

Cosmonauts

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1. Introduction

On 12 April 1961, Yuri Gagarin became the first human to orbit the Earth in the spacecraft Vostok 1. This first space flight not only expanded the dimensions of the Cold War, but also established the entirely new professions of cosmonauts (USSR) and astronauts (USA). The first male and female space travellers became the focus of media campaigns that lasted for years, institutionalising them as [heroes](#) and perfect representatives of their respective political systems.^[1]

2. Sputnik, Laika and Gagarin

When the Soviet Union launched Sputnik, the first artificial satellite, into space in 1957 and shortly thereafter the dog Laika, the first living creature in space, the USA was compelled to realise that they had underestimated the technological progress made by the Soviets.^[2]

After this so-called ‘Sputnik shock’, space travel advanced to become a substitute for war in the ideological conflict between East and West. In April 1959, the newly founded National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) introduced a group of seven experienced test pilots who were to fly into space as astronauts of the USA. Known as the “Mercury Seven”, these all-American boys – all white, Protestant, and from the middle class – were presented to the public through an extensive media campaign, long before they had even left Earth for the first time. In the Soviet Union,

meanwhile, a selection programme was being carried out, from which six cosmonaut candidates emerged in February 1960. These candidates, also all fighter pilots, had their identities kept hidden from the public, however, until their space flights.[3]

The success story of Yuri Gagarin's orbit around the Earth on 12 April 1961 was broadcast to the population of the Soviet Union by radio announcer Yuri Leviatan. This moment held immense significance, as Leviatan, Stalin's favoured radio announcer, had previously announced the victory over Nazi Germany via radio in 1945.[4]

To ensure that Gagarin's reception in Moscow upon his return would be a propaganda spectacle, local industrial enterprises were assigned fixed sections along the parade route where their workers were instructed to gather, clap and wave to welcome the cosmonaut. The needlessness of this measure, however, soon became clear: when Gagarin landed in Moscow, the streets were overflowing with people who wanted to get a glimpse of the cosmonaut.[5] The enormous popularity that the cosmonauts to follow would enjoy was already becoming evident.

The popularisation of Gagarin as an exemplary Soviet citizen began with the report of his flight and reached one of its climaxes at the XXII CPSU Party Congress in October 1961, just six months after his return to earth, when the Party adopted a programme aimed at propelling the country to new heights. It not only called for the realisation of communism in the Soviet Union within the lifetime of a generation and the establishment of the necessary technical and material foundations for this, but also demanded the formation of the 'New Soviet Man'. The "Moral Code for the Builders of Communism", which pointed the way ahead and demanded not only love for the socialist fatherland, collectivism and moral purity, but also respect within the family and concern for the upbringing of children, showed a significant congruence with the media portrayal of Gagarin.[6]

Gagarin's meticulously planned public persona was not only well suited to these principles, his personal history also fit the narrative conceived by the Party. As a simple country boy who had managed to travel beyond the borders of the world with the help of socialism, he embodied a model biography.[7] With his deprived wartime childhood, hard-won education and professional training, Gagarin represented the experience of an entire generation. Despite his military rank, he also came across as a more convincing ambassador for peace than any of the Mercury Seven astronauts who had previously served as fighter pilots in the Korean War.[8]

The first manned space flight was followed by other pioneering achievements of the Soviet Union, notably cosmonaut Valentina Tereshkova's journey to space as the first woman in 1963, and the first spacewalk in 1965, with which the Soviet Union sought to demonstrate not only its technological superiority but also the political superiority of socialism.[9]

The so-called Gagarin's Guard, the first cohort of Soviet cosmonauts, along with Valentina Tereshkova played an important role inside and outside the Soviet Union. They served as symbols of a new political style that clearly distanced itself from the era of Stalin and epitomised the Soviet campaigns for atheism and scientific education. As global [propaganda](#) figures, they represented the Soviet Union, as well as its political and social system, travelling the world in all blocs that had formed. In doing so, they were to strengthen the ties between the socialist states, promote communism in Third World countries and present a progressive Soviet Union to the West with Gagarin's famous smile.[10] Between 1961 and 1970, the cosmonauts attended over 60,000 public events in the Soviet Union and made 200 trips abroad, 42 of which were undertaken by Tereshkova alone.[11]

Although the public persona of the cosmonauts was planned and supervised by the state, the attempt to appropriate them as role models of the New Soviet Man did not work smoothly. The

cosmonauts partly resisted their transformation into propaganda icons and, after their heroization, partly indulged in alcoholic escapades that had to be hidden from the public's eye.[12]

3. Institutionalised heroism

3.1. The cosmonauts as socialist heroes

Since the New Soviet Man did not originate by itself from socialist society, it needed trend-setting role models like the cosmonauts, whose biographies were subsequently appropriated and whose deeds were orchestrated as major social events. This instrumentalisation of [heroization processes](#) by party politics is not only characteristic of the Soviet Union's political habitus, but also of the hero canon in other socialist countries.

With the help of the cosmonauts, the communist worldview could be effectively condensed into a message that was more compelling than any slogan or political training. As socialist heroes, they were a popular means of party-political agitation, ensuring uniform and controlled communication.[13]

The political cadres of the Soviet Union used Gagarin as an identification figure who reduced complex questions of meaning through his actions when promoting the cosmonaut as the template for the New Soviet Man.[14] He was to serve as a source of strength for both the party and the population, but also as a catalyst in the construction and further development of socialism.

One of the main functions of the socialist hero in general and the cosmonauts in particular was to generate trust. This trust was cultivated through the perceived closeness of the cosmonauts to the population. Extensive coverage in all mass media, appearances at parades or journeys undertaken by the hero contributed to this perception. The trust placed in their heroes by the population served as an intermediary step. It was supposed to then pass on to the party and the political system, which, according to the narrative, made the [hero's deeds](#) possible only through their policies.[15]

3.2. The guaranteed hero title

All cosmonauts were awarded the title "Hero of the Soviet Union" after their journeys into orbit. This [honorific title and medal](#), established in 1934 to honour seven rescue pilots, institutionalised heroism in the Soviet Union and heralded a change in heroism that was to last until the fall of socialism in Europe. State hero worship aimed at a new type of hero who no longer came into being through individual, spontaneous decisions but was specifically selected to perform their deeds and was prepared for them. At the centre of the state-ordained heroism of the cosmonauts was the vision of the New Man of Soviet Communism, who was destined to dominate both the world and outer space through science and technology. Through the distinction of the cosmonauts, space was culturally appropriated, and including, for example, cosmonauts from other socialist countries in the Soviet realm of heroes aimed to strengthen the brotherly bond of these states and reflect their unity to the outside world.[16]

Klaus Gestwa, for instance, describes the cosmonaut cult as a rescue measure that modernised the institutionalised Soviet heroism. After the communist founding fathers, leading party politicians, pilots, scientists, or athletes were often ascribed hero status in order to legitimise the power of the communist party cadres. The cosmonauts are often described in literature as heroes of a new era. Within this context, the cosmonauts of Czechoslovakia, the People's Republic of Poland and the German Democratic Republic (GDR), who flew into space in 1978 as participants in the Soviet

Interkosmos programme, are considered the last socialist heroes in their respective states.[17] The success or failure of their heroization can be viewed as an indicator of the mobilising power of the communist parties of Central Eastern Europe.

The paradox of the hero, having to be both an ideal role model and a relatable part of the masses, becomes particularly evident in the case of space travellers. The cosmonauts were considered the epitome of the New Soviet Man.[18] Despite being **military men**, almost all trained fighter pilots, their missions were staged as peaceful endeavours exclusively serving economic and scientific progress.[19] Male cosmonauts were presented in the media as extraordinary heroes and ideal role models for the youth and at the same time as completely 'normal' men, communists, loving husbands and fathers who shared their way of life with the rest of Soviet citizens.[20] In this way, they were both ideal and relatable to the masses.

4. Poster boys in space suits

4.1. The cosmonauts as the faces of space travel

From the late 1950s into the 1960s, the concept of space flight became omnipresent, especially in science fiction films and books. Images of Sputnik or the dogs that had been in space were found on numerous everyday objects, from cigarette packets to teacups. This trend continued with the cosmonauts.[21] Photographs showing the cosmonauts looking at themselves on the front page of *Pravda* after their successful landing or thanking the Soviet leadership for the support of the party became iconic. Pictures of them at the cosmonaut training centre, participating in social leisure activities – ideally with other cosmonaut candidates – and in the company of their families and children were ubiquitous. These seemingly everyday images further solidified the presentation of cosmonauts as ordinary people who were merely given the privilege of transforming the achievements of the entire nation into a practical act with their space flights. These motifs implied that the focus was not on the uniqueness of the individual, but on the achievement of the **collective**.[22]

Party-orchestrated events, such as the welcoming of the cosmonauts in Moscow after their space flights, produced iconic images of the Space Age that were disseminated through all available media channels and provided Soviet leaders the opportunity to partake in the fame and positive reception of the cosmonauts.[23]

In this way, the Space Age produced many new heroes and a few new heroines. They gave the otherwise top-secret space research a face that could be effectively used for propaganda purposes. Due to the strict secrecy surrounding all scientists involved in the space programme, the cosmonauts appeared as the sole public figures, thereby embodying all **heroic agency**. Even though the identity of the Soviet chief rocket designer Sergei Korolev was revealed after his death in 1966,[24] the cosmonauts remained the central figures in the Soviet space narrative, and their faces and life stories intricately interwoven with the heroic image of the space traveller that was meticulously planned by the party.

In the Soviet Union, the cosmonauts of Gagarin's Guard were regarded as post-war heroes who were leading towards a utopian future, stood for progress, and symbolised an end to everything old – war and Stalinism. The cosmos served as the perfect metaphor for an emerging, science and technology-oriented Soviet Union in which the New Man triumphed over nature.[25]

Despite the party's affirmation of gender equality, significant differences emerged between the treatment of the male cosmonauts and Valentina Tereshkova. She was rarely seen in military attire

but instead portrayed as a neat and deliberately non-sexualised woman, wife and loving mother. Images of male cosmonauts with high military ranks, however, were usually contrasted with images of them as caring fathers or even husbands helping in the household.[26] While the male cosmonaut was thus portrayed as the conqueror of space and at the same time the head of the family who supported his wife in household matters, the female cosmonaut was presented as an exception who was expected to return to traditional femininity upon returning to Earth.

Gagarin's tragic death in 1968, resulting from an accident during a training flight, which to this day remains not fully explained, caused horror but inscribed the first cosmonaut all the more deeply into the memory of his fellow citizens.[27] In present-day Russia, Gagarin's pioneering spaceflight continues to be considered one of the Soviet Union's historic achievements. After the uncomfortable revelations of perestroika, many Russians still take pride in the Soviet space triumphs.[28] Similarly, Valentina Tereshkova remains prominent in the Russian public eye, often being entrusted with prestigious assignments. At the opening ceremony of the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, for example, she carried the Olympic flag.[29]

4.2. The cosmonauts as transnational heroes

In the late 1970s, the culmination of transnational hero construction among socialist countries was reached when, in July 1976, the Soviet Union informed Czechoslovakia, the People's Republic of Poland and the GDR that representatives of these brother countries would now also be allowed to participate in its space flights as part of the so-called Interkosmos programme. Two years later, in the summer of 1978, one representative of each of these countries travelled in a Soyuz capsule together with a Soviet commander to the Salyut 6 space station, where they spent almost seven days before returning to Earth.[30]

The meticulously planned media campaigns in the cosmonauts' home countries commenced already during the flight. Upon their return from space, they, like all cosmonauts before them, were awarded the "Hero of the Soviet Union" medal in the Kremlin (fig. 1), followed by a festive reception (fig. 2) and the highest honours in their home countries. For example, the first German in space, Sigmund Jähn was awarded the honorific title and medal "Held der DDR" (Hero of the GDR) by Erich Honecker (fig. 3).[31]

When Jähn's rocket took off into the cosmos, the optimism of the first years of the Honecker government had already faded. In the late GDR, the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED) struggled to create new heroes.[32] Although the honorific title "Hero of Labour" was awarded until the GDR ended, its diminishing appeal symbolises the declining credibility of the party's propaganda. Nevertheless, Sigmund Jähn's modest and people-oriented demeanour was conveyed so credibly in the late 1970s that it seemed almost incongruous with that of party officials. Jähn's spaceflight still reverberates, especially in East Germany. The fortieth anniversary of his flight in August 2018 prompted positive, nostalgic coverage on German public television,[33] as did the extensive, equally positive obituaries after his death in September 2019.[34]

Fig. 1 - 3: Honours for Sigmund Jähn after his return from space



Fig. 1:
Sigmund Jähn receives the “Hero of the Soviet Union” medal from Leonid Brezhnev, General Secretary of the CPSU, in the Kremlin shortly after returning from space.

12 September 1978. Photo of the Ministry of State Security of the GDR, archived by the Bundesarchiv: BArch MfS, HA VIII, Fo 78, Bild 0012.

Source: Ministerium für Staatssicherheit der DDR / BStU

Licence: With kind permission of the BStU; subject to authorisation.



Fig. 2:
Sigmund Jähn (l.) with his commander, Soviet cosmonaut Valery Bykovsky (r.), and Erich Honecker at the welcome parade in Berlin after their spaceflight.

21 September 1978. Photo of the Ministry of State Security of the GDR, archived by the Bundesarchiv: BArch MfS HA VIII, Fo 78, Bild 0023.

Source: Ministerium für Staatssicherheit der DDR / BStU

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Fig. 3:
Erich Honecker congratulates Sigmund Jähn in Berlin on his successful space flight. Shortly afterwards he awards him the medal “Hero of the GDR”.

21. September 1978. Photo of the Ministry of State Security of the GDR, archived by the Bundesarchiv: BArch MfS, HA VIII, Fo 78, Bild 0024.

Source: Ministerium für Staatssicherheit der DDR / BStU

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In contrast, the People's Republic of Poland faced a severe economic crisis during the 1970s, placing the Polish government under significant pressure. To gain credibility, it sought political successes. The space flight of the first (and only) Polish cosmonaut, Mirosław Hermaszewski, filled this need. However, Hermaszewski's spaceflight coincided with the election of Archbishop of Krakow Karol Wojtyła to become Pope John Paul II, diverting public attention in Poland away from the cosmonaut. This propagandistic defeat against the developments in the Roman Catholic Church was the Polish United Workers Party's last attempt to establish a socialist hero.[35] The later involvement of Hermaszewski in the Military Council for National Salvation (WRON) while martial law was instituted in the early 1980s continues to impact his public image to this day. For many Poles, martial law was one of the worst repressions under socialism and the Cosmonaut was part of it. This led to court cases initiated by the ruling PiS party in spring 2018 to strip him of his military honours. [36] In the end, the proposed law was vetoed by President Andrzej Duda and Hermaszewski was able to keep his honours and his military pension.[37]

5. Current Research

In addition to extensive literature on Soviet space history and Yuri Gagarin, the historians Silke Satjukow and Rainer Gries took on the phenomenon of the socialist hero in their anthology *Sozialistische Helden: Eine Kulturgeschichte von Propagandafiguren in Osteuropa und der DDR* (Socialist Heroes: A Cultural History of Propaganda Figures in Eastern Europe and the GDR).[38] Subsequent German scholarship on socialist hero figures consistently draws on the theoretical reflections of Satjukow and Gries on the construction of socialist heroes. Roland Hirte contributed one of the few scholarly articles about the East German cosmonaut to Satjukow's and Gries's anthology with his essay *Ein später Held. Sigmund Jähns Flug ins All* (A Late Hero. Sigmund Jähn's Flight into Space), which goes beyond the technical aspects of spaceflight. Gerhard Kowalski's essay *Der Rote Kolumbus* (The Red Columbus), published in the same volume, explores Soviet space travel. The first and only Polish cosmonaut has so far been studied mainly by Paweł Szulc, who, in *Mirosław Hermaszewski – kosmiczna ikona propagandy sukcesu* (Mirosław Hermaszewski – The Cosmic Icon of the Propaganda of Success), also delves into the intra-party considerations for the propagandistic use of spaceflight.

While the assertion that the cosmonauts were the last socialist heroes is repeatedly found in research literature,[39] the research discourse has largely omitted a comparative, transnational perspective on cosmonauts as socialist hero types, and mostly focused on the Soviet Union while neglecting other European socialist countries. The author's publication *Kosmos und Kommunismus. Die Kosmonauten Mirosław Hermaszewski und Sigmund Jähn als Helden in der Volksrepublik Polen und der DDR* (Cosmos and Communism. The Cosmonauts Mirosław Hermaszewski and Sigmund Jähn as Heroes in the Polish People's Republic and the GDR) attempts to close this gap by examining the construction and realisation of the heroic narrative of the Polish cosmonaut Hermaszewski and the East German cosmonaut Jähn.

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- 2 Sigmund Jähn (l.) with his commander, Soviet cosmonaut Valery Bykovsky (r.), and Erich Honecker at the welcome parade in Berlin after their spaceflight., 21 September 1978. Photo of the Ministry of State Security of the GDR, archived by the Bundesarchiv: BArch MfS HA VIII, Fo 78, Bild 0023.
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- 3 Erich Honecker congratulates Sigmund Jähn in Berlin on his successful space flight. Shortly afterwards he awards him the medal "Hero of the GDR"., 21. September 1978. Photo of the Ministry of State Security of the GDR, archived by the Bundesarchiv: BArch MfS, HA VIII, Fo 78, Bild 0024.
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Subject Headings (LOC)	Sputnik satellites , Astronautics , Astronautics and civilization , Astronauts , Heroes--Soviet Union , Outer space , Propaganda , East German , Socialism , Space flight , Propaganda , Soviet , Heroes
Index	<p>Authors: Christina Heiduck</p> <p>Persons and Figures: Juri Gagarin, Joseph Stalin / Josef Stalin, Juri Leviatan, Miroslaw Hermaszewski, Valentina Tereshkova, Pope John Paul II, Sigmund Jähn, Erich Honecker, Sergei Koroljow, Valery Bykovsky, Leonid Brezhnev, New Soviet Man (figure), Andrzej Duda</p> <p>Spaces and Locations: Russia, Soviet Union, German Democratic Republic (GDR) / East Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Kremlin, Moskow, Sochi, USA, Europe, Eastern Europe</p> <p>Time and Events: 20th century, 21st century, 1950s, 1960s, 1970s, Nazism, Cold War, Korean War (1950–1953), Perestroika, 2014 Winter Olympics</p>

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