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Research Guide Series

Air Policing during the Inter-War Years

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Air policing during the inter-war years

One of the most controversial episodes in the history of air power is the use of aircraft in the air policing role by the Royal Air Force during the 1920s and 1930s. Air policing in the period between the two World Wars is seen by some authors as a tool to maintain the last vestiges of the British Empire against unsophisticated and out-gunned native populations. The effectiveness of air policing is still very much a matter for debate, especially by ground force commanders and armchair strategists. However, the literature shows that air policing did have an important role in British military policy and in the permanent establishment and enduring doctrine of the Royal Air Force.

Air policing, also known as air control, was employed very soon after the end of the First World War as a method of combating local unrest or outright rebellion in far-flung corners of the British Empire. The intention was that air policing would be significantly cheaper than garrisoning large numbers of ground troops overseas; an attractive idea in the depression years of the 1920s. Air policing was employed in the Middle East, particularly Iraq (then also known as Mesopotamia), Aden and Palestine, and on the North West Frontier of India (now Afghanistan and Pakistan). The opposition consisted of what were often termed “dissident tribesmen” who were ill-equipped to fight against aircraft and were, initially at least, easily impressed into submission by the appearance of a new weapon of war of which they had very little comprehension.

Air policing was a very useful task for the fledgling Royal Air Force that had been formed on 1 April 1918. Born at the height of war, the RAF had to expend considerable effort over the next two decades to maintain its independence from the Army and the Royal Navy from which it had sprung. The doctrine of air policing was developed to demonstrate that air power transcended ground and naval forces (and was, at that time at least, claimed to be cheaper than both) and therefore Lord Trenchard used it as a political lever to help secure the RAF’s independent future.

In the 1920s the RAF had a huge number of surplus airframes that had been ordered during the last year of the First World War; many of these had never been used. Even though some of these aircraft were being slowly replaced by more modern designs, the undemanding role of air policing at that time did not require anything more sophisticated than the reconditioned Bristol Fighters or DH9As of wartime vintage. There was also a large supply of recently demobilized aircrew who had wartime experience, many of whom were eager to get back into the Service. For about 20 years, air policing in the Middle East and the North West Frontier was the only opportunity that the RAF had to fly operationally and it provided useful experience to airmen who would later be placed in command positions in the Second World War. Even if the pace and intensity of air policing bore little relation to that of all-out war, it did at least provide some personal experience as well as help to identify future leaders.

Air policing, especially when used as an instrument of Colonial authority, continues to divide authors and pundits into two very distinct camps of virulent supporters and equally virulent detractors. The point about air policing is that in certain circumstances it did indeed seem to work well (more so in Iraq than in India), even if the underlying reasons for the insurgency were not addressed. The fact that it worked in some circumstances where the conditions were right was seized upon by its supporters to claim that air policing should be widely adopted. The detractors of air policing claim that it has never worked well and that the only way to combat insurgency is troops on the ground, and not bombs from the air. The ‘truth’ is probably well hidden somewhere in between these two arguments. Today’s counter-insurgency air operations bears some resemblance to the air policing operations between the two world wars but there is also a world of difference, not just in the doctrine, tactics and equipment of today, but in the military and political character of the enemy as well.

This bibliography has been designed to provide a guide as to where to find information on Air Policing. Please note that the list of references below is a selection of the more relevant titles and information on the subject. The list is not intended to be exhaustive or definitive but is an introductory guide to some of the resources available.

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