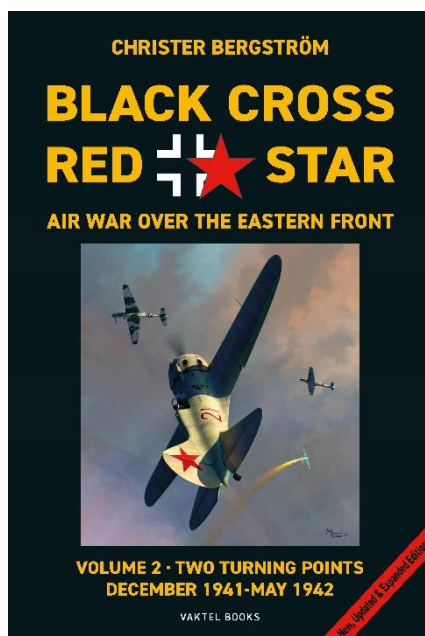


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“Mayor Vasilij Chuvilo received the special task of neutralizing the German fighters at Klin. He organized the operation as a series of ‘rolling attacks’ so that the smoke from the fires caused by the aircraft that attacked first would not obscure the sight of the following planes. The first strike was carried out by nine Pe-2s at 0916 hours, followed by one crew at 0930, and five at 1120 hours. All bombers returned safely to base after the raids, with the fliers enthusiastically reporting great success. The whole airfield was reported to be in flames. In fact, this operation neutralized both II./JG 52 and the Spanish volunteer squadron Escuadrilla Azul. Mayor Chuvilo was awarded the Order of the Red Banner five days later.”

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**BLACK CROSS**  **RED STAR**  **2**

CHRISTER BERGSTRÖM

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# BLACK CROSS RED **STAR**

AIR WAR OVER THE EASTERN FRONT



**VOLUME 2 - TWO TURNING POINTS**  
**DECEMBER 1941-MAY 1942**

VAKTEL BOOKS

*New, Updated & Expanded Edition*

## CHAPTER 8

# “Grünherz” Fighters Versus Soviet Aces

In the Northern Combat Zone, between Lake Ladoga and the area around Lake Ilmen, the Red Army mainly focused on raising the German blockade of Leningrad, which had lasted since September 1941. The Soviet offensive immediately to the south of Lake Ladoga in early December 1941 had pushed the Germans out of their advanced position at Tikhvin, thus relieving Leningrad of its most acute supply difficulties. This also thwarted the hopes of Germany's Finnish ally for a united German-Finnish military operation along the eastern shores of Lake Ladoga, because Soviet Seventh Independent Army had halted the Finns along River Svir—which connects Lake Ladoga and Lake Onega—between 80 and 250 km inside the 1939 border of the Soviet territory.

For all that, the Germans still held a wedge between Leningrad and the Soviet hinterland on the southern shore of Lake Ladoga at Schlüsselburg, east of the city. Thus, the Soviet counteroffensive could not prevent the besieged Leningrad from becoming the scene of a terrible famine. However, a combination of scarce Luftwaffe resources and the powerful air defense of Leningrad—above all the anti-aircraft artillery—saved the city from air raids during the first three months of 1942. But apart from this, the Soviet air forces in the northern combat zone were not able to achieve many successes in early 1942.

As the cream of the VVS was concentrated at the Moscow battle zone, only weak Soviet air forces remained in the Northern Combat Zone following the costly air battles in 1941. On January 1, 1942, General-Leytenant Aleksandr Novikov's VVS Leningrad Front mustered 280 aircraft, of which 175 were serviceable—144 fighters, 27 bombers, and 4 Shturmoviks, plus 3 reconnaissance aircraft.<sup>1</sup>

The fighters based in Leningrad were Curtiss P-40s of 39 IAD's five regiments (see p. 54) and those of 7 IAK/PVO, which by January 1942 had been reduced to four regiments:

- 26 IAP (equipped with Hawker Hurricanes)
- 44 IAP (LaGG-3)
- 123 IAP (I-16 and Yak-1)
- 124 IAP (MiG-3)

The air force of the new Volkhov Front under General-Mayor Ivan Zhuravlyov had been reinforced with new biplane bombers and the 2nd Reserve Air Group, 2 RAG, with three fighter regiments and one each bomber and Shturmovik regiment. On January 12, VVS Volkhov Front reported a strength of 211 serviceable aircraft, of which more than half were biplane night bombers—U-2s, R-5s, and R-Zs. General-Mayor Mikhail Samokhin's Air Force of the Red Banner Baltic Fleet, VVS KBF, which operated over the Gulf of Finland and Lake Ladoga, mustered 91 service-



Hannes Trautloft (left) addressing some of his men. In the background, Hans Philipp and a row of Bf 109s can be seen. Trautloft commanded JG 54 between August 1940 and July 1943. He is recognized as one of the most competent Geschwaderkommodore of the Luftwaffe Fighter Arm in World War II. In the summer of 1943, the General der Jagdflieger, Adolf Galland, appointed him Inspector of Fighter units on the Eastern Front. By that time, he had flown 560 combat missions and been credited with 58 aerial victories, including five in Spain. After the war, Trautloft rose to the rank of a Generalleutnant in the Bundesluftwaffe. He retired at the age of 58 in 1970 and passed away in Bad Wiessee on January 11, 1995. (Photo: Via Trautloft.)

able aircraft. One advantage on the Soviet side was that Leningrad PVO was provided with a chain of ten RUS-2 early warning radar stations, with a range of between 100 and 150 km.

The primary responsibilities of Soviet aviation in the Northern Combat Zone were divided between air defense



of Leningrad, air cover of the so-called "Ice Road" (the supply "lifeline" across the frozen surface of Lake Ladoga to Leningrad), and close support for the front troops. In late 1941, 123 IAP of 7 IAK/PVO, along with the Red Banner Baltic Fleet's 11 IAP, 13 IAP, and 12 OIAE had been allocated to the defense of the "Ice Road." These forces were reinforced by 39 IAD of VVS Leningrad Front on New Year's Day. On January 2, VVS KBF formed a special aviation group for operations in the southern Ladoga region; it consisted of sixty-four aircraft of the naval 5 IAP, 13 IAP, 57 ShAP, 71 IAP, 42 ORAE, and 13 OIAE.

As the Soviet offensive from Tikhvin was halted at River Volkhov, which connected Lakes Ladoga and Ilmen, Generaloberst Alfred Keller instructed his Luftflotte 1 to intensify armed reconnaissance over the "Ice Road." Luftflotte 1 had been responsible for air cover for the German Army Group North since the opening of the invasion of the USSR. This air fleet was composed of only a single air corps, General Helmuth Förster's Fliegerkorps I, which mustered 115 serviceable aircraft on January 15, 1942—forty-four Bf 109 fighters, thirty-two Ju 88 and He 111 bombers, twenty-six transport and liaison aircraft, eight Ju 87 dive-bombers, and five Ju 88 reconnaissance planes. In addition, there were two tactical reconnaissance Staffeln, 2.(H)/21 and 4.(H)/23. On the plus side, the units of Luftflotte 1 operated from well-equipped airdromes in or close to the former Baltic countries, which were in turn tied directly to the Luftwaffe's infrastructure in Germany. Thus, Fliegerkorps I was not hampered by the cold to the same extent as Fliegerkorps VIII farther to the south. In combination with a comparatively lower qualitative standard of the Soviet aviation units in this sector, this gave the air war in the northern combat zone in the winter of 1941-42 a completely different character than that in the central combat zone.

Since the new year opened with clear skies (and minus 25-degree-Celsius-temperature (-13°F), a series of intense air fighting evolved over Lake Ladoga during the first days in January—in which the Bf 109s of JG 54 "Grünherz" would prove their vast superiority. This, which was the only Jagdgeschwader in the Leningrad area, had some of the most highly motivated German airmen on the Eastern Front during the difficult winter of 1941-42. Credit for JG 54's morale must go to the Geschwaderkommodore, Major Hannes Trautloft, who took great personal care of his men—in contrast to certain other fighter unit commanders who were mainly occupied with achieving personal victories. The large and well-equipped bases at Siverskaya and Krasnogvardeysk also contributed to keeping the mood up among the "Grünherz" men. At the latter base, they were billeted in the old Czar's residence.

The atmosphere amongst these highly trained German fighter pilots formed a sharp contrast to what the Soviet defector Starshiy Leytenant Petr Kulakov of 13 IAP/VVS KBF (see pp. 49ff) said during his interrogation about the Soviet airmen in the same area: "The mood among the old fliers is very negative. In any case, there are very few old pilots remaining. Most pilots are very young novices who have arrived at the front directly from the schools. Some of them flew their first missions only in 1941. The atti-

tude among the younger pilots is quite different. They are fanatical and naïve, very narrow-minded, and incapable of realizing the seriousness of the situation. The pilots evade combat with the Messerschmitts. The word 'Messerschmitt' is even prohibited among us."<sup>2</sup>

\*

Throughout New Year's Day, the Bf 109s of JG 54 conducted strafing missions and fighter sweeps over the "Ice Road," claiming six locomotives and fourteen trucks destroyed. During a mission by four Bf 109s of 7./JG 54 in this area, Unteroffizier Gerhard Raimann suddenly caught sight of a lone four-engine TB-3, painted all over in black, that came lumbering at low altitude above the frozen surface of Lake Ladoga. "Four-engine transport plane below! I attack!" Raimann excitedly cried in the R/T.<sup>3</sup> The huge TB-3 attempted to make it across the lake with twenty passengers, but without any fighter escort, it stood no chance at all. "A few seconds later I could see the four-engine transport plane fall in flames and crash onto the ice on Lake Ladoga," Major Trautloft later wrote in his diary. "The word *Abschuss* crackles in my headphones, and that was the end of the game."<sup>4</sup> Sixteen of the passengers were killed and the other four were rescued with severe injuries.<sup>5</sup> In addition, the Chief of Staff of VVS KBF, Polkovnik Dmitriy Surkov, was killed when a "Grünherz" pilot shot down the UTI-4 in which he flew over Lake Ladoga. And that was not the only serious personnel loss the Soviet air forces sustained in this area on New Year's Day.

On the Soviet side in this region, Mayor Vladimir Matveyev, the commander of 158 IAP, was something of the equivalent to Major Hannes Trautloft: one of the most popular and respected unit commanders at that time. Early on January 1, 1942, he took off at the head of four P-40 Tomahawk fighters to patrol above the "Ice Road." He spotted two Bf 109s that were strafing a truck convoy on the ice, and pressed the transmit button of his R/T and called out: "Enemy ahead. Attack!"

Just as the four P-40 Tomahawks put their noses down, a second Bf 109 Rotte bounced them from the rear and above, headed for the lead Soviet fighter. Leytenant Vasilii Kharitonov got on the tail of these two Bf 109s and reportedly shot down one of them. As he turned to attack the next enemy fighter, Kharitonov found even more Bf 109s appearing on the scene. He also saw his commander pursue a Bf 109 while a second enemy fighter approached Matveyev's Tomahawk from below. Tracer bullets hit the Tomahawk right in the belly. The fighter fell into a spin and sent Mayor Matveyev plunging to his death. Oberleutnant Hans-Ekkehard Bob's 9./JG 54 returned from the first mission carried out that morning with four claims for four shot down Soviet fighters,<sup>6</sup> possibly including Matveyev's P-40.

13 IAP/VVS KBF also took a heavy beating from JG 54 over the Ladoga that day. Five of this regiment's I-16s, divided into two groups, were on patrol over the western part of the lake when the commissar of 1st Eskadrilya, Starshiy Politruk Seven Dmitriyevskiy, caught sight of a formation of German bombers. Dmitriyevskiy, leading two other I-16s, had just turned in against the bombers when

six Bf 109s appeared on the scene. After a tight turning combat, Serzhant Dmitriyev's Ishak was set burning and the pilot bailed out. Next, a Bf 109 got on Politruk Dmitriyevskiy's tail while he was still pursuing the bombers. One or two cannon shells exploded in the engine of his I-16, which immediately burst into flames. The small Ishak turned over, went into a steep dive, and crashed onto the ice close to the coast, killing Starshiy Politruk Dmitriyevskiy. Shortly afterward, Serzhant Aleksandr Baydrakov's I-16 was badly hit and this pilot had to disengage.



Leytenant Gennadiy Tsokolayev at his I-16, which has been embellished with the Guards emblem after 13 IAP was elevated to 4 GIAP/VVS KBF in January 1942. Born in 1916, Gennadiy Tsokolayev flew with 13 IAP/VVS KBF during the Winter War against Finland. He scored two individual and four shared victories in 1941. Tskoloayev was one among many Soviet servicemen who was appointed a Hero of the Soviet Union on June 14, 1942. He survived 510 combat missions during the war and was credited with seven individual and thirteen shared victories.

Then two three-plane Zveniya, led by Leytenant Gennadiy Tsokolayev, of 13 IAP/VVS KBF's 2nd Eskadriya, and Kapitan Aleksandr Agureyev, deputy commander of the 3rd Eskadriya, were scrambled. Shortly after takeoff, as they had reached two thousand meters and were still climbing, a Bf 109 Staffel bounced them. The three I-16s led by Kapitan Agureyev, flying top cover, received the brunt of the attack. Both Serzhant Zaboykin's and Agureyev's I-16s were severely damaged and the pilots disengaged, with the latter limping back towards the base escorted by the third fighter of the Zveno. Having thus neutralized the Soviet top cover, the Bf 109s went straight after Gennadiy Tsokolayev's flight, whose three pilots soon found themselves involved in a desperate struggle for survival. While Leytenant Tsokolayev, who was one of the most skillful fighter pilots in VVS KBF, managed to evade all attacks by using everything his aircraft had to give, Serzhant Nikolay Shchegolyov was wounded.

Only when the other 13 IAP/VVS KBF I-16s that remained airborne intervened did the German fighter pilots disengage. But Kapitan Agureyev's crippled I-16 could not be saved. Unable to complete the landing approach, the aircraft clipped the top of a tree, was thrown into a dense fir grove, and caught fire. Agureyev managed to get out of the aircraft only seconds before the fuel tanks blew up.

By that time, three more formations, each comprised of nine Ju 88s escorted by Bf 109s, appeared on a heading towards the Kobona area and the "Ice Road." The 13 IAP/VVS KBF pilots went after them, and in the ensuing clash another two I-16s were damaged. In total, the combat this day cost 13 IAP/VVS KBF one pilot killed and five wounded, with three aircraft destroyed and seven dama-

ged. One of the unit's pilots, Leytenant Vasily Golubev, heard the regiment's senior engineer, Nikolay Nikolayev, remark bitterly: "Two or three such days more, and there will be no aircraft left in the regiment."<sup>7</sup>

In I./JG 54, Hauptmann Franz Eckerle claimed two I-16s for his 39th and 40th kills, while his wingman Oberfeldwebel Karl Fuchs bagged one for his 14th, and 9./JG 54's Oberfeldwebel Friedrich Rupp claimed a fifth. Shortly afterward, Unteroffizier Fritz Ebner of I./JG 54 also claimed an I-16, for his first kill. Apart from 13 IAP/VVS KBF, 439 IAP of the Leningrad Front also lost two I-16s, with both pilots, Politruk Filipp Arzhanov and Starshiy Serzhant Filipp Mandra, getting killed.

With 13 IAP/VVS KBF more or less neutralized, Yak-1s, LaGG-3s, and P-40 Tomahawks from 5 IAP/VVS KBF and 39 IAD were sent into the air as further reinforcements. During a twenty-five-minute combat, three of these fighters were shot down. In return, Leytenant Igor Kabarov of 5 IAP/VVS KBF claimed a Bf 109 for his seventh victory—quite vividly described in his memoirs:

"'There they are, Petro!' I shouted over the radio to Chepelkin. Meanwhile, the pair of Messerschmitts flew low above the trucks. First, I took aim at the second Messerschmitt, but it unexpectedly banked to one side and disappeared. Then I went after the leader, who had already shot at one of the vehicles. I opened fire. The enemy fighter, enveloped in black smoke, turned sharply aside, turned on its back and fell to the ice.

'That's the way to wish a Fascist a Happy New Year!'

Red flames and a plume of black smoke showed against the white snow. People were running across the lake's virgin snow to the place where the Messerschmitt had fallen. But where was the other aircraft? We couldn't see it. Probably, somewhere in this area, the enemy had a station for eavesdropping. The second Messerschmitt had not made off without a reason, for I had only shouted: 'There they are, Petro!' The leader had evidently hoped to strike the motor vehicle and slip away, but he wasn't so lucky."<sup>8</sup>

After another combat later that day, Starshiy Leytenant Petr Chepelkin reported: "We ran into some dangerous opponents. They took us on without the advantages of visibility or altitude. Both the leader and the second pilot were experienced wolves."<sup>9</sup> These "dangerous opponents" might have been 3./JG 54's Staffelfkapitän, Oberleutnant Max-Hellmuth Ostermann, and his wingman. Ostermann in fact flew straight into the Soviet Lufbery circle, outturned one of the Yak-1s and shot it down.<sup>10</sup> The pilot, Kapitan Petr Munin, was lucky to survive the demise of his aircraft. It was Ostermann's 47th victory.

In total, JG 54 reported thirteen Soviet aircraft shot down on the first day of 1942. Its own losses are unclear. In his diary, Major Trautloft reported that there had been no losses, but the Luftwaffe's records indicate that JG 54 lost two Bf 109s this day, one shot down above Lake Ladoga and one in a take-off accident, though the identity of the shot down pilot was not mentioned.

The Soviet airmen fared somewhat better on January 2. The combat started in the morning, when Luftwaffe bombers from KG 1 and KG 4 mounted concentrated raids against the western stretch of the "Ice Road" and the loading port of Osinovets. Meanwhile, six Bf 109s from 7./JG 54 spotted a group of "I-18s" above Novaya Ladoga Airdrome—probably LaGG-3s of 5 IAP/VVS KBF, where Starshiy Leytenant Georgiy Kostylev and Semyon Lvov reported an engagement with Bf 109s. Oberfeldwebel Karl-Heinz Kempf made a high-side attack and claimed two of the Soviet fighters shot down. However, no such Soviet losses were recorded.<sup>11</sup>

As Kempf and the other pilots of 7./JG 54 set course for their base at Siverskaya, they could see black smoke rising from the airfield. VVS Leningrad Front had sent five Pe-2s of 18 BAP, escorted by eight I-16s of 439 IAP, against the German airfield. The airborne 7./JG 54 pilots arrived just as the Soviet aircraft turned for home and struck down on them with a vengeance. But the Soviet escort fighters engaged the Messerschmitts in a frantic air combat. Only after Kempf had claimed two I-16s and Unteroffizier Johann Halfmann one, was Kempf able to break through to the bombers and shoot one down. Thus, Kempf had achieved five kills in a single mission, bringing his total victory score to forty-one.<sup>12</sup> Two days later, he was awarded the Knight's Cross.

However, the Pe-2s had succeeded in taking out six Bf 109s, four Ju 88s, and twenty trucks on the ground, and one



A row of white-painted I-16s of 4 GIAP/VVS KBF (formerly 13 IAP VVS/KBF). "Red 34" was flown by Mladshiy Leytenant Grigoriy Guryanov, who is seen in the foreground. Guryanov arrived at the unit in September 1941, fresh from flight school. He was shot down as Hans Philipp's 90th victory on March 17, 1942, but survived. Guryanov was shot down and killed on his 365th combat mission on August 22, 1944. He amassed a score of six individual and five shared victories.



Vasily Golubev is seen here with one hand on one of his I-16's propeller blades. Born in 1912, Golubev was an enthusiastic sailplane flier before the war. He served as a naval fighter pilot from August 1940 and was appointed commander of the 3rd Eskadrilya of 4 GIAP/VVS KBF in March 1942. By June 1942, he had flown 339 combat missions and scored four individual and twenty shared victories, for which he was appointed a Hero of the Soviet Union. He survived the war with 546 combat missions in his logbook and 15 individual and 20 shared victories on his tally. Vasily Golubev passed away in Moscow on April 17, 2001.



soldier was killed and ten were injured by bomb shrapnel. Moreover, the actual losses sustained by the Soviets during this raid was confined to two I-16s and no Pe-2s. On the other hand, they made unsubstantiated claims for two shot down Bf 109s.<sup>13</sup>

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Adhering to Stalin's demand of a general offensive, the Soviets resumed their offensive in the northern combat zone on January 7, this time with simultaneous attacks all along the front held by Field Marshal Wilhelm Ritter von Leeb's Army Group North, which had the Eighteenth Army in the Leningrad area, and the Sixteenth Army on both sides of Lake Ilmen. The Eighteenth Army was pounced on by the Volkhov and Leningrad Fronts, with the aim of breaking the blockade of Leningrad, and, for the next stage, to surround and annihilate this army. For that purpose, the Volkhov Front had been reinforced with two new armies: the Fifty-ninth at Gruzino on the eastern side of River Volkhov, about half-way between Lakes Ladoga and Ilmen, and, to the south of it, the Second Shock Army.

The air forces of the Leningrad and Volkhov fronts were tasked to interdict the German supply route along River Volkhov, and to delay and destroy German troop columns. However, mainly U-2, R-5, and R-Z biplanes were available for this task, and these could not deal the Germans any significant damage. Meanwhile, daylight operations conducted by VVS Leningrad Front achieved very little in the face of JG 54's spirited defense. On the first day of the offensive, three VVS Leningrad Front bombers escorted by five Tomahawks of 158 IAP attempted to reach and attack Siverskaya Airdrome. They were intercepted by Bf 109s from I./JG 54, whose pilots shot down two—credited to Hauptmann Franz Eckerle and his wingman—and forced the remaining pilots to disengage.<sup>14</sup> One of the 158 IAP pilots who was shot down that day was Leytenant Sergey Demenkov. He survived with injuries; the following spring he was back in action and scored the first of

the total of fifteen victories that he would attain during the war.

Generaloberst Keller decided to concentrate his forces against the Volkhov Front, and on January 8, the Ju 88s and He 111s of KG 1 and KG 4 were brought in against the congestion of Second Shock Army troops that advanced across the ice of the Volkhov River near Chudovo. "The bombers created a total chaos among the columns, which brought a considerable relief to our infantry," wrote Major Trautloft in his diary.<sup>15</sup> Provided with the primary task of providing their troops and lines of communication with air cover, the VVS Volkhov Front and VVS Leningrad Front fighters flew at their full strength—only to be butchered by Trautloft's fighters. JG 54 reported five fighters, three Pe-2s, and two SBs shot down against only one own loss. The fighters were reported as "I-26s" and "I-180s," but three of them were Curtiss P-40 Tomahawks, one each from 154 IAP, 158 IAP, and 159 IAP. In the former unit, Leytenant Vladimir Yakovlev, a veteran from the air fighting over China in 1937-1938, was so badly injured that he lost one eye. The two other fighters shot down by JG 54 pilots can be verified as a LaGG-3 of 44 IAP and a MiG-3 of 124 IAP. An I-16 of 123 IAP was also lost.<sup>16</sup>

One of the shot down Pe-2s, from 116 ORAE, was found by a Russian aircraft archaeology team seventy years later. The pilot of the downed Bf 109, Feldwebel Wilhelm Quack, managed to evade capture for two days but was finally seized in a completely exhausted condition and brought to the airbase at Novaya Ladoga, where he was introduced to Soviet fighter pilots.

The dialogue between Feldwebel Quack and these Soviet fighter pilots, among them Leytenant Vasily Golubev of 13 IAP/VVS KBF, says quite a lot about both sides' view of fighter tactics. Golubev wrote: "Feldwebel Quack, an ardent Fascist who was shot down over Lake Ladoga, answered the question why the German pilots would not accept frontal attacks: 'What am I, a fool? In a frontal attack we have the same chances of winning. No, it is better to wait until our chances are at least ninety percent.'

'Why don't you fight in turns?'

Quack replied that this wasn't either profitable for them, adding: 'A sudden attack at high speed and a quick departure—that is our main tactic.'

Golubev commented: "What he said was true. We should have looked for new techniques in combat with the Me 109 F. It is better to work in cooperation between small groups of fighters. However, even many of our experienced pilots failed to understand the enemy's methods of free hunting, and instead considered the Fascists as cowards, and that their tactics were those of 'thieves': after all, they avoided frontal attacks, and would not get involved in protracted air combats, especially turning combats, where their chances of victory were insignificant. Of course, a coward can be in any airplane, but it was a mistake to consider all Fascist pilots as cowards."<sup>17</sup>

On January 9, I./JG 54 nevertheless met stronger resistance in the air. Two of its Bf 109s were shot down—one in air combat and one reportedly by their own Flak guns—and a third crashed at Krasnogvardeysk due to engine damage. It is possible that one or two of these fell prey to one of the "Grünherz" pilots' old acquaintances, 32-year-old Kapitän Sergey Vlasov. Having graduated from flight school already in 1941, Vlasov had flown against JG 54 since the outbreak of the war between Germany and the Soviet Union and had been shot down twice, on July 22 and August 12, 1941—possibly by Hauptmann Franz Eckerle on both occasions! After recovering from his wounds, he returned to service with 159 IAP on January 6, 1942, flew a Curtiss P-40 Tomahawk in combat on this January 9 and claimed to have shared in the destruction of two Bf 109s on this day.

However, not least because of their weakness in the air, the Soviets failed to make any breakthrough during this round of attacks on the ground. After only two days, the Second Shock Army had lost about three thousand men in the offensive, and the entire venture had to be discontinued. The German Army managed to hold their positions both at the Volkhov River and around Leningrad.

But, to the south of Lake Ilmen, the situation was different. Here, Northwestern Front's Eleventh and Thirty-fourth armies had begun by attacking German Sixteenth Army at Staraya Russa on January 7. Two days later, farther to the south, the Third and Fourth Shock Armies joined in, developing the offensive along Northwestern Front's entire area, and striking both the Sixteenth Army of Army Group North and the Ninth Army of Army Group Center (see p. 88).

To support the offensive, General-Leytenant Timofey Kutsevalov's VVS Northwestern Front had been reinforced with 253 IAP and, from Leningrad, 41 SAD, comprised of 38 IAP and 55 SBAP, to muster approximately 200 serviceable aircraft. The two northern armies were supported by 6 SAD and 57 SAD:

#### 6 SAD

12 IAP (renumbered into 739 IAP on January 25) -  
LaGG-3  
299 ShAP - Il-2  
502 ShAP - Il-2  
624 SBAP - SB  
514 BAP - Pe-2  
626 NBAP - SB

#### 57 SAD

12 IAP - Yak-1  
161 IAP - Yak-1  
402 IAP - MiG-3  
288 ShAP - Il-2  
674 LBAP - U-2  
676 LBAP - U-2

The Third Shock Army, operating against the southern flank of Army Group North between Velikiye Luki and Kholm, had an air force consisting of 7 SAD, with 73 serviceable aircraft (including 16 Yak-1s in 163 IAP, 20 I-16s and two LaGG-3s of 6 IAP, 35 light bomber biplanes, and three liaison aircraft).<sup>18</sup>



The Bf 109 F-4s of the Geschwaderkommodore of JG 54, Major Hannes Trautloft (right), and his wingman, the Geschwaderadjutant, Oberleutnant Otto Kath. (Photo: Trautloft.)





A Soviet Pe-2 bomber after a combat mission. Note the dive brakes under the wing and the open bomb bays.

The main weakness in VVS Northwestern Front was its capacity to strike ground targets in daylight. At the start of the year, it only had one under-equipped Shturmovik regiment, 288 ShAP. This was joined by 299 ShAP and 502 ShAP, which entered combat on January 12, but with only a handful of Il-2s. These three regiments carried out an average of less than five sorties per day until the end of the month. The situation was not much better regarding bomber operations in daytime. VVS Northwestern Front had only one regiment for this purpose, 514 BAP, and its Pe-2s carried out an average of only eight combat sorties per day between January 7 and 31.<sup>19</sup> Thus, most air attacks against ground targets—German troop concentrations, supply columns and depots, airfields, and occupied settlements—were carried out by single-engine light bomber biplanes at nighttime and strafing fighters in daytime.

When the Northwestern Front initiated its offensive, the Luftwaffe had only Hauptmann Wilhelm Hachfeld's I./JG 51 "Mölders"—minus its 3. Staffel, which was in the Leningrad sector—in the area immediately to the south of Lake Ilmen, and its seventeen Bf 109s had to be evacuated from Staraya Russa to Dno in the face of the rapidly advancing Soviet troops. The main weakness of Fliegerkorps I was its almost total lack of ground-attack aircraft, so its bombers had to be dispatched in low-level attacks against the advancing Soviet troops, instead of carrying out more "normal" bomber missions against targets in the enemy's rear area. In doing so, they became an easy target for ground fire, with severe German losses as a consequence. During the first four days of the Soviet offensive, nine Ju 88s or He 111s were shot down. On January 10, the com-

mander of I./KG 4 "General Wever," Major Heinz Alewyn, had to bail out of his burning He 111. These missions were however so successful that they had to be continued at all cost. For instance, on January 10, a six-kilometer-long column of Soviet infantry and vehicles was plastered with cluster bombs, inflicting bloody losses and destroying fifty-three motor vehicles according to the German report.<sup>20</sup>

With the fighters of both sides also mainly employed in strafing missions, only a few air combats were fought. In the first of these during Northwestern Front's offensive, on January 10, I./JG 51 shot down two Yak-1s of 163 IAP for no own losses.<sup>21</sup>

During the next six days, air activity in the sector south of Lake Ilmen was curtailed by prevailing fog and snowfalls. Fliegerkorps I carried out a daily average of 50 sorties—transport missions not included—in the area, and VVS Northwestern Front flew a daily average of 83 sorties in daytime, though approximately one third were against Army Group Center. Thus, the air activity on both sides was more or less on the same scale. VVS Northwestern Front lost sixteen aircraft between January 9 and 15, a loss rate of three percent. The bomber units of Fliegerkorps I suffered heavy losses due to their many low-level attacks; the nine Ju 88s and He 111s that were shot down in the sector south of Lake Ilmen between January 9 and 15 represent a seven percent loss rate.

With such a limited air support, the numerically inferior German troops were unable to hold their lines south of Lake Ilmen. On January 9, a German troop contingent was isolated in Vzvadskoye, northeast of Staraya Russa, and at Nechayevo Airdrome, German reconnaissance Staffel

4.(H)/23 had to destroy five of its own aircraft to prevent them falling into the hands of approaching Soviet troops. January 13 was a black day for the Germans. A supply store with 6,000 tons of provisions fell into Soviet hands, while bombers of the VVS set Staraya Russa, dominated by wooden houses, on fire. A heavy loss was also suffered by I./JG 51 that day, when Feldwebel Egon Grosse, an ace with twenty-eight victories, was severely injured when bad weather forced his airplane down near Staraya Russa. He later died from his injuries.

That day too, the Soviet Leningrad and Volkhov Fronts resumed their offensives against the Schlüsselburg wedge east of Leningrad and at the Volkhov River. Marching straight against the German fortifications in fog and raging blizzards, the Second Shock Army troops managed to tear open a 12-km wide gap in the German front lines at Myasnoy Bor, 25 km northeast of Novgorod. Its cavalry forces then advanced 30 km in five days and reached Finev Lug, thus severing the rail connection between Novgorod and the German troops south of Leningrad. Farther to the north, the Leningrad Front's Fifty-fourth Army attacked in a southwestern direction at Pogostye, threatening to cut off German I Army Corps, which held positions at the Volkhov River between this army and the Second Guards Army in the south.

Field Marshal von Leeb panicked and flew to Hitler's headquarters in East Prussia where he asked for permission to pull back his troops. Hitler absolutely disagreed, claiming that von Leeb exaggerated. The result was that the Field Marshal asked to be relieved of his command. The Führer agreed and immediately replaced him with Generaloberst Georg von Küchler.

The Nazi dictator was in fact proven right in his controversy with von Leeb. The Volkhov Front was still handicapped by having weak air support. The Fifty-fourth

Army, for instance, had an air force consisting of only one fighter regiment and a U-2-equipped night bomber regiment. Indeed, Aleksandr Novikov diverted many units of his VVS Leningrad Front to this army's support, but even those were insufficient to fulfill the Volkhov Front's requirements of air support. Thus, on January 15, only a handful of I-153s from 153 IAP attacked the German troops that fought against the Fifty-fourth Army.<sup>22</sup> This resulted in no more than nine killed and eighteen injured German soldiers.<sup>23</sup>

Meanwhile, as soon as the weather cleared the bombers of Fliegerkorps I were brought in against this new threat. The report for January 16 describes their actions: "In air attacks against troop concentrations, infantry, and truck and horse-drawn columns in settlements and in the area of Sitno, Gorodok, Dubovitsy, and Spasskaya Polist, the enemy suffered high bloody losses, several trucks and sledges were destroyed."<sup>24</sup>

What it looked like at the receiving end of these air attacks was described by one of the surviving Soviet veterans, Nikolay Nikulin: "What was the cost, for example, of crossing the railway near Pogostye in January 1942! This area was subject to a massive bombardment, and we called it the 'Valley of death.' (There were many of such valleys, and in other places.) We crawl forward, in groups of ten, and are lucky if no one is wounded. We pass over corpses, hide behind the corpses—as if this is how it should be. And tomorrow we are sent forward again... And when next to you a man is torn to shreds, douses you with his blood, hangs his insides and brain on you—in peaceful conditions this is enough to make you crazy."<sup>25</sup>

The Soviet offensives were soon halted. "The main cause of our failures was our lack of artillery ammunition and the German dominance in the air," wrote the Volkhov Front's C-in-C, General Armii Meretskov.<sup>26</sup>



The two main opponents in the air war in the Volkhov river sector in early 1942: General-Mayor Ivan Zhuravlyov (left), the commander of VVS Volkhov Front, and General Helmuth Förster (right), the commander of Fliegerkorps I. Ivan Zhuravlyov (1905-1989) flew bomber missions during the Winter War against Finland, served as the Deputy Commander of VVS Northern Front in 1941, and commanded the VVS of the Volkhov Front (later 14th Air Army) between 1942 and 1947. Helmuth Förster (1889-1965) was a combat pilot in World War I. He served in various staff positions early in the war and commanded Fliegerkorps I between June 1941 and August 1942. Thereafter he was the Chief of Administration at the German Air Ministry, Chef der Luftfahrt.





Bruno Dilley (1913-1968) earned fame for having fired the first shot of World War II when he attacked a target in Poland some minutes before the war officially broke out. He served as a Stuka pilot from 1937 and was appointed commander of I./StG 2 in January 1942. On February 12, 1942, he and his radio operator, Oberfeldwebel Ernst Kather, were shot down behind enemy lines, but survived and made it back to the German lines.

Indeed, VVS Volkhov Front had an able commander, as Meretskov attested to: "General-Mayor of Aviation Ivan Zhuravlyov had earned respect as a talented air commander. He skillfully used the long winter nights for night bomber operations. In the midst of solid swamps and deep snow, his subordinates learned how to keep airfields operational. Initially, we had few aircraft, only little fuel, and few air bombs. And still the Volkhov aviation contributed quite well to the success of the ground forces. All of that is a considerable merit of its commander."<sup>27</sup> During this battle, Zhuravlyov's airmen carried out an impressive number of sorties against German lines of communication and airfields during the hours of darkness, but since mainly obsolete U-2s, R-5s, and R-Zs were used, the effect was almost negligible.

To the south of Lake Ilmen, German Sixteenth Army managed to hold Staraya Russa even though the Soviets dominated in the air in this sector. With temporarily cleared skies, VVS Northwestern Front carried out a record of 178 sorties, including 13 by bombers and 12 by Shturmoviks, on January 16<sup>28</sup>—against which the Germans could only mount 52 sorties with bombers and 27 with fighters, mainly against troop and vehicle columns, south of Lake Ilmen.<sup>29</sup> Next day, the Northwestern Front outflanked the German II Corps and the bulk of X Corps—ninety-five thousand men—at Demyansk, a forward post and communication center 80 km southeast of Lake Ilmen, and advanced westward on both flanks of this garrison. A few days later, fifty-five hundred German soldiers were isolated at Kholm on the Lovat River, another 80 km farther to the southwest.

Hitler ordered the encircled forces to stay put rather than attempt a breakout. Demyansk was even officially declared a "fortress"—*Festung Demyansk*. By holding these two strategic communication hubs, the Germans thwarted all Soviet possibilities of expanding their advance much farther to the west.

An air supply operation to the besieged garrisons commenced in an atmosphere of urgency. The first Ju 52 transport planes landed on the narrow airstrip at Demyansk on January 17, bringing in 330 troops and equipment, and evacuated 470 wounded men.<sup>30</sup> Only seventy-five operational Ju 52s were available for this task, so the commander of Luftflotte 1, Generaloberst Keller, decided to allocate the He 111s of I./KG 4 "General Wever" to fly in supplies and reinforcements to Demyansk and Kholm.

Other Luftwaffe reinforcements also arrived. I./StG 2 "Immelmann" under Hauptmann Bruno Dilley arrived at Dno after a period of rest and recuperation in Germany, equipped with the first of the new Ju 87 D version—which had increased the payload to 1,800 kg from 500 kg in the B-version—to reach the Eastern Front. Among the unit's airmen were veterans such as the Staffelkapitäne of 1. and 3. Staffeln, Knight's Cross holders Oberleutnant Friedrich Lang and Oberleutnant Alwin Boerst. The latter had carried out more than three hundred dive bombings, and Lang would celebrate his five hundredth combat sortie in February 1942. Later on, both were among the four Stuka pilots who were to be awarded the Swords to the Knight's Cross with Oak Leaves.

I./StG 2 began operations in this new sector on January 18, when its Stukas carried out eleven sorties. It sustained its first loss the next day, when Dilley's adjutant, Oberleutnant Karl Brausch, was posted as missing—probably after getting shot down as the eighth victim of 12 IAP's Starshiy Leytenant Ivan Dzyuba. In immediate response to this, a Schwarm from 8./JG 54 flew from Siverskaya to Dno to support I./JG 51 in the area. This was followed shortly afterward by 9./JG 54 under Oberleutnant Hans-Ekkehard Bob.<sup>31</sup>

The reinforced Luftwaffe immediately had a strong impact on the fighting both on the ground and in the air. On January 19, Fliegerkorps I for the first time surpassed VVS Northwestern Front by flying 181 combat sorties (transport missions not included) in the area south of Lake Ilmen, against just 73 in daytime by the Soviets. This led to one of the rare air combats in this sector. Shortly before noon on January 19, a Bf 109 Schwarm from I./JG 51 flew an escort mission for a Hs 126 when four 161 IAP Yak-1s appeared and attempted to attack the reconnaissance aircraft. In the ensuing combat, the Soviets lost two Yak-1s but reported a Bf 109 shot down. One of the Soviet pilots was killed—Leytenant Timor Frunze, the son of the legendary military commander Mikhail Frunze, who gave his name to the Soviet military academy. I./JG 51's Stabsarzt Dr. Veit Vogel (the unit's medical doctor who flew combat missions) and Oberleutnant Reinhard Josten were credited with one victory each. In I./JG 51, one Bf 109 was indeed lost, with the pilot wounded but, according to the German report, the reason was a crash landing in adverse weather.



From this day onward, the Luftwaffe took control of the air south of Lake Ilmen, with its fighters gradually forcing VVS Northwestern Front to shift its activities to nighttime. During the four first days of the offensive, VVS Northwestern Front had flown three times more sorties in daytime than at night, but this changed to two-thirds of all sorties being flown at nighttime between January 25 and 28. However, not even this would save the Soviet air units from sustaining heavy losses. On the night of January 28, for instance, seven U-2s were lost.<sup>32</sup>

Similarly, as a result of the Luftwaffe attacks, the Soviet ground troops were compelled to restrict all movements to the hours of darkness.<sup>33</sup> This in turn enabled the bombers of Fliegerkorps I to direct more of their attention against the Soviet rail traffic in Northwestern Front's rear area. As we have seen in Chapter 7, this was already subject to attacks by the bombers of Fliegerkorps VIII. Thus, for instance, on January 21, Fliegerkorps VIII attacked the rail line between Ostashkov and Bologoye, and bombers of Fliegerkorps I reported hits on eight freight trains on the railway station at Chyorny Dvor, 15 km northeast of Ostashkov.<sup>34</sup>

The Stuka planes of Hauptmann Dilley's I./StG 2 were sent to-and-fro between the sectors to the north and to the south of Lake Ilmen like a fire brigade. German war correspondent Georg Brütting gave an example of its operations:

"I./StG 2 attacked an armored train on the railway Staraya Russa - Bologoye to the east of the encirclement area at Demyansk. The well-aimed artillery fire from this armored train created a difficult situation for the German troops in this sector. The dive-bombing took place in clear winter weather, commencing from an altitude of 3,000 meters. The aircraft dived against the wind in the direction



Timor Frunze, the son of the legendary military commander Mikhail Frunze, who gave his name to the Soviet military academy. Leytenant Timor Frunze arrived at 161 IAP on January 10, 1942, and was killed in aerial combat with pilots from I./JG 51 "Mölders" on his ninth combat mission, nine days later. He was credited with one shared victory.

of the front line. After releasing their bombs from a very low altitude, the pilots flew out of the target area almost on the deck, and thus managed to evade the anti-aircraft artillery. The bombs were dropped with accuracy. Six of the long, white-painted rail wagons fell across the railway.

After the landing at Dno, the command post of I./StG 2 received a radio message from the ground troops reporting that the armored train still maintained its unpleasant activity. The Stukagruppe hurriedly prepared another raid against the same target. This time the Russians had called in fighters to protect the remainder of the armored train. As an additional protective measure, the commander of the armored train had dispersed the wagons. One of the wagons had been moved 200 meters closer to the front line. The accurately dropped bombs completed the destruction and the army command sent its gratitude for the completely successful work.<sup>35</sup>

Such reports from the ground troops repeatedly emphasized the importance of air support. In its summary of the situation south of Lake Ilmen during the period January 18-25, the Headquarters of Army Group North established that "the situation is relieved by effective operations of the air fleet."<sup>36</sup> This too relied on the "Grünherz" fighters. In the Staraya Russa - Demyansk area south of Lake Ilmen, Soviet fighter opposition continued to be quite light, but during operations against the Second Shock Army north of Lake Ilmen, the war diary of I./StG 2 noted increased opposition from Soviet fighters. This is hardly surprisingly, since VVS Volkhov Front was receiving considerable reinforcements—though mostly U-2 and R-5 biplanes—and reached a strength of 313 aircraft by the end of January. The air force of the Second Shock Army increased from three to eight aviation regiments, and seven new aviation regiments were allocated to the Fifty-ninth Army. Nevertheless, the Bf 109s managed to save I./StG 2 from losses to Soviet fighters throughout both January and February. Moreover, when I./StG 2 was concentrated south of Lake Ilmen, I./JG 54 took its place by strafing Second Shock Army's troops and lines of communication. The German bombers meanwhile were tasked to attack rail lines and airfields east of the Volkhov River. These operations did not entirely halt the Soviet troops, but the pace of their advance was considerably slowed down, allowing the Germans to move reinforcements forward.

The Soviet fighter units naturally did whatever they could to relieve their hard-pressed ground troops but largely failed in this task. Engagements with the "Grünherz" Bf 109s were quite discouraging. In the sector between lakes Ladoga and Ilmen, it was mainly the aces of Hauptmann Franz Eckerle's I./JG 54 that caused the Soviet losses in the air. On January 19, an entire Zveno of three I-16s from 286 IAP failed to return from a mission. It later was established that they had all been shot down by attacking Bf 109s. A look at the German side shows that Eckerle claimed two of these for his forty-fourth and forty-fifth victories.

Next day, six P-40 Tomahawks of 154 IAP, led by the ace Kapitan Petr Pokryshev, clashed violently with I./JG 54 near Leningrad. Pokryshev was a veteran from the Winter War against Finland, in which he had achieved two victories, although he himself was also shot down twice. As



A Hs 126 of 2.(H)/21 with a Fi 156 Storch and the Soviet-constructed hangars at Siverskaya Airdrome in the background. With 4.(H)/23 operating in the area south of Lake Ilmen, this was the only German tactical reconnaissance Staffel in the Leningrad – Volkhov area in early 1942. In February 1942, this Staffel had two Hs 126s shot down and lost three more to technical failures.

they patrolled the sky in the area of Pogostye, his formation was bounced by six Bf 109s that came out from the sun and behind the Soviet formation. Lieutenant Andrey Chirkov and Mladshiy Leytenant Georgiy Fyodorenko were shot down by Oberleutnant Max-Hellmuth Ostermann (his fifty-second victory) and Hauptmann Heinrich Jung (his fifth). Both Soviet pilots survived by bailing out, but Chirkov came down behind enemy lines. He had lost his flying helmet and gloves during the descent. What that meant is obvious from a note in Trautloft's diary that day: "Temperature minus 29 degrees Celsius"! However, after an arduous two-day walk in the unforgiving wilderness and cold, the frostbitten and exhausted Chirkov managed pass through the thinly held German lines to reach Soviet lines.<sup>37</sup> He was lucky to find warm shelter before the temperature plummeted to a terrible minus 49 degrees Celsius (-56.2°F) on January 23.

Defying this barbaric cold, Ostermann and his wingman nevertheless took to the skies on a free-hunting mission that day. When they returned, Ostermann had shot down an I-16 and an Il-2 for his fifty-third and fifty-fourth victories. Both of these can be identified as belonging to VVS KBF's 4 GIAP and 57 ShAP. 4 GIAP/VVS KBF was the former 13 IAP/VVS KBF, which five days previously had been elevated to a Guards regiment, while 5 IAP/VVS KBF became 3 GIAP/VVS KBF and 1 MTAP/VVS KBF became

1 GMTAP/VVS KBF, in an attempt to encourage the heavily pressed airmen. However, the real state of the unit is evident from the fact that on this January 23, the C.O. of 4 GIAP/VVS KBF, Mayor Mikhail Okhten, was removed from his post for "mismanagement of the unit." To a certain degree, however, this was related to Petr Kulakov's desertion the previous month (see pp. 49ff).

Next day, Ostermann chalked up his number fifty-five, and on the 25th, he attacked an MP-1—the civilian version of the single-engine MBR-2 flying boat—on an air transport mission from Priyutino to Novaya Ladoga. "The flying boat in front of us appeared like a big barn door," said Ostermann. "I saw the fighter escort behind and above us, two puny biplanes, which were hanging with their tails high in the air, which meant that they were diving, but they certainly could not catch up with us. I was already very close to the big 'beef'. I pressed the buttons, and after a very short burst of fire, bright flames shot out of all sides of the fuselage. The airplane resembled a ball of fire. Only the wing ends poked out of the flames. I had never seen a machine burn like that before! I pulled up and then saw the impact in a small grove. A thick black pile of smoke hung in the air."<sup>38</sup> Four crewmembers and five passengers in the MP-1 were killed.<sup>39</sup>

Then Ostermann engaged the two escorting I-153s. These were too agile for him, so he made several mock



attacks until they started to run low on fuel and had to disengage. He then pursued them from afar, flying with his white-painted Bf 109 low over the snow-covered ground, until he caught up with them. He then pulled up and destroyed one of the Chaykas with his cannon. The other one got away, but Ostermann soon caught sight of another formation of I-153s. He attacked, and one of the Soviet pilots made an abrupt 180-degree turn and came rushing against the Bf 109 frontally. Both pilots fired with all their guns, and it was the I-153 that got the heaviest hits and plummeted to the ground. After that, Ostermann had to return to base because the red lamp on the dashboard told him that he too was running out of fuel now.<sup>40</sup>

On January 26, Hauptmann Eckerle led an interception of a formation of Pe-2 bombers that had wrought havoc on Mga's railway station. Ostermann and Leutnant Alfred Teumer shot down two bombers, while Eckerle and his wingman, Unteroffizier Gerhard Proske, blew two of the escorting LaGG-3s out of the sky. These were from 2 GIAP, and both pilots, Leytenant Aleksandr Maltsev and Mladshiy Leytenant Nikolay Rybakov, were killed.<sup>41</sup> Two days later, Ostermann brought home his sixtieth victory while Eckerle bagged his fiftieth.

Around this time, a second Stukagruppe equipped with the new Ju 87 D, III./StG 1, arrived from Germany to Fliegerkorps I and was stationed at Gostkino, 60 km west of Novgorod. Moreover, Hauptmann Dietrich Hrabak's II./JG 54 returned from a lengthy period of rest and refit in Germany. With this, the "Grünherz" Geschwader's top

ace, Hauptmann Hans "Fips" Philipp with 73 victories, was back in action.

This was echoed in the memoirs of one of the Soviet fighter pilots who fought in this sector, Dmitriy Medvedev. He described how Kapitan Boris Solomatin, a veteran who had flown both against the Japanese at Khalkhin-Gol, against the Finns in the Winter War, and against the Germans since June 1941, arrived from the Army Headquarters with some serious news:

"Solomatin arrived with a warning to us:

– As reported by our intelligence, the Germans have received replenishments of flying personnel. Among the new arrivals there are some famous aces.

– Ha, who cares about the Fritzes' aces, interrupted Grisha Voyna. And besides, we have Lyashchenko!

But Solomatin continued calmly:

– What I am saying is that our comrades have lots of courage, but sometimes we lack the ability to figure out the enemy's tricks, and the newly arrived aces have a large arsenal of all sorts of tricks, Comrade Voyna. Our task in the first encounters with them is to learn to understand their tactics, challenge them in an open fight, discourage their willingness to ambush us, and to withdraw from the combat when the situation is unfavorable.<sup>42</sup> (Leytenant Fyodor Lyashchenko was an ace in 92 IAP with six individual and five shared victories.)

The VVS also received reinforcements. In late January, 299 ShAP handed over its six remaining Il-2s to VVS Northwestern Front's 502 ShAP and was shifted to the



A formation of Ju 87 D Stukas returning from a combat mission. The arrival of Hauptmann Bruno Dilley's I./StG 2 "Immelmann" at Fliegerkorps I became something of a game-changer for the battle.



“Mayor Vasilij Chuvilo received the special task of neutralizing the German fighters at Klin. He organized the operation as a series of ‘rolling attacks’ so that the smoke from the fires caused by the aircraft that attacked first would not obscure the sight of the following planes. The first strike was carried out by nine Pe-2s at 0916 hours, followed by one crew at 0930, and five at 1120 hours. All bombers returned safely to base after the raids, with the fliers enthusiastically reporting great success. The whole airfield was reported to be in flames. In fact, this operation neutralized both II./JG 52 and the Spanish volunteer squadron Escuadrilla Azul. Mayor Chuvilo was awarded the Order of the Red Banner five days later.”

This new edition of Volume 2 of *Black Cross Red Star* contains twice the word count of the 2000 edition, a very large number of new photographs (many of which are from pilot veterans’ photo albums and have never been published before), and so much new material that it is rather a completely new book than an updated edition.

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# BLACK CROSS RED STAR

AIR WAR OVER THE EASTERN FRONT



**VOLUME 2 - TWO TURNING POINTS  
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## CHAPTER 8

# “Grünherz” Fighters Versus Soviet Aces

In the Northern Combat Zone, between Lake Ladoga and the area around Lake Ilmen, the Red Army mainly focused on raising the German blockade of Leningrad, which had lasted since September 1941. The Soviet offensive immediately to the south of Lake Ladoga in early December 1941 had pushed the Germans out of their advanced position at Tikhvin, thus relieving Leningrad of its most acute supply difficulties. This also thwarted the hopes of Germany's Finnish ally for a united German-Finnish military operation along the eastern shores of Lake Ladoga, because Soviet Seventh Independent Army had halted the Finns along River Svir—which connects Lake Ladoga and Lake Onega—between 80 and 250 km inside the 1939 border of the Soviet territory.

For all that, the Germans still held a wedge between Leningrad and the Soviet hinterland on the southern shore of Lake Ladoga at Schlüsselburg, east of the city. Thus, the Soviet counteroffensive could not prevent the besieged Leningrad from becoming the scene of a terrible famine. However, a combination of scarce Luftwaffe resources and the powerful air defense of Leningrad—above all the anti-aircraft artillery—saved the city from air raids during the first three months of 1942. But apart from this, the Soviet air forces in the northern combat zone were not able to achieve many successes in early 1942.

As the cream of the VVS was concentrated at the Moscow battle zone, only weak Soviet air forces remained in the Northern Combat Zone following the costly air battles in 1941. On January 1, 1942, General-Leytenant Aleksandr Novikov's VVS Leningrad Front mustered 280 aircraft, of which 175 were serviceable—144 fighters, 27 bombers, and 4 Shturmoviks, plus 3 reconnaissance aircraft.<sup>1</sup>

The fighters based in Leningrad were Curtiss P-40s of 39 IAD's five regiments (see p. 54) and those of 7 IAK/PVO, which by January 1942 had been reduced to four regiments:

- 26 IAP (equipped with Hawker Hurricanes)
- 44 IAP (LaGG-3)
- 123 IAP (I-16 and Yak-1)
- 124 IAP (MiG-3)

The air force of the new Volkhov Front under General-Mayor Ivan Zhuravlyov had been reinforced with new biplane bombers and the 2nd Reserve Air Group, 2 RAG, with three fighter regiments and one each bomber and Shturmovik regiment. On January 12, VVS Volkhov Front reported a strength of 211 serviceable aircraft, of which more than half were biplane night bombers—U-2s, R-5s, and R-Zs. General-Mayor Mikhail Samokhin's Air Force of the Red Banner Baltic Fleet, VVS KBF, which operated over the Gulf of Finland and Lake Ladoga, mustered 91 service-



Hannes Trautloft (left) addressing some of his men. In the background, Hans Philipp and a row of Bf 109s can be seen. Trautloft commanded JG 54 between August 1940 and July 1943. He is recognized as one of the most competent Geschwaderkommodore of the Luftwaffe Fighter Arm in World War II. In the summer of 1943, the General der Jagdflieger, Adolf Galland, appointed him Inspector of Fighter units on the Eastern Front. By that time, he had flown 560 combat missions and been credited with 58 aerial victories, including five in Spain. After the war, Trautloft rose to the rank of a Generalleutnant in the Bundesluftwaffe. He retired at the age of 58 in 1970 and passed away in Bad Wiessee on January 11, 1995. (Photo: Via Trautloft.)

able aircraft. One advantage on the Soviet side was that Leningrad PVO was provided with a chain of ten RUS-2 early warning radar stations, with a range of between 100 and 150 km.

The primary responsibilities of Soviet aviation in the Northern Combat Zone were divided between air defense



of Leningrad, air cover of the so-called "Ice Road" (the supply "lifeline" across the frozen surface of Lake Ladoga to Leningrad), and close support for the front troops. In late 1941, 123 IAP of 7 IAK/PVO, along with the Red Banner Baltic Fleet's 11 IAP, 13 IAP, and 12 OIAE had been allocated to the defense of the "Ice Road." These forces were reinforced by 39 IAD of VVS Leningrad Front on New Year's Day. On January 2, VVS KBF formed a special aviation group for operations in the southern Ladoga region; it consisted of sixty-four aircraft of the naval 5 IAP, 13 IAP, 57 ShAP, 71 IAP, 42 ORAE, and 13 OIAE.

As the Soviet offensive from Tikhvin was halted at River Volkhov, which connected Lakes Ladoga and Ilmen, Generaloberst Alfred Keller instructed his Luftflotte 1 to intensify armed reconnaissance over the "Ice Road." Luftflotte 1 had been responsible for air cover for the German Army Group North since the opening of the invasion of the USSR. This air fleet was composed of only a single air corps, General Helmuth Förster's Fliegerkorps I, which mustered 115 serviceable aircraft on January 15, 1942—forty-four Bf 109 fighters, thirty-two Ju 88 and He 111 bombers, twenty-six transport and liaison aircraft, eight Ju 87 dive-bombers, and five Ju 88 reconnaissance planes. In addition, there were two tactical reconnaissance Staffeln, 2.(H)/21 and 4.(H)/23. On the plus side, the units of Luftflotte 1 operated from well-equipped airdromes in or close to the former Baltic countries, which were in turn tied directly to the Luftwaffe's infrastructure in Germany. Thus, Fliegerkorps I was not hampered by the cold to the same extent as Fliegerkorps VIII farther to the south. In combination with a comparatively lower qualitative standard of the Soviet aviation units in this sector, this gave the air war in the northern combat zone in the winter of 1941-42 a completely different character than that in the central combat zone.

Since the new year opened with clear skies (and minus 25-degree-Celsius-temperature (-13°F), a series of intense air fighting evolved over Lake Ladoga during the first days in January—in which the Bf 109s of JG 54 "Grünherz" would prove their vast superiority. This, which was the only Jagdgeschwader in the Leningrad area, had some of the most highly motivated German airmen on the Eastern Front during the difficult winter of 1941-42. Credit for JG 54's morale must go to the Geschwaderkommodore, Major Hannes Trautloft, who took great personal care of his men—in contrast to certain other fighter unit commanders who were mainly occupied with achieving personal victories. The large and well-equipped bases at Siverskaya and Krasnogvardeysk also contributed to keeping the mood up among the "Grünherz" men. At the latter base, they were billeted in the old Czar's residence.

The atmosphere amongst these highly trained German fighter pilots formed a sharp contrast to what the Soviet defector Starshiy Leytenant Petr Kulakov of 13 IAP/VVS KBF (see pp. 49ff) said during his interrogation about the Soviet airmen in the same area: "The mood among the old fliers is very negative. In any case, there are very few old pilots remaining. Most pilots are very young novices who have arrived at the front directly from the schools. Some of them flew their first missions only in 1941. The atti-

tude among the younger pilots is quite different. They are fanatical and naïve, very narrow-minded, and incapable of realizing the seriousness of the situation. The pilots evade combat with the Messerschmitts. The word 'Messerschmitt' is even prohibited among us."<sup>2</sup>

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Throughout New Year's Day, the Bf 109s of JG 54 conducted strafing missions and fighter sweeps over the "Ice Road," claiming six locomotives and fourteen trucks destroyed. During a mission by four Bf 109s of 7./JG 54 in this area, Unteroffizier Gerhard Raimann suddenly caught sight of a lone four-engine TB-3, painted all over in black, that came lumbering at low altitude above the frozen surface of Lake Ladoga. "Four-engine transport plane below! I attack!" Raimann excitedly cried in the R/T.<sup>3</sup> The huge TB-3 attempted to make it across the lake with twenty passengers, but without any fighter escort, it stood no chance at all. "A few seconds later I could see the four-engine transport plane fall in flames and crash onto the ice on Lake Ladoga," Major Trautloft later wrote in his diary. "The word *Abschuss* crackles in my headphones, and that was the end of the game."<sup>4</sup> Sixteen of the passengers were killed and the other four were rescued with severe injuries.<sup>5</sup> In addition, the Chief of Staff of VVS KBF, Polkovnik Dmitriy Surkov, was killed when a "Grünherz" pilot shot down the UTI-4 in which he flew over Lake Ladoga. And that was not the only serious personnel loss the Soviet air forces sustained in this area on New Year's Day.

On the Soviet side in this region, Mayor Vladimir Matveyev, the commander of 158 IAP, was something of the equivalent to Major Hannes Trautloft: one of the most popular and respected unit commanders at that time. Early on January 1, 1942, he took off at the head of four P-40 Tomahawk fighters to patrol above the "Ice Road." He spotted two Bf 109s that were strafing a truck convoy on the ice, and pressed the transmit button of his R/T and called out: "Enemy ahead. Attack!"

Just as the four P-40 Tomahawks put their noses down, a second Bf 109 Rotte bounced them from the rear and above, headed for the lead Soviet fighter. Leytenant Vasily Kharitonov got on the tail of these two Bf 109s and reportedly shot down one of them. As he turned to attack the next enemy fighter, Kharitonov found even more Bf 109s appearing on the scene. He also saw his commander pursue a Bf 109 while a second enemy fighter approached Matveyev's Tomahawk from below. Tracer bullets hit the Tomahawk right in the belly. The fighter fell into a spin and sent Mayor Matveyev plunging to his death. Oberleutnant Hans-Ekkehard Bob's 9./JG 54 returned from the first mission carried out that morning with four claims for four shot down Soviet fighters,<sup>6</sup> possibly including Matveyev's P-40.

13 IAP/VVS KBF also took a heavy beating from JG 54 over the Ladoga that day. Five of this regiment's I-16s, divided into two groups, were on patrol over the western part of the lake when the commissar of 1st Eskadrilya, Starshiy Politruk Seven Dmitriyevskiy, caught sight of a formation of German bombers. Dmitriyevskiy, leading two other I-16s, had just turned in against the bombers when



six Bf 109s appeared on the scene. After a tight turning combat, Serzhant Dmitriyev's Ishak was set burning and the pilot bailed out. Next, a Bf 109 got on Politruk Dmitriyevskiy's tail while he was still pursuing the bombers. One or two cannon shells exploded in the engine of his I-16, which immediately burst into flames. The small Ishak turned over, went into a steep dive, and crashed onto the ice close to the coast, killing Starshiy Politruk Dmitriyevskiy. Shortly afterward, Serzhant Aleksandr Baydrakov's I-16 was badly hit and this pilot had to disengage.



Leytenant Gennadiy Tsokolayev at his I-16, which has been embellished with the Guards emblem after 13 IAP was elevated to 4 GIAP/VVS KBF in January 1942. Born in 1916, Gennadiy Tsokolayev flew with 13 IAP/VVS KBF during the Winter War against Finland. He scored two individual and four shared victories in 1941. Tskoloayev was one among many Soviet servicemen who was appointed a Hero of the Soviet Union on June 14, 1942. He survived 510 combat missions during the war and was credited with seven individual and thirteen shared victories.

Then two three-plane Zveniya, led by Leytenant Gennadiy Tsokolayev, of 13 IAP/VVS KBF's 2nd Eskadriya, and Kapitan Aleksandr Agureyev, deputy commander of the 3rd Eskadriya, were scrambled. Shortly after takeoff, as they had reached two thousand meters and were still climbing, a Bf 109 Staffel bounced them. The three I-16s led by Kapitan Agureyev, flying top cover, received the brunt of the attack. Both Serzhant Zaboykin's and Agureyev's I-16s were severely damaged and the pilots disengaged, with the latter limping back towards the base escorted by the third fighter of the Zveno. Having thus neutralized the Soviet top cover, the Bf 109s went straight after Gennadiy Tsokolayev's flight, whose three pilots soon found themselves involved in a desperate struggle for survival. While Leytenant Tsokolayev, who was one of the most skillful fighter pilots in VVS KBF, managed to evade all attacks by using everything his aircraft had to give, Serzhant Nikolay Shchegolyov was wounded.

Only when the other 13 IAP/VVS KBF I-16s that remained airborne intervened did the German fighter pilots disengage. But Kapitan Agureyev's crippled I-16 could not be saved. Unable to complete the landing approach, the aircraft clipped the top of a tree, was thrown into a dense fir grove, and caught fire. Agureyev managed to get out of the aircraft only seconds before the fuel tanks blew up.

By that time, three more formations, each comprised of nine Ju 88s escorted by Bf 109s, appeared on a heading towards the Kobona area and the "Ice Road." The 13 IAP/VVS KBF pilots went after them, and in the ensuing clash another two I-16s were damaged. In total, the combat this day cost 13 IAP/VVS KBF one pilot killed and five wounded, with three aircraft destroyed and seven dama-

ged. One of the unit's pilots, Leytenant Vasily Golubev, heard the regiment's senior engineer, Nikolay Nikolayev, remark bitterly: "Two or three such days more, and there will be no aircraft left in the regiment."<sup>7</sup>

In I./JG 54, Hauptmann Franz Eckerle claimed two I-16s for his 39th and 40th kills, while his wingman Oberfeldwebel Karl Fuchs bagged one for his 14th, and 9./JG 54's Oberfeldwebel Friedrich Rupp claimed a fifth. Shortly afterward, Unteroffizier Fritz Ebner of I./JG 54 also claimed an I-16, for his first kill. Apart from 13 IAP/VVS KBF, 439 IAP of the Leningrad Front also lost two I-16s, with both pilots, Politruk Filipp Arzhanov and Starshiy Serzhant Filipp Mandra, getting killed.

With 13 IAP/VVS KBF more or less neutralized, Yak-1s, LaGG-3s, and P-40 Tomahawks from 5 IAP/VVS KBF and 39 IAD were sent into the air as further reinforcements. During a twenty-five-minute combat, three of these fighters were shot down. In return, Leytenant Igor Kabarov of 5 IAP/VVS KBF claimed a Bf 109 for his seventh victory—quite vividly described in his memoirs:

"'There they are, Petro!' I shouted over the radio to Chepelkin. Meanwhile, the pair of Messerschmitts flew low above the trucks. First, I took aim at the second Messerschmitt, but it unexpectedly banked to one side and disappeared. Then I went after the leader, who had already shot at one of the vehicles. I opened fire. The enemy fighter, enveloped in black smoke, turned sharply aside, turned on its back and fell to the ice.

'That's the way to wish a Fascist a Happy New Year!'

Red flames and a plume of black smoke showed against the white snow. People were running across the lake's virgin snow to the place where the Messerschmitt had fallen. But where was the other aircraft? We couldn't see it. Probably, somewhere in this area, the enemy had a station for eavesdropping. The second Messerschmitt had not made off without a reason, for I had only shouted: 'There they are, Petro!' The leader had evidently hoped to strike the motor vehicle and slip away, but he wasn't so lucky."<sup>8</sup>

After another combat later that day, Starshiy Leytenant Petr Chepelkin reported: "We ran into some dangerous opponents. They took us on without the advantages of visibility or altitude. Both the leader and the second pilot were experienced wolves."<sup>9</sup> These "dangerous opponents" might have been 3./JG 54's Staffelfkapitän, Oberleutnant Max-Hellmuth Ostermann, and his wingman. Ostermann in fact flew straight into the Soviet Lufbery circle, outturned one of the Yak-1s and shot it down.<sup>10</sup> The pilot, Kapitan Petr Munin, was lucky to survive the demise of his aircraft. It was Ostermann's 47th victory.

In total, JG 54 reported thirteen Soviet aircraft shot down on the first day of 1942. Its own losses are unclear. In his diary, Major Trautloft reported that there had been no losses, but the Luftwaffe's records indicate that JG 54 lost two Bf 109s this day, one shot down above Lake Ladoga and one in a take-off accident, though the identity of the shot down pilot was not mentioned.

The Soviet airmen fared somewhat better on January 2. The combat started in the morning, when Luftwaffe bombers from KG 1 and KG 4 mounted concentrated raids against the western stretch of the "Ice Road" and the loading port of Osinovets. Meanwhile, six Bf 109s from 7./JG 54 spotted a group of "I-18s" above Novaya Ladoga Airdrome—probably LaGG-3s of 5 IAP/VVS KBF, where Starshiy Leytenants Georgiy Kostylev and Semyon Lvov reported an engagement with Bf 109s. Oberfeldwebel Karl-Heinz Kempf made a high-side attack and claimed two of the Soviet fighters shot down. However, no such Soviet losses were recorded.<sup>11</sup>

As Kempf and the other pilots of 7./JG 54 set course for their base at Siverskaya, they could see black smoke rising from the airfield. VVS Leningrad Front had sent five Pe-2s of 18 BAP, escorted by eight I-16s of 439 IAP, against the German airfield. The airborne 7./JG 54 pilots arrived just as the Soviet aircraft turned for home and struck down on them with a vengeance. But the Soviet escort fighters engaged the Messerschmitts in a frantic air combat. Only after Kempf had claimed two I-16s and Unteroffizier Johann Halfmann one, was Kempf able to break through to the bombers and shoot one down. Thus, Kempf had achieved five kills in a single mission, bringing his total victory score to forty-one.<sup>12</sup> Two days later, he was awarded the Knight's Cross.

However, the Pe-2s had succeeded in taking out six Bf 109s, four Ju 88s, and twenty trucks on the ground, and one



A row of white-painted I-16s of 4 GIAP/VVS KBF (formerly 13 IAP VVS/KBF). "Red 34" was flown by Mladshiy Leytenant Grigoriy Guryanov, who is seen in the foreground. Guryanov arrived at the unit in September 1941, fresh from flight school. He was shot down as Hans Philipp's 90th victory on March 17, 1942, but survived. Guryanov was shot down and killed on his 365th combat mission on August 22, 1944. He amassed a score of six individual and five shared victories.



Vasily Golubev is seen here with one hand on one of his I-16's propeller blades. Born in 1912, Golubev was an enthusiastic sailplane flier before the war. He served as a naval fighter pilot from August 1940 and was appointed commander of the 3rd Eskadrilya of 4 GIAP/VVS KBF in March 1942. By June 1942, he had flown 339 combat missions and scored four individual and twenty shared victories, for which he was appointed a Hero of the Soviet Union. He survived the war with 546 combat missions in his logbook and 15 individual and 20 shared victories on his tally. Vasily Golubev passed away in Moscow on April 17, 2001.



soldier was killed and ten were injured by bomb shrapnel. Moreover, the actual losses sustained by the Soviets during this raid was confined to two I-16s and no Pe-2s. On the other hand, they made unsubstantiated claims for two shot down Bf 109s.<sup>13</sup>

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Adhering to Stalin's demand of a general offensive, the Soviets resumed their offensive in the northern combat zone on January 7, this time with simultaneous attacks all along the front held by Field Marshal Wilhelm Ritter von Leeb's Army Group North, which had the Eighteenth Army in the Leningrad area, and the Sixteenth Army on both sides of Lake Ilmen. The Eighteenth Army was pounced on by the Volkhov and Leningrad Fronts, with the aim of breaking the blockade of Leningrad, and, for the next stage, to surround and annihilate this army. For that purpose, the Volkhov Front had been reinforced with two new armies: the Fifty-ninth at Gruzino on the eastern side of River Volkhov, about half-way between Lakes Ladoga and Ilmen, and, to the south of it, the Second Shock Army.

The air forces of the Leningrad and Volkhov fronts were tasked to interdict the German supply route along River Volkhov, and to delay and destroy German troop columns. However, mainly U-2, R-5, and R-Z biplanes were available for this task, and these could not deal the Germans any significant damage. Meanwhile, daylight operations conducted by VVS Leningrad Front achieved very little in the face of JG 54's spirited defense. On the first day of the offensive, three VVS Leningrad Front bombers escorted by five Tomahawks of 158 IAP attempted to reach and attack Siverskaya Airdrome. They were intercepted by Bf 109s from I./JG 54, whose pilots shot down two—credited to Hauptmann Franz Eckerle and his wingman—and forced the remaining pilots to disengage.<sup>14</sup> One of the 158 IAP pilots who was shot down that day was Leytenant Sergey Demenkov. He survived with injuries; the following spring he was back in action and scored the first of

the total of fifteen victories that he would attain during the war.

Generaloberst Keller decided to concentrate his forces against the Volkhov Front, and on January 8, the Ju 88s and He 111s of KG 1 and KG 4 were brought in against the congestion of Second Shock Army troops that advanced across the ice of the Volkhov River near Chudovo. "The bombers created a total chaos among the columns, which brought a considerable relief to our infantry," wrote Major Trautloft in his diary.<sup>15</sup> Provided with the primary task of providing their troops and lines of communication with air cover, the VVS Volkhov Front and VVS Leningrad Front fighters flew at their full strength—only to be butchered by Trautloft's fighters. JG 54 reported five fighters, three Pe-2s, and two SBs shot down against only one own loss. The fighters were reported as "I-26s" and "I-180s," but three of them were Curtiss P-40 Tomahawks, one each from 154 IAP, 158 IAP, and 159 IAP. In the former unit, Leytenant Vladimir Yakovlev, a veteran from the air fighting over China in 1937-1938, was so badly injured that he lost one eye. The two other fighters shot down by JG 54 pilots can be verified as a LaGG-3 of 44 IAP and a MiG-3 of 124 IAP. An I-16 of 123 IAP was also lost.<sup>16</sup>

One of the shot down Pe-2s, from 116 ORAE, was found by a Russian aircraft archaeology team seventy years later. The pilot of the downed Bf 109, Feldwebel Wilhelm Quack, managed to evade capture for two days but was finally seized in a completely exhausted condition and brought to the airbase at Novaya Ladoga, where he was introduced to Soviet fighter pilots.

The dialogue between Feldwebel Quack and these Soviet fighter pilots, among them Leytenant Vasily Golubev of 13 IAP/VVS KBF, says quite a lot about both sides' view of fighter tactics. Golubev wrote: "Feldwebel Quack, an ardent Fascist who was shot down over Lake Ladoga, answered the question why the German pilots would not accept frontal attacks: 'What am I, a fool? In a frontal attack we have the same chances of winning. No, it is better to wait until our chances are at least ninety percent.'



'Why don't you fight in turns?'

Quack replied that this wasn't either profitable for them, adding: 'A sudden attack at high speed and a quick departure—that is our main tactic.'

Golubev commented: "What he said was true. We should have looked for new techniques in combat with the Me 109 F. It is better to work in cooperation between small groups of fighters. However, even many of our experienced pilots failed to understand the enemy's methods of free hunting, and instead considered the Fascists as cowards, and that their tactics were those of 'thieves': after all, they avoided frontal attacks, and would not get involved in protracted air combats, especially turning combats, where their chances of victory were insignificant. Of course, a coward can be in any airplane, but it was a mistake to consider all Fascist pilots as cowards."<sup>17</sup>

On January 9, I./JG 54 nevertheless met stronger resistance in the air. Two of its Bf 109s were shot down—one in air combat and one reportedly by their own Flak guns—and a third crashed at Krasnogvardeysk due to engine damage. It is possible that one or two of these fell prey to one of the "Grünherz" pilots' old acquaintances, 32-year-old Kapitän Sergey Vlasov. Having graduated from flight school already in 1941, Vlasov had flown against JG 54 since the outbreak of the war between Germany and the Soviet Union and had been shot down twice, on July 22 and August 12, 1941—possibly by Hauptmann Franz Eckerle on both occasions! After recovering from his wounds, he returned to service with 159 IAP on January 6, 1942, flew a Curtiss P-40 Tomahawk in combat on this January 9 and claimed to have shared in the destruction of two Bf 109s on this day.

However, not least because of their weakness in the air, the Soviets failed to make any breakthrough during this round of attacks on the ground. After only two days, the Second Shock Army had lost about three thousand men in the offensive, and the entire venture had to be discontinued. The German Army managed to hold their positions both at the Volkhov River and around Leningrad.

But, to the south of Lake Ilmen, the situation was different. Here, Northwestern Front's Eleventh and Thirty-fourth armies had begun by attacking German Sixteenth Army at Staraya Russa on January 7. Two days later, farther to the south, the Third and Fourth Shock Armies joined in, developing the offensive along Northwestern Front's entire area, and striking both the Sixteenth Army of Army Group North and the Ninth Army of Army Group Center (see p. 88).

To support the offensive, General-Leytenant Timofey Kutsevalov's VVS Northwestern Front had been reinforced with 253 IAP and, from Leningrad, 41 SAD, comprised of 38 IAP and 55 SBAP, to muster approximately 200 serviceable aircraft. The two northern armies were supported by 6 SAD and 57 SAD:

#### 6 SAD

12 IAP (renumbered into 739 IAP on January 25) -  
LaGG-3  
299 ShAP - Il-2  
502 ShAP - Il-2  
624 SBAP - SB  
514 BAP - Pe-2  
626 NBAP - SB

#### 57 SAD

12 IAP - Yak-1  
161 IAP - Yak-1  
402 IAP - MiG-3  
288 ShAP - Il-2  
674 LBAP - U-2  
676 LBAP - U-2

The Third Shock Army, operating against the southern flank of Army Group North between Velikiye Luki and Kholm, had an air force consisting of 7 SAD, with 73 serviceable aircraft (including 16 Yak-1s in 163 IAP, 20 I-16s and two LaGG-3s of 6 IAP, 35 light bomber biplanes, and three liaison aircraft).<sup>18</sup>



The Bf 109 F-4s of the Geschwaderkommodore of JG 54, Major Hannes Trautloft (right), and his wingman, the Geschwaderadjutant, Oberleutnant Otto Kath. (Photo: Trautloft.)



A Soviet Pe-2 bomber after a combat mission. Note the dive brakes under the wing and the open bomb bays.

The main weakness in VVS Northwestern Front was its capacity to strike ground targets in daylight. At the start of the year, it only had one under-equipped Shturmovik regiment, 288 ShAP. This was joined by 299 ShAP and 502 ShAP, which entered combat on January 12, but with only a handful of Il-2s. These three regiments carried out an average of less than five sorties per day until the end of the month. The situation was not much better regarding bomber operations in daytime. VVS Northwestern Front had only one regiment for this purpose, 514 BAP, and its Pe-2s carried out an average of only eight combat sorties per day between January 7 and 31.<sup>19</sup> Thus, most air attacks against ground targets—German troop concentrations, supply columns and depots, airfields, and occupied settlements—were carried out by single-engine light bomber biplanes at nighttime and strafing fighters in daytime.

When the Northwestern Front initiated its offensive, the Luftwaffe had only Hauptmann Wilhelm Hachfeld's I./JG 51 "Mölders"—minus its 3. Staffel, which was in the Leningrad sector—in the area immediately to the south of Lake Ilmen, and its seventeen Bf 109s had to be evacuated from Staraya Russa to Dno in the face of the rapidly advancing Soviet troops. The main weakness of Fliegerkorps I was its almost total lack of ground-attack aircraft, so its bombers had to be dispatched in low-level attacks against the advancing Soviet troops, instead of carrying out more "normal" bomber missions against targets in the enemy's rear area. In doing so, they became an easy target for ground fire, with severe German losses as a consequence. During the first four days of the Soviet offensive, nine Ju 88s or He 111s were shot down. On January 10, the com-

mander of I./KG 4 "General Wever," Major Heinz Alewyn, had to bail out of his burning He 111. These missions were however so successful that they had to be continued at all cost. For instance, on January 10, a six-kilometer-long column of Soviet infantry and vehicles was plastered with cluster bombs, inflicting bloody losses and destroying fifty-three motor vehicles according to the German report.<sup>20</sup>

With the fighters of both sides also mainly employed in strafing missions, only a few air combats were fought. In the first of these during Northwestern Front's offensive, on January 10, I./JG 51 shot down two Yak-1s of 163 IAP for no own losses.<sup>21</sup>

During the next six days, air activity in the sector south of Lake Ilmen was curtailed by prevailing fog and snowfalls. Fliegerkorps I carried out a daily average of 50 sorties—transport missions not included—in the area, and VVS Northwestern Front flew a daily average of 83 sorties in daytime, though approximately one third were against Army Group Center. Thus, the air activity on both sides was more or less on the same scale. VVS Northwestern Front lost sixteen aircraft between January 9 and 15, a loss rate of three percent. The bomber units of Fliegerkorps I suffered heavy losses due to their many low-level attacks; the nine Ju 88s and He 111s that were shot down in the sector south of Lake Ilmen between January 9 and 15 represent a seven percent loss rate.

With such a limited air support, the numerically inferior German troops were unable to hold their lines south of Lake Ilmen. On January 9, a German troop contingent was isolated in Vzvadskoye, northeast of Staraya Russa, and at Nechayevoye Airdrome, German reconnaissance Staffel

4.(H)/23 had to destroy five of its own aircraft to prevent them falling into the hands of approaching Soviet troops. January 13 was a black day for the Germans. A supply store with 6,000 tons of provisions fell into Soviet hands, while bombers of the VVS set Staraya Russa, dominated by wooden houses, on fire. A heavy loss was also suffered by I./JG 51 that day, when Feldwebel Egon Grosse, an ace with twenty-eight victories, was severely injured when bad weather forced his airplane down near Staraya Russa. He later died from his injuries.

That day too, the Soviet Leningrad and Volkhov Fronts resumed their offensives against the Schlüsselburg wedge east of Leningrad and at the Volkhov River. Marching straight against the German fortifications in fog and raging blizzards, the Second Shock Army troops managed to tear open a 12-km wide gap in the German front lines at Myasnoy Bor, 25 km northeast of Novgorod. Its cavalry forces then advanced 30 km in five days and reached Finev Lug, thus severing the rail connection between Novgorod and the German troops south of Leningrad. Farther to the north, the Leningrad Front's Fifty-fourth Army attacked in a southwestern direction at Pogostye, threatening to cut off German I Army Corps, which held positions at the Volkhov River between this army and the Second Guards Army in the south.

Field Marshal von Leeb panicked and flew to Hitler's headquarters in East Prussia where he asked for permission to pull back his troops. Hitler absolutely disagreed, claiming that von Leeb exaggerated. The result was that the Field Marshal asked to be relieved of his command. The Führer agreed and immediately replaced him with Generaloberst Georg von Kuchler.

The Nazi dictator was in fact proven right in his controversy with von Leeb. The Volkhov Front was still handicapped by having weak air support. The Fifty-fourth

Army, for instance, had an air force consisting of only one fighter regiment and a U-2-equipped night bomber regiment. Indeed, Aleksandr Novikov diverted many units of his VVS Leningrad Front to this army's support, but even those were insufficient to fulfill the Volkhov Front's requirements of air support. Thus, on January 15, only a handful of I-153s from 153 IAP attacked the German troops that fought against the Fifty-fourth Army.<sup>22</sup> This resulted in no more than nine killed and eighteen injured German soldiers.<sup>23</sup>

Meanwhile, as soon as the weather cleared the bombers of Fliegerkorps I were brought in against this new threat. The report for January 16 describes their actions: "In air attacks against troop concentrations, infantry, and truck and horse-drawn columns in settlements and in the area of Sitno, Gorodok, Dubovitsy, and Spasskaya Polist, the enemy suffered high bloody losses, several trucks and sledges were destroyed."<sup>24</sup>

What it looked like at the receiving end of these air attacks was described by one of the surviving Soviet veterans, Nikolay Nikulin: "What was the cost, for example, of crossing the railway near Pogostye in January 1942! This area was subject to a massive bombardment, and we called it the 'Valley of death.' (There were many of such valleys, and in other places.) We crawl forward, in groups of ten, and are lucky if no one is wounded. We pass over corpses, hide behind the corpses—as if this is how it should be. And tomorrow we are sent forward again... And when next to you a man is torn to shreds, douses you with his blood, hangs his insides and brain on you—in peaceful conditions this is enough to make you crazy."<sup>25</sup>

The Soviet offensives were soon halted. "The main cause of our failures was our lack of artillery ammunition and the German dominance in the air," wrote the Volkhov Front's C-in-C, General Armii Meretskov.<sup>26</sup>



The two main opponents in the air war in the Volkhov river sector in early 1942: General-Mayor Ivan Zhuravlyov (left), the commander of VVS Volkhov Front, and General Helmuth Förster (right), the commander of Fliegerkorps I. Ivan Zhuravlyov (1905-1989) flew bomber missions during the Winter War against Finland, served as the Deputy Commander of VVS Northern Front in 1941, and commanded the VVS of the Volkhov Front (later 14th Air Army) between 1942 and 1947. Helmuth Förster (1889-1965) was a combat pilot in World War I. He served in various staff positions early in the war and commanded Fliegerkorps I between June 1941 and August 1942. Thereafter he was the Chief of Administration at the German Air Ministry, Chef der Luftfahrt.





Bruno Dilley (1913-1968) earned fame for having fired the first shot of World War II when he attacked a target in Poland some minutes before the war officially broke out. He served as a Stuka pilot from 1937 and was appointed commander of I./StG 2 in January 1942. On February 12, 1942, he and his radio operator, Oberfeldwebel Ernst Kather, were shot down behind enemy lines, but survived and made it back to the German lines.

Indeed, VVS Volkhov Front had an able commander, as Meretskov attested to: "General-Mayor of Aviation Ivan Zhuravlyov had earned respect as a talented air commander. He skillfully used the long winter nights for night bomber operations. In the midst of solid swamps and deep snow, his subordinates learned how to keep airfields operational. Initially, we had few aircraft, only little fuel, and few air bombs. And still the Volkhov aviation contributed quite well to the success of the ground forces. All of that is a considerable merit of its commander."<sup>27</sup> During this battle, Zhuravlyov's airmen carried out an impressive number of sorties against German lines of communication and airfields during the hours of darkness, but since mainly obsolete U-2s, R-5s, and R-Zs were used, the effect was almost negligible.

To the south of Lake Ilmen, German Sixteenth Army managed to hold Staraya Russa even though the Soviets dominated in the air in this sector. With temporarily cleared skies, VVS Northwestern Front carried out a record of 178 sorties, including 13 by bombers and 12 by Shturmoviks, on January 16<sup>28</sup>—against which the Germans could only mount 52 sorties with bombers and 27 with fighters, mainly against troop and vehicle columns, south of Lake Ilmen.<sup>29</sup> Next day, the Northwestern Front outflanked the German II Corps and the bulk of X Corps—ninety-five thousand men—at Demyansk, a forward post and communication center 80 km southeast of Lake Ilmen, and advanced westward on both flanks of this garrison. A few days later, fifty-five hundred German soldiers were isolated at Kholm on the Lovat River, another 80 km farther to the southwest.

Hitler ordered the encircled forces to stay put rather than attempt a breakout. Demyansk was even officially declared a "fortress"—*Festung Demyansk*. By holding these two strategic communication hubs, the Germans thwarted all Soviet possibilities of expanding their advance much farther to the west.

An air supply operation to the besieged garrisons commenced in an atmosphere of urgency. The first Ju 52 transport planes landed on the narrow airstrip at Demyansk on January 17, bringing in 330 troops and equipment, and evacuated 470 wounded men.<sup>30</sup> Only seventy-five operational Ju 52s were available for this task, so the commander of Luftflotte 1, Generaloberst Keller, decided to allocate the He 111s of I./KG 4 "General Wever" to fly in supplies and reinforcements to Demyansk and Kholm.

Other Luftwaffe reinforcements also arrived. I./StG 2 "Immelmann" under Hauptmann Bruno Dilley arrived at Dno after a period of rest and recuperation in Germany, equipped with the first of the new Ju 87 D version—which had increased the payload to 1,800 kg from 500 kg in the B-version—to reach the Eastern Front. Among the unit's airmen were veterans such as the Staffelkapitäne of 1. and 3. Staffeln, Knight's Cross holders Oberleutnant Friedrich Lang and Oberleutnant Alwin Boerst. The latter had carried out more than three hundred dive bombings, and Lang would celebrate his five hundredth combat sortie in February 1942. Later on, both were among the four Stuka pilots who were to be awarded the Swords to the Knight's Cross with Oak Leaves.

I./StG 2 began operations in this new sector on January 18, when its Stukas carried out eleven sorties. It sustained its first loss the next day, when Dilley's adjutant, Oberleutnant Karl Brausch, was posted as missing—probably after getting shot down as the eighth victim of 12 IAP's Starshiy Leytenant Ivan Dzyuba. In immediate response to this, a Schwarm from 8./JG 54 flew from Siverskaya to Dno to support I./JG 51 in the area. This was followed shortly afterward by 9./JG 54 under Oberleutnant Hans-Ekkehard Bob.<sup>31</sup>

The reinforced Luftwaffe immediately had a strong impact on the fighting both on the ground and in the air. On January 19, Fliegerkorps I for the first time surpassed VVS Northwestern Front by flying 181 combat sorties (transport missions not included) in the area south of Lake Ilmen, against just 73 in daytime by the Soviets. This led to one of the rare air combats in this sector. Shortly before noon on January 19, a Bf 109 Schwarm from I./JG 51 flew an escort mission for a Hs 126 when four 161 IAP Yak-1s appeared and attempted to attack the reconnaissance aircraft. In the ensuing combat, the Soviets lost two Yak-1s but reported a Bf 109 shot down. One of the Soviet pilots was killed—Leytenant Timor Frunze, the son of the legendary military commander Mikhail Frunze, who gave his name to the Soviet military academy. I./JG 51's Stabsarzt Dr. Veit Vogel (the unit's medical doctor who flew combat missions) and Oberleutnant Reinhard Josten were credited with one victory each. In I./JG 51, one Bf 109 was indeed lost, with the pilot wounded but, according to the German report, the reason was a crash landing in adverse weather.

From this day onward, the Luftwaffe took control of the air south of Lake Ilmen, with its fighters gradually forcing VVS Northwestern Front to shift its activities to nighttime. During the four first days of the offensive, VVS Northwestern Front had flown three times more sorties in daytime than at night, but this changed to two-thirds of all sorties being flown at nighttime between January 25 and 28. However, not even this would save the Soviet air units from sustaining heavy losses. On the night of January 28, for instance, seven U-2s were lost.<sup>32</sup>

Similarly, as a result of the Luftwaffe attacks, the Soviet ground troops were compelled to restrict all movements to the hours of darkness.<sup>33</sup> This in turn enabled the bombers of Fliegerkorps I to direct more of their attention against the Soviet rail traffic in Northwestern Front's rear area. As we have seen in Chapter 7, this was already subject to attacks by the bombers of Fliegerkorps VIII. Thus, for instance, on January 21, Fliegerkorps VIII attacked the rail line between Ostashkov and Bologoye, and bombers of Fliegerkorps I reported hits on eight freight trains on the railway station at Chyorny Dvor, 15 km northeast of Ostashkov.<sup>34</sup>

The Stuka planes of Hauptmann Dilley's I./StG 2 were sent to-and-fro between the sectors to the north and to the south of Lake Ilmen like a fire brigade. German war correspondent Georg Brütting gave an example of its operations:

"I./StG 2 attacked an armored train on the railway Staraya Russa - Bologoye to the east of the encirclement area at Demyansk. The well-aimed artillery fire from this armored train created a difficult situation for the German troops in this sector. The dive-bombing took place in clear winter weather, commencing from an altitude of 3,000 meters. The aircraft dived against the wind in the direction



Timor Frunze, the son of the legendary military commander Mikhail Frunze, who gave his name to the Soviet military academy. Leytenant Timor Frunze arrived at 161 IAP on January 10, 1942, and was killed in aerial combat with pilots from I./JG 51 "Mölders" on his ninth combat mission, nine days later. He was credited with one shared victory.

of the front line. After releasing their bombs from a very low altitude, the pilots flew out of the target area almost on the deck, and thus managed to evade the anti-aircraft artillery. The bombs were dropped with accuracy. Six of the long, white-painted rail wagons fell across the railway.

After the landing at Dno, the command post of I./StG 2 received a radio message from the ground troops reporting that the armored train still maintained its unpleasant activity. The Stukagruppe hurriedly prepared another raid against the same target. This time the Russians had called in fighters to protect the remainder of the armored train. As an additional protective measure, the commander of the armored train had dispersed the wagons. One of the wagons had been moved 200 meters closer to the front line. The accurately dropped bombs completed the destruction and the army command sent its gratitude for the completely successful work.<sup>35</sup>

Such reports from the ground troops repeatedly emphasized the importance of air support. In its summary of the situation south of Lake Ilmen during the period January 18-25, the Headquarters of Army Group North established that "the situation is relieved by effective operations of the air fleet."<sup>36</sup> This too relied on the "Grünherz" fighters. In the Staraya Russa - Demyansk area south of Lake Ilmen, Soviet fighter opposition continued to be quite light, but during operations against the Second Shock Army north of Lake Ilmen, the war diary of I./StG 2 noted increased opposition from Soviet fighters. This is hardly surprisingly, since VVS Volkhov Front was receiving considerable reinforcements—though mostly U-2 and R-5 biplanes—and reached a strength of 313 aircraft by the end of January. The air force of the Second Shock Army increased from three to eight aviation regiments, and seven new aviation regiments were allocated to the Fifty-ninth Army. Nevertheless, the Bf 109s managed to save I./StG 2 from losses to Soviet fighters throughout both January and February. Moreover, when I./StG 2 was concentrated south of Lake Ilmen, I./JG 54 took its place by strafing Second Shock Army's troops and lines of communication. The German bombers meanwhile were tasked to attack rail lines and airfields east of the Volkhov River. These operations did not entirely halt the Soviet troops, but the pace of their advance was considerably slowed down, allowing the Germans to move reinforcements forward.

The Soviet fighter units naturally did whatever they could to relieve their hard-pressed ground troops but largely failed in this task. Engagements with the "Grünherz" Bf 109s were quite discouraging. In the sector between lakes Ladoga and Ilmen, it was mainly the aces of Hauptmann Franz Eckerle's I./JG 54 that caused the Soviet losses in the air. On January 19, an entire Zveno of three I-16s from 286 IAP failed to return from a mission. It later was established that they had all been shot down by attacking Bf 109s. A look at the German side shows that Eckerle claimed two of these for his forty-fourth and forty-fifth victories.

Next day, six P-40 Tomahawks of 154 IAP, led by the ace Kapitan Petr Pokryshev, clashed violently with I./JG 54 near Leningrad. Pokryshev was a veteran from the Winter War against Finland, in which he had achieved two victories, although he himself was also shot down twice. As





A Hs 126 of 2.(H)/21 with a Fi 156 Storch and the Soviet-constructed hangars at Siverskaya Airdrome in the background. With 4.(H)/23 operating in the area south of Lake Ilmen, this was the only German tactical reconnaissance Staffel in the Leningrad – Volkhov area in early 1942. In February 1942, this Staffel had two Hs 126s shot down and lost three more to technical failures.

they patrolled the sky in the area of Pogostye, his formation was bounced by six Bf 109s that came out from the sun and behind the Soviet formation. Lieutenant Andrey Chirkov and Mladshiy Leytenant Georgiy Fyodorenko were shot down by Oberleutnant Max-Hellmuth Ostermann (his fifty-second victory) and Hauptmann Heinrich Jung (his fifth). Both Soviet pilots survived by bailing out, but Chirkov came down behind enemy lines. He had lost his flying helmet and gloves during the descent. What that meant is obvious from a note in Trautloft's diary that day: "Temperature minus 29 degrees Celsius"! However, after an arduous two-day walk in the unforgiving wilderness and cold, the frostbitten and exhausted Chirkov managed pass through the thinly held German lines to reach Soviet lines.<sup>37</sup> He was lucky to find warm shelter before the temperature plummeted to a terrible minus 49 degrees Celsius (-56.2°F) on January 23.

Defying this barbaric cold, Ostermann and his wingman nevertheless took to the skies on a free-hunting mission that day. When they returned, Ostermann had shot down an I-16 and an Il-2 for his fifty-third and fifty-fourth victories. Both of these can be identified as belonging to VVS KBF's 4 GIAP and 57 ShAP. 4 GIAP/VVS KBF was the former 13 IAP/VVS KBF, which five days previously had been elevated to a Guards regiment, while 5 IAP/VVS KBF became 3 GIAP/VVS KBF and 1 MTAP/VVS KBF became

1 GMTAP/VVS KBF, in an attempt to encourage the heavily pressed airmen. However, the real state of the unit is evident from the fact that on this January 23, the C.O. of 4 GIAP/VVS KBF, Mayor Mikhail Okhten, was removed from his post for "mismanagement of the unit." To a certain degree, however, this was related to Petr Kulakov's desertion the previous month (see pp. 49ff).

Next day, Ostermann chalked up his number fifty-five, and on the 25th, he attacked an MP-1—the civilian version of the single-engine MBR-2 flying boat—on an air transport mission from Priyutino to Novaya Ladoga. "The flying boat in front of us appeared like a big barn door," said Ostermann. "I saw the fighter escort behind and above us, two puny biplanes, which were hanging with their tails high in the air, which meant that they were diving, but they certainly could not catch up with us. I was already very close to the big 'beef'. I pressed the buttons, and after a very short burst of fire, bright flames shot out of all sides of the fuselage. The airplane resembled a ball of fire. Only the wing ends poked out of the flames. I had never seen a machine burn like that before! I pulled up and then saw the impact in a small grove. A thick black pile of smoke hung in the air."<sup>38</sup> Four crewmembers and five passengers in the MP-1 were killed.<sup>39</sup>

Then Ostermann engaged the two escorting I-153s. These were too agile for him, so he made several mock



attacks until they started to run low on fuel and had to disengage. He then pursued them from afar, flying with his white-painted Bf 109 low over the snow-covered ground, until he caught up with them. He then pulled up and destroyed one of the Chaykas with his cannon. The other one got away, but Ostermann soon caught sight of another formation of I-153s. He attacked, and one of the Soviet pilots made an abrupt 180-degree turn and came rushing against the Bf 109 frontally. Both pilots fired with all their guns, and it was the I-153 that got the heaviest hits and plummeted to the ground. After that, Ostermann had to return to base because the red lamp on the dashboard told him that he too was running out of fuel now.<sup>40</sup>

On January 26, Hauptmann Eckerle led an interception of a formation of Pe-2 bombers that had wrought havoc on Mga's railway station. Ostermann and Leutnant Alfred Teumer shot down two bombers, while Eckerle and his wingman, Unteroffizier Gerhard Proske, blew two of the escorting LaGG-3s out of the sky. These were from 2 GIAP, and both pilots, Leytenant Aleksandr Maltsev and Mladshiy Leytenant Nikolay Rybakov, were killed.<sup>41</sup> Two days later, Ostermann brought home his sixtieth victory while Eckerle bagged his fiftieth.

Around this time, a second Stukagruppe equipped with the new Ju 87 D, III./StG 1, arrived from Germany to Fliegerkorps I and was stationed at Gostkino, 60 km west of Novgorod. Moreover, Hauptmann Dietrich Hrabak's II./JG 54 returned from a lengthy period of rest and refit in Germany. With this, the "Grünherz" Geschwader's top

ace, Hauptmann Hans "Fips" Philipp with 73 victories, was back in action.

This was echoed in the memoirs of one of the Soviet fighter pilots who fought in this sector, Dmitriy Medvedev. He described how Kapitan Boris Solomatin, a veteran who had flown both against the Japanese at Khalkhin-Gol, against the Finns in the Winter War, and against the Germans since June 1941, arrived from the Army Headquarters with some serious news:

"Solomatin arrived with a warning to us:

– As reported by our intelligence, the Germans have received replenishments of flying personnel. Among the new arrivals there are some famous aces.

– Ha, who cares about the Fritzes' aces, interrupted Grisha Voyna. And besides, we have Lyashchenko!

But Solomatin continued calmly:

– What I am saying is that our comrades have lots of courage, but sometimes we lack the ability to figure out the enemy's tricks, and the newly arrived aces have a large arsenal of all sorts of tricks, Comrade Voyna. Our task in the first encounters with them is to learn to understand their tactics, challenge them in an open fight, discourage their willingness to ambush us, and to withdraw from the combat when the situation is unfavorable.<sup>42</sup> (Leytenant Fyodor Lyashchenko was an ace in 92 IAP with six individual and five shared victories.)

The VVS also received reinforcements. In late January, 299 ShAP handed over its six remaining Il-2s to VVS Northwestern Front's 502 ShAP and was shifted to the



A formation of Ju 87 D Stukas returning from a combat mission. The arrival of Hauptmann Bruno Dilley's I./StG 2 "Immelmann" at Fliegerkorps I became something of a game-changer for the battle.