

Introduction

Russia's Culture of Flight in Historical Perspective

Of the twentieth century's many remarkable inventions, none exerted such powerful and lasting influence on the human imagination as the airplane. Inspiring the creative introspection of artists and intellectuals and attracting public interest through the presentation of spectacle, machine-powered flight shaped popular perceptions of the nation while simultaneously challenging states to adapt to the modern world. As mountains were conquered and continents traversed, aeronautical successes overturned conventional notions of time and space, compelling young and old, citizen and statesman alike, to reconsider their relationship with the natural order. Accompanying the physical changes that it effected, aviation produced new symbols and images that celebrated the sensations of speed and motion, communicated meanings of power and authority, and forever enriched the range of human expression. Of course, the airplane is not only a cultural symbol. It is also a military weapon, an economic instrument, and a convenient method of transportation. In fulfilling these functions aviation served as a practical device for states attempting to modernize in the course of the twentieth century. As an index of technological proficiency and human mastery over nature, the airplane has symbolized substantive progress; assisting in the development of nations, while simultaneously contributing to perceptions of "the modern."

Given its power in shaping modern sensibilities, it is not surprising that the airplane has produced a scholarly literature dedicated to exploring the image and substance of flight. In recent years, scholars of European and American culture have devoted increasing attention to the subject of aviation. Laurence Goldstein, Clive Hart, and Felix Ingold have written on the airplane's place within the modern literary canon while Stephen Pendo and Michael Paris have chronicled the portrayal of aviation in the cinema. In his pioneering work, *The Winged Gospel*, historian Joseph Corn examined America's early appropriation of flight technology as a symbol of reform and national renewal. Similarly, studies by Jonathan Vance and Peter Fritzsche have respectively explored the contours of Canadian and German flight culture. More recently, Robert Wohl has published the second installment of a projected three-volume study of "aviation and the western imagination." Focusing on the aesthetic dimensions of flight and the airplane's role as a source of cultural inspiration, Wohl's trilogy, when complete, promises to

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become the definitive treatment of aviation culture in the twentieth-century West.¹

Notably absent from western scholarship, however, is any account of the Russian culture of flight. Although valuable studies devoted to Russian and Soviet aviation have been produced, none consider the role of the airplane in reflecting and affecting broader patterns in Russia's development. Likewise, none have attempted to measure Russia's response to aviation within the context of then-contemporary European institutions and trends.² This book attempts to address this absence. Through an examination of private and public responses to the airplane, it chronicles the culture of Russian flight from its origins in the first decade of the twentieth century to the end of the Second World War. It seeks to identify the fundamental characteristics of Russian aviation and to assess their impact in shaping the images and institutions created by the country's citizens and statesmen.

Although flight devotees and aviation enthusiasts will find much to interest them in these pages, this is not a typical book about airplanes. It is not intended to provide readers with a complete account of Russia's aeronautical development, nor is it a reference work cataloging Russian contributions to the evolution of flight technology. The subject of this book is instead the historical concurrence of aviation "symbols" and "substance." It explains how successive generations of Russian and Soviet leaders understood the airplane, how they articulated that understanding through the promotion of specific images and symbols, and why they institutionalized their visions through the pursuit of particular programs and policies. In doing so, this book aims to answer a basic, but essential, question: "What is 'Russian' about Russian aviation"?

Central to this approach is my specific use of the term "air-mindedness." Initially coined by contemporary American observers to explain their nation's early, unbridled enthusiasm for the flying machine, "air-minded" has subsequently been employed by historians to describe the interest shown by any nation, group, or individual in things aeronautical.³ In this sense, the adjective "air-minded" and the noun "air-mindedness" typically refer to an enthusiasm for machine-powered flight. My use of the term is somewhat different. I have chosen to employ "air-mindedness" in reference to the particular set of cultural traditions, symbols, and markers that, combined with existing political culture and social institutions, constitute a given nation's response to the airplane. Defined in this manner, "air-minded" retains its accustomed meaning as the semantic equivalent of "enthusiastic about flight," whereas "air-mindedness" is used to communicate the specific

¹ Complete citations of these works appear in the bibliography.

² For examples of these texts, see the bibliography.

³ Joseph Corn, *Winged Gospel: America's Romance with Aviation, 1900-1950* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), vii.

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historical factors that revealed, expressed, and produced that enthusiasm. Put simply, I argue that both the meaning and the substance of air-mindedness are particular to the culture that one is studying. Although Americans, Britons, Germans, and French may all be said to have been enthusiastic about aviation (or, air-minded), the specific manifestations of that enthusiasm (air-mindedness) were the products of those nations' unique historical and cultural traditions. The purpose of this book is to examine air-minded Russia and to identify the cultural, social, and political conditions that contributed to the formation of a specifically Russian air-mindedness.

As scholars of western flight have convincingly demonstrated, twentieth-century Europeans and Americans communicated their separate visions of flight through reference to a shared set of cultural symbols and standards.⁴ Rooted in the Hellenic tradition of the Icarus legend and shaped by the common Renaissance values of humanism and individualism, western cultures of flight focused on the accomplishments of individual pilots and endowed aeronautical successes with a supernatural bearing that typically bordered on religious reverence. In the western imagination, the advent of flight gave birth to new heroes, modern Prometheans named Wright and Blériot, Lindbergh and Earhart, whose airborne achievements spoke to the power of technology and, through it, the individual's ability to master time and space and to transcend the challenges of the human condition. Illustrative of the West's dynamism and idealism, as well as its tendencies toward conquest and self-destruction, the Icarus myth has dominated European and American consciousness and established the perceptual framework within which aviation progress, programs, and personalities are regarded by western citizens.⁵

Unknown to most audiences outside of Russia is the existence of a corresponding Icarian vision in the Russian cultural tradition. Although its origins are neither as old nor as celebrated as the western legend, the peculiar Russian variation on the ancient Greek tale likewise lends insight into Russians' unique understanding of the promise and problems posed by human flight. Recorded in obscurity and popularized in the early twentieth century, the story of the "Russian Icarus" has been retold and recast over many generations.⁶ Reprinted in the general and scholarly press, transformed into

⁴ Clive Hart, *Images of Flight* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988); Laurence Goldstein, *Flying Machine and Modern Literature* (London: Macmillan, 1986); and Robert Wohl, *A Passion for Wings: Aviation and the Western Imagination, 1908–1918* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994).

⁵ Wohl, *Passion for Wings*, 2–3.

⁶ Aleksandr Rodnykh, *Istoriia vozdukhoplavaniia i letaniia v Rossii: letanie i vozdukhoplavanie v starinu* (St. Petersburg, 1911); Vasilii Naidenov, *Russkoe vozdukhoplavanie i istoriia i uspekhi* (St. Petersburg, 1911); P. D. Duz', *Istoriia vozdukhoplavaniia i aviatsii v Rossii* (Moscow, 1979); V. A. Popov (ed.), *Vozdukhoplavanie i aviatsiia v Rossii do 1907 g.* (Moscow, 1956); and, most recently, D. A. Sobolev and Iu. V. Rychkov, *Vsemirnaia istoriia aviatsii* (Moscow: Veche, 2002), among others.

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illustrative plates, and even translated to the motion-picture screen, the Russian version of the Icarus myth has attained the status of a cultural icon. As such, the tale bears retelling in its entirety.

During the reign of Ivan the Terrible, a certain serf by the name of Nikitka, belonging to the *boyar* Lupotov, devised a mechanism with which, in the presence of the Tsar and a large number of people, he intended to fly away to the Aleksandrovskii settlement. Notwithstanding a successful flight, the “inventor” Nikitka was subjected to the following decree of the Tsar: “A man is not a bird. He does not have wings. Those who attach wooden wings to themselves do so in opposition to the will of nature. Such is not a godly deed, but a deed which emanates from unclean powers. For such an association with the forces of darkness, the head of the inventor shall be cut off. The body of the enserfed [*smerdiashchago*] cur will then be thrown to swine in order that they may feed. As for the invention undertaken with demonic assistance, following a blessed liturgy, it shall be consumed by fire.”⁷

The existence of this specifically Russian legend would remain a mere curiosity were it not for its recurrence in the pages of the nation’s history. Another narrative, set during the reign of Tsar Peter I (1682–1725), tells a similar story, suggesting that the notion of a uniquely native Icarus speaks to larger, more enduring issues in the history of Russian flight. On 30 April 1695, a peasant [*muzhik*] by the name of Emelian Ivanov announced his intention to “fly like a crane” from the middle of Red Square. Curious to discover if the peasant could indeed fly, the tsar granted him eighteen rubles to construct a pair of wings. When the wings proved ineffective, the peasant explained that he had made them too heavy. After receiving an additional five-ruble subsidy, he refashioned the wings from leather but again failed to soar. As punishment, the peasant was beaten and his property sold to repay his incurred debts.⁸

In various guises, these two legends have served as the foundation for innumerable accounts regarding the origins of Russian flight. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as the country’s citizens and state officials struggled to respond to European airborne successes, these stories were cited as indisputable proof of Russia’s peculiar aeronautical heritage. One of the earliest (and more vociferous) efforts in this regard came from the pen of Konstantin Masal’skii, a state official and minor litterateur who lived during the reign of Tsar Nicholas I (1825–55). His 1833 rendition of the tale concerning the peasant aeronaut Emelian Ivanov consciously endeavored to establish the Russian genesis of human flight. In introductory remarks to an embellished version of the Petrine-era legend, Masal’skii warned foreign skeptics not to mistakenly attribute the invention of flight to European genius. Long

⁷ N. Borozdin, *Zavoevanie vozdushnoi stikhi* (Warsaw, 1909), 6.

⁸ I. A. Zheliabuzhskii, *Zapiski Zheliabuzhskago s 1682 g. po 2 iulia 1709 g.* (St. Petersburg, 1840), 46–7.

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FIGURE 1. *The Russian Icarus*. Reproduced from Aleksandr Rodnykh, *Kratkii ocherk po istorii russkago vozdukhoplavaniia* (St. Petersburg, 1910).

before the helium experiments of English and Italian scientists, and some eighty-eight years before the first balloon ascent of the French Montgolfier brothers, he wrote, Ivanov's 1695 effort to fly had granted to Russia the "palm of first place in aeronautics." Even before Peter the Great had begun to transform Russia from a backward Asiatic power into a modern European

nation, Masal'skii claimed, the native talent of the Russian peasantry had "put to shame" the leading minds of Europe.⁹

Masal'skii's early attempt to exploit the Icarus legend to accord Russia primacy in the annals of flight reveals one of the structuring motifs of the nation's history and a characteristic trait of its aviation culture: the recurrent effort to lay claim to distinction in the face of competition from Western Europe. From the "Third Rome" theories of Muscovite ideologists and the romantic reveries of nineteenth-century Slavophiles, to Communist claims of ideological supremacy and the resurgent nationalism of contemporary politicians, Russian citizens and statesmen have long measured themselves against the perceived standards set by Europe. Positioned on the cultural periphery of both the East and the West, Russians have embraced ideas and institutions imported from Europe while attempting to reconcile them with their own native values. The alternating enthusiasm and ambivalence that has characterized this embrace helped to produce a particular vision of the nation and its future. Perhaps nowhere is this tendency more evident than in the nation's response to flight.

As the quintessential marker of twentieth-century progress, the airplane, more so than any other technology, clarified the link between nationalist aspirations and the advent of the modern age. In promising military and economic advantage, and in demonstrating mastery over nature, the airplane emerged as the clearest measure of nations, distinguishing not only European civilization from those of Africa and Asia, but also the truly great powers among the Continent's leading states.¹⁰ Influenced by the successes and symbols of aviation and eager to demonstrate their own technological prowess, Russians enjoined the aerial challenge emanating from Europe by seeking to establish their own place in the heavens. Not unlike western citizens and statesmen who came to view aerial machines as measures of their modernity, Russians also invoked the airplane as a portent of national progress and pride. Despite this shared recognition of the symbolic resonance of human flight, however, the Russian embrace of aviation remained essentially distinct. Whereas Western Europeans viewed the airplane symbolically as a marker of progress and personal liberation, Russians conceived it in iconic fashion. Like the religious images of the Russian Orthodox faith, which are understood both to represent God's heavenly realm and to effect salvation, the airplane served dual functions for Russians desirous of besting the West. They saw aviation both as a sign of the future and as an instrument for collectively liberating the nation from the constraints of its past. More than a mere symbolic representation of sought-after modernity, the

⁹ First published in A. Smirdin (ed.), *Novosel'e* (St. Petersburg, 1833), 241–316, the story may also be found in the recent collection, Konstantin Masal'skii, *Strel'tsy* (Moscow, 1994).

¹⁰ Peter Fritzsche, *A Nation of Fliers: German Aviation and the Popular Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 3.

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airplane was also seen as a means to that end, the mastery of which would make possible backward Russia's rapid transformation into the world's most advanced and powerful nation.¹¹

Recognized by successive generations of Russians as both a symbol and a means of modernization, the airplane played a central, if largely overlooked, role in the efforts of twentieth-century officials to secure political legitimacy. Following the investigative lead of the late Kendall Bailes, I argue that, as the preeminent embodiments of technological modernization, aviation images and institutions were integral to Russians' views of themselves, their nation, and their place in the world.¹² Unlike Bailes, however, I propose that the airplane's influence in shaping Russian identity was not limited to the Stalinist era. Rather, it has been a continuous and essential feature of modern Russian culture, one that has structured public and private understanding of progress and legitimacy from the dawn of the air age to the present day.

Such an approach to Russia's aviation culture lends valuable insight into the continuities shared by the Imperial and the Soviet eras. As the following chapters will show, the recurrent effort to derive legitimacy through appeals to aeronautical mastery led both Imperial and Soviet political leaders to pursue policies and programs that did not always serve their country's best interests. Eager to demonstrate competency in the conquest of the air, but unable to keep pace with foreign advances, Imperial leaders focused on quantitative solutions to their aeronautical dilemmas. Revisiting long-standing patterns in Russian history, they attempted to acquire airplanes and parts abroad in a hurried effort to jump-start development and rapidly master technique. As these measures failed, tsarist-era officials and aeronautical patrons resorted to the rhetoric of "compensatory symbolism" in an effort to maintain their political legitimacy. They embellished actual accomplishments, exaggerating, and at times actively inventing, Russian achievements when, in fact, much less progress had been made. These tendencies resurfaced following the Bolsheviks' rise to power in 1917. In their efforts to foster public air-mindedness, Communist officials employed images and rhetoric derivative of those used by their Imperial predecessors. They, too, adopted compensatory symbolism as a strategy for maintaining legitimacy while relying on the West for technology and expertise. Likewise beholden to an iconic vision of flight, their understanding of the airplane and their goal of establishing a modern, air-minded nation did not differ substantially from those of their predecessors.

Still, the Soviet experience diverged from the Imperial in one critical respect. Under the influence of their Marxist ideology, Communist officials

¹¹ Scott W. Palmer, "Icarus, East: The Symbolic Contexts of Russian Flight," *Slavic and East European Journal* 49(1) (Spring 2005): 19-47.

¹² Kendall Bailes, *Technology and Society Under Lenin and Stalin: Origins of the Soviet Technical Intelligentsia, 1917-1941* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), 381-406.

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imposed untold sacrifices on the country and its people in an effort to realize their modernist dreams. Unlike Imperial statesmen, they spared no expense, nor did they conserve any resources, in their totalizing campaign to transcend Russian backwardness. To be certain, they did achieve noteworthy successes in aviation, but these were sorely qualified by the injustices and inefficiencies of their authoritarian system. Ironically, while the advent of the command economy and the pursuit of crash industrialization during the 1930s made possible the rapid and impressive growth of Soviet aviation, they simultaneously institutionalized obsolescence, ensuring that the USSR would remain dependent on the acquisition of advanced technology from the more dynamic and productive West. Beholden to a static image of an industrialized utopia, but unable to make the present conform with their visions, Communist Party leaders pressed forward in an effort to engineer the future. The actions they undertook in regard to aviation revealed the inherent limitations of their modernizing agenda. They also demonstrated how the quest to create a “dictatorship of the air” ultimately abetted monumental tragedy.