

HOLDING THE LINE



WAVE UPON WAVE OF FIGHTERS ATTACKED LITHUANIA AS THE LUFTWAFFE SPEARHEADED OPERATION BARBAROSSA IN JUNE 1941.

MIKHAIL TIMIN DESCRIBES 24 HOURS OF INTENSIVE AIR COMBAT AS THE RUSSIANS TRIED TO STEM THE TIDE

Above
Abandoned at Vilnius because of battle damage, I-15bis tactical number 'White 6', of the 42nd Fighter Air Regiment of the 57th Combined Air Division. ALEXANDER KAZAKOV © 2016

Right
Major Konstantin E Belousov, commander of the 42nd Fighter Air Regiment.

Right centre
Senior Political Instructor Avenir M Smirnov, deputy leader of the 4th Squadron of the 42nd Fighter Air Regiment.

Since the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet Union, much of Europe has enjoyed a period of stability that was unimaginable in the earlier part of the 20th century. Prior to the outbreak of the Great War in 1914, the present-day Baltic state of Lithuania was part of Imperial Russia; by 1919 most of today's nation was an independent state, but land to the south of the capital, Vilnius, was within the newly created Poland.

In 1938 Germany and the USSR signed a pact of mutual assistance. Secretly, the two countries agreed to carve up Poland, with Moscow taking the Baltic states. The agreement was one of raw expediency; both parties were convinced before long they would be at war.

Poland was invaded in September 1939 and World War Two broke out. To the northeast of the Polish capital, Warsaw, was Orany – which, along with the surrounding area, was granted to Lithuania by Germany, the town reverting to its former name, Varėna.



The handover was an empty gesture. Hitler unleashed his Blitzkrieg in Western Europe in May 1940, and the following month Stalin's troops slipped into Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia.

The turmoil was only just beginning. On June 22, 1941, Germany turned its forces eastwards on a massive front from the Black Sea to the Baltic; this was Operation 'Barbarossa' and the destination was



Moscow and beyond.

No matter what they called their town, Orany or Varėna, the inhabitants found themselves amid a whirlwind as the Wehrmacht and the Luftwaffe clashed with the Red Army and Air Force. This is the story of the bitter aerial combats fought on June 22 over the town.

COMBAT ALERT

On June 19 and 20, 1941, all units of the Soviet Baltic Special Military District were brought up



Left
Tactical number '7', an agile I-153 powered by a 1,000hp M-62 radial.



Left
Junior Lt Vladimir I Antipov.



Left centre
Junior Lt Nikolai A Karyukin.

to alert status. The 42nd Fighter Air Regiment's 1st and 4th Squadrons deployed to Orany with eight and six combat crews respectively, while the 2nd and 3rd Squadrons settled into Perloja with seven and nine crews, plus another two attached to the headquarters flight. The 42nd had 30 Polikarpov I-153 and at least two I-15bis biplanes and a single I-16 monoplane fighter.

Below
Polikarpov I-153s and an I-15 of the 42nd Fighter Air Regiment.

Stationed alongside the 42nd at Orany was the 237th Fighter Air Regiment which had just started to form. It had 15 pilots and 12 I-153s. At Vilnius were 26 I-153s, nine of them inoperable; 19 I-15bis, three of which were unserviceable; and three out-of-action I-16s, all without crews.

At 03:00 hours Moscow time on the 22nd, all personnel of the





Above
Messerschmitt Bf 109F-2 'White 3' of 4/JG 52, summer 1941. VLADIMIR KAMSKY © 2016

Below
While probably flown by Jr Lt M F Mitin, I-153 tactical number '8' of the 4th Squadron, 42nd Fighter Air Regiment, made a forced landing at Orany after a battle with Bf 109s of II/JG52.

42nd were put on combat alert. The guns were loaded and the engines run up. An unidentified aircraft overflew Orany at 04:05 at about 3,200ft (1,000m), turned through 180°, descended, dropped several bombs and strafed the camp. On the orders of Senior Political Instructor Avenir M Smirnov, three I-153s of the 4th Squadron took off to intercept, but the enemy outran them.

Fifteen minutes later, German fighters machine gunned Orany and Perloja. Smirnov reported: "At 04:20, nine Messerschmidt-109 [*sic*] aircraft appeared above the airfield [Orany]. The Me 109s flat-dived upon a line of grounded, concealed aircraft and subjected them to fire. As a result, eight aircraft were damaged, including an UTI-4 [two-seat I-16]

CLAIMS FOR JG 52 IN COMBAT OVER ORANY 10:48 TO 11:00, JUNE 22, 1941

Pilot	Unit	Claimed	Time and notes
Othr Waldemar Semelka	4/JG 52	I-15	10:48
Fw Georg Mayr	4/JG 52	I-15	10:50
Oblt Carl Hartmann	Stab II/JG 52	I-15	10:50
Uffz Bernhard Wilsky	Stab II/JG 52	I-15	10:52
Hptm Erich Weitke	Stab II/JG 52	I-15	10.53 south of Varena
Oblt Johannes Steinhoff	4/JG 52	I-15	11:00 Varena
Oblt Siegfried Simsch	4/JG 52	I-15	10:00 west of Varena

whose oil tank was pierced. An I-153 caught fire; however, fire was quickly put out by technical personnel using extinguishers."

FIRST VICTORY

Five Bf 109s attempted a raid on Orany and Perloja at 06:25 and a

dozen I-153s took off to meet them. The fighters clashed at 2,500ft, but the enemy disengaged and headed west. There were no losses on either side.

A third raid on the two airfields, by Bf 109s of III/JG 53 (3rd Gruppe of Jagdgeschwader





Far left
Junior Lt Alexei
I Artemiev.

Centre left
Junior Lt Ivan S Zudilov.

Left
Lt Feodor S Lyapin.



Above
On the morning of June
22, 1941, the 42nd Fighter
Air Regiment had just one
Polikarpov I-16 on charge
at Orany.

53), came at around 09:00. Situation Summary No.1 of the 57th Combined Air Division reported: "Twelve I-153s near Orany at 800m were conducting an air battle with five Bf 109s... the enemy disengaged and retreated to their territory; no losses on either side. One of the I-153s suffered bullet perforations."

Smirnov noted: "Fifteen I-153s took off and attempted to engage the enemy. The Me 109s declined the battle and left in the direction of Perloja airfield, where they strafed a motor vehicle unit."

Twenty minutes later, a repeated strike by fighters of 8/JG 53 (8th Staffel of JG 53) was repelled by only three I-153s of the 2nd or 3rd Squadron, which took off from Perloja. Fortune favoured the Soviet pilots, as the 57th Combined Air Division records described: "At 9.30, three I-153s engaged two Me 109s,

which attempted to attack Orany airfield. One of the Me 109s retreated to enemy territory at a low altitude; the other supposedly made a forced landing."

Experienced pilot Oberfeldwebel (Obfw – equivalent to RAF flight sergeant) Eduard Koslowski in Bf 109F-2 5523 made a forced landing near Merkinè. The fighter was destroyed, but Koslowski returned to his unit the following day. He was credited with a victory over an I-153 at 09:10, but the 42nd lost no aircraft in that combat. It's not recorded which Soviet pilot damaged Koslowski's Bf 109, but it was the first German fighter shot down by the Northwestern Front Air Force.

TURNING POINT

The first round of the confrontation was undoubtedly won by the Soviet

pilots. The Luftwaffe needed to increase its forces, and for the next attack *all* the aircraft of II/JG52 were sent out on a strafing mission, the Gruppe splitting into two echelons.

Led by 'ace' Hauptmann (flight lieutenant) Erich Woitke, Bf 109Fs of 4/JG 52 began the assault. Although the Soviet fighters were quick to meet the enemy in mid-air, this time the Luftwaffe had the upper hand.

Smirnov described the fight: "A total of 20 aircraft took off from Varèna and Perloja. During the combat, two I-153s burnt out in mid-air. The pilots, Jr Lt Karyukin and Sr Lt Antonov [most probably Jr Lt Vladimir I Antipov – author], landed safely by parachute. Karyukin was shot in the left leg and in the left side in the air [while descending by parachute]."

(It is interesting to note that Smirnov had problems with the name of his base, referring to it as ➔





Above
An I-153 parked at Orany.

Below right
Senior Lt Nikolai E
Linchevsky.

SOVIET TACTICAL NUMBERS

Aircraft of the 42nd Fighter Air Regiment adopted different 'font' styles for the tactical numbers applied to the rudders of its Polikarpov I-15s and I-153s, probably depending on the groundcrew member doing the painting. Olive green and with pale blue undersides or overall light grey colour schemes were used at Orany on June 22, 1941. Employed across the Red Army Air Force, the colour of tactical numbers denoted the squadrons within a regiment: 1st Squadron - red; 2nd Squadron - blue; 3rd Squadron - yellow; 4th Squadron - white.



Known tactical numbers of the I-153s of the 42nd Fighter Air Regiment, June 1941. ALEXANDER KAZAKOV © 2016

both the Lithuanian Varėna and the Polish Orany.)

"In the course of the combat, the disengaged Me 109s descended and machine gunned the aircraft on the ground and the shelter slits [trenches] where the personnel were staying. Six I-153s caught fire. No casualties among the personnel."

German and Soviet documents confirm the clash was intense and lasted about 15 minutes. Pilots from 4/JG 52 and the Stab (headquarters flight) claimed seven I-15s between 10:48 and 11:00 – see the table.

In spite of the losses, Soviet fighters stayed above the airfield, whereas the Germans disengaged, having run short of fuel and ammunition. Almost as soon as the first group of Bf 109s returned to base, aircraft of 5/JG 52 and 6/JG 52 arrived, going straight into action. That was the turning point of the battle and the Germans claimed three more I-15s: from 11:07 to 11:11, victories were scored by

Unteroffizieren (Uffz – corporals) Albrecht Hanika, Franz Gilhaus and Hermann Spengler.

Smirnov's report notes: "At the fourth arrival of the Me 109s, an air combat began again. There were no losses; the only thing was that two lower spars were shot through on Sr Lt Likin's aircraft and wheel wells and other locations were shot through on Jr Lt Mitin's aircraft. Jr Lt Artemiev's aircraft nosed over at landing; Comrade Artemiev suffered minor injuries. On Mitin's aircraft, landing gear failed to extend, due to pierced wheel wells and air tubes, [he] performed a belly landing."

The 57th Combined Air Division headquarters recorded that when the Soviet pilots attempted to disengage and land, short of fuel, the Germans took the opportunity to finish off their enemy. At the end of the battle, the Luftwaffe lost Bf 109F-2 5780, shot down near Perloja. There are no records of who was flying it.

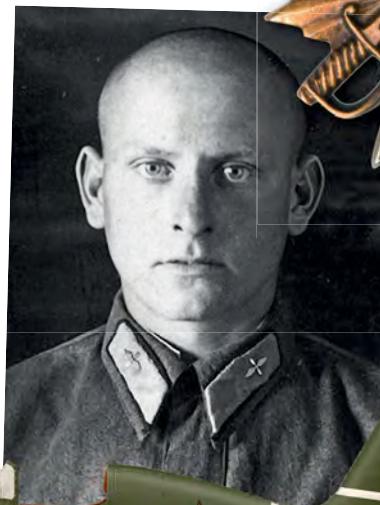
COUNTER-ATTACK

Despite the unrelenting Luftwaffe onslaughts, the Soviet aircraft remained at the same airfields until 14:00 – there was no attempt to regroup. The commander of the 57th Combined Air Division, Colonel Katichev, approached the



Northwestern Air Force headquarters suggesting redeployment of the 42nd and 237th Fighter Air Regiments to other airfields as early as 09:10. Permission was not granted until early afternoon, by which time the 42nd had lost most of its aircraft.

Without permission to withdraw, Katichev resorted to a tactical trick. Tupolev SB bombers were ordered to prepare for a counter-attack on German airfields. Situation Summary No.1 of the 57th Combined Air Division recorded: "At 10:20, the 54th High-Speed Bomber Regiment, with a total of ten aircraft, departed



for the loitering area, with a further mission to follow the enemy aircraft and to bomb them [on] landing. Three squadrons with a total of 19 aircraft are waiting, in a state of alert, on operational airfields."

Confronting the crews of the 54th were the pilots of 5/JG52 and 6/JG52. They attacked the SBs while they were in the loitering area; the tables had been turned.

Victories were claimed by the commander of 5/JG 52, Oberleutnant (flying officer) August-Wilhelm Schumann (two), and Uffz Alfred Lehmann of 6/JG 52 (one). Both pilots described their claims as Ilyushin DB-3s, not SBs; Soviet records confirm the loss of three SBs of the 5th Squadron of the 54th.

CLEAR-CUT VICTORY

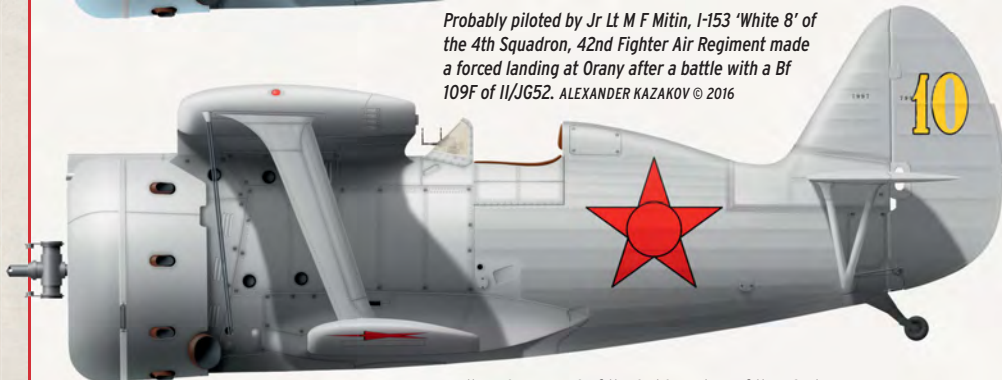
At dawn on June 22, 1941, the Luftwaffe did not have an instant numerical superiority. The Germans outplayed the 42nd by the use of larger groups of fighters with short intervals between each strike. This gave the Soviets no time to counter the raids. By 10:00 there were only 21 operable I-153s at Orany and Perloja.

In dogfights the experienced II/JG 52 pilots proved a Bf 109F could outmanoeuvre an agile I-153. The Germans did not attempt turning combats, as 57th Combined Air Division documents concluded: "They strove to pull our I-153s to a high altitude, then disengaged, taking advantage of their higher speed, and dived." Through vertical combat tactics, the Luftwaffe won a clear-cut victory.

The 42nd Fighter Air Regiment probably suffered more losses in the air than surviving documents show. Smirnov only specified losses of the



Probably piloted by Jr Lt M F Mitin, I-153 'White 8' of the 4th Squadron, 42nd Fighter Air Regiment made a forced landing at Orany after a battle with a Bf 109F of II/JG52. ALEXANDER KAZAKOV © 2016



'Yellow 10', an I-153 of the 3rd Squadron of the 42nd Fighter Air Regiment, was abandoned at Vilnius. ALEXANDER KAZAKOV © 2016

1st and 4th Squadrons and had no data on the 2nd and 3rd Squadrons, which were stationed at Perloja.

Another confirmation of more serious losses suffered by the 42nd is the 57th Combined Air Division personnel casualty list for June 22 – which includes, apart from the aforementioned pilots, Jr Lts A Martyanov and N A Eliseyev as wounded in action.

UNEQUAL STRUGGLE

Soviet combat claims were much more modest than those of the opposition. Pilots of the 42nd were credited with two destroyed Bf 109s and Lt Feodor S Lyapin is mentioned in award recommendations.

Flying considerably inferior aircraft, and with only half the necessary pilots, the men of the 42nd nevertheless repelled almost all enemy attacks for a comparatively long period and shot

down two Bf 109Fs. No other fighter regiment of the Northwestern Front Air Force managed to destroy a single Bf 109F that fateful morning.

The 42nd's pilots staged an heroic stand in the defence of their two airfields, and in doing so prevented the Germans from strafing and destroying all the aircraft on the ground. Soviet documents contain no data about the number of 42nd and 237th aircraft destroyed on the ground at Orany and Perloja on June 22.

Studies of photographs, documents and memoirs suggest the losses from strafing totalled 15 to 20 aircraft. Of those, four or five I-153s and an I-15bis were completely destroyed and the rest suffered minor damage. With the speed of events of the day, minor damage could not be repaired, putting them out of the battle: they were effectively written off.

Top left
With only trees providing blast shelter, the aircraft at Orany were very vulnerable to attack.

Top right
Junior Lt Mikhail F Mitin.



Right

An I-15 at Vilnius after capture by the Germans, with a Henschel Hs 126 behind.



Below

Operational trainer Polikarpov UTI-4, tactical number 'White 3', of the 4th Squadron of the 42nd Fighter Air Regiment, abandoned at Orany with battle damage. ALEXANDER KAZAKOV © 2016

Major Konstantin Belousov, commander of the 42nd Fighter Air Regiment, and his staff acted well in deteriorating circumstances, setting up a warning and concealment system. As a result, the Germans never caught the regiment by surprise.

Patrols by large groups (12 to 15) of I-153s were effective and, thanks to them, the regiment was able to repulse almost all the enemy attacks up to the last combat, which started at 10:45.

In the summer of 1941 the Red Army Air Force was unable to make combat on a par with Luftwaffe fighter units. German pilots had excellent flying and shooting skills, used the most advanced tactics and flew state-of-the-art aircraft.

With the courage of their pilots and competent actions of their commanders, Soviet units could, under favourable conditions, defeat the enemy and inflict losses – exactly as Major Belousov and his men demonstrated in the skies above Orany.

About 50 combat aircraft were not far away, at Vilnius, but there were no aircrew. If the pilots who had lost their

aircraft at Orany and Perloja had been redeployed, the battle could have been continued with renewed vigour, but that opportunity was denied to the 42nd.

On that first day of Barbarossa, the Luftwaffe displayed true perseverance and consistency in pursuing its objectives. At midday, aircraft of 8/JG52 began systematically hitting Vilnius airfield and destroying the aircraft there.

Operating in large groups, 23 Bf 109Es of II/JG27 launched an attack at 12:30. They showered the airfield with bombs and subjected it to cannon and machine gun fire. Another 20 Bf 109s returned at 16:30 and buildings and aircraft caught fire; four Red Army soldiers were killed and five wounded. After another raid at 17:30, by the end of the day there were almost no operable aircraft at Vilnius.

STILL FIGHTING

At 15:30, all the remaining serviceable aircraft of the 42nd and 237th (some 13 I-153s) flew from Orany to landing grounds around Jonava, in central Lithuania. By this point the 42nd was no longer a serious combat force but its pilots kept flying sorties till the end of the day, providing air cover for Vilnius and Orany and escorting SBs of the

54th High-Speed Bomber Regiment.

The 42nd's I-153s still had some punch left. At 17:30 three of the biplanes engaged a couple of Bf 109s. Senior Lt Nikolai E Linchevsky and Jr Lt Ivan S Zudilov were both decorated for their part in the fight, in which it's likely their victim was Obfw Josef Kronschnabel's Bf 109F-2 6698.

Pilots of the regiment won their last victory of the day at 18:46. According to the 57th Combined Air Division's operations record book, a pair of I-153s destroyed a Dornier Do 17 over Orany.

The kill was actually Bf 110 '8H+DK' which made a forced landing near the village of Puvočiai, to the west of Orany. One of the crew was wounded and the aircraft was written off. Again, the names of the successful Soviet pilots were not recorded.

With this victory the 42nd had dispatched more Luftwaffe fighters than any of the regiments of the Red Army Air Force over the entire Soviet-German Front on that first day. Many of the 42nd's pilots received decorations – the Order of the Combat Red Banner and the Order of the Red Star – for their part in the battles around Orany. The list included Alexei I Artemiev, P S Likin, N E Linchevsky, F S Lyapin, I S Zudilov, A I Koltsov, and Nikolai A Karyukin.

In the afternoon, Major Konstantin Belousov was severely injured during a bad landing and he was sent to a hospital in Daugavpils. For unknown reasons, he was not evacuated to the rear and was captured by units of the Wehrmacht's 56th Motorised Corps when it captured the city.

Instead of honours, Major Belousov had to suffer the atrocities of the German occupation and died in an extermination camp. The 42nd Fighter Air Regiment finally disbanded in early June 1942. ●

