

Introduction

The story of *Luftwaffe* night fighter airmen and their operations on the Eastern Front is one of consistently belated and ad hoc reactions made in response to a Soviet opponent growing steadily in strength and skill. It is a story that defies the traditional stereotype of the Germans as well-organised and meticulous planners, but emphasises just how successfully they could improvise. A limited number of German night fighter units and crews were slowly deployed along a very lengthy and difficult-to-defend frontline from late-1941 until war's end. These units and personnel faced many difficulties, including a permanent shortage of resources, low priority from their high command, generally poor infrastructure in the East, and regular periods of extraordinarily severe weather conditions. Although the German night fighters of the Eastern Front were always too weak to attain a decisive result, they still managed to achieve a considerable degree of success despite their many challenges and deficiencies.

At the time of *Unternehmen* Barbarossa, the German invasion of the Soviet Union, the *Luftwaffe* had less than 250 night fighters on strength; a mixture of Bf 110s, Do 215s, Bf 109s, Ju 88 Cs, and Do 17 Zs serving in five *Nachtjagdgruppen*. Except for a single *Staffel* that was moved to the Mediterranean, all of these were based in north-west Europe to oppose the RAF bombers raiding the Reich by night with growing regularity and strength. Not a single night fighter was assigned to any of the three German *Luftflotten* deployed for Barbarossa. As a result, after the Germans marched into Soviet territory on the early morning of 22 June 1941, they would quickly discover they were missing a vital defensive capability. This demonstrated that the Germans had not anticipated any problems with Soviet nocturnal air operations; a gap undoubtedly linked to the false assumption that the campaign against the Soviet Union would be sharp and short, with the Soviet air force quickly destroyed. However, the lack of *Luftwaffe* night fighter capacity for the German campaign in the East also reflected the fact that there were simply not enough night fighter units, personnel and aircraft available to meet all potential needs, even at that early stage of the war.

The absence of German night fighters in the East did not become a pressing issue in the early months of their invasion, but would soon prove to be a mistake, as the Soviets increasingly turned to nocturnal operations. Initially, the Soviet air force was only making a nuisance of itself at night, despatching nightly harassment and bombing sorties with aircraft mostly operating individually. The level of nuisance rose towards the end of 1941, as the first dedicated Soviet night harassment units were created, and the Soviet long-range and maritime air forces also stepped up operations in the longer hours of winter darkness. As the winter of 1941 gave way to the spring of 1942, the German commanders began to see the hole in their defences. Despite a dawning realisation of what would be required, the establishment of an effective German night fighter force in the East for even key parts of the enormous front was something that developed only very slowly.

In the spring and summer of 1942, the number of Soviet nocturnal incursions across the full width of the front increased dramatically, with no organised night fighters on the German side to combat them. A large percentage of these missions were conducted by transport and night harassment units supporting the growing Soviet partisan movement behind German lines. The *Luftwaffe* would try to counter this tide, but never mustered sufficient resources to cut the partisans' vital aerial supply lines transporting weapons, explosives, and personnel. These partisan supply flights would remain one of the main objectives for German night fighter operations on the Eastern Front through almost to war's end. However, the enormous scale of the Soviet effort devoted to these activities after 1942 meant this was an enemy that was never stopped, even temporarily.

The reality was that the *Luftwaffe* was constantly on the back foot in combating Soviet aerial activity by night. Along with curtailing partisan supply lines and interdicting the nocturnal harassment sorties flown by the Soviets in their obsolete biplanes, as the war progressed, the thinly-spread *Luftwaffe* night fighters on the Eastern Front also had to devote increasing efforts to intercept raids by Soviet long-range air force bombers, attacking major *Wehrmacht* centres of communication, supply and transportation essential to operations at the front. These larger and steadily more organised night raids proved a distinct challenge given the limited German air defence resources available, but the *Luftwaffe* night fighter airmen still managed to distinguish themselves, some going on to amass impressive victory tallies.

This air war would bear very little resemblance to the one being waged against RAF Bomber Command, and there were many significant differences between German night fighting on the Eastern Front and in the West. The Germans devoted enormous manpower, equipment, radar, anti-aircraft guns, and aircraft to counter British night bomber raids in the West, but in the East, the German night fighter force was created initially from units or off-shoots of units that did not even include night fighting duties as their primary task. These ad hoc formations were never sufficiently resourced to provide even adequate coverage of the lengthy frontline. In late-1941 and the first ten months of 1942, German night fighting on the Eastern Front was no more than improvisations and self-initiatives; individual aircraft rose on moonlit nights to chase Soviet aircraft, relying on eyesight and luck alone. Likewise, the circumstances around shooting down an enemy aircraft at night differed considerably between the

East and West. While British bomber formations drew attention to themselves by tuning their radios or switching on electronic devices, the Soviet long-range bombers, transport and harassment aircraft, had no electronic devices at all. Consequently, the night fighters in the East often had to maintain constant patrols in assigned areas, flying long distances often fruitlessly, and exercising a great deal of patience. This led inevitably to a considerable disproportion between the number of victories claimed and the number of sorties and kilometres flown.

Improvised German night fighting efforts by Bf 109 fighters, He 111 bombers, and a variety of other types in 1942 did result in some successes, particularly during the short summer nights on the northern and central sectors, but it was obvious that a more organised approach was required. Finally, towards the end of 1942, the German *Luftflotten* on the northern, central and southern sectors of the Eastern Front set up their first *Schwärme* dedicated to night defence, resulting in a variety of aircraft types being employed in this task, including the He 111, Bf 110, Do 17 and Ju 88. The *Schwarm* leaders had to build up their tiny units under very difficult circumstances, with little support from those 'higher up', often remaining heavily reliant on the help of the local units from which the *Schwarm* had been carved.

The *Schwarm*-size formations of the Eastern Front night fighters were a further unique characteristic. With such enormous expanses to defend, a *Schwarm* could in time grow to many more than four aircraft. However, this nominally tiny unit size and the flexibility inherent in a small organisation enabled decisions regarding deployments to be made and implemented quickly, shifting resources as necessary, even down to individual aircraft, as defensive needs altered across the very large areas being defended.

The gradual build-up would continue through early 1943, but it was only in the second half of that year that the force finally achieved significant strength. The major reinforcement was the arrival of an entire, dedicated night fighter *Gruppe* in June 1943, in the shape of IV./NJG 5. Soon becoming I./NJG 100, it would remain active on the Eastern Front until war's end. A strengthening of the German night fighter force in the East had by then become essential, as Soviet night incursions were becoming greater and more effective, and also more aggressive with an increasing proportion of attacks by modern, twin-engine bombers.

Along with the deployment of I./NJG 100, fighter control trains mounting radars were introduced to support the Eastern Front. These radar trains enabled fast redeployments to the sectors with the highest concentrations of Soviet night incursions. They represented a significant technological step forward, and played a vital role in improving the effectiveness of *Luftwaffe* night fighters. In some parts of the central and southern sectors, where no radar trains were available in 1943 and 1944, units were instead equipped with the Do 217 night fighter fitted with airborne radar. Unfortunately, this seemingly convenient solution proved only a disappointment in practice, because the Do 217 was entirely unsuitable for deployment to bases without paved runways. These two attempts, one very successful, the other rather less so, to introduce radar flexibly into the East were much-needed supplements to the relatively few stationary ground radars on the Eastern Front, which were located mainly near major airfields and East Prussia.

Meanwhile, the surviving assortment of night fighter *Schwärme* in the Eastern Front *Luftflotten*, plus a pair of night fighter *Staffeln* created within ZG 1, pursued unguided night fighter operations assisted by searchlights. Later reorganised as NJG 200, elements of this unit worked together with local anti-aircraft and searchlight commands. 10.(NJ)/ZG 1 and the *Staffeln* of NJG 200, equipped variously with the Bf 110, Fw 58, He 111, Do 217 and Ju 88, were largely left to cover the southern sector, where the defence of isolated, individual vital areas was the only realistic option given the enormous occupied territory to be defended.

Eventually, I./NJG 100 fought Soviet aircraft at night in all the main areas of the Eastern Front. In the summers of 1943 and 1944 though, the *Gruppe* operated most notably in the central sector during the decisive battle at Kursk, and later in Belarus, where the massive Soviet Bagration offensive was launched in June 1944. As a result, a handful of prominent names would emerge from amongst the Eastern Front night fighter pilots of NJG 100. Gustav Francsi, Alois Lechner, Rudolf Schoenert, Günther Bertram and Josef Pützkuhl will each feature heavily in this account.

In addition to NJG 100 and NJG 200, several *Gruppen* of NJG 5 and the operational *Staffeln* of two training units, NJG 101 and NJG 102, also flew defensive missions on the Eastern Front from the summer of 1944 onwards, as the German army suffered defeat after defeat. Shortly before the end of the war, several other erstwhile Western Front night fighter *Gruppen* were also called upon for day and night operations on the Eastern Front. However, the burden of night fighting against the Soviets would fall largely on small, improvised units, plus NJG 100 and NJG 200, and it is the exploits of these units that are the focus of this book.

By the end of the war, the Eastern Front night fighters had submitted claims¹ for the destruction of 900 Soviet aircraft, and a notable handful of the *Luftwaffe* crews had amassed substantial tallies in the nocturnal war against the Soviet air forces. From very humble and ad hoc beginnings in late-1941 and 1942, the semblance of a night fighter force was developed in 1943 and refined in 1944, using new weaponry, technology, and aircraft types dedicated to the task. This provided the *Luftwaffe* with at least a skeleton defence against the tens of thousands of Soviet incursions in the hours of darkness.

¹ Despite a rigorous *Luftwaffe* aerial victory claims process, requiring eyewitnesses and, if possible, the location of the downed enemy aircraft, some German nocturnal claims were still confirmed by the RLM even though the enemy aircraft did not crash in German territory. There were also occasions when badly damaged Soviet aircraft were able to land on their own airfields after attacks by night fighters.

Chapter 1: Background

1939 - 22 June 1941

"I received new orders, it must have been between 21 and 24 June 1940, to move my Gruppe to Düsseldorf. From there we were to fly night sorties against the RAF in defence of Cologne and the heavily industrialised Ruhr district. I thought all the big shots must have gone crazy. Night chases were impossible, because our aircraft were not equipped for it."

Oblt. Wolfgang Falck, Gruppenkommandeur of I./ZG 1



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Introduction

As the reader will discover, the nocturnal air war on the Eastern Front was a distinctively unique affair, and very different from air combat anywhere else between 1939 and 1945. As emphasised in the Introduction of this book, improvisation was the keyword, not only for the thrown-together *Luftwaffe* night fighter force and its supporting radar units, but also for its Soviet opponents, who had never envisaged anything like the scale of nocturnal air operations they would end up conducting between 1941 and 1945. The result was some very unlikely aerial combatants, as both sides regularly called on aircraft not originally intended for night operations. Before diving into the story, some background on the participants might be helpful.

The German Night Fighter Arm

Night fighting had never been a priority for the Germans prior to their invasion of Poland in September 1939, but 21 months later, by the time of *Unternehmen Barbarossa*, the *Luftwaffe* had been compelled to develop the semblance of a night fighter force. This German force had grown rapidly in 1940 out of sheer necessity (see Table 1), but was still only 4,7 per cent of overall *Luftwaffe* strength when the Soviet Union was invaded, and could barely keep pace with the need for night aerial defence as the *Reich* borders expanded.

This expansion had been improvised at breakneck speed, all by taking existing types and adapting them as quickly as possible for night fighting. The Messerschmitt Bf 110, Dornier 17, Dornier 215 and Junkers 88 were selected as the most

promising, and before long, dedicated night fighter versions of all these types were being produced. However, excepting the very flexible design of the Bf 110, these were only available in small quantities early in the war.

From late 1940 and into 1941, the *Luftwaffe* built up its night fighter force and even began long-range missions following Allied aircraft across the Channel to attack them when landing, which proved quite successful. *Oberst* Josef Kammhuber energetically led the expansion of the night fighter arm, creating new tactics and establishing a new defensive system on the Western Front with radar and searchlights, that would later become known as the Kammhuber Line.

As the German war had expanded, a single night fighter *Staffel* was transferred to the Mediterranean in the spring of 1941, serving in Sicily and North Africa. That apart, German night fighting remained exclusively an affair in the Low Countries and northern Germany, with a few nocturnal intrusions over Britain. As such, it was entirely consistent that the *Luftwaffe* allocated no night fighter units whatsoever to support the invasion in the East.

In summary, when Germany invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941, a *Luftwaffe* night fighter arm had been created, was growing and gradually being enhanced, learning and developing as it went. Yet night fighting was deemed wholly irrelevant to the campaign in the East, primarily because of Hitler's flawed belief that once the Soviet door had been kicked in, the whole rotten edifice would come crumbling down. Even had there been acknowledgement that such a force was necessary, in June 1941 there simply were not the resources available to provide for such a requirement. Once the need for an Eastern Front night fighter arm was belatedly realised, its development would generally mirror that of the overall German night fighter arm through the early war years; initially tiny and then later small forces applying a variety of stopgap but often ingenious, improvised solutions against a largely unanticipated threat.

The *Luftwaffe* would employ an even wider variety of aircraft types as night fighters on the Eastern Front, ranging from the Messerschmitt Bf 109 fighter, Heinkel 111 bomber, Focke-Wulf 58 multi-purpose aircraft, Do 17, and Focke-Wulf 189 reconnaissance aircraft, to the standard dedicated night fighter versions of the Bf 110, Ju 88, and the Do 217.



The twin-engine Ju 88 would eventually become the primary German night fighter on the Eastern Front, but that was only in late 1943. It was a fine aircraft for this role, with good range, more than sufficient performance, and heavy armament, which often included *Schräge Musik*, a cannon array fixed to fire up and forwards. This fitting dramatically enlarged the expanse of engines and wing tanks that could be attacked simultaneously. Originally developed for use against the RAF's Bomber Command, *Schräge Musik* was just as useful against Soviet aircraft, which were equally vulnerable to this form of attack.

The Bf 110 *Zerstörer* was also used by night in substantial numbers in the East, especially in 1942 and 1943, when German 'night fighter' units on that front were employed in the heavy fighter role as much as they were as night fighters. The Bf 110 was a very fine multi-purpose aircraft, but it lacked the range of the Ju 88, a distinct disadvantage for Eastern Front night fighting, which involved much loitering and longer-range sorties.

The Bf 109 was the supreme day fighter in the early war years, but could only ever be a temporary stop-gap measure as an Eastern Front night fighter during 1942. Likewise, the twin-engine He 111, excellently suited to the medium bomber role, was only a temporary measure used out of necessity. In the autumn of 1943 and subsequent winter, the

superb Focke-Wulf 190 was also tested as an Eastern Front night fighter, but did not make the cut, and only a handful of combat missions were ever flown.

As will be seen, the Do 217 proved troublesome in the East. A very heavy aircraft, its landing gear required paved runways, always in short supply in the Soviet Union. Only a few pilots, such as *Hptm.* Rudolf Schoenert, were successful with this type as a night fighter flying against the Soviets. It would have been far more beneficial to equip units with some Fw 189s, a design eminently better suited to combat the numerous low and slow Soviet night harassment biplanes. The Fw 189 was used as an Eastern Front night fighter, but only in very limited numbers.

Above: The Bf 109 D-1 was tested as a night fighter with the experimental unit 11.(N)/LG 2 from the late-summer of 1939 onwards. This photograph was taken at Jüterbog-Damm airfield near Berlin, and the aircraft displays the owl emblem used by this short-lived *Staffel*. (Knoke via Stipdonk)

Below: A Do 17 Z-6 night fighter probably serving with 2./NJG 2 and photographed at Amsterdam-Schiphol airfield, in either the autumn of 1940 or the spring of 1941. This aircraft was used for long-range night fighter missions over England, but had not yet been equipped with an infrared night scope. (Stipdonk)



Date	Total	Types
08.07.1939	12	Bf 109 D
30.09.1939	66	Bf 109 D, Ar 68
30.12.1939	48	Bf 109 D, Ar 68
16.03.1940	38	Bf 109 D, Ar 68
27.04.1940	75	Bf 109 D, Ar 68
25.05.1940	37	Bf 109 D, Ar 68
07.09.1940	64	Bf 110 C, Ju 88, Do 17 Z
09.11.1940	179	Bf 110 C, Bf 110 D, Bf 109 E, Ju 88, Do 17 Z
28.12.1940	165	Bf 110 C, Bf 110 D, Ju 88, Do 17 Z, Do 215
29.03.1941	199	Bf 110 C, Bf 110 E, Bf 109 E, Ju 88, Do 17 Z, Do 215
28.06.1941	244	Bf 110 C, Bf 110 E, Bf 109 E, Ju 88, Do 17 Z, Do 215

Table 2: VVS Sortie Breakdown

Year	Day Sorties	Night Sorties	Night %
1941	259.686	9.879	3,6
1942	365.060	206.070	36,0
1943	474.343	203.514	30,0
1944	630.468	186.579	22,8
1945	448.855	120.307	21,1
Total	2.178.412	726.349	25,0

As in the West, the reliable Ju 88 and Bf 110 would become the backbone of the *Luftwaffe* night fighter force on the Eastern Front, with various more 'exotic' types like the He 111 and Fw 189 called on out of necessity or circumstance. However, the two former types would not begin finding their way to the East in a dedicated night fighter configuration until late-1942 and mid-1943 respectively. By then though, the fortunes of war in the night skies of the Eastern Front were already starting to turn sharply against Germany.

German Radar

Before the war, Germany was amongst the world leaders in radar development. At the outbreak of hostilities in 1939, two types of compact radar sets were already available to the *Luftwaffe*, with all installations concentrated on Germany's North Sea coastline. Work had begun on the short-range FuMG 62 Würzburg radar system in 1936, and the Germans soon began developing a coastal radar chain, which would integrate the long-range FuMG 80 Freya early warning radars. The Freya radar was able to detect aircraft at up to 80 kilometres early in the war, later achieving a range of 120 to 150 kilometres. The more accurate, but shorter-ranging (40 kilometre) Würzburg sets provided the more detailed and accurate tactical information to the defenders. The improved FuMG 65 Würzburg Riese was developed later in the war, and could detect targets out to 70 kilometres.

Below: Bf 110 night fighters of 9. and 10./NJG 1 at List airfield on the northern part of the isle of Sylt, seen in the late-winter snow on 25 February 1942. (Stipdonk)



Establishing any equivalent to the Kammhuber Line in the East was entirely out of the question, due to the enormous area involved – with a front more than 3.000 kilometres long – as well as the unpredictable volatility of the frontlines. Instead, the innovative solution of trains bearing a combination of Würzburg and Freya radars and fighter direction control rooms was adopted, mixed in with the establishment of illuminated night fighting zones with searchlight detachments in some of the sectors most frequently targeted by Soviet night bombers. Only as the front approached the coast of the Baltic States and the *Reich* did traditional fixed radar sites also begin to figure in this story.

Night Operations by the Soviet Air Force

The Soviet air force, the *Voyenno-Vozdushnyye Sily*, or VVS, had focussed largely on daylight operations prior to the German invasion, although the bomber arm had recognised the importance of night missions in its pre-war Field Manual. A pivot to nocturnal operations occurred out of necessity after the catastrophic opening months of the war; in 1941 fewer than four per cent of VVS operations were by night, but that figure would rise to 36,0 per cent in 1942!

The Soviet air force organisation was complicated, comprising multiple independent branches. The VVS FA (*Frontovaya Aviatsiya*, frontal aviation) supported the Red Army directly,



whilst a maritime element was titled the VVS VMF (*Voyenno-Morskogo Flota*, military maritime fleet). The latter was further subdivided by fleet area (see the Soviet Naval Aviation section below). Soviet long-range bombers were initially under the command of the DBA (*Dal'ne Bombardirovchnaya Aviatsiya*), but that was reorganised and hived off into another wholly independent command, the ADD (*Aviatsiya Dal'nego Deystviya*), in early 1942. These three elements would provide most of the work for German night fighters on the Eastern Front, along with a mix of transport aircraft flown by the Civil Air Fleet, or GVF (*Grashdanski Vozdushy Flot*), which itself was subordinated to the ADD in July 1943.

By the end of 1941, the Germans had destroyed more than 10.000 Soviet aircraft, and in total, the Soviet air forces had lost at least 17.000 aircraft of all types to all causes. Together with these enormous losses, by the autumn of 1941 many of the Soviet aircraft industry's major plants had either been overrun or were still being relocated eastwards, and by production of almost all Soviet combat aircraft had temporarily ceased. At the close of that year, the Soviets were critically short of aircraft of all types, and the surprising rebirth of the VVS during the latter half of 1942 and into 1943 would be an eye-opener for the *Luftwaffe*.

Although the pre-war Soviet air forces had focused largely on daylight operations, a shift to

night operations became a necessity in 1942, both because of the astronomical aircraft and personnel casualties in the preceding year, and to minimise losses and make best use of the aircraft types most available. Consequently, old, slow aircraft only flown at night for survivability soon came to form a very significant component of Soviet air operations. Overall, in the years 1941, 1942, and 1943, the VVS flew a remarkable 27,6 per cent of its missions at night, and with overwhelming likelihood the majority of these night sorties were flown by obsolete two-seater biplanes in both 1942 and 1943. These small and obsolete aircraft could fly up to ten sorties, sometimes even more, per night during the long winter nights. This situation forced the *Luftwaffe* to take countermeasures.

Above: A Do 215 B-5 Kauz 3 with its powerful armament of three 20mm MG FF and three 7,92mm MG 17. The aircraft was also equipped with an infrared night scope, shown by the glass nose and aiming device installed in the front cockpit glass. The aircraft belonged to NJG 1 and the photograph was probably taken in the spring of 1941. (Klees via Stipdonk)

Table 3: DBA and ADD Strength²²

Date	Strength	Serviceable	Percentage	Types
22.06.41	1.339	1.018	76,0%	DB-3, DB-3F, TB-3, TB-7
10.07.41	688	515	74,8%	DB-3, TB-3
01.10.41	472	275	58,2%	DB-3, DB-3F, TB-3, TB-7
18.03.42	402	231	57,4%	DB-3, Il-4, Yer-2, TB-3, TB-7
18.11.42	479	319	66,5%	DB-3, Il-4, Yer-2, TB-3, TB-7, Li-2, B-25
01.07.43	740	512	69,2%	Il-4, Yer-2, TB-3, Pe-8, Li-2, B-25
01.01.44	1.003	777	77,4%	Il-4, Pe-8, Li-2, B-25
01.06.44	1.266	1.266	100%	Il-4, Pe-8, Li-2, B-25
01.01.45	1.355	1.182	87,2%	Il-4, Yer-2, Pe-8, Li-2, B-25
10.05.45	1.675	1.454	86,8%	Il-4, Yer-2, TB-3, Pe-8, Li-2, B-25

Chapter 2: Early Night Fighting on The Eastern Front

22 June 1941 - 31 December 1942

"The Soviets, unsurpassed in improvisation, use single-engine two-seaters for night-time attacks, where, due to the lack of bomb-dropping equipment, the small fragmentation bombs were simply thrown overboard by the man in the rear cockpit. The result was one could no longer find rest at night. The thought of remedying the situation gave rise to the idea of using the heavy He 111 as a makeshift night fighter. The attempt was daring and Ofw. Engelbert Heiner from the 9. Staffel was able to achieve several successes."

Lt. Karl Schmid from III./KG 27, 17 September 1942



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Introduction

On 22 June 1941, Germany invaded the Soviet Union. The Soviets suffered tremendous casualties in the surprise attack, and could initially muster little in response. However, as early as the night of 7/8 August, Soviet long-range bombers flew to Berlin on moonlit nights, causing Berliners to scurry to their shelters as air raid alarms sounded. Although these attacks caused only minor damage, they were completely unacceptable to the leadership in Berlin. As a result, they issued an unrealistic instruction that no Soviet bomber was to release its bombs over the greater *Reich*, including East Prussia. At this time, Berlin was only protected by anti-aircraft batteries assisted by searchlights, and despite the demands of the German leadership, the Soviets continued their nuisance raids more or less unhindered, albeit on a very small scale. On the night of 16/17 August they flew their fourth raid, and it was the largest so far, albeit still only a very small effort: of the 22 aircraft from the VVS KBF that took off for Berlin, seventeen reached the city, dropping 10,5 tons of high explosive and incendiary bombs.

These 1941 attacks on the *Reich* only subsided after Soviet airfields within range had been lost to the relentless German army advance in the autumn. Meanwhile, other Soviet aircraft commenced nocturnal activities over the Eastern Front in the summer and autumn of 1941. For the remainder of the war, the main purpose of Soviet air force night operations would be the supply and support of their partisans operating behind enemy lines, supplemented by bombing and harassment sorties flown against Axis troops, military installations, *Luftwaffe* airfields, and a variety of other targets in German-occupied territory. In late-1941 and 1942, this would compel the Germans to use whatever means they had available to provide some kind of deterrence.

Stopgap Measures - Night Fighter Units Arrive

Although the Soviet air force night operations in 1941 and 1942 were of little more than nuisance value, the *Luftwaffe* had to take steps to counter them. The result in the first year-and-a-half after the invasion of the Soviet Union was a number of uncoordinated and ad hoc German responses, improvised independently by each of *Luftflotte* 1 in the north, *Luftwaffenkommando Ost* in the centre, and *Luftflotte* 4 in the south. Thus, through 1941

and 1942 there was no systematic overall approach to establishing German night fighter defences on the Eastern Front, because the *Luftwaffe* lacked the necessary specialist resources, with a much greater need for existing night fighter units to remain on the Western Front. The Soviet nocturnal missions simply paled in significance when compared to the nightly assaults of the RAF's Bomber Command.

The German drive on Moscow by *Heeresgruppe Mitte* stumbled and failed within sight of the Soviet capital in the final months of 1941. Simultaneously, the *Luftwaffe* withdrew numerous flying units from that sector and sent them to the Mediterranean, in part to bolster forces defending vulnerable Axis supply lines to North Africa. With the heavy aircraft losses suffered since the beginning of *Unternehmen Barbarossa*, and then the launch of a significant Soviet counteroffensive near Moscow on 5 December 1941, the *Luftwaffe* suddenly had an urgent need for reinforcements for the central sector of the Eastern Front. The commander-in-chief of the *Luftwaffe*, *Reichsmarschall* Hermann Göring, therefore ordered that flying units be sent immediately to augment VIII. *Fliegerkorps*, which was now commanding all *Luftwaffe* forces on that part of the front. These would include a sprinkling of night fighter units.

I./Nachtjagdgeschwader 4

To establish night air defences in the central sector of the front following the Soviet counteroffensive, the I. *Gruppe* of NJG 4 was chosen in haste as a stopgap measure. The unit had been created from I./ZG 26 'Horst Wessel' - an experienced daytime *Zerstörergruppe* that had been involved in all major German campaigns since May 1940. After a sufficient period of night fighter training at Kitzingen and Lüneburg, the unit assembled at Stargard in north-western Poland on 23 December 1941. It transferred with 22 Bf 110s via Jesau and Bryansk to Shatalovka-West, arriving between 27 and 30 December in the depths of a bleak Soviet winter.

The unit immediately found itself in a very difficult situation. The massive Soviet counteroffensive had ripped large holes in the *Heeresgruppe Mitte* front in the final weeks of 1941, and the commander of VIII. *Fliegerkorps*, *General der Flieger* Wolfram Freiherr von Richthofen, had called upon all his units to undertake combat missions in a desperate order on 4 January 1942. He even went as far as to instruct *Luftwaffe* crews to carry out operations without regard to loss:



"I order and expect extreme efforts to get as many aircraft as possible into the air. Work is to be undertaken on the aircraft regardless of rank or specialist training. Any take-off risk is to be accepted. The situation demands that combat be carried out without any consideration to loss. Every crew must know that they alone are responsible for determining when to initiate combat and for upholding the honour of service under arms. Sacrifice is your duty!"

This new order meant that the night fighter unit immediately undertook risky daytime ground-attack operations, rather than fulfilling its intended role; in effect it now performed more in its former role as a *Zerstörergruppe* than as a night fighter unit.

On 6 January, two days after von Richthofen's order, I./NJG 4 was subordinated to *Gefechtsverband Rettberg* under the *Nahkampfführer Nord*, *Generalmajor* Martin Fiebig, operating to the south-west of Moscow in support of 2. *Armee*, 2. *Panzerarmee* and 4. *Armee*. The *Gruppe* flew in daylight alongside II./ZG 26, escorting Stuka and bomber units, as well as carrying out strikes on railway stations, trains, roads and airfields. A typical daily order for I./NJG 4 from this period, dated 25 January 1942, read:

"A) To attack enemy movements in villages on both sides of the Vytebet valley.

B) To detect and monitor enemy advances near Kuzminko and to the south-east, and from Nyushkova towards the south-west. Top priority: to clearly identify the spearheads of the enemy assault groups and the main assembly areas of enemy forces. Secondary target: road Kozelsk-Bel'ov and from Kozelsk towards the south-west."

Despite the focus on shoring up the immediate situation on the ground, night missions were also ordered and flown, beginning in late-February and continuing into March. For example, during

Above: Some Bf 110 Es of I./NJG 4 near Moscow during January or February 1942. Note that the aircraft are still carrying the unit code from their former unit, ZG 26, and are displaying a new all-white camouflage to match their surroundings.

Below: Bf 110 E '3U + FK' of 2./NJG 4 with a very worn winter camouflage scheme, at Bryansk airfield during the early spring of 1942.



Below: The commander of VIII. *Fliegerkorps*, *General der Flieger* Wolfram Freiherr von Richthofen, who was impressed by the successes achieved by the early improvised night fighter units.



the night of 1/2 March, I./NJG 4 was instructed to fly night fighter and ground-attack operations along the road between Roslavl and Yuhnov, the road between Vyazma and Gzhatsk (modern Gagarin), along the railway line Smolensk-Yartsevo-Vyazma, as well as to airfields in the area, plus the interdiction of a snow road. On the night of 5/6 March, night fighters again went hunting ground targets, this time along the Yuhnov-Roslavl and Vyazma-Smolensk roads. Despite the focus on nightly strafing missions, aerial victories were not unheard of. On 31 March, an unidentified crew of I./NJG 4 shot down a U-2, although this was probably during daytime. This made it the second *Staffel* of a *Zerstörergruppe* (albeit now operating with a

Below: Map showing the ground situation west of Moscow during the Soviet counteroffensive from mid-December 1941 to late-January 1942.



night fighter unit designation), to achieve its 100th confirmed daytime aerial victory. Given the focus on daylight operations, and with the situation on the Eastern Front stabilised again, the *Gruppe* became part of the newly recreated ZG 2 the following month. It was not until September 1942 that the *Luftwaffenführungsstab* ordered the reformation of a new I./NJG 4 from parts of I./NJG 3, III./NJG 1 and III./NJG 4, but this was now to bolster the night fighter defences of the *Reich*.

Nachtjagdgeschwader 3

In February 1942, the Bf 110-equipped 2. and 3. *Staffeln* of NJG 3 were ordered to operate in the area of *Heeresgruppe Mitte* to combat the enemy's round-the-clock bombing attacks and harassment missions. On 22 February 1942, both *Staffeln* took off from Wittmund for Stade. Via Prenzlau and Königsberg-Devau, they reached Smolensk-Nord the next day, and their new base of Shatalovka on the 24th. In the evening of 27 February, between 19:45 and 22:15, the crew of *Oblt.* Gerhard Böhmel flew a patrol over Shatalovka and made contact with one of the large Soviet TB-7 bombers, but had no luck in shooting it down.

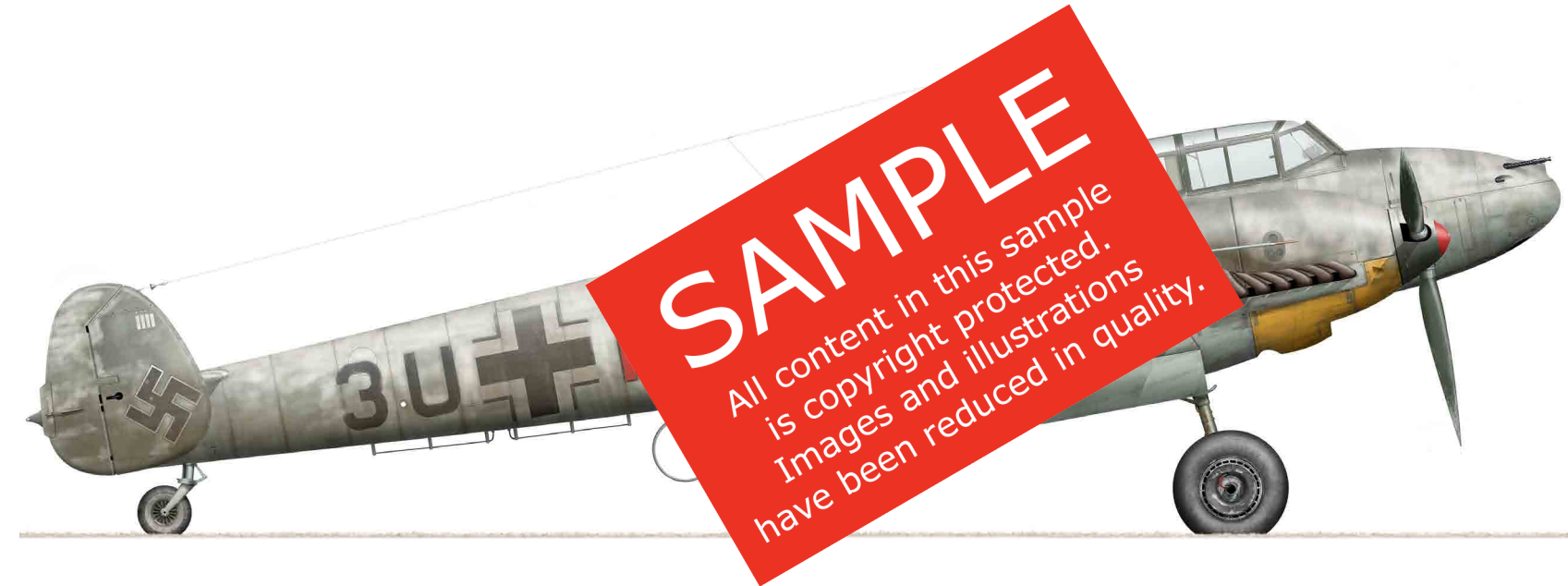
Böhmel, who was the *Staffelkapitän* of 3./NJG 3, had previously flown with I./ZG 76, was active again the following night, but at around 20:25, the Bf 110 he was piloting was hit by an enemy gunner and shot down. Although *Oblt.* Böhmel's radio operator, *Fw.* Rudolf Seifert, was able to parachute to safety, Böhmel was killed in the ensuing crash. It was an inauspicious start to operations.

Böhmel's opponent on the night of 28 February/1 March 1942 was future Hero of the Soviet Union Vasily Reshetnikov, born in Ukraine in 1919, who recalled this mission in an Il-4:

"On 28 February we headed off to Orsha to attack Balbasovo airfield where the bombers targeting Moscow were based. ...

At the same moment the tail of our aircraft was caught by a good dozen searchlights and shell bursts began to dance furiously around us. ... Then suddenly the shooting ceased and there was silence, although the searchlights still wouldn't leave us alone. An anxious thought: 'What's up? Why have they stopped shooting?' 'Chernov,' I yelled, 'watch the surrounds!'

I glanced back and left. Then I gasped: the



black silhouette of a twin-engine Messerschmitt 110 was hanging above us, quite close. It seemed that Chernov had headed him off, sending a long burst into his belly out of his ShKAS, but the Messerschmitt still managed to shoot a powerful burst of fire from all his nose guns. It pierced the fuselage of our aircraft with a roar. Losing altitude quickly, I stalled into a sharp left turn. I even turned down the revs to reduce my turning radius, but I could see that my instrument panel had been smashed to pieces and the centre section [of the fuselage] was full of holes. When the ground seemed quite close, I revved up both engines. The left one was no longer putting out maximum revolutions but the load on the elevator had grown immensely - the aircraft was lifting its nose. But something even worse was happening - in the cockpit Vasya Zemskov gave a groan and then fell silent.

What is our speed? Can we hold the aircraft in the air or are we going to crash now? Maybe it is better to land somewhere before we drop? Chernov, Nezhentsev, what is on your instruments? 'Altitude 200 [metres], speed 240 [km/h]. We'll be okay!'

'Where is the fighter aircraft?' - 'Burning on the ground!' A fire was indeed blazing below us and to the right. Only aircraft burn that way. It was our kill."

Throughout the rest of March, the night fighters of I./NJG 3 monitored the enemy airspace south-west of Vyazma, without encountering any enemy aircraft. When the weather was suitable for operations, the night fighters also flew, amongst other things, road-hunting missions on the Yuhnov-Roslavl

road and twilight sorties south of Vyazma. Then, on 18 March, both *Staffeln* were ordered to leave the Eastern Front and transfer to Vechta, in north-western Germany, which they reached three days later. This illustrates very well how Western Front night fighting took priority over the Eastern Front, with these resources diverted away from the East just three months after Göring had ordered the reinforcement of the Moscow sector. Yet, the results achieved on the Eastern Front hardly justified keeping these units there - the two *Staffeln* of NJG 3 had claimed no night victories at all during their deployment - and the situation on the ground had now stabilised after the German period of crisis through the winter.

The Beginnings of an Eastern Front Night Fighter Force

In the spring and summer of 1942, the first German night fighting sectors (*Räume*) were set up in the central and southern parts of the Eastern Front, in cooperation with local anti-aircraft units. These sectors were largely covered by crews from long-range reconnaissance units with the requisite night-flying experience. At the end of April 1942, for example, a Bf 110 crew was deployed by the *Nahkampfführer* Mariupol for night fighting in the Mariupol area against the Soviet transport aircraft flying supply missions to partisans and remnants of trapped Red Army formations now operating in the German rear areas. Reflecting the Soviet inability to inflict serious damage on the German army during night operations, it was not until June 1942 that *Luftflotte 4* issued guidelines for the

Below: Highly decorated Soviet long-range bomber pilot Vasily Reshetnikov, photographed in 1943. He was a Ukrainian, and passed away at the age of 103 on 20 March 2023. (warheroes.ru)

