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R. Higham, *Two Roads to War. The French and British Air Arms from Versailles to Dunkirk*. Annapolis, Md: Naval Institute Press, 2012. xxii + 410 pp. Maps, tables, figures, photographs, notes, bibliography and index. \$44.95 U.S.; £28.74. (cl). ISBN 978-1-61251-058-3.

R. Higham, *Unflinching Zeal. The Air Battles over France and Britain, May-October 1940*. Annapolis, Md: Naval Institute Press, 2012. xxii + 321 pp. Maps, tables, figures, photographs, notes, bibliography and index. \$44.95 U.S., £28.74. (cl). ISBN 978-1-61251-111-5.

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Robin Higham has published extensively on air power, and taught military history at Kansas State University for thirty-five years. He is also, according to his publishers' flyers, a former RAF fighter pilot with a World War II combat record, surely rare among writers in the field today. He is therefore admirably equipped to address the subject of these two companion volumes, the origins and scope of the defeat of the French Air Force (FAF) in 1940. Using the British Royal Air Force (RAF) as a comparative control, Higham asks why the FAF, even with RAF support, failed to hold back the Luftwaffe in the Battle of France, whereas the RAF alone achieved the same aim in the Battle of Britain only weeks later. *Two Roads to War* (henceforth referenced as *2RW*) covers the interwar history of the two air forces, halting with the German invasion of the West on 10 May 1940 (and not, as the title suggests, at Dunkirk); *Unflinching Zeal* (referenced below as *UZ*), covers the state of the FAF, RAF, and Luftwaffe in 1940, as well as the battles themselves. Unfortunately, both books suffer from significant shortcomings, both superficial and structural. These are particularly, but not exclusively, evident in *Two Roads to War*.

In the first place, Higham cites "national character--those intellectual and operational traits that today might be termed politically incorrect stereotypes" as a causal factor. Thus "[t]he root cause of the ultimate failure of the Armée de l'Air during May-June 1940 was the descent of France to its lowest point as a Great Power and the very basic nature of the French culture" (*UZ*, p. 7). The French suffer from "a national predisposition to believe that if something simply had been talked about it had, in effect, been done" (*UZ*, p. 69). The negotiations preceding the 1936 Matignon Accords were marked by "gesticulating garrulity rather than gentlemanly discourse" (*2RW*, p. 281). National character is reflected in language: "The language of the French and British even show interesting contrast [*sic*]. English is a monosyllabic language of action and community. Words are representative of acts. French, on the other hand, is multisyllabic, intellectual, and passive" (*2RW*, p. 43). The trouble, of course, with such "deep" explanations is that they leave you wondering how, with these handicaps, the French have ever succeeded at anything.

Second, when Higham strays from aviation history into the politics of the interwar years, he trips up badly. Granted, he understands that policymaking under the Third Republic suffered from government instability and from a weak executive hobbled by powerful parliamentary committees. It is in the detail that the howlers really appear. Blum "persuaded 67 per cent of the Socialists to join the Comintern" (*2RW*, p. 3). Stavisky was "arrested" between the two ballots of the elections that brought Blum to power (*2RW*, p. 123), that is, over two years after he had been found dead. The "Troisième République

never succeeded in passing legislation to prepare for a new war” (2RW, p. 125). Apparently Higham has not heard of Daladier’s *Loi sur l’organisation générale de la nation pour les temps de guerre* of 13 July 1938, which attempted to do just that. His conclusions on what followed the Third Republic are frankly jaw-dropping: “What France needed in the 1930s—at least during 1936-40—was that ‘man on horseback’ who had periodically come to the rescue in time of crisis. The country found one too late, on 17 June 1940, in the shape of the savior of Verdun, Pétain. His Vichy administration gave the Fascist *patrie*, some say, what it had needed from before 1936” (2RW, p. 288); and “If it is acceptable to see the 1940-1944 Quatrième République [Fourth Republic] of the Vichy regime as the end of the Troisième République, then some of the rancor, detestable themes, and political, social and economic worries and hostilities continued, perhaps typified by both the Riom *procès* and by the imprisonment of the former Front Populaire prime minister Léon Blum.” (2RW, p. 281). It is curious to see Pétain, embodiment of the defeatism that Higham castigates elsewhere in the book, presented as a “savior”; stranger still to see the Vichy régime, which expressly rejected the republican motto for *Travail, Famille, Patrie*, mistaken for the Fourth Republic, under which France was governed from 1946 to 1958—or, indeed, for any republic.

Third, some of Higham’s most important assertions are unsourced. For example, he states in both books that aircrew training suffered because “facilities in North Africa were closed, and at stations in France the approach was pleasure before training” (2RW, p. 259; see also *UZ*, p. 38) but neither develops nor attributes this claim. Fourth, he repeatedly contradicts himself. Thus although “[a]t the root of the Armée de l’Air’s problem was lack of funding,” nevertheless the defeat resulted from “not so much a lack of money, but of will, direction, and a sense of urgency to put the country in order for a modern war” (2RW, pp. xx, 279). Similarly, although the period of the Phoney War was “wasted by inaction” (2RW, p. 120), or “squandered” (2RW, p. 253), still “The Armée de l’Air made use of the Phoney War to obtain more modern aircraft and to improve its situation” (2RW, p. 259). His coverage of the Munich crisis left me particularly perplexed. He seems to agree with contemporary assessments that, had war begun in September 1938, the FAF would have lasted two weeks, the RAF perhaps three (2RW, pp. 153, 213-214). Yet he avoids the obvious inference that Munich bought necessary time. Instead, “it was not the weakness of the Armée de l’Air but the unwillingness of the government to go to war that resulted in the debacle at Munich” (2RW, p. 178) and “[b]y not taking a firm stand [at Munich], France sacrificed both peace and security” (2RW, p. 229)—as well as the support of the Czech air force. Curiously too, Munich appears as a peculiarly French failure: Neville Chamberlain, “that thoroughly decent and opinionated Englishman,” (2RW, p. 142) escapes responsibility.

Higham’s work also suffers from a certain laboriousness, and at times opacity, of expression. Do we need to know, for example, that “General Lucien Robineau, sometime chef de SHAA, in a private e-mail to the author (19 January 2000), sent a copy of his article ‘L’Armée de l’Air dans la Guerre 1939-1945,’ which appeared in the journal *Carnet de la sabre-tache. Revue militaire rétrospective* (1999)” (*UZ*, p. 29)? And it is hard to know what to make of the claim that “Patrick Facon’s myth of the 1,000 victories is important in that it gave the British time to recover their defenses while the Battle of France badly mauled the Luftwaffe” (*UZ*, p. 206). If the 1,000 victories (against German aircraft, by the FAF) was really a myth, how did it give such tangible help to the RAF? Higham is not helped, either, by spelling, and especially by transcription of French terms, which is either just wrong or suggests an unrestrained use of the spell-check function.

All of these shortcomings might possibly be overlooked if these books’ core air power history was really excellent. Alas, it suffers from significant structural defects. The first concerns sources. I would have expected a study running to some 550 pages of text (excluding notes) in total, produced by an author plus two researchers, to draw on an impressive body of original research. It does not. Higham makes quite extensive use of the UK National Archives, both for material on the RAF and for translated documents on the Luftwaffe. For the crucial French side, however, I can find no primary references at all. In particular, the rich resource of the Service Historique de l’Armée de l’Air (SHAA) at Vincennes

remains practically untapped. Fortunately, Facon and other SHAA researchers like Patrice Buffotot, General Lucien Robineau, or Claude d'Abzac-Épezy, or non-French scholars like Anthony Cain have published extensively on the subject. But inevitably the SHAA team has left gaps; and when Higham regrets the lack of scholarly work on French airfields (*2RW*, p. 337, n. 53) or the fact that Buffotot and Ogier give only graphed information on killed and wounded (*UZ*, p. 65), one wonders why neither he nor his researchers went to the original records.

Higham also has difficulty organizing his material purposefully. This is clear from the contents list of *Two Roads to War*: the difference between chapter four ("From the Advent of Hitler to War, 1933-1940") and chapter six ("On the Road to War, 1933-1940") is far from clear, either in their titles or in the text. Chapters bleed into one another, and the same subject is treated in paragraphs or sentences scattered across the two works, rather than in one or two systematic paragraphs or sections. The nationalisation of the French aircraft industry, for example, gets just a single page of specific treatment, but numerous allusions elsewhere to its disastrous outcome.

Weak organisation also applies at the micro level, between and within paragraphs. Higham does give a warning at the outset: "Critics of my chronologies that often move back and forth in time need to understand that I believe that the historian's job is to clarify, a task often necessitating flashbacks" (*2RW*, p. xxii). Few would disagree with the premise, but I have considerable reserves about the execution. For example, Higham states that "[t]he 1935 Plan I included the Dewoitine 500 and 501, the Amiot 140, the Bloch 200, and the ANF Les Mureaux 117. This order was followed in October 1933 by the BCR concept, which resulted in the Potez 540 and the Bloch 131" (*2RW*, p. 213). However agile the author, I am not convinced that an aircraft equipment plan from 1935 can precede an order dated 1933. This comes at the end of a paragraph that moved from a claimed push for FAF independence by its officers in the 1920s to the impact of the 1924 elections, to the French public's opinion of the army and air force, to the FAF being cast as a "new Marianne," to the "lack of doctrine" of French airmen—all without references (*2RW*, p. 213). The books' disjointed character continues to the very end. The last paragraph of *Unflinching Zeal* is a single sentence: "On 14 May, when 55 Germans were confirmed shot down, the FAF had to have flown a minimum of 825 sorties, and during 5-10 June some 4,490" (*UZ*, p. 249). This is not a conclusion; it is an abrupt halt in full flow.

Perhaps unsurprisingly in the light of the above, Higham's arguments tend to lack focus. At the outset he announces that "[t]he two major historiographical controversies of the interwar years—appeasement and the fall of France—are both peripheral to the book," before adding, three pages later, that "the argument presented herein returns to a middle continental ground on which the leadership of both the Armée de Terre and the Armée de l'Air are held responsible for the defeat of 1940" (*2RW*, pp. xiii, xvi). Two pages after that, we are told that "*Two Roads to War* takes the debate about France in 1940 back to the basics, at least in the military, aviation, and technological worlds. It answers in a microcosmic way the question, Why did France fall?" (*2RW*, p. xix). The answer offers rather little of the clarification that Higham identifies as the historian's task: "The story of French military aviation is depressingly complex. It reveals that the blame for the French defeat of 1940 must be spread so wide as to cover the whole of French society, not just the leadership of the political parties, of the unions, of the Armée de Terre and the Armée de l'Air, nor even of the manufacturers alone" (*2RW*, p. 121).

Unflinching Zeal begins, apparently, with a somewhat tighter brief. How many German aircraft did the FAF shoot down in May-June 1940? "Initially this volume started out to show that the Armée de l'Air in the Battle of France did not destroy 1,000 or even 782 Luftwaffe machines, but rather a much more modest number. Those figures, however, became eclipsed by the realization that the 1,000 or 782 claimed—whichever—were part of the undefeated 'myth' that General Vuillemin [chief of the FAF staff in 1938-40] and others began to perpetuate as soon as the fighting stopped on 24 June 1940" (*UZ*, p. 8). Quickly, however, Higham starts to believe in the "myth" himself: French fighter pilots, he says "apparently acquitted themselves much better than we have a right to have expected"; indeed, the FAF

and RAF did better, in terms of destroying GAF aircraft, than the RAF in the early stages of the Battle of Britain—a point also noted by Richard Overy (*UZ*, pp. 8, 184, 193). The tension in *Unflinching Zeal*, never fully resolved, is between the demonstration of the FAF's inferiority in most respects to the RAF (and to the Luftwaffe) and the evidence, which Higham comes to accept, that the FAF's fighters actually performed rather well.

Matters are not helped by Higham's handling of figures, not least in the two crucial areas of French aircraft production and of Luftwaffe aircraft destroyed by the FAF. *Two Roads to War* contains two tables within ten pages of one another, one (table three) entitled "Production and distribution of Armée de l'Air Aircraft," the other "French Aircraft Production, 1939-1940." Table three indicates production rising from 1,739 aircraft in December 1939 to 2,166 in May 1940; table seven has 284 aircraft produced in September 1939, rising to 434 in June 1940 (*2RW*, pp. 160, 169). No explanation is given of the discrepancy; neither table is referenced. Because the RAF is consistently used for comparison, Higham also cites British defence spending. British defence estimates, according to his table five, apparently taken from a history of *French* military aviation (*2RW*, p. 166), were £254.4m in 1938, of which fully £216.1m (85 percent) was committed to Air; this rose to £3,840.4m in 1939, of which a mere £133.8m (3 percent) went to Air; and to £4,840.0 in 1940, of which £269.5m (6 percent) went to Air. The average figure is 31 percent for the RAF, but these extreme fluctuations in the RAF's share of the total spending strain the reader's credulity; and the table is not consistent with Higham's later assertion that "[t]he French air service share [of the defence budget] was 1 percent in 1918 and 23 percent in 1938, as compared to the RAF's 54 percent" (*2RW*, p. 208).

When we get to the number of Luftwaffe aircraft downed by the FAF, Higham initially seems happy with a midway figure between the estimates of Paul Martin and Peter Cornwell: "[t]abulating from Martin's count of 400 and Cornwell's tally of 369, I used the average of 384" (*UZ*, p. xv). Later, he appears uncertain: "General Lucien Robineau, late chef of the SHAA, had said that the French shot down 733 Luftwaffe aircraft and that the GAF lost another 450 in accidents, for a total of 1,183, or 69 percent of the GAF's 10 May strength (1,710) in fighters. ...We shall never know. I said that in a conference held in Freiburg in August 1988 under the official Luftwaffe historian Horst Boog's direction, which nobody then contested. It came from FAF archives and was consistent with the Buffotot-Ogier findings" (*UZ*, p. 67). Towards the end of the book, he returns to the figure of 384 (*UZ*, p. 237), before announcing on the penultimate page that "[i]n the forty-two days of the Battle of France the FAF accounted for 162 Me-109s, 56 Me-110s, 90 Do-17s, 124 He-111s, 42 Stukas, 80 Hs-126s, and another 40 of miscellaneous types" (*UZ*, p. 248). That, however, gives a total of 594—an unreferenced figure but extremely close to the figure 602 reached by Paul Martin in 1990.[1] Indeed, Higham concedes, "we have to admit that they [French fighter pilots] were the invisible conquerors that Paul Martin hails." French fighter pilots did well, he conjectures, because they were brave and experienced men fighting for their honour. Possibly, but I cannot help wondering how much the avalanche of figures offered in *Unflinching Zeal* has really added to our knowledge of the subject.

What should the reader take from these books? First, despite the questionable figures, Higham demonstrates the extreme complexity of air power in 1940. He goes behind the usual tallies of first-line aircraft on each side to talk about the performance of the planes; command, control, and communication (including radio and radar); the training and experience of both aircrew and ground crews; the quantity and quality of airfields, the availability of road access to them, and the accommodation available; and the supply and transport of fuel and ammunition. In most of these areas, the Armée de l'Air was deficient compared to its British and German counterparts. Higham surely gets it about right when he states that "[t]he Armée de l'Air was doomed from the start because it never was able to settle upon a high command structure, upon a viable doctrine to accommodate its three missions, and upon suitable equipment, logistics, communications, and bases with which to implement these policies in war," whereas "[t]he British started with the fundamentals and followed through with overall plans, of which

the Trenchardian bomber offensive was misguided, but the air defense of Britain itself was not" (*UZ*, pp. 242, 248).

Higham illustrates the variety of inputs needed to make an air force work as diagrams, which he calls "bamboo baskets" (*2RW*, pp. 290-291; *UZ*, pp. 10-11). I wish he had developed them more thoroughly. As it is, he has set a research agenda. But the systematic, concise, archive-based study that this might have been has still to be written.

NOTE

[1] Paul Martin, *Invisibles vainqueurs: Exploits et sacrifices de l'armée de l'Air* (Paris: Yves Michelet, 1990), quoted in *Unflinching Zeal*, p. 87.

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