

Information Division
Air Service

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Munitions Bldg.,
Washington, D.C.42350
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The purpose of this letter is to keep the personnel of the Air Service both in Washington and in the field informed as to the activities of the Air Service in general, and for release to the public press.

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AVIATION IN RUSSIA FROM 1917 to 1921.

Aviation in Russia has always been an unknown quantity, but seen from the serious side it has always been regarded as totally ineffective. Before the war both the Army and Navy wings of the Imperial Russian Flying Corps were made up of a nondescript collection of aircraft, principally French, but containing a few British and American machines, the latter being Curtiss flying boats of the Navy wing.

At the outbreak of war there were not more than from 100-150 effective machines of doubtful vintage in the whole of Russia, and it was not until 1916 that any effort was made in Russia to produce airplanes and aero engines.

The principal aircraft factories at that time were the Russo-Baltic Works in Petersburg, which built aircraft to the designs of Igor Sikorsky, and Lebediew, which produced biplanes fitted with Salmson engines. In Moscow the Dux Works built Nieuport and Spad biplanes. This firm had a branch in Odessa, where Anatra seaplanes and Anasal engines, the latter of Salmson type, were turned out under the supervision of a French engineer, M. Decaux. In addition, France supplied quantities of aircraft, mainly Spads, Great Britain Sopwiths, and U.S.A. Curtiss flying boats.

When the revolution broke out, aviation was just beginning to impress Army H.Q. as to its value, and the great hopes that were attached to the revolution generally were equally felt with respect to aviation.

The ideals of Bolshevism, which were apparently, "Everyone for himself", apart from the fact that Russia was still nominally at war, were not in keeping with industrial prosperity and development, with the result that popular interest palled and production fell off. At what was once the front the air service suffered a similar slump, as all would be pilots and none mechanics. As a result, work practically ceased and supplies sent to the front were stolen en route. The Dux factory alone kept open, but the nature of their work could hardly be recognized as of national importance.

During the Civil War the Aviation Section of the Northern Army at Archangel, under Capt. Kozakhoff, who was nominally under the British forces stationed there, was in a fairly good state of efficiency.

After the failure of this Army the volunteer army of General Wrangel possessed the strongest air service. This started with two machines left behind by the Bolsheviks at Rostov during the retreat, but it gradually expanded until at one time it consisted of six squadrons, - four volunteer squadrons and two Don squadrons, each consisting of three flights of six machines. Bombing was the principal duty with the various nondescript air services, as there were no recognized trench lines, but owing to the difficulty of telling friend from foe, and also the fact that either side was impartial as to the treatment of prisoners, the practice of flying over what was possibly enemy territory was not exactly "de rigueur".

The Allies supplied the South Russian air service with many machines, but owing to the majority of them being single-seater fighters, they were not of much use, as there were no opponents to fight. Of all the flying equipment supplied, only two squadrons of D.H.'s proved to be of any use. The main force of the volunteer air service was kept in the Crimea, and was commanded by Gen. Tkatchoff, who had been chief of the Imperial Air Service during the Great War.

Practically no offensive work was carried out by the Bolshevik aircraft, although it was known that considerable sums had been spent on it and that they held much equipment dating from pre-revolutionary days. The Bolshevik air force was commanded by a young pilot named Sergieff, whose principal qualification for the post appeared to be that he possessed all the vermilion qualities

3447

Oct 9-21-1923

of a keen Bolshevik, and all his underlings were young men with no previous experience in aviation, being apparently selected for their political leanings. A few former Imperial Russian air service officers were serving with the Soviet forces, but as their families were held as hostages for their faithfulness to the Red regime, confidence and cooperation between H.Q. and squadrons were not of the highest quality.

In spite of the tender care shown by the Soviet authorities, numbers of Bolsheviks surrendered to the White forces, with the result that all Red Squadrons were finally withdrawn in order to stop leakage of military secrets. To replace these squadrons it was decided to train Lithuanians and Chinese, but owing to the amount of "bois casse" caused by unsuitable pupils, the only aircraft factory, the Dux Works at Moscow, could not keep pace in the supply of spares and new machines.

The gentle art of "scrounging" appeared to be the principal qualification of a genuine Bolshevik, with the result that most of the petrol despatched to the front became the property of those into whose hands it fell.

Similarly Bolshevik naval aviation was hardly effective, although it possessed more enterprise than its military counterpart. This can possibly be accounted for by the fact that there existed in the Black Sea a fairly strong force of the R.A.F. operating in connection with the Royal Navy.

The Russian seaplane industry was always in a more flourishing condition than the airplane industry. The Russian firm of Shetetnin gradually became the chief contractor to the Russian Navy, and aircraft built by them to the designs of naval engineer Grigorovitch formed the main equipment during the latter part of the war. The principal models used were the M.5, a two-seater fitted with a Mono-Gnome engine, the Salmson engined three-seater-M. 9, and the M. 15 two-seater, fitted with a 150 h.p. Hispano Suiza. The fighting qualities of these aircraft were poor, but the machines were very stable and carried a large useful load.

Shortly before the outbreak of the revolution, the M. 23 was produced. This was a pursuit flying boat fitted with a Hispano-Suiza engine, and proved to be a success, but it could not be put into production because of the revolution.

The seaplane industry has now ceased to exist. The main stores, in Petersburg, were destroyed by explosion and much material was lost during the Bolshevik retreat from Petersburg to Yaroslav.

So long as the Red regime exists, Russia can never hope to reorganize its aircraft industry. Its total lack of skilled engineers, mechanics, and suitable materials is a cause in itself, and an illustration supplied by the workers of the Fiat firm in Italy shows how not to run a large industry on the Soviet system.

It only remains for them to obtain supplies from other countries, and assuming that they intend to build up an Air Force it would appear that, so long as Russians are learning to fly, firms favoured by their patronage may expect to be kept busy.

One professes to know nothing of what Bolshevik Russia intends to do in this respect, although for one to say that no firm in Great Britain would have anything to do with Russia in supplying Russians with means of a rapid exit from their earthly existence might make one confess to having told an untruth. Anyway, according to those who know, the Russian is temperamentally unfit to fly, and will never make a mechanic, so that so long as he is willing to and does pay for what he orders let us sell him aircraft. - The Aeroplane, (London).