

Dinglir's thoughts on the use of airpower

In this document, I will try to describe the way I deploy my airforces, as the old discussion has been brought to life again, and I have modernized my own school of thought. I will describe my overall thinking and then come around to suggestions for the specific use of the various early war types for both sides.

Overall strategy (both sides)

A lot of the discussions on forums seem to be about how best to annihilate the other side's air forces, almost treating the airwar as a parallel conflict to the one raging on the ground. I used to be guilty of this misconception myself, and I now formulate my "overall, on sentence air war strategy" as follows:

The only purpose of the airforce is to impact operations on the ground, either directly (bombing, recon etc) or indirectly (by shooting down the enemy's bombers, recon aircraft etc)!

As such, focusing ones resources on the enemy's aircraft production or fighter forces needs to bring some very tangible results in the future to be worth sacrificing the ground support one can have right now. You may agree or disagree with this reasoning, but it is the reasoning I use for designing my air forces.

How to use the following

Below my general setup for starting a game is described, but it is essential to note that any air strategy should be flexible and adjust to circumstances. As newer aircraft types enter service, your strategy should change accordingly. As you figure out the enemy's air strategy, your own should change accordingly.

Nothing is set in stone!

Early war strategic aims for the Soviet Air Force

In the early war, the Soviet main aim is to gather their strength while blunting the Axis advance as much as possible. In order to do this, the Soviets will need to build their own strength, keep the German fighters busy (and hopefully shooting down a few), while also helping to slow down the German advance as much as possible.

Building strength means that the Soviets should build more high quality aircraft than they lose but they also need to build morale and experience in their Air Groups which means that throwing low morale Air Groups against the German Luftwaffe is generally a bad idea. I try to keep only airgroups with a morale of at least 45 at the front. A round of combat with the Germans usually mean that several airgroups has a lot less morale than this, meaning an instant withdrawal to the National Reserve followed by a regroup to an airbase well behind the front and then an air transfer forward.

Keeping the German fighters busy means that they should be engaged from the very start of the game with the eventual aim being to wrest air supremacy from the Luftwaffe. This needs to be balanced against the section above.

Blunting the German advance is more effectively done by bombing the German infantry than the German Panzers (In my AAR against Sparkley I summed up the math behind this).

This allows for the following main use of Early War Soviet aircraft:

Fighters

MIG-3: I believe the MiG-3 is actually overrated, mainly due to it's lack of armament compared to the other "prime" Soviet fighters. It is fast and has a little range however, and thus makes an ideal escort fighter for bomber formations sent at the German Infantry or transport aircraft bringing supplies to encircled ground units.

I-15 types: Worthless in a dogfight, the I-153 has a couple of 100kg GP bombs, which is pretty standard for Soviet Fighter Bombers. The I-15bis version is useless and the aircraft type I generally consider the worst aircraft of the game. I prefer using these aircraft in bomber trained ShaP units (you'll have a few by turn two) and using them together with I-16's as Air Support during the Axis turn. They will get blown from the skies, but you do have 2.500 of them and they will not grow less obsolete as time goes by.

I-16 types: Only a little less bad than the I-15's in a dogfight, these are still the aircraft I use as fighters during the German turn. I tend to set up something like 3 I-15's and 5-6 I-16's on an airfield and setting them to fly 8-10 hexes. They will drop from the sky as flies, but hopefully, they will buy you a little time to get your production of better aircraft going. You have close to 5.000 of these aircraft, so the Germans should spend some time chewing through them.

Yak-1: By far the best early war Soviet dogfighter. I use these to guard IL-2's or Hurricane IIB's, using about 4-5 Yak-1 Regiments to 4 bomber regiments on an airfield. Production at the start of the game is rather low, so I usually gather enough to maintain an entire airfield before I deploy them.

LaGG-3: The best Soviet fighter for shooting down enemy bombers. Because of this, I usually deploy them as airfield defenders during the first few turns and then I use them to supplement my Yak-1's as I get more and more.

Bombers

I-153BS, SU-2 and IL-2: During the early game, you will not have many of these. Especially if you choose to evacuate the IL-2 factories early, which I currently prefer to do. Because of this, I usually set them up with Yak-1's or LaGG-3's and I generally do not fly them during the German turn in order to save the ones I do have.

U-2VS: These aircraft are insanely cheap, and I just mass them 8 or 9 groups on an airfield, set it on a railway as close to the front as I can get and start night bombing everything within range. I am really not bothered with losses.

SB-2: These bombers have zero survivability and I generally set them up for night flying and use them to bring supplies to encircled Soviet formations. Production is 0 and they will slowly get supplanted by Pe-2's

Pe-2: A decent, early war bomber, but not one you should use as combat support. I prefer using them for bombing German Infantry. The main aim is causing disruption which will translate into fatigue which will translate into fewer MP and a slower advance.

DB-3B, IL-4: Heavy load, long range bombers. I use them at night for partisan support and flying supplies to encircled units.

Lend Lease

P-40B: A perfect escort fighter. It's long range will ensure that enough stay with the bombers to ensure that less Germans will get through.

Hurricane IIB: This machine is armed with 2 500lbs GP bombs and 12 machine guns making it perfect for bombing soft ground targets in the open. Once they and Yak-1' are available, I set them up together and at some point start using them for ground support.

Early war strategic aims for the Axis Air Force

I do not believe the Luftwaffe will not be able to defeat the Soviet Air Forces if they Soviet player is playing a decent game. Axis air strategy should reflect this. By all means take out as much as you can on turn 1 (plenty of guides out there showing this), but then you should start focusing on ground support.

This means that the Luftwaffe fighter wing should focus on keeping the Luftwaffe bomber wing effective for as long as possible. The use of aircraft reflect this.

Fighters

Bf 109E: This is actually pretty heavily armed, and a good fighter against enemy bombers, so use it for protecting your airfields if need be. It also has an upgrade path going Bf 109E-3 to Bf 109E-4B to Bf 109E-7/U1, the last being a tactical bomber with brilliant fighter capabilities. If fighter losses allow, my advice is to consider changing out all Bf 109E-3's so that you can get the other aircraft into your pool.

Bf 109F: The standard German fighter. At the beginning of the war, you have more than enough to protect your Ju-87's. I advice using the remainder as protection for He-111's doing daytime attacks if feasible, as the Soviets will not yet be entrenched and HE-111's can prepare the ground attacks very well.

Bombers

Ju-87B: Actually not that good, but it will soon upgrade to the Ju87-D1, which is a VERY substantial upgrade. Very good for ground support, you need to ensure that no enemy fighters get close to it.

He-111: As long as they fly with fighter cover, they can do OK during the day. Once fighter cover is missing, they will get slaughtered by the Soviets and should shift to night flying (no need to build up Soviet Morale and Experience). Good for preparing ground attacks.

Ju-88: I personally dislike this aircraft very much, as I have found no good use for it. Historically, it was very effective in the early Barbarossa period, but in this game it simply cannot fly alone. I usually despair at some point and shift it to night flying. Good for bombing heavily entrenched units.