

ROBERT ARLEY'S RECOMMENDED READS

Unlike the scholarship formulations, I'm not going to list every book I've read, but will merely offer a few pointers as to where you will be able to enrich your comprehension of staggeringly complex matters. Here is a list of fifty books - ordered alphabetically - from which I have drawn much of my narrative; and some reasons why I would recommend them:

Air War over Italy Andrew Brookes

Fine detail on the complexities and ambitions of edging up the huge peninsula; so gaining airstrips from which to venture northward into German territory. Excellent range of little seen photographs and good, clear maps.

All Hell Let Loose Max Hastings

This is a terrific encapsulation of the whole of World War Two. No one can match Sir Max in comprehending complex military matters and presenting them in text that is accessible, wise, and beautifully composed. I think this book should be compulsory for every teenager in Britain - which is what I told its author as he kindly signed my treasured copy at the Hay Literary Festival in May 2016.

Barbarossa Alan Clark

This formidable volume explains the key war within the Second World War: Hitler's attempt to subdue the Soviets to his east, and Stalin's defence against the Nazi regime. German forces got close to Moscow, after which – four brutal years later – Russian armies stormed Berlin. Unlike aerial warfare, the greater part of which consisted of air crews killing civilians below, this was soldier versus soldier; tank versus tank. Clark provides us with some valuable contextual narrative, not least regarding the Fuhrer's rages directed against his generals. We have made fun of these outbursts, but Clark points out that Adolf wrong-footed his senior soldiers by demanding unconventional action in the early stages of trying to dominate Europe and eliminate elements of the citizenry.

Battle of the Atlantic Jonathan Dimbleby

Crisply offsets the tendency to dismiss hundreds of sinkings and thousands of drownings as merely minor statistical side issues compared with the menacing aerial bombardment campaigns that impacted directly on citizens and their leadership. Points out that Hitler had U-boat captains flown to HQ for grand going ceremonies. From one of Hay Festival's most impressive speakers.

Battle of Britain James Holland

This reads like a novel – a terrific cast of characters pursuing problematic tasks on either side of the English Channel. We learn of goals, strategies, trials and troubles from representatives ranging from a Biggin Hill tea lady to Hermann Goering musing over maps of Maidstone in the comfort of his Reich castle. It does not dwell on 15th September 1940 as of huge significance.

Battle of Britain Roy Conyers Nesbit

This valuable tome knuckles down to the numbers of daily losses on both sides during the summer and autumn of 1940. It makes clear how the progress and set-backs every 24 hours were immensely difficult to evaluate and to thus transcribe into a broader picture. Unlike a fairground ride which has a finite length of track or turn time, at the end of every day there was no sense as to how long the horrors of the aerial combats might last. Nightfall simply punctuated the loss of some British and German pilots - their planes littering the landscape of Kent or splashing into the Channel. We now know what would happen next. It's almost impossible to perceive how daunting the skirmishes must have been at the time for those involved.

Battle of Britain Richard Overy

A cool, concise summary of before, during and after issues; including a constructive assessment of the German High Command (in contrast with our chosen comic book presentation). Makes for a refreshing counter to the Spitfire worship syndrome.

Battle over the Reich Alfred Price

Sobering statistics and case histories of the challenges of getting a plane to reach Berlin, drop ordnance and head back home in one piece.

Blood, Tears and Folly Len Deighton

A review of the early years of the war, ending with Pearl Harbor – after which the conclusion was predictable. Covers Coastal Command's initial attempts to impede German U-boats with special anti-submarine bombs. These tended to explode in the air almost as soon as they were released – often causing the damaged aircraft to drop into the sea alongside the unaffected enemy vessel. In one case, a submarine captain rescued a couple of stricken British airmen swimming nearby.

Bomber Aircrew in World War Two Bruce Barrymore Halpenny

Good source of examples of challenges and misfortunes that belaboured squadrons across the arc of the air war. Identifies how the shortcomings in craft design would later make life miserable, or impossible, under combat conditions.

Bomber Command Max Hastings

The first substantial analysis of the difficulties and challenges experienced by so many. This great book pricked the bubble of the balloon of triumphalism. Sir Max even managed to interview an elderly Sir Arthur Harris. In his Foreword, Sir Max acknowledges that many senior ex-RAF personnel do not share his conclusions.

Bomber Command 39-45 Reaping the Whirlwind Richard Overy

This is where Professor Overy first digs into the data on aircraft, missions and men. He exposes the terrible statistics of problems, failures and fatal repercussions; and brings sombre evaluation to the impact of the bombing campaign on Germany.

Bomber Flight Berlin Mike Rossiter

I am indebted to Mr Rossiter for his most readable book that centres round the training and operational experiences of one Lancaster crew assigned to 57 Squadron at East Kirkby in Lincolnshire. He explains the issues and incidents in absorbing detail, and provides invaluable context. His chapter on the arrival of Arthur Harris at Bomber Command is particularly enlightening: 'Such a raid would make the world take notice and underpin his ambition for Bomber Command to become a war-winning weapon.'

The Bombing War in Europe Richard Overy

I read a review in a broadsheet newspaper describing this as one of the best books written about World War Two. Unquestionably. Packed with grim and shocking detail, plus statistics on the limitations and unintended consequences of so much of the endeavour. It destroys all the convenient, heroic myths of admirable performance. Stimulated my wish to understand more and convey some of this to a wider constituency than those who might be drawn to such a title.

Bombers C.G. Grey

A slightly dotty book published in 1942. Charles Grey Grey had been editor of the *Aeroplane Monthly*, but his soft spot for Fascism meant he was considered unsuitable for continuing in this role when the war started, and so had to commence an independent career as an aeronautical warfare pundit. Amongst observations that must have bemused his readership were his perception of paratroopers: 'a man who is dropped by parachute is only a more intelligent type of bomb than one that goes 'bang''; the Soviet Union's capacity to utilise aircraft: 'many kinds of Russians are horse-riding people, and so there are certain to be a goodly number of competent pilots'.

Bristol under siege Helen Reid

Captures the nature of Luftwaffe raids and their aftermath on a strategic port. Very good collection of bomb damage photographs.

Catch 22 Joseph Heller

This brilliant comic anti-war novel captures the agony of the bureaucratic manipulation of the requirements of air men to reach certain ceilings of performance before the possibility of release from front line service. However many scary missions the guys have undertaken, the goal posts of how many more may be required - before they will be treated as having done their bit - keep moving. Feigning illness, mental or physical, was one way to delay, or gain respite from, another flight into hell. No wonder that in Heller's fictitious fleets men faked madness to try to be disengaged from what seemed a mad institution pursuing a mad activity.

Coastal Command 1939-45 Ian Carter

Clear identification of the parallel endeavours by a dedicated RAF force trying to protect British shipping services and imports from German naval activity; not least of a U-boat nature. Candid descriptions of operational frustrations, between little-known pictures of handsome flying boats.

Coventry Blitz David McGrory

The value of this book is its straightforward presentation of a string of recollections of people living in one location recalling the fears and repercussions of a few nights of German bombing. Several describe what they experienced or learned about one plane or one explosive. Each individual saw or heard something slightly different. McGrory respects the testimony and does not seek to produce a definitive account of the incident, which allows the reader to gain a sense of how the experiences must have evolved into a broader perception for those in that vicinity.

Crash Pilot Dick Grace

The autobiography of an American who flew some missions in Europe towards the end of the Great War, then became a barn-stormer, then a stunt pilot for Hollywood movies. He persuaded The Eighth to assign him combat work from East Anglia, which is described with muscular passion. You gain a strong sense of how an American does his best to help remove the Nazi menace; cowboy-like, but with anxiety and tragedy.

Death from the Skies Dietmar Suss

Professor Suss of the University of Augsburg (a heavily bombed location) examines how the Germans and the British survived the bombing. Hitler instructed Speer to design future cities as fortresses because in effect the civilian population had become soldiers. Third Reich administrators worked hard to comprehend, then manipulate, the mass behaviour of society.

Defence of the Third Reich Steven Zaloga

Good illustration of the monstrous Flak Towers; then and now.

Fighter Len Deighton

A demystifying analysis of the critical characteristics and challenges faced by Fighter Command. A popular book and one of the first to constructively point out that not everything went swimmingly well.

Fighter Command 1939-45 Ian Carter

Highly respectful descriptions of the major sequences of endeavours, year by year, but no summary or conclusions. Many photos indicating the changing appearance and hence performance of the aircraft. Lots of pictures of cheery pilots, 17 of whom were later killed in action; 4 more destined to become prisoners-of-war.

Flying into the Flames of Hell Martin W. Bowman

Vivid descriptions of the huge array of hazards faced by Bomber Command crew on a nightly basis. Immensely sobering.

Forgotten Blitzes Andrew Knapp

Evaluates the deaths across France caused by British or American ordnance - of which there were 10,000 in May 1944 alone. Many French people had welcomed the raids of early 1942 but by the autumn of 1943 they had become hostile to these assaults on their factories, railways, towns and countrymen. Knapp reveals that even Commander Harris felt unease at the suffering he had inflicted on the French. In September 1944, Harris circulated a memo recommending that every Bomber Command staffer contribute a shilling to a fund for relieving the troubled nation across the Channel.

The German Air Force 1933–45 Matthew Cooper

Sub-titled 'An Anatomy of Failure', this useful study explores the short-term decision-making, management squabbles, commissioning and production difficulties, and leadership clumsiness which meant the machinery that should have been supporting the front lines of the Luftwaffe frequently did not deliver appropriate equipment to the air fields and crews.

A God in ruins Kate Atkinson

Rare for a woman to take such interest and empathy in the trials of Bomber Command. This domestic tale of a family's evolving circumstances weaves around the experiences and recollections of an airman.

The Hardest Victory Denis Richards

A richly-textured account of the arc of Bomber Command's contributions to the war. Richards celebrates its achievements whilst acknowledging its trials, concluding: 'One in every two Bomber Command operational aircrew suffered wounds, imprisonment or death. The price... paid for helping preserve freedom in Britain and restore it to western Europe was an extremely heavy one.'

Killing Hitler Roger Moorhouse

How many attempts were made to assassinate the Fuhrer? More than most of us realise. And did any succeed? Well, we know the answer to that. This book presents powerful passages of German history in the first half of the twentieth century, interspersed with detective-story style accounts of the planning and plotting of would-be extinguishers of the Hitler-flame. These attempts have a sort of 'Mr Bean' quality: clumsy preparations, faulty assessments, incomplete plans, inept execution. One is forced to conclude that 'that man' was extraordinarily lucky not to have had a knife rammed into his back at some stage or other during his dreadful political career.

But be warned, Moorhouse encompasses a number of agonising-to-read explanations for the driving motives of some of the would-be Nazi leadership assassins – detail of the disgusting, despicable assaults on innocent alleged enemies of the state.

The Killing Skies Simon Read

Once again, my thanks to Simon Read for his comprehensive descriptions of the major events befalling Bomber Command. He passionately communicates the dreadful nature of life in the craft that endeavoured to function above Germany. A marvellous compendium of the fundamentals for a bomber force struggling to make a dent in its enemy without annihilating itself in the process: 'a saga of extreme violence and unfathomable courage'.

Lancaster Leo McKinstry

How a misfit aircraft was re-configured into a fit-for-purpose machine to execute the agenda of Bomber Command. A powerful range of recollections of its performance and its users' experiences.

Lancaster – The Biography Squadron Leader Tony Iveson & Brian Milton

Invaluable history of the development of the aircraft. Insightful descriptions of its utilisation, challenges and impact. Points out that a dozen of its troublesome predecessors, the Manchester, were bombed by the Luftwaffe at the factory where they had just been assembled, which probably lengthened the lives of the crews who were due to fly them.

Excellent testimony passages from both British and German air veterans. Vital statistics on the "careers" of individual aircraft.

The Last Enemy Richard Hillary

As a school-boy at Gosforth Grammar, north of Newcastle-on-Tyne in the 1960s, Mike Jackson (aka Robert Arley) was taught Physics by a man who had a peculiar-looking face. No-one asked what had caused the disfigurement, but I now realise that this teacher was a victim of war-time burns, and another beneficiary of brilliant, pioneering plastic surgery.

The Luftwaffe over Germany Donald Coldwell & Richard Muller

A fascinating examination of how the Jagdwaffe - the German day fighters - did their best to protect domestic skies from British, then American, intrusions, despite lack of resources, appropriate personnel and status within the Luftwaffe hierarchy.

The summary of the organisational and operational mistakes identified by its senior officers after the war makes clear that, had these fighters had more support, they would have caused the Americans considerably bigger challenges.

The Many not the Few Richard North

Vigorously challenges popular perceptions of key events. Points out that Churchill chose to focus on The Few as a neat, attractive narrative, easily digested – all while Germany endeavoured to propose settlement terms in parallel to their deployment of invasion barges in continental ports to the east of the English Channel.

The Mighty Eighth Roger Freeman

A clear account of the planning and delivery of huge numbers of ambitious missions. Impressive descriptions of how and why some USAAF men were awarded Medals of Honor. Excellent selection of photographs which don't eclipse the text but complement it - very unusual among illustrated books on military flying.

Pioneer Pilot William Armstrong

This adventurous Geordie was in the Royal Flying Corps; after which he became a commercial pilot, initiating some of the routes developed by Imperial Airways across the globe. He conveys a charming sense of possibility, discovery and the joys of achievement.

Post-War Europe Tony Judt

Comprehensive presentation of how each and every country in Europe has recovered and/or evolved from the traumatic scenarios which had come about by the summer of 1945.

POW Adrian Gilbert

Undramatic explanation of the procedures, frustrations and ambitions of Allied war prisoners in western Europe. For many POWs, would-be escapers were a damned nuisance, making life even more miserable as a consequence of their almost inevitable re-capture.

RAF Bomber Command at War Rupert Matthews

A substantial account of the difficulties faced by commanders and crew; revealing a string of unfortunate endeavours in the experimental years, slowly replaced by bolder deployment of better equipment, albeit now without many fine airmen who had perished in those early sorties. Particularly good on quoting official confidential reports that anticipated trouble ahead due to inadequacies of machines, spare parts or training. Excellent descriptions of evolving capacities of aircraft.

Reaching for the stars Mark Connelly

I came to this book quite late in my work, and was intrigued to discover it covered much of the same ground I had been exploring. In particular, Connelly compares the media treatment of critical events with the raw outcomes for the RAF.

The Second World War Antony Beevor

When he was featured on Desert Island Discs, Sir Anthony revealed he suffered a breakdown after delivering this manuscript to his publishers. Unsurprising, considering the enormity of the horrors he documents in this vital book. Beevor notes that the Japanese had killed 200,000 Chinese people in the autumn of 1937; that the Nazi invasion of Russia was 'a time of iron'.

He is critical of the RAF and USAAF, considering that the combined bomber offensive was 'slightly less murderous compared with citizens across Europe and Russia killed by the Luftwaffe'; however, the urban destruction by the RAF had 'shaken Hitler more than he dared to admit'.

Beevor points out that the aerial engagements above Kursk were among the most intensive of the war; then the invasion of Sicily contributed to Hitler's rage, panic and depression. Most harrowing are descriptions of the Nazi 'dehumanisation of victim categories' across Europe; the mass extermination of unwanted people.

The Second World War Winston S. Churchill

Fascinating volumes reflecting the unbelievable weight of decision-making undertaken by the man who was Prime Minister, First Lord of the Treasury, Minister of Defence and Leader of the House of Commons for most of the war. The 'moral of the work': In war: resolution; in defeat: defiance; in victory: magnanimity; in peace: goodwill. Written after the war and first published in 1949 - nothing can match them for making us realise how lucky we were; and are.

The Soviet Air Force since 1918 Alexander Boyd

Clear presentation of elements, issues, politics and problems; drawing on many sources due to the lack of substantial histories published from Moscow. My essay, Red Skies, is no more than a shallow contrivance drawn from across the chapters of Boyd's measured work.

There shall be wings Max Arthur

Packed with good testimony, but packaged with over-simplified circumstances. Makes no mention of the significance of Soviet armies, yet declares: 'Combined with the U.S. 8th Air Force's daylight onslaught, the RAF's night campaign brought Nazi Germany to its knees'.

The Third Reich at War Richard J. Evans

Marvellous investigation of the evolving culture and dynamics that resulted in 11 million Soviet Union servicemen and women dying in action prior to their colleagues raising the Red Flag in Berlin.

War in the Air 1914-45 Williamson Murray

This volume in the Cassell 'History of Warfare' series, points out that the German V2 rocket programme ate up resources which could have produced 24,000 more fighter aircraft for the Luftwaffe - a potential asset that could have effectively protected the Third Reich from aerial intrusion prior to D-Day. However, if German scientists had mastered pinpoint targeting of rockets (say, simply, by spies dumping a homing device in a suitcase close to the desired spot), then Churchill - rather than face the arrival of destruction at a series of specific iconic destinations, such as Westminster Bridge or Abbey - might have been forced to negotiate.

When will war come to Europe? H. R. Knickerbocker

Early in the 1930s this enterprising and attention-seeking journalist managed to secure interviews with Heads of State (including Mussolini, but not Hitler) right across Europe, that allowed him to publish assessments of likely future conflict; and caused him to observe that there were 'no madmen running Germany today'.

World War II – A Beginner's Guide Christopher Catherwood

Good primer on chronology and major issues, with some consideration of media presentation. Explorations of how recently available documents throw fresh light on analysis and interpretation. Very useful breakdown of the complexity of conflicts initiated in the Far East.

Wikipedia

Finally, it would be churlish not to mention this huge, instant reservoir of information. I have drawn on its contents for some of the Pacific theatre history. The extraordinary electronic institution delivers a three-dimensional chess-like complex of elements that no single book can match. Having talked to some of the self-elected editors, I am inclined to respect the validity of most of the material presented under this banner. However, all of it is no substitute for one good book.