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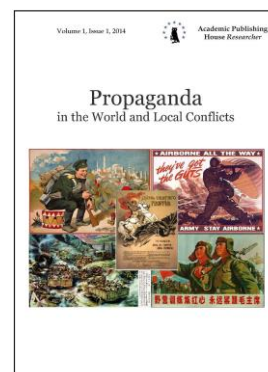
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Technical Means of Propagandists

The Flagship of the Soviet Political Agitation Squadron

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Abstract

This article describes the flagship of the special propaganda squadron, the ANT-20 “Maxim Gorky”, the largest civil plane in the world at that time. The article deals with the story of its construction, its main characteristics and describes the structure of this unique machine.

The documents of the Russian State Historical Archive, as well as Russian and foreign specialized historiography and reference literature were used as the materials for this research. In his analysis of sources and literature the author strives for scientific objectivity, the indispensable condition of which is the fundamental methodological principle of historicism, as well as in the conclusions that are the result of this research.

The author considers some versions of the tragedy that occurred on 18th of May, 1935.

Keywords: campaigning, special propaganda squadron, the gigantic aircraft “Maxim Gorky”, the crash of ANT-20, pilot N.P. Blagin.

1. Introduction

Political ideologies began to take shape during the New Age as a result of the crisis of religious doctrines and the formation of national states, becoming the framework of the Westphalian model of international relations. Over the past 300 years, political ideologies have met the interests of new social groups and national states that were taking shape.

Political ideology can be viewed as a system through a multitude of elements and interrelations that form a kind of integrity or a structure that is immersed in a certain external environment and has a specific purpose to exist. Each of the characteristics of a political system is a factor in its self-development and transformation. Political agitation and propaganda are used to impart ideological stability to the state. Agitation (Latin *agitatio*-putting into motion) is an oral, printed or visual political activity that influences the consciousness and mood of people in order to induce them to political or other actions.

Political agitation is carried out by spreading certain ideas and slogans through various means: through the press (newspapers, magazines, pamphlets, leaflets, appeals, etc.), oral

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presentations (reports, talks, reading newspapers, etc.), radio, television, cinema, theater, visual arts (posters, diagrams, cartoons, etc.), fictional and political literature. Its main goal is the dissemination of political ideas and slogans in order to influence the consciousness and moods of the broad masses. Direct communication with the public was the main form of political agitation before the development of electronic media. For this purpose each country created different structures. We would like to highlight the political agitation squadron, organized in the USSR in the 30s of the XX century.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. The documents of the Russian State Historical Archive, as well as Russian and foreign specialized historiography and reference literature were used as the materials for this research. In his analysis of sources and literature the author strives for scientific objectivity, the indispensable condition of which is the fundamental methodological principle of historicism, as well as in the conclusions that are the result of this research.

2.2. The methodological basis of this research is made by logical methods, definitions, descriptions, analysis and synthesis. A general scientific method of analysis has also been used. In addition, the historical-descriptive method was widely used in the methodology, as well as the method of historical and comparative analysis.

3. Discussion

The Special political Agitation Squadron was formed because of the huge size of the country and the poor development of the road network. Collection of funds for the formation of the political agitation squadron named after Maxim Gorky, (Alexei Maximovich Gorky (1868–1936), began in October 1932 on the initiative of the “Ogonyok” magazine. By the order of March 17, 1933, the formation of an agitation squadron was announced, and on May 5 (Day of Printing) in 1933 its regular work began. The squadron fleet consisted of airplanes (mostly U-2), auto-gyro TSAGI 2-EA and the V-3 “Krasnaya Zvezda” (“Red Star”) zeppelin. The squadron aircrafts carried agitators, newspapers and literature to remote settlements. However, it lacked something outstanding.

The idea of creating the giant “Maxim Gorky” aircraft belonged to the young, but already well-known journalist, a favorite of Stalin, Mikhail Koltsov (né Moisey Fridlyand; 1898–1940). In September 1932, the Soviet Union solemnly celebrated the 40th Anniversary of the literary activity of the great proletarian writer Maxim Gorky. As a present to the writer, Koltsov proposed to start fundraising for the construction of the world's largest aircraft, which would bear his name. It was to become the special squadron flagship for political agitation and propaganda of Bolshevik ideas (Rigmant, 1997: 22).

“The construction of a giant airplane-agitator should become the basis for updating and reconstructing the methods of all our agitational and mass political work, in applying the high technical level to which our country is now moving to... Soviet designers, technicians, inventors, political workers, writers - all must contribute to the creation of the giant aircraft not only materially, but also give their thoughts, ideas, experience and knowledge”, – Koltsov wrote in the “Ogonyok” magazine (Kol'tsov, 1932: 12). Back then, aviation was very popular in the USSR, and Maxim Gorky was loved by people, thus, in a year it was possible to raise six million rubles.

The team of Andrei Nikolayevich Tupolev (1888-1972) started the construction of the ANT-20 aircraft (a further update of the TB-4 six-engine bomber, which was huge but too slow for its military application) in 1931. However, at the end of 1932, with the decision to prioritize the creation of a special political agitation aircraft, the purpose of ANT-20 was changed. The technical requirements for this aircraft, approved in early 1933, provided for the possibility of using it as a passenger and transport aircraft, a heavy bomber and a flying HQ for the high military command. Like all the previous Tupolev types of planes, the “Maxim Gorky” was made of duralumin and had corrugated (wavy) plating (Andreev, 1972: 22).

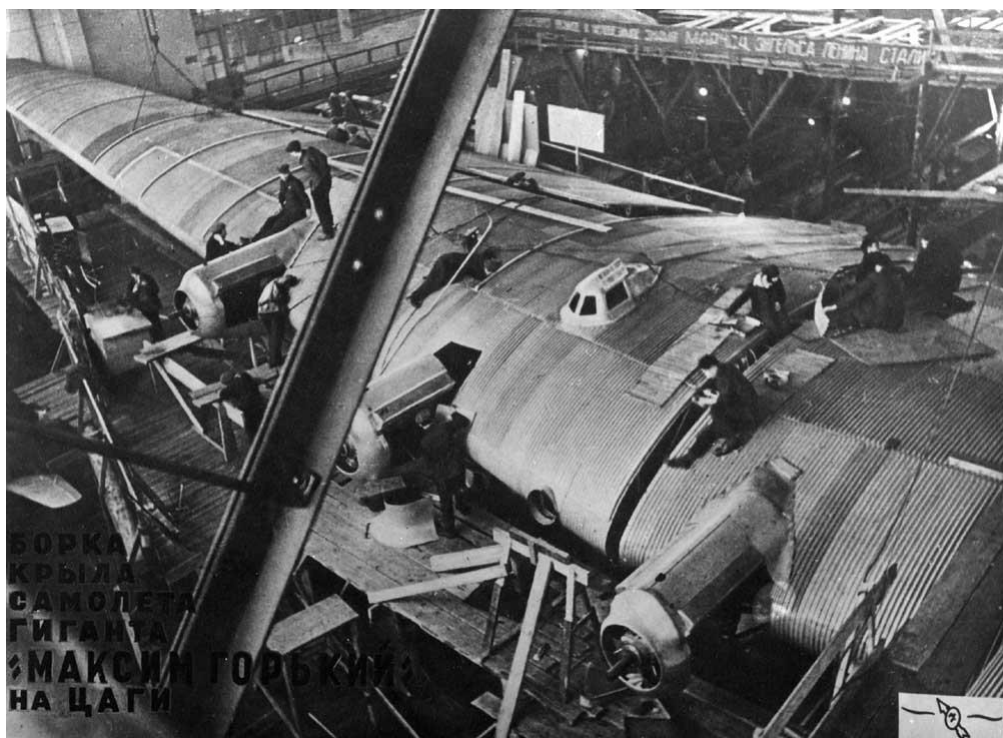


Fig. 1. Construction of the “Maxim Gorky”

It was necessary to place the equipment and means of agitation on the board of the aircraft: a printing unit, a photo lab, a cinema projector, a loud-speaker "Voice from the sky" and several radio stations. The aircraft was to be operated from relatively small airfields; its take-off distance should not exceed 400 m (TB-4 had an 800 m distance). This required designing a wing with a larger area and length. Accordingly, eight gear-motors M-34FRN should be used for the power engine with a total capacity of 7200 horsepower. Six engines were located in the toe of the wing and a couple of engines (the same as on TB-4) were placed in a tandem unit above the fuselage. The crew could approach the engines through the aisles in the wing in order to correct possible malfunctions during the flight. It was possible to continue horizontal flight without the function of any two engines. On-board compressor unit ensured the launch of all aircraft engines within three minutes (Kollektiv avtorov, 1994; 348).

According to its flight weight (42 000 kg), the “Maxim Gorky” airplane was the largest civil land plane in the world before the 1950s. It featured a payload of fourteen tons, wing span of 63 m and the diameter of the wheel was two meters. The full metal aircraft had a fuselage length of 32.5 m, a width of 3.5 and a height of 2.5 m. The maximum speed of the aircraft was 260 km / h. (Shavrov, 2002: 428-429).

The interior of the “Maxim Gorky” was magnificent! The area of its internal premises was 100 square meters: it could take up to 70 passengers. Carpets, spacious armchairs, curtains on the windows, tables with lamps were provided in the passenger compartments. There were also sleeping cabins (in the wings there were two-level beds), an electrified buffet with hot and cold snacks, a storage room, luggage space, washbasins and toilets. The airliner was equipped with a ladder, which, when folded, was a part of the floor. For the first time, the experts used an electric remote control system in a massive airplane. The navigation and aerobatic rigging of the ANT-20 ensured its use both during the day and night. It also could land on unprepared terrain and was equipped with an autopilot (Kollektiv avtorov, 1994: 349-350).

A variety of “political agitation tools” were placed on board of the “Maxim Gorky”, including a cinema projector for displaying propaganda films right at the airport (at first it was planned to project the image on the clouds during the flight, using them as a giant screen, but this venture

proved technically impossible). There was a powerful radio station called “Voice from the Sky”, a printing unit capable of printing up to 10,000 illustrated flyers, radio transmitters, a photo lab, a library, etc. The novelty aircraft was equipped with pneumatic mail system, which allowed the commander to exchange notes with the radio operator and journalists on board (Kollektiv avtorov, 1994: 352).

A special power station was installed on board to ensure the operation of this equipment. ANT-20 had a system of electric supply with alternating current of 120 V, 50 Hz. This innovation was used for the first time in national practice. The onboard power station consisted of two gasoline engines and four generators. Two generators (3 and 5.5 kW) conducted alternating current and two more generators (3 and 5.8 kW) provided constant voltage of 27 V. The plane could be disassembled and transported by the railway if necessary (Shavrov, 2002: 430).

4. Results

On April 1, 1934 the construction of the “Maxim Gorky” was completed at the TSAGI Experimental Construction Plant. Parts of the giant aircraft were transported to the Central Aerodrome named after M. V. Frunze, where it was assembled and tested. In mid-June 1934, the “Maxim Gorky” airplane took off for the first time, piloted by the TSAGI chief pilot Mikhail Mikhailovich Gromov (1899-1985). He said the following about the new aircraft: “It is an amazing plane; it is exceptional in its flight characteristics and aerodynamics. The machine has an impeccable steering. It is extremely convenient and simple to fly the world's largest aircraft” (Kotov, 2007: 28-29).

The plane was so reliable that on the third day of the flight tests, June 19, 1934, it took part in the parade organized in honor of the first Heroes of the Soviet Union (the returned “Chelyuskinites” and the pilots who rescued them). Thousands of leaflets were scattered over Moscow. Regular flights of a unique airplane began. Soon new world records of carrying capacity were set on it – ten and fifteen tons were raised to the height of 5000 m. By August 1934, the air giant became the flagship of M. Gorky's political agitation squadron (Kotov, 2007: 32).

Indeed, it was a flagship worthy more than just one squadron! Any largest aircraft of the world aviation could be envious of the size and weight of the “Maxim Gorky”. Shortly, the agitators turned out to have not only means for broadcasting and issuing volatile newspapers and leaflets, but also something not less effective - a modern aircraft built at a Soviet factory from Soviet materials. Needless to say that such a unique machine inspired the young Soviet industry. After the flight over Red Square, the world press immediately reacted to such a significant event, noting that the USSR became a strong world aviation power capable of building the most up-to-date aircraft, such as the giant “Maxim Gorky”, which was impossible without a good scientific base and talented designers (Matulevich, 1994: 39).

Meanwhile, the agitation squadron coped with routine work; the material part of the unique aircraft worked flawlessly for more than a year. May Day holiday of 1935, when the “Maxim Gorky” led the air parade of Soviet cruise vehicles over Red Square was a joyful day for the political agitation squad. The loudspeaker greeted thousands of Muscovites gathered for the holiday. On weekdays the “Maxim Gorky” made regular flights over Moscow and conducted “air baptism” of the foremost workers of Moscow enterprises (Rigmant, 1997: 68).

Unfortunately, the unexpected happened. In the middle of the day on May 18, 1935, the plane rose above Moscow, piloted by I. Mikheyev and I. Zhurov. The “Maxim Gorky” was escorted by light aircrafts I-5 and P-5, with a cameraman on board (Muromov, 2003: 71). The events of that day are described in the compilation of TSAGI and the Scientific and Memorial Museum of N.E. Zhukovsky “Aircraft construction in the USSR. 1917-1945”: “... accompanying the “Maxim Gorky” on the I-5 fighter plane, pilot N. P. Blagin began to perform aerobatic figures near the giant aircraft, which were not in the flight assignment. Trying to make a loop around the wing of the plane, he lost speed at the top point, and his uncontrolled aircraft fell on the wing of the “Maxim Gorky” (Kollektiv avtorov, 1994: 374–376).



Fig. 2. The "Maxim Gorky" at the parade on May 1, 1935

29 passengers, 11 crew members and pilot Nikolai Pavlovich Blagin (1896–1935) died in this accident. The absurd catastrophe claimed dozens of human lives and destroyed a unique airplane. As for the crash of the giant “Maxim Gorky” aircraft, many articles with various versions of the tragedy appeared in the media. For example, there was a theory that Blagin was envious of Valery Chkalov, and at his own risk decided to “twist” the “dead loop” around the wing of the “Maxim Gorky”. There was also frank informational sabotage - on September 12, 1935 the Russian emigrants' Polish media "Mech" claimed that Blagin deliberately rammed the giant airplane. The paper contained a letter, allegedly written by Blagin on the eve of the tragic event. Stylistically the letter was an anti-communist appeal to the citizens of Russia. Even a superficial analysis shows that the letter had obvious absurdities, showing that the letter is fake, and that it was made up only for a sensation (Muromov, 2003: 72-73).



Fig. 3. Catastrophe of ANT-20

The conjecture completely refutes the fact that Blagin was buried along with the others, and that the funeral of the victims was attended by I. V. Stalin. He stood in the guard of honor at the urns with the ashes in the Hall of Columns. The members of the highest party leadership in Moscow brought the urns in the hall. The widow and daughter of N. Blagin were assigned personal pensions and the daughter went to a prestigious university after school. Thus, proceeding from the hypothesis of a willful ram, there is no way to explain that the family of the "terrorist" was not arrested, and even received an increased pension. Secondly, the circumstances of the disaster indicate that it was more likely an accident than a deliberate act (Muromov, 2003: 76-77; Ivanov, 1997).

Only in 2010 it became known that the NKVD officers conducted an investigation determining that an hour and a half before the flight, military documentary film-makers V. G. Ryazhsky and A. A. Pullin met the pilots. They were not interested in the giant aircraft, but wanted a sensation. The sanction of the senior leadership of the Air Force allowed them to insist on changing the flight scenario. As a result, the pilots, without coordinating with the head of the flight and their superiors, were forced to agree. The documentary film-makers pursued the goal of filming of aerial tricks near the "Maxim Gorky" for an agitation campaign. Ryazhsky and Pullin were arrested after the tragedy (Muromov, 2003: 77).

5. Conclusion

There are only a few constructed in one copy and maintained for only a year aircrafts which took an honorable place in the history of aviation without setting any official records and without performing any heroic combat raids. The "Maxim Gorky" (ANT-20) was one of them. It took off on its first flight on 17th of June, 1934, and on its last one - on 18th of May, 1935.

The idea justified itself, despite the tragedy of the flagship. Several hundred agitation flights were carried out, 3.2 thousand meetings were held, 5 thousand various reports and lectures were held during the five years of the existence of the squadron. The squadron flew 55 million kilometers, covered more than 10 million people with various events. Every arrival of the aircraft (especially to remote areas) was used to show it to people, to take as many passengers as possible, and most importantly – to make the people feel that the air fleet was the success of the Soviets, obtained by sweat and blood (Kotel'nikov, 2004: 22).

The agitation squadron was formed not only for the purpose of agitation, but also for reasons of industrial necessity. It was necessary to deliver urgently the newspaper matrices to the cities where the central newspapers began to be printed, first and foremost, "Pravda" newspaper. For the first time, newspaper strip matrices began to be transported by airplanes. First they were taken to Leningrad and then to other major centers of the country. By the way, the most intelligent and quick correspondents began to use passing aircrafts with matrices to fulfill urgent assignments of the editorial staff (Kotov, 2007: 24).

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