

BOOK REVIEW BY GROUP CAPTAIN PETER W GRAY DIRECTOR OF DEFENCE STUDIES (RAF)

GOERING

**RICHARD OVERY,
Phoenix Press, London 2000
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The popular image of Hermann Goering is of a corrupt, indolent individual who owed his high position to his sycophancy to Hitler. Goering is often portrayed as a bumbling character whose taste for high living, fancy uniforms and exotic medals and paraphernalia were at odds with the stereotypical Nazi.

In this welcome reissue, of what was originally a controversial biography, Richard Overy takes the reader far beyond these images. He shows us a ruthless, energetic and ambitious man whose tactics and techniques for the acquisition and expansion of power were on a par with those of his colleagues, Himmler and Goebbels. Although as Professor Overy points out, Goering's public face was very carefully cultivated and he enjoyed far more popularity than his character and track record indicate that he deserved.

Although Goering is best remembered as head of the Luftwaffe, he was also responsible for the creation and running of large sections of the German industry that subsequently became the engine room of Germany's war machine. To the casual reader, Germany in World War II could be perceived as being an extreme dictatorship with the vast bulk of society on a regimented war footing with the tentacles of the police state ever present. Whilst this was undoubtedly true, it did not happen overnight. The process

by which Hitler, and his supporters, gradually infiltrated all sections of German society, industry and the military makes fascinating reading. The setting up of parallel economic instructions, the bullying of officials in other ministries only to deal with Goering's machine and the ruthless exploitation of real and fictional personal failings took time, vision and machiavellian energy to bring about. Goering evidently revelled in it all especially when the vendettas got personal. When he replaced Schacht as temporary Economics Minister, Goering's first act was to telephone his out-maneuvred and discredited predecessor to crow over his victory. There is also an enduring image of Goering being less extreme and less anti-semitic than many of his contemporaries. His opposition to 'Kristallnacht' in November 1938 is a classic example. Overy quickly shatters this myth, pointing out that part of Goering's 'distress' was due to his non-involvement. Furthermore, he did not approve of the random and wanton destruction of property that in time would be expropriated anyway. In reality, Goering was at the forefront of the passage of anti-Jewish legislation and the 'organisation' of industry.

For students of air power, the Chapter on the Luftwaffe makes excellent reading. Goering's personality traits, foibles and failings again come to the fore. He saw himself as a latter-day Charlemagne, Napoleon or Frederick the Great. His relish of the title of Reichsmarschall typified his wish to be seen as a man who embraced the complete spectrum of public life. Part of the reason for the Luftwaffe's ultimate failure lay in the German military's conservative failure to challenge Goering. Part of this was due to his intolerance of criticism or challenge, part was also due to deference to his rank and previous gallantry. Goering's incompetence, however, was a major factor. He had difficulty in grasping technical matters and was unwilling to defer to those that did.

Although Goering was not oblivious to strategy, his loyalty to Hitler ensured that he mirrored his leader's every move inevitably to the chagrin of the more enlightened subordinates whose advancement was deliberately

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