

British Royal Navy's Quest for Disposal of Obsolete Warships: From Crimean War to Washington Naval Treaty

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In the era of rapid technological innovation c. 1850–1930, the British Royal Navy was forced to maintain a surfeit of obsolete warships. To cope with increasing military tension with France, Russia, and Germany, the expansion of armaments was necessary, but under the contemporary slogans, e.g. ‘Retrenchment’ and ‘Efficiency’, obsolete warships were waste to be disposed of in the highest priority. Although an examination of the disposal of obsolete warships is crucial to understanding how the Navy addressed the reconciliation of peacekeeping with retrenchment, previous studies on this topic have been limited to Sir John Fisher’s Reform (1905–). By contrast, this paper clarifies, both in quantitative and qualitative approaches, two underlying issues: (1) to what extent and under which financial system the disposal of obsolete warships contributed to retrenchment in naval finances; and (2) what types of obsolete ships were disposed of intensively, mainly from the Crimean War (1854) to the Washington Naval Treaty (1922). The main findings are that the sale of old ships was a major means for the retrenchment since the 20th century; and that the technological innovations had a more significant impact on relatively new steamers than on obsolete wooden vessels. This paper will give new insights on further studies, including the culture of historic ship preservation, the diplomacy of shipbroking, and the industry of British shipbreaking.