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Introduction

After the collapse of the USSR in 1991, people throughout Russia seemed to participate in the reevaluation of the seventy-four-year experiment. The failure spared nothing from reassessment, including the most traumatic experience of the nation—World War II. For an all-too-brief period of the 1990s, town halls, television, cafés, and dining rooms overflowed with arguments over the true meaning of the USSR. These post-Soviet discussions emerged out of the human need to evaluate and edit the experience and to determine how to celebrate and remember the past. Former Soviet citizens sought to balance the memory of communist rule between the nostalgia of being a great power and the regret of a failed and corrupt state. The image of the Cold War hero, the cosmonaut, could not evade this reevaluation despite its seemingly uncontroversial past. The Russian population experienced the stress of choosing between nostalgia for a romantic and hopeful past and a need to blame someone for the failure to fulfill the promises of postwar life. As a result, two images of the cosmonaut exist today—that of the hopefulness of youth and that of the forlorn victim of a cynical state.

This book presents new avenues and perspectives from which to understand how the image of the Russian cosmonaut has changed over time. It relies heavily on sources outside of the traditional archives, incorporating visual and material culture, films, and literature, and introduces a range of actors in the space program that traditional histories of the space program rarely address. Doing so realizes two goals. The first is to discern the limitations of state-sanctioned images to perpetuate an idealized concept. The USSR could only hope for control and manage a vision for a short period, after which individual interpretations inevitably emerged. The second goal is to understand better the process through which the Russians have reexamined their past in the aftermath of the collapse of the USSR. This book does not describe a decline and fall of the cosmonaut, nor even a withering

of the image. It does explain a change of public and artistic opinion once freed from close state direction. From this perspective, one can understand the transition and link between the images of the smiling, happy face of a young cosmonaut of the 1960s through the twenty-first-century portrayal of a perplexed hero who must surmount the state and bureaucratic forces that constrain him.

The public unveiling of the cosmonaut as a state instrument occurred with the first announcement of a human being orbiting the Earth. The official press agency of the USSR, TASS, publicized the flight of Yuri Gagarin on 12 April 1961, just a few minutes after his rocket launched him into space. Upon landing, Gagarin's prepared formal thank-yous to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), the Soviet government, and Nikita Khrushchev contained tried-and-true phrases from Soviet heroic rhetoric. He paid tribute to the integrated party and state structure that built his equipment. The one surprising note in this relatively low-key proclamation was a final line, stating that the "accomplishment of a piloted space mission opens up new vistas for humanity's conquest of space." Gagarin's message made no mention of the Cold War competition with the United States and situated the accomplishment of his flight beyond the borders of the USSR. It implied that he was a peaceful pioneer who was leading the world into a new era. That was the birth of what I term "the Red Stuff"—the result of generations of gestation of the idea of sending a Russian into space. Almost as soon as it was born, however, the elements of the Red Stuff began to unravel, as though the carefully managed accomplishment that took generations to create succumbed to an inevitable entropy. Within fifty years of his flight, the role and the shapers of the public understanding of Gagarin were quite different from those of the 1960s.

The origins of the Russian cosmonaut image resulted from extensive contributions of past generations and immediate needs of contemporary politicians. Immediately after Gagarin's landing, the state, party, and Nikita Khrushchev's leadership began to expand his image beyond the noble cause of leading humanity to conquer space. Gagarin and subsequent cosmonauts quickly became Soviet Cold Warriors, exemplars of a new Soviet generation and the visible representatives of thousands of anonymous space workers. To stretch the Red Stuff to cover so many purposes within the party and state, Khrushchev relied on the creative energies of many sectors of society to augment the material, visual, and literary culture that supported the cause. After the mid-1960s, the propaganda utility of the Red Stuff dwindled at home and abroad, leaving many who had played a

supporting role to their own devices to interpret the meaning of Russians in space. The party state and leadership changed their attitude and personnel after 1961. Russians in space remained a reality, even as the meaning of the Red Stuff had changed with the changing world around it.

"The Red Stuff"

The phrase "Red Stuff" has dual origins. The word "Red" in Russian is more than the name of a color. Its connotations go beyond the best-known and relatively recent political distinction between the Reds (Bolshevik) and Whites (anti-Bolshevik) of the Russian Revolution. In Russian, "red" has an ancient meaning associated with beauty, goodness, and honor. Historical examples of this usage include the Red Square in Moscow, which originated as a public market space situated between St. Basil's Cathedral and the Spassky Tower (Christ, the Savior) of the Moscow Kremlin. The word referred to the beautiful square over which hung the country's most cherished icon and the church-monument to Ivan IV's (commonly known as "the Terrible") defeat of Kazan. The word conveyed both physical and spiritual beauty. For the last thousand years, Russian Orthodox households have had a "red corner" that featured icons and talismans of Russian Orthodox prayer and scripture. During a brief period in the twentieth century, secular icons of Soviet party leaders (also "Red") temporarily replaced religious artifacts. In the last quarter century, the overtly religious character of the red corner has returned, even on board the secular International Space Station. During the seventy-four-year period of Soviet rule, Bolshevik leaders took advantage of the positive connotations of the Russian and revolutionary associations with the color red to buttress their power. "Red" in this book refers not only to that which is communist, but also to that which is intrinsically Russian, and which reforms itself within the contexts of political, economic, and social change.

The second part of the phrase gestures to Tom Wolfe's book about the *Mercury* astronauts, *The Right Stuff*. Wolfe used the term to encapsulate the mental and physical characteristics of test pilots and their willingness to take risks, as exemplified by Chuck Yeager. In contrast, the Red Stuff describes the process of adding layers of meaning to the idea of Russians in space from the end of the nineteenth century through the first decade of the twenty-first. It includes the act of selecting a different and broader collection of personality, family, and cultural characteristics that best reflected the authors' vision of human spaceflight and deleting others that do not

match contemporary expectations. These traits do not solely define technical prowess, but the possessor's ability to act as a guide to society into the future or to serve as a mirror from which to reflect on the past. The Red Stuff is a Russian version of human spaceflight, rendered in the image of the Russian cosmonaut.

Placing Soviet Human Spaceflight into Historical Context

This book attempts to reconcile the history of the late USSR and Russia in the twenty-first century with the historiography of the Soviet human spaceflight program. The two fields frequently referenced each other for the last sixty years but have never offered a resolution to the intricate interaction between the two histories—a function that the public image of the cosmonaut fills.

Knowledge of the Soviet space program has changed dramatically over the last fifty years, reflecting changes in the availability of archival resources. Initially, Soviet secrecy encouraged extreme methodologies. Early space historians, lacking traditional archival and documentary evidence, relied on remote observations and close comparisons to the more open American space program to understand what had gone on within the USSR. They began by presuming similarities between the early Soviet human spaceflight program and the American *Mercury* program, almost as though the latter program induced the former's actions, adopting the binary superpower competition theme that dominated US-Soviet politics of the era. More sophisticated historians relied on theoretical political-historical analysis to place Soviet space history within a comprehensible context. In all cases, historians such as James Oberg and Walter McDougall studied cosmonauts within the context of the Cold War and made direct comparisons to their American counterparts.[1] Their arguments are understandable. Oberg, among others, judged Soviet activities based on some incomplete official statements, observations from specialists, incomplete published records, and his technical knowledge of the American program. McDougall was assessing the technocratic origins of the space program and its implications from the perspective of the politics of the United States during the Space Race. Although this comparison served a purpose from a political perspective, it fell short of recognizing the indigenous Russian cultural origins of the idea of spaceflight and local motivations and strategies for exploring space.