



Challenges and consequences of the reorganization of the Army, 1919-1921

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For the army, the end of the war is not synonymous with the end of operations. Peace remained precarious. While they continued to fight beyond the European area, the French forces also defended a new border with Germany, while demobilizing en masse to return to their pre-war format. In 1919, the French Army embarked on a process of reorganization and foresight by publishing two studies on the organization of the army and the armament of the future. The technical innovation of the Great War led to the appearance of tanks and aircraft on the battlefield, as well as the associated anti-tank and anti-aircraft means. It is through the prism of the management of tanks and counter-aircraft defense that we propose to present the challenges of the reorganization of the Army between 1919 and 1921.

The case of the tanks

After a first failed offensive on the Chemin des Dames, on April 16, 1917, the assault artillery (the original name for tank units), contributed greatly to the final victory. During the offensives of the summer and autumn of 1918, now equipped with the Renault FT tank, the AS gave the full measure of its potential. The note of February 5, 1919 on the organization of the army proposes the annexation of tanks by the infantry and restricts its use to the exclusive support of infantrymen. The instruction on large units, published in 1921, confirmed this role. Despite the innovative ideas of General Estienne, who declared in 1922: "The tank is an independent weapon, without analogy with the infantry" and later, of General de Gaulle, the doctrine of use and the organization of armored units remained inappropriate. The late constitution of 4 armoured divisions did not allow to oppose the rush of Panzers in May 1940. This was a sad legacy of the years 1919-1921 and of a too narrow vision of the operational assets of tanks.

The case of the DCA

As the Army had to return to its pre-war format, the question of the future of the counter-aircraft defence (CAS), created during the war, was raised. It was decided in 1919 to transfer it to the aeronautical arm, on the acceptable pretext that it should work in coordination with the air force. This was done despite the fact that it had earned its place within the land forces, in support of which it had shot down more than 400 aircraft between 1914 and 1918¹. The disarmament that followed the end of hostilities in Western Europe also took place at the level of the mind: since there were no more hostile aircraft, the sacrifice of the flak could be made. This sudden stop slowed down technical modernization and tactical thinking, whereas the aircraft appeared to be a real game changer, both strategically, with the bombing of Paris, and tactically, in support of the troops. The French blindness to this new threat continued in the decades following the First World War. Thus, General Gamelin, Chief of Staff of the French National Defense, declared in 1938: "Aviation will not play in the next war the role that some military chroniclers predict for it [...] Aviation in the next war will be a flash in the pan. The consequences of this downgrading of the DCA will be strongly felt in 1940 when, insufficient in quantity, mobility and means of communication, the French DCA will not be able to effectively oppose the Luftwaffe²."

Thus, the decisions taken at the end of the war were not based on experience, but on pure conservatism or lack of pragmatism. These decisions had far-reaching consequences for the Army in the following decades.

1 - The questioning of the dual subordination of land anti-aircraft artillery is still relevant in 2021.

2 - Despite a total of 120 German aircraft shot down in six weeks, which is far from negligible.

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