

**BOOK REVIEW****AIR BATTLE FOR MOSCOW 1941-1942****BY DMITRY DEGTEV & DMITRY ZUBOV****PUBLISHED IN 2021 BY AIR WORLD AN IMPRINT OF PEN & SWORD BOOKS LTD****ISBN 978 1 52677 446 0 (HB)**

The authors have produced an exceptionally well researched and fascinating book on a little-known aspect of the Second World War – The Air Battle For Moscow. Adolph Hitler had in 1939, for political expediency a non-aggression pact with the Soviet Union despite his deep-seated hate of Bolshevism. On the 24<sup>th</sup> June 1941 he launched ‘Operation Barbarossa’ the invasion of the Soviet Union. A priory target was Moscow, which was hundreds of kilometres distant from the German front line and could only be reached by the Luftwaffe.

The aerial operation against Moscow was code named ‘Clara Zetkin’. She was a German Marxist, communist activist, and advocate of women’s rights. When Hitler took power the

communist party of Germany was banned following the Reichstag fire in 1933 and Clara went into exile in the Soviet Union and died there. The Luftwaffe began reconnaissance flights over Moscow in July 1941 to photograph the layout of the city and identify targets for bombing.

There was not universal support for the operation against Moscow amongst the Nazi hierarchy, but they put aside their reservations in deference to the Fuhrer. The Luftwaffe had no reserves to undertake raids on Moscow due to commitments in Europe and the Mediterranean. In order, to attack Moscow air groups had to be garnered from these operational areas.

The first raid on Moscow was carried out on the 21<sup>st</sup> July by 195 aircraft. Their time over the target and the number of bombs carried was limited due to the endurance of the aircraft. They dropped 104 tons of bombs and over 40,000 incendiary bombs causing fires and damage to factories, military installations, buildings, railways, and the Kremlin. 213 Muscovites were killed and over 300 injured. The Russian air defences around Moscow was comprised of anti-



aircraft guns, machine-guns, searchlights, barrage balloons and the 24<sup>th</sup> Air Defence Fighter Division composed of 278 ageing aircraft. Later after re-organisation the 6<sup>th</sup> Air Defence Fighter Corps was formed composed of approximately 500 aircraft and became known as 'Stalin's Falcons'.

The authors give precise information about the various types of aircraft used by both sides, including their identification numbers, type of armaments carried, ceiling heights, and location of where the aircraft were brought down and fate of their crews. Similar details are given about the defensive operations undertaken by Soviet aircraft and anti-aircraft ground crews during the air raids. The Germans launched further follow-up raids and when operation 'Clara Zetkin' ceased at the end of August, after the capture of Smolensk, armoured units of the German Army were to advance on Moscow, in accordance with the timescale laid down by Hitler.

The early air raids on Moscow were the heaviest but never amounted to more than one hundred aircraft and later were considerably reduced, at times to just one or two aircraft. During Stalin's purges of the 1930's experienced military personnel were executed or exiled and by 1941 pilots of Soviet air force had little combat experience compared to their German counterparts. The latter had benefited from combat in the Spanish civil war and during the early phases of the Second World War. Though frowned upon, as Stalinist propaganda hailed Soviet aviation as the best in the world, Soviet pilots brought down German aircraft by ramming their opponents and destroying each other. Miraculously, on occasions some of the air crews survived the ordeal. As Soviet losses mounted in the opening weeks defending Moscow, pilots who rammed enemy aircraft were proclaimed heroes for propaganda purposes. German airmen had a fear of landing in the Soviet Union and the authors cite a case of German pilot who shot himself rather be captured. Some who were captured were never heard of again, others did manage to reach German lines.

Both sides exaggerated their battle achievements for the benefit of their superiors and domestic consumption. Stalin never let reality get in the way of his propaganda. As the late summer drifted towards winter, the weather became a serious concern for the Germans who were not equipped to fight in severe winter conditions, unlike their Soviet opponents. Air raids on Moscow continued until April 1942 but the bombing campaign did not have the desired effect on the population as Hitler had forecast. Some inhabitants of Moscow feared that the bombing would destroy their city. As, a consequence unrest surfaced in areas around Moscow, but when it became known that Stalin had not left the Kremlin the confidence within the population was restored and they endured. Gradually the Soviet Union stepped up their war production and

improved the designs of their aircraft and armaments to fight a twentieth century war. Aircraft from Great Britain and USA, under the Lend Lease scheme augmented the Soviet Union's resources.

The authors make critical comments about Stalin's policies during the war, which today reflect, that Russian historians have the freedom to do so without reprisals. Within the text are personal accounts and experiences of both combatants and civilians. Photographs, drawings, posters and extracts from newspapers enhance the written material. The appendices contain information on 'Stalin's Falcons' and aircraft lost by the Luftwaffe in the air battle over Moscow in 1941-1942. There are also brief biographies on selected personnel and aircraft.

Dmitry Degtev and Dmitry Zubov are to be congratulated for their dedication and enthusiasm in researching archival material held by the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation.

Between them they have produced a book of significance not only for those who have a specific interest in aerial warfare but also for those who enjoy reading about 20<sup>th</sup> century history. The possibility that a second book about the Air Battle For Moscow between 1942 and 1944 may be forthcoming is an intriguing prospect.

***Roger Coleman***