



Cosmonaut: A Cultural History

Cathleen S. Lewis

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The symbolism of the Soviet space program is examined in Cathleen S. Lewis's cultural history *Cosmonaut*.

On April 12, 1961, Yuri Gagarin became the first human being to enter space. Though brief, Gagarin's venture outside of Earth's atmosphere led to an intensification of the space race between the Soviet Union and the United States and added additional heat to the Cold War. The triumph over the United States became a propaganda victory for the Soviet Communist regime, and a new type of hero was born: the cosmonaut.

Initiated by Nikita Khrushchev after he dismantled Josef Stalin's cult of personality, the Soviet space program spearheaded the change to focus on the collective, not the leader, while at the same time serving as a distraction from the lingering yoke of Stalinism. Space scientists became a group of anonymous laborers; cosmonauts thanked the Soviet people upon their returns. And Lewis notes that the propaganda that surrounded the Soviet space program was in place from the very beginning: the technical malfunctions and botched landing of Gagarin's flight were covered up. The biographies and professional accomplishments of the cosmonauts were doctored to fit the narrative of the cosmonaut as a Soviet hero.

Lewis brings the disconnect between propaganda and real life to the fore with the exploitation of cosmonauts for political purposes—from the arbitrary selection process leading up to the space flights to cosmonauts' curated lives under the watchful eye of the Communist party. In this context, the space flight of Valentina Tereshkova, the first woman to enter space, is revealed to be something other than the feminist accomplishment it is generally regarded to be.

An innovative study of pop culture, memorabilia, propaganda, and hero worship, *Cosmonaut* brings the Soviet space program to life from inside Soviet society.

ERIKA HARLITZ KERN (July / August 2023)

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