

# *The Air Doctrine of General Douhet*

By General Tulasne



General Giulio Douhet

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This material is based mainly on an article published in *Rivista Aeronautica*, July 1932, by General Tulasne, entitled *A New Military Doctrine*.

**A**t the end of 1930 the death occurred of a man who, although comparatively unknown outside his own country, has played a by no means unimportant part in the development of Italy's defence policy, and who has, as a result of his writings, attracted a great deal of attention in several other countries. This man, General Giulio Douhet, was an Army officer who served in the Great War, and who was at one time imprisoned on account of his criticism of the higher command, but was reinstated after the disaster of Caporetto, as it was recognized that his criticisms were fully justified and that he had sacrificed his career in the interest of his country. Subsequently, during 1918, he served as head of the Central Command of Aviation, and returned to civil life after the Armistice.

He had already devoted much thought to the problems of air power, and had, during the war, recommended the use of aircraft in an independent role, but it was not until 1921 that his first paper of importance, entitled 'Air Supremacy', was published. It attracted comparatively little attention, but in the course of time, as his works became better known, the doctrine developed by him gradually created an increasing amount of interest and, incidentally, encountered a considerable volume of opposition.

The fundamental basis of this doctrine is that it is necessary for the security of a country to have a powerful air force, independent of the other two services, and that this air force should be made the primary arm because, owing to the impossibility of preventing air attacks, an independent air force, used offensively against military and economic objectives, can force a decision, whereas on land and sea, owing to the superiority of the defence over the offence, a land or naval offensive requires forces greatly superior to those of the enemy in order to have any chance of being successful.

In support of his arguments the General quoted the Great War, in which he said that it was not mere chance that a balance was established on the land and

sea fronts, but that this was inevitable under the conditions then ruling, owing to the power of the defence.

In the air, on the other hand, he considered that an offensive policy would be the most advantageous, owing to the impossibility of providing an effective defence from air attack. For this reason, and owing to the fact that it is impossible to be strong everywhere, he recommended that the greatest strength of the national forces should be concentrated in the arm which is most likely to prove decisive, namely, the air force, which can take action not only against the enemy air force, but also against the land and sea forces, and against objectives in the interior of the enemy territory.

He was of the opinion, therefore, that the air will normally be the decisive element, and that it will be necessary for the air force to take the offensive, whilst the navy and army maintain a defensive role. The General then proceeded to argue that, if the soundness of his premises is admitted, the major part of the expenditure on national defence should be allotted to the air force, the army and navy being granted only a proportion sufficient to ensure that they will be capable of undertaking adequately a defensive role in war, and preventing the enemy achieving a decisive result on land or sea.

The General attached so much importance to being able to develop a powerful air offensive that he recommended that the auxiliary aircraft allotted to the army and navy should be abolished, and the money saved thereby used to increase the strength of the independent air force. Similarly he considered that fighter aircraft are of so little value in defence that they should also be eliminated, and that the whole of the aircraft of the independent air force should consist of bombers.

He recognized, however, that it is possible that the enemy may undertake a counter air offensive, and that it is therefore necessary to limit as far as possible the damage which might be caused by such attacks. For this purpose anti-aircraft defences must be provided, but they should be concentrated on the defence of a few of the most important points, and in addition all possible means of

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passive defence of the civil population should be organized and developed.

Having outlined briefly the main points of General Douhet's doctrine, they can be summarized as follows:

- i. Adopt a defensive attitude on land and sea, and concentrate on the air offensive.
- ii. Allot all the air resources available to the creation of an independent air force designed solely for offensive action.
- iii. This involves the abolition of all auxiliary aircraft, including those allotted to the army and navy, and all fighter aircraft.
- iv. Concentrate the anti-aircraft defences on the protection of centres of maximum importance, thus avoiding dissemination which would make the defence ineffective everywhere.
- v. Organize the whole nation so as to develop the best possible measures of passive air defence.
- vi. Concentrate technical research and development on the design of aircraft which will

have the maximum radius of penetration into enemy territory.

These theories naturally encountered a great deal of opposition, and for some years the arguments for and against occupied a considerable amount of space in all the Italian military journals. The main objections, and the answers thereto by the General, fell under the following headings:

- i. Aircraft are an indispensable auxiliary to land and sea forces, and an army or navy unprovided with aircraft would find itself at a grave disadvantage if opposed to an enemy possessing auxiliary air forces.

The General's reply to this was that to provide auxiliary air forces means a dispersal of effort, and a decrease in the offensive power of the independent air force. If the latter is beaten the auxiliary air forces will be of no further use, and the army and navy would be powerless to defend the nation from an enemy air force possessing air supremacy.

- ii. The General attached insufficient importance to fighter aircraft and anti-aircraft defences, which can provide an efficient defence from air attack.

In reply to this objection the General stated that his whole doctrine was founded on the fact that no effective defence to air attack as yet exists. If proof to the contrary could be provided he would be willing to renounce his theories.

iii. It is admitted that the independent air force can penetrate the air over enemy territory, but before they can attack their objectives they must first defeat the opposing air force. In the air, therefore, as on the land and sea, the primary aim must be the defeat of the enemy forces.

The General's reply to this was that an air force which concentrates on the attack of objectives in enemy territory may be interfered with by the enemy air force, but that such attacks cannot be entirely prevented. An attacking air force which endeavours first of all to defeat the opposing air force will, therefore, be wasting its efforts, as it can achieve its aim without doing so. Air warfare, therefore, does not consist of air fighting, but of a bombing offensive.

iv. The final objection is that the land or sea, and not the air, will probably be the decisive element in wars of the future as of the past.

To this the General replied that, even if this contention is correct, it is still necessary to make the air force the strongest of the 3 services because, even if the air should not be the decisive element, it will still be necessary for the success of the naval or military operations to ensure that the national territory is safe from attack by the enemy air force. On the land or sea it is possible to temporize, but not in the air, and therefore it will always be essential to have a powerful air force. This does not mean that the whole of the defence resources should be concentrated in the air force, but that, as it is impossible to be in strength everywhere, the army and navy should only be strong enough to ensure that the enemy cannot force a decision on land or sea, whilst entrusting the major responsibility for defence to the air force. Each of the three services has, therefore, its mission in the defence of the country, and there is no question of entrusting to the air force alone the task of deciding the result of a war.

Finally, as a general conclusion, General Douhet stated that war must be considered as a whole and not from the point of view of any particular service. In order, therefore, that the resources of the nation can be correctly proportioned between the land, sea and air forces, it is necessary to have a Chief of the General Staff who will be responsible to the Government for the employment of all the defence services, whilst a Ministry of National Defence should be created which would administer the whole of the funds allotted to the defence services, and which would decide upon the proportion to be allocated to each. The officers on the General Staff of this Ministry should be trained at a special Military Academy, distinct from any schools or colleges belonging to any of the three services, where the study of war should be undertaken from the national aspect.

There is no doubt that the General's doctrine has profoundly influenced Italian ideas in regard to national defence, and, although his theories have not been adopted in their entirety, particularly in regard to his proposals to abolish fighter and auxiliary aircraft, his suggestions have in many cases been carried out. In 1927, for example, the first step towards the creation of a Ministry for National Defence was taken when a Chief of the General Staff of the Forces of Italy was appointed.

A great deal of attention has also been devoted to the General's writings in the press of other countries, and, even if one is not in entire agreement with all his theories, it must be admitted that he has put forward forcible arguments and that he has made a thorough study of the problems involved. It should also be taken into consideration, however, that the General developed his thesis mainly from the point of view of Italy, and that he did not intend, therefore, that it should necessarily be applicable to all other countries. Nevertheless, a study of his doctrine is considered to be of considerable general interest, and, in addition, to provide a valuable guide to the trend of thought in regard to air power in a country which is occupying an increasingly important place amongst the great Powers.

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