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Some aspects of developing Luftwaffe doctrine based on the experience of the war in Spain

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Abstract

The article deals with the views of German military leaders on the role, place and missions of the Germany Air Force. The fascist Air Force doctrine prior to World War II is considered in detail. The Air Force is regarded as the opportunity for commanders to create an assault group and to divert the main attack swiftly and unexpectedly for the enemy. The conclusion is drawn that Luftwaffe military doctrine underestimated both offensive strategic aviation and the need for an air defense system, emphasizing the role of initiative and courage in decision-making and willingness to take risks.

Key words: Luftwaffe, blitzkrieg, total war, doctrine, war in Spain, bombing operations.

The fascist Germany Air Force doctrine was based on the general military doctrine of Germany as an aggressor. The total war for which Hitler Germany was preparing, aimed at achieving world dominance by any means and at the enslavement of other peoples, was fully reflected in the views on the engagement of the Air Force [1].

The milestone of the fascist Germany military strategy is a “blitzkrieg”. The ways to succeed in this blitzkrieg include a sudden powerful attack against the enemy, causing panic in its troops and among the population, disorganizing state and military control, and winning the war in weeks or even days. The composition, organization, armament and training of the German air force prior to the Second World War completely corresponded to that strategy. The air force was primarily intended to act in favour of the army and the navy. It was believed that the operational-tactical interaction with ground forces is their main purpose. Moreover, the German command relied on the Air Force in disorganizing and terrorizing the enemy frontline and the rear [2].

It is clear that the German Air Force doctrine should have been derived from the experience of the World War I. Deprived of military aviation after the World War I, the Germans continued considering the role, place and main tasks of the Air Force in a new war of revenge. Germany never stopped working on keeping and training flight and technical personnel, developing and producing all the necessary types of aircraft, and preparing the country for a war in the air [3].

How did Germany manage it? It was allowed to have civil aviation, which meant that it was possible to have technical personnel required for the specialized aviation, the airfields, and the aviation industry. When building a civilian aircraft, the Germans always developed the military version of this aircraft. Part of the German aircraft plants were moved to other countries, for example, the plant of the famous German manufacturer Fokker, who left for Holland (Amsterdam), where he continued to develop, manufacture and sell military aircraft. In the future, the Germans hoped to return these plants to their country or, in any case, to return their main personnel with all the ready data on the design and production of military aircraft. Otherwise, in case of war, the Germans expected to seize these plants quickly. Some

of the German technical flight personnel sought to enter the civil aviation service of the neighboring countries. For example, after 1918 Goering served in Sweden as a test pilot at one of the plants. The fascists, having come to power in 1933, did not have to start all over again. Forming the armed forces in general and the Air Force in particular, the Nazis received a significant legacy: a large aircraft fleet, all the necessary personnel, and a developed aviation industry etc. [4]

The joint Soviet-German aviation school "Vifupal", which was established in Lipetsk shortly after the agreement in Rapallo, played a huge role in this. There, the Germans prepared several hundreds of senior Luftwaffe officers, and tested new aviation equipment and weapons [5].

In 1935, the Nazis declared that they did not recognize the restrictions imposed on them by the Versailles treaty, and began an uncovered arms race. Germany rushed to prepare for the Second World War. All hidden reserves were mobilized, and the German Air Force began to develop rapidly. After just one year, in 1936, the German military aircraft took an active part in the Spanish war. The slogan "The Germans are a flying nation" was proclaimed. In two years (1938) the German Air Force overran the Air Force of such countries as Britain and France. The military alliance with fascist Italy formed by that time provided new possibilities, making the Nazi air force doctrine even more aggressive. The seizure of Austria, then Czechoslovakia with their developed industry and, in particular, with the high-quality Czechoslovak aviation industry, strengthened Germany to a great extent. Its Air Force was reinforced by means of the Austrian Air Force personnel, the developed aviation industry, large aircraft fleet, significant materiel (engines, gasoline, lubricating oils, ammunition, building materials, airfield networks). These results of the Munich policy made it possible for the fascist clique to significantly multiply the power of its Air Force in the shortest period [6].

The Air Force doctrines adopted prior to the World War II could be considered according to the speeches of military representatives and politicians, the official military documents, the analysis of the general military doctrine, the state of the Air Force and their development, the combat assessment and the development of civil aviation industry. The ability of providing the combat operations of the Air Force with gasoline and oils, as well as reinforcing it with aviation personnel should have been taken into account. [7]

Official statements in the media did not reflect the real conditions of the Air Force development and combat training. The official unclassified documents also needed to be viewed critically, since they were often obsolete and did not correspond to the accepted views and ideas [8].

Actual Air Force doctrines, rather than original doctrinal views, should have been considered on the basis of the data on the real conditions of the Air Force development, especially if these data were compared with an assessment of political aspirations and overall economic conditions. Any war reveals genuine Air Force doctrines most obviously. This is mainly true for the first stage of the war and not always for all its participants. The role, place and main Air Force tasks of the participants during the course of the war are largely determined by the real situation, and can differ from the initially planned ones. [9].

The correct and precise definition of the Air Force doctrines adopted in the period preceding the World War II is possible only with regard to the issues mentioned above. Analyzing the fascist Germany Air Force doctrine as it was prior to World War II, let us first focus on the statements on this issue that were made at that time.

At the opening ceremony of the Air Force and Aviation-Technical Academy in Gatovo in November 1935, the Chief of the General Staff of the Fascist Germany Air Force said: "The tasks we determine for the Air Force are significant. We want to: 1. To destroy the enemy Air Force by means of our military forces on its territory, destroy its bases and the aviation industry, and at the same time destroy the enemy offensive forces invading our country, in the air and on land. 2. To prevent the movement of the numerous armies of the

enemy to the locations of crucial operations, destroying the roads, first of all, the highways necessary for the movement and supply of these armies. 3. To support ground operations, especially carried out by armored formations. 4. To assist the operations of the navy, destroying enemy naval bases, simultaneously protecting their own ones and taking part in naval operations. 5. To destroy the enemy military industry vital for the armed forces. A critical condition for this is the destruction of the enemy Air Force."

Later, Major General Wever made a very important statement. He said: "We, as well as the British and the French, were convinced that defense cannot rely only on defensive weapons, and that it is most worthwhile to try to eradicate evil at its very root, i.e. seize the enemy bombers off guard during the hours when they are on the ground, or are descending to the base for refueling or ammunition... The bomber is the crucial weapon of aerial war... ." But he adds that "in operations, every branch of the armed forces is equally important, so that they cannot exist without each other" [10].

Outstanding German General Wetzell commenting on the book of the English military writer Liddell-Hart "If England enters the war" wrote in 1937: "Liddell-Hart has recently become a powerful propagandist of large Air Force. He believes that it is called upon to play a decisive role in the war. From the UK point of view, he is right to some extent. He regards the Air Force as a means to implement his ideas of the "British strategy", i.e. not to engage significant British ground forces on the decisive battle fields. It is possible to agree with him partially, but this idea is not to be followed. Even the strongest air fleet will be able to prove a special role in a future war, if it is engaged in strategic agreement with the main ground forces and at the critical points ... Which of the three main branches - naval, aerial or ground - will ever be effective cannot be foreseen in advance by any human mind. It seems that the most reliable solution can be found in their right combination" [11].

The war in Spain (July 1936 - February 1939) was the first experience for the German Air Force. German aviation together with the Italian one took an active part in supporting the fascist insurgency in Spain. In this "small" war, their aircraft had a significant superiority in number. So, in the second half of the war (since 1938), the fascists had 600-700 aircraft against approximately 100 republican ones. The fascist aviation was used under the leadership of representatives of the German command, and it consisted largely of German aircraft. That is why the actions of the fascist aviation in the Spanish war can to some extent be regarded as implementation of the German command doctrine [12].

The war in Spain was the testing of modern technical means of warfare and if the use of aviation was limited to very small scales within the "small war", then this did not mean that that experience was irrelevant. The experience of using aviation in this war was widely taken into account by the Germans in forming the Air Force and in further operational and tactical views on its application [13].

From this point of view, the following actions of aviation should be emphasized. In the struggle for air superiority fascist aviation sought, in the first stage of the war, to deliver sudden strikes against airfields. Such actions were less carried out in the second stage of the war due to the fact that, on the one hand, the Republicans began to use fighter aircraft that were superior to fascist, and on the other hand, they began to take serious measures to protect their airfields. The struggle for air superiority in the subsequent stages of the war was carried out mainly by aerial combat. That experience of these battles showed the decisive importance of the aircraft performances and, first of all, the flight speed.

The use of aircraft in the warfare was of particular importance in the war in Spain. After World War I, the role, place and tasks of the Air Force, were considered as critically important due to the fact that the aviation was out of reach of field artillery fire, i.e. beyond ground forces battlefield. Such a viewpoint on the use of the Air Force was motivated by the difficulties of hitting targets on the battlefield with increased aircraft flight speed, the inevitability of high altitude bombing, great limitation of attack aircraft at low-level flight due to the increased anti-aircraft machine-gun fire power and because of location finding

difficulty at these altitudes at high flight speeds. And finally, this point of view was motivated by the expediency of using aviation where other types of troops cannot operate, i.e., in the enemy's rear [14].

Contrary to these views, in the Spanish war the aircraft was widely used by both sides on the battlefield, and this experience was positively assessed. The aviation was used before the main battle to exhaust the enemy troops. Bomber aviation acted in small groups during the day and single planes bombed a tactical enemy defense zone at night. During the period of artillery preparation, bomber aircraft, supporting the artillery, delivered massive strikes against individual strongholds. The loss of manpower and the destruction of defenses was relatively small, but the moral impact on the troops was significant. In the course of the battle, the combat aircraft continuously supported the advance of infantry and tanks by suppressing artillery, machine-guns, anti-tank guns, as well as by attacks on the enemy infantry. Bomber and fighter aircraft took part in such actions [15].

This type of aviation application was then widely practiced in World War II. The experience of the war in Spain was taken into account. It proved the need to create assault aviation, along with bomber one, designed for direct interaction with the troops on the battlefield and armed with a special type of aircraft. But the Germans, having ascertained the feasibility and the possibility of using the above mentioned aviation application in offensive operations, remained at their former point of view, i.e. use of only bomber aviation [16].

Regarding the actions of aviation in the cities, the war in Spain showed any moral reasons did not prevent the Germans from using bombings. German aviation in Spain widely practiced such actions. The war in Spain obviously showed that modern combat aviation is capable of inflicting serious damage, the scale and significance of which mainly depend on the composition of the attacker's air force and on the forces opposing them. From the experience of this war, it was possible to make a definite conclusion that in World War II, fascist aviation would bombard cities not only as industrial centers and centers of military and state administration, but also in order to kill residents, influence the population, intimidate it and create panic [17].

The action of the Air Force on naval bases and ships should also be emphasized. Dive bombers did not participate in this war as a part of special aviation units. But the horizontal flight bombing led to the sinking of vessels and warships, especially in ports, which, along with the destruction of port facilities, made it difficult for Republicans to be transported by sea [18].

At the same time, focusing on offensive operations, the Luftwaffe military doctrine to a certain extent underestimated both offensive strategic aviation and the need for an air defense system, and sometimes neglected it; emphasizing the role of initiative and courage in decision-making and willingness to take risks. However, it led to adventurism. Self-confidence, arrogance of both the Luftwaffe commanders and ordinary pilots often developed into a boast and inability to proper assessment of the situation, and the detailed methods of armed struggle often turned into a model.

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