Giulio Douhet and His Critics

One hundred years ago, in World War I, combatants began initial reconnaissance flights in aircraft barely able to carry a two-man crew. By that time, Italian army officer Giulio Douhet had already spent a decade writing about warfare becoming more about conflicts between nations themselves, not just between the military forces of those nations. As Thomas Hippler emphasizes, to Douhet, "a given nation’s morale and political cohesion" could become a target in warfare (p. 36). And, with an associated interest in technology and how it changed warfare, he had naturally moved on to envision the role of aircraft in such conflicts. Hippler successfully links these matters—the advent of total war and the role of aircraft—through an analysis of Douhet’s writings from the first decade of the century until his death in 1930, detailing the significant changes evident in Douhet’s perspectives over time on the use of air forces and their role in warfare. Just as important, Hippler introduces the many contrary arguments that Douhet had to confront, particularly from those within his own country and service. This study is more than a biography of the individual. It is the richness of intellectual ferment that gives this book its importance.

The book’s two sections address each of these major themes: first, Douhet and the development of his ideas, “Douhet’s Strategic Thought”; and, second, the intellectual ferment evident in Italy during the time period covered in the book, “Douhetism under Discussion.” That division does not fully describe the focus, however, for while Douhet’s strategic thoughts appear in the first section, that section also includes much discussion of the corresponding ideas of his critics, also the subject of the entire book’s second section, a point that might not be immediately evident in the book’s title. The book features Douhet, but is really about Italian strategic thought on airpower more generally.

Hippler has extensively researched Italian sources and archives and that comes through in the extent of his development of Douhet’s ideas over time. Apparently there is a lack of material on Douhet himself as opposed to what he wrote—he was a prolific writer—and that brings some difficulties: in his writings, Douhet changed his focus and his mind on many occasions, often within the same year. Giving details or charting some sort of progression of his thoughts on air power, therefore, poses particular problems for Hippler as he must deal with clear contradictions in Douhet’s early writings; Hippler at times refers to these contradictions as paradoxes, but they do not often deserve that classification. Granted, Douhet was writing during a period of rapid advances in the capabilities of aircraft and had to often modify his positions, but still, he did not leave a clear path for historians to follow. Douhet argued very early on for the acceptability, or inevitably, of targeting civilians and a country’s economic infrastructure (by whatever means) in future wars, and by 1915 he specifically introduced aerial bombardment as the means in the strategy for which he is best known. But the progression of his thoughts was not linear, and Hippler is left to explain some often odd turns.

One aspect of Douhet’s theories that Hippler addresses is the Italian’s leap into the future in assessing the nature of warfare while remaining grounded in current
experience and the lessons of the First World War. Hippler’s explanation is Douhet’s “ahistorical historicism,” which, if I understand it properly, describes a process of recognizing historical change but disregarding the immediate lessons of the past as limited and backward thinking (p. 75). Such a formulation is used to define how Douhet’s theories on the use of aircraft rested on the promise of technology, not on any demonstrated capabilities.

Hippler provides some themes to guide the reader through the decades of Douhet’s writings, pointing out the association with Alfred Thayer Mahan and sea power theory, linking the command of the air with that of the sea, for instance. Another important trail is how Douhet moved from emphasizing air defense as a primary mission to a final position of declaring air defense impossible. At times, Hippler reaches too far in presenting contrasts, as when he describes how Douhet shifted from a position of pacifism while on his path to a strategy of city bombing. The evidence he presents is of Douhet’s early advocacy of international laws against warfare or at least internationalizing the use of force (as within the League of Nations), but the evidence takes the point further than that. Douhet made such statements while at the same time advocating the further production of bombers and theorizing on how to conduct offensive warfare, neither of which fits within a definition of pacifism.

In the concluding part on Douhet’s strategic thoughts, Hippler describes a major debate of the time over the priority of achieving command of the air or initiating ground attacks. At issue is whether these would be two separate missions. An added element, however, and not mentioned by Hippler, was Douhet’s plan to attack enemy air forces on the ground (destroying nests and eggs in his parlance), thus obviating the need for air combat as a separate mission. Here and in other places in analyzing the evolution of Douhet’s thoughts, Hippler does the reader no favor by assuming knowledge of Douhet’s final formulations in his book *The Command of the Air* (1921; rev. ed. 1927). Without those final formulations as background, the reader is left with no reliable means to follow or measure the path of Douhet’s thoughts on air power strategy as those ideas move from aircraft as an auxiliary force to aircraft dominating warfare. A several-page summary of the key points from *The Command of the Air* would have helped enormously.

These minor criticisms aside, Hippler does well in capturing and assessing Douhet’s thoughts on warfare, his responses to critics, and his effects on his own country’s air force. By putting Douhet in the middle of the debates on air power taking place in Italy in the 1920s, the author draws in very well the competing ideas of Douhet’s critics concerning the relative importance of support for ground and naval forces, air to air fighting, and fragility of the civilian population under air attack. In this regard, Hippler seems certainly correct in depicting the Italian air force during the period as the most intellectually productive of any country. In this context, Douhet is regarded as a player, but not a dominant one, in “the foundations of air-power strategy” (as stated in Hippler’s book’s title) of the time. And, his influence on what that strategy and force became was limited. Finally, as shown in this account, Douhet, though apparently an ardent Italian fascist, linked none of his theories to that ideology, and vice versa.

After Douhet’s death, the future of the Italian air force lay in the hands of his critics, and Hippler describes as most prominent Armedeo Mecozzi, to whom he devotes an entire chapter. As opposed to Douhet, who was not a pilot, Mecozzi served as a combat pilot in the war and was accomplished in both air to air fighting and in air to ground attacks. This experience left him not at all ahistorical about the effectiveness of anti-aircraft artillery and the need for what are now termed tactical aircraft, not just bombers. Thus, Mecozzi dealt with tactics and specific capabilities (and limitations) of aircraft, subjects that were of much less interest to Douhet. Because of his perspectives and ideas, Mecozzi deserves this separate chapter, and Hippler integrates well the areas in which he agreed and disagreed with Douhet. This chapter becomes probably the most important one of the book, as it investigates issues discussed at the time that remain unresolved or are still open to interpretation: division of targeting authority between air and ground forces, value of attacks on forces themselves or on their supporting industries, and the value of targeting civilian morale.

The book concludes with an epilogue, in which the author examines the history of strategic bombing as defined by Douhet and similar theorists in other countries. The chapter is a short one and only touches lightly on a variety of campaigns. It does dwell importantly on the question of strategic bombing, here considered attacks not aimed at surface forces, but at the country’s leadership or “the social, economic and political life of the country” (p. 252). In this respect, Hippler theorizes, or at least asks the reader to question the ultimate effects of, air attacks that result in the decapitation of a country’s leadership or a rebellion of the people against their leadership, conditions that might lead to civil war or internal
political chaos. Dwelling on these implications rightly brings the book’s account of Italian debates of the time into the present, making the arguments applicable to not just major state on state war but also to the hybrid forms of conflict now underway. The ideas presented on this subject are well worth further examination, as is the book overall.

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