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Introduction

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TEXTE

1 Numerous studies have been devoted, in whole or in part, to the ideas of General Giulio Douhet (1869-1930),¹ “the only Italian military theorist (after Machiavelli) known throughout the world, perhaps more abroad than in Italy”,² commonly considered in military and aeronautical circles as the first paladin of the independence of the air forces and as the founder of the doctrine of strategic bombardment,³ which he formulated organically in his most famous work published in 1921, then revised and expanded in a second edition in 1927.⁴

2 And yet, partly because of probably irreparable documentary gaps,⁵ certain aspects of Douhet’s thinking and, more importantly, of his life remain so little known or unexplored that the American air power specialist Phillip Meilinger, a retired US Air Force colonel, was rightly able to write:

Perhaps the most important air theorist was Giulio Douhet. When studying him, however, one is struck by how little has been written about the man and his ideas. No biography of Douhet has been published in English (although a useful doctoral dissertation on him appeared nearly 25 years ago),⁶ and little is known about his life. Analyses of his works are also surprising in both their superficiality and their paucity in number. Most amazing of all, although Douhet wrote prodigiously, very few of his works have been translated from his native Italian. His prewar writings, war diaries, and numerous articles and novels composed in the 1920s are unknown in English. Indeed, fully one-half of the first edition of his seminal *The Command of the Air* remains untranslated and virtually forgotten.⁷

3 How can Meilinger be wrong, when such a specialist in aeronautical history, however highly experienced, is convinced that Douhet, who never took the pilot’s licence, would have led “at the head of a squadron [...] in 1911 the first air raid in history against Turkish positions in

Libya” but also that he would have been for several year Head Officer of Aviation in the governments presided over by the fascist leader Benito Mussolini, even though it is true that he had to give up this office, to which he had actually been appointed in October 1922, before he could even take up his office;⁸ or when a military historian states that Douhet “declined Mussolini’s offer to head the new force [the *Regia Aeronautica* created on 28 March 1923], recognising that his fiery nature and propensity toward polemics would make his leadership problematical”, when Mussolini did not think for a moment of entrusting him with the direction of the independent air force he had just founded?⁹ Or again when the most recent English-language reprint of Douhet’s master book¹⁰ is a reprint of the introduction to a 1983 edition, the authors of which make various blunders about Douhet’s military career and claim that for a few months he was “the head of aviation in Mussolini’s government in 1922”.¹¹

- 4 Moreover, this kind of mistake should not come as a surprise: knowledge of the history of Italian aeronautics, particularly that of the Great War and the Fascist period, was for a long time altered by tenacious myths that specialists have only belatedly begun to deconstruct.¹² Even more astonishing is the radical ignorance of Douhetian thought confessed with disarming candour by the air force pilot officer who wrote the first complete French translation of the book *Il Dominio dell’aria*, published in 2006:

[...] I only discovered Douhet when I entered the college...¹³, thanks to my strategy teachers. This discovery was first of all a surprise: I thought I knew the history of military aviation well, but I had never heard of an author who was at the origin of the founding concepts of the use of air power.¹⁴

- 5 The dossier we are presenting today, with the assistance of some of Douhet’s leading experts on Douhet and the history of air power, is intended to provide an overview of the latest research on the main aspects of Douhet’s life, theory and legacy in the doctrine and operational practice of some of the Western world’s air forces.
- 6 The first two articles place Douhet in the Italian context of his time, from the last years of the liberal era to the first decade of the fascist regime. It follows the path of a military career that looked promising

before Douhet's reckless conduct during the First World War brought it to a premature end. It also studies the complex network of relationships that Douhet wove in the political world with the dual aim of gaining acceptance for his ideas and becoming the head of the Italian military air force.

- 7 The second part of the dossier deals with Douhet's contribution to the development of contemporary strategic thinking. The reader will find two interpretative essays, each representing one of the two main trends in the most recent historiography on the subject.
- 8 In the third part, the authors examine the weight of the Douhetian legacy by measuring the influence of the strategic vision of the author of *The Command of the air* on the doctrine and operational practice of some of the major air powers of the Western world.
- 9 In conclusion of the dossier, we wished to take stock of the origin and maturation of the theory developed by Douhet.

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NOTES

1 The literature on the subject is very rich, so we will limit ourselves to mentioning in the bibliography a sample of works and articles which seem to us to be the most appropriate to situate Douhet's theory in the context of the history of war and the use of the air force, on the one hand, and to take account of the diversity of interpretations and judgements relating to this theory, on the other.

2 G. Rochat, *Le guerre italiane 1935-1943. Dall'impero d'Etiopia alla disfatta* (Torino: Einaudi, 2005), p. 226.

3 According to colonel of the US Air Force Phillip Meilinger, "Gen Giulio Douhet of Italy was among the first people to think deeply and write cogently about airpower and its role in war, methodically and systematically elevating an idea to a level of abstraction that could be considered a theory", P. Meilinger, *Giulio Douhet and the Origins of Air Power Theory*, *idem* (dir.), *The Paths of Heaven. The Evolution of Air Power Theory* (Maxwell: Air university press, AL, 1997), p.1.

4 G. Douhet, *Il dominio dell'aria. Saggio sull'arte della guerra aerea, con una appendice contenente nozioni elementari di aeronautica*, *Il dominio dell'aria. Saggio sull'arte della guerra aerea, con una appendice contenente nozioni elementari di aeronautica*, Stabilimento poligrafico per l'amministrazione della guerra, Rome, 1921; *idem*, *Il dominio dell'aria. Saggio sull'arte della guerra aerea. Seconda edizione coll'aggiunta di un nuovo libro pubblicata sotto gli auspici dell'Istituto Nazionale Fascista di Cultura* (Rome: C. De Alberti Editore, 1927). The modern reference edition of both texts, with an introduction by L. Bozzo, can be found in the volume: *Il dominio dell'aria e altri scritti* (Roma: Aeronautica Militare – Ufficio Storico, 2002), pp. 11-168.

- 5 On 26 October 1966, the Director of the Air University Center of the United States Air Force John L. Boone Atkinson wrote to the aviation historian Robin Higham a letter in which he recounted a visit made in 1957 to the Roman home of the engineer Gianni Caproni, an old friend of Douhet's, a few weeks before the death of the famous aircraft manufacturer: "[...] I understood from the Countess Caproni [the engineer's widow] that Douhet's widow destroyed his papers after his death" (Maxwell: United States Air Force Historical Research Agency (AFHRA), AL, file 168.66).
- 6 F. Cappelluti, *The Life and Thought of Giulio Douhet* (PhD thesis, Newark NJ: Rutgers University, 1967).
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- 9 B. Sullivan, *Downfall of the Regia Aeronautica, 1933-1943*, in R. Higham, S. Harris (dirs.), *Why Air Forces Fail. The Anatomy of Defeat* (Lexington KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2006), p. 136.
- 10 G. Douhet, *The Command of the Air*, Air University Press (Maxwell Air Force Base, AL, 2019).
- 11 *Idem*, *The Command of the Air* (Washington DC: Office of Air Force History, 1983). The introduction is by Richard H. Kohn and Joseph P. Harahan. Errors that we mention can be found on pp. IX-X in the 2019 edition.
- 12 For a critical study of this aeronautical mythology, cf. É. Lehmann, *Le ali del potere. La propaganda aeronautica nell'Italia fascista* (Torino: Utet, 2010).
- 13 The Collège Inter-armée de Défense, as the École de guerre was called between 1993 and 2011.
- 14 Lieutenant-colonel Benoît Smith, translator's foreword, in G. Douhet, *La Maîtrise de l'air* (Paris: Economica, 2006), p. 33.

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