

1942

Book Reviews

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Recommended Citation

Book Reviews, 13 J. AIR L. & COM. 278 (1942)
<https://scholar.smu.edu/jalc/vol13/iss3/8>

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VICTORY THROUGH AIR POWER. By Major P. de Seversky:
Simon and Schuster, New York, 1942. Pp. 354.

This book was published after our April quarterly had gone to press. Hence this belated review. It is just as well, because the earlier ones have used a more conventional approach than will be employed here.

It is the most brilliant book yet to appear on the present war. No one has written anything more truly prophetic, and yet it is a book primarily analytical, not prophetic. A logical explanation is provided for the successes, great and not so great, and for the failures of the Axis air power. In Poland, Holland, and France the Luftwaffe took out all opposition with high-speed, heavy-load bombers, protected by high-speed fighters, the whole operation being designed for a particular region and with the tactical purpose of clearing the way for and afterwards supporting the ground forces. In the Battle of Britain these same planes were too short on flying range (200 miles) and too light on fire power and individual bomb power. Added to this, the tide was turned by the advantage of fire power in each British aircraft of from four-to-one to eight-to-one, which more than canceled the German aircraft numerical superiority of three-to-one. In Russia the tactical objective is taking territory rather than sheer destruction, and the necessity of setting up new air bases each 200 miles has greatly hampered the German occupation of Russia's vastness. Until lately in the Pacific, Japan has had better armed planes with a higher power and rate-of-climb than those she encountered. The Seversky formula just as easily accounts for today's Axis successes in Lybia, where the Luftwaffe is employing sky-trucks, air-borne machine ships, and air ambulances.

As to the formula just mentioned, the book reviews itself if you will give attention to three random-selected paragraphs:

"The most significant single fact about the war now in progress is the emergence of aviation as the paramount and decisive factor in warmaking. There is still some difference of opinion as to the precise role of aviation in the immediate future, its relation to the older military services, its role in this or that specific battle or campaign. But there are no two opinions on the fundamental fact that aviation has altered the traditional textbook conceptions of strategy and tactics. All experts agree that air power will play an ever more decisive part in determining the power balance among the nations of the earth. But it does not need an expert to recognize this towering truth. It is inescapable in the day-to-day news from every theater of conflict."

"The challenge of air power cannot be met by merely 'admitting' our failures and undertaking to 'catch up' with more advanced countries. The tempo of air-power expansion is much too swift. A nation content to imitate and 'catch up' must in the nature of the case remain backward, trailing foreign leaders. The method of trial-and-error is ruled out because the penalty for error may be loss of national independence. We cannot afford to wait and see, to suspend judgment; we may not have a second chance. The challenge can be

met only by exploring the physical and psychological causes of our tardiness and weakness in the air, applying radical surgery rather than surface cures, and preparing for nothing less than undisputed first place in the epochal race for aerial supremacy."

"America's aerial potential, as compared to that of the Axis, is so clearly greater that in the race for supremacy in the skies victory is assured. We must, however, bear in mind that the differential is being rapidly reduced as the Germans and the Japanese lay hands on new sources of supply. Hence the immense importance of acting now, when the advantages are still overwhelmingly on our side. Tomorrow it may be a race between approximate equals; today our margin of superiority in materials, productive forces, and brains is still large enough to guarantee success."

Finally, the language of the book is simple and incisive, which with abundant illustrations, give it universal reader interest and understanding. Perhaps its chief function will be to so well and intelligently inform all of the American public on war aviation that there will be no mistake as to the future course of our public officials, civil and military. Indeed, every adult in the United Nations should read this book.

The book has one fault, and even this may be arguable. The author envisions so clearly the future beyond the immediate that at times he tramps with seven-league boots over a necessary period of development and transition. Thus sea-dogs and other die-hards are provided with an opportunity to pooh-pooh the logic of he who would eventually abolish navies and armies as such. It would have been better to put it that the older arms keep their identity but become "aviationized," as they have become motorized. And yet Major de Seversky may be right. It is difficult to take issue with one of his experience and proven vision and ability. His arguments must be regarded as temperate, at the least. Surely so when latest details of the great Naval victory at Midway turn it into a triumph for land-based, long-range bombers which by-passed the protecting battle-wagons of the Japanese Naval task force and turned back the attack by sinking all or nearly all of the carriers with consequent loss of the enemy aircraft.

HOWARD C. KNOTTS

