



Jeremy Black. *Air Power: A Global History*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016. 386 pp. \$38.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4422-5096-3.

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Published on H-War (August, 2017)

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The field of air power history, much like the airplanes it studies, is in a state of fast evolution. Older works that focus almost entirely on the efficacy of air power have given way to a more diverse analysis, placing air power in a variety of broader contexts. These recent works tend to focus on narrow aspects of air power. For example, Mark Clodfelter's *Beneficial Bombing: The Progressive Foundations of American Air Power, 1917-1945* (2013) examines the relationship between bombing theory and the progressive era, while Brian D. Laslie's *The Air Force Way of War: U.S. Tactics and Training after Vietnam* (2016) explores changing conceptions of warfighting in the US Air Force in the post-Vietnam period. Other scholars have attempted to create broader overviews of the history of air power, such as Robin Higham and John Andreas Olsen. The prolific Jeremy Black has added to this growing discussion with *Air Power: A Global History*. The book is an attempt to examine how air power has been used by minor powers; explore air power's political dimension; and incorporate the roles of naval air power, ground and logistical support, transport, and air mobility into an overall conception of air power.

Black's central argument seems to be that "air power has confirmed, not challenged, the overall ranking of military strength, even if it has not enabled that strength to operate as effectively as had

been proclaimed and as might have been anticipated." Furthermore, air power "has greatly changed global reach capabilities, but it has not changed the way the global system operates politically nor radically altered the concentration of military capabilities" (p. 319). This idea—that air power has caused drastic changes, but not revolutionary ones, and that air power is now an essential part of conflict, but that it has not changed how we conceptualize or engage in conflict—is hardly novel. Benjamin S. Lambeth came to similar conclusions in *The Transformation of American Air Power* (2000), as did Charles J. Gross in *American Military Aviation: The Indispensable Arm* (2002), neither of which are cited. Although Black is not necessarily treading new ground, the book is valuable mostly for its broad pool of wide-ranging examples that make the book feel more global, as well as its summation of the existing literature. Thus, the work is best presented as an introduction for nonspecialists.

Black approaches air power with a few framing devices. First, he employs an action-reaction dialectic for understanding the progression of air power doctrine and technology. This observation is a common theme among numerous air power historians. A variety of air power historians, including Kenneth Werrell, Marshall Michel, Craig Hannah, and me, have all employed, if not expli-

citly named, an action-reaction model. Black also emphasizes changing goals and conceptions of air power over time. As he asks, “Is an enemy a network of systems that can be bombed, or is war primarily a matter of imposing will on the enemy through very human elements of combat that can only be brought to bear on the ground? In short, is it about pure physical destruction or, psychologically, about subjugating the enemy’s will?” (p. 5).

Black stresses that air power was global almost from its origins, and his early chapters are most useful when they explore air power as an extension (and instrument) of imperialism. After noting the first military use of aircraft in the Italian-Turkish War of 1911, Black explores how imperial powers in the early twentieth century employed air power as a means of pacification, such as in French Morocco, first in 1911 and later in 1913, which was the first use of incendiary bombs. In 1912, the British had already begun combining air and naval power. Most world powers at that time conceived of air power as a reconnaissance tool, but clearly as part of a combined-arms approach. Even before the outbreak of the First World War, global discussions of air power included modern-seeming concepts, such as air superiority and the strategic effects of bombing.

Most chapters are organized around specific large conflicts. Understandably, the longest is on the Second World War. Black considers the war from multiple angles, including a somewhat typical operational overview of major battles, but he does not neglect discussing the ethics involved in strategic bombing as well as the development of atomic weapons. Some readers may find his survey approach too brief, although his citations prove a useful guide to more in-depth reading. His discussion of the Japanese surrender is especially thin, failing to mention the Russian invasion of Manchuria as a possible influence on the decision. The strength of this section, however, is Black’s emphasis on how the war introduced air power into many allied nations and thus became the

backbone (or at least an important element) of militaries around the world, regardless of their size. Black is right to point out that the ability of a nation to field air weapons is limited because of the high cost, wide logistical support, and extensive training necessary to maintain them. This theme carries over into the remainder of the book and becomes more prevalent as time moves forward.

Black divides the Cold War into three periods, the first dividing point being the Cuban Missile Crisis. Black argues that after this crisis, nations poured more resources into nuclear missiles as opposed to bomber aircraft, and the United States shifted toward the doctrine of “flexible response” as an alternative to President Dwight Eisenhower’s “tripwire” approach. This encouraged a more diverse array of aircraft than the early Cold War period. The second breaking point for Black is 1976, after which, he argues, détente broke down as both the United States and the Soviet Union began significant rearmament in the Leonid Brezhnev and Ronald Reagan eras. Although clearly these are logical points of periodization regarding the superpowers of the time, it is less clear that these are “global” breaking points in conceptualizing air power. For example, other countries, such as Israel and Pakistan, seem to have embraced a more tactical-centered approach to air power earlier than the United States did, as seen in the 1965 Indo-Pakistani War and the 1967 Six-Day War.

Any broad discussion of the history of air power should spend considerable time on the Vietnam War, and Black certainly does. Most of his analysis repeats points made well by Earl H. Tilford Jr.’s *Crosswinds: The Air Force’s Setup in Vietnam* (2009) and Mark Clodfelter’s *The Limits of Airpower: The American Bombing of North Vietnam* (2006); strangely he only cites the former in its unpublished dissertation form, and the latter is surprisingly absent from the citations in this chapter. Black emphasizes that the United States

was not prepared for the type of warfare it encountered in Vietnam and proceeded with an air force of interceptors and bombers designed for war against the Soviet Union. Despite efforts at “flexible response,” the United States was ill-equipped for close air support (CAS), interdiction, and air-to-air missions. Outside of these arguments, Black’s interpretations might seem controversial to some historians. Black criticizes the USAF for only using fighter-bombers instead of larger dedicated bombers to attack Hanoi. This is a strange argument, as bombing of targets in Hanoi (which began as early as 1965) were against specific military targets, which called for the increased precision of the smaller craft. Larger “morale” bombing against Hanoi did not begin until 1972, and in that case, by massive B-52 bombers. It is unclear if Black is suggesting that more massive bombing earlier could have ended the war sooner. If so, that conclusion is problematic given the worry of Soviet and/or Chinese intervention before 1972. Black also insists that late in the war, “air power acted as a substitute for troops [and] made up the difference as the Americans reduced their force numbers in South Vietnam, and provided a key context in which a compromise peace could be negotiated. Air power had not led to American victory, but it played a major role in preventing defeat” (p. 201). Many scholars might take issue with this interpretation, as the degree to which air power can “substitute” for troops is highly debatable, and many find it difficult to see Vietnam as anything but an American defeat.

Black’s Cold War discussion is most useful when discussing the period in a broader international context. He correctly points out that air power technology itself became a sort of currency for both superpowers to attempt to win over third world countries or strengthen allies around the globe. Thus, many nations could build air forces, but by doing so, were implicitly (or explicitly) taking sides in the Cold War and also became attached to their chosen side’s system of armament, logistics, and doctrine. Black does a commendable

job of going beyond the nations that are more familiar and frequently discussed in the literature (such as Israel, Egypt, and Vietnam) and broadening his examples to include often ignored national air forces of such countries as Singapore, India, and Malaysia.

One of the most dominant topics in any broad survey of air power revolves around the 1991 Gulf War and the concept of the alleged “Revolution in Military Affairs” (RMA). Black has addressed this issue before, most notably in *War and Technology* (2013). RMA is a hypothesis that certain moments in history have seen technological and doctrinal changes that fundamentally alter the conduct of war, requiring others to adopt certain technologies or doctrines. The discussion of RMA usually centers around the 1991 Gulf War but has grown to include other topics.[1] Black agrees with the concept of RMA; he believes that an RMA did occur, but he is careful to place strict limits on how “revolutionary” it was. He argues that John Warden’s theory of bombing the “five rings” of an enemy to strategically incapacitate them (sometimes cited as a key element of RMA) was only partially used in 1991 but more fully implemented in the 1999 bombings in Yugoslavia. Yet Black emphasizes that it is easy to overstate or exaggerate the ability to achieve strategic goals, even when applying Warden’s theories and using such advanced technologies as stealth. In subsequent chapters, Black further clarifies the limits of RMA by correctly pointing out that in post-9/11 conflicts, air power struggled to find an application in counterinsurgency (COIN) warfare, and that in many ways, the invasion of Iraq in 2003 refuted, if not invalidated, the very idea of RMA.

Black is ultimately successful and convincing in his argument that “the hopes of its advocates were frequently misplaced, notably in terms of outcomes or political consequences, but air power has become both the key means of power projection and the most deadly and rapid form of delivering force at a distance” (p. 316). Indeed, al-

though *Air Power* offers new insights about the global reaches and dynamics of air power, many of its arguments are quite familiar to specialists. One reason for this is that Black keeps to secondary sources, citing few primary documents. Nevertheless, Black offers readers a concise historical context to understand air power scholarship. *Air Power* serves as a helpful entry point for students, young scholars, or general readers. Despite some minor flaws, it is a fine addition to Black's large and growing oeuvre.

Note

[1]. The literature on RMA is extensive, and many air power historians address it in some form. Two useful overviews and critiques of the concept include Stephen Biddle, *Military Power: Explaining Victory and Defeat in Modern Battle* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006); and Thomas G. Mahnken, *Technology and the American Way of War since 1945* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

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Citation: Mike Hankins. Review of Black, Jeremy. *Air Power: A Global History*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. August, 2017.

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