

# Remembering the Soviet Space Program

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Slava Gerovitch, *Soviet Space Mythologies: Public Images, Private Memories, and the Making of a Cultural Identity*. 232 pp. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2015. ISBN-13 978-0822963639. \$27.95.

Slava Gerovitch, *Voices of the Soviet Space Program: Cosmonauts, Soldiers, and Engineers Who Took the USSR into Space*. 305 pp. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. ISBN-13 978-1137481788. \$95.00.

When Valentina Ponomareva, who served as backup for the first woman in space in 1963, was asked about the most important tasks for today's researchers of Soviet space history, she answered: "First, it is necessary to record the reminiscences of people who witnessed the early days" (*Voices*, 235). Indeed, firsthand accounts of the Soviet space age are still relatively scarce. Well known are the diaries of Nikolai Kamanin and the four-volume memoirs of the rocket designer Boris Chertok.<sup>1</sup> Their revealing personal insights into a formerly closed world of secrecy and the opening of Russian archives in the 1990s led to a heightened interest of historians in the societal and cultural dimension of the Soviet space program. Within the last ten years, several conferences across the globe were held, exhibitions organized, and the list of scholarly publications dealing with the "cosmic enthusiasm" of Soviet society is constantly growing.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Nikolai Kamanin, *Skrytyi kosmos*, 4 vols. (Moscow: Infortekst/Novosti kosmonavtiki, 1995–2001); Boris Chertok, *Rakety i liudi*, 4 vols. (Moscow: Mashinostroenie, 1994–99), published in English as *Rockets and People*, 4 vols. (Washington, DC: National Aeronautics and Space Administration, 2005–11).

<sup>2</sup> Steven J. Dick and Roger D. Launius, eds., *Societal Impact of Spaceflight* (Washington, DC: National Aeronautics and Space Administration, 2007); Igor J. Polianski and Matthias Schwartz, eds., *Die Spur des Sputnik: Kulturhistorische Expeditionen ins kosmische Zeitalter* (New York: Campus, 2009); Asif A. Siddiqi, *The Red Rockets' Glare: Spaceflight and the Soviet*

However, few historians actually went and interviewed former members of the Soviet space program. Slava Gerovitch, a historian of science and technology teaching cultural history of mathematics at MIT, set out to bridge this gap. In a large-scale oral history project he interviewed no less than 13 men and women who worked in different fields within the space program. Their fascinating accounts are published in English translation in *Voices of the Soviet Space Program*. The volume contains the reminiscences of former cosmonauts such as Vladimir Shatalov and Ponomareva, of the stress psychiatrist Ada Ordianskaia, engine designer Anatolii Daron, display designer Iurii Tiapchenko, military construction engineer Sergei Safro, and many more less-known experts.

For decades, Russian as well as Western publications on Soviet space history have frequently centered around iconic heroes such as the “grandfather of cosmonautics” Konstantin Tsiolkovskii, his alleged heir Sergei Korolev, and cosmonauts such as Iurii Gagarin, German Titov, and (maybe) Valentina Tereshkova. They were the main ingredients needed for a “master narrative” of Soviet space conquest. This storyline, however, blurred the fact that a huge number of unknowns worked on a daily basis in the background to make the dream of cosmic exploration possible. Gerovitch’s foremost aim was to record some of those unknown voices and, by so doing, to capture the multiple and often diverging perspectives on the Soviet space program. The interviews lay bare the fact that rocketry was not just an endeavor of peaceful civilian research but also part of the secret military complex. They also reveal how great were the tensions and rivalries between these institutions. In his introduction Gerovitch circumscribes the lives and conditions of the interviewed as follows: “Secrecy restrictions limited their knowledge, institutional allegiances shaped their perspectives, and professional cultures formed their distinct collective identities” (*Voices*, 1).

“Identity” also figures in the center of his second book, *Soviet Space Mythologies*, published a year later. The volume collects previously published articles (except chapter 4), however, in a substantially revised and updated form. The articles in some way echo the findings of Gerovitch’s oral history project. They dissect the ample myths surrounding Soviet space history, for

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*Imagination, 1857–1957* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Eva Maurer, Julia Richers, Monica Rüthers, and Carmen Scheide, eds., *Soviet Space Culture: Cosmic Enthusiasm in Socialist Societies* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); James T. Andrews and Asif A. Siddiqi, eds., *Into the Cosmos: Space Exploration and Soviet Culture* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2011); Matthias Schwartz, Kevin Anding, and Holt Meyer, eds., *Gagarin als Archivkörper und Erinnerungsfigur* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2014); Michael G. Smith: *Rockets and Revolution: A Cultural History of Early Spaceflight* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2014).

example, the myth of the brave, autonomous, morally impeccable pilot-cosmonaut, the myth of the success story (with no failures) or the myth of the peaceful civilian outlook of the space program. Drawing from *Voices of the Soviet Space Program*, Gerovitch brings to light the parallel universe of secretive lives and counter-memories. He argues that the space program brought about a specific professional collective identity that also had a strong impact on personal lives and private memories. In some cases, experts of the space program showed signs of a “split identity,” since “the secretive world of postwar rocketry reinforced their affinity with the military, while working on cutting-edge technologies nurtured their sense of belonging to the international techno-scientific elite” (*Mythologies*, 43, 47). The iconic space hero Gagarin is another variant of such a torn identity. In this context, the military construction officer Safro states in his interview that in fact “the silly obsession with secrecy ruined many lives” (*Voices*, 32). For Ponomareva the exorbitant use of coded language itself posed a threat to the cosmonauts: “We had to talk about any malfunction in code, usually botanical... One could get so confused that it would be hard to disentangle things” (*Voices*, 230). There was a notorious insistence on obfuscation, duplicity, and outright misinformation. Gagarin, Tereshkova, and others were constantly forced to make false claims about their space flights. Gerovitch’s argument of highlighting secrecy as a crucial impact factor engages with other recent scholarship that addresses this topic, such as Andrew Jenks’s work on Gagarin, Asif A. Siddiqi’s current research on “closed cities” (ZATOs) in the Soviet Union, or the research projects of the participants of the international conference “Cultures of Secrecy in Soviet Life” held at the University of Zurich in January 2017.<sup>3</sup>

In this secretive world, competition and rivalry figure as prominent topics. Both of Gerovitch’s volumes present the whole Soviet space industry as a highly competitive battlefield where different professional cultures and diverging views on design, automation, safety, and military or civilian appropriation led to constant “internal squabbles,” as “cosmonaut 13” Shatalov put it (*Voices*, 160). Since the majority of the interviews in *Voices of the Soviet Space Program* were conducted with designers and engineers, we get a detailed picture of the discussions on the “human-machine issue,” meaning automation, onboard computing, and its impact on the division of function between human and machine in spacecraft control. Unlike the United States,

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<sup>3</sup> The Janus-faced life of Gagarin is documented in Andrew Jenks, *The Cosmonaut Who Couldn't Stop Smiling: The Life and Legend of Yuri Gagarin* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2012).

Soviet spacecraft were designed to carry out all flight tasks automatically according to instructions from the ground.

Finally, the accounts in *Voices of the Soviet Space Program* in particular give rare glimpses into daily life and routine in the celebrated space program. Both Safro and the display designer Tiapchenko describe the uncomfortable life in Baikonur, with its blistering heat, water shortage, bedbugs, and seemingly eternal moments of boredom. Others mention recurring instances of antisemitism and misogyny. And the psychiatrist Ordianskaia, a specialist in stress-induced pathology, gives exceptional insights into different forms of psychosomatic disadaptation common among the cosmonauts in training and in outer space.

Overall, both volumes present important findings and cast new light on lesser-known aspects of the cultural history of the *kosmicheskaia era* in the Soviet Union. *Soviet Space Mythologies* reflects on every page the well-known precision and thought-provoking work of the author. All articles in the volume are not limited to space history but engage with a number of larger critical issues surrounding the study of the often paradoxical nature of the Soviet experience. *Voices of the Soviet Space Program* unites an invaluable collection of individual experiences and personal viewpoints. The impressive successes of the space program did elicit real “cosmic enthusiasm,” especially among the young but also among the known and unknown participants in the Soviet space program. The numerous triumphs of the USSR in space did generate pride and real approval. Besides that, the interviews also reveal ample new insights, aspects, and details that cannot be found in official documents and archival resources.

It could be critically remarked that Gerovitch does not provide sufficient information on the choice and selection of his interview partners: why them, and not others? Also, oral history as a method of historical research includes a lengthy discussion about the appropriateness of preconditioning sets of questions. By posing specific questions, Gerovitch to a degree monitors and influences the outcome of the conversation. These are only minor remarks, for Gerovitch’s volumes are highly engaging and insightful contributions to the cultural history of the Soviet space age. They address one of the many academic voids still present in space history. Besides the aforementioned lack of personal accounts, the material and visual legacy of the Soviet space age has received only a little scholarly attention. In addition, the complex interplay between science and party considerations—the “technopolitics” of the time—is still underresearched. In this context, the omnipresent culture of secrecy should be balanced against the numerous attempts at international

cooperation. Here research on the networks following the International Geophysical Year 1957/58, on the Intercosmos program, or the Apollo–Soyuz Test Project may provide interesting insights. They may add to the current research on the Nylon Curtain and cooperation across the blocs. Or, on the contrary, they may reveal the clear limits of transcontinental exchange, disclosing the new Soviet openness as a sort of “Potemkin village.”

To summarize, Gerovitch’s studies develop considerably the discussion of the complexities of Soviet cosmic enthusiasm. In some instances, complexity formed an unlucky alliance with ambivalence and absurdity. Asked about automation and the automatic docking system of the spacecraft, a number of interviewees stated that the system repeatedly did not work properly, but the authorities often hesitated to give permission for the crew to dock manually. For Gerovitch, in these cases it was not the Party or the government that encouraged the obsession with automation; rather it was the space engineers’ own “mind-set of control” (*Mythologies*, 43), reflecting some sort of awkward vestige of the Stalin era. In the end, the major part of participants in the Soviet space program inevitably remained dependent on ground control.

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