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Book Review

Slava Gerovitch, *Soviet Space Mythologies: Public Images, Private Memories, and the Making of a Cultural Identity* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2015), 256 pp., $27.95 (pb), 9780822963639.

The glory days of Soviet cosmic achievements remain in our imaginations as much for the ways in which they embodied a moment of utopian hubris as for the fact that they represented a narrative of an abandoned future. This combination remains powerful today for many in Russia who see little in the proximate future, preferring to relive the genuinely halcyon achievements of Sputnik, Laika, and Gagarin—a nostalgia for a future that was never fully attained. This unstable state of never-quite-fulfilled promise has fueled a relatively large explosion of scholarship in recent years on the cultural dimensions of the Soviet space program. The proliferation of conferences, books, and edited volumes dedicated to unearthing the anthropology, practices, and mentalité of Soviet space enthusiasm has wrested the space program from one understood simply as the outcome of Cold War military imperatives, to one that reflected, expressed, and reshaped popular and populist aspirations for Soviet people at a crucial and transformative moment of postwar history. Joining this fray is historian of science Slava Gerovitch's exploration of the broader cultural imperatives that gave shape to a distinctly Soviet cosmic identity in the 1960s. The book is less a sustained and singular narrative than a compilation of seven essays on a variety of topics, all but one of which were published before in other venues. As such, the material in *Soviet Space Mythologies* might be familiar to some, but organized in this new setting, the book works as a surprisingly cogent and provocative excursion into various aspects of Soviet cosmic culture.

Gerovitch's short introductory essay lays out the stakes of his scholarship, one that is invested less on revisiting what happened than how various communities drew meaning from what happened. Memory is a central trope here, and most of the chapters in one way or another bear on the tensions and contradictions inherent in memorializing the Soviet space program, both

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at the time of its greatest achievements and in the years and decades later. As others have shown, the Soviet space program was victim to a fundamental contradiction: it needed to publicize its achievements as much as possible, while maintaining the utmost secrecy about its military origins. In practice, this meant many clumsy rhetorical strategies that created a kind of unstable narrative of its exploits, or in Gerovitch's lexicon, "myths." The theme of myths runs through several of Gerovitch's chapters, highlighting the ways in which official state and Party-propagated myths vied against "counter-myths;" the former represented Soviet power's attempts to regulate, manage, and advance a triumphalist narrative, while the latter were circulated privately among managers, cosmonauts, and engineers who had access to the inner workings of the program. As Gerovitch notes, the "preservation and passing on to the next generation [of the counter-myths] through group folklore became an integral part of the professional culture of the space program," (5) thus considerably complicating the ultimate meaning of any given episode.

One of the core terrains where myths and counter-myths were constructed was on the figure of the Soviet cosmonaut who, in the words of the late Svetlana Boym (as quoted by Gerovitch), "was the peacetime hero who was ready to dedicate himself to the motherhood [sic] and, if necessary, sacrifice his life for her sake." (13) At least four of the chapters deal explicitly with the early generation of Soviet cosmonauts who were the most potent public face of Soviet space exploits, graceful ambassadors of socialist expertise who were "designed" to be an idealized version of the Soviet subject. In practice, this meant the creation of a highly sanitized image of the cosmonaut, devoid of imperfection and devoted to Communism, who was both extraordinary and ordinary at the same time. Gerovitch places this cultural construct as embodying the "New Soviet Man," who was caught between the heroism and rugged individualist qualities required of a new explorer, and the discipline and regulation necessary to be part of a massive technological enterprise that required (at least as an ideal) total perfection. The result was a cosmonaut archetype who was both heroic and yet banal, replete with contradictions.

Such contradictions are starkly evident in the one new chapter of the book, the one dedicated to the pioneering flight of first cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin. Here, the text works as a kind of Rashomon view of the Soviet space program as Gerovitch describes the exact same event from multiple perspectives, thus highlighting the deep instabilities in the master narrative of Soviet space exploration.

The penultimate chapter on the cosmonaut myth (titled "The Human Inside a Propaganda Machine") is one of the most insightful. Echoing the work

of historian Andrew Jenks, Gerovitch delves deeply into the creation of the public image of the cosmonaut, produced as a result of much give-and-take between important players such as cosmonaut overseer General Nikolai Kamanin, the KGB, military officials, design engineers, Party functionaries, and, of course, the cosmonauts themselves, who often pushed the boundaries of acceptable public decorum. Agency is a central concern for Gerovitch—and his work suggests that cosmonauts were not simply passive vessels for state and Party imperatives—but it is also clear that as the Soviet space program ground into disenchantment and drudgery in the 1970s and 1980s, the cosmonaut myth too declined as Soviet spacefarers and their exploits began to represent the stagnation of Soviet rule rather than its initial promise. In this respect, the final chapter on the memory of the space program in the post-Soviet period reveals a desire for more stable narratives. In recent years, we find the original trope of heroic cosmonaut resurrected. Through a skillful use of post-Soviet cultural markers such as the novel *Omon Ra* by Victor Pelevin, movies, and documentaries, Gerovitch argues that the heroic cosmonaut archetype now has been embedded into the nostalgia many Russians have for an imagined past of greatness, now unencumbered by moral or narrative ambiguity.

Of equal interest are Gerovitch's forays into the worldviews of the engineers who built Soviet spaceships, part of the technical intelligentsia who came into positions of power during Khrushchev's Thaw. In exploring how their professional identities were shaped at a time of great cultural upheaval, Gerovitch finds that these elite engineers essentially relinquished adversarial political agency ("there were no dissidents among us," (46) he quotes one engineer as saying) in exchange for the security and benefits of the new post-Stalinist social order. Here, he expertly weaves into the lives of the technical intelligentsia another running theme in the book: the tension between automation and human agency in Soviet spaceships. Such complicated technical artifacts as Vostok and Soyuz were produced as a result of extended negotiations among many stakeholders, but the outcome always favored automatic control. As Gerovitch shows in Chapters three and five, for a variety of reasons—including absence of confidence in the abilities of cosmonauts, the lack of "predictability" of the cosmonaut's behavior, and the design and production culture of Soviet engineering—Soviet engineers persistently reduced the ability of cosmonauts to control their ships in space. Gerovitch sees this as symptomatic of the larger culture of Soviet life, noting that "[l]ike any other technological artifact, [the] Vostok [spaceship] reflected the professional culture of its designers" and given the degree of control over human agency inherent in Vostok, "the most celebrated artifact of the Thaw, was [actually] a flying example of

mythologized Stalinism." (43) In this way, Gerovitch implies a continuity across the divide of 1953, suggesting, as many others have done, that the Thaw carried with it many remnants of the Stalinist era.

The tension between control and agency is a running theme throughout many of the chapters, and there is a tendency to repeat the obvious. On many points, Gerovitch lapses into an analytical heuristic that trades nuance and complexity in favor of dichotomies (narrative/counter-narrative, control/agency, openness/secrecy, etc.). Such dual frames can seem reductive and inflexible in accounting for something as complex and multifarious as the Soviet space program, which involved massive state resources, mobilized innumerous cultural tropes, and was connected to many different strands in both Soviet history and the history of science and technology writ large. But to his credit, Gerovitch has done an exemplary job in locating his research on the Soviet space program within the larger concerns of the scholarship on Soviet history—the bibliography on secondary literature is prodigious and the result is a richly researched work that wrests the Soviet space program from its Cold War concerns back into a context sensitive to Soviet history. But that laser focus on Soviet history also robs Gerovitch's otherwise rich insights from being more generalizable. As much recent literature on the United States' space program shows, NASA was also keenly invested in managing the public image of astronauts through carefully vetted images, inspirational rhetoric, and sanitized narratives. And similar debates about automation and agency were ubiquitous on the other side too, suggesting that many of the cultural tropes linked to Soviet space accomplishments were not that exceptional or unique. Should we then see Soviet space culture as anomalous? Or, as one manifestation of a common cultural response to humanity's first steps off the planet? These are questions that remain unanswered here but they do not limit the ultimate value of this work, which serves as an excellent introduction to the cultures, meanings, and memories of the once great Soviet space program.

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