

Despots Aloft

To the three most infamous dictators of the 20th century, the airplane was much more than a way to get from Stalag A to Gulag B.

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Von Hardesty

BY THE SUMMER OF 1941, OPERATION BARBAROSSA, Hitler's bold plan for the invasion of Soviet Russia, was in full swing. With the Soviet armies in retreat, Hitler invited his Italian ally, Benito Mussolini, to fly with him to the war zone in his Fw 200 Condor, the Immelmann III. The journey would allow Hitler to savor his triumphs in the east and to view the conquered Ukraine, where his Army Group South had destroyed 20 enemy divisions and taken over 200,000 prisoners. Hitler firmly believed that Joseph Stalin and his Bolshevik regime now faced extinction.

The trip to the Ukraine called for a flight of over 600 miles to an airstrip at Uman', in an active sector of the front 150 miles south of Kiev. The weather proved ideal—little turbulence and a nearly cloudless sky. Joining Hitler and Mussolini for the flight were Nazi Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop, SS head Heinrich Himmler, and the Italian ambassador to Germany, Filippo Anfuso. Santi Corvaja in his *Hitler and Mussolini, The Secret Meetings*, records Anfuso's vivid account of the unspoken anxiety aboard: "They were all thinking of the front pages of the newspapers had we all crashed together." The Soviet air force had been nearly destroyed, so it posed no real threat; still, the Luftwaffe deployed an escort of Messerschmitt Bf 109 fighters to ensure the Führer's safety.



The Maxim Gorky, an enormous eight-engine Tupolev ANT-20, struck awe in those who watched its propaganda flights over Red Square (below). (Von Hardesty/NASM)

But Hitler and his personal pilot, Hans Baur, encountered another danger: On the return leg, Mussolini asked his German host if he could fly the airplane. Mussolini had earned his pilot's license in the pre-war years and fancied himself a talented aviator. Hitler acquiesced but prudently instructed Baur to remain at the controls.

Once Mussolini entered the cockpit, Hitler nervously returned to his Führersessel (special leader's seat). Under the watchful eye of Baur, Mussolini put the Condor through several shallow banks and other maneuvers and expressed great admiration for the airplane's responsive controls. After an hour, Mussolini finally returned to the cabin, to the relief of all. Anfuso wrote of the incident, "I'm sure the joke was not at all to Hitler's liking. The SS must have thought of it as an attempt to murder the Führer. Not knowing what to do, they stared blankly at Himmler, who kept silent. When the time came to land, Hitler's pilot...told the Duce landing was not such a good idea. Mussolini turned and saw the convulsed faces of the passengers, who having so far avoided death at the hands of the Soviets did not want to die because of an Italian, however famous he may have been."

Much to Hitler's annoyance, Mussolini then instructed an aide to mention in a joint communiqué from the two Axis leaders that the Duce had flown the Führer home from the

front. Mussolini's posturing as an intrepid aviator could have been a scene in a classic movie: Charlie Chaplin's 1940 parody, *The Great Dictator*.

Despite the comic opera aspects of Hitler and Mussolini's aerial odyssey to the Russian front, both men took aviation very seriously. Along with Stalin, the other high-profile authoritarian ruler of the era, they shared an enthusiasm for aviation as a way to showcase national technological progress. Mussolini, Hitler, and Stalin fully comprehended the mystique and powerful public appeal of aviation and exploited the technological marvel of the age—the airplane—for their peculiar ends, including taking to the air themselves.

Mussolini: The Winged Despot

Mussolini displayed a keen interest in aviation as early as 1909, when, as a young socialist and journalist, he had heralded the attempts to fly across the English Channel (with Louis Blériot succeeding) as a portent of the future. He viewed flying machines as more than a novelty or the plaything of the wealthy, arguing that the airplane was destined to alter the course of history.

The stalemate of trench warfare in World War I only deepened his respect for flying. As a soldier, he marveled at the freedom and heroism of pilots, in particular Italy's own Gabriele d'Annunzio, who made a dramatic bombing raid on Austria's capital, Vienna. After the war, Mussolini took great delight in hobnobbing with military pilots, taking airplane rides, and promoting the advance of Italian aviation.

By 1920, Mussolini was ready to take flying lessons. R.J.B. Bosworth's *Mussolini* recounts that he trained at the Arcore airfield, north of Milan, and greatly enjoyed flying, quickly learning rudimentary aerobatics. Soon after completing 18 solo flights, he survived a crash, walking away from the wrecked airplane with only minor scratches on his face and a twisted knee.

The mishap did not slow Mussolini's rise in Italian politics. His stump speeches—delivered in a strutting, highly animated style—attracted a mass following. His muscular physique, truculent jutting jaw, and dark piercing eyes set him apart from other politicians. In 1922, Mussolini gained political control of Italy when his followers, the Blackshirts, made their highly theatrical March on Rome.

Mussolini quickly moved aviation to the forefront of his authoritarian regime. He advocated the building of a modern air force, the Regia Aeronautica, promoted airshows and record-breaking flights, and called for the design of advanced military aircraft. Winning the Schneider Trophy race in 1926 became an early benchmark for Mussolini's air-minded regime. His Minister of Air, Italo Balbo, catapulted Italian aviation to worldwide prominence in 1933 when he led a flotilla of 25 Savoia-Marchetti SM-55 flying boats on a transatlantic flight to New York and Chicago.

Mussolini's stylized reputation as an aviation pioneer meshed well with his larger persona as Il Duce, the dynamic leader of Italian Fascism. He appeared in various guises in official propaganda photographs—a sort of Superman at the helm of state, speaking to the masses, playing the violin, singing arias, winning at chess, and, as a man of the people, working shirtless with the peasants at harvest time. Dubbed the First Sportsman of Italy, Mussolini appeared as an avid swimmer, race car driver, equestrian, fencer, and skier. He inspired his countrymen to believe that Italy was on the cusp of greatness—a modern incarnation of the Roman Empire.

The momentum of Mussolini's rise eventually led to military adventures: first the conquest of Ethiopia in 1935 and then intervention in the Spanish Civil War in 1937 to 1939 to support the Nationalists under General Francisco Franco. In the Spanish war, Mussolini's son, Bruno, a pilot, flew 27 combat sorties, and the Italian press lionized him and his fellow airmen as exemplars of Italian aviation under Fascism.

Mussolini cast his lot with Nazi Germany in World War II, committing the Italian military, including the Regia Aeronautica, to a long, ruinous war. Italy now had to contend with the armed forces of Great Britain and the United States, both intent on neutralizing Italian military power in the Mediterranean and seeking unconditional surrender. The stakes could not have been higher: An Allied victory would mean the destruction of Mussolini's regime.

Mussolini's pre-war stress on aerial spectaculars had evoked an image of Italy as a modern air power. In reality, Italy pursued records at the expense of establishing an industrial base for aviation, and the Regia Aeronautica entered the war with few operational aircraft and minimal capacity for reinforcement. When fully mobilized, Italian aviation plants could manufacture only 200 aircraft of various types each month. Great Britain out-produced Italy by more than eight to one; the United States by at least 30 to one. But the airplane would also figure prominently in Mussolini's own fall from power.

Just two weeks after the July 10, 1943 Allied invasion of Sicily, Italy's King Victor Emmanuel III, in league with rebellious elements in the Fascist party, ordered Mussolini's arrest. Once Italy's self-styled "modern-day Roman Caesar," Mussolini began a perilous odyssey. His captors moved him repeatedly to foil any rescue, finally shipping him to the Apennine Mountains, 80 miles northeast of Rome.

By September, Mussolini was powerless and isolated in a second-floor room at the Campo Imperiale Hotel, atop the Gran Sasso d'Italia. He was keenly aware that any attempt at rescue would be daunting; his resort-prison was on a high plateau accessible only by cable car.

Hitler was greatly alarmed by the arrest of Mussolini, fearing it might set the stage for Italy to pull out of the war and endanger Germany's southern flank. He therefore recruited one of

his most talented commandos, Waffen SS Colonel Otto Skorzeny, for a rescue mission, later dubbed Operation Eiche (Oak).

Tall, fearless, and bearing facial scars from 15 duels, Skorzeny was a dedicated Nazi and a soldier tempered by the brutalities of the Russian front; he had all the requisite skills to lead an assault on Gran Sasso d'Italia. On September 12, 1943, he flew out of an airfield near Rome at the leading edge of a group of DFS-230 gliders carrying over 100 commandos.

Mussolini was sitting near a window when he caught sight of Skorzeny's gliders touching down adjacent to the hotel. The commandos quickly advanced and disarmed the guards at the door. Observers later reported that Mussolini had yelled to the Germans from his window, "Don't shoot, don't shed any blood!" Skorzeny himself was the first to reach the second floor, where he disarmed two guards and then burst into Mussolini's room, shouting "Duce, the Führer has sent me. You are free."

Skorzeny had decided to evacuate Mussolini by air, largely because the region surrounding the mountain resort was filled with anti-Fascist partisans. Luftwaffe pilot Walter Gerlach flew a Fiesler Fi 156 Storch to the mountain, landing his short-takeoff-and-landing aircraft on time and in less than one hundred feet.

Skorzeny hurriedly escorted Mussolini to the Storch. For security reasons, Skorzeny decided to fly out with Mussolini, which burdened the aircraft with 220 additional pounds. Mussolini added even more to the Storch's load by insisting on taking all his luggage. Gerlach expressed his apprehension but nevertheless agreed that he would attempt a takeoff.

With the flaps extended and the engine at full throttle, Gerlach took off down the rocky strip. Bouncing along, the Storch slowly gained momentum, then suddenly struck a rock outcropping that smashed the left landing gear. Just as the aircraft cleared the edge of the cliff, Gerlach managed to regain control and set a course for Rome. From there, the Luftwaffe flew Mussolini to Vienna and then Rastenburg in East Prussia, where he was reunited with Adolf Hitler.

Despite his remarkable rescue by Hitler, Mussolini proved to be a reluctant and ineffectual ally. He agreed to head up a short-lived puppet regime in northern Italy, proclaimed as the new Italian Social Republic, but his heart was not in it. The war had been difficult for Mussolini and filled with tragic events, not the least being the death of Bruno while testing a new bomber.

On April 27, 1945, Benito Mussolini, along with his mistress, Clara Petacci, was captured by Italian partisans and summarily executed.

Hitler: The Pioneer of "Luftwaffe One"

In the opening frames of Leni Riefenstahl's propaganda film *Triumph des Willens* (Triumph of the Will), Adolf Hitler appears in the skies over Nuremberg in a glistening Junkers Ju 52; its shadow is shown moving across the cityscape. The event is the 1934 Reich's Party Day convention, and the crowds milling in the streets below glance skyward to follow the Junkers.

They greet the arrival of Hitler with awe and anticipation. The symbolism was powerful: The new German Führer, descending from the heavens, embodied the vision of German renewal.

During his 12 years in power, Hitler proved to be a frequent flier. And he managed to pioneer some real innovations, among them the first air squadron to operate a head of state's aircraft—an analog of the U.S. Air Force's 89th Airlift Wing, which operates Air Force One. He also fully embraced aviation as essential for the evolution of national life and as a way to project military power.

Unlike Mussolini, Hitler took no particular delight in flying and was not interested in learning to fly. His approach was measured, more an embrace of necessity than a personal passion. Hitler's involvement began in the national elections of 1932, when as a presidential candidate of the National Socialist Workers Party, he leased a tri-motor Junkers Ju 52 transport from Lufthansa German Airlines for campaign jaunts.

Hans Baur, a veteran flier of World War I and a senior Lufthansa pilot, accepted the charter assignment. Baur flew Hitler to a number of rallies, fostering in the Nazi leader a level of comfort with air travel. When Hitler became chancellor in 1933, he formed the Fliegerstaffel des Führers, or F.d.F. (Aviation Squadron of the Leader), with Baur in charge as his personal pilot. The F.d.F. operated independently of the Luftwaffe and reported directly to Hitler.

Based at Berlin's Tempelhof airport, the squadron quickly expanded. Baur attracted the most talented pilots and technicians, creating an elite unit. Since Hitler flew only occasionally, the squadron began to transport other Nazi leaders: Heinrich Himmler, Herman Goering, Karl Doenitz, and Albert Speer. Baur's unit also flew Hitler's Axis partners to Germany: Mussolini was a frequent passenger, as was Ion Antonescu of Romania, Miklos von Horthy of Hungary, and King Boris of Bulgaria.

After several years of flying the Junkers Ju 52, the squadron happily made the transition to the new Focke-Wulf Fw 200 Condor in 1939. The Condors represented a new level of technology and comfort. Hitler's personal Fw 200, christened the Immelmann III, entered service in late 1939.

Hitler's Condor was highly modified: The interior of the fuselage was divided into two compartments, the forward compartment for the Führer, the aft section for staff and guests. Hitler's compartment was fitted with a couch, a table, the Führersessel seat, and an altimeter, airspeed indicator, and clock.

During the war, the F.d.F. added an armed Fw 200 Condor that had been a maritime reconnaissance bomber. Bristling with gun turrets, the airplane had a cabin identical to that of the Immelmann III except that Hitler's special seat was armor-plated and fitted with a parachute. A safe was installed for important documents and personal items. The airplane also had a lavatory and a small galley with a cupboard full of elegant china, crystal, and silverware, all adorned with the eagle and swastika.

The F.d.F. flew 13 armed Condors during World War II. For Hitler and his advisers, these special aircraft became an essential link to the outside world. To better match Hitler's pattern of travel, the F.d.F. established a new airfield close to his headquarters: the Wolfsschanze (Wolf's Lair) at Rastenburg in East Prussia.

High security surrounded all flights of Hitler's Condor during the war. This security screen was broken in 1943 when two talented German officers, Major General Henning von Tresckow and his close aide, Lieutenant Fabian von Schlabrendorff, fashioned a bizarre plot. Both men were part of a loose network of officers seeking to topple the regime. After the defeat of the German army at Stalingrad, these officers believed the only way to reverse the disastrous course of the war was to eliminate Hitler. Calling their plan Operation Flash, the conspirators plotted to place a time bomb on the Immelmann III when Hitler made a scheduled flight to Smolensk in March 1943.

Getting close to the Führer was no easy task. Hitler flew only occasionally to the front and often changed his itinerary with no advance notice. Security measures, routinely severe, were heightened whenever Hitler was on board. The airplane was always guarded by SS troops and escorted to its destination by a flotilla of fighters. Hitler also flew in the secure knowledge that his Führersessel sat atop an escape hatch through which he could theoretically parachute to safety.

Finding a suitable bomb posed another problem; existing German fuses emitted a hissing sound. The conspirators turned to Admiral Wilhelm Canaris, head of Abwehr (German intelligence) and sympathetic to their cause. Canaris made available to Treschow several captured British bombs with great explosive power and silent fuses. Always thorough, Treschow tested several samples of the devices even as he studied purloined sketches of the aircraft's interior. Meanwhile Schlabrendorff cleverly fashioned the bomb to fit into what looked like a package containing two brandy bottles.

On the morning of March 14, 1943, the plotters were ready to act. Treschow asked Colonel Heinz Brandt, a member of Hitler's official party, if he would deliver a gift to General Helmuth Stieff, a mutual acquaintance. Brandt innocently agreed, never realizing that he would be putting his own life in jeopardy. Treschow and Schlabrendorff delivered the potent explosive package to Brandt at the airfield, and just before Schlabrendorff gave Brandt the package, he pressed on the package and crushed a vial filled with acid, which began to dissolve a wire holding the striker mechanism in place. The bomb was timed to explode in 30 minutes, about the time Hitler would be over Minsk.

Treschow and Schlabrendorff returned to their offices confident that a fiery crash would eliminate Hitler. Hours passed before reports arrived that Hitler had landed safely in Rastenburg. Schlabrendorff then made an arduous journey to retrieve the bomb from Brandt, telling him that Treschow had mistakenly given him the wrong bottles. Later, Schlabrendorff discovered that the striker mechanism had released properly, but the bomb had failed to

detonate, probably because of the low temperature in the cargo hold. Although he never realized it, Hitler had survived his most perilous air journey.

Stalin's Fear of Flying

Soviet ruler Joseph Stalin commuted from his dacha in the suburbs of Moscow to his office in the Kremlin in a heavily guarded motorcade. For rare travel beyond Moscow, he typically used an armored train with a large contingent of soldiers. He harbored a deep fear of flying and flew only once, to attend the 1943 Tehran conference with British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and President Franklin Roosevelt.

Stalin hid his disinclination to fly behind a facade of air enthusiasm: In this cardboard reality he was a patron of airshows, the builder of a mighty air force, and the inspired genius behind Soviet air triumphs in the pre-war years. He basked in the accomplishments of his elite pilots, Stalin's Falcons, and his name was emblazoned on Valery Chkalov's ANT-25 airplane as it made a flight across the North Pole in 1937. At Stalin's behest, Soviet aircraft flew against Franco's rebels in the Spanish Civil War, and on the eve of World War II, the Soviet Union boasted a force of 10,000 aircraft.

To the citizenry, Stalin was remote and godlike—the audacious revolutionary and heir to Lenin, a brilliant prophet of Communism, great teacher, and kindly and infallible father of the nation. Yet he presided over the great purges of the late 1930s. Arrests, show trials, and a vast system of prisons and labor camps reflected his fear that enemies were poised to overthrow his regime.

Stalin lived a cloistered and secretive life, always fearing conspiracy. He was a night owl who obliged party and government officials to remain close to their phones at all hours in anticipation of a call. Many contemporaries described Stalin's eyes as yellow and alert, like a tiger's. His short stature, pockmarked face, and withered arm had not slowed his advance to absolute political power. He did not drink to excess, but he was an inveterate chain smoker, known to Americans in World War II as the benign, pipe-smoking "Uncle Joe."

To Stalin, every failure was a sign that the enemies of the people were at work. A tragic crash of the giant Tupolev ANT-20 transport raised the specter of sabotage carried out by hostile elements.

The eight-engine aircraft, named the Maxim Gorky, was built in 1934 and made dramatic flyovers of Red Square. Passengers enjoyed bourgeois comforts: easy chairs, reading lamps, sleeping berths, a galley, and even a library. With onboard cinema, loudspeakers, and a print shop, the airplane became flying proof that the Soviets were at the cutting edge of aeronautical technology. Rides on the Maxim Gorky were reserved for the party elite and those factory and farm laborers who had dramatically exceeded their work quotas.

The Maxim Gorky came to an abrupt end on May 18, 1935, when Nikolai Blagin, performing aerobatic maneuvers in an I-5 biplane escort, crashed into its right wing. The lumbering airplane shook upon impact, continued on briefly, and crashed. The accident killed Blagin and

49 others, and cast a pall over Soviet aviation at the very time Stalin was vying with European powers for air records. No doubt this tragedy added to Stalin's personal fear of flying.

Nonetheless, in 1943 Stalin was compelled to attend the Allied conference in Tehran with Winston Churchill and Franklin D. Roosevelt. The earth-bound Stalin would have preferred an overland trip to Iran, but no secure or practical rail link existed, and he reluctantly agreed to fly.

Two Soviet versions of the Douglas DC-3 airliner, built under license as the Li-2, had been specially configured for the flight. Always suspicious, Stalin rejected the two aircraft in favor of two American-built Lend-Lease C-47 transports drawn from active service in the Soviet air force.

For the mission, the air force's Supreme Command took special care to test and service the two aircraft. Air Commander Alexander Novikov then ordered the two C-47s flown to Baku, the departure point.

On November 27, 1943, Stalin arrived at the airfield to face the dilemma of which C-47 transport to board for Tehran. Air Marshal Alexander Golovanov, commander of the 18th Air Army (strategic aviation), had been designated Stalin's pilot, a logical choice. The second C-47 was to be flown by a relative unknown, Lieutenant Colonel M. Grachev, a pilot pulled from frontline duty.

The moment of truth came as Stalin approached Golovanov's C-47, the airplane designated for him. He paused, and glanced over his shoulder at the second C-47. Then he announced: "So, who will we fly with? Perhaps it is better to go with Grachev. Marshals do more sitting behind a desk than behind the controls of a plane. It will be safer that way!"

Grachev flew Stalin without mishap, for which he received a warm handshake from Stalin, a quick promotion in rank, and later, the highest military honor: Hero of the Soviet Union. However, rumors circulated that Stalin's C-47 had encountered severe turbulence en route. Passengers on board reported that Stalin had been terrified by the bumpy ride and was visibly tense. After this journey, he never flew again.

Despite Stalin's phobia, the Soviet air force command established a special air regiment for use by the Soviet brass. A parallel unit for Soviet dignitaries was organized under the control of the NKVD, or secret police. These units, made operational in 1944, represented a radical departure from the past, offering luxury air travel for the political elite.

Unit planners chose as their aircraft the Pe-8 (TB-7) bomber, a Soviet four-engine type built in small numbers during the war. The Pe-8 fitted for VIP passenger service—the "Ye" model—could carry 14 people in some comfort, despite wartime shortages in lightweight metals and the absence of materials for upholstery. The interior fuselage was laid out like that of a pre-war DC-3 airliner: It had two rows of cushioned seats with overhead luggage racks and sleeping berths. Soundproof bulkheads, a toilet, hot water, oxygen masks, and lights for each seat gave this Pe-8 an unaccustomed level of luxury.

Stalin's unspoken "no fly" policy shaped the character of wartime diplomacy in subtle ways, often frustrating and inconveniencing Churchill and Roosevelt. Churchill flew to Moscow in October 1944 for a critical meeting with Stalin. The ailing Roosevelt, just two months prior to his death, made an arduous journey by sea and air to Yalta in the Crimea in 1945 for the last Big Three meeting of the Allied leaders. The alternative of asking Stalin to fly to a neutral site was never seriously considered.

Though he shunned flying, Stalin was most willing to send his minions on dangerous wartime air missions. Foreign Minister Vyacheslav M. Molotov flew on a Pe-8 from Moscow to Washington D.C.'s Bolling Airfield in May 1942. Dressed in a fur-lined flying suit and boots, Molotov endured the journey in an unheated cabin. He and his delegation were keenly aware of the dangers of crossing the north Atlantic twice with no effective survival equipment on board.

In late summer 1944, Andrei Gromyko, a senior Soviet diplomat, substituted for Stalin on one of the most bizarre Soviet diplomatic forays of the war. He led a 19-member delegation to Washington, D.C., for the Dumbarton Oaks conference to establish the United Nations.

Assigned a marginally flyable C-47, Gromyko flew from Moscow across the vast expanse of Siberia to Fairbanks, Alaska. Upon reaching Fairbanks, three U.S. airmen boarded Gromyko's airplane to organize a mixed American-Russian cockpit crew for the final leg to Washington. Gromyko insisted that the command seat on the left be reserved for the Soviet pilot, who did not speak English.

The American pilot assigned to the flight was shocked that one of the Soviet Union's top diplomats was flying on such a derelict aircraft. Moreover, he angrily protested having to take the copilot's seat.

David Chavchavadze, an Army Air Forces lieutenant, served as the interpreter during the tension-filled flight across Canada and the United States, standing between the Soviet and American pilots in the cockpit. Chavchavadze later reported that the disgruntled and nervous American pilot began each communication to his Soviet counterpart in the left seat with "Tell that son of a bitch..." Even when he was confronted with unfamiliar flight protocols and landing procedures, the Soviet pilot refused to surrender the controls, telling his copilot: "In the Soviet Union we learn quickly."

Luckily, good weather allowed for a safe passage to Washington. On the return trip, however, the Gromyko transport limped into Edmonton, Alberta, broke down, and was declared unfit to fly. The United States provided a replacement airplane.

When Stalin traveled to Potsdam for the July 1945 conference, he chose a special train made up of 11 armored coaches with more than 17,000 NKVD troops to provide security. Stalin himself traveled in any of four green carriages, former tsarist cars removed from a museum.

As the train approached Germany, the number of guards deployed to protect the tracks increased from six men per kilometer in Russia to 10 per kilometer in Poland to 15 per kilometer outside Potsdam in occupied Germany.

While 11 aircraft were ready to handle any urgent requirement to evacuate Stalin and his delegation from Potsdam, it was apparent that Stalin would never fly. Nonetheless, he continued to promote aviation, building the intercontinental Tu-4 bomber and fostering jet technology for his air force and for the fledgling Aeroflot airline. To the very end, Soviet propaganda organs portrayed him as the great prophet of aviation progress.

Stalin died in March 1953, and six years later, his political heir, Nikita Khrushchev, flew in a huge Tu-114 turboprop airliner to Washington, D.C. for a Cold war conclave with President Dwight Eisenhower. He appeared to enjoy the flight.