



*Air Power and the Evacuation of Dunkirk: The RAF and Luftwaffe during Operation Dynamo, 26 May–4 June 1940* by Harry Raffal.

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In his first monograph, historian Harry Raffal (Royal Air Force Museum) explores the role of air power in the evacuation of Dunkirk (Spr. 1940) from both the British and German perspectives. In so doing, he closes a gap in both the scholarly literature and our knowledge of the role of air power in the period. He also dispels persistent myths surrounding the evacuation of Dunkirk as seen by the RAF. The British in particular have mythologized it as a symbol of national pride and determination. This process has clouded both contemporary and historical understanding of the evacuation and the role of air power in support of it.

Raffal helpfully begins with an analysis of the capabilities of both the RAF and Luftwaffe as well as the wider military and geographical contexts in which they operated. The inclusion of German air operations is especially welcome in an English-language work, something missing in the literature. The work has no main thesis per se. Instead, it seeks to explore the effectiveness of the air operations of both forces, with a view to clarifying which one dominated its adversary.

While the book is meant for an academic audience, its engaging and lucid prose make it accessible to non-specialists interested in World War II or the role of air power. Its eleven chapters (counting an introduction and conclusion) are enhanced by three appendices, a bibliography, and index.

Chapter 1 concerns the positions of both British and German forces in the immediate aftermath of the Battle of France (10 May–25 June), with attention to their air forces' proximity to the evacuation beaches. The following five chapters cover the Luftwaffe attacks that led to the suspension of daylight evacuations by the British. Raffal concludes that heavy air strikes on the beaches, not German artillery, brought a halt to daylight evacuations on 1 June.

The evidence from the ships' logs and the chain of events reveal that it was the losses incurred as a result of air attack which halted daylight evacuation. The artillery fire which came to menace Route X was, at best, a contributing factor in the decision to suspend daylight evacuations. (112)

The remaining chapters concern operations by fighter aircraft on both sides as well as the role of Bomber and Coastal Commands. The author bases his investigation throughout on relevant British and German primary sources.

Raffal also seamlessly links the experience gained by the RAF during Operation Dynamo to fighter maneuvers against the Luftwaffe as well as tactical developments seen in the Battle of Britain.

The failure to understand the RAF and Luftwaffe air operations during the Dunkirk evacuation has also had an impact on the historical understanding of events during the Battle of Britain. By considering 11 Group's operational use of wing patrols during the evacuation, it is possible to develop a fuller understanding of the subsequent tactical decision in the Battle of Britain not to employ wing patrols. (4)

Hence, we can trace the development of the Big Wing argument between Air Vice-Marshals Sir Keith Park and Trafford Leigh Mallory in summer and autumn 1940.

The scrutiny of Luftwaffe operations reveals such critical problems as lack of concentration on the key objective, the Ju-87 Stuka dive-bomber's failure to operate well in contested air space, and the difficulty Luftwaffe fighters had escorting the bombers. The intensification of these problems in the subsequent Battle of Britain is not lost on Raffal.

*Air Power and the Evacuation of Dunkirk* is a well balanced account of the air operations conducted by the RAF and the Luftwaffe and the effectiveness of both forces in their efforts to influence the evacuation of British and French forces at Dunkirk. It is a most welcome addition to the literature of the Second World War and air power studies generally—one that will be consulted for years to come because it challenges and revises many of the myths surrounding the Dunkirk evacuation. This alone makes it required reading for anyone interested in its subject.