

Kursk THE AIR BATTLE

Figures for aircraft losses during the Battle of Kursk have been subject to much dispute. It is not uncommon to find that accounts which focus on the ground war relate to the highly exaggerated Soviet figures on German aircraft losses – ranging from ‘over one thousand German aircraft lost’ to 3,700 German aircraft losses during the Battle.³⁹¹ Other accounts are based on German wartime figures which exaggerate Soviet losses and give figures for German aircraft losses which are lower than the reality. One frequently related source asserts that 1. *Fliegerdivision* alone claimed 1,733 victories for the loss of 64 aircraft from 5 July 1943 to mid-August 1943. The origin of the latter figure can not be established, but an examination of the loss returns to *Generalquartiermeister der Luftwaffe* shows that 1. *Fliegerdivision*’s actual losses were considerably higher.³⁹²

The immediate daily battle reports submitted by the *Fliegerverbindungsstabschef* of 2. *Armee* is often quoted in more scholarly accounts.³⁹³ But these figures were preliminary and do not include all losses. A comparison between Soviet claims, the figures from daily battle reports submitted by the *Fliegerverbindungsstabschef* of 2. *Armee* and the more reliable loss returns to *Generalquartiermeister der Luftwaffe* for the first four days of the battle draw an interesting picture:

Date	Fliegerkorps VIII aircraft losses			Luftflotte 6 aircraft losses			Total German aircraft losses		
	Soviet claims*	According to Flivo 2. Armee	According to Generalquartiermeister der Luftwaffe**	Soviet claims***	According to Flivo 2. Armee	According to Generalquartiermeister der Luftwaffe*	Soviet claims	According to Flivo 2. Armee	According to Generalquartiermeister der Luftwaffe*
5 July	154	19	27	106	7	18	260	26	45
6 July	105	7	11	113	7	11	218	14	22
7 July	122	10	11	96	3	8	218	13	19
8 July	106	5	9	76	2	2	182	7	11
Totals	487	41	58	391	19	39	878	60	97

* Only claims made by 2 VA.

** Only total losses due to hostile action in the air included.

*** Only claims made by 16 VA.³⁹⁴



Bf 109 G-6, W. Nr 15999, of I./JG 52 at Anapa in 1943. The machine carries the double chevron of the Gruppenkommandeur and may have been flown by Hptm. Helmut Bennemann or Hptm. Johannes Wieser of I./JG 52.

The corresponding figures for Soviet aircraft losses during the same period break down as follows:

Date	Soviet aircraft losses in the southern sector of the Kursk Bulge				Soviet aircraft losses in the southern sector of the Kursk Bulge (16 VA)		Actual losses sustained by 2 VA, 17 VA and 16 VA* German claims of Soviet aircraft shot down in the southern sector of the Kursk Bulge	
	Actual losses by 2 VA	Actual losses by 17 VA*	Total number of Soviet aircraft losses in the southern sector of the Kursk Bulge*	German claims of Soviet aircraft shot down in the southern sector of the Kursk Bulge	Actual losses by 16 VA	German claims of Soviet aircraft shot down in the northern sector of the Kursk Bulge		
5 July	78	80	158	260	100	165	258	425
6 July	45	45	90	74	91	130	181	204
7 July	37	50	87	96	43	81	168	177
8 July	41	10	51	43	49	73	100	116
Totals	201	185	386	473	283	449	707	922

* Estimations due to incomplete figures for 17 VA.

For the whole period 5–31 July 1943, the files of the *Generalquartiermeister der Luftwaffe* give a total of 681 *Fliegerkorps VIII* and *Luftflotte 6* aircraft reported as put out of commission due to hostile action or unknown reasons on operations – 335 from *Fliegerkorps VIII* and 346 from *Luftflotte 6*. Of this total, 420 were completely destroyed or written off (192 from *Fliegerkorps VIII* and 229 from *Luftflotte 6*).

In return, during the same period, these formations reported 2,197 Soviet aircraft shot down (night victories not included) – 670 by *Fliegerkorps VIII* and 1,527 by *Luftflotte 6*. Interestingly, while *Fliegerkorps VIII* reported two Soviet aircraft shot down for each own aircraft which was put out of commission due to hostile action or unknown reasons on operations, the situation in *Luftflotte 6* was twice as good from the German point of view. This is probably mainly attributable to the higher amount of overclaims which were submitted by JG 51 and JG 54, rather than any significant difference in the qualities of the *Luftwaffe* units at *Fliegerkorps VIII* and 1. *Fliegerdivision*.

To return to the Soviet side, Soviet archive records show that 2 VA claimed to have shot down 811 enemy aircraft during the most intense phase of the battle – between 5–18 July 1943. These were spread across the various *Diviziyas* as follows:

- 4 IAK – 175 victories
- 5 IAK – 451 victories
- 1 ShAK – 121 victories
- 291 ShAD – 48 victories
- 1 BAK – 16 victories

However, the Soviets were aware that a substantial amount of these claims were optimistic exaggerations. The same document comments on these figures: ‘Most probably the reports of 811 shot down enemy aircraft is exaggerated, since this is based on the pilots’ own reports, which have not been verified by the commanders of the units or larger formations.’³⁹⁵

The same source specifies 2 VA’s aircraft losses during the same period as follows:

Aircraft type	Aircraft losses on operations		Reported missing on operations due to unknown causes	Recovered damaged on friendly territory	Aircraft irrevocably lost
	In aerial combat	To AAA fire			
Fighters	26	8	254	117	171
Shturmoviks	11	20	215	76	170
Bombers	4	3	46	22	31
Totals	41	31	515	215	372

For the whole month of July 1943, Soviet archive documents specify the statistics for 2 VA's operations as follows:³⁹⁶

Formation	Aircraft losses on operations				Enemy aircraft reported shot down
	In aerial combat	To AAA fire	Irrevocably missing on operations	Total sum of losses	
4 IAK	12	4	45	61	184
5 IAK	59	18	40	117	484
10 IAK	3	-	-	3	10
1 ShAK	44	35	20	99	196
291 ShAD	35	41	34	110	80
1 BAK	12	9	15	36	19
208 NBAD	-	-	3	3	-
454 BAP	2	1	1	4	6
Totals	167	108	158	433	979

Although the statistics for 17 VA are not as detailed as those regarding 2 VA, the following statistics for 17 VA for the period 1-31 July 1943 apply:³⁹⁷

Formation	Aircraft type	Aircraft losses on operations				Total sum of losses
		In aerial combat	To AAA fire	Irrevocably missing on operations	Destroyed on the ground through enemy action	
1 SAK	Fighters	6	-	-	-	6
Shturmoviks		6	7	11	-	24
3 SAK	Fighters	12	6	3	2	23
Shturmoviks		2	18	16	2	38
9 SAK	Fighters	10	3	15	-	28
Shturmoviks		25	26	55	-	106
244 BAD	Bombers	3	8	6	-	17
262 NBAD	Bombers	-	-	2	-	2
Totals		64	68	108	4	244

In conclusion, all of this shows that according to the respective side's own loss statistics, the air war on the southern flank of the Kursk Bulge resulted in 677 Soviet and around 220 German aircraft losses.

On the northern flank of the Kursk Bulge, 16 VA was reported to have carried out 8,393 combat sorties during the defensive stage of the battle – between 5 and 12 July 1943. Of this total, 4,050 sorties were carried out by fighters, 1,181 by *Shturmoviks*, 984 by day bombers and 2,178 by night bombers. In the course of these operations, 16 VA claimed to have shot down 517 enemy aircraft. Own losses were 439 aircraft.³⁹⁸

In conclusion, the air war on the northern flank of the Kursk Bulge between 5-11 July 1943 – before Operation *Kutuzov* commenced – resulted in around 430 Soviet and 57 German aircraft losses.

During the offensive stage – from 13 July to 15 August 1943 – the air units of 16 VA performed more than 22,000 combat sorties and reported around 400 German aircraft shot down.³⁹⁹ As far as Soviet losses are concerned, the offensive in the Orel area cost all participating Soviet air

formations a total loss of 1,104 aircraft between 12 July and 18 August 1943.⁴⁰⁰

One interesting feature of the air war during the Battle of Kursk was the 'internationalisation' of the campaign. Spanish pilots fought on both sides during the battle. Flying a Yak-7B with 2 VA, José Sánchez-Montes became the most successful Spanish fighter pilot in the Kursk battle by achieving four aerial victories before he was shot down and wounded on 13 July 1943. On the Axis side, his fellow countryman *Teniente (Oblt.)* Lorenzo Lucas Fernandez became 15./JG 51's – *Escuadrilla Azul* – top scorer by bringing home three victories in July 1943. In total, the Spaniards of 15./JG 51 performed 392 combat sorties – with a total of 583 flight hours – through July 1943, claiming eleven victories against three own combat losses. The French fighter pilots of the *Normandie-Niemen Eskadrilya* meanwhile claimed 22 victories against nine own losses in July 1943. The records of the Hungarian air units have proved very difficult to locate. Meticulous research by historian Csaba Becze indicates that the fighter squadron 5/1. *Vadász század* performed 138 combat sorties and was credited with five confirmed and five unconfirmed victories in July 1943. The results for fighter squadron 5/2. *Vadász század* are even more difficult to establish; it filed at least four claims in July 1943.⁴⁰¹

Indeed, if merely loss statistics are analysed, the Soviets got the worst of the Kursk battle. The situation was similar in the ground war. According to historians Anders Frankson and Niklas Zetterling, the Soviets sustained 177,000 casualties and lost between 1,600 and 1,900 tanks during Operation *Zitadelle*, while the German loss figures were 56,000 casualties and 280 tanks irrevocably lost.⁴⁰²

However, of far greater importance than these figures was the impact of the strategic victory achieved by the Soviets. Günther Rall, one of the most outstanding German fighter aces and the *Gruppenkommandeur* of III./JG 52, asserts that the Battle of Kursk was the real turning point in the air war on the Eastern Front: "The Russians are absolutely correct when they state that the Battle of Kursk decided the outcome of the war", Rall recorded. "From then and onward, the Russian Air Force would only grow better and better while the *Luftwaffe* went into decline. After Kursk, we all asked ourselves how we would get out of this mess."⁴⁰³

Another German fighter pilot who took part in the Kursk Battle – or at least in the Battle of the Orel Bulge – was *Oblt.* Norbert Hannig of 5./JG 54. In his memoirs he commented on the mood after the defeat in July 1943: "A new expression was coined mocking the official communiqués which spoke reassuringly of straightening the lines and advancing to prepared defensive positions: 'Forward, comrades! We've got to pull back!'"⁴⁰⁴

To the VVS, the Battle of Kursk meant a decisive turning point, as *General-Leytenant* Stepan Krasovskiy, who commanded 2 VA, pointed out: "The Battle of Kursk saw the Soviet air forces successfully accomplish extremely complex tasks, starting with the fight for the domination of the air, and finishing in the participation of the pursuit of the retreating and defeated enemy armies and the battle against his operational reserves. The Battle of Kursk signified a most important milestone in the development of the application of operational and tactical forms and methods of the Soviet military aviation."⁴⁰⁵

By defeating the German offensive plan at Kursk, Soviet soldiers and airmen not only forced the Germans onto the defensive and compelled Hitler to abandon his plan to attack Leningrad; the initiative on the Eastern Front firmly passed to the Soviets. The Germans would spend the rest of the war reacting to the Red Army's moves. Instead of providing the Germans and those who fought on Germany's side with encouragement – which had been one of the prime intentions of Operation *Zitadelle* – the Battle of Kursk gave the Allied side in general, and the Soviets in particular, a great moral boost.

Generaloberst Heinz Guderian, the Inspector-General of the German *Panzer* troops, wrote:

"With the failure of '*Zitadelle*' we had suffered a decisive defeat. The armoured formations, reformed and re-equipped with so much effort, had lost heavily in both men and in equipment and would now be unemployable for a long time to come. It was problematical whether they could be rehabilitated in time to defend the Eastern Front... [...] Needless to say the Russians exploited their victory to the full. There were to be no more periods of quiet on the Eastern Front. From now on, the enemy was in undisputed possession of the initiative."

lotte 4

D-1	W.Nr. 430710	G+LK	2.(F)/11	PQ 71/817	He 111 H-16	W.Nr. 161000	G1+KP	6./KG 55	PQ 6132
Observer	Lt Schulz, Hans		missing		Pilot	Lt Lachmann, Georg		missing	
Radio operator	Lt Wiebe, Wolfgang		missing		Radio operator	Uffz Schmidt, Kurt		wounded	
Observer	Gefr Krebs, Alfred		missing		Flight engineer	Obgfr Maas, Willi		wounded	
Observer	Gefr Cordes, Martin		missing		Shot down by fighter. Damage 100 %.				
Cause unknown. Damage 100 %.					He 111 H-6	W.Nr. 7100		1./KG 100	Dimitriyevka
He G-3	W.Nr. 4913		NAGr 6	PQ 61573	Gunner	Gefr Ebert, Richard		KIA	
Shot down by fighter. Damage 20 %.					Hit by fighters and Flak. Damage 45 %.				
He G-4	W.Nr. 19732		1./NAGr. 2	Kharkov North Airfield	He 111 H-16	W.Nr. 8521	6N+IH	1./KG 100	East of Sumy
Technical failure. Damage 50 %.					Pilot	Fw Kaiser, Heinz		wounded	
He 26	W.Nr. 4261		5.(H)/32	PQ 67791	Observer	Obgfr Schkowski, Bruno		missing	
Observer	Fw Zukrowski, Franz				Radio operator	Uffz Hechtbauer, Anton		missing	
Observer	Obt Delp, Heinz		KIA		Gunner	Uffz Lothmate, Bernhard		missing	
Shot down by fighter. Damage 100 %.					Gunner	Obgfr Koewara, Karl		missing	
He A-14	W.Nr. 144348		4./KG 3	PQ 6179	Shot down by fighters and Flak. Damage 100 %.				
Observer	Fw Zimmermann, Norbert				He 111 H-16	W.Nr. 160260		3./KG 100	Varvarovka
Observer	Uffz Liebert, August		KIA		Pilot	Bollmann			
Shot down by AAA. Damage 10 %.					Hit by fighters and Flak. Damage 45 %.				
He A-4	W.Nr. 888834		4./KG 3	Poltava Airfield	Bf 109 G-4	W.Nr. 15177	II./JG 3		Kharkov
Crash landing accident. Damage 30 %.					Shot down by friendly Flak. Damage 40 %.				
He A-4	W.Nr. 144125		5./KG 3	PQ 6119	Bf 109 G-4	W.Nr. 19965	white 11	4./JG 3	Kharkov-Regan Airfield
Engine damage. Damage 100 %.					Pilot	Uffz Liebmann, Helmut		wounded	
He 111 H	2./KG 27			Krasnaya-Dorvov	Hit by fire from Yak-1 during take-off. Damage 40 %.				
Radio operator	Uffz Drisler, Hermann		wounded		Bf 109 G-4	W.Nr. 19976	black 7	5./JG 3	Volchansk
Shot down by fighter. Damage 20 %.					Pilot	Obfw Schütte, Josef		wounded	
He 111 H-6	W.Nr. 7738		2./KG 27	Yakovnevo	Air combat. Damage 100 %.				
Shot down by fighter.					Bf 109 G-4	W.Nr. 19323	yellow 5	6./JG 3	Belgorod
He 111 H-6	W.Nr. 4918		3./KG 27	Krasnaya-Dorvov	Pilot	Lt Schmidt, Friedrich Wilhelm		wounded	
Shot down by fighter. Damage 20 %.					Air combat.				
He 111 H			5./KG 27	Belgorod	Bf 109 G-4	W.Nr. 19302	yellow 4	6./JG 3	Belgorod
Radio operator	Ogefr Dittrich, Rudolf		wounded		Pilot	Gefr Schilling, Hans		wounded	
Shot down by fire from fighter.					Air combat. Damage 15 %.				
He 111 H-16	W.Nr. 8159		III./KG 27	Belgorod	Bf 109 G-4	W.Nr. 19220	<+I	Stab III./JG 3	PQ 6111
Pilot	Obt Löwe, Johannes		KIA		Pilot	Hptm Eggers, Leo		KIA	
Pilot	Lt Rudel, Dankwart		KIA		Air combat with fighter. Pilot baled out but parachute failed to open completely. Damage 100 %.				
Observer	Fw Lang, Walter		KIA		Bf 109 G-4	W.Nr. 14941		7./JG 3	PQ 5126
Radio operator	Uffz Sarter, Fritz		KIA		Pilot	Obt Schloef, Hans			
Flight engineer	Uffz Hirschmann, Emil				Force-landed following air combat. 100 %.				
Shot down by AAA. Damage 100 %.					Bf 109 G-4	W.Nr. 16172	7./JG 3		PQ 6138
He 111 H-16	W.Nr. 160705		III./KG 27	Kharkov-Voychenko Airfield	Engine failure. Damage 20 %.				
Pilot	Obt Bartel, Klaus		wounded		Bf 109 G-4	W.Nr. 19307	black 2	8./JG 3	PQ 613
Pilot	Lt Wendt, Horst		wounded		Pilot	Uffz Lüdtke, Heinz		PoW	
Radio operator	Uffz Thom, Eduard		wounded		Shot down by ground fire. Pilot later died of wounds. Damage 100 %.				
Exploded during landing. Damage 100 %.					Bf 109 G-4	W.Nr. 19969		8./JG 3	PQ 6138
He 111 H-16	W.Nr. 8321		6./KG 55	PQ 6156	Technical failure. Damage 30 %.				
Shot down by fighter. Damage 20 %.					Bf 109 G-4	W.Nr. 14856	yellow 14	9./JG 3	Airfield Orlovka
He 111 H-16	W.Nr. 8468		6./KG 55	Kharkov	Pilot	Uffz Kreul, Erich			
Observer	Uffz Müller, Walter		wounded		Technical failure. Damage 20 %.				
Radio operator	Uffz Winkler, Heinz		wounded		Bf 109 G-4	W.Nr. 14883		9./JG 3	PQ 61182
Flight engineer	Uffz Müller, Ludwig		KIA		Pilot	Fw Zibler, Emil		missing	
Gunner	Gefr Scharmacher, Gerhard		wounded		Belly-landed in hostile territory following air combat. Damage 100 %.				
Force-landed after getting hit by fighter. Damage 100 %.					Bf 109 G-6	W.Nr. 20030	1./JG 52		Airfield Bessonovka
					Overtuned during landing. Damage 80 %.				