



SEND IN THE DESTROYER



MIKHAIL TIMIN EXPLAINS HOW THE MALIGNED MESSERSCHMITT BF 110S REGAINED THEIR REPUTATION WITH THE LUFTWAFFE HIERARCHY WHEN THEY INFLECTED CARNAGE ON THE RED AIR FORCE



have come forward casting doubt on the Red Army Air Force's huge losses – Soviet historians and military specialists having estimated that up to 1,200 aircraft were neutralised, of which 800 were destroyed on the 66 airfields attacked.

VETERAN LINE-UP

Zerstörergeschwader 26 (ZG 26 – see the panel overleaf for details of unit structure) was one of the most experienced Luftwaffe heavy fighter outfits. Its crews had come through the French campaign, the Battle of Britain and the Balkans. They were trained in the fighter and ground attack roles.

The nose of a Bf 110C contained a pair of 20mm MG FF cannon, four 7.9mm MG 17 machine guns, with another 7.9mm in a flexible mount in the rear of the ↗

greatest number of aircraft of World War Two, and saw the Bf 110 enjoy a brief renaissance in its effectiveness.

Despite its importance, a significant lack of research has been dedicated to the air war connected with Barbarossa; moreover this is prevalent on both sides. There has never been a complete analysis of the air fighting using documents from both Germany and the USSR.

In recent years various authors

By June 1941 the nickname 'Zerstörer' (Destroyer) was beginning to wear thin in the light of combat experience with the Messerschmitt Bf 110, especially during the Battle of Britain. When it entered flight testing in 1936 the concept of a 'heavy fighter' or, to use naval parlance, a destroyer (hence Zerstörer) had an air of invincibility about it.

Twin-engined and heavily armed, able to punch its way through any opposition, the Bf 110 was seen as a vital part of the blitzkrieg. Yet over the skies of Britain the '110 suffered the ignominy of needing an escort of Bf 109s to prevent them from becoming easy prey for the Hurricanes and Spitfires.

The air battles that unfolded on June 22, 1941 when Operation Barbarossa was unleashed on the Soviet Union involved some of the

Above
Commander of ZG 26,
Obstlt Johannes Shalk.
CHRIS GOSS

Above right
Obtl Theodore Rosswall
of 5./ZG 26. CHRIS GOSS

Right
Leader of 11./ZG 26, Hptm
Ralph von Rettberg.

Far right
An artist's impression of
Messerschmitt Bf 110s in
action during Operation
Barbarossa. ANTONIS KARIDIS



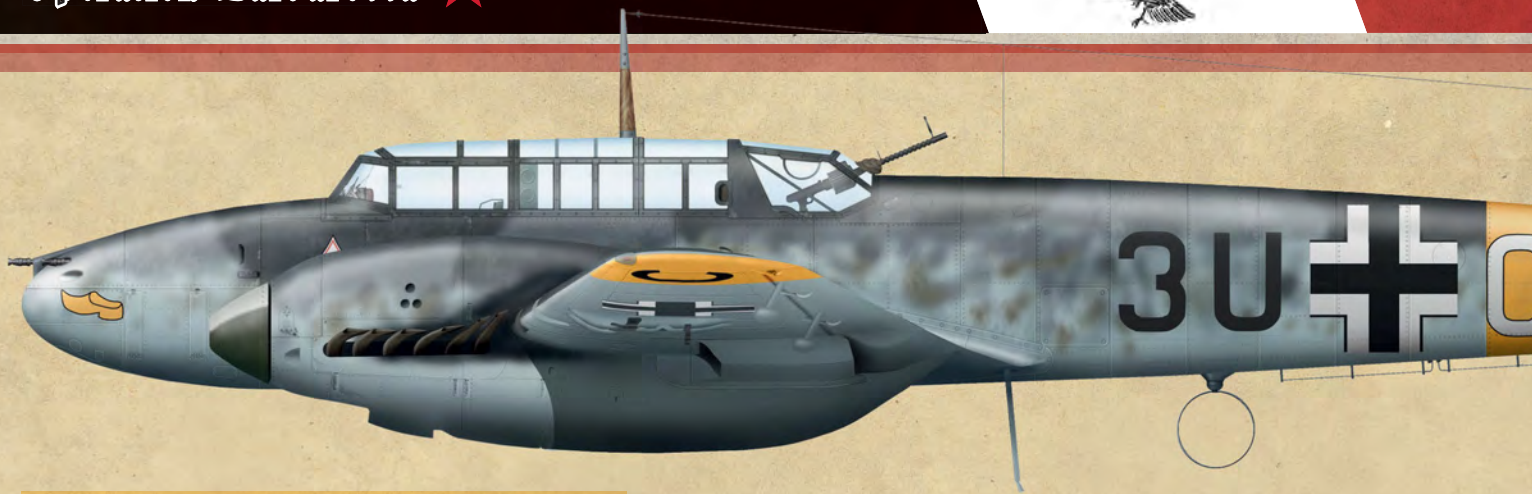


FLY



GERMANY INVADES





LUFTWAFFE UNIT STRUCTURE

Staffel: Plural - Staffeln. Smallest combat flying unit, normally of nine aircraft. Denoted using Arabic numerals. Thus 3./JG 26 would be the 3rd Staffel of Jagdgeschwader 26. RAF equivalent would be a squadron.

Gruppe: Plural - Gruppen. Comprising three (in later years four) Staffeln plus a Stab (headquarters, or staff) flight. Denoted using Roman numerals, eg I, II, III. Thus I./JG 26 would be the 1st Gruppen of Jagdgeschwader 26 and Stab/JG 26 would be its headquarters flight. RAF equivalent would be a wing.

Geschwader: Plural is also Geschwader. Comprising three (in later years four) Gruppen plus a Stab. Denoted using Arabic numerals, eg 1, 2, 3. RAF equivalent would be a group.



Top
Messerschmitt Bf 110 '3U+CM' of 4./ZG 26. IGOR ZLOBIN

Above right
An Arkhangelskii Ar-2 at Borisovshiznaof.

Right
Bf 110s of 5./ZG 26 in flight. CHRIS GOSS

canopy. Under the centre fuselage section, on an ETC-500 pylon, combinations of 250kg (551lb) or 500kg bombs could be carried. Some of the 'E-2s had underwing points for either four 50kg bombs, or 96 SD-2 high-explosive bomblets – both of which were effective against unarmoured military vehicles, or aircraft.

Led by Knight's Cross holder Oberstleutnant Johannes Shalk, ZG 26's I Gruppe was commanded by Hauptmann Herbert Kaminski, while Hptm Ralph von Rettberg headed II Gruppe. Rettberg had been awarded the Knight's Cross on the eve of Barbarossa on June 14, 1941.

In addition to Rettberg, ZG

26's line-up included several aces, among them the following staffeln commanders: Hptm Wilhelm Spies (also awarded the Knight's Cross on June 14, 1941) of 1./ZG 26,

9th Fighter Air Division (FAD), and the 122nd Fighter Air Regiment (FAR) of the 11th FAD had been driven away from forward airstrips by the constant German attacks.

The remains of the 41st, 124th, 126th, and 129th FARs

redeployed around Białystok, while the 122nd FAR moved to Lida and Lesishche.

After this the Luftwaffe transferred its attention to airfields deep inside Soviet territory, along a line stretching from Lida to Białystok to Pinsk.

By around 09:30 ZG 26 had been readied for the next sortie, targeting the 127th FAR, the 16th High-Speed Bomber Air Regiment (HSBAR) of the 11th Mixed Air Division at Skidzyl' and Churlona, and the 13th HSBAR of the 9th Mixed Air Division at Borisovshizne. All of these bases were located in the area around Lunna about 24 miles (40km) southeast of Grodno in Belarus, close to the present-day Polish and Lithuanian border.

At 09:35 Moscow time, around 40

Oberleutnant Johannes Kiel of 4./JG 26 and Oblt Theodore Rossiwall of 5./JG 26.

In June 1941, ZG 26's inventory of Bf 110Cs and 'Es stood at: Stab 4, I Gruppe 38 and II Gruppe 36.

STANDING IN LINE

The first Luftwaffe sorties on the Eastern Front were carried out early in the morning of June 22, 1941, attacking Soviet airfields in Lithuania. Units from the 8th Fliegerkorps operated over the border between the Soviet west and northwest fronts and were active in the Baltic states and in Belarussia (now Belarus).

Between 09:30 and 10:00 hours all four fighter regiments of the Soviet





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Bf 110s took off from Suwałki. Oblt Johannes Kiel's diary takes up the story: "Soviet aircraft stood on the airfield both in lines and on parade, ready for a sortie. We dived and after dropping our bombs we began to strafe."

"The attack was broken off only after our guns had rained fire down across the airfield. Up to 50 aircraft were destroyed on the ground, their shelters were wrecked, and the runway was peppered with craters."

"We flew on to another airfield, and since we had dropped all our bombs we attacked at low level and opened fire. It was the same on a third airfield, the aircraft stood in

a line - and a few minutes later black clouds were rising up from the ground."

According to Soviet information, at around 10:00 a force of 34 Bf 110s hit Borisovshizne leaving 33 Tupolev SB and Arkhangelskii Ar-2 twin-engined bombers destroyed or seriously damaged. Soviet aircrew, including bombardier-gunner Lt Ya V Laptev, Lt V M Yartsev and gunner-radio operators Sgts A A Kondakov, I P Ryabchenko and O I Pryadkin, tried to fire on the Zerstörers from gun positions in the SBs and Ar-2s, but were killed during the onslaught.

Despite this an Ar-2 and two SBs were able to take off and redeploy to airfields behind the lines. The 13th HSBAR lost its combat capability following this raid and took no further part in operations.

TIME TO REACT

German crews went on to flatten the neighbouring airfields of Cherlona and Skidzyl'. At the former, the 16th HSBAR had already been subjected

Above
Remains of Ar-2s and SBs of the 13th High Speed Bomber Air Regiment at Borisovshizne after the attentions of the ZG 26 Bf 110s on June 22, 1941.

Left
A wrecked Petlyakov Pe-2 of the 16th High Speed Bomber Air Regiment at Cherlona airfield.

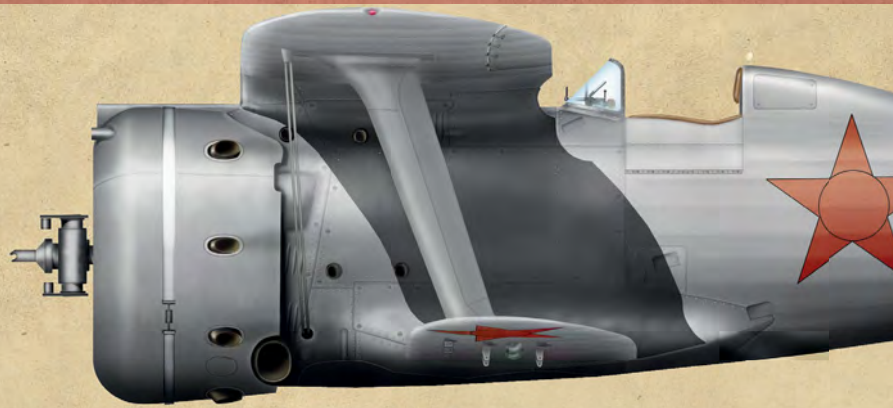
Left
Applying the 'ace of spades' nose art to a 5./ZG 26 Bf 110. CHRIS GOSS

Below
Blitzed Pe-2s of the 16th High Speed Bomber Air Regiment at Cherlona.





Above and below
Emblems of II./ZG 26 Bf 110s, all featured a wooden clog. The 4th Staffel included a ladybird, the 5th an ace of spades and the 6th the ace of diamonds. IGOR ZLOBIN



"As if in a dream we saw one of our aircraft trailing smoke. It had been hit by enemy fire and was heading for home. It lost altitude however and eventually crashed"



MASTER OF THE ZERSTÖRER



Commander of 5./ZG 26 Oblt Theodore Rossiwall was one of the most successful Zerstörer pilots, gaining his first two victories during the Spanish Civil War. By the start of Operation Barbarossa on June 22, 1941 he had 13 victories.

On the Eastern Front he had gained a further seven victories by August 6, 1941, after which he was awarded the Knight's Cross.

to an intensive attack at 07:00. This was followed up by ZG 26; its Bf 110s destroyed 11 Petlyakov Pe-2s and 20 SBs of the regiment.

Skidzyel' had been the 127th FAR's base but at the beginning of June it had redeployed to a forward airstrip at Lesishche. At the time

ZG 26 struck, the aircraft present were unserviceable examples or trainers. In photographs taken by German soldiers ten Polikarpov I-153 'Chaikas' can be seen, either destroyed or damaged.

At Lesihische, about 10 miles behind the action, there was time to react. According to the 127th FAR's combat journal, at 10:00 all the regiment began to take to the air to counter a group identified as Dornier Do 215s and Bf 110s.

The first to get airborne were the nine I-153s of the 2nd Squadron, led by the Deputy Squadron Commander (DSC) Lt G A Kupchey. At 10:10 they engaged 30 enemy aircraft in a battle lasting 20 minutes and shifting from the Lunna area further towards Grodno.

Three Chaikas were lost and Lts N N Mikhaylov and I G Markin were killed. R I Varaksin was seriously injured and struggled to make an emergency landing. The Soviet pilots did not claim any victories.

Five minutes later a quintet of 3rd Squadron I-153s, commanded by DSC Lt S Ya Zhukovskiy, entered the battle. After a 15-minute struggle, Zhukovskiy and Lt B A Fokin both attained aerial victories.

At 10:20 two groups of three I-153s from the 4th Squadron joined in, these were headed by Senior Political Instructor (SPI) A A Artyomov, and Senior Lt P A Kuzmin. A group victory of one enemy aircraft was shared by six pilots.

At about this time eight I-153s from the 1st Squadron were noted getting stuck in. By chance, DSC Lt S S Deryugin and his men became involved as they returned to Lesihische following a patrol over Grodno. Deryugin attained a victory over a Do 215, but SPI A S Danilov failed to return. Despite being seriously injured, Danilov was able to make an emergency landing.

Aircraft from the 1st Squadron only participated for a very short



Above
Polikarpov I-153s of the 127th FAR. IGOR ZLOBIN

time. It is likely they were only able to make a single attack since by that time they had been in the air for more than an hour; by 10:25 they had landed.

Last to challenge the crews from II./ZG 26 were three Chaikas from the 1st Squadron, under Lt A I Druzhko. These came up to replace Deryugin's eight over Grodno. By all accounts the Germans had run out of ammunition and this flight was able to do battle with 30 Do 215s. Having patrolled for a further 20 minutes, they were the last to land back at Lesishche, at 11:00, without sustaining any losses.

EVERYTHING ABLAZE

Even though almost all the pilots of the 127th FAR took part in this battle, no significant descriptions of the confrontation were ever compiled. The only thing recorded is that the enemy formed a defensive circle, which the Soviet fighters allegedly managed to break.

Under the headline 'The Six Aerial Attacks by Stalin's Falcons', some details were described in the newspaper *Krasnaya Zvezda* dated June 28, 1941 concerning the 127th FAR: "The first to scramble was Lt Kupcha's squadron. The encounter with the enemy occurred close to the town itself. A fierce air battle blew up.

"The enemy had a ratio of almost two to one on their side, but that did

little to put our fighters off. They boldly attacked head on, got on the fascist vultures' tails, or bore down on them from above.

"It was Junior Lt Deryugin who opened the tally of downed enemy aircraft. Three Messerschmitts got on the tail of the leader's aircraft. Lt Kupcha found himself in a closed circle.

"Deryugin, however, came just in time. He attacked one of the enemy the moment he got on the tail of the commander's aircraft. The Messerschmitt began to trail smoke, and crashed. The other two managed to break off combat.

On the German side the only assessment of the battle is provided by Oblt Kiel's notes: "The radio



Above
A wrecked Polikarpov I-153 at Skidzyel'.

Left
Oblt Theodore Rossiwall leading 5./ZG 26. CHRIS GOSS





Right
 Oblt Theodore Rossiwall
 being awarded the
 Knight's Cross on August
 6, 1941.

Far right
 Dispersed at the
 perimeter of Skidzyel'
 airfield, Soviet Polikarpov
 I-153s of the 127th FAR
 with collapsed wings.

Below
 Bf 110 '3U+AA', flown by
 the Kommodore of ZG 26,
 and damaged I-153s at
 Vilnius, June 1941.
 ALL VIA AUTHOR



operator called out again: 'Watch out! Enemy aircraft to port!'

"Then the enemy aircraft were on top of us. Below us everything was ablaze, explosions and clouds of smoke could be seen, billowing higher and higher.

"As if in a dream we saw one of our aircraft trailing smoke. It had been hit by enemy fire and was heading for home. It lost altitude however and eventually crashed. At that moment the overall responsibility lay on the commander's shoulders, his groups had to hold their nerve and their leadership skills together getting the crews back to base.

"On the way back we inspected our own aircraft more thoroughly. The majority of these had been holed, but the engines, oil, and the oil temperature were normal. The results of the attack were impressive: 48 aircraft destroyed on the ground, three in the air, and only one of ours had been lost."

RECKONING

Soviet pilots thought they were attacking a group of German bombers when they encountered the Bf 110s. As the 127th FAR went into the fray in small groups, the Chaikas would

have been rapidly outgunned and outclassed by the waves, or circles, of Zerstörers.

If a classic dogfight had developed the manoeuvrable I-153s would have held all the cards over the cumbersome Bf 110s. In defence of the Soviet pilots, the majority were experiencing their first ever air battle.

The group of nine Chaikas from the 2nd Squadron that tackled 30 to 40 Bf 110s would have had little chance of success, and to make it worse, the Soviet fighters attacked head on and immediately lost three aircraft.

With the arrival of reinforcements from the 3rd and 4th Squadrons the Germans began to form a closed circle and to draw away in a westerly direction. Until the start of the air combat they had been hitting airfields for at least ten minutes and it was likely that their ammunition was low, or had run out.

The Soviet pilots to their credit evidently succeeded in breaking through the Luftwaffe formations, possibly even the closed circle. This did not lead to a rout, indeed the Germans managed to shoot down another I-153 and others sustained bullet holes.

After this the Germans broke off

and headed for their base at Suwałki. Oblt Kiel wrote that the Soviet pilots downed one Luftwaffe aircraft, but this is not confirmed by Luftwaffe documents.

Over Grodno, the Germans were subjected to an ultimately unsuccessful attack by a patrol led by Lt Druzchkov. He was very lucky that the Bf 110s did not have any shells or cartridges left. On the other hand, it is unlikely that the three I-153s could have inflicted much damage.

The actions of the ZG 26 crews in this sortie were of the highest level of professionalism. In the course of one sortie approximately 50 Soviet aircraft were destroyed, including the entire 13th High Speed Bomber Air Regiment.

After that the experienced German crews survived an intense 20-minute dogfight. Not only did they counter all the attacks from the Soviets, but they shot down two Chaikas and damaged two more.

Such highly effective actions enabled the Luftwaffe's Fliegerkorps to decimate the Red Army Air Force units that were opposing. By the middle of the first day of Barbarossa the Luftwaffe had command of the skies. ●

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