

attitudes toward the airplane as well as the cultural, social, and institutional factors that shaped Russian efforts to transform erstwhile flights of fancy into the modern realities of an air-minded nation.

### RUSSIA'S PASSION FOR WINGS

The heady excitement generated by word of Blériot's flight was transformed into tangible reality for Russian citizens in the fall of 1909. Eager to display the capabilities of their airplanes in the months that followed the Channel crossing, French aviators undertook public demonstrations across the European continent. Less than eight weeks after French spectators flocked to bid farewell to Blériot, Russian audiences gathered to greet the arrival of western pilots and their flying machines. On 15 September 1909, the inhabitants of Moscow saw for themselves the miracle of heavier-than-air flight as French aviator Georges Legagneux organized a public display of his Voisin biplane. Thousands of curious Muscovites flocked to Khodynka field just outside the city to witness this first-ever flight of an airplane in Russia. Although none of the five flights made by Legagneux on the 15th lasted more than a few minutes, his demonstration was a great success. He repeated his performance with an encore presentation on the 19th.<sup>17</sup> Subsequent demonstrations in St. Petersburg and Odessa attracted even greater numbers of spectators and generated further excitement.<sup>18</sup>

While French fliers entertained Russian audiences with feats of aerial daring, the Russian Ministry of War moved to establish a national aviation program. On returning from France, Grand Duke Aleksandr Mikhailovich assumed a leading role in mobilizing support for Russian aviation. As honorary chairman of the state's Special Committee for the Strengthening of the Military Fleet by Means of Voluntary Subscriptions, the grand duke had been instrumental in raising donations to rebuild the nation's navy following the disastrous losses of the Russo-Japanese War (1904-5). Hoping to capitalize on the work of the existing Committee, the grand duke petitioned Tsar Nicholas II for permission to transfer funds from the Naval Committee to a newly formed Special Committee for the Establishment of the Air-Fleet. He also requested that the tsar approve the circulation of a series of decrees intended to mobilize support for aviation construction. Overcoming the skepticism of some members of the Russian military hierarchy, the grand duke secured the tsar's approval. On 6 February 1910, Nicholas announced that 900,000 rubles of the Naval Committee's treasury be used for the development of a military air wing. The tsar subsequently

<sup>17</sup> For press coverage of Legagneux's flights, see "Polety aviatora Legan'e v Moskve," *Niva* 40 (1909): 696; *Gazeta kopeika*, 16 September 1909; *Novaia Rus'*, 16 September 1909; and *Novoe vremia*, 16 September 1909, among others.

<sup>18</sup> *Gazeta kopeika*, 12 October 1909.

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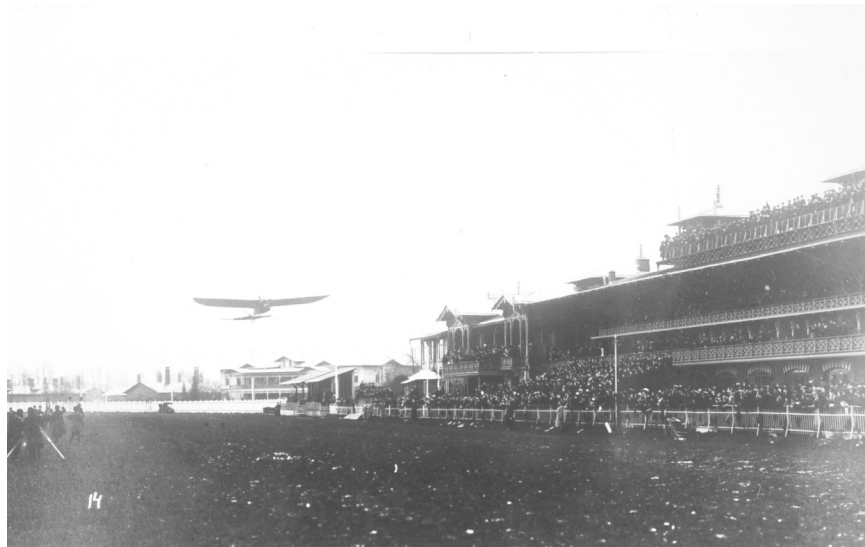


FIGURE 2. In the second public flight of an airplane in Russia, French aviator Albert Guillaud pilots a Blériot XI monoplane at the Kolomianskoe aerodrome in St. Petersburg, November 1909.

proclaimed the inauguration of a nationwide voluntary subscription to support the Committee's goals of training military officers to fly airplanes and establishing a reserve of fully equipped aircraft for military use. In March, following the proclamation of the voluntary subscription, the Committee for the Establishment of the Air-Fleet sent six military officers to France, where two each enrolled in the pilot schools run by Henri Farman, Louis Blériot, and the Antoinette Company. Six enlisted men, who were to be trained as airplane mechanics, accompanied the officers.<sup>19</sup>

In addition to preparing cadres to serve in the future air corps, the Committee moved to secure necessary equipment and infrastructure. Concomitant with the decision to send officers abroad for training, the Committee placed orders with leading French airplane manufacturers for the delivery of eleven airplanes by June 1910. The Committee also established training facilities in Russia. At Gatchina, southwest of St. Petersburg, hangars were constructed to house the military's aircraft. A flight school, to be run by the French-trained Russian officers, was also established on the grounds. Unfortunately, the site proved to be a poor location. Owing to harsh winters and the region's swampy soil, training flights were limited to the summer months. As a result, having already invested a considerable sum of money

<sup>19</sup> Velikii kniaz' Aleksandr Mikhailovich, *Kniga*, 2, 237 and RGVA f. 2000, op. 7, d. 59 (Otchet o deiatel'nosti osobogo komiteta po usilii vozdushnogo flota), ll. 78–9.

to construct the Gatchina facilities, the Committee was compelled to find a new site capable of sustaining year-round training. A more temperate location in the Crimean city of Sevastopol' was chosen, and, following a delay in the arrival of the airplanes ordered from France, training began there in November 1910.<sup>20</sup>

The activity of the nation's military authorities was paralleled by that of private Russians who enlisted in the battle for the skies through participation in the ever-increasing number of aeronautical clubs, circles, and societies that blossomed in the wake of the Channel crossing. By the end of 1909, such major cities as St. Petersburg, Moscow, Odessa, and Kiev boasted their own private aeronautical organizations. Similar to automobile societies, literacy circles, and other voluntary associations, air clubs provided private enthusiasts with a forum for pursuing a common interest while facilitating the public assembly of civic-minded citizens.<sup>21</sup> In addition, organizations like the Moscow Society of Aeronautics and the Odessa Aero-Club produced regular journals for the nation's reading public, and, as interest increased and resources grew, they established flight schools of their own, turning the possibility of flight into a daily reality for those wealthy enough to afford the expensive training. Through generating interest in aviation and training private citizens to master mechanical flight, aeronautical clubs hoped to create a consumer demand for airplanes, thereby subsidizing the growth of the few Russian factories that could reproduce the Farman and Blériot models popular in Europe. By the fall of 1910, Russia possessed three factories capable of manufacturing airplane chassis and one enterprise equipped to build aircraft motors.<sup>22</sup>

Russians' passion for flight intensified during the early spring of 1910 as newspapers reported on an initial landmark in the nation's infant aviation program: the first exhibition of an airplane in Russia piloted by a native Russian. Undertaken in the Black Sea port of Odessa on 8 March before a select crowd of citizens and military representatives, Mikhail Efimov's aeronautical display aboard a Farman IV biplane was heralded as a transcendent event by the capital's journalists. Although the longest of his five demonstration flights lasted only twenty minutes, the courageous Russian aviator was credited with having "already surpassed the skill of his instructor," the pioneering French aviator and airplane designer Henri Farman.<sup>23</sup> According to

<sup>20</sup> RGVA f. 2000, op. 7, d. 59. ll. 78–9.

<sup>21</sup> Joseph Bradley, "Voluntary Associations, Civic Culture, and *Obshchestvennost'* in Moscow," in Edith Clowes, Samuel Kassow, and James L. West (eds.), *Between Tsar and People: Educated Society and the Quest for Public Identity in Late Imperial Russia* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 131–48.

<sup>22</sup> The factories were the "First Russian Association of Aeronautics" (St. Petersburg), the "Russo-Balt Carriage Factory" (St. Petersburg), the company "Aviata" (Warsaw), and the "Motor" factory (Riga). See *Vozdushnyi put'* 2 (1910): 40.

<sup>23</sup> *Russkoe slovo*, 9 March 1910.

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FIGURE 3. Russian aviators Mikhail Efimov (*left*) and Lev Matsievich (*right*) in 1910.

one delirious reporter, Efimov's accomplishment had proven beyond doubt that "Russia was now poised to assume the world's lead in the subjugation of the heavens."<sup>24</sup> Like fellow countrymen Sergei Utochkin, Nikolai Popov, and the circus strongman-turned-pilot Ivan Zaikin, Efimov was a prominent early member of the emerging ranks of "sportsmen-aviators" who had honed their skills in French aviation schools before setting out to earn a living as flight instructors or participants in the Continent's burgeoning aerial shows and competitions.<sup>25</sup> A former locksmith and telegrapher, Efimov had borrowed money to finance flight training in Paris. Earlier in the year he had scored a spectacular coup when he set a new world record for altitude on a flight with a passenger. In keeping with all early aviation records, Efimov's mark was rapidly eclipsed. Still, it earned him considerable fame at home as an exemplar of Russian bravado and skill in the new art of flying.

<sup>24</sup> *Gazeta kopeka*, 10 March 1910.

<sup>25</sup> For an evocative, though inconsistent, account of Imperial Russia's sportsmen-aviators, see James Dimitroff, "The Confluence of Aviation and Russian Futurism, 1909-1914" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Southern California, 1998), 77-124.

Popular excitement over Russia's very own aviator-heroes and the airplane in general was quickly manifested in the everyday customs and habits of the Empire's citizens. A reflection of producers' new efforts to market modernity to the growing ranks of the Russian middle class, "Blériot" cigarettes, "Aeroclub" matches, "Aviator" candies, and "Aeronautics" chocolates appeared as brand names offered for sale to air-minded consumers.<sup>26</sup> Hoping to inspire interest in the development of aeronautics among Russia's far-flung inhabitants, the journal *Vestnik vozdukhoplavaniia* [*Herald of Aeronautics*] and the First Russian Association of Aeronautics jointly sponsored a mobile exposition that embarked on a fourteen-month, fifty-city tour of European and Asian Russia. Journeying as far as the Far Eastern port city of Vladivostok to "broaden provincial awareness of the successes of aeronautics," the exposition brought aviation to the nation's hinterlands. Meanwhile, in Russia's urban centers, cultured residents demonstrated their own fascination with the airplane by hosting fashionable "aeronautical balls" (complete with floating dirigibles and plane-shaped confetti) for air-conscious party goers. Others satiated their curiosity by flocking to the nation's new cinema halls. Featuring documentaries filmed from the air as well as fictional reels bearing such titles as *Experiments of the Aviator-Genius* and *Air Pirates*, cinema helped ensure the rapid dissemination of the airplane's image to audiences throughout the Empire.<sup>27</sup> By 1910 aviation had taken so rapid and complete a hold on the public's imagination that one leading journal could claim "interest in the question of aviation has spread like fire throughout the whole [of Russia] and throughout all classes of society . . . it has become fashionable and, as such, knowledge of [aviation] is now essential to every person who would consider himself to be a 'middling intelligent' [*srednii intelligent*]."<sup>28</sup> To meet the growing demand of the "aeronautical intelligentsia," leading publishers produced countless histories and studies of flight, while major newspapers sponsored special brochures and supplements devoted to aeronautics.<sup>29</sup> Aviation had become so popular that "the windows of almost every bookstore were peppered with the most enticing titles and covers and new books on flight appeared every week. . . ."<sup>30</sup>

<sup>26</sup> For reference to these products see "Aeroklub," *Smena* 3 (1934): 8–9.

<sup>27</sup> *Vestnik vozdukhoplavaniia* 11 (1910): 3–4; "Aero-bal," *Tiazhelee vozdukha* 8 (1911): 11–12; and *Sine-fono*, 1 December 1909 and 15 March 1911.

<sup>28</sup> *Aero i automobil'naia zhizn'* 1 (1910): 4.

<sup>29</sup> Among a few of the original Russian titles on aviation and aeronautics produced in the two years following Blériot's flight were N. Borozdin, *Zavoevanie vozdushnoi stikhi* (Warsaw, 1909); M. L. Frank, *Istoriia vozdukhoplavaniia i ego sovremennoe sostoianie* (St. Petersburg, 1910); Rodnykh, *Istoriia*; L. Ruzer, *Vozdukhoplavanie: ego istoriia, uspekhi i budushchee* (St. Petersburg, 1910); K. E. Veigelin, *Zavoevanie vozdushnogo okeana: istoriia i sovremennoe sostoianie vozdukhoplavaniia* (St. Petersburg, 1911); Stamat'ev, *Vozdukhoplavanie* (Odessa, 1910); and D. Dubenskii (ed.), *Vozdukhoplavanie* (St. Petersburg, 1911). The last two sources were published, respectively, by the journal *Rodina* and the newspaper *Russkoe chtenie*.

<sup>30</sup> *Aero i automobil'naia zhizn'* 4 (1910): 5. The ellipses appear in the original.