Byers on Renner, 'Broken Wings: The Hungarian Air Force, 1918-45'

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Stephen Renner's new work, *Broken Wings: The Hungarian Air Force, 1918-1945*, is certainly a welcome addition to our knowledge of central European aviation during the twentieth century, but it is also much more. Renner (School of Advanced Air and Space Studies) weaves together an enthralling tale of Hungarian political and institutional history centered on its air force's development. The book is rich with details of central European regional tensions and the anxieties of a revisionist, truncated interwar European state often completely unknown to English-language-only readers. Basing the work on extensive research in the Hungarian Military Archives and other unpublished Hungarian sources, Renner manages to bring the story of Hungary's early twentieth-century air force to a wider audience, simultaneously widening our understanding of twentieth-century aviation and providing a model for future researchers. This accomplishment is remarkable given the wartime destruction of both world wars' operational records of the Hungarian Air Forces.

Renner's narrative begins by noting the underrated but significant role played by Austro-Hungarians in early European aviation history, and then details the empire's First World War efforts in the skies, which he notes were hamstrung by the regime's limited industrial capacity, scarcity of natural resources, and lack of skilled labor. Both in terms of productive output and financial commitment, Austria-Hungary's airpower investments trailed far behind the other major belligerents, and when the war ended the former imperial air forces faced an uncertain political and strategic future—actually a looming existential crisis manifested by the implosion of the Hungarian wartime state—flying obsolete, imported aircraft mostly produced in Germany. Renner argues that these circumstances resulted from the empire's catastrophic grand strategy, which imposed near-monopolies and industrial mass production of war materials on an economy, population, and resource base wholly unsuited to these challenges. Military aviation manufacturing in the Austro-Hungarian Empire suffered from procurement bottlenecks and lack of competition, but the imperial air force itself Renner judges favorably, noting that it performed well against its adversaries and "gave as good as it got" (p. 35).

Determined to revise the shameful terms of the 1920 Treaty of Trianon, the postwar Hungarian Air Force, like its German counterpart, went underground after the war ended, clandestinely continuing as a shadow force within the Hungarian Department of Commerce with the tacit and active support of Hungarian political and military elites. Renner hilariously retraces these covert shenanigans across...
the 1920s as determined “airminded” Hungarian military and civilian officials, often with public support, stymied the efforts of Allied inspectors to limit and prevent covert Hungarian rearmament. These efforts bore fruit, as a new generation of Hungarian aviators joined forces with First World War veterans and sympathetic state elites to ensure that the dream of a restored Hungarian nation—and military—remained alive in an embryonic form. These new flyers were fully engaged in the intellectual debates of their time and imagined a future Hungarian air force with strategic capabilities stretching well beyond border defense. Renner brings these young aviators and their voices to life, demonstrating that central Europeans actively participated in—and contributed to—the major interwar military-intellectual debates over aviation and airpower's future roles and capabilities just as frequently as their Western European counterparts. Through this engagement with the ideas of Gabriel Douhet and others, Hungarian Air Force officers, such as Ferenc Szentnemedy, imagined a future Hungarian Air Force that employed strategic airpower doctrine to wage "unrestricted air warfare" upon its neighbors and rivals, particularly Romania, which would restore Hungary's pre-1914 frontiers and also Hungarian national honor.

These visions never materialized, as Renner shows that regional and international political forces drove Hungary ever closer into Nazi Germany's political and strategic orbit by the late 1930s, as Hungary's former regional patron, Fascist Italy, abandoned central Europe and refocused on the Aegean Sea and North Africa in terms of its imperial ambitions. Hungary was the largest export customer for German aircraft between 1936 and 1938, and the earlier dreams of Hungarian pilots appeared to be coming true, but only briefly. Renner reveals the bitter irony of the Hungarian state's closer embrace with Adolf Hitler's Germany, which directly facilitated open Hungarian aerial rearmament after 1938, but as Renner shows German production priorities favored their own Luftwaffe units over Hungarian export orders, leading to delivery delays and cancellations.

Hitler's negative views of Hungary's military capabilities also meant that Hungarian Air Force units received German cast-offs and obsolete designs, fatally limiting their capabilities and relegating them to a series of limited roles during the Second World War almost identical to those they performed in the First. As in that earlier conflict, Renner notes, they performed well against their Slovakian and Allied adversaries despite ongoing problems maintaining flight readiness and pilot numbers, but by 1945 the Hungarian Air Force's wings were broken again as they were in 1918. Out of fuel and experienced pilots, they were largely powerless to repel the Allied bombing raids and advancing Red Army Air Forces, even though they fought on alongside Nazi German units until the end of the war in Hungary in April 1945. Interestingly Renner notes that the Hungarian Air Force's senior personnel largely remained apolitical throughout its existence between 1918 and 1945, choosing to serve and remain in their posts even during the tumultuous 1918-19 and 1944-45 periods, when Hungary's political and institutional structures either largely or totally collapsed.

Renner's work deserves a wide audience beyond those interested in aviation history. His well-researched study reveals a wider story of the enormous strategic challenges facing small states with limited resources in uncertain regional and ideological environments during times of massive and unpredictable technological change, and its contemporary relevance rings loudly. English-language scholarship on war and technology in the twentieth century, still enthralled in its post-1945 triumphalism, all too often ignores these realities, which remain today for many twenty-first-century small and medium-size states. Filled with previously unpublished photographs, fascinating anecdotes, and a rich vein of dry humor, Renner's *Broken Wings* is an essential addition to twentieth-century
Hungarian, European, and global aviation history.


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