

*Dictatorship of the Air: Aviation Culture and the Fate of Modern Russia.* By Scott W. Palmer. (New York: Cambridge University Press. 2006, Pp. xx, 307. \$40.00.)

Scott Palmer asks "What is 'Russian' about Russian aviation?" In *Dictatorship of the Air* he has written a cultural history of Russian and Soviet aviation up to 1945. The book has three sections bounded chronologically by Blériot's cross-Channel flight (1909), the Bolshevik Revolution (1917), Stalin's "Great Breakthrough" (1929), and victory over Germany (1945). It draws on the Russian archives and contemporary publications, together with a substantial secondary literature, and reproduces (in monochrome) many fascinating photographs and posters.

The main feature of Russia's "culture of flight," Palmer suggests, was that aviation symbolised the advancement of the West. This was perceived as both threat and opportunity. Responding to the threat before a single aircraft had reached Russia, the secret police enacted border controls on aviation (15). After that, attitudes changed quickly. Public spirit embraced aviation as a symbol of modernity and an opportunity to modernise Russia. Through aviation, Russia would prove the West's equal and be born again as a civilised country. Through aviation Russia could defend itself, because the civilised countries that had brought aviation into being might use it to attack Russia.

In comparing Soviet air-mindedness with that of Russia before the revolution, Palmer comes out strongly for continuity (82). The Bolsheviks inherited the idea that the Soviet Union could catch up and overtake the West in a single great leap, by focusing a vast collective effort on aviation technology. Similarities included the emphasis on public spirit over private initiative, the advertisement of domestic pioneers in preference to foreign achievements, and the illusory goal of national self-sufficiency contrasted with persistent dependence on foreign designs and advances in reality. Some themes became more elaborate, including the potential of aviation to integrate a large, poor society, to promote the image of the Soviet state abroad, and to counter aerial attack. The Bolsheviks differed from their predecessors mainly in the Stalinist readiness to sacrifice living standards and lives to achieve these goals (8).

The story that Palmer tells is intriguing but not wholly convincing. He claims it is specific to Russia (2), but did Japan not follow a similar path? Palmer criticises the Soviet strategy of "institutionalising dependence on the West" (285), but what alternative was there? Aviation technology has always been global, not the property of any one country; it could not have made sense for the Soviet Union to aspire to true self-sufficiency. Anyway, the strategy deserves more credit than that: Soviet industry developed a capacity for rapid copying and appropriate modification without which it could have made little use of what was borrowed. How else did the Soviet Union have aircraft that could win air superiority over Germany in World War II (262, 266)? Finally, it is a pity to see yet another history of the Stalin period that

could not resist adding a cursory survey of the next 50 years (275-281) to underpin a subtitle about "The Fate of Modern Russia."

That said, historians and air enthusiasts will enjoy this book and learn much from it.

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