



The RAF in the Battle of France and the Battle of Britain: A Reappraisal of Army and Air Policy 1938–1940 by Greg Baughen.

Charleston, SC: Fonthill Media, 2016. Pp. 270. ISBN 978–1–78155–525–5.

Review by Matthew Powell, RAF College Cranwell (matthew.powell@port.ac.uk).

Greg Baughen has written widely on the development of both British and French air power since World War I. In this, the third volume of a projected five-volume series, he reassesses the British Air Ministry's development and use of air power both strategically and tactically during the Battle of France and the Battle of Britain. He maintains that air power was best used in World War II in support of land forces and that the Air Ministry's concentration on strategic bombing was ineffective. Though he has written prolifically on his subject, Baughen is an amateur historian whose work is designed for a general readership rather than specialists.

The author takes no account of the wider context of the interwar period, when the Royal Air Force (RAF) was fighting for its very existence; fighter aircraft were unable to intercept bombers effectively, particularly without early warning defensive systems. Britain still relied on naval power for its defense and had no tradition of a large standing army. The decision to send an expeditionary force to the continent in support of France was not taken until 1939. Given their scarcity of resources, all three British military services had to decide on their specific priorities. Instead of focusing on air power, one might as easily criticize the British Army for failing to develop mobile armored warfare as Germany had done. Baughen also ignores the geopolitical reasons for the difference between the British and German approaches to air power: as a nation with several land borders, Germany was likely to be involved in a ground campaign at the outbreak of hostilities and therefore prioritized land forces over strategic air power.

The book comprises an introduction, sixteen chapters, and a conclusion, enhanced by ten pages of notes,¹ two appendices, a bibliography, and an index. There are plentiful photographs, mostly of RAF commanders and various aircraft. Maps of Norway, France, the Netherlands, and Britain will aid the reader in following particular operations. What the author does not provide is any compelling critique of previous studies of the deficiencies of air power in France in 1940 and during the Battle of Britain. The result is an incomplete, tactical-level discussion that adds little to existing knowledge.

Baughen misunderstands fundamental concepts of air superiority. He favors the early World War II British Army conception of aircraft patrolling above ground forces rather than anything more fluid and dynamic. He also misinterprets the wider context of the Battle of France, omitting to discuss French and British expectations regarding the speed of ground operations. If ground operations in the Second World War had evolved as they had in the First (which the French and

1. The (too few) sources cited are mostly out of date and often seem cherry-picked to support a preconceived argument. There are no references to, e.g., David Ian Hall, *Strategy for Victory: The Development of British Tactical Air Power, 1919–1943* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2008); Matthew Powell, *The Development of British Tactical Air Power, 1940–1943: A History of Army Co-operation Command* (NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); or John Buckley, "The Air War in France," in *The Battle for France and Flanders: Sixty Years On*, ed. Brian Bond and Michael D. Taylor (London: Leo Cooper, 2001) 109–26.

British expected), then strategic air power could have had a decisive effect on German capabilities. Baughen does highlight the chances lost by French and British air forces to attack and stop German armored columns moving through the Ardennes Forest. But he does not mention that the RAF had spotted the German columns and asked for permission to attack them prior to the German assault across the Meuse on 12 May 1940. This permission was denied, due to French fears of retaliation against their civilian populations.

The author does not appreciate the speed of the Germans' advance once they had crossed the Meuse. Nor does he describe how the rigidly hierarchical French command and control structure kept the Allies from forming a solid defensive line in time to mount anything more than small, poorly coordinated counteroffensives. Also overlooked is the fact that the ill-advised Allied plan to move into Belgium once hostilities had begun was exploited by the Germans with ruthless efficiency.

In his conclusion, Baughen implies that air superiority in the Battle of France was something only the Luftwaffe could achieve (233), but never points out that this was the result not of happenstance but of the Germans' hard-fought interdiction operations before their assaults along the Meuse.

Baughen discusses German strategic bombing attacks on Britain, but does not track the development of tactical air power in Britain through to 1941. Had he done so, he could have explained developments initiated by the Air Ministry through experimentation, as well as the creation of Army Co-operation Command. He pointedly states several times that the Air Ministry refused to create an Army Co-operation Command in summer 1940, but ignores the plans begun for such an organization already in late September of that year.

The author's inadequate research and poor grasp of the role of air power in specific contexts is typified in the following excerpts.

Three times the Germans decided to rely on air power operating independently of ground forces. Three times it failed. First, the Luftwaffe failed to stop the British Army escaping from Dunkirk. Then it failed to destroy Fighter Command in the Battle of Britain. Finally, it failed to break the morale of the British people with the Blitz. The strategy used on these occasions was not how Germany had conquered the rest of Europe.... The German Navy had never required air superiority over London—for an invasion to be successful, the Luftwaffe merely had to control the skies above the Channel and the German bridgeheads. Arguably, the Luftwaffe had long since achieved this objective. (233, 214)

How the Germans could have supported a land invasion without air superiority is not indicated. The author seems to take it for granted that the Wehrmacht could have succeeded simply by crossing the Channel. Air superiority entails more than the ability to fly and engage an opponent. Specifically, it means denying one's enemy the freedom to exploit the advantages the sky can give at all levels of war.

Baughen excoriates the Air Ministry, but says little about the British Army. The War Office investigation conducted by Gen. Sir William Bartholomew is not mentioned at all. The author does allude to calls by the Army for the creation of its own air arm, as if it would know instinctively how to operate aircraft and design a communications system to ensure various types of air support needed in the field. Baughen also does not analyze army calls for extra support aircraft or how long it would have taken to develop them, let alone whether the British aircraft industry could produce them in sufficient numbers.

The chapter on the German assault at Sedan (14 May 1940) considers only the morning attacks, when German antiaircraft defenses were more substantial than the author claims. He fails

to mention that the afternoon attacks incurred huge casualty rates, as more recent scholarship has shown. Baughen also takes issue with Air Marshal Sir Hugh Dowding's refusal to allow extra fighter squadrons to participate in the Battle of France, citing French criticism of the RAF without acknowledging the poor performance of French aircraft during the battle or explaining why the French were so reliant on the RAF.

All in all, Greg Baughen fails to provide a compelling reappraisal of British army and air policy in 1938–40. Overlooking the current scholarly consensus on his subject, he fashions and demolishes a straw man, rather than acknowledging that fault should be found elsewhere than solely in the Air Ministry.