

# AIR POWER

## *In evaluation*

By J. M. SPAIGHT, in the *Fortnightly*, March, 1945

THE STOCK of air power in the market of popular estimation has fallen a little since the heavy fighting began on land. Of that there is no doubt, but to conclude from the fall that, objectively, there has been a "debunking" of air power, or that it has been shown to be nothing but a fraud, would be utterly unwarranted. It was, is, and will continue to be a factor of the first importance in the process of the achieving of victory. What has happened is that many people expected it to yield quick results, which, in point of fact, were never possible. The enthusiasts who backed and boosted air power were not always its best friends.

A sign of the changed view was to be seen in a recent message from a British newspaper correspondent in New York. "It is now accepted by all the top Allied leaders," he stated, "that the experiment of trying to win this war by bombing can be written down as a failure. Whatever has happened to Major Seversky?"

No doubt Major Seversky, Mr. W. B. Ziff, and the others who did expect victory to be secured by air action alone would reply that the conditions which they postulated were never in fact fulfilled. They assumed the creation of air forces and the adoption of an air strategy which the Allies were not, it is clear, prepared to create and to adopt.

That, too, would be the answer to the critics of the distinguished chief of our own Bomber Command if he were now asked to comment on a statement of his made in the spring of 1942. "If I could send 20,000 bombers to Germany to-night," he said, "Germany would not be in the war to-morrow."

We know that that kind of force, at least, has not been employed; in fact, it could in no circumstances have been employed. Even Sir Arthur Harris's other and more moderate programme, of 1,000-bomber raids regularly maintained, was not and could not be realized. There were always too many conflicting calls on Bomber Command's resources to allow the assault on the industrial Reich to be maintained on the peak load.

Indeed we have Mr. Churchill's word for it that the idea of knocking Germany or Italy out of the war by bombing alone was not one beyond the bounds of possibility. "Opinion is divided," he told the American Congress on May 19, 1942, "as to whether the use of air power could by itself bring about a collapse in Germany or Italy. Well, there is certainly no harm in trying." It was evident that he himself doubted whether the experiment would result in a speedy decision, for he went on to explain the purpose of the Anglo-American air offensive as the smashing of Germany's war industry, the destruction of the centres engaged in it, and the dispersal of the munitions population. That is obviously not a programme which could be completed in a brief time.

No Government expected the war to be decided by air action alone. The proof of that fact is that every Government built up a great army as its main force for war. If there had been any real prospect that an air force would have sufficed, such a force would have been given priority in the preparations for war.