur past, with a future marshal of the Royal Air Force writing, "There was something agreeably amateur about the Services, perhaps particularly about the Army, in those days."[32] This attitude was epitomized by the regimental system, which prioritized social stauts and "gentlemanly" pursuits. Indeed, " 'shop talk' was strictly forbidden at meals; officers occupied themselves with discussions about racing, horses and other gentlemanly pursuits."[33] Recent scholarship has convincingly demonstrated that, while junior officers were required to undertake various assessments and training to progress in rank, study beyond the minimum required was not encouraged. Indeed, future Field Marshal Edmund Ironside, when he was a junior officer in India, recalled an occasion while hospitalized, when he was found with military textbooks on his bedside table by a senior officer. He was asked, "What the devil are you reading those for? You are a horse artilleryman; what more do you want?"[34] In this context, where many officers had grown out of the habit of professional study, the challenge posed by the Staff College entrance examination, particularly in light of the increased competition for places, led many to look for shortcuts to success.

For them, the solution to overcome the army's lack of focus on continuing professional education was to pay to attend a "crammer," who would, during a relatively short period of a few months, attempt to impart all the necessary information an officer required to pass the Staff College competitive examination. However, even though this method undoubtedly helped many officers pass the examination, it did create significant problems, not just for the officers concerned but for the army as a whole. First, there was no guarantee of finding a good quality crammer, for as a contemporary publication noted, "Some are—well, business men, shall we say? . . . who are fully aware that if a candidate fails . . . he may return a second or third time."[35] Thus, were an officer to engage a charlatan crammer, at best he would have to pay multiple times for the same instruction, and at worst he could develop a "feeling of discouragement and even discontent . . . [as] in spite of sometimes repeated efforts . . . failed to achieve [his] ambition to get to the Staff College."[36] Not only would the officer have been out of pocket, he would potentially have been discouraged from taking any further interest in continuing to learn beyond his regimental duties. Furthermore, for those who found an effective crammer who could help them pass the examination at the first attempt, although they had achieved their initial objective of obtaining a place at Staff College, their longer-term knowledge may not have received a boost.

Indeed, in discussing the relative merits of cramming and personal study, A. R. Godwin-Austin noted, "He will probably benefit considerably by burrowing for it, since knowledge diligently acquired remains longer in the memory."[37] As a result, not all officers were able to continue the promise shown by their examination scores into their studies at the colleges. In an analysis of the 1925 Junior Division, Major General Ironside noted that only "about 30% are obviously fitted for further training."[38] Thus, not only did the system of vacancy allocation to the staff colleges fail to allow for one of the central tenents of British doctrine, namely flexibility of purpose, it encouraged a system of learning that did nothing to encourage junior officers to break away from long-established traditions of amateurism and aversion to learning for learning's sake. As will be seen below, opening up competitive vacancies—while not solving the army's political and social difficulties with defining a role for itself within the wider sphere of imperial defense planning—would have, theoretically at least, improved the available staff. It would have done so by encouraging more academically capable men to apply, not just for Staff College, but to join the army as officers through the greater possibility of advancement within the more scientific corps. Furthermore, it would have allowed the creation of a general staff more capable of undertaking operational planning of a scientific and flexible nature, through the incorporation of officers from all corps.

Abolition of Prewar Quotas

Even though no justification was given for the abolition of the prewar quota system in 1926, given the recruitment problems facing the army at this time, the reasons behind this decision should be clear. In addition, the open recognition by the Chief of the Imperial General Staff (CIGS) that certain officers put forward for the staff should not have been allowed essentially forced the alteration of the system by the Army Council. Removing this system had the desired effect, as the 1926 intake saw a significant increase in the overall scores earned by those officers obtaining competitive vacancies. Under the prewar quota system, the lowest successful mark was 5,473 out of a possible 10,100. In contrast, by removing the quota system, the lowest successful mark rose by between 147 and 456 marks to a maximum of 5,929.[39] Given that the difference between the lowest seven qualifying marks was less than 100, this is significant. By assuming that the difference in marks between candidates broadly followed that provided to the military members, under the prewar quota system, the lowest qualifier would have sat 18 places lower in the order of merit than under a system of open competition. With an average of 25 competitive vacancies on offer each year, it is clear that this scenario would have seen a significant decrease in the academic quality of those gaining competitive places. For the army as a whole, removing the quota and improving the academic quality of prospective staff officers had some key benefits. Chief among these for the army was that it helped move away from the idea that "what mattered were questions of breeding . . . not acquired skills or theorizing about the conduct of war."[40] Furthermore, by implementing open competition, the Army Council virtually removed the element of luck, whereby an officer who passed the examination well could be denied access due to the quota for his service arm being filled, while an officer from another arm who "had just scraped through all the papers is . . . eligible."[41] This would have gone a long way to improve morale within an officer corps where, due to limited promotion prospects, Staff College represented the most secure route to continued progression within the army. Thus, the decision to make competitive entry to Staff College a meritocracy was crucial for a period when the majority of ambitious junior officers believed that "unless they can get a *p.s.c.* [passed staff course], their chances are nil."[42]

Although clearly of benefit to the army at a time when it was grappling with significant problems in the structure of its officer corps, the result of this change had a series of unintended and not necessarily negative consequences for the army and its staff, namely a change in the balance of arms at Staff College. A decline in the number of infantry officers successfully obtaining competitive vacancies, coupled with an increase in the number of Royal Engineer officers applying for the Staff College would have resulted—had it continued—in the Staff College intake being dominated by officers of the Royal Engineers by 1930, followed closely by the Royal Artillery.[43] Indeed, an analysis of the distribution of officers taking the entrance examination showed that in 1930, of the top 40 candidates, 13 came from the Royal Engineers, 10 from the Royal Artillery, 8 from the Indian Army, only 5 from British infantry units, and none from British cavalry units.[44] This represented a significant shift from 1926, the last year of the prewar quota, when 16 came from British infantry, 10 from the Royal Artillery, 6 from the Royal Engineers, 4 from the Indian Army, and 1 from British cavalry.[45] As a result, the abolition of the prewar quota system and the subsequent increase in the number of officers from the technical corps had the potential to create an army staff that mirrored the changed face of a modern Euopean battlefield, with its increased emphasis on field fortifications, artillery, and additional logistical and supply requirements.

Furthermore, figures presented to the CIGS demonstrated that not only were these officers applying for Staff College in greater numbers, but their military knowledge was equal to that of their colleagues in the infantry and cavalry. The director of staff duties, Major General Cameron, compared the results of infantry, cavalry, Royal Artillery, and Royal Engineer officers taking the 1926 Staff College entrance examination. He found that officers from the technical arms achieved better average marks in the examination than the infantry and cavalry officers (6,083.25 compared to 5,855.75).[46] As demonstrated above, the 200-mark difference this entailed would have represented a significant difference in placing an officer in the order of merit and therefore in the theoretical academic quality of the officer attending the Staff College. In addition, it was demonstrated that in the four Training for War examination papers, seen as the litmus test for potential staff officers, the technical corps achieved broadly comparable scores (2,321.7 compared to 2,374.25).[47] As a result, it is clear that even though these officers may have had less practical experience of regimental duties and the handling of troops in the field, their theoretical knowledge was as sound as those officers for whom handling troops in combat was their regimental role. As has already been shown, the majority of British commitments did not require field level staffs beyond those at headquarters level. The main concentration of staff officers was at the War Office in a variety of planning and organizational roles, where theoretical planning knowledge, rather than practical operational leadership, was required. Furthermore, from a temperament perspective, officers from technical arms, with their more academic and technical training, were ideally suited to the type of staff work generally required of junior staff officers. *Field Service Regulations* stated that staff officers' duties involved assisting "their commander in the execution of the duties entrusted to him, to transmit his orders and instructions to subordinate commanders and to the services, to make the necessary arrangements in connection therewith."[48] Given the nature of the training received by officers in the technical arms, it is evident that these officers were more suited to the duties described above than those of the more aggressive, action-oriented infantry and cavalry.

This technical training was largely gained after officers had completed their initial officer training at the Royal Military Academy, Woolwich. Engineering officers were then sent for a two-year mechanical science course at Cambridge University followed by courses at the School of Military Engineering.[49] In a similar manner, officers from the Royal Artillery attended a course at the School of Artillery at Larkhill, where they learned the technical and scientific skills required of their role as well as how to cooperate with infantry in the field.[50] In contrast, officers from the infantry and cavalry undertook a two-year course at Royal Military College, Sandhurst, followed by a nine-month period of training at a regimental depot, where they were taught the history of their new regiment, the interior economy of an infantry company, and relearned the drill they had already been taught at Sandhurst.[51] Thus, officers from the technical arms received significant post-commissioning training in academic subjects via university, skills easily transferable to the heavily administrative functions of the staff, and the teeth arms received training that was far more practical and focused on action, leadership, and tactical training. Furthermore, while the training provided to technical officers could guarantee a standard level and quality of education, the same could not be said for that given to infantry and cavalry officers.

A significant problem within the British Army was its ability to provide uniform, effective tactical training for its officers that was carried out within individual units.[52] This left the British Army at the mercy of its regimental commander's attitudes toward training. "Some, like Wavell, Hobart and Burnett-Stuart, were enthusiastic trainers. . . . Other senior officers adopted a *laissez-faire* attitude towards training. . . . Some had so little imagination that they failed to recognize the need to explain to their subordinates the lessons which a particular exercise was intended to highlight."[53] This was to be a problem with broader consequences for the British Army's ability to conduct operations in the opening battles of the Second World War, particularly in the ability of formations that had not previously served or trained together to cooperate seamlessly on the battlefield.[54] However, when it came to its impact on staff training, it is clear that the more critically minded, uniformly trained technical officers were better suited to the role of coordinator and planner than the variable professional training of the infantry and cavalry officer. Similarly, the roles undertaken within their regiments gave further support to the positive nature of this increase in technical officers obtaining Staff College vacancies. Wartime developments, particularly within the artillery but equally so the Royal Engineers, had resulted in a more scientific approach to warfare for these arms that fitted them for staff service. For the Royal Artillery, the development of flash spotting for counter-battery fire, preplanned creeping barrages, and the use of battery boards and map firing all developed this arm's knowledge and experience of preoperational planning, advanced supply collection and coordination, and the issuing of complex operational orders at regimental level.[55] In contrast, infantry and cavalry officers' roles were dominated by the character traits deemed to make them effective leaders of men rather than able administrators.

Challenging the Social Status Quo

This shift in the makeup of the Staff College intake proved a significant stumbling block for a number of senior officers and resulted in a change of policy for the allocation of Staff College vacancies, which reflected not only the institutional prejudices of the regimental system but also reflected a significant problem within the British Army. This latter problem was an ingrained lack of understanding or agreement over the purpose of British Army staff colleges. Both of these issues had been present within the British Army long before this discussion about the allocation of vacancies took place and represented significant stumbling blocks not just for Staff College in this period but for the army in general. The problems engendered by the regimental system of the British Army had existed long before it was formalized by Edward Cardwell and Hugh Childers in the 1860s and 1870s. The reforms of Cardwell aimed at improving the reputation of the army within society and encouraging the recruitment of "a better class of recruit and reduce losses from desertion by doing away with the prospect that soldiers could expect to spend most of their adult lives in colonial exile."[56] In addition, it sought to improve professionalism within the officer corps, along the lines of the Prussian system and to "control the over-regulation payments for commissions . . . by ending purchase entirely."[57] Although not an overt attempt to break the hold of the traditional officer class over the army, there were many within the institution who believed that the abolition of purchase would create more of a meritocracy within the officer corps.[58]

Ultimately, the reforms were more an attempt to professionalize the army after its disastrous performance in the Crimean War, and any idea that a true meritocracy would develop within the officer corps was effectively snuffed out by the reforms proposed by Childers a decade after those of Cardwell. The creation of localized regiments by Childers aimed at much the same ideal as those of Cardwell in that it desired improved professionalism within the army, while the introduction of compulsory retirement ages and promotion via regimental lists aimed to streamline the promotion process for regimental officers and remove those unfit for further promotion through a system of qualifying examinations.[59] Within these reforms developed a system of regimental hierarchy that became so embedded in the psyche of the British military that the civilian permanent under secretary of the War Office felt secure in stating that "it is a principle established from the very inception of the army, that fighting corps . . . have the precedence of all other corps."[60] Even though a distinct hierarchical structure existed within the fighting corps, it was the distinction between the fighting corps and the military tail that was to cause significant problems for the reform of Staff College during this period.

This was largely a reflection of the generally conservative social structure of Britain at the time, particularly those sections of society that had historically provided the officer corps for the army. Indeed, Kier has argued, "While 'social suitability' was an important criterion for the prestigious infantry and cavalry regiments, the technical branches ranked candidates according to professional standards."[61] This departure from the gentleman amateur created similar feelings within the officer corps as that experienced within the Royal Navy on the introduction of engineer officers and created hostility toward the idea of a "garage mechanic's war."[62] This idea was most clearly set out in the discussion on vacancies at Staff College by Major General Sir Charles Bonham-Carter, in which he stated, "As a general rule the R.E. officer inspires less confidence in commanders and troops."[63] As a result, according to those officers who thought like Bonham-Carter, though they may have manifested the key attributes to be a good staff officer, they did not have the aura of leadership required to be an effective commander. Following on from this comment, Bonham-Carter noted that it would be "advisable to limit the number of R.E. officers who can enter the Staff College without the check of nomination."[64] By requiring engineer officers to be nominated, Bonham-Carter was essentially proposing a character test to mitigate the supposed lack of command character among officers of this corps and ensure that those admitted possessed "stamina, courage, gallantry, character, and above all morale."[65] As a manifestation of the tradition of the gentleman-officer, such a move provided senior officers with a pseudo-legitimate reason to deny officers from the technical corps a place at the college, ultimately being based on the Victorian ideals of the characteristics required of a good officer. Similarly, the adjutant general, Sir Walter P. Braithwaite, stated that he was "apprehensive of an overdose of R.E. officers at the Staff College and the resultant difficulty of placing such officers, when they become p.s.c. to the best advantage so far as the good of the Army is concerned."[66] Braitwaite does not elaborate on what "the good of the army" means, although his later comment, "that the number passing would embarrass you in the placing of them on the staff in the future," perhaps provides some indication.[67] As demonstrated above, technical officers displayed the same level of operational knowledge in the examination as those officers from the infantry and cavalry; indeed, the growing domination of competitive vacancies by officers from the Royal Engineers demonstrated that they frequently received higher marks than officers of those arms. Thus, it could not have been their academic standing that would have caused embarrassment to the CIGS, but their social standing.

Staff College or War College?

The second factor to create resistance to this change centered on a divergence of views surrounding the actual purpose of the Staff College within the interwar army. Principally, this was a debate waged between the postwar commandants of the Staff College and senior officers who had held roles in the prewar college. The former believed that "the Staff Colleges have their own special role, in the training of officers, in the duties of the staff in their respective services."[68] This view reflected the changed nature of modern warfare and was based on the experiences of the British Army during the First World War. For postwar commandants, it was important to ensure that future staff officers and commandants recognized the increased importance of prearranged fire plans, logistical support, and the rapid replacement of exhausted units with fresh formations, alongside having the practical knowledge required to ensure that such planning as was necessary took place. In contrast, those with experience of the prewar Staff College, particularly during the period when Sir Henry H. Wilson was in command (January 1907–July 1910), believed that it served "(a) To get into the way of concentrating on work. (b) To learn how to work and what to work to. (c) To learn how to read with understanding. . . . In fact the true value of a Staff College course is not so much to learn what you do learn . . . as to be put in the way of continuing your own education."[69] Wilson had believed firmly in the establishment of the Staff College as a school of thought with the result that one student during his tenure in command, future field marshal, Lieutenant Archibald P. Wavell, was moved to note that teaching was "too academic and theoretical and aimed too high. Its main object should surely have been to turn out good staff officers."[70] Therefore, even at the time, these attitudes were the subject of controversy.

Much like the issues surrounding the social status of technical officers, this subject had its roots in traditional problems within the institution of the British Army. Unlike many Euopean armies, the British Army was very slow to come around to the concept of a general staff. Indeed, in 1870, German General Bronsart von Schellendorff was "astonished to find the duties of the Prussian Great General Staff performed in Britain by twelve general staff officers."[71] Along with the Cardwell and Childers reforms, the creation of a staff college at Camberley in 1858 came about as a result of British Army performance in Crimea.[72] Taking place prior to the establishment of the general staff in 1904, its initial purpose was never truly established; however, during the years leading up to the First World War, it established itself as "the only school of strategy, of organization, of Imperial Defence, in the Queen's dominions."[73] This was an idea firmly established by Sir Henry Wilson to the extent that immediately prior to the First World War, the commandant, Lieutenant General Sir Launcelot Kiggell, commented that "it would be a good idea to change its name to 'War School'."[74] However, it must be remembered, these developments had taken place at a time when the army had not experienced a European-scale war since Crimea and had little understanding of how the logistical demands of this type of war had changed. Furthermore, the conditions that had manifested during the First World War, although not necessarily revolutionary in type, were certainly on a scale far beyond the experiences of the nations involved.[75] As a result, the staff colleges were the only establishments available to train higher commanders and thus became the de facto route to high command until the opening of the Senior Officers' School in 1916 and the Imperial Defence College in 1927.[76] Hence, while many in the army saw the training provided at the staff colleges as the best preparation for future commanders, many shared the attitude displayed both in the 1880s and during the course of the 1920s debates around the allotment of vacancies to Staff College that "the man who is likely to become the best Staff Officer is one who has obtained ample, practical experience in the handling of troops."[77] That Staff College was seen as the breeding ground for British commanders by senior officers during the 1920s is evident from the fact that the CIGS, Sir George Milne, filled 74 percent of senior posts with Staff College graduates. This attitude continued beyond Milne's term of command to the extent that under Field Marshal Archibald Montgomery-Massingberd (1933–36), 100 percent of senior appointments were held by Staff College graduates.[78] It is clear that for many senior officers, Staff College was a place to teach officers the art of learning and the knowledge they would need to be successful commanders rather than the practical skills required of a staff officer.

At the time these views were developed, this understanding was broadly correct; however, the conditions prevailing in the First World War had completely changed the landscape of war for the British Army and for its system of staff work and training. The rapid proliferation of staff schools during the First World War clearly demonstrated a need for the rapid training of staff officers, not only to make good losses but also to cope with the vastly increased logistical demands.[79] Alongside this, the development of a worldwide informal network of learning within the British Army, largely facilitated by staff officers, suggested that the system of training was no longer fit for the purposes of modern war.[80] Furthermore, this focus on the training of commanders resulted in the staff becoming "infantry to excess."[81] Ultimately, as warfare was no longer a matter of infantry fighting it out until one side was too exhausted to continue, this overfocus on command was outdated. With the change in makeup of Staff College courses reflecting the dominant arms of the interwar period, it, like the army as a whole, was clearly entering a period of transition. However, similar to the debates surrounding the development and use of armored forces and their consequent morale-lowering impact on the traditional arms, when it came to the shifting of the allocation of Staff College vacancies, there was resistance from senior officers.

The Response and Its Impact

Despite the clear positive impact of the system of open competition on the academic quality of officers entering Staff College and its change in compostion more closely representing the increasingly technical nature of operations, a meeting of the military members of the council decided "that the allotment of vacancies at the Staff College to officers of technical corps, in which they include the R.E. [Royal Engineers], R.C. [Royal Corps] of Signals and the R.A.S.C. [Royal Army Service Corps], should be limited in number."[82] As demonstrated above, this change did not reflect the academic abilities of technical officers, or their importance to the army in future conflicts. Instead, it reflected a social hierarchy that owed as much to the Victorian army as it did to the backgrounds of those of a heavily class-conscious, postwar society that continued to view the army as a refuge for a certain strata of public school–educated man. Indeed, the quotas set out by the director of staff duties demonstrates exactly how far traditional attitudes and beliefs were represented. Figures for 1930 show that the infantry were allocated 16 competitive vacancies to the Royal Engineer's 4.[83] This new quota system was to run alongside the continued use of nominations in the proportion of 80 percent competitive to 20 percent nominated.

Given that this examination had been undertaken to improve the quality of officer attending the staff colleges, it was added that "no British Army officer will, however, be eligible to fill a competitive vacancy unless he is within the first 45 in order of merit."[84] However, this pass requirement could not be met by some arms, with the result that the infantry failed to fill its full allocation of competitive vacancies requiring 5 of the 16 available infantry vacancies to be filled by nomination.[85] Thus, to find infantry officers who would be eligible for nomination, the nominating committee had to look outside the top 50 candidates. Even though it has already been demonstrated that those officers entering the staff colleges via nomination were of comparable quality with those entering via competition, this return to the pre-1926 quality of candidate did not represent the expected improvement in the quality of officer. In addition, as the interwar period progressed, the much-desired wartime experience would have diminished, with the result that "the quality of nominated candidates declined . . . and, by 1930, most nominated officers had never seen combat; selection was instead based on subjective assessment of routine duties."[86] Thus, it would have become virtually impossible for the committee to ensure that a nominated officer had the necessary character qualities to appoint based on the flawed understanding that the staff colleges existed to mold and train future commanders. However, based on the factors cited above, it is easy to see why those officers, with their ingrained regimental attitudes and prewar belief in the role of the Staff College, reacted as they did. Had the vacancies been filled through open competition, thus giving competitive vacancies to the first 33 officers on the examination order of merit, the Royal Engineers would have amassed 18 vacancies to the infantry's 6.[87]

Theoretically, this new quota system could have benefitted the army. By examining the staff lessons of the First World War, the Army Council could have quickly identified the more complex and technical nature of staff work in the postwar military and adjusted the quota to suit these needs. However, the issue of India, along with those discussed above, served to further nullify the British Army Council's ability to see this. The system of linked battalions, established as part of the 1860s Cardwell reforms, essentially ensured that a large number of infantry battalions were required to be maintained on the British Army strength to serve as reinforcement depots for the British/Indian establishment.[88] This, combined with the problem of needing to improve the attractiveness of the army as a career by ensuring the possibility of progression to senior rank, meant that any quota system adopted for the allocation of Staff College vacancies had to be based on "regimental peace establishments."[89] Thus, with a greater number of infantry officers to satisfy as to their future progression, alongside the hierarchical, elitist attitude fostered by the regimental system, effectively negated any potential for positive change.

Conclusion

As can be seen, the reintroduction of a quota system for allocating competitive vacancies at the Staff College had a significant impact, not only on the quality of officers attending the colleges. By lowering the qualifying position in the order of merit and introducing a set limit on the number of officers from each arm, the British Army denied itself the opportunity to recruit the best officers for staff training and the ability to reshape its staff on the basis of its wartime experiences. Instead, by continually relying on regimental prejudice and Victorian notions of the qualities required to be a good regimental officer and commander, the British Army chose to ignore the lessons of industrial warfare and the attitudes of society toward the army and focus only on those skills seen as traditionally beneficial. Doing so not only disregarded the increased importance of the logistical tail of the army and the requirement for extensive operational planning and interarm cooperation developed during the First World War but also had ensured the continued alienation of educated potential candidates for commissions. Given that the British Army was overstretched during the interwar years and struggled to recruit officers in adequate numbers or of the required quality, such a policy represents a significant failure to adequately utilize its available resources. Had the system of open competition been allowed to stand, the British Army would have rapidly acquired a staff that better reflected the planning requirements of modern war and also served as a vehicle to dismiss the idea that bright young men could not make a career in the army. With the rapid proliferation of threats from Germany, Italy, and Japan, combined with the continued fear of Russian involvement in India and other colonial actions, a more controlled and considered approach to operational planning was vital. Consequently, by returning to a system of vacancy allocation similar to that which had existed prior to the First World War, the Army Council condemned the British Army to repeat the mistakes of the early twentieth century and to focus on training future commanders, rather than officers capable of the type of logistical and operational planning that was to become the hallmark of warfare in the twentieth century.

Notes

1. See Brian Bond, *British Military Policy between the Two World Wars* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, an imprint of Oxford University Press, 1980); J. M. Brereton, *The British Soldier: A Social History from 1661 to the Present Day* (London: The Bodley Head, 1986); David French, *Military Identities: The Regimental System, the British Army, and the British People c. 1870–2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); and Keith Jeffery, *The British Army and the Crisis of Empire, 1918–22* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984).
2. Brian Bond, "The Twenty-year Truce: 1919–1939," in *War and Society in Europe: 1870–1970* (Guernsey: Sutton Publishing, 1998), 135–67.
3. David French, *Raising Churchill's Army: The British Army and the War against Germany 1919–1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 66–75.
4. French, *Military Identities*, 153.
5. MajGen David Belchem, *All in the Day's March* (London: William Collins, 1978), 17.
6. For an exhaustive list of British Army deployments in this period, see Anthony Clayton, *The British Officer: Leading the Army from 1660 to the Present* (London: Pearson Longman, 2007), 182.
7. Clayton, *The British Officer*, 188–89.
8. French, *Raising Churchill's Army*, 59–60.
9. *Field Service Regulations*, vol. I, *Organization and Administration* (London: British War Office, His Majesty's Stationary Office, 1923), 4.
10. *Field Service Regulations*, vol. II, *Operations* (London: British War Office, HMSO, 1924), 1.
11. Brian Bond and Williamson Murray, "The British Armed Forces, 1918–1939," in *Military Effectiveness*, vol. 2, *The Interwar Period*, ed. Allan R. Millett and Williamson Murray (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 98.
12. Bond and Murry, "The British Armed Forces, 1918–1939," 99.
13. Clayton, *The British Officer*, 183.
14. Brian Bond, *British Military Policy between the Two World Wars* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, an imprint of Oxford University Press, 1980), 91.
15. Clayton, *The British Officer*, 195.
16. Lt R. D. Foster, "Promotion by Merit in the Army,"*RUSI Journal* 70, no. 480 (1925): 685, https://doi.org/10.1080/03071842509426078.
17. Report of the Committee on the Preliminary Education of Candidates for Royal Air Force Commissions (1919), National Archives (NA), Kew, AIR (Air Ministry of Defense) 2/100/A13339, 1.
18. Tony Mansell, "Flying Start: Educational and Social Factors in the Recruitment of Pi-

lots of the Royal Air Force in the Interwar Years," *History of Education* 26, no. 1 (March 1997): 75, https://doi.org/10.1080/0046760970260105.

19. Mansell, "Flying Start," 76.
20. MajGen Sir Hugh Elles, "The Early Education of the Officer," in *Report on the Staff Conference Held at the Staff College, Camberley, 14th to 17th January, 1929*, NA, War Office (WO) 279/65, 96.
21. *Report on the Staff Conference Held at the Staff College, Camberley, 17th to 20th January, 1927*, NA, WO 279/57.
22. *Report on the Examination for Admission to the Staff Colleges at Camberley and Quetta Held in February–March 1925 with copies of the Examination Papers and Remarks of the Examiners Thereon* (London: British War Office, HMSO, 1925), 2, hereafter *Report on the Examination for Admission*.
23. A. R. Godwin-Austin, *The Staff and the Staff College* (London: Constable & Company, 1927), 274.
24. *Report on the Examination for Admission*, 2.
25. Brian Bond, *The Victorian Army and the Staff College, 1854–1914* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1972), 139.
26. For examples of the developments to take place in this period, see J. P. Harris, *Men, Ideas and Tanks: British Military Thought and Armoured Forces, 1903–1939* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995); Aimée Fox, *Learning to Fight: Military Innovation and Change in the British Army, 1914–1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); and Shelford Bidwell and Dominick Graham, *Fire-Power: The British Army Weapons & Theories of War, 1904–1945* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2004).
27. B. C. Denning, *The Future of the British Army* (London: Witherby, 1928), 60–61.
28. Godwin-Austin, *The Staff and the Staff College*, 278.
29. Edward Smalley, "Qualified but Unprepared: Training for War at the Staff College in the 1930s," *British Journal of Military History* 2, no. 1 (November 2015): 58.
30. Smalley, "Qualified but Unprepared," 59.
31. "Results of the Division Passing Out, December 1927," *Staff College: Allotment of Vacancies by Arms*, NA, WO, 32/3092.
32. Sir John Slessor, *The Central Blue: Recollections and Reflections* (London: Cassel, 1956), 83.
33. Elizabeth Kier, *Imagining War: French and British Military Doctrine between the Wars* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 124.
34. MajGen Sir Edmund Ironside, "The Modern Staff Officer," *RUSI Journal* 73, no. 491 (1928): 436, https://doi.org/10.1080/03071842809422454.
35. Godwin-Austin, *The Staff and the Staff College*, 283.
36. Second Report of the Committee on the Supply of Army Officers, December 1937, NA, WO 32/4461, 45.
37. Godwin-Austin, *The Staff and the Staff College,* 283.
38. Report on Higher Education for War, December 1925, NA, WO 32/4840.
39. Lord Milne to A.G., Q.M.G. and M.G.O., 17 June 1926, *Staff College: Allotment of Vacancies,* NA, WO 32/3090.
40. Kier, *Imagining War*, 125.
41. *Report on the Staff Conference Held at the Staff College, Camberley, 17th to 20th January 1927*, 51.
42. *Report on the Staff Conference Held at the Staff College, Camberley, 17th to 20th January 1927*, 49.
43. Godwin-Austin, *The Staff and the Staff College,* 277.
44. Staff College Entrance Examinations 1926–1930: Distribution by Arms of first 40, 45 and 50 Candidates Competing for Camberley, NA, WO 32/3092.
45. Staff College Entrance Examinations 1926–1930.
46. MajGen Cameron to Field Marshal Milne, 15 July 1927, *Staff College: Allotment of Vacancies by Competition*, NA, WO 32/3091.
47. MajGen Cameron to Field Marshal Milne.

48. *Field Service Regulations,* vol. I, *Organization and Administration*, 1923, NA Main Library 355.6, 22.
49. George Forty, *Companion to the British Army, 1939–1945* (Stroud: History Press, 2009), 22–23.
50. French, *Raising Churchill's Army*, 59.
51. French, *Raising Churchill's Army*, 59.
52. *Report on the Staff Conference Held at the Staff College, Camberley, 13th to 16th January 1930* (London: HMSO, 1930), 49.
53. French, *Raising Churchill's Army*, 170. Emphasis in original.
54. See Edward Smalley, "Introduction," in *The British Expeditionary Force, 1939–40* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 1–3; and French, *Military Identities*, 259–90.
55. Bidwell and Graham, *Fire-Power*, 116–46.
56. French, *Regimental Identities*, 13–14.
57. Hew Strachan, *The Politics of the British Army* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, an imprint of Oxford University Press, 1997), 38.
58. Capt J. Spencer, "Our Army Organisation of 1871: An Epitome of What It Is, and Results," *United Services Journal* (December 1871): 560–63.
59. French, *Regimental Identities*, 22.
60. Herbert Creedy to MajGen Sir Evan Carter, 22 October 1930, NA, WO 32/2861.
61. Kier, *Imagining War*, 134.
62. Kier, *Imagining War*, 133.
63. Bonham-Carter to Milne, 11 October 1928, NA, WO 32/3092.
64. Bonham-Carter to Milne.
65. Kier, *Imagining War*, 123.
66. Braithwaite to Milne, 29 December 1928, NA, WO 32/3092.
67. Braithwaite to Milne.
68. MajGen Sir Hastings Anderson memorandum to the Committee of Imperial Defence subcommittee on the institution of a joint Staff College, 20 September 1922, NA, CAB 16/45.
69. Gen Sir Walter Braithwaite to MajGen Cameron, 22 March 1926, NA, WO 32/4840.
70. Bond, *The Victorian Army*, 254.
71. Bond, *The Victorian Army*, 44.
72. Godwin-Austin, *The Staff and the Staff College*, 117–18.
73. Bond, *The Victorian Army*, 168.
74. Bond, *The Victorian Army*, 266.
75. Many historians have demonstrated how the American Civil War heralded an era of trenches, field fortifications, machine guns, and supply requirements. However, even the largest battles of this war were dwarfed by the requirements of the western front in the First World War.
76. The Imperial Defence College was established in 1927 as the result of a Committee of Imperial Defence subcommittee, with its aim being to provide a pool of senior officers from the three Services trained in the requirements of imperial defense as a whole. The Senior Officers' School opened in 1916 as a result of the poor quality of battalion commanders during the First World War and would continue into the interwar period as an effective commander training course for those officers taking command of formations.
77. Gillman to Milne, 6 November 1928, NA, WO 32/3092.
78. David French, " 'An Extensive use of Weedkiller': Patterns of Promotion in the Senior Ranks of the British Army, 1919–39," in *The British General Staff: Reform and Innovation, 1890–1939*, ed. David French and Brian Holden Reid (London: Frank Cass, 2002), 168.
79. Godwin-Austin, "The Great War and After," in *The Staff and the Staff College*.
80. Aimée Fox, "A Networked Army," in *Learning to Fight*, 57–98.
81. Anderson to Milne, 3 November 1928, NA, WO 32/3092.
82. Extract from Military Members Meeting No. 543. Wednesday, 21 November 1928, NA, WO 32/3092.

83. Bonham-Carter to Milne, 14 July 1931, NA, WO 32/3092.
84. Staff College, Camberly and Quetta—Entrance Examination, NA, WO 32/3092.
85. Bonham-Carter to Milne.
86. Smalley, "Qualified but Unprepared," 58.
87. Bonham-Carter to Milne.
88. Bond, *British Military Policy*, 100–2.
89. Bonham-Carter to Milne.