

*Soviet Aviation and Stalinist Culture*

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lines were also seen as ideal instruments for waging ideological warfare on the international stage. Magnified by the Stalinist propensity toward excess, the size of Soviet aircraft would quickly reach colossal proportions.

On 17 September 1932, more than 100 delegates representing thirty-nine periodicals gathered in Moscow to commemorate the fortieth anniversary of the writer and social activist Maxim Gorky. One after another, speakers rose to honor the accomplishments of the well-known writer and to praise his ability to raise social consciousness through his literary works. Encouraged by editors from the popular journal *Ogonek*, the delegates proposed to honor Gorky by constructing a giant new aircraft that would bear the writer's name. Following the unanimous ratification of a resolution calling for the aeronautical monument, the attendees concluded their meeting by forming a "Special Committee" to oversee a voluntary donation drive that would raise funds for the plane's construction.<sup>30</sup> The committee was immediately successful. Within three days of its formation it had collected more than 400,000 rubles in support of the project.<sup>31</sup>

The airplane envisioned by the delegates at the Moscow meeting was intended to serve the dual functions expected of all *agit-samolety*: It would be both bearer and symbol of Party-mandated enlightenment. To assist in fulfilling its mission, the *Maxim Gorky* would be equipped with an array of the Soviet Union's "most recent technological achievements," including a typography, telephone switchboard, photographic laboratory, and a radio transmitting station capable of beaming broadcasts along the air routes it would fly. In addition, the *Maxim Gorky* would include a motion-picture projector to enable Party activists to screen propaganda films for the largely illiterate peasant audiences they routinely encountered. On the underside of its wings, rows of built-in lights would allow the aircrew to transmit electronic text messages to the earthbound citizens over whom the plane flew.<sup>32</sup> As the ultimate propaganda weapon, the *Maxim Gorky* would serve as the flagship of a new agit-squadron once it emerged from the assembly line on 1 May 1934. Continuing in the tradition of the 1920s, the new squadron would travel throughout the Soviet Union bearing news of the advances made by

<sup>30</sup> The Special Committee was composed of sixty-nine luminaries from Soviet political, cultural, and technical fields and included such prominent figures as Nikolai Bukharin, Karl Radek, Mikhail Tomskii, Aleksei Tolstoi, and Andrei Tupolev. RGAE f. 9527, op. 1, d. 370 (Resoliutsiia obshchego sobraniia redaktsionnykh i literaturnykh rabotnikov 39 zhurnalov i gazet Zhurnal'no-Gazetnogo Ob"edineniia sostoishchegosia 17 IX 1932 g.), ll. 2-3 and RGAE f. 9527, op. 1, d. 385 (Resoliutsiia obshchego sobraniia redaktsionnykh i literaturnykh rabotnikov 39 zhurnalov i gazet Zhurnal'no-Gazetnogo Ob"edineniia sostoishchegosia 17 IX 1932 g.).

<sup>31</sup> "Gigant-samolet 'Maksim Gor'kii,'" *Ogonek* 28 (20 September 1932): 1.

<sup>32</sup> RGAE, f. 9527, op. 1, d. 517 (O eskadrilia "M. Gor'kogo"; vyrezki iz gazet; besedy nachal'nika GUGVF s predstaviteliami sovetskoi pechati), l. 1.

the Party and rallying the populace to support the construction of socialism. In the interim, the “Maxim Gorky Agitational Squadron,” consisting of five airplanes and a dirigible, began work in earnest to raise public donations for the ANT-20.<sup>33</sup>

Aside from providing the Party with an additional tool with which to enlighten its citizenry, the *Maxim Gorky* was supposed to symbolize the tremendous strides made by Soviet science and technology. Although airplanes had served for two decades as markers of modernity and national strength, proponents of the *Maxim Gorky* made clear their intention that this craft would be much more than just another airplane. The world’s largest and most politically advanced state demanded the world’s largest and most technologically advanced airplane: a flying monument to the skill of the country’s workers and the enlightened leadership of party officials. In short, “the plane would not only be of gigantic size and possess tremendous lift capacity, but it would also be of high enough quality to reflect all of our recent accomplishments in aviation technology. In all of its flying specifications and internal equipment, it would be the best built plane to date.”<sup>34</sup>

The design and construction of so large a plane presented a host of challenges to the TsAGI engineers and technicians charged with fulfilling the order. Initial estimates indicated that the fifty-nine-ton, 112-foot-long, eight-engine behemoth would cost more than 5 million rubles and require some 750,000 hours of labor to complete.<sup>35</sup> As the nation lacked appropriate facilities to accommodate such an enormous aircraft, the *Maxim Gorky* was constructed at the TsAGI workshops and then partially dismantled for transportation to the Moscow aerodrome for reassembly. Time was also a factor. In keeping with the Soviet propensity of forcing the tempo of industrial projects, the resolution calling for the construction of the *Maxim Gorky* demanded that the plane be built in the shortest time possible.<sup>36</sup> In the end, TsAGI was given just over eighteen months to deliver the aircraft to Party officials.

The *Maxim Gorky* was unveiled to the public on 19 June 1934. It appeared over Red Square as part of the festivities celebrating the return of the *Cheliuskin* expedition whose members had been rescued from an ice floe after several months of arctic isolation.<sup>37</sup> The airplane-giant provided an

<sup>33</sup> RGAE, f. 9527, op. 1, d. 517, ll. 106–107. The squadron included the ANT-14 (by now christened *Pravda*), an ANT-9, Stal’-2, U-2, and G-1 aircraft. A V-3 dirigible was scheduled to join the squadron at a later date, following its construction.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, l. 3.

<sup>35</sup> RGAE, f. 9527, op. 1, d. 371 (Protokol zasedaniia Vsesoiuznogo Komiteta po postroike agit-samoleta “Maksim Gor’kii”), l. 6.

<sup>36</sup> RGAE, f. 9527, op. 1, d. 370 (Materialy o sozdanii fonda dlia sooruzheniia agitatsionno samolete “Maksim Gor’kii”), l. 3.

<sup>37</sup> For details on the *Cheliuskin* rescue, see the subsequent discussion on p. 221.

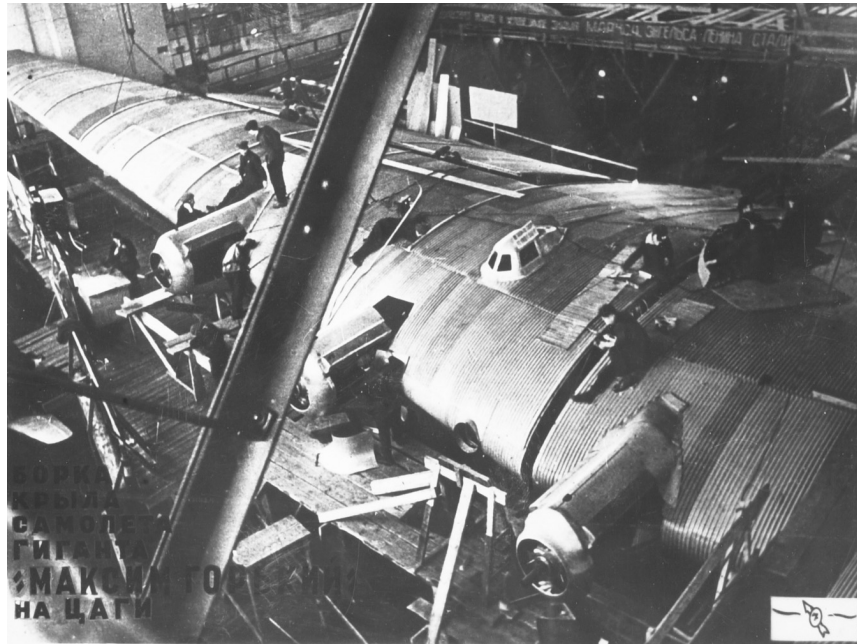


FIGURE 40. The ANT-20 *Maxim Gorky* under construction, 1933.

awesome spectacle for the tens of thousands of citizens who gathered to observe the celebration. The decorated flier Mikhail Gromov piloted the craft on its maiden flight. He waxed rhapsodic in fulsome praise of the airplane. “Seized by an unforgettable feeling of peace and pride in [the Soviet] victory over the earth, the ice, and the air,” Gromov proclaimed his experience at the helm “the happiest day of my life” and noted that the quality and workmanship of the nation’s new plane testified to the tremendous advances recently accomplished by proletarian industry.<sup>38</sup> Not surprisingly, the plane’s debut also met with a rapturous response from the nation’s press. For weeks on end leading publications printed articles enumerating the plane’s technical specifications and capabilities and retelling the story of its construction. The journal *Ogonek* went so far as to devote its entire 5 July issue to the *Maxim Gorky* and its meaning to Soviet culture.

Foreign observers were not as smitten with the plane. First Lieutenant Thomas D. White, assistant military attaché for the U.S. Army present in Moscow in the summer of 1934, was particularly critical. In a report to American military authorities he cast aspersions on Soviet claims of having constructed the world’s most modern and technically advanced airplane,

<sup>38</sup> M. Gromov, “Izumitel’naia mashina!,” *Pravda*, 21 June 1934.



FIGURE 41. The *Maxim Gorky* on display over Red Square, 1934.

noting that the all-metal cantilever wing monoplane was merely an oversized edition of prior ANT-type aircraft. As it appeared to have simply been assembled on the basis of blueprints from previously existing aircraft, the plane represented no great engineering advance. This fact, White noted, was of considerable importance for it explained the short period required for planning and constructing the airplane. More disconcerting than the shortcuts taken in designing the *Maxim Gorky* were many indications of poor workmanship and shoddy construction techniques. The plane was “unbelievably ponderous in construction. Even the tail wheel is made of steel filled with cement.”<sup>39</sup>

The problems apparent with the *Maxim Gorky* project did not end with the design and construction of the airplane-giant. The new aeronautical squadron organized to provide the ANT-20 with an operational base was proving chronically inept. Despite the Party’s claims of having triumphed over technique, the enterprise was plagued by appalling disorder. In the months preceding the debut of the *Maxim Gorky*, reports from the agit-squadron’s field commander complained that routine mechanical

<sup>39</sup> NARA, “Correspondence of the Military Intelligence Division Relating to General, Political, Economic, and Military Conditions in Russia and the Soviet Union, 1918–1941” (Microfilm Publication M1443), MID 2090, roll 20, frame 188.

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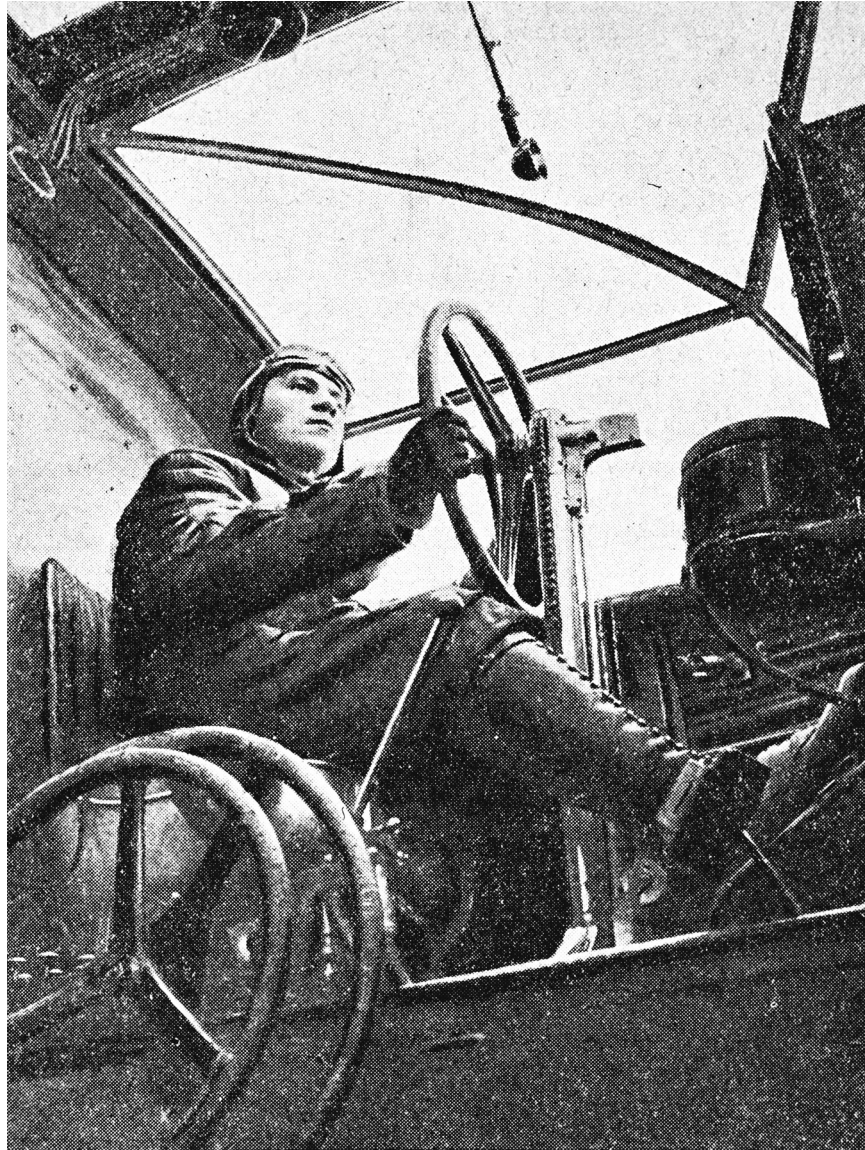


FIGURE 42. Pilot Ivan Mikheev at the helm of the *Maxim Gorky* during one of the airplane's demonstration flights. Photo: The David King Collection, London.

breakdowns, slapdash organization, inadequate repair facilities, and constant shortages of fuel and essential spare parts seriously interfered with the squadron's activities. The circumstances surrounding operations were so poor that, owing to an absence of hangars, all of the squadron's airplanes

were stored out in the open.<sup>40</sup> The lack of properly trained personnel and all-too-infrequent maintenance contributed to a growing number of accidents. The most serious occurred on 5 September 1933, claiming the lives of Abram Gol'tsman, head of GUGVF, GosPlan's Valentin Zarzar, and Glavaviaprom chief Pavel Baranov. The following spring, the squadron suffered through a particularly serious bout of incompetence that saw five airplanes crash in fewer than four months. Although the number of aircraft assigned to the Maxim Gorky Squadron expanded to twenty-three by the winter of 1934–5, owing to continuing accidents and mechanical failures only half of these were typically available for use.<sup>41</sup> Given these persistent problems it is easy to question the wisdom of devoting such an inordinate amount of labor and resources to the production a single aircraft. Perhaps the most telling indication of misplaced priorities surfaced on 22 June 1934. On that date, three days after the public debut of the *Maxim Gorky*, *Pravda* announced the inauguration of a new voluntary subscription campaign to raise funds for the construction of a hangar large enough to house the airplane-giant.<sup>42</sup>

Criticism of Soviet leaders' short-sightedness should not, however, overlook the broader social and political considerations that motivated the construction of the ANT-20. The *Maxim Gorky* concerned much more than merely affirming the capabilities of Soviet aviation technology. The campaign was intended to unite the country's citizenry behind a collective cause while legitimating the authority and policies of Party leaders. As was true of every aeronautical project undertaken since the early 1920s, the *Maxim Gorky* provided a façade of popular legitimacy for the Soviet regime by demonstrating the scientific basis of the Party's political hegemony.<sup>43</sup> From the inauguration of the campaign in September 1932 to the debut of the aircraft in June 1934 (and beyond), Party officials and press organs heralded the ANT-20 as proof of the Soviet leadership's technical prowess. The construction of the airplane validated the industrial policies pursued under Stalin. It demonstrated the extent to which the country had developed "under the glorious banner of socialism."<sup>44</sup> As the largest, "most technically advanced" airplane in the world, the *Maxim Gorky* provided material evidence that the Soviet Union was overtaking its capitalist rivals. Its appearance intimated that the attainment of the Communist kingdom was soon to follow.

<sup>40</sup> RGAE, f. 9527, op. 1, d. 654 (Doklady nachal'nika glavnoi inspektsii o rabote agiteskadrii'ia), l. 37.

<sup>41</sup> The agit-squadron's woes are chronicled in RGAE f. 9576, op. 1, d. 5 (Materialy o rabote eskadrii'ia, 1933–1936).

<sup>42</sup> "Postroim bazu dlia 'Maksima Gor'kogo,'" *Pravda*, 22 June 1934.

<sup>43</sup> Kendall Bailes, *Technology and Society Under Lenin and Stalin: Origins of the Soviet Technical Intelligentsia, 1917–1941* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), 383–4.

<sup>44</sup> "Rozhdenie giganta," *Pravda*, 21 June 1934.