

Sammelrez: Storming the Heavens: Soviet Astroculture, 1957–1969

Maurer, Eva; Richers, Julia; Rütters, Monica; Scheide, Carmen (Hrsg.): *Soviet Space Culture. Cosmic Enthusiasm in Socialist Societies*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2011. ISBN: 978-0-230-27435-8; 323 S.

Andrews, James T.; Siddiqi, Asif A. (Hrsg.): *Into the Cosmos. Space Exploration and Soviet Culture*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press 2011. ISBN: 978-0-8229-6161-1; 330 S.

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In an astute essay published about a decade ago, literary scholar Svetlana Boym sketched a Russian Space Age characterized by a popular fascination and predominant preoccupation with anything considered 'cosmic.' „Born at the time of the Soviet cosmic triumph in space, my generation learned to look at the world as if from outer space,“ Boym described this momentary shift of perspectives: „A trip to the Moon seemed more likely than a journey to America.“¹ Ubiquitous and powerful as it once was, the subsequent fall of the cosmic myth was as sudden as its rise in the aftermath of the Second World War. Even before the dissolution of the Soviet Union the cosmos ceased to provide a blueprint for futuristic utopias beyond planet Earth. Half a century later, 'Sputnik,' 'Laika' and 'Gagarin' are still with us as familiar household names, yet their meaning has radically changed. No longer epitomizing world-shaking scenarios of human expansion and expectant hopes for a collective departure into the spatial unknown, they stand for a bygone past, reduced to icons of pop culture and shrunk to relics of a future-prone epoch that, at most, evoke a sense of nostalgia, possibly spiked with a pinch of transtemporal envy.

Against this background, two recently published collections of essays pursue one and the same goal. They aim to chart this Russian Space Age; to seek, trace and map cosmic enthusiasm in its manifold sociocultural manifestations; and to analyze the ramifications and impact of Soviet 'astroculture' (as I would

term this once so omnipresent complex of images, artifacts and social practices) during its heyday. Together featuring no less than 31 essays by 24 different authors – four of which contribute to both volumes – there is little appreciable difference between the two books' chrono-chorological settings. Most analyses are situated somewhere during the twelve years that it took to launch Sputnik, the first artificial object to orbit planet Earth, in October 1957, and to land the first man on the Moon, in July 1969. By that time, at the latest, as an estimated audience of 500 million television viewers witnessed worldwide, it had become manifest that Soviet supremacy in space was past. Such a delimited setting certainly suggests itself, but it is also bound to confirm pre-existing periodizations. The cultivation of popular interest in the cosmos took off in the 1920s, a few years earlier than in the West, with the founding of the world's first space advocacy group, the Moscow Society for the Study of Interplanetary Communication, in 1924. Only after Stalin's death in 1953 did a second and much more momentous wave of space enthusiasm set in, concomitant with Khrushchev's attempts to re-launch socialism alongside investment in large-scale technologies. A period of societal optimism, the „thaw,“ coincided with the biggest Soviet successes in space. These achievements, in turn, supported a widespread belief in technological determinism and provided apparent evidence for the coming of communism. In both cases the geographical focus is as clear-cut as the chronological setting, if slightly self-limiting. Only a single article in each volume addresses astroculture in socialist countries other than the Soviet Union. Thus, „Into the Cosmos“ includes an essay on cosmonaut Titov's visit to East Berlin in September 1961, while „Soviet Space Culture“ contains a similar contribution on the Apollo 11 crew's celebrated two-day stopover in Belgrade, Yugoslavia, in the fall of 1969. All in all, the ensuing outcome is as fascinating as its subject matter, and the emerging picture proves surprisingly coherent.

¹ Svetlana Boym, *Kosmos. Remembrances of the Future*, in Adam Bartos / idem (eds.), *Kosmos. A Portrait of the Russian Space Age*, New York 2001, pp. 82–99, here p. 82 and 97.

Contributions to both books can be broadly grouped in three categories. A first group ascertains the making and remaking of Soviet cosmic celebrities usually named in one breath with the 1953–1964 era, including Konstantin Tsiolkovskii (1857–1935), the ‘grandfather’ of Soviet space travel; chief designer Sergei Korolev (1907–1966), the program’s ‘father’; Iurii Gagarin (1934–1969) and German Titov (1935–2000), the first and second persons to fly in space, respectively; and Valentina Tereshkova (1937–), the first female cosmonaut.² Some of the authors rate the cult status attained by these space personae so highly that they see „Russia’s Sputnik generation“ (Donald J. Raleigh) complemented by a „Tereshkova generation“ after her 1963 flight. A second key area comprises popular culture in the widest sense, including the complex relationship between science and fiction, and variants of visual representation, for instance at exhibitions or in film, as the medium par excellence for the imaginary exploration of space.³ A third, less clearly defined group includes articles on topics as diverse as secrecy and propaganda, space dogs, and scientific atheism in „Into the Cosmos;“ and the history of mobile planetaria, cosmos fever among socialist children as well as forms of regional and contemporary space propaganda in „Soviet Space Culture.“⁴

Which contributions among such a multitude deserve special attention? According to this reviewer’s scholarly ethos and taste, some articles are of particular interest. In the first volume, Amy Nelson analyzes the short-lived careers of space dogs Laika, Belka, Strelka and other ‘canine cosmonauts’ as „boundary objects.“ For three years, from 1957 until 1960, animals proved central to the Soviet effort to master space before it was recast as a human drama, with the dogs’ international fame instantly receding when Gagarin took center stage. Asif A. Siddiqi delineates the indissoluble contradiction between military secrecy and propagandistic instrumentalization, one of the space program’s prevailing and most characteristic features. By the time of his death in 1966, neither had Korolev’s name been revealed nor was it publicly known that rockets were launched from Tiura-Tam, a spot in the Kazakh steppe, rather

than the actual town of Baikonur, three hundred kilometers away, after which the spaceport was named. Andrew Jenk’s brilliant piece on the „complex hermeneutics of Soviet truth-telling,“ that is lying, reads as a congenial counterpart as it shows such mechanisms at work en détail.⁵ During the seven years of stardom he experienced before his death by accident in 1968, Gagarin found himself increasingly caught up in a web of „truth-lies,“ necessary to maintain his public persona while repeatedly challenged by his own and his superiors’ actions. Some would argue that these two deaths, Korolev’s and Gagarin’s, marked the dawn of the Space Age, Soviet-style, rather than the Apollo moon landing a year later. Today, the Gagarin cult lives on, more vital than ever before, and it comes as no surprise then that both books feature him on their covers.

In the „Soviet Space Culture“ volume, Michael Hagemeister’s effective deflating of Konstantin Tsiolkovskii stands out. In a short yet powerful corrective Hagemeister situates Tsiolkovskii’s oft-cited spaceflight writings in the larger context of his comprehensive, less-known oeuvre. The grand, much-celebrated ‘grandfather’ of Soviet spaceflight, it turns out, cared first and foremost about man’s self-perfection. The most atrocious ideas that he propagated for its achievement included the elimination of all imperfect life forms, from animals to the „lowest races of humanity.“ For Tsiolkovskii, then, human spaceflight never constituted an end in itself but a merely technical means to attain spiritual redemption and eternal bliss. In a similar vein, Slava Gerovitch analyzes the making and meandering of the myth created around

² See the contributions by Slava Gerovitch, Andrew Jenks, Roshanna P. Sylvester and Heather L. Gumbert in „Into the Cosmos,“ and by Michael Hagemeister, Slava Gerovitch and Roshanna P. Sylvester in „Soviet Space Culture.“

³ See the contributions by James T. Andrews and Cathleen S. Lewis in the first volume, and by Thomas Grob, Lewis H. Siegelbaum, Iina Kohonen, Matthias Schwartz, Andrei Rogatchevski and Anneli Porri in the second.

⁴ See the contributions by Asif A. Siddiqi, Amy Nelson and Victoria Smolkin-Rothrock, and by Victoria Smolkin-Rothrock, Monica Rütters, Anna Eremeeva and Vladimir Sadym, respectively.

⁵ Into the Cosmos, p. 115.

Sergei Korolev, another central protagonist and sometimes called the Soviet Wernher von Braun. Gerovitch demonstrates how multiple authors and instances that included Korolev himself but also contemporary rivals, Soviet and post-Soviet historians and, in particular, two feature films, „Taming of the Fire“ (1972) and „Korolev“ (2007), added one layer of meaning after another until the ensuing outcome was an inextricable farrago of fact and fiction, historiography and hagiography, with the choice no longer being between history and memory, but only different versions of the same myth.⁶ Finally, Radina Vučetić's essay on the Apollo 11 crew's visit to Belgrade during their „Giantstep Apollo 11“ world tour three months after the moon landing is one of the very few that transcends geographical and political boundaries alike. The warmth and enthusiasm with which the local population received the American astronauts in October 1969 by far outshone any of the preceding cosmonauts' visits. The essay arguably lacks a specific argument beyond a strong pro-American orientation in 1960s Yugoslavia meant to counter Soviet exercises of influence. However, the insight this case study offers is instructive, as it conveys a glimpse of the unworked potential that astroculture has to offer.

All due praise aside, some criticism cannot be eschewed. Three brief remarks must suffice to sharpen the ongoing debate. First, the self-labeling. Quite rightly, both books justify their existence by referring to the fact that the cultural history of outer space is an aborning historiographical field. „The cultural history approach to the study of space travel is a new and innovative field of historiography,“ declares Julia Richers, and James Andrews and Asif Siddiqi concur. Setting out to deepen „the literature on the cultural history of the Space Age,“ they promise to „transcend the shortcomings of the antecedent scholarship on the Soviet space program and to examine the many ways in which space exploration contributed to the construction of a distinct set of markers of Soviet identity at the national, community, and personal levels.“⁷ Ostentatious research gap rhetoric aside, it seems that there is no clear difference made between approach and subject matter. His-

tory of popular culture is not necessarily tantamount to cultural history. Upon closer inspection both books assemble building blocks for a history of spaceflight in Soviet popular culture but do not engage in the cultural history of outer space per se. Nowhere are changing human configurations of the cosmos, space colonization scenarios or concepts of alien life and the search for extraterrestrial intelligence integrated into the account. Ironically, the resulting portrayal of outer space remains planar, or, as it were, predominantly terrestrial.

Second, it is worth noting that questions of transnationality, either within the Communist Bloc or from without, do not play any significant role (yet), neither here nor for this nascent field at large. Although it is well known that the Soviet space program and the technoscientific modernity it represented were of considerable appeal to the so-called Third World, global ramifications are not traced. In both cases, the United States serves at most as an all-too-implicit foil for comparison while other significant space efforts are nowhere considered. As an academic field, space history has long mirrored the conditions of its isolationist creation during the politically bifurcated Cold War. Hardly reflecting upon their own positionality, books such as these are in danger of perpetuating the very binary character of scholarship on space history that they aim to overcome.

Last but not least, some editorial matters. In both cases this reader would have appreciated a more ruthless selection process and more radical editorial interventions. To state that the originality, quality and depth of analysis widely differ from one contribution to another is possibly a cliché, but applicable in this case once again. Four authors publish in both volumes, and there is considerable overlap in concepts, themes and even verbatim text. Is it a good idea, for instance, to claim that an article concerns Soviet planetaria when it is largely identical with the author's contribution to the other volume, on scientific atheism? Other essays would likewise have profited from less fainthearted editing. Why in-

⁶Soviet Space Culture, p. 99.

⁷Soviet Space Culture, p. 14; Into the Cosmos, p. ix and 6.

clude seven full pages of textbook knowledge on „crisis management“ in 1950s GDR, if the chapter’s subject matter is Titov’s visit to East Berlin, a brilliant propaganda coup enacted just three weeks after the border closure? A third author chose to republish a virtually identical version of his unquestionably shrewd essay on the Soviet Sputnik exhibit at the 1958 Brussels world’s fair in a recent issue of a well-known journal of contemporary history, without indicating the duplication either here or there. It is precisely such insouciances and oversights that give edited volumes, alas, such a bad name, despite all the hard labor that undoubtedly goes into them.

Such carpings aside, however, these two books clearly constitute a major achievement towards a thorough and re-evaluated history of spaceflight in Soviet popular culture, especially when consulted side by side, and are, as such, to be recommended to space buffs and earthbound historians alike.

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