

From Farmboy to First Man: The Global Construction of Yuri Gagarin as a Soviet Anti-Imperialist Icon

Who do you think Russians are proud of the most? Survey conducted by the leading Russian research institute “The National Institute for Opinion Surveys and Marketing” (INSOMAR) reveals the answer to this question. Surprisingly, the great Russian poet, national literary demigod, Alexander Pushkin has lost to the first human to travel into space — Yuri Gagarin. The young cosmonaut who needs no introduction, with 31% of the vote, is not just the first man in history to travel into the cosmos, but a myth in a space suit, a living proof that anyone could reach the stars — both literally and figuratively. Gagarin and, more importantly, the Soviet Union he represented brought once-unreachable dream to life. His image was constructed at a pivotal moment. Certainly, Yuri Gagarin’s flight into outer space launched the new era of space exploration, galvanizing new generations of scientists, engineers, and explorers. Implications of the spaceflight were not limited to science which had long been closely intertwined with politics. Discussion of the Soviet space program outside the Cold War framework is impossible given how the former grew out of the latter. The U.S.–USSR space race was never just about space. Gagarin's unprecedented flight was a triumph of the Soviet space exploration program — and withal of the Soviet alternative to the US-led capitalist system.

I argue that Gagarin’s image implies a deliberate strategy behind its construction. It was constructed in a way that ensured fulfillment of dual political functions. Within the Soviet Union, he became an embodiment of the ideal Soviet citizen - modest, diligent, and loyal to the socialist cause; Internationally his image aligned with anti-imperialist narratives and promotion of socialism as a superior and modernizing force.

This paper attempts to analyze cultural, intellectual, and political forces involved in the construction of Yuri Gagarin's image, and the use made of this image to construct political narratives during the Cold War — including the narratives stated for export to the emerging post-colonial states. I begin by exploring the origins of early Soviet intellectual and cultural interest in cosmic themes, rooted in Russian cosmism and revolutionary utopianism; following that, I examine how these themes survived the Stalinist era and both shaped and served the context of the Cold War's ideological competition ; then, I tackle the core topic of this paper — construction of Yuri Gagarin's image and adaptation for both domestic and international arena; finally, I analyze how the image was used to promote the Soviet Union's Socialist cause in Cold War dynamics and buttress Khrushchev's legitimacy.

Pre-Gagarin Cosmic Fascination in Russia

“Earth is the cradle of mankind, but one cannot remain in the cradle forever”

Konstantin Tsiolkovsky (1911–1912, as cited in Siddiqi, 2000).

The origins of Russian Intellectuals' interest in cosmic themes can be traced back to the late 19th century philosopher and religious thinker Nikolai Fedorov (1829–1903) who pioneered the movement of Russian cosmism. Perhaps, surprisingly, Russian cosmism was deeply rooted in Orthodox religious hopes and radical philosophical ideas, transforming the space into the arena for humanity's salvation and giving birth to cosmic utopianism, which was driven by the desire

to establish victory over death, humanize the cosmos, and create a heaven on Earth and beyond it using technology.

This sentiment is manifested in Fedorov's most influential work *The Philosophy of Common Task*, according to which humankind's filial duty is to resurrect all humans who had ever lived by creating the "technological, social, and political conditions" (Groys, 2018, p.4). Fedorov had a cosmic vision of redemption integrating science, religion, and ethics. Humanity's creative purpose, according to him, consisted in "redressing" the destruction wrought by nature's law of death by uniting "all sciences within astronomy" (Fedorov, 2018, p.55). Fedorov also asserted that merge of biology and astronomy was a natural outcome that would result in the rejuvenation of Earth, up to now a cemetery of all past life, and extension of life beyond its terrestrial limits. Colonizing the cosmos to settle it with resurrected ancestors, humanity would fulfill its religious duty of conquering death and achieving brotherhood across time and space.

Boris Groys interprets Fedorov's project as a materialization of Hegelian philosophy, according to which history's ultimate goal is to reconcile past and future through "the spiritual reconstruction of all its [history's] past epochs" (Groys, 2018, p. 4). Fedorov, in contrast, believed that this spiritual synthesis remains limited due to its 'abstract' nature, relying solely on memory and imagination, rather than material realization — resurrection of the dead — which would bring about true synthesis in Fedorovian vision.

The remaining question, then, is how the material resurrection of the dead necessitates humanity's expansion into outer space. Where does the cosmos come in? The answer to this lingering question is simple as it may sound. Apparently, realization of humanity's ultimate goal

of overcoming death and resurrecting our ancestors could be problematic given the carrying capacity for human life on our planet, making colonization of other planets, or “the patrifaction of the heavens” as Fedorov called it, a *sine qua non* for the success of his project. Fedorov further insisted that the patrifaction of the heavens was not only contingent on technological innovation but also radical social organization — that is, collective action. Fedorov advocated for directing all our efforts to the fulfillment of humanity’s ultimate goal — overcoming death. He did not support Marxist economics per se, but his ideas radiate socialist sentiments as “the common task” implied transformation of society from capitalist-individualist chaos into a collective resurrection machine, unified by a global goal shared by all humanity. That is very socialist in spirit.

This secularization of Christian eschatology made Boris Groys compare Fedorov to Marx who, though a child of Enlightenment, “did not want to reject the Christian promise of happiness and harmony” but to fulfill it through the construction of communist society (2018, p.5) .

Fedorov sought salvation in the shift from theology to technology just as Marx shifts religious promise of harmony from divine grace to secular technology. Fedorov’s religious-philosophical ideas opened the door to a world where technology replaces theology.

His cosmic and religious radicalism intrigued Russia’s greatest minds such as Fyodor Dostoevsky, Leo Tolstoy, and Vladimir Solovyov. Among them was a cosmist philosopher and a self-taught scientist, who is often referred to as the “grandfather of Soviet rocket science,” Konstantin Tsiolkovsky (1857–1935). In his numerous essays and futuristic stories, he echoes Fedorov, envisioning defeat of death, poverty, and suffering through social organization and science on a cosmic scale. Tsiolkovsky was an advocate of cosmic biopolitics dedicated to

realizing Fedorov's patrification of heavens, making space exploration not only a scientific pursuit but a sacred one. He pioneered the spaceflight by calculating the rocket equation for achieving escape velocity as early as in 1903. One of his core ideas was that space colonization would pave the way for the perfection of humanity and resolve the problem of scarcity once for all. According to Tsiolkovsky, there is a chance that at least "million billion habitable planets" exist, which is hundreds of thousands of worlds per person if divided equally (Tsiolkovsky, 1911-1912, as cited in Groys, 2018, p.113). This calculation is on the verge of being whimsical, yet it stresses an important point: cosmic abundance would sustain the life of immortal human beings, eliminating earthly inequality. No one would have to compete and suffer, then, once solar energy is harnessed as "people's wealth would increase billions of times"(Tsiolkovsky, 1911-1912, as cited in Groys, 2018, p.114). Having abolished suffering, humanity can spread its influence by settling other planets with advanced life and "eliminate [the] hard road" of revolutionary struggle for other worlds and "replace it with an easy road that excludes suffering" (Tsiolkovsky, 1911-1912, as cited in Groys, 2018, p.145). Tsiolkovsky's humanistic cosmic philosophy laid the groundwork for the later Soviet space program and its rhetoric of conquering the cosmos for the good of humankind.

Valerian Muravyev (1885 -1932) was another Russian intellectual who believed in the mastery of space. In a 1923 paper, he imagined a future when a "great worldwide labor army" would turn its "courage and craft" not to war, but to defeating "death, time, poverty, and disease," transforming the entire world in the process (Muravyev,1923, as cited in Groys, 2018, p. 111). This would require "transforming outer space" and establishing a "cosmocracy," making it possible for humans to live "throughout the world, in all environments," by "vitalizing all nature" and converting the chaotic cosmos into a "world...fully subordinate" to human reason

(Muravyev, 1923, as cited in Groys, 2018, p. 111). Such language reveals Muravyev's fusion of scientific ambition with utopian and egalitarian zeal.

Fedorov's philosophical tracts, though influential among Russian intellectuals, did not attract wide readership among the general populace. Interest in cosmic themes emerged, however, but it was not for Fedorov's or Tsiolkovsky's contributions. As James T. Andrews & Asif A. Siddiqi (2011) note, "the imported science fiction of such Western icons as Jules Verne and H. G. Wells" introduced Russian readers to cosmic themes (p.4). Following the Bolshevik revolution, he observes, "this interest exploded," yet he does not risk attributing this explosion entirely to the Revolution, leaving a metacommentary "although not necessary because of it" (Andrews & Siddiqi, 2011, p.4).

Cosmic idealism, once confined to obscure philosophical tracts and whimsical calculations, found its way to the masses. Popular fascination with the cosmos is evident from the proliferation of poems, paintings, films, and novels in Soviet culture, making Russian cosmism a broad cultural phenomenon. One of the prominent literary works that contributed to cosmic utopian thought is Alexander Bogdanov's *Red Star* (1908), science-fiction novel written in the midst of Russia's revolutionary ferment. It is important to note that Bogdanov himself was a Bolshevik revolutionary, scientist, and philosopher familiar with Fedorov's theories. *Red Star*, which, according to Julia Wintner, derives from Fedorov's ideas, is Bogdanov's attempt to reenergize discouraged revolutionaries after the failed Revolution of 1905 (2022). He penned the tale of the Russian revolutionary Leonid's journey to Mars where Martians live by the motto of production according to ability and free consumption according to need. Doing so, Bogdanov offers to the readers a prophetic vision of what socialist future might look like by depicting a

classless, technologically advanced world that has achieved communism with the conquest of biology and space. Bogdanov's advocacy for blood transfusion as a means of longevity is reflected in *Red Star* which discusses how Martians transfuse blood for well-being. Later Bogdanov sought to bring to life his chimeric dream and founded the Soviet Institute for Blood Transfusion in 1926. He died during one of his transfusion experiments, and his dreams of rejuvenating bodies and potentially extending life remained a work of fiction.

Red Star unfolds through a series of dialogues between Martians and the protagonist Leonid — not an arbitrary but a deliberate literary strategy where dialogues serve as a didactic tool. Wise Martian communists educate the readers through Leonid about the benefits of their social system, criticizing Earthly fragmentation which is evident from the following excerpt: “the common cause of mankind is not yet really a common cause among you. It has become so splintered in the illusions generated by the struggle among men that it seems to belong to individual persons rather than to mankind as a whole” (Bogdanov, 1908). Mars, unlike the Earth, precluded racial and national divisions to form one martian humanity, united by a common purpose of overcoming feudal and capitalist phases and advancing science through social cooperation not profit-driven competition. This highlights the importance of collective endeavour to humanity's progress and anticipates how Soviet ideology would frame space exploration — the fruit of socialist science and industry and a proof that a planned, collective society could outperform capitalism and individualism.

When discussing the origins of interest in cosmic themes, it is important to observe how closely the later narrative around Gagarin aligns with the earlier cosmists' utopian ideals. Radical religious-philosophical mysticism became more scientific with Tsiolkovsky, while Bogdanov,

being a Bolshevik revolutionary, injected Marxist revolutionary fervor into cosmic utopianism. Doing so, he helped forge the ideological foundations that made Gagarin an embodiment of a long-held utopian dream.

Vigorously imaginative cosmism of the post-revolutionary years transformed under Lenin and Stalin into concrete science and industry. This is not to say that space exploration was prioritized as a practical objective immediately after the Bolshevik Revolution, but to emphasize that cosmic fascination endured; though, the pressure of ideological conformity stripped of overt religious overtones, talk of immortality and mystical cosmism. Instead, the interest in cosmic themes lived on as a part of the larger revolutionary ethos. One of the projects initiated by Lenin is the launch of *Gosudarstvennaya komissiya po elektrifikatsii Rossii* (GOELRO) translated as "State Commission for Electrification of Russia." Under this ambitious electrification plan USSR's industrial base grew while scientific institutes proliferated. One of the core ideas of electrification was conquering nature - gaining mastery over all environments through science and technology. This electrification, industrialization, and command over natural resources became integral to building socialism, declaring the GOELRO Plan, as Lenin stated, "the basis of the new world" since "Communism is Soviet power plus the electrification of the whole country" (Lenin, 2020). Conceptually, space is simply more nature to be conquered. Granted, this idea is not explicit in Lenin's early 1920s writings, but, with the advancement of technologies, total mastery over all environments through science and technology can be logically extended beyond Earth - to total mastery of space (Siddiqi, 2003). The cosmist influence of figures such as Fedorov and Tsiolkovsky circulating among Soviet scientists had already established a strong cultural association that the conquest of nature meant moving beyond Earth and framing space as a future site of socialist conquest (Siddiqi, 2010, p.6). Siddiqi notes that despite the absence of

technologies that would make spaceflight feasible, early Soviet journals and scientists talked about cosmic travel as the logical extension of domestication of Earth (2010, p.6). Futurist cosmic sentiments can later be found in popular science writing that linked Marxist -Lenin mastery of nature to future mastery of the universe.

Under Stalin, these dreams persisted but Stalinist doctrine demanded more pragmatic approaches, subordinating them to the immediate needs of industrialization and military might. Under Five-Year Plans (1928-1939) massive industrial infrastructure was built and technical education was funded on an unprecedented scale. Notwithstanding the efforts to disassociate Khrushchev's leadership from Stalinist regime, the Soviet space program was indebted to industrialization under Stalin's rule. The material foundation in the form of massive investments in metallurgy, aeronautics, and military rocketry during Stalin's era made the launch of satellites and human flight into cosmos possible. This made Siddiqi locate the Soviet space program in terms of a paradoxical paradigm: "while terror decimated the nascent rocket community, mass industrialization during Stalinism ironically laid the infrastructural foundation for spaceflight" (2010, p. 5). Indeed, in its entirety, the Soviet space program embodied a profound paradox: it was materially enabled by Stalinist industrialization, yet ideologically distanced from Stalin himself, cloaking continuity in rupture. Realized through technological and industrial foundations under Stalin, the Space program was reframed under Khrushchev to a triumph of peaceful socialism. The space program, therefore, reflected both discontinuities and continuities - disassociated from the regime that enabled its realization, program lived on as part of the broader revolutionary ethos initiated in 1917. Domestically, this bright young hero was a marker of the catharsis after Stalin's death. Jenks contrasts Gagarin as a "man with a love for life" and "seemingly boundless optimism," a breath of fresh air after the recent grim past (2012). The cult

of Gagarin, therefore, bridged the gap between the fathers of the Party and the sons of the new generation, united by the common cause of building communism.

By the 1930s, aviation had turned into a national obsession with the emergence of the world-class wind tunnels and aero-technology institutes. General populace gazed with awe at pilots like Valery Chkalov and Mikhail Gromov who were glorified as national heroes during huge public events staged by the government. Slava Gerovitch argues that Soviet space celebrations deliberately echoed these public events devoted to aviation culture of the 1930s: the old “Aviation March” that had been “very popular in the 1930s , as part of the Stalin-era ‘aviation culture’ ” was played by a military band when Gagarin landed in Moscow (2015, p.87). Gerovitch draws attention to “the public ceremony of Gagarin’s welcome [which] evoked the mass celebrations of Soviet aviators’ feats in the 1930s,” picturing Gagarin as an heir to the Stalin era aviators (2015, p.87). This brings us closer to a foreseeable yet important conclusion: the psychological groundwork for cosmonautics had been already seamlessly laid by the cultural cult of aviation. In other words, by the time the Soviet state sent the first human to travel into space, technological mastery had already been associated with national pride. National heroes of 1930s aviation served as a template for celebrating cosmonauts. This cultural continuity - mass enthusiasm that had been building for decades - demonstrates that cosmic fascination was not invented *ex nihilo*.

Cold War and Space as its Arena

“Yuri Gagarin: the spaceman who came in from the cold”

After Stalin's death, ideological and political recalibration was a necessary measure to distance the post-Stalin leadership from the brutal excesses of Stalin's rule, such as purges, mass terror, and Russian-Soviet chauvinism. Geoffrey Hosking notes that Stalin had "bequeathed his successors, and the Soviet peoples, a paradoxical and in most respects baleful legacy" (2006, p.268). Raised to the status of superpower under Stalin, the Soviet Union became mightier than any Russian state had ever been before. However, Stalin also "committed the country to huge expenditures and a massive leeching of talent and resources into the military field, leaving most of society poverty-stricken and demoralized" (Hosking, 2006, p.268). The Soviet Union, isolated from both the outside world and much of its own past, became a security state "enclosed in a cocoon of narrow-minded ideological dogma" (Hosking, 2006, p.268).

Atrocities that Stalin inflicted posed a terrible dilemma for his successors, as Hosking observes (2006). Silencing his appalling crimes against Soviets meant leaving a "perfect weapon for a future political opponent to use" (Hosking, 2006, p.268). Disclosing them and denouncing Stalin, on the other hand, would "dethrone the great wartime hero" and "besmirch the shared social memory" that had been constructed during the war (Hosking, 2006, p.268). Nikita Khrushchev, who rose to power in 1953 following Stalin's death, resorted to the second option. At the 20th Party Congress of February 25, 1956, during a special closed session held after the public sessions, he gave a "Secret Speech" which is popularly known as *On the cult of personality and its consequences*. As the name it acquired hints, Khrushchev blames the cult of personality "which is so alien to the spirit of Marxism-Leninism" for generating "the many negative phenomena" (Khrushchev, 1956).

Acutely aware of the credibility crisis both within the state and in the international arena, Khrushchev had to replace the legacy of Stalin's "millennial terror" and Russian-Soviet chauvinism with a principle of order and legitimacy (1956). Hosking argues that "strategy was to intimate that the basic goal remained the same: the building of Communism, combined with 'catching up and overtaking' the United States" (2006, p.273). This is evident from Khrushchev's speech that stresses the party's "resolute will to accomplish the great task of building communism" (Khrushchev, 1956). This all resulted in redefining Soviet identity and legitimacy by positioning the Soviet Union as a progressive force. A number of new reforms were implemented following Stalin's death to the Agitprop apparatus. Reinvigorating propaganda operations was an indispensable measure during de-Stalinization.

Space exploration during the Cold War became a perfect arena where this new narrative could unfold. Hosking notes that initially space exploration, specifically rocketry, began with the goal of achieving military parity through the development of long-range missiles capable of delivering destructive weapons — atomic ones, for example (2006). Space exploration that once emerged from scientific curiosity or military dominance became a symbol of technological and ideological superiority. Popular fascination with cosmic themes was harnessed by the Soviet state for propaganda. Soviet breakthroughs in space science were glorified and, more importantly, politicized as it can be seen from the narrative construed by state and popular media. Pravda's issue from 9th of October, 1957, five days following the world's first satellite Sputnik's launch, starts with the headline "*Великая Победа в Мирном Соревновании с Капитализмом*" or "*A Great Victory in the Global Competition with Capitalism*". This is how the space program became "the most persuasive element of Khrushchev's relaunch of utopia" (Hosking, 2006, p.286).

The Soviets' primacy in the conquest of space was Soviet success as well as American failure. Soviet media, specifically *Pravda*, repeatedly stressed this narrative in its publications. One of *Pravda's* journalists, Nikolai Gribachev, made a joke out of it with the headline that reads "Let us Catch with the Soviet Union." In this way, technological advancements of the Soviets were perceived not only as a proof of their superiority but also a stagnation or failure of the American space program. Jamie Doran cites the Head of the Space Policy Institute in Washington, DC, Dr. John Logsdon, to demonstrate the turmoil Gagarin's flight gave rise to in the US, where people wondered "how did we get beaten by this supposedly backward country?" (1998, p.266).

Gherman Titov once said that Gagarin's wife found it difficult "to get used to the fact that he didn't really belong to her any more" (Doran, 2011, p.331). In fact, Gagarin did not belong to himself anymore, as "Gagarin belonged to Khrushchev" (Doran, 2011, p.336). It is interesting why Doran points out that Gagarin belonged to Khrushchev — not even to the State. The fact that Doran emphasized Khrushchev's 'possession' provokes one to explore the construction of Gagarin's image as a way to buttress Khrushchev's administration. Indeed, the study of Gagarin's image offers an insight into how Khrushchev's administrations used propaganda — specifically, Gagarin's image — to buttress his legitimacy.

"By deconstructing what Gagarin's image was made to represent, we can ascertain a great deal about the political imperatives and ideological currents at work within the Soviet system of Gagarin's time" (Rockwell, 2003, p.3). The problem with many works that study Gagarin's image and symbolical value is that they are overly concerned with the truth behind its construction. That is not to say that questions regarding the verisimilitude of his biography and

character attributed to him are ungrounded. His “various biographies revealed too much of the conspicuous hand of the state propaganda apparatus to be accepted as reliable accounts of the man’s life and character” (Rockwell, 2003, p.3). Indeed, one can find many inconsistencies reading about Gagarin and his biography — in fact, one can find many inconsistencies reading about the Soviet space exploration program.

Granted, disclosing the truth behind Gagarin’s story we can indulge our curiosity, yet we tend to forget that the matter of no less importance is why his image was constructed in a way it was constructed. The answers to the questions regarding his amiable character, integrity, infidelity, and death might be inconclusive which provokes exploring subjects as not whether he always smiled, but why he was portrayed as always smiling.

Image

*“ И совершит этот подвиг скромный советский человек
в форме старшего лейтенанта Гагарин Юрий Александрович ”*

At 9:06 AM Moscow time on 12 April, 1961, Yuri Alexeyevich Gagarin was launched aboard the spaceship Vostok, becoming the first man to enter outer space. In a country where symbolism runs deep, the one who took that first step into the cosmos will always shine a little brighter — that is what made Gagarin a myth in a space suit whose level of veneration surpassed that of Pushkin.

Almost immediately after his triumph, *Pravda* - that is, Soviet propaganda machinery - began crafting Gagarin's official biography - and the word biography is no mere chronicle of events. *Pravda*'s version was a deliberately edited tale of an ideal Soviet citizen who embodied the virtues that the Party sought to promote: humility, diligence, loyalty to the state, and proletarian origins. As *Pravda* later summarized in 1968:

“Our space epic has convincingly revealed to the world the upbringing of a new person—spiritually beautiful, courageous, devoted to communist ideals, and having a high sense of internationalism.”

—*Pravda*, November 4, 1968, describing
the profession of the cosmonaut

Indeed, the myth concocted by the propaganda centered around Gagarin's humble origins. Born into a family of peasants, he was referred to as a 'Farmboy' by historians such as Doran and Bizony (1998) — and quotation marks in this sentence are used not for the purpose of citation. Soviet propaganda incessantly stressed his background — an ordinary citizen who came from humble peasant roots and rose to extraordinary heights. Trevor Rockwell cites Gagarin's speeches for the press where he repeatedly claimed to be “an ordinary Soviet person” with “no princes in my [his] genealogy,” stressing proudly that his parents had been poor before the Revolution. Gagarin's biography was molded to reflect “the basic facets of the propaganda plan,” praising enthusiastically “the virtues of Leninist ideals, scientific atheism, and the ‘science’ of Marxism-Leninism” (Rockwell, 2005, p.5).

Siddiqi brings attention to “Communist Party's unwritten criterion that the first Soviet person be from a completely Russian and working-class background” (2010, p.262). Although there is no documented evidence to corroborate his observation, Siddiqi's argument sounds plausible. NASA reported that on May 30, 1960 Yuri Gagarin, Anatoly Kartashov, Andrian

Nikolayev, Pavel Popovich, Gherman Titov, and Valentin Varlamov — Vanguard six — were chosen from 20 cosmonauts, 17 of whom were Russians, 2 Ukrainians, and 1 Tatar. It is not surprising that ethnic Russian was chosen for the mission of sending the first human into space.

Gagarin was portrayed by the media as modest, cheerful, and diligent — the model Soviet citizen. Golovanov in his famous work *Our Gagarin* cites Gagarin's school principal's testament, "Was he special? No. Just hard-working, lively, and charming" (p.42). Only through Soviet propagandists' meticulous efforts are we presented with Gagarin's paradoxical image of a hero, a superhuman who was yet not too exceptional to stand out from the collective society. That is, Gagarin's very normality had to be celebrated in order not to elevate an individual hero and disrupt the narrative of collectivist ideology. Therefore, credit for his success went for "collective efforts of a large team" encompassing the entire Soviet Union (Rockwell, 2005, p.43).

The narrative around Gagarin, including his biography and personal positive attributes, revolves around the qualities expected of all Soviet people under communism. But the most repeated trait attributed to Gagarin was that he was a Soviet citizen — a Son of socialism, reassuring people that the Soviet Socialist Republic could — more than any capitalist rival — elevate one from humble origins to greatness. Fixation on Gagarin's proletarian lineage and peasant origins serve as a proof of the supremacy of socialism which enables any loyal, hard-working citizen — even a Farmboy — to loft high.

Surprisingly, the inscription CCCP (USSR) on Gagarin's helmet was reportedly added hastily right before the launch of Vostok, emphasizing the importance of visual symbols in the construction of his image. During his pre-flight training, as shown in Figure 1, Gagarin was seen

wearing a plain white helmet with no inscriptions (Abramov & Skoog, 2003, p. 198). However, on launch day, the same helmet features the bold red letters “CCPP” as depicted in Figure 2. Interestingly, in Figure 3 which depicts the image taken during centrifuge training the helmet once again bears the red lettering. This made some observers speculate that later images of Gagarin’s preparation for flight must have been staged after the mission to reinforce the cosmonaut’s visual association with the Soviet state. Estonian art critic Anneli Porri explores the image of cosmonauts within the context of iconology and myth construction — an apt framework considering how Gagarin became the myth in spacesuit. She argues that mythology does not necessitate exact portrayal of detailed individual features. Individual, in her opinion, is identified primarily by his characteristic attribute. One of the most important attributes of cosmonauts is a space suit, particularly a helmet. Porri parallels the iconography of cosmonauts to that of knights whose suit of armor is “the space suit’s most likely semiotic predecessor” (2011, p. 267). This resemblance made Porri compare cosmonauts to knights who “gave vows to enhance their honour and fame,” and carried a symbol such as an emblem, ribbon, or tokens as a reminder for themselves and signal to others of this promise (2011, p.267). Porri equates the letters CCCP (USSR) prominently painted on the helmet to these symbols, arguing that the universally understood letters CCCP were an external sign of internal duty: a vow to serve the Soviet Union. Trivial to an uncritical eye, visual symbols such as the inscription CCCP transformed functional pieces of equipment such as helmets into an emblem of national pride and ideological commitment.



Figure 1

Helmet used during Gagarin's pre-flight training without inscriptions [Photograph].

Adapted from *Russian Spacesuits* (p. 198), by I. A. Abramov & A. I. Skoog, 2003, Springer-Praxis. Copyright 2003 by Springer-Praxis.



Figure 2

Helmet used during Gagarin's training with added "СССР" inscription [Photograph].

Adapted from *Russian Spacesuits* (p. 198), by I. A. Abramov & A. I. Skoog, 2003,
Springer-Praxis. Copyright 2003 by Springer-Praxis.



Figure 3

Helmet with "CCCP" inscription during centrifuge training [Photograph].

Adapted from *Russian Spacesuits* (p. 198), by I. A. Abramov & A. I. Skoog, 2003,
Springer-Praxis. Copyright 2003 by Springer-Praxis.

Kamanin, in his diary, divulges his belief that Gherman Titov was stronger, and Hosking drives us into a dead end, arguing that Titov also was “more educated and urbane figure” (2006, p.288). The fact that Titov was stronger alone should have been sufficient to posit him as a more eligible candidate. On December 4 1961, Kamanin divulged his another belief that it is serendipity, a sheer luck that Gagarin was chosen. Any other cosmonaut could have been in his

place. Doran and Bizony's observation might account for the preference of Gagarin over Titov: Gagarin's very ordinariness was the whole point of his selection for the mission (1998). Unfit for the desired image of a hero from the laboring masses, the more educated and urbane Titov, in this regard, lost to Gagarin.

The smile and the Cult of the Son

“Yuri Gagarin belied the West's austere impression of the Soviet Union – a charming, easygoing Russian with a ready smile. The first man in space became a powerful propaganda tool. It was the smile that clinched it.” (Dowling, 2021)

One might find it paradoxical that Khrushchev, who blamed the cult of personality for the atrocities Stalin inflicted, furthered the very same cult he condemned in his speech, cultivating the cult of Gagarin. Rockwell, however, views this development not as a continuation of the cult of Stalin – unlike the latter, the cult of Gagarin is not political but social, meaning that “the creation of a hero figure outside of politics [for Khrushchev] may have seemed both advantageous and acceptable” (2005, p.5). Jenkins points out that “Soviets felt genuine affection for Gagarin,” contrasting him to the severe father figure of an earlier era – Stalin. If Stalin had been the terrifying father figure, Gagarin was cast as the beloved son of the Soviet Union. Jenkins, therefore, names this development the cult of the son as opposed to the cult of the father. This might seem as not an apt wording to describe the cult veneration of Gagarin generated if to mistakenly assume that the word “son” implies Gagarin's affinity to Stalin. Instead, youthful, joyful, and radiating hope, Gagarin became a son of the nation – a figure in crisis people aspired to.

This was particularly important at this pivotal moment of history of the Soviet Union whose former public ideal was experiencing a grave crisis and the nation needed someone to aspire to – to replace him. While Gagarin’s image was seemingly apolitical, the state harnessed it for its political ends. Gagarin became a literal embodiment of the Soviet space triumph and Khrushchev’s trump card. Popular enthusiasm that Gagarin inspired was leveraged for the promotion of Khrushchev’s policy agenda and legitimizing the new regime in the wake of de-Stalinization. Gagarin attended major events, spoke to the youth groups, and even served as a deputy to the Soviet of the Union. Gagarin propaganda conformed to Party directives, so Gagarin exemplified the correct path of the Soviet citizen. The message that Khrushchev was attempting to communicate was clear: Thank the Party – and its First Secretary – for producing the nation’s beloved son.

Khrushchev saw the potential that propaganda of Gagarin’s image could bring. Gagarin became the face of Khrushchev’s “peaceful coexistence,” unofficial spokesman for it. His affable persona of the young man who gave a face to peace by cradling a dove lent was used to justify Soviet claims that space exploration was a peaceful mission for all mankind. This grin, benign at the first glance, image is a carefully curated piece of visual propaganda that not only aligns but complements Khrushchev’s doctrine of peaceful coexistence. Rockwell uses one of Gagarin’s images depicting him holding a white dove as an evidence to corroborate the argument that Gagarin literally became the face of this doctrine (see figure 4). Reprinted endlessly in 1961, the snapshot became emblematic of peace: white dove that the cosmonaut is gently holding is a universal symbol of peace. This narrative is further perpetuated by Pravda which names the cartoon portraying Gagarin beaming with childlike delight merged with the body of a dove “Gagarin the peacemaker.”



Figure 4

Pilot-cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin holding a dove presented to him by Bulgarian Young Pioneers [Photograph].

From P. Barashev, 1961, Sputnik Media Bank

(<https://sputnikmediabank.com/media/15294.html>). Copyright 1961 by Sputnik Media Bank.

Defining feature of Gagarin's iconography was his "million-ruble smile" (Jenks, 2012). Porri explores the image of cosmonauts within the framework of iconology, contrasting it with other press photos in newspapers which "usually depict serious people busy with work ... or something else important ... as it was deemed suitable for a Soviet person" (2011, p.267). Photogenic smile, on the other hand, is what cosmonauts are recognized for. Porri argues that "this stereotype owes much to the personal qualities of the pioneering space pilot Iurii [Yurii] Gagarin" who became the epitome of the character of cosmonaut (2011, p.267). His open and friendly portrait infused warmth, youth, and optimism to the image of the Soviet Union, whose

people were “famous in the capitalist world for frowning in public” (Jenks, 2012). Gagarin’s shining countenance, therefore, humanized the Soviet Union’s image that had been long limited to missiles and Marxism.

Battle for hearts and minds

This scientific milestone was seized by the state, making Gagarin become a powerful asset in the USSR’s soft-power arsenal. The power his fame exerted was not confined to the socialist bloc, extending beyond Soviet borders around the globe. Gagarin’s public persona became an epitome of socialist modernity, peace, and anti-imperialist solidarity. Andrews and Siddiqi bring attention to Moscow's enormous resources expended on both the actual mission itself as well as space publicity - or simply put, international advertising (2011). Soon after his flight, Gagarin embarked on a global tour that lasted for two years, visiting almost 30 countries. He was greeted as a hero of humanity wherever he went. Jenks, in an attempt to convey the fame Gagarin acquired, argues that Gagarin was “possibly the most photographed person in the world,” meeting world leaders like India’s Jawaharlal Nehru, Cuba’s Fidel Castro, and even her highness the Queen of England. The cosmonaut’s image was a propaganda coup for Moscow. The so-called Global South - decolonizing nations of Asia, African, and Latin America - gazed at friendly, modest, and modern Gagarin - the face of the Soviet Union which was seeking influence over these nations. The whole tour was orchestrated for this purpose: project Gagarin as an embodiment of anti-colonial triumph.

The whole world wanted to see the first man to travel into outer space in flesh. Kamanin, in his diary, states that “almost all newspapers noted that Gagarin’s trip proved how great a man he is” (). Gagarin was more than just a Soviet hero. Unlike fiction heroes, he was real, and he was not a Soviet hero but a world hero. As Rockwell notes, the triumph of Vostok 1 was repeatedly spoken of as “an achievement for all of humanity” (2005, p. 68). At official events, Gagarin was extolled for being an exemplary of “courage, valor, and heroism in the service of mankind” (Rockwell, 2005, p. 68). This characterization implied that the Soviet Union acted upon the will of all of humanity, generating goodwill on its benevolence, while the Capital USA was pursuing its individualistic ends. Though Gagarin was staged as a world hero, the divide between East and West was stressed when convenient. The Soviet space program is peaceful and scientific aims were contrasted with the purportedly militaristic American plans to weaponize space. The cosmonaut gently holding the dove which signals peace was the perfect ambassador to win the trust of non-aligned nations. This narrative is supported by the European Space Agency which notes that the “images of his [Gagarin’s] smiling face humanized space for the public, and gave a human quality to Soviet society at that time.” Indian news accounts from November 1961 describe his visit, emphasizing how crowds applauded slogans like “Long Live Indo-Soviet Cooperation for Disarmament and Peace” (PTI, 2021). Prakash Reddy, who later on became Communist Party leader in Mumbai, recalls Gagarin’s visit describing his success as a “different kind of achievement by a communist state for mankind and the whole world” (Kamalakaran, 2016). These reports illustrate that for the Indian press Gagarin’s visit was an expression of Indo-Soviet Solidarity and peaceful progress.

Similarly, in July 1961, Gagarin met the prime minister of Cuba Fidel Castro and even took part in the ceremonies commemorating the Moncada assault - violent attack on the

Moncada Barracks in 1953 that started Fidel Castro's revolution. When Castro asked the cosmonaut how long his Earth orbit took Gagarin replied "an hour and a half, comandante," to which Castro wittily answered "then, start counting" (Vicent, 2021). This witty political remark during their conversation was downplayed in Russian-language sources which tended to describe Gagarin's visit very diplomatically. Castro's "start counting" was a way of saying "for us Cubans, revolutionary journey has just begun and it will take a fast and victorious path just as your orbit around the Earth." After Gagarin's visit, his busts were erected to symbolize Soviet solidarity and that the first man in space honored Cuba's revolutionary cause.

Gianfranco Caterina explores this event from the perspective of the change in the perception of Brazilian political elites about the USSR (2020). According to her, the press coverage on Gagarin's tour was extensive. She found that on August 1st, 1961, when Gagarin's tour reached Brazil, 90% of the questions reached a local telephone service of the newspaper *Folha de S. Paulo* was about Gagarin, ranging from technical details about the flight to personal trivia. Political advisor of the U.S. Embassy in Brasilia shares Caterina's belief that Soviets' scientific achievements left a significant impact on Brazilians as "even the most conservative" of them were "impressed by some economic records of the socialist superpower" (Caterina, 2020, p.11). This observation made the advisor suggest intensifying efforts to dramatize American technical-scientific and military achievements and initiate impact projects in Northeast Brazil aimed at maintaining hopes for US-aligned democratic solutions (Caterina, 2020).

These are one of the many receptions that demonstrate how media discourse described Gagarin's success, highlighting the awe of technology and solidarity with the USSR. As is argued by Caterina, by 1961 "the USSR [had] changed the perception that the political elites of

Third World countries had of [it]" (2020). This highlights that Gagarin's success was strongly associated with friendship, peace, and socialism in the Global South.

Conclusion

This paper has shown that Gagarin's elevation was far from being a spontaneous celebration of technological prowess. Intricate construction of his image has proven to be one of the most grandeur myth making projects of the twentieth century as it made not only the Soviets but the whole world greet this myth in a spacesuit with awe. Tracing the origins of Russian cosmic fascination, I have shown that Gagarin travel into space, in fact, was the culmination of religious, philosophical, and political thoughts that had been evolving in Russia over centuries. Material foundation of Soviet industrialization secularized the mythical aspirations of Russian cosmism stripping it of religious overtones. At the same time, this interest in cosmic themes was harnessed to serve the political needs of the Cold War era. These disparate and seemingly contradictory forces were reconciled, laying the foundation for the narrative revolving around Gagarin. At once, ancient and modern, spiritual and material, utopian and pragmatic converged to infuse Gagarin's image with extraordinary resonance.

Soviet space exploration, at its core, was not a novelty but a legacy to some extent; it derived from earlier religious and philosophical traditions. For Nikolai Fedorov and Konstantin Tsiolkovsky space exploration was not limited to scientific breakthrough; they envisioned the conquest of space as a sacred mission to overcome death, scarcity, and injustice. Therefore, the utopian belief that humanity's destiny lay beyond earth was consequential to Fedorov's vision of cosmic resurrection and Tsiolkovsky's secularized prophecy of space colonization. Humanity's oldest promise of redemption and immortality transcended their theological origins and

transformed into 'secular' faith - faith in science and collective progress that would later be harnessed as a cultural foundation upon which Soviet projects could build.

However, the evolution of these ideas is not said to have followed continuous linear development. Cosmic themes saw alignment with the spirit of socialist construction in early 20th century and esoteric and mystical overtones had to be stripped away. Rapid industrialization and military might of the state were prioritized under Stalin's regime, subordinating scientific and technological ambitions to immediate economic, political, and security needs. Stalin's Five-Year Plans with their infrastructural and technological investments provided future cosmic endeavors with the material conditions; first human travel into space would not have been feasible if it were not for the groundwork under Stalin's regime. However, the very same regime known for its terror and repressions crushed intellectual freedom and utopian dream, creating the paradox of Soviet history.

After Stalin's death, the process of de-Stalinization demanded a need to create new symbols of Soviet legitimacy. New system was reframed, so were earlier dreams within a new ideological narrative. These symbols had to embody both continuity and rupture: distance the new regime from brutalities of the recent past while affirming the enduring devotion for socialist cause. Gagarin's flight in 1961 could not be a more apt moment to eclipse the dark legacy of Stalinism with the radiant image of a young, humble, joyful Soviet man who was the first to conquer heavens. Gagarin's image, therefore, became a myth in a space suit to translate a rejuvenated, peaceful, and progressive Soviet identity that is a testament to the benevolent and utopian spirit of socialism.

Therefore, Gagarin's image implies a deliberate and elaborate strategy behind its construction. Within the Soviet borders, the cosmonaut was cast as the ideal Soviet citizen: a humble farmboy, diligent worker, and loyal party member. His proletarian origin was emphasized incessantly so that people would not forget a clear message: only within the Soviet system is greatness accessible to everyone equally. Through Gagarin's public facade socialism was proven to rise to the stars even the son of peasants. Gagarin's ordinariness that made him a relatable figure of millions was not a vice, but his idiosyncrasy - the very ordinariness made him extraordinary. His "million-ruble smile," affable character and repeated statements of gratitude to the Communist Party was a living proof of the Soviet project's success in creating the "New Soviet Man."

Internationally, Gagarin's image became a political soft power tool. The global tour organized immediately after his flight was more than a mere celebration of the milestone. It was a carefully orchestrated diplomatic campaign to win hearts and minds - or to put it simply, the best "advertisement" the world has ever seen. Emerging postcolonial world was presented with the human face of socialism amidst the ideological battle between the USSR and the US. The cosmonaut who couldn't stop smiling communicated an implicit yet powerful message that the true champion of global peace and progress, the Soviet Union, unlike its imperialist and militarist counterparts offered a different, better future for all humanity. The last minute addition of the bold red letters "СССР" to his helmet was a calculated visual construction of his image to make a symbolic association between the cosmonaut and the state. Gagarin did not belong to himself, he belonged to the Soviet people, to the Party, and most importantly to socialism. However, deconstruction of his image reveals deeper ambiguities. Innocent, optimistic, beloved son of the

nation became an embodiment of hope, mirroring and replacing the stern and formidable father, exposing the fragile dependency of Soviet legitimacy on charismatic symbols.

To conclude, the myth behind Gagarin's image fused occult traditions, revolutionary dreams, industrial achievements, and Cold War imperatives into a single, radiant symbol. Celebration of Gagarin is the Soviet Union's celebration of its own self image as the harbinger of a universal future that encompasses a final victory over scarcity and inequality - a future that, like Gagarin himself, would soar forever higher and forever smiling. The answer to the question of what made the image of a young cosmonaut orbit higher in the collective memory of the nation I believe is not needed.

References:

Abramov, I. A., & Skoog, A. I. (2003). *Russian spacesuits*. Springer-Praxis.

Andarovna, S. Y. (2019). *Blood, Water and Mars: Soviet Science and the Alchemy for a New Man* (Master's thesis). Central Washington University.

<https://digitalcommons.cwu.edu/etd/1201>

Andrews, J. T. (2009). Storming the stratosphere: Space exploration, Soviet culture, and the arts from Lenin to Khrushchev's times. *Russian History*, 36(1), 77–87.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/24664586>

Andrews, J. T., & Siddiqi, A. A. (Eds.). (2011). *Into the cosmos: Space exploration and Soviet culture*. University of Pittsburgh Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt6wren2>

Caterina, G. (2020). Gagarin in Brazil: Reassessing the terms of the Cold War domestic political debate in 1961. *Revista Brasileira de Política Internacional*, 63(1).

<https://doi.org/10.1590/0034-7329202000104>

Doran, J., & Bizony, P. (1998). *Starman: The truth behind the legend of Yuri Gagarin*.

Bloomsbury Publishing. <https://openlibrary.org/books/OL463798M/Starman>

Dowling, M. (2021, April 9). Yuri Gagarin: The spaceman who came in from the cold. *BBC Future*.

<https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20210409-yuri-gagarin-the-spaceman-who-came-in-from-the-cold>

Fedorov, N. (2018). Astronomy and architecture. In B. Groys (Ed.), *Russian cosmism* (pp. 55–58). MIT Press.

Gerovitch, S. (2015). *Soviet space mythologies: Public images, private memories, and the making of a cultural identity*. University of Pittsburgh Press.

Groys, B. (Ed.). (2018). *Russian cosmism*. MIT Press.

Hosking, G. (2006). *Rulers and victims: The Russians in the Soviet Union*. Harvard University Press.

Jenks, A. (2012). *The cosmonaut who couldn't stop smiling: The life and legend of Yuri Gagarin*. Northern Illinois University Press.

Kamalakaran, A. (2016, December 10). When India played host to Yuri Gagarin. *Russia Beyond*. https://www.rbth.com/blogs/tatar_straits/2016/12/10/when-india-played-host-to-yuri-gagarin_655041

Khrushchev, N. (1956, February 25). *On the cult of personality and its consequences* [Speech transcript]. Wilson Center Digital Archive. <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/khrushchevs-secret-speech-cult-personality-and-its-consequences-delivered-twentieth-party>

Maurer, E., Richers, J., Rùthers, M., & Scheide, C. (Eds.). (2011). *Soviet space culture: Cosmic enthusiasm in socialist societies*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Muravyev, V. (2018). A universal productive mathematics. In B. Groys (Ed.), *Russian cosmism* (pp. 91–111). MIT Press.

Porri, A. (2011). Two images of a spaceman in Estonian art. In E. Maurer, J. Richers, M. Rütters, & C. Scheide (Eds.), *Soviet space culture: Cosmic enthusiasm in socialist societies* (pp. 266–280). Palgrave Macmillan.

Pravda Editorial Board. (1957, October 9). A great victory in the global competition with capitalism. *Pravda*.

Pravda Editorial Board. (1968, November 4). Our space epic has convincingly revealed to the world the upbringing of a new person. *Pravda*.

PTI. (2021, April 12). Months after milestone journey into space, Gagarin received rousing reception during India tour. *Hindustan Times*.
<https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/months-after-milestone-journey-into-space-gagarin-received-rousing-reception-during-india-tour-101744465613434.html>

Rockwell, T. (2003). Yuri Gagarin and the myth of the ‘first man in space.’ *Skeptic Magazine*, 10(1), 3–7.

Rockwell, T. (2005). *The smile that conquered the world: Yuri Gagarin and the Soviet space mythology*. Paper presented at the 56th International Astronautical Congress.

Siddiqi, A. A. (2000). *Challenge to Apollo: The Soviet Union and the space race, 1945–1974* (NASA SP-2000-4408). NASA History Division.
<https://history.nasa.gov/SP-4408/SP-4408.htm>

Siddiqi, A. A. (2003). The rocket's red glare: Technology, conflict, and terror in the Soviet space program. *Technology and Culture*, 44(3), 470–501.

Siddiqi, A. A. (2010). *Cosmic enthusiasm: Soviet space culture in the 1920s and 1930s*. Paper presented at conference. [Published later as part of *Into the Cosmos*].

Vicent, M. (2021, June 26). Cuba's Hotel Nacional: The iconic site that hosted Jean-Paul Sartre, Muhammad Ali, and Yuri Gagarin. *El País*.

<https://english.elpais.com/usa/2021-06-26/cubas-hotel-nacional-the-iconic-site-that-hosted-jean-paul-sartre-muhammad-ali-and-yuri-gagarin.html>

Wintner, J. T. (2022). Cosmism and Afrofuturism: Life against death. *SFRA Review*, 52(3),

104–110. <https://sfrareview.org/2022/08/03/cosmism-and-afrofuturism-life-against-death/>