GENERAL INTRODUCTION

After the First World War, the rulers of the British Empire faced new problems of incorporation and 'pacification'. With the acquisition of the mandated territories from the defeated German and Ottoman Empires, the Empire reached its greatest extent at a time when Britain was weakened by war and was facing a period of rapid economic decline. It was thus essential to find and successfully utilise a cheaper means of maintaining the 'imperial peace'. After some hesitation and experimentation, air policing seemed to satisfy the need. This new technology offered opportunities to suppress dissidents by aerial means, sometimes as a propagandist and psychological device, but primarily by bombing.

Historians have recently become interested in the extent to which technology lowered the costs of imperial expansion and thus served to reduce financial resistance to new commitments. Air policing appeared to offer just such technical opportunities in environments which posed severe difficulties for the more traditional and terrestrial work of the military. The problems of terrain and climate associated with deserts and mountains – the most difficult of policing contexts – were to be found not only in the new mandated territories, but also in other regions where populations had proved intractable, for example on the North West Frontier of India, in the Sudan and the Horn of Africa. Air policing was used in many other colonial possessions, in a variety of empires, but its prime and most effective incidence occurred in the crescent of territory from north-eastern Africa, through the Middle East, to north-western India.

In this strikingly original study, David Omissi examines the origins, character and effectiveness of air policing and its role not only in offering a cheaper means of 'pacification' in the inter-war years, but also in securing the survival of the Royal Air Force as an independent service. He identifies its significance in specific geographical contexts, its effects on the mentality of imperial administrators and air force personnel together with the reactions and responses of the people against whom it was directed. He illuminates the potentialities and limitations of the new aerial technology by considering the characteristics of the flying machines and the problems of the men who flew them. His work provides the first full-length treatment of air policing and makes important contributions to the history of colonial resistance and its suppression, to the relative significance of technology in the maintenance of imperial rule, and to the origins and development of the RAF. It also clarifies the debates of politicians and service commanders about the application and relative success of aerial deployment in civil unrest. This book should find a wide readership among those interested in the history of the British Empire and of the Middle East, of the politics of armed forces after the First World War, and of the RAF.

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