

Richard D. Newton. *The RAF and Tribal Control: Airpower and Irregular Warfare between the World Wars.* Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2019. 240 pp. \$34.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7006-2871-1.



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Richard D. Newton aims to add context and detail to the oft-imperfectly understood topic of interwar “air policing” practiced by the Royal Air Force (RAF), in and beyond the Middle East. The principal shortcomings of popular understanding stem from an overemphasis of the role played by airpower in what was meant to be a more economical use of force leaning on the combination of air and ground mechanization, complemented by intelligence activities of Special Service Operators (SSOs).

The concept, advanced by airpower leaders like Hugh Trenchard and supported by politicians like Winston Churchill, was intended as a way to allow an overstretched post-World War I British military (and a cash-strapped and indebted empire) to deal with security challenges across that empire and in the new mandate territories it oversaw. Punitive raids had been a frequently employed method of coercing restive groups into compliance. Mechanization, on the ground and in the skies, was advanced as a cheaper alternative. Newton notes that it would also have the effect, of

comparatively incidental concern to imperial policymakers, of wreaking less physical damage than earlier overland campaigns had done.

The book pushes back on presentist approaches to the topic. “Employing airpower has often devolved to determining where best to place a bomb in order to achieve a desired effect at least cost to friendly forces” (p. 19), and the text makes clear that Newton worries that intellectual laziness about the application of airpower in modern contexts reinforces a presumption that the sole use of aircraft was for targeting truculent tribes and bombing them into compliance. This certainly did occur, but other uses of airpower such as personnel transport, emergency relief, and medical evacuation were also in evidence from the start, and these nonkinetic uses increased as the interwar era advanced.

Thus, presentism on the one hand has led air policing activities to be, in the author’s perspective, unfairly stereotyped and maligned out of context. On the other hand, decontextualized appraisal

als have also separately triggered interest in using the air policing example (or, more specifically, the *image* of air policing) for modern uses of airpower. Professional historians should applaud the dedication to approaching a subject on its own terms, because the description and explanation of the past stands at the heart of the field. That professional stance does not mean celebrating past actions or events but rather achieving a more meaningful understanding of them. The author at intervals indicates that colonial policing activities would not gain favor in modern contexts.

Newton also notes that air-ground mechanized policing approaches were not equally well suited to all geographical or security contexts. This was a point understood by interwar practitioners themselves. In desert regions against rural tribal communities, British policymakers were satisfied with the effects. In contrast, airpower and armored cars were of limited use in the more urban environments of Palestine. Where policing was most successful, in Iraq, Transjordan, and British India's Northwest Frontier, there was "integration of intelligence information provided through the district administrators" (p. 92), involving civilian officials and RAF SSOs.

The book emphasizes the role of the SSOs as communicators in addition to their activity reporting intelligence information to British and mandate authorities. The book addresses theoretical issues connected to coercion, and the SSOs' tasks included communicating with tribes about colonial demands and the consequences of non-compliance while also reporting on the effectiveness of raids and on potential follow-up targets. Interservice rivalry, predictable in an era of slashed defense budgets, led to Army opposition in regard to an expanded RAF role as well as to characterizations that emphasized air actions as brutal, destructive, and indiscriminate. This likely helped erode potential attention to the activities and impact of SSOs, and the book's purpose in large part is to refocus attention back to this aspect in partic-

ular and to the multifaceted and multiservice character of interwar policing in general.

"Too often, historians looking at the RAF's air control ... have done so through a lens of the modern era" (p. 150), Newton opines. Historians will be intrigued by the provocative point that "the RAF's collective air control experience, using air attack to shape the moral will of the population, was a major influence on British strategic offensive theory" (p. 105), while airpower practitioners will find the book's last chapter particularly engaging for its overt discussion about the need to integrate intelligence and communication into what is often a technologically dominated space. Upholding the value of context can be a complicated task in an era that is fascinated by gauging the past by the metrics of the present. But, in its appeal to recognizing context in pursuit of understanding, and in the light it sheds on little-acknowledged aspects of the recognized topic known as "air policing," *The RAF and Tribal Control* is a useful addition to the shelf of the historian and the airpower practitioner alike.

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