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Israel's Best Defense: The First Full Story of the Israeli Air Force

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Cohen, Eliezer. *Israel's Best Defense: The First Full Story of the Israeli Air Force*. New York: Crown, 1993. 496pp. \$32.50

The author, having served with the visionaries responsible for the creation of the Israeli Air Force (IAF), spans four decades of Israeli combat aviation. The book begins in 1947 with a handful of civilian aircraft, homemade bombs, and machine gunners conducting daring operations that were instrumental in David Ben-Gurion's declaration of independence for the Jewish state in 1948. The Czechs, in an effort to lessen British influence in the region, and with support from Moscow, supplied ten Messerschmitt aircraft, which made up the new Israeli Air Force upon independence.

Prior to the 1956 Arab-Israeli war a massive buildup of Arab airpower began, with British Meteor and Vampire jets. The IAF had entered the jet age in June 1953, with fifteen Meteors, which Prime Minister Ben-Gurion promptly named after verses of Psalm 83. The author builds on the political pressure of the times and a desperate IAF looking for jets to counter the MiG-15, 17, and 21 fighters as well the Ilyushin bombers supplied to the Arabs by the Soviets during the four Arab-Israeli wars. The IAF found them in the French *Mystère IV*, the *Mirage*, and the U.S. *Phantom*. Cohen paints a fascinating portrait of how arms agreements were based on the political moods in the various formerly British and French territories. The taint of colonialism was further complicated by the start of the Cold War.

However, the author's description of his Arab adversaries during the four Arab-Israeli conflicts seems one-sided. It is disappointing not to gain the perspective on Arab failures and successes of a senior Israeli Air Force officer. What is interesting is Cohen's description of

the various planes in the Israeli inventory and their advantages and disadvantages compared to the MiG series. His description of IAF dogfights and missions places the reader in the cockpits of the top Israeli fighter pilots of the time.

After the 1956 Sinai campaign, the author takes up the founding of Israel's formal flight school. In the early 1960s training was intense, because of the variety of aircraft that a young Israeli pilot had to be familiar with. Cohen also mentions intelligence coups, among them the defection of an Iraqi pilot with a MiG-21 fighter prior to the 1967 war.

Cohen's account of the Six-Day War is fascinating. He discusses the controversial decision made by Chief of Staff Iyitzak Rabin to initiate a preemptive strike (Operation *MOKED*) against the Arabs. Operation *MOKED*, devised in 1963, was based on the German *Luftwaffe's* World War II tactic in Operation *BARBAROSSA*, the invasion of the USSR, that decimated the Soviet air force while still on the ground. Cohen unfolds the plan from the gathering of aerial intelligence, to showing how runs would be conducted to maximize the destruction of the combined Arab forces.

In 1973, in response to the *Phantom F-4E* provided to the IAF by the United States, Egypt deployed an extensive network of Soviet SA-3 missile batteries along the Suez Canal and the Nile River valley. Egypt opened hostilities on 6 October 1973 with MiG-17 fighters and infantry penetrating the Bar-Lev Line. The Yom Kippur War ended two weeks later with Egypt in control of half the Sinai Peninsula. There were high casualties on both sides.

The final chapters cover the Israeli raid on Entebbe and the bombing of an Iraqi nuclear reactor. Cohen also elaborates on the development of the Israeli jet fighters, the *Kfir* and *Lavi*, as well as pilotless systems, like the *Yehuda* and *Baban*.

Cohen's book should be of interest to students of combat aviation. It comes full circle from the initial successes of 1948, 1956, and 1967 to the effects of the 1973 war and the resulting self-examination by the Israelis of their heavy reliance on the Air Force. It is a very good narrative and easy to follow. Sadly, it does not go into great detail on policy and decision making within the IAF but focuses on telling the slightly glorified story of Israel's air force.

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Levine, Alan J. *The Pacific War: Japan versus the Allies*. New York: Praeger, 1995. 200pp. \$49.95

Levine, a historian whose specialty is Russian history and the author of a number of works on the Soviet Union and the Cold War, has turned his attention in this work to the war with Japan, with very mixed results.

The book is divided into chapters, with subheadings concerning major events of the war. The author has chosen to include the China-Burma-India theater in his definition of the Pacific War, thereby making his task more difficult. In his introduction Levine is critical of others who have written general histories, with the implication that his book would avoid their faults. His stated aim, to treat the war as a "particular war waged by a particular Japanese regime," is not unique. This truism aside, the key question is how successful the author has been in relating the major details of this complex war.

This book's strength lies in the first chapter, where Levine traces in a concise way the events that led to U.S. involvement in the Pacific War. Other interesting and informative sections deal with

American and Japanese home fronts. However, it is evident that once Levine begins to analyze the tactical side of the war he is more at ease; his discussions of naval actions and the segment on submarines are particularly good. Overall, unfortunately, the negatives outweigh the good aspects of this work.

The major fault of the book is its length. After discussing the generalities of the U.S., Chinese, and Japanese situations before and after the war, Levine has little space left to deal with the many campaigns. He criticizes others for concentrating too much on the tactical side of war; but surely, to a large extent, that was what the war was about. The Japanese were defeated by air, naval, and land actions in a number of theaters, and any book that minimizes those actions is basically flawed.

There are many examples of oversimplification. One is Chapter Seven, which deals with the crucial period of 1944–1945: it is only eleven pages long, and three of them are devoted to a single naval action, that of Leyte Gulf. To the Marianas campaigns—which the author admits were the key to breaking Japan's inner defenses—he devotes less than a page. He even repeats the ill founded myth that the great banzai attack on Saipan overran "a poorly run army unit." The desperate battle for Guam, which ultimately became the U.S. forward base in the Pacific, is dismissed in one sentence. The longest and most complex action of the Pacific War, the nineteen-month-long Luzon campaign, is given slightly over one page.

Levine accuses another author of having "a maniacal bias" toward General Douglas MacArthur. Yet Levine himself obviously has a bias for MacArthur (though he does not vindicate MacArthur's inaction that allowed his air force to be destroyed in December 1941). He avoids criticizing MacArthur for the lack of preparation on Bataan, his decision to