

New Dawn for Russia

Since the late 1990s, Moscow has conducted a slow but systematic restoration of its fleet of long-range Bears and Blackjacks.

Photography by Aleksey Mikheyev



Above, the crew of a Tu-160 Blackjack bomber finishes off a night training mission with an early morning landing at Engels Air Base. Such training has become more frequent and sophisticated in recent years. Engels is a prime bomber site on the east bank of the Volga River near the southern Russian city of Saratov, 450 miles southeast of Moscow.

n Bombers



A Russian Air Force Tu-95MS Bear-H bomber starts its engines at the beginning of a night mission. Strategic aviation, alone among components of the Russian Air Force, has been immune to budget cuts.



The Soviet Union in its last days fielded 105 advanced bombers—19 Tu-160 Blackjacks and 86 Tu-95MS Bear-Hs. When the USSR disintegrated, three nations wound up with them—Ukraine with all the Blackjacks and 24 Bears, Kazakhstan with 40 Tu-95s, and Russia with the rest of the Bears. Moscow re-acquired some bombers and began to rebuild its bomber fleet. At right, technicians service a Bear-H. Below, 13 refurbished Bear-Hs grace the flight line at Engels, one of Russia's two major bomber bases. Parked in the background: a Tu-160 Blackjack.



Photos by Aleksey Mikhayev/FoxbatFiles.com



Above, six Blackjacks on the line. By tradition, Blackjacks bear names of famous pilots or "heroes of the Soviet Union," while Bears carry names of Russian cities. The first two Blackjacks shown here are named for revered pilots—Valeriy Chkalov (foreground) and Aleksey Plokhov. At right, airmen tow a Blackjack to a new position. Though in use since 1987, the Tu-160 did not officially achieve operational status until December 2005.





The Tu-160 plant in the city of Kazan uses old parts to create new bombers, but production proceeds at a glacial pace. New Blackjacks rolled out in 1995, 1999, and 2005. There are enough parts to produce two more. Above, a Tu-160 ground crew fuels Pavel Taran, named for a Soviet hero. At right, a Tu-134UBL trainer, based on a civil airliner, takes off. This trainer is heavily used by Blackjack aircrew members such as the airman below.



Russia today fields a total of 14 Blackjacks and 64 Bear-Hs in four heavy bomber air regiments. The 121st regiment has only Blackjacks. The 79th, 182nd, and 184th regiments have only Bear-Hs. There are two big Russian bomber bases—Engels in the west and Ukrainka in the east, near China. As the host of the 121st and 184th regiments, Engels possesses both types of bombers, whereas Ukrainka has only Bear-Hs.

Below, the Pavel Taran takes off on a training flight. The Blackjack is the largest combat aircraft today, with a length of 177 feet, span of 182 feet, and maximum takeoff weight of more than 606,000 pounds. The big bomber can fly at speeds exceeding Mach 2, with a maximum range of more than 7,000 miles.



A commercial satellite snapped these images of Engels, with its large concentration of bombers. Inset at right: A closeup shot of the base's main parking area shows a single Tu-160 Blackjack and Bear-Hs on the Tu-95MS flight line. All 14 operational Blackjacks can be found in this background shot of the entire base.

Inset below: A base museum has an outdoor display of aircraft of the Cold War era. Upper row, bottom to top, are an L-29 trainer, L-39 trainer, Tu-134UBL trainer, Tu-134UShS, An-12 transport, and An-24T transport. Lower row, bottom to top, are a 3MS-2 Bison, Tu-95K-22 Bear-G (with Kh-20 missile at left), and four versions of the Tu-22 Blinder. At the bottom far left corner are (l-r), an An-2 and an An-24.





Inset at left: Six Blackjacks in their brilliant white paint jobs sit parked in a holding area. (A seventh is just outside this field of view.) This summer, Engels will receive one additional Blackjack from the test community, making 15.



Artist's renderings show head-on, plan, and side views of a Tupolev Tu-95MS6 Sprut, a late production model Tu-95 Bear-H. The airplane is named Vorkuta, after a large Russian city, and is deployed to Engels Air Base.



The Tu-95 Bear, whose first flight came in 1952, long has been a pillar of Russian bomber aviation. At right, an Engels museum display of a Tu-95K-22 missile carrier, developed in the mid-1970s to carry then-new Kh-22 missiles.

Russia's heavy bombers have traditionally been dedicated to the nuclear mission. The bombers now are receiving new long-range, non-nuclear Kh-555 missiles, gliding standoff weapons, and other types of armament. In the future, they will be armed with long-range conventional and nuclear cruise missiles.



Photos by Aleksey Mikhayev/FoxbatFiles.com



Above, a Bear-H returns at daybreak from a training flight. At left, another Bear-H taxis at Engels. Below, A Tu-95MS touches down. The Russians now are carrying out major midlife upgrades to both types of heavy bombers. Navigation, communication, and self-defense systems are being replaced. These overhauls and upgrades will keep the big aircraft in service until at least 2030. ■

The author, Piotr Butowski, is a noted authority on Soviet/Russian military aircraft. He resides in Gdansk, Poland.

