



Army of the Sky

Russian Military Aviation
before the Great War,
1904–1914

Gregory Vitarbo

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| Introduction

In the last decade of Imperial Russia the challenge of “modernization” took on new urgency. Modernization included such processes as the growth of mass representative politics and complex bureaucratic structures, the expansion of the scope and prerogatives of the state, technological advancement, and increasing socio-economic differentiation. The tangible manifestations of such processes—rapid industrialization, the growth of professional middle and industrial working classes, the spread of nationalism, the beginnings of mass political mobilization, cultural ferment—characterized a period of rapid, destabilizing change. Russian thinkers, politicians, and officials devised and modified conceptual and analytical models through which to interpret these processes. In turn, these models helped direct the evolution of such processes by contributing to the framing of governmental and public policy. Moreover, in addition to their own social and cultural heritage, Russians could seize upon the prior historical experience of the self-consciously “modern” Western Europe nations as an archetype through which to perceive, explain, and pass judgment upon the changes affecting Russia.

The dynamics of modernization took on a unique cast within the Russian Imperial army through the period from 1905–1914. As both the primary instrument and prop of tsarist power, the army occupied a crucial place, structurally and ideologically, within the edifice of the regime. By virtue of the demands placed upon it, the scope of the army’s interaction with society was arguably broader than that of any other state institution. From conscription to repression to local administration, some form of military experience was shared, and hence in part shaped, by nearly every tsarist subject. The Imperial officer corps itself cultivated long-standing traditions of its prominent role and status, the ideal of state service which underpinned this status, and the deeper link between tsar and nobility symbolized by such service. Yet despite its apparently deep-seated affiliations to the tenets of the old order, the officer corps was unavoidably caught up in the contemporary political, social, and cultural flux that was challenging those very tenets.

Further, any study of the military in the last years of the Empire must contend with the inescapable shadow of World War I, the Russian Revolution, and the civil war. The upheaval of 1914–1921 has inevitably exercised a powerful influence upon memoirists and historians alike. This influence is

frequently manifested in a “trial and judgment” model of analysis that holds the Russian army to an unforgiving paradigm of modernization and finds it wanting. The leitmotif of such work is the adjudged failure of the army to master objective challenges of technological advancement and military reform and the subsequent price of such failure—defeat in the Great War and the demise of the Russian Empire. This analytical orientation is to an extent understandable. The Russian officer corps in the early twentieth century was not engaged in merely philosophical debates regarding Russia's pride, place of importance, and cultural superiority vis-à-vis the West. Instead, it was in the midst of an increasingly feverish arms race and worriedly anticipating the outbreak of a major conflict, where defeat might mean more than mere humiliation or an anguished re-examination of “Russia.”

Yet the impulse to assign blame frequently leads to a failure to appreciate sufficiently the context, parameters, and set of choices in which contemporaries operated. Military modernization was necessarily a complex and multi-faceted process. At one level it involved efforts to acquire new technology and utilize foreign doctrines and institutional models. The requisite policies and practices were more or less consciously emulated as “modern” or “Western”, or at least allowing Russia to compete with the West. These efforts, however, must be placed within the broader context of domestic blueprints of modernization largely external to the army and its control, but which nevertheless impinged upon its mission. Such projects, themselves envisaged as “modern” by their sponsors, included not only state-sponsored industrialization, but also such efforts as building a more coherent administrative structure for the Imperial polity. In turn, as perceptive Russian statesmen and thinkers had long ago learned, both artifacts of technology and programs of modernization imported from abroad were themselves underpinned by exogenous cultural values and historical experiences.

Further, if modernization was a reciprocal and dynamic process of negotiation, the terms of this exchange were mediated fundamentally by the culture of the tsarist officer community. By culture I mean that body of values, assumptions, and practices that structured how officers perceived, defined, and articulated their role, function, and identity. This set of values derived from their collective experience served as the starting point for any interpretation and appraisal of programs of modernization. Thus, one must pay particular attention to the unique features of this military community. The officer corps was an organization with specific functions and internally generated conventions and norms, but institutionally sensitive as well to international standards of military performance. At the same time, it was a part of the tsarist state apparatus whose relations with other parts of this apparatus,

from the high sphere of the central ministries to provincial police officials, were varied, complex, and often contentious. Lastly, it was a community conditioned by broader links to prevailing social structures and cultural patterns in the tsarist empire.

This work specifically addresses the development of military aviation in the period 1905–1914 as a case study through which to explore the dynamic relationship between technology, the imperatives of modernization, and the culture of the Russian Imperial officer corps. The airplane was emblematic of the dilemma of modernization, for both army and state, in the last years of the Russian empire. It at once presented both a serious challenge and a tantalizing opportunity; it sharply exposed the limitations of Russia's economic, technological, and infrastructural development while simultaneously offering a means to rapidly overcome them; it provided a means to demonstrate and assert Russia's achievements, pride, and place while also giving rise to fears of the penalties of backwardness with the stakes of modernization now risen, literally, dramatically higher. The airplane thus offered a potent symbol around which definitions and visions of what modernization should mean for Russia could be contested. The advent of the airplane also called into being the need for a requisite cadre of trained personnel: the flyers and mechanics, the priests and acolytes, who would serve this new idol of technology. This task involved the creation and assimilation within the army of an almost entirely new profession of arms and a unique society of officers. In this way the airplane was the harbinger not just of a new age of technology, but of the birth of a culture of aviation within the Russian army, one that would reach its zenith of expression under the Soviet regime.

Given this symbolic power of the airplane, traditional indictments of the Russian military community take on heightened form in regard to aviation. They entail not only judgments of military performance in the air, but a broader critique of the inability of the tsarist army and state to confront the military, economic, and political challenges besetting the Empire. In contrast, the successes of aviation amongst various European powers of the period, particularly during World War I, offer a vivid comparative standard. This critical stance has again been exaggerated by the aftermath of the Russian Revolution. Instead of the broader, evolutionary continuity with which to judge the development of aviation in the United States and Western Europe, there is the seemingly stark contrast between the lame, feeble efforts of tsarist aviation and the large devotion of priorities, resources, and propaganda that surrounded aviation under the Soviet regime. In this view, the material backwardness and cultural failings of the tsarist military were graphically exposed, even before the debacle in war, by its response to the airplane. Soviet

literature is united in painting a picture in which the tsarist officials and senior army officers failed to adequately adapt to the airplane and cultivate its “necessary” development. Even works which praise the efforts of early Russian fliers, inventors, and aviation enterprises stress the difficulties they labored under.¹ The best example of such work is the exhaustive study by P. Duz’, *Istoriia vozdukhoplavaniia i aviatsii v Rossii* (*History of Aeronautics and Aviation in Russia*).² The composite picture, which remains largely the same in post-Soviet accounts, thus presents a sharp dichotomy. In the front lines of Russia’s encounter with the airplane was a budding, vibrant culture of aviation professionalism, uniting a small group of “progressive” army officers with civilian inventors and enthusiasts. However, their efforts were ultimately stifled by the short-sightedness and inertia which generally prevailed both at the levels of command and the line, within the officer corps as a whole and even the aviation service itself. In turn, the general economic, industrial, and infrastructural backwardness fostered by the tsarist political and social order presented fundamental obstacles beyond the control of the officers of the air services. Hence, a visionary aviation culture was unable to flower fully until after the October Revolution and the Bolshevik commitment to modernity, symbolized by the regime’s idolization of the airplane.

While somewhat more sympathetic, the small amount of Western work on the topic also treats Imperial military aviation largely as a preparatory footnote to the impressive aviation tradition of the Soviet armed forces. Such works generally focus upon the large-scale features of economic backwardness—a small industrial base, poor infrastructure, financial constraints—which hindered the development of Imperial military aviation and especially a domestic aviation industry.³ These works also make mention of the energetic and fruitful activity of a handful of committed and innovative enthusiasts. Yet, like Soviet scholars, they depict such visionaries as largely alone and generally unheeded, like straws against the wind, amongst the general milieu of backwardness and obscurantism that characterized the late Imperial army.

However, in his history of Soviet aviation Robert Kilmarx does emphasize the debt owed by the Red Air Force to its tsarist predecessor—a debt that the Soviets were only too happy to minimize—in terms of inherited experience, techniques, methods, and theoretical knowledge.⁴ Recent work on Russian Imperial aviation likewise presents a more nuanced picture. Scott W. Palmer’s exploration of the prominent place and role of aeronautics and aviation in Russian popular culture throughout the tsarist and Soviet periods stands out.⁵ He evocatively demonstrates that a tradition of aviation possessed long-cultivated and deep-seated roots in the Russian national memory. In a related piece he argues that in the years before World War I the airplane acted

as a powerful symbol for the Russian public of the ability to overcome Russia's chronic "cultural stagnation and historical backwardness." Aviation thus offered Russians an example of strength and "a means of redefining their national identity," an identity pointedly contrasted to the obsolescent political and social order promoted by the Tsarist regime.⁶ Likewise, Von Hardesty also chronicles the numerous achievements of Russian military and civilian aviators, scientists, inventors, and aeroclub enthusiasts in the years before and during World War I. He points to the renowned aircraft designer Igor Sikorsky, for example, as a glowing symbol of a Russian talents and initiative in this sphere.⁷ Noting that it was long official Soviet policy to downplay the accomplishments of Imperial aviation, Hardesty instead argues that "one is struck with the continuity between the tsarist and communist periods" in terms of perceived challenges and responses to aviation, claiming that both periods evinced a common style "which could be described as distinctively 'Russian.'"⁸ He thus stresses the numerous similarities—in philosophies, methods, and cadres—shared by Imperial and Soviet aviation policies.

While offering invaluable insights regarding the general development of Imperial aviation, however, neither Hardesty nor Palmer focus in depth upon strictly military aviation, which dwarfed civil aviation in this period. In turn, Palmer's analysis draws heavily upon the traditional model of a moribund autocracy pitted against an increasingly assertive public over the imperatives of modernization and the future course of the nation. Existing scholarship on Russian Imperial aviation thus offers both strident indictments of the army's failure to master the challenges of modernization, as well as indications that such judgments deserve a reappraisal.

This study provides such a reappraisal through a comprehensive and in-depth examination of the tsarist aviation service before the Great War. Limiting this study to the years before the outbreak of conflict has several advantages in terms of analytical and comparative context. It helps avoid the dangers of the aforementioned posture of judgment and the resulting tendency to view Russian defeat both in the air and on the ground as somehow preordained. It further allows a more fruitful application of an appropriate comparative framework, one that distinguishes between the pre-war period and the experience of the war itself, when the stalemate of the trenches dramatically increased the attention and resources devoted to aviation and the resulting pace of its development. Before the exploits of the Great War's aces crystallized the popular image of early aerial combat, aviation was a novel and dodgy business. All of the European militaries grappled with the challenge of the airplane with varying levels of commitment and success; it was a highly competitive process of trial and often deadly error, where relevant knowledge