Dictatorship of the Air

Focusing on one of the last untold chapters in the history of human flight, *Dictatorship of the Air* is the first book to explain the true story behind twentieth-century Russia’s quest for aviation prominence. Based on nearly a decade of scholarly research, but written with general readers in mind, this is the only account to answer the question “What is ‘Russian’ about Russian aviation?”

From the 1909 arrival of machine-powered flight in the “land of the tsars” to the USSR’s victory over Hitler in 1945, *Dictatorship of the Air* describes why the airplane became the preeminent symbol of industrial progress and international power for generations of Russian statesmen and citizens. The book explains how, behind a façade of daredevil pilots, record-setting flights, and gargantuan airplanes, Russia’s long-standing legacies of industrial backwardness, cultural xenophobia, and state-directed modernization prolonged the nation’s dependence on western technology and ultimately ensured the USSR’s demise.

Scott W. Palmer is a specialist on the history of modern Russian culture and technology. A frequent traveler to the Russian Federation, he has conducted eight extended visits to Russian archives since 1994. His research has been supported by the American Council of Learned Societies, the United States Library of Congress, the Smithsonian Institution, the Fulbright-Hays Program, the International Council for Research Exchange, and the Kennan Institute for Advanced Russian Studies. He currently resides and teaches in the Midwest.
Cambridge Centennial of Flight

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The series presents new titles dealing with the drama and historical impact of human flight. The Air Age began on December 17, 1903 with the epic powered and controlled flight by the Wright brothers at Kitty Hawk. The airplane rapidly developed into an efficient means of global travel and a lethal weapon of war. Modern rocketry has allowed heirs of the Wrights to orbit the Earth and to land on the Moon, inaugurating a new era of exploration of the solar system by humans and robotic machines. The Centennial of Flight series offers pioneering studies with fresh interpretative insights and broad appeal on key themes, events, and personalities that shaped the evolution of aerospace technology.
Dictatorship of the Air
Aviation Culture and the Fate of Modern Russia

SCOTT W. PALMER
To M
But, good Lord, what do I care about the laws of nature and arithmetic if I have my reasons for disliking them, including the one about two and two making four! Of course, I won’t be able to breach this wall with my head if I’m not strong enough. But I don’t have to accept a stone wall just because it’s there and I don’t have the strength to breach it.

Fyodor Dostoevsky, Notes from the Underground
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Notes on Usage

All Russian names appearing in the text have been transliterated with the Library of Congress system save those for which an alternative version is already widely known to English-speaking readers (for example, “Leon Trotsky” rather than “Lev Trotsky”).

Until February 1918 Russia adhered to the Julian calendar (Old Style) that ran thirteen days behind the Gregorian calendar (New Style) used in Western Europe. Unless otherwise noted, dates before 31 January 1918 are given in the Julian style.
### List of Key Terms and Abbreviations

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<td><em>Obshchestvo druzei aviatsionnoi oborony i promyshlennosti</em>, Society of Friends of Aviation and Chemical Defense and Industry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>bogatyry’</em></td>
<td>warrior, hero</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>chastushka</em></td>
<td>a rhymed couplet or ditty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dobrokhim</td>
<td><em>Obshchestvo druzei khimii</em>, Society of Friends of Chemistry</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dobrolet</td>
<td><em>Dobrovol’nyi vozdushnyi flot</em>, Voluntary Air-Fleet</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>ekipazh</em></td>
<td>flight crew</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gosplan</td>
<td><em>Gosudarstvennaia planirovannaia komissiia</em>, State Planning Commission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GPU, OGPU</td>
<td><em>(Ob’edinnoe) Glavnoe politicheskoe upravlenie</em>, (Unified) Main Political Directorate. Secret Police</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glavaviaprom</td>
<td><em>Glavnoe upravlenie aviatsionnoi promyshlennosti</em>, Main Directorate of the Aviation Industry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GVF</td>
<td><em>Grazhdanskii vozdushnyi flot</em>, Civilian Air Fleet</td>
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<tr>
<td>IVAK</td>
<td><em>Imperatorskii Vserossiiskii aero-klub</em>, Imperial All-Russian Aero-Club</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NKID</td>
<td><em>Narodnyi komissariat inostrannykh del</em>, Peoples’ Commissariat of Foreign Affairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NKVD</td>
<td><em>Narodnyi komissariat vnutrennykh del</em>, Peoples’ Commissariat of Internal Affairs. Secret Police. Successor to the GPU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>oblast’</em></td>
<td>region (an administrative unit)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ODVF</td>
<td><em>Obshchestvo druzei vozduzhnogo flota</em>, Society of Friends of the Air Fleet</td>
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<tr>
<td>OKB</td>
<td><em>Opytnoe konstruktorskoe biuro</em>, Experimental Design Bureau</td>
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<tr>
<td>OSO</td>
<td><em>Obshchestvo sodeistvija oborony</em>, Society for Assistance to Defense</td>
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<tr>
<td>Osoaviakhim</td>
<td><em>Obshchestvo druzei oborony i aviatsionno-khimicheskogo stroitel’stvo</em>, Society of Friends of Defense and Avia-Chemical Construction</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>prostranstvo</em></td>
<td>(vast) space</td>
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<td>Revvoensovet</td>
<td><em>Revoliutsionnyi voennyi sovet</em>, Revolutionary Military Council. The highest decision-making body of the Red Army, 1918–1934</td>
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<tr>
<td>skazka</td>
<td>fairy-tale, fable</td>
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<tr>
<td>smychka</td>
<td>union, alliance</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sovnarkom</td>
<td><em>Sovet narodnykh komissarov</em>, Council of Peoples’ Commissars. Nominal government of the Soviet Union, functioning as a cabinet of ministers</td>
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<tr>
<td>TsAGI</td>
<td><em>Tsentral’nyi aero-gidrodynamicheskii institut</em>, Central Aero- Hydrodynamical Institute</td>
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<td>versy</td>
<td>plural of <em>versa</em>, a unit of measurement equal to approximately 0.63 mile</td>
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<td>VNO</td>
<td><em>Voennoe nauchnoe obshchestvo</em>, Military Scientific Society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VVF</td>
<td><em>Voenno-vozdushnye sily</em>, Military Air Force</td>
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I am pleased to acknowledge those organizations and institutions whose generous financial assistance made possible the creation of this book. Fellowships from the U.S. Department of State’s Fulbright-Hays Program and the International Council for Research Exchange provided significant early research support. Subsequently, individual grants from the Kennan Institute for Advanced Russian Studies, the Robert W. Tomilson Foundation, the Art Institute of Chicago, and the Western Illinois University Foundation facilitated summer archival visits to Washington, D.C., and Moscow.

Above all, I am indebted to the American Council of Learned Societies for enabling me to set aside other responsibilities and focus my full attention on Russian aviation culture during 2001–2. By granting me the simple luxury of time to research, think, and write, a year-long fellowship from the ACLS proved invaluable to the completion of this study. In addition to facilitating access to the world’s largest collection of aviation-related materials, a Daniel and Florence Guggenheim Fellowship from the National Air and Space Museum in Washington, D.C., brought me into contact with many of America’s leading aviation historians. Tom Crouch, Michael Neufeld, Dominick Pisano, and Robert Van der Linden were gracious and expert guides during my tenure at the Museum. Von Hardesty, who introduced me to the study of Russian aviation during my first visit to the Air and Space Museum many years ago, has been an ever-generous source of indispensable and timely support from the start to the finish of this book.

Among the friends and colleagues who offered advice, assistance, and encouragement during my work on this project, I am particularly grateful to Roger Bilstein, Jonathan Daly, Alan Holiman, Jacob Kipp, Matt Lenoe, John McCannon, David McDonald, Vladimir Pozniakov, Carl Reddel, Kurt Schultz, Sergei Shenin, Dmitrii Sobolev, Helen Sullivan, Robert Tomilson, Andrew Verner, Frank Wcislo, Elena Zheltova, and John Zukowsky. Although their individual contributions may not be immediately obvious to them, I am indebted to them all. I greatly appreciate the candor and professionalism with which the two peer readers, David Stone and Anonymous, undertook their task. Their perceptive recommendations significantly strengthened the manuscript. At Cambridge University Press, Frank Smith has proven the very model of a conscientious and forthright editor. I thank as
Acknowledgments

well Larry Mortier and Larry Balsamo at WIU for their assistance with publication. Larry Dean and the staff at the Visual Production Center provided excellent and timely service in preparing the illustrative matter. Naturally, I bear responsibility for the content of this book.

On a more personal level, I am grateful for the help given me by my wife, Leesa, and my mother, Faye. In ways too numerous to count, their sacrifices and support sustained me, especially during difficult times. Without my two children, Athena and Alexander, this book would have been completed much sooner, but my life would be far poorer.

I also owe an extraordinary debt of thanks to my family in Moscow, the Dmitrievs. Vitya, Nina, Volodya, and especially Shurik played a much more important role in the creation of this book than they could possibly imagine.

Having long ago exhausted ways of expressing appreciation in words, I offer my heartfelt gratitude to M. in the form of a dedication.