

Book review

Why Air Forces Fail: The Anatomy of Defeat

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In *Why Air Forces Fail: The Anatomy of Defeat* (Higham & Harris, 2016), historians Robin Higham and Stephen Harris assemble a team of experts to investigate examples of failure and defeat in the application of air power. While the book was published 10 years ago, with its original edition published 20 years ago (Higham & Harris, 2006), the evocative title of the book will undoubtedly still draw a strong readership, and the book has much to commend it. On the other hand, the book also has its limitations. As Higham & Harris (2016) themselves acknowledge, 'notions of "defeat" and "fall" are applied very loosely'. In addition, and as I argue below, the three 'categories of defeat' defined by the editors are unnecessarily reductionist and arbitrary, making the analysis in the book somewhat limited in value. Despite these limitations, the book identifies several important lessons that are still applicable in contemporary settings and is therefore an important work for those interested in air power, how to best wield it, and how to avoid the more common failings associated with air power projection.

In the 2016 edition, thirteen case studies are examined spanning air power from pre-World War One to 1982. Refreshingly, the book includes several less well-known case studies such as the defeat of the Polish air power in 1939; the demise of the Italian Regia Aeronautica over the period 1933-1943; and the failure of the Argentine Air Force in the Falklands War. The 2016 edition of the book is 'revised and expanded' over the original (Higham & Harris, 2006), and it is definitely the version to read as it includes two additional chapters evaluating the performance of the Royal Air Force's Bomber Command and American air power in Vietnam.

Applying notions of 'defeat' and 'failure' loosely is a forgivable oversimplification, insofar as most discerning readers will recognise warfare is rarely amenable to such clear-cut results. Several case studies implicitly recognise this by analysing air forces over a lengthy period, for example the German and Austro-Hungarian air forces over 1909-1918, and the Russian air force across both World Wars.

The more problematic oversimplification is the editors' identification of three 'categories of defeat' in the introductory chapter, through which the case studies are subsequently evaluated. These categories are the 'dead ducks'—those that 'never had a chance and whose defeat was part of a national shame'; the 'hares that lost the race'—those that 'had initial success but eventually failed'; and the 'phoenixes'—those that 'suffered initial disasters but were victorious in the end'.¹ In my mind, these categories are overly reductionist and arbitrary.

The result is predictable: as one proceeds through the subsequent chapters, the category that a particular case study is assigned is in some cases highly contestable. For example, the Imperial Japanese Air Force is identified as a 'hare that lost the race'. However, factors including a low, and rapidly diminishing technical and industrial capacity; inferior operational skill due to doctrinal inflexibility; deeply ingrained cultural practices of *bushido*, *jibaku* and

¹ Higham and Harris failed to update the introduction to categorise the two air forces examined in the additional chapters as either 'dead ducks', 'hares that lost the race' or 'phoenixes'.

kamikaze; a narrow focus on decisive battle to the detriment of strategy; and long supply lines, combine to suggest that World War Two Japanese air power may be more appropriately assigned to the 'dead duck' category.² Another example is Russia's Air Force being judged as 'dead ducks' across two World Wars. This seems unreasonable on at least two grounds: first, the time period chosen seems arbitrary—if not inappropriate—in the sense that the Russian Air Force of 1914-1917 was vastly different to the Soviet equivalent of 1941-1945, as were the environment and threats each had to combat. Second, while the Russian Air Force of 1917 was decimated, it was so only after the most extreme long-term conditions which attrited a capable initial force to the point of exhaustion (Kilmarx, 1963). These conditions would likely have placed any air force of the period in similar peril. For the Red Air Force, the story was reversed: initial failures in 1941 led to a force growing in strength and capability. By 1945, it had become a formidable weapon against the German forces (Olsen, 2010, pp. 37-40). Post-war, the Soviet Union continued to field impressive air capabilities with which they fought the Cold War. These are hardly the hallmarks of a 'dead duck.'

Notwithstanding these weaknesses, *Why Air Forces Fail* has much to commend it. The book is engaging and easy to read. It is structured such that it can be read in the normal linear way or, if the reader is interested only in particular case studies, by self-contained chapters. Each chapter contains a detailed recommended reading list and a section on areas of further research—both are handy for those entertaining academic study. And for those with limited time, the book's structure lends itself to a more targeted reading approach: in the opinion of this reviewer, 90% of the major themes can be understood by reading the introductory chapter, the chapter conclusions for each case study, and the concluding chapter—a task of only 50 pages.

Key lessons argued in the conclusion of the book include: the aggressor has the advantage because it dictates the pace of conflict; quick victory should not be expected (i.e. drawn-out conflicts should be planned for); and logistic and industrial capacities are critical because air forces are both hungry and fragile. Two great lessons stand out for this reviewer. The first is that although 'aircrews (and especially pilots) usually take pride of place, air forces are materiel organisations utterly dependent on complex understructures. When these are degraded, air power cannot be effectively projected (Higham & Harris, 2016, p. 416). The second, even more strategically important, lesson is that historically:

There [has been] a kind of universal assumption that airpower had to be present everywhere. The axiom that followed was that once present, even in penny packets, airpower would make a critical difference to any military engagement. In short, the theoretical or philosophical ideal of strategic omnipotence percolated down to the smallest of land or sea campaigns. Somehow [for example], a handful of B-17s stationed in the Philippines was assumed to be a strategic, operational, and tactical deterrent to the Japanese government and the military... Somehow, a few Gladiators and Hurricanes flying off frozen lake beds were to be important factors in Norway. And somehow, for an important few years in France, it was thought that one aircraft type could do everything. The chapters in this book are about the falseness of th[is] axiom (Higham & Harris, 2006, p. 406).

The chronic susceptibility of air power practitioners to focus on 'sharp end' functions to the detriment of air power capability; their fascination with technology; and their entrenched belief that air power is the panacea for most strategic problems, are well-studied subjects.³ Air power practitioners and strategists alike would do well to pin the two quotes above to their office walls.

One final point of interest surrounding *Why Air Forces Fail* is that the United States Air and Space Forces Association (US AFA)—an independent, professional military association

² The Japanese Air Force was, after all, effectively defeated by 1943, unable to conduct a meaningful role even in support of ground and maritime forces. Refer to Chapter 2 of Wood (2007).

³ For example, see: Biddle (2002); Clodfelter (2006); Gray (2012); and Gray (2009).

aiming to educate the public about air and space power, and advocate for the US Air and Space Forces—appears to have appreciated the book’s message. Two US AFA documents (US AFA, 2008a; US AFA, 2008b) are publicly available and are worth reading in conjunction with the book.

Overall, *Why Air Forces Fail* is an interesting and important book because it analyses the reasons why air forces have suffered defeat and failure. It draws some important lessons in this regard, and it provides an excellent resource for those studying air power. It would also serve as a valuable text for air power professionals at the tactical and operational levels.

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