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Peter Kilduff. *Herman Göring Fighter Ace: The World War I Career of Germany's Most Infamous Airman.* London: Grub Street, 2010. 224 pp. $39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-906502-66-9.

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Young Man Göring

Since his suicide in a Spandau prison cell in 1946, Hermann Göring has been closely examined by scholars, notably by British historian Richard Overy. However, Overy's work skips over Göring's early life to focus on Göring's Nazi career, as do most other scholarly and popular accounts.[1] In his latest work, *Hermann Göring Fighter Ace*, Peter Kilduff examines a different side of Göring, his early life and World War One military service, which have been somewhat neglected by historians. Kilduff's work, extensively researched using multiple state and private documentary collections, reveals the young Göring as a driven and ambitious man, determined to overcome his relatively modest social background through military service and wartime rewards. On both accounts, he succeeded, managing to meet and socialize with royalty, and eventually win Germany's highest military award, the Pour le Merite. At the same time, he became increasingly egotistical, vain, and antisemitic, particularly after being targeted by antisemitism as a schoolboy when his classmates discovered that Göring's godfather and patron, Dr. Hermann von Epenstein, was Jewish. Of course, many years later in July 1941, it would be Göring's letter to Reinhard Heydrich that set in motion the Wannsee Conference and the organization of the "Final Solution." Although these actions remained far in the future, Kilduff's research anchors Göring's antisemitic behavior in his childhood, refuting his claims made at Nuremberg in his defense that he had never been an anti-Semite. As Kilduff recounts, Göring trained his childhood dog to be aggressive toward those he saw as Jewish, an irony lost on him as he, like many of his contemporaries, possessed Jewish ancestors.

Göring's antisemitism proved to be no obstacle as he entered military school, performing with distinction before graduating and joining the army of the Grand Duchy of Baden in January 1914. As Kilduff's narrative shows, Göring reveled in the environment of war and military service, and performed soundly in combat, both on the ground before rheumatoid arthritis ended his infantry career, and then in the air. Beginning his aerial service with characteristic bravado by bluffing his way into an aviation unit, Göring performed well as an observer and later as a pilot, finishing the war with twenty-two combat victories, which Kilduff reduces to nineteen based on his cross-examinations of German and Allied flight records. Later in his career, Göring's early life became the subject of much interest to the Nazi regime, which reconstructed it to lionize him and reinforce his image as a great war hero. Ironically, these efforts have allowed Kilduff to mine archival resources that would probably otherwise have been destroyed in the Second World War, along with much other documentary material from World War One that perished in air raids and the chaos of the war's conclusion.

Kilduff's work is the latest in his series investigating German aviation aces during the First World War. The author's role as founder of the League of World War I Aviation Historians, and his long association with Cross and Cockade, the First World War Aviation Society, indicate that he deserves much credit as a scholar who both actively participates in public debates over First World War aviation history and also produces serious academic studies, such as this one. Within it, the young Göring appears as vain, ambitious, and determined to rise through Germany's social strata, using friends, acquaintances, military connections, and awards as door opening opportunities. As Kilduff's research convincingly shows, Göring consistently embellished his combat encounters to create an image of himself as a daring and deadly aviator who usually destroyed his enemies, when the records suggest otherwise. Göring's overestimates of his successes were not unusual in the chaotic context of First World War aerial combat, but Kilduff shows that Göring became

adept at manipulating the military record to highlight his combat performance, both as a fierce fighter and as a capable leader. These manipulations were entrenched as "fact" later during his years as commander of the Luftwaffe and as a powerful Nazi official.

Excellent use of German documentary sources, particularly after-action combat reports, cross-referenced where possible with English, French, Canadian, Australian, and New Zealand materials, ground the work and carry the reader through the narrative. Aircraft profile illustrations are also included, as are maps of the areas over which Göring saw combat. Perhaps the greatest asset of *Hermann Göring Fighter Ace* in terms of its wider audience appeal lies in its numerous photographs, many taken by Göring himself during his time as an aerial observer. They are superbly detailed and in many cases never previously published.

This book is a valuable contribution to the literature surrounding Göring, and avoids deterministic allusions in favor of a source-derived account of the childhood, adolescence, and early adult life of one of the twentieth century's most appalling figures. Anyone interested in World War One aviation history should read it, and it should also be recognized as the standard work on the early life of a significant National Socialist figure.

Note

[1]. The latest version of Overy's work on Göring, originally published in 1984, is Richard Overy, *Göring: Hitler's Iron Knight* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2012).

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