

USSR: Backfires for Baltic

The Soviets may soon assign Backfire bombers to their Baltic Fleet.

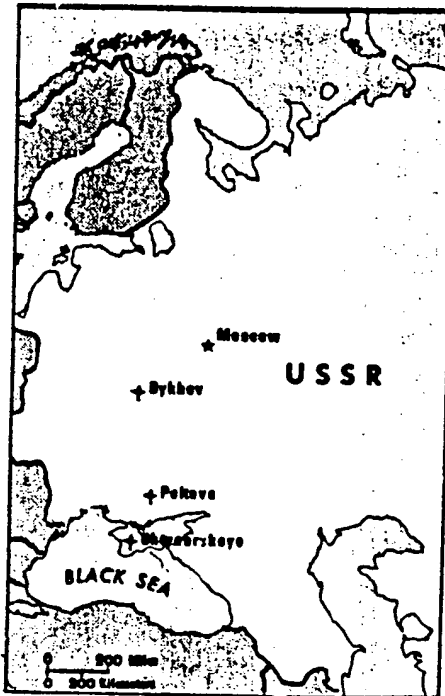
On June 18, three and possibly six Backfires flew from Oktyabrskoye airfield, near the Black Sea, to Bykhov airfield in the Baltic Fleet area. Oktyabrskoye houses the Soviet navy's only operational Backfire unit, and the flight could have been to familiarize Backfire crews with conditions at Bykhov.



The Soviets are producing about two Backfires a month. Some 30 have been delivered to operational military units since series production began in 1973. Sixteen of these have gone to the naval air

unit at Oktyabrskoye; the remainder have been delivered to Long Range Aviation and are based at Poltava, southeast of Kiev.

The Backfire, capable of high-speed attack missions at both high and low



altitudes, is being used to replace the Soviet navy's standard intermediate-range bomber, the aging TU-16. Like the TU-16, it probably will be used for over-water reconnaissance and for operations against hostile naval units and shore facilities.

In addition to the Backfire, SU-17 Fitter-C fighter-bombers also have been recently assigned to the Baltic Fleet. The SU-17, the first fighter assigned to the Soviet navy in over a decade, has a high-speed, low-altitude capability that would make it more effective than the TU-16 against the fast and highly maneuverable, smaller naval craft likely to be found in the Baltic.

It can also conduct strikes against coastal targets in support of amphibious or ground operations.