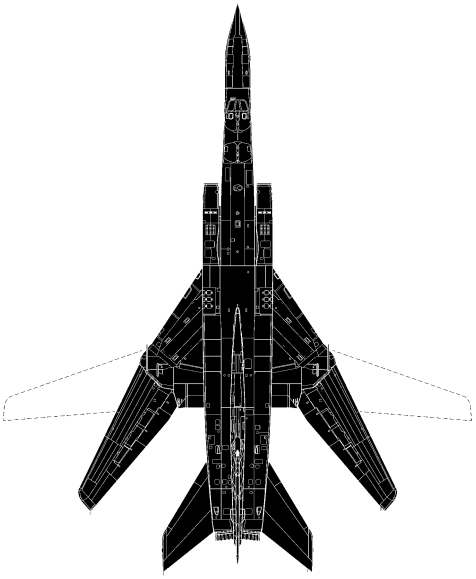
Artwork by Zaur Eylanbekov

Tu-22M Backfire



The Tu-22M Backfire bomber was developed in the 1960s as a supersonic, variable-sweep-wing bomber for the Soviet air forces and Navy. Equally capable as a strategic bomber or naval strike platform, the Tupolev aircraft provided the power to strike naval targets on the Soviet periphery or, given the right equipment, targets at intercontinental range. Its primary mission in a war against NATO was to cut US supply lines to Europe by destroying strategic harbors and airfields. Russia inherited the Soviet inventory.

Backfire's advanced wings were key to the project. They were variable in sweep and tapered with curved tips. When extended, they permitted relatively short takeoff and landing. Swept, they provided efficient cruising, high top speed, and stable high-speed, low-level flight. The long and slender fuselage and pointed nose gave it a rakish look. Its low-level penetration features made it more survivable than its predecessors.

Upgrades gave the basic airplane stronger engines, better avionics, and more ordnance—including supersonic missiles. It could accept air-refueling probes to increase range, a fact that became a major issue in US-Soviet SALT II negotiations.

In the 1980s, Backfires were employed in conventional bombing raids in Afghanistan, particularly during the last year of direct Soviet involvement. Russian pilots flew some 100 operational sorties against rebels in Chechnya in the mid-1990s and against Georgian forces in the 2008 South Ossetian War. It was in the latter conflict that the first Backfire was lost in combat, shot down by a Georgian missile. In the 2000s, Russian Backfires resumed combat patrols in international airspace.

—Robert S. Dudney with Walter J. Boyne

This aircraft: Soviet Tu-22M2 Backfire B—*Bort 42 Red*—as it looked in 1985 when assigned to the 43rd Combined Training and Flight Crew Training Center, Dyagilevo AB, USSR.

In Brief

Designed, built by Tupolev ★ first flight Aug. 30, 1969 ★ number built 497 ★ crew of four (pilot, co-pilot, navigator, weapon systems operator). **Specific to Tu-22M3:** two Kuznetsov NK-25 turbofan engines ★ defensive armament one 23 mm GSh-23 cannon in remote-controlled tail turret ★ max payload 53,000 lb of nuclear and/or conventional munitions (gravity bombs, PGM, cruise missiles, naval mines) ★ max speed 1,429 mph ★ cruise speed 560 mph ★ max range approx. 4,200 mi (unrefueled) ★ combat radius 1,367 mi ★ weight (max T/O) 273,373 lb ★ span 76 ft 6 in (swept) and 112 ft 6 in (spread) ★ length 139 ft 4 in ★ height 36 ft 3 in ★ service ceiling 45,932 ft.

Famous Fliers

Notables: Lt. Col. Aleksandr Koventsov (shot down, MIA, 2008 war with Georgia); Maj. Vyacheslav Malkov (shot down, POW, war with Georgia). **Test Pilots:** Boris Veremey, V. P. Borisov, A. Bessonov.

Interesting Facts

Conducted simulated attacks on US Navy battle groups in 1970s ★ saw first combat in 1984 in Afghanistan ★ flown by Russian pilots in 1995 strikes against Chechen rebels near Grozny ★ originally named Samolyot 145 (Airplane 145) ★ derived from smaller Tupolev Tu-22 Blinder ★ judged by the Defense Intelligence Agency to have intercontinental strike capability when fitted with refueling probe ★ offered to China, India but never exported ★ nicknamed "Troika" (M3 variant) or "Trio" ★ converted to reconnaissance variant (12 aircraft) ★ made numerous simulated attacks on Sweden in 2013 and 2015.

DOD photo

In a war against NATO, Backfires were to pound Western ports and airfields.