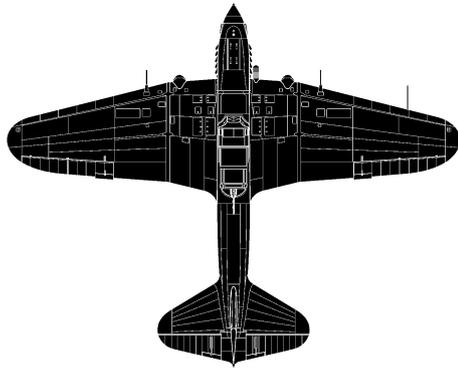


Airpower Classics

Artwork by Zaur Eylanbekov

Il-2 Shturmovik



The Soviet Il-2 Shturmovik ground attack aircraft played a crucial role in World War II. It was a principal cause of German defeat on the Eastern Front. Indeed, Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin claimed the Red Army needed it “like the air it breathes, like the bread it eats.” That demand brought production in huge numbers—more than any other combat aircraft ever.

Designed by Sergey Ilyushin, the Il-2 at first was a two-seater, but Stalin himself deleted the rear gunner position (reinstated in 1942). The key to the aircraft’s success was the 1,540-lb armored steel shell around the pilot, engine, radiators, and fuel tank. Initial ground-skimming tactics were replaced by attacks from about 6,000 feet. Shturmoviks in line-astern formation would circle down in a 20-degree dive to attack, then rejoin the circle for another

attack. The Il-2’s cannon and rockets were not as effective as its other weapon, the 5.5-lb. anti-tank bomblet with a shaped warhead. Dropped in massive quantities, the bomblets were devastating to the upper surfaces of tanks.

When the Wehrmacht stormed into Russia on June 22, 1941, German pilots found the single-seat Il-2 an easy target, and soon the gunner’s position returned. Even then, the Il-2’s work was recognized as so hazardous that pilots received the Hero of the Soviet Union award after only 10 missions; those flying other aircraft needed 100 missions. Thanks to heavy armor protection, an Il-2 could take a great deal of punishment, and it has long been clear that they dished out more than they took. Many view it as the most decisive land-warfare aircraft of all time.

—Walter J. Boyne

This aircraft: Soviet Air Force Il-2 Type 3 Shturmovik—#12—as it appeared in April 1945 when assigned to 16th *Vozdushnaya Armiya* (Air Army) based near Berlin.



In Brief

Designed, built by Ilyushin ★ first flight Oct. 2, 1939 ★ crew of two ★ number built 36,163 ★ one Mikulin AM-38F 12-cyl engine ★ **Specific to Il-2M3:** armament two 23 mm cannon, two fixed 7.62 mm machine guns, one flexible 12.7 mm machine gun, up to 1,320 lb of bombs or four RS-82/RS-132 rockets ★ max speed 257 mph ★ cruise speed 195 mph ★ max range 450 miles ★ weight (loaded) 13,850 lb ★ span 47 ft 11 in ★ length 38 ft 1 in ★ height 13 ft 9 in.

Famous Fliers

Aces: Many, including Talgat Begeldinov (seven kills), Ivan Drachenko (five) **Notables:** Georgiy Beregovoi, 185 missions, became cosmonaut on 1968 Soyuz 3 mission; Ann Yegorova, 277 missions; Nelson Stepanyan, 243 missions; Georgiy Alekseyenko, 223 missions; Musa Gareyev, 207 missions.

Interesting Facts

Third most-produced of all aircraft (behind Cessna 172, Polikarpov Po-2 ★ 20,000 lost in WWII (all causes) ★ name means “Assaulter” ★ nicknamed “Gorbach” (humpback), “Flying Infantryman,” “Ilyusha” ★ given propaganda names “Black Death” and “Flying Tank” ★ called “schlaechter” (slaughterer) by Germans ★ averaged only 25 missions in combat ★ pilots sent into battle after six to eight hours of training ★ rear gunners killed at rate four times greater than that of pilots. (Special thanks to George Mellinger.)



Shturmovik in action.