

Historic Book Review

The Command of the Air Guilio Douhet

(Translated by Dino Ferrari)

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Reviewed by Gp Capt

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The Command of the Air is one of those books in the air power pantheon that many have heard of, a smaller number are able to quote from, and an even smaller number have ever read, despite (or perhaps because of) its reputation.¹ To some extent the same holds true for its author, who has developed over the years a reputation as one of the early giants of air power thinking. But how justified are both the reputation of the author, and the generally understood pre-eminent position of the book in early air power thinking? These are the questions which this review seeks to answer – or at

least, to provide sufficient information for the reader to make up their own mind. Following in the pattern of this series, we begin with an examination of Douhet himself, in order to gain an understanding of the man and his background, before moving on to consider the book, and concluding with a brief examination of the influence that Douhet has had on air power theory over the past 80 years.

Guilio Douhet was without doubt one of the earliest military theorists to consider the use of air power, and was a direct contemporary, in age terms

at least, of both Hugh Trenchard and Billy Mitchell.² However unlike both Trenchard and the flamboyant Mitchell, Douhet had a solid grounding in the area of science and technology. Born in 1869, he attended the Genoa Military Academy after leaving school, where he graduated first in his class and was initially commissioned as an officer in the artillery in 1888. Later on in his career he would also undertake a course of study at the Polytechnic Institute in Turin, where he particularly specialised in engineering and science subjects; a fact which should be borne in mind when considering his later thinking about the future possibilities of air power. He did not enter the aviation world until relatively late in his career, a strong parallel with Trenchard in particular, although he had been on the General Staff of the Italian Army since 1900, and had been closely associated with what would now be regarded as concept work on army mechanisation.

By 1910 though he had become associated with the introduction of aircraft into the Italian Armed Forces, and during that year published one of his earliest public pieces on the subject of this new area of military activity.³ During the period that led up to the entry of Italy into the First World War, in 1915, Douhet was involved with the production of a report based upon Italy's use of aircraft against Turkey in Libya in 1911, which made recommendations regarding the lessons from this conflict that should be taken forwards.

His intemperate character led to him being arrested and court-martialled in 1916, effectively for undermining public security, and he was sentenced to a year in jail. However on release his fortunes began to change: the many shortcomings

in the organisation of the Italian Army that he had accurately commented on had been shown to be correct, and he was appointed to an important aviation post the same month. After the war, in 1920, his court-martial was overturned, and he was promoted to the rank of general. Instead of returning to active service he chose to concentrate on his writing though, which resulted in *The Command of the Air* being published in 1921 as an official War Department Publication.

Perhaps inevitably, given Douhet's belief in the link between the Italian character and aviation, he became a strong supporter of the Fascist movement in Italy in the early 1920s, and a friend of Benito Mussolini. But his dream of being the head of the Italian air force was not to be: Mussolini offered him the post of commissioner of aviation after he had come to power, but Douhet was not cut out to be a bureaucrat, and after a few months in the post resigned to spend more time on his beloved writing. The following years saw a succession of articles, essays, novels and plays – all on the theme of the supremacy of air power – which continued until he died of a heart attack, aged 61, in February 1930. Perhaps this was as well, for if he had seen the way in which the Regia Aeronautica developed during the 1930s, and its subsequent performance during the Second World War, it is most unlikely that he would have been content.

And so onto the book itself. It should be borne in mind from the start that the version most widely available for study, the 1943 translation on which this review is based, is actually a compendium of different articles, papers and books produced by Douhet over roughly a 10-year period, and that not

all of the original contents of the Italian book of this title were ever translated.⁴ The Ferrari version consists of four main parts, which cover *The Command of the Air* (Book I), *The Probable Aspects of the War of the Future* (Book II), *Recapitulation* (Book III) and *The War of 19__* (Book IV). All of the books are written in much the same style, with a strongly rhetorical approach, highly confident in nature, and brooking no consideration of matters of balance or judgement. Now Douhet's views with regard to the use of air power certainly hardened over the years, and the contents of this particular version of the book represent him at his most polemic, which was perhaps both a weakness and a virtue.

Book I, which as already mentioned was first published in 1921, contains the bulk of background to his understanding of the world in which he saw aviation operating. It outlines the way in which warfare had evidently changed on the ground, with all the advantages seen as lying on the defensive side, where machine guns and barbed wire produced such strength that it had reduced offensive strategy to a simple matter of attrition. Against this backdrop the aircraft is seen as offering the only means of breaking out of the inevitable strategic stalemate, as it was, in Douhet's own words, "the offensive weapon par excellence".⁵ Armed with this understanding of the way in which warfare had developed – and would continue to develop – he therefore develops the argument that as the only available offensive weapon, air power presents the only opportunity for decisive action in the future. He then considers a number of other aspects in the light of this initial conclusion: for instance what is actually meant by

command of the air, the appropriate division of resources between air and surface forces, the futility of defence, and the differing types of aircraft that would be required to conduct an independent air campaign. All of these represent very reasonable areas for discussion, however, because each is only measured in terms of the initial conclusion reached, the logic used – whilst impeccable in one sense – is completely flawed in another.

His whole argument is best summed up by Douhet himself, who in the final paragraph states that an independent air force: "... will be in a position to break up the whole social structure of the enemy in less than a week, no matter what the army and navy may do. In face of this state of affairs, is it possible to deny that a revolution has taken place? Is it possible to refuse to admit the truth of the affirmation which forms the basis of this book – namely, that the command of the air is a necessary and sufficient condition of victory".⁶

It is worthwhile considering at this point that Douhet, in common with a number of air power theorists down the ages, had a significant weakness when it came to carrying out any factual analysis – which is perhaps surprising given his strong scientific and technical background. For instance he suggests that anti-aircraft guns had proven to be generally ineffective during the First World War. But the German Armed Forces, who studied the war in the air in some detail between 1919 and 1922, had reached an opposite conclusion, with theirs being based upon a study of the known causes of enemy aircraft losses. Furthermore, his initial analysis of land warfare, which quite clearly shows the

way in which any advance in military effectiveness resulting from technology inevitably results in a counter-measure being developed, is not carried through into his analysis of future air warfare. Whilst his failure to foresee the development of radar specifically can be forgiven, his inability to see that some mechanism would be produced to allow better defence against an air threat is not so pardonable. Douhet's willingness to simply ignore, or perhaps not go looking for, any facts that would prejudice his case should act as a cogent reminder of the need for balance when trying to develop any new doctrine.

Other aspects are reinforced in the next book, on probable aspects of future warfare, which appeared in 1927. In this Douhet comes out even more firmly against wasting aeronautical assets in the area of 'auxiliary aviation', or air force elements specifically intended to support both naval and army units. His contention that future war will be won or lost entirely in the air, if accepted, leads to the logical conclusion that all available resources should therefore be turned towards ensuring victory in this arena. It also looks at the impact of air superiority upon the ability of armies and navies to conduct their own operations, and deduces that in the future air superiority will be a necessary prerequisite for them to operate with any degree of freedom. The conclusion ends with an appeal to why an appreciation of air power should be received particularly well in Italy: "The air arm is the arm not of a rich people, but of a young people, ardent, bold, inventive, who love space and height. It is therefore an arm eminently suited to us Italians... To dominate our own sky will mean to dominate the

Mediterranean sky. Let us therefore look to the future with hope and confidence and give thanks to all those whose daring and ingenuity have made this arm powerful."⁷ However despite such an optimistic end, by this point Douhet's star was waning, at least with regard to influence in his own country, and it is against this backdrop that the next element must be considered.

The third book, which first appeared as a journal article in 1929, goes back to contemplate the case for the aerial field of battle being the decisive point, again with especial reference to the Italian perspective – and also directly addresses concerns or comments made by various critics. The need to consider carefully how defence expenditure should be apportioned is considered, and a specific recognition of the need for an army strong enough to defend a country's frontiers, and a navy that can maintain the security of its seas is made. Reflection on the humanitarian aspects of attacking enemy cities is also provided, but here the deduction is that as an overall approach, war from the air is likely to be more humane. A critic suggests that in such a war peace would be signed "in the cemetery of the enemy", but Douhet suggests that "Cemeteries would undoubtedly grow larger, but not as large as they became before the peace was signed at Versailles".⁸ Nevertheless the end conclusion reached is the same: "What would be the use of a powerful Italian army deployed on the Alps, and a strong navy in command of our surrounding waters, if one of our eventual enemies should achieve command of the air and launch his aerial forces against our country, destroying our moral and material strength? ... Would we not be

putting our nation, our army, and our navy in better condition for the conflict if we directed our effort to holding the conquest of the air? The most urgent danger should be met and faced first; the others can be attended to in due time." As an interesting aside, it ends with a suggestion that what is needed to ensure success in the future is a War Academy, which would enable "... officers of the armed forces, selected from the most intelligent, learned and open-minded of them, to study these formidable new problems together. In such an academy ideas could be exchanged and approved or rejected; and through this sifting of ideas ... a final agreement could be born." It is clear that Douhet perceives that the doctrine which will arise from this agreement would be in accord with his own thinking!

The publication finishes with a future vision, *The War of 19__*. In this piece an imagined future conflict is played out between a Franco-Belgian alliance and a resurgent Germany, with all of Douhet's main themes reinforced throughout. France and Belgium have developed their air forces mainly as auxiliaries to their armies, whilst Germany has invested in an independent air force – partly because of the limitations imposed upon her by the Treaty of Versailles. The end result is a massive battle of the skies, where despite the entire first and second waves of the German attack being destroyed, the French and Belgian air forces are wiped out and unable to prevent the German forces from completely obliterating a number of major towns. And there the story ends, with a clear inference that the war at this point has been lost, with the allied forces on the ground realising the mistakes that have been made by

their countries, "... though they cursed the barbarous nature of their enemy, they could not help feeling bitter against their own aeronautical authorities, who had not taken enough protective measures against such an eventuality".⁹ It is a graphic exposition of all of Douhet's beliefs, and a fitting endpoint for the book.

So what do we make of both Douhet and the work for which he is most well known today? It is clear that he saw tremendous potential in the very earliest of aircraft, and was able to both identify, and perhaps as importantly articulate, that if the most was to be made of this new weapon of war then it would require a new conceptual approach, as well as reorganised force structures. He certainly recognised the need for control of the air, and the ability of an air force to reach over an enemy to strike directly at vital points, although in both of these regards he was not unique.¹⁰ He also foresaw the use of air forces as a means of waging total war against an enemy, and whilst more realistic with regard to the way such warfare would be both regarded and fought, in common with others he overestimated the impact on societal morale, and the subsequent effect on government. In this regard his vision at times was clouded by a combination of an unwillingness to accept particular realities, and (possibly) a desire for self-aggrandisement.¹¹ It is tempting to write, albeit with the benefit of considerable hindsight, that Douhet's ideas, whilst original, were certainly not exclusive. However he was far more articulate than many of his air power contemporaries, especially in the printed arena, and perhaps this is why he has come to be regarded as such a visionary.

His legacy is somewhat mixed: many individuals who pass through staff colleges around the world even now will be aware of a few selected quotes, and possibly of his overall ideas regarding the ability of air power to create strategic effect. Amongst his contemporaries he was not so well known; Trenchard had met him, and even exchanged correspondence – but only with regard to an official visit. And whilst the French, German and American air forces were aware of his writings, and there is clear evidence that his ideas had received a warm reception with one American officer in particular, he was certainly not generally cited as an individual whose pronouncements should be taken as infallible.¹²

Perhaps the greatest legacy of *The Command of the Air* should be the clear warning that it provides about putting too much faith in technology, and not taking a balanced approach to combining lessons from history with the need to think about how new capabilities can best be exploited. But it also provides an object lesson in the difference that one individual can make within a country in terms of acting as an apologist for a new way of war, and to that extent Douhet's reputation is well deservedly secure alongside those of his closest air power contemporaries, Trenchard and Mitchell.

Notes

- 1 Which certainly makes it qualitatively different from the previous two publications considered in this series, which are hardly known by any modern students of RAF history and air power theory!
- 2 Anyone looking for a more in-depth treatment of Douhet as an individual and his overall contribution to aviation thought would be well advised to start with 'Giulio Douhet and the Origins of Airpower Theory' by Colonel Phillip S Meilinger (*The Paths of Heaven: The Evolution of Air Power Theory*, edited

by Colonel Phillip S Meilinger, Air University Press, Alabama, 1997, 1-40)

3 Major G Douhet, "I problemi dell' aeronavigazione", *La Preparazione*, Rome, 1910.

4 Meilinger, 'Giulio Douhet and the Origins of Airpower Theory', 8. ("... fully one-half of the first edition ... has never been translated and remains largely forgotten.")

5 Giulio Douhet, 'The Command of the Air', London, 1943, 19.

6 *Ibid*, 118.

7 *Ibid*, 167.

8 *Ibid*, 224.

9 *Ibid*, 314.

10 For instance the term 'air superiority', used in this sense, is used on a number of occasions in the RAF's first doctrine manual, published in 1922.

11 This is particularly evident in his habit of (very) selectively quoting from earlier articles of his own, in order to increase the degree of his perceived prescience.

12 Major Edgar Gorrell wrote a memo, widely circulated within the American Air Service, on the desirability and feasibility of strategic bombing. This was based heavily on an article by a journalist friend of Douhet's, Nino Salvaneschi, and the ideas contained in owed much to Douhet. Meilinger, 'Giulio Douhet and the Origins of Airpower Theory', 7.

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