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“Let Us Look into the Future”:
Representations of Upward Social
Mobility in Soviet Space Culture

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HIST 485

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Abstract

Beginning in 1957 with the launch of Sputnik, the world's first artificial satellite, the Soviet Union initiated what would come to be known as the Space Age. This scientific endeavor produced an enormous and unprecedented cultural phenomenon identified by historians today as "space culture," or "cosmic culture." This "space culture" permeated both official and popular discourse in the Soviet Union from the time of Khrushchev to the fall of Communism in 1991, and an examination of how space exploration was represented in the USSR is critical to understanding the society more broadly. Most historians have understood the Khrushchev Era as a decisive break from the Stalin Era. In contrast, in this paper I show that space culture representations, as conveyed through posters and other forms of visual propaganda, daily consumer items, folk art, film and public ceremonies reveal continuities in Stalinist narratives of upward social mobility that few scholars have examined to date. These narratives center around heroic and mythic expressions of space exploration as a means of massive upward social mobility through material prosperity, education, gender equality and national prestige. Intersecting both officially-sanctioned as well as unofficial and popular discourse, representations of space exploration in the Soviet Union contain crucial insights in evaluating the role of science and ideology in culture.

The woman looks into the mirror. Beaming, she proclaims to her fairy-godmother: “Show me. I know what has already been. I’d like to know what will be.” The smiling fairy-godmother beckons her through the mirror and into the dream world, takes her by the hand and leads her into an automobile, which begins to soar over the skyline of Moscow. The woman begins to sing: “What happiness, flying through the ether, flying by ourselves, flying all by ourselves ... all of what was once just a song, what we dreamed about and what we loved, has become more wonderful in our living Soviet fairy-tale today!”¹ This scene occurs in Grigorii Aleksandrov’s 1940 film *The Radiant Path*, which leads the audience through the story of Tanya, a simple woman who is raised up from illiterate poverty to the status of an educated, elite worker in the Stalinist 1930s, with the flying car symbolizing the future possibilities of the Soviet state. It was only seventeen years later that the Soviet Union sent the first satellite into orbit and less than twenty-five years later that it sent the first human beings flying into outer space.² A 1957 film on the success of Sputnik and the anticipated future of the Soviet space program, *Road to the Stars*, would echo a variation on Tanya’s words with its proclamation “Let us look into the future.”³

¹ *The Radiant Path* (Svetly Put’), directed by Grigorii Aleksandrov (1940, Mosfilm), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t1wM1FSTIm0>.

² “Space Race Timeline,” Royal Museums Greenwich, accessed April 2, 2020, <https://www.rmg.co.uk/discover/explore/space-race-timeline>.

³ *Road to the Stars* (Doroga k zvyozdam), directed by Pavel Klushantsev (1957, Lennauchfilm, 2020), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9CX0oSjwLqI>. A pioneering film in terms of technical content, the fictional space station featured in the film also bears striking resemblance to that used in Stanley Kubrick’s 1968 film *2001: A Space Odyssey*.



Figure 1. Tanya and her fairy-godmother rise into the sky above Moscow in the film *The Radiant Path* by Grigorii Aleksandrov, 1940.⁴

In her essay analyzing *The Radiant Path*, Maria Enzensberger explores the use of fairy-tale-like representations of social mobility in Soviet popular film and about the place of this “folklorization” within the broader Stalinist ethos and socialist project.⁵ In doing so, she makes use of the famous Stalin-era song “March of the Aviators” (1931): “We were born to make fairy-tales come true/to conquer distances and space/Reason gave us steel wings for arms/and a

⁴ All images used in this essay have been identified and sourced correctly to the best of my ability. In certain instances, this has presented certain difficulties for a myriad of reasons, including the ubiquitous use of certain images in popular sources or commercial news publications without original Russian citations. In spite of this, I have endeavored to accurately source and date all images used in this paper.

⁵ Maria Enzensberger, “‘We were born to turn a fairy tale into reality’: Grigorii Aleksandrov’s *The Radiant Path*,” in *Stalinism and Soviet Cinema*, ed. Richard Taylor and Derek Spring, 97 (London: Routledge, 1993).

flaming motor for a heart.”⁶ Both the song and the film both have several key elements in common: the use of the fairy-tale motif, the imagery of flight, the implications of social mobility and a brighter future, and the special quality of the Soviet people and system in fundamentally transforming reality.

It was “the most happy and honestly celebrated public holiday ever in the city’s history” in Moscow the day that Yuri Gagarin, the first human to visit outer space, returned to the city from his space voyage.⁷ A giant red banner carried by the crowd proclaimed “Long live the great Soviet people--builders of communism!”⁸ It is no coincidence that the same “March of the Aviators” was played by a military brass band as Gagarin’s plane touched down.⁹ From Red Square, Nikita Khrushchev proudly proclaimed the now familiar refrain of Soviet achievement: “The unfulfilled dream of conquering outer space -- has been indeed the greatest of all human dreams. We are proud of the fact that this dream became true through our Soviet people, that this fairy-tale has been brought into reality by them.”¹⁰ The advent of spaceflight within the Soviet Union would spawn what scholars have since termed “space culture” or “cosmic culture,” the

⁶ Adam Bartos, *Kosmos: A Portrait of the Russian Space Age* (Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, 2001), 88.

⁷ Matthias Schwartz, “A Dream Come True: Close Encounters with Outer Space in Soviet Popular Scientific Journals of the 1950s and 1960s,” in *Soviet Space Culture: Cosmic Enthusiasm in Socialist Societies*, ed. Eva Maurer, Julia Richers, Monica Rüthers and Carmen Scheide, 232 (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

⁸ “The Capital Meets Its Hero” (text), “1961: First Cosmonaut; Texts,” Seventeen Moments in Soviet History, Michigan State University, accessed January 2020, <http://soviethistory.msu.edu/1961-2/first-cosmonaut/first-cosmonauts-texts/the-capital-meets-its-hero/>.

⁹ Slava Gerovitch, “The Human inside a Propaganda Machine: The Public Image and Professional Identity of Soviet Cosmonauts,” in *Into the Cosmos: Space Exploration and Soviet Culture*, ed. James Andrews and Asif Siddiqi, 78 (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2011).

¹⁰ Matthias Schwartz, “A Dream Come True: Close Encounters with Outer Space in Soviet Popular Scientific Journals of the 1950s and 1960s,” in *Soviet Space Culture*, 232-33.

phenomenon of cultural representations of space exploration and the mass popular reception of and engagement with these representations.

The rhetorical recurrence of bringing dreams and fairy-tales into reality raises the question: is there a direct connection between the Stalinist fairy-tale of social mobility and space culture in the post-Stalinist Soviet Union? In this paper I will argue that there is indeed a direct connection between space culture and representations of social mobility and that this connection represents a continuity of Stalinist discourse. Social mobility, specifically upward mobility, is here understood in broad terms as referring to the improvement of material conditions, education, technology, and social status for a given people. While considerable work has been done analyzing the empirical reality of social mobility in the Soviet Union, most famously by Sheila Fitzpatrick, this essay will concern itself with how upward social mobility was represented in Soviet society.¹¹ These representations encompass official publications and unofficial discourse, driven by state interests but with enormous popular participation. It is also necessary to point out that social mobility is not solely limited to class concerns, but importantly intersects with gender relations, Soviet notions of women's liberation and advancement, as well as national prestige; the status of the Soviet Union on the international stage and how this directly involved ordinary Soviet citizens. In order to investigate the relationship between representations of social mobility and space culture, I will draw from statements made by key figures as well as visual representations which permeated Soviet everyday life, including posters, ordinary domestic objects and films, intersecting both the public and private spheres of life.

¹¹ Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Education and Social Mobility in the Soviet Union, 1921-1934* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

Despite the wealth of invaluable scholarship on space culture in the Soviet Union, most particularly within the last decade, the connection between Stalinist and post-Stalinist representations of social mobility and space culture specifically remains an underexplored avenue in the field. That said, there is a great deal of scholarship relevant to this issue, even though it is not framed in the light of social mobility specifically. Asif Siddiqi, for example, has dealt with the history of cosmic enthusiasm in pre-Soviet and early Soviet Russia and has commented on how cosmic enthusiasm intersected with class and elite status.¹² Slava Gerovitch has explored representations of cosmonauts as mythic, heroic figures and “New Soviet Men,” in the context of a uniquely Soviet concept of modernity.¹³ In her essays “Cosmic Enlightenment” and “The Contested Skies,” Victoria Smolkin has done considerable work explaining the role of atheism within Soviet space culture and vice versa, which is relevant to social mobility due to the Soviet framing of religion as backwards and ignorant.¹⁴ Furthermore, Roshanna Sylvester has analyzed the role of women and girls in space culture in the context of Valentina Tereshkova and representations of women in cosmonautics and science.¹⁵ This is a crucial stepping stone to addressing the subject of social mobility in the context of gender. Despite these recent studies, presently scholarship on the subject of space culture as a representation of social mobility in the Stalinist tradition remains poorly developed.

¹² Asif Siddiqi, *The Red Rockets' Glare: Spaceflight and the Soviet Imagination, 1857-1957* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 303.

¹³ Slava Gerovitch, *Soviet Space Mythologies: Public Images, Private Memories, and the Making of a Cultural Identity* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2015).

¹⁴ Victoria Smolkin-Rothrock, “Cosmic Enlightenment: Scientific Atheism and the Soviet Conquest of Space,” in *Into the Cosmos*, 159; Victoria Smolkin-Rothrock, “The Contested Skies: The Battle of Science and Religion in the Soviet Planetarium,” in *Soviet Space Culture*, 57.

¹⁵ Roshanna Sylvester, “She Orbits over the Sex Barrier: Soviet Girls and the Tereshkova Moment,” in *Into the Cosmos*, 195; Roshanna Sylvester, “Let’s Find Out Where the Cosmonaut School Is’: Soviet Girls and Cosmic Visions in the Aftermath of Tereshkova,” in *Soviet Space Culture*, 121.

In addition to not directly addressing the issue of social mobility specifically, scholars have tended to emphasize de-Stalinization and Khrushchev's re-launch of socialism in discussing the dynamics of space culture. This falls into the dominant paradigm of a strong break between the Stalin and Khrushchev eras, a break most notable in Khrushchev's secret denunciation of Stalin to the Congress of the Communist Party in 1956.¹⁶ The analysis of space culture in terms of the notion of a hard societal break between Stalin and Khrushchev continues to dominate scholarship. For example, Cathleen Lewis has pointed out that "the cosmonaut myth played a major role in Khrushchev's attempts to de-Stalinize Soviet society—to break with the Stalinist past and to reconnect with the original revolutionary aspirations for a communist utopia."¹⁷ In their essay "What Does Soviet 'Space Culture' Mean?" Maurer, Richers, Rütters and Scheide also present space culture within the framework of de-Stalinization, pointing out that "the subsequent process of de-Stalinization brought about changes in many different fields," and that Sputnik "refuelled utopian hopes, became a symbol and part of the re-launch of socialism and in turn shaped Soviet history, culture, media and lifestyles for the next generation."¹⁸ Discussed throughout much of the literature is the sense of optimism and openness which followed the process of de-Stalinization in the Khrushchev years and how this is connected to space culture.

¹⁶ Nikita Khrushchev, "On the Cult of Personality and Its Consequences," delivered at the Twentieth Party Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union," February 25, 1956, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, From the Congressional Record: Proceedings and Debates of the 84th Congress, 2nd Session (May 22, 1956-June 11, 1956), C11, Part 7 (June 4, 1956), pp. 9389-9403. <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/115995>

¹⁷ Slava Gerovitch, "Creating Memories: Myth, Identity and Culture in the Russian Space Age," in *Remembering the Space Age*, ed. Stephen Dick (Washington: National Aeronautics and Space Administration, 2008), 214.

¹⁸ Eva Maurer, Julia Richers, Monica Rütters and Carmen Scheide, "What Does 'Space Culture' Mean in Soviet Society?" in *Soviet Space Culture*, 5.

These insights are indeed critical and important to understanding Soviet space culture. On the other hand, they must be considered in conjunction with a considerable degree of continuity from the Stalin era which scholars continue to under-emphasize. Khrushchev himself was fully willing to acknowledge a certain continuation of the Stalinist ethos. As the quasi-dissident Soviet historians Roy and Zhores Medvedev wrote, “In March 1963, Khrushchev retreated from the anti-Stalin position...he [Khrushchev] justified Stalin’s actions up to 1934, saying that there must be due recognition for ‘Stalin’s contributions to the Party and to the Communist movement. Even now we feel that Stalin was devoted to Communism, he was a Marxist, this cannot and should not be denied.’”¹⁹ Leaving aside the personal opinions of Khrushchev, this essay argues that the space culture of the later Soviet Union was an articulation and outgrowth of the Stalinist culture which preceded it, not a break. As Siddiqi points out, space culture in the Soviet Union was primarily the domain of a newly-created middle class: “The middle class...were both the producers and consumers of the new Soviet space fad.”²⁰ It is important here to point out that this middle class was the result of an unprecedented degree of social mobility and technological growth, the majority of which took place under Stalin, including the creation of an entirely new, Sovietized intelligentsia elite, as Fitzpatrick argued more than a generation ago.²¹

It stands to reason then that the story of space culture in the Soviet Union is itself a story of Stalinist social mobility. The importance of representing and emphasizing this point to the general public was not lost on Yuri Gagarin, the product of a Stalinist upbringing who

¹⁹ Roy Medvedev and Zhores Medvedev, *Khrushchev: The Years in Power*, trans. Andrew Derkin (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1978), 148.

²⁰ Asif Siddiqi, *The Red Rockets’ Glare: Spaceflight and the Soviet Imagination, 1857-1957* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 302.

²¹ Sheila Fitzpatrick, “Stalin and the Making of a New Elite, 1928-1939,” *Slavic Review* 38, no. 3 (Sept. 1979), 377-402.

emphasized his peasant origins prior to his rise to elite status: “I am a simple Soviet man. I was born March 9, 1934, to the family of a peasant. The place of my birth was in the Smolensk region. There were no princes or nobility in my family tree. Before the revolution my parents were poor peasants. The older generation of my family, my grandfather and grandmother, were also poor peasants, and there were no princes or counts in our family.”²² The significance of Gagarin’s status as someone with lowly origins who quite literally transcended the limits of the world—crucially, under the caring guidance of the Communist Party and in the name of the Soviet homeland—represents a continuation of themes of upward social mobility from the Stalin era reflected in films like *The Radiant Path*, as well as echoing closely the lines of post-Stalinist popular representations of space exploration and the heroism of cosmonauts. It is also not without coincidence, then, that the refrain from “March of the Enthusiasts,” the song originally sung by Tanya in *The Radiant Path* which became prominent throughout the socialist world, was featured in space propaganda, with posters featuring variations of the line “We will carry through the worlds and ages!” (see Figure 2).²³

²² Yuri Gagarin, “Yuri Gagarin’s First Speech About His Flight Into Space,” *The Atlantic*, April 2011, accessed March 2020, paragraph 1, <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2011/04/yuri-gagarins-first-speech-about-his-flight-into-space/237134/>.

²³ “March of the Enthusiasts” (music), “1936: Rebuilding of Moscow; Music,” Seventeen Moments in Soviet History, Michigan State University, accessed March 2020, <http://soviethistory.msu.edu/1936-2/rebuilding-of-moscow/rebuilding-of-moscow-music/>.



Figure 2. “We will carry the banner of our country through the worlds and ages!” 1961. The language of several Soviet space posters evoked the language of the “March of the Enthusiasts,” from *The Radiant Path*. Source: Kino-USSR.ru.

The representation of space exploration as being an important part of the overall continuous Soviet project of elevating humanity is also found in official pronouncements, such as Leonid Brezhnev’s 1964 statement “In the great and serious cause of the exploration and development of outer space, the spirit of frantic gamblers is alien to us. We see in this cause part and parcel of the tremendous constructive work the Soviet people are doing in conformity with the general line of our party in all spheres of the economy, science and culture, in the name of man, for the sake of man.”²⁴ Spaceflight, then, became both a new theoretical source of advanced transportation as aviation and the Moscow metro had represented in the Stalinist period, as well

²⁴ Leonid Brezhnev, “Text of Brezhnev’s Speech at Ceremonies in Red Square,” *The New York Times*, trans. Tass, October 20, 1964, accessed March 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/1964/10/20/archives/text-of-brezhnevs-speech-at-ceremonies-in-red-square.html>.

as a source of awe and inspiration for Soviet citizens. It became visible proof from their government that ascension to what was previously thought impossible was now indisputable reality and that this was a tremendous source of international prestige for the now ultra-modern, scientific Soviet Union, which could not only compete on the world stage with advanced capitalist countries, but win laurels for itself. Cold War dynamics, a key feature of most Space Age historical literature, also feature in Soviet notions of social mobility, due to the Stalinist tradition of understanding the Soviet Union as the heir to the Enlightenment and successor to American hegemony. This is reflected in national prestige concerns as well as Space Age continuations of the Stalinist heroic tradition.

The Stalinist Heroic Tradition and the Development of Space Age Popular Engagement

One important arena in which Stalinist continuity is well-embraced in the literature is on the subject of the connection between the pantheon of aviation heroes of the 1930s and the cosmonaut heroes of the 1960s. Slava Gerovitch specifically makes the point that the nickname for the great pilots of the 1930s “Stalin’s falcons,” was echoed by Sergei Korolev, the director of the Soviet space program until his death in 1966, in his referring to the first cosmonauts as “my little eagles.”²⁵ Despite the fact that, as Gerovitch goes on to argue, the agency of cosmonauts within their spacecrafts was considerably less than the agency of pilots, from the perspective of myth and representation cosmonauts had more or less the same function. The realm of cosmonautics thus “adopted the spectacle and hero worship of aviation culture under Stalin.”²⁶

²⁵ Slava Gerovitch, *Soviet Space Mythologies: Public Images, Private Memories, and the Making of a Cultural Identity* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2015), 53.

²⁶ Steven Harris, “Dawn of the Soviet Jet Age: Aeroflot Passengers and Aviation Culture under Khrushchev,” [unpublished manuscript]. Fredericksburg: University of Mary Washington; 2020, 16.

This connection between Stalinist aviators and post-Stalinist cosmonauts has key implications for the subject of social mobility and the return of the “folklorization,” mentioned earlier. According to Gerovitch the aviators and cosmonauts both represented the “New Soviet Man” of their day, and the widely-read biographies of aviators and cosmonauts mostly followed the same pattern of upward mobility: “humble beginnings, childhood burdened by wartime hardship, encouragement by the family and teachers, good education paid for by the Soviet state, a wise mentor who taught the core communist values...and finally coming back with an important message reaffirming the abovementioned values.”²⁷

This trajectory, which bears remarkable resemblance to the journey of Tanya in *The Radiant Path*, who is given free education and an important mission by the state and ultimately proclaims a message of wisdom and goodwill, is very clearly a national mythos which pervaded both the Stalinist era and the Space Age, representing an emphatic Soviet answer to the American Dream.²⁸ The optimistic and demanding Stalinist slogan “Higher, further, better” remained the popular ethos of the Space Age.²⁹ Despite de-Stalinization, the slogan not only continued to hold sway but effectively was granted new life by the replacement of the skies with the cosmos as the new frontier for Soviet success, an ultra-modern and technological answer to yet another American phenomenon—manifest destiny. These comparisons to American modes of thinking directly relate to social mobility because of the Soviet Union’s self-image as the heir to and paragon of the Enlightenment, and thus, the natural inheritor of American technological

²⁷ Gerovitch, *Soviet Space Mythologies*, 13.

²⁸ *The Radiant Path*, directed by Grigorii Aleksandrov (1940, Mosfilm, 2020), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t1wMIFSTIm0>.

²⁹ Eva Maurer, Julia Richers, Monica Rütters and Carmen Scheide, “What Does ‘Space Culture’ Mean in Soviet Society?” in *Soviet Space Culture*, 6.

hegemony and the promise of rapid social mobility. Stephen Kotkin in particular makes the case for Stalinist civilization as a reflection of the Enlightenment and points to Soviet efforts to “catch and overtake” American success, using Magnitogorsk and its imitation of Gary, Indiana as a case study.³⁰ Efforts to “catch and overtake” the United States and the West in general not only continued after the death of Stalin but became central to Soviet ideology, with Khrushchev famously promising in 1956, “Whether you like it or not, history is on our side. We will bury you!”³¹ Soviet efforts in air and space similarly sought to “catch and overtake” American successes, hence the Space Race and the enormous priority placed on achieving space exploration “firsts.”

The motif of the fairy-tale also makes an important return at this junction. As Gerovitch writes, “The martial rhetoric of space conquests also drew on earlier cultural memories: even in prerevolutionary Russia, aviators were traditionally depicted as ‘conquerors of the air,’ direct descendants of Russian fairy-tale warriors.”³² Other examples were the “visionary inventors and reckless pilots [who] had played the role of the Greek hero [Icarus] for audiences who largely experienced flight vicariously through their heroic feats,” a theme which would return strongly with the cosmonauts of the 1960s.³³ This theme of fairy-tales of course recalls the aforementioned “March of the Aviators,” and its promise to make fairy-tales come true. Understood to be heirs of the Enlightenment, the Soviets now conceived of themselves as fully

³⁰ Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 41.

³¹ “Khrushchev’s ‘We Will Bury You’,” CIA Declassified Document, February 7, 1962, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP73B00296R000200040087-1.pdf>.

³² Gerovitch, *Soviet Space Mythologies*, 13-14.

³³ Steven Harris, “Dawn of the Soviet Jet Age: Aeroflot Passengers and Aviation Culture under Khrushchev,” [unpublished manuscript]. Fredericksburg: University of Mary Washington; 2020, 1.

capable of not only persisting to engage with dreams, myths and fairy-tales, but in fact bringing them into reality, having discarded perceived barriers to doing so such as feudalism, capitalism, religion and illiteracy. Much like Brezhnev's statement that the space program was "in conformity with the general line of our party in all spheres of the economy, science and culture, in the name of man, for the sake of man," Stalin similarly proposed a toast "to the progress of science, of that science which does not fence itself off from the people and does not hold aloof from them, but which is prepared to serve the people and to transmit to them all the benefits of science, and which serves the people not under compulsion, but voluntarily and willingly."³⁴ Thus, in the context of post-Stalinist space culture, the old "March of the Aviators" refrain makes a return in reference to the achievements of Soviet space exploration: "We were born to make fairy-tales come true." (see figure 3).

³⁴ "Kremlin Speech to Higher Educational Workers" (text), "1936: Pilots and Explorers; Texts," Seventeen Moments in Soviet History, Michigan State University, accessed March 2020, <http://soviethistory.msu.edu/1936-2/pilots-and-explorers/pilots-and-explorers-texts/kremlin-speech-to-higher-educational-workers/>.



Figure 3. “We were born to make fairy-tales come true!” 1960s. Source: Russiatrek.org.

The relationship between space exploration and the personal lives of the masses of Soviet citizens—particularly their material circumstances—is of course rather abstract. The possibility of more extensive space travel, including interplanetary voyages, and wider engagement with the masses towards some useful end certainly existed in the minds of both Soviet elites and citizens. Indeed, posters from the space program went as far as to claim “We will open distant worlds!”³⁵ (figure 4). However, the actualization of this prospect was notably nonexistent and existed as a

³⁵ Laura Sampler, “These Soviet Space-Race Propaganda Posters Retain Their Delusional Intensity 50 Years Later,” *Business Insider*, April 26, 2012, accessed March 2020, <https://www.businessinsider.com/here-are-the-soviets-extremely-intense-space-race-propaganda-posters-from-1958-1963-2012-4?op=1>.

vague fantasy for Soviet citizens.



Figure 4. “We will open distant worlds!” 1963. Source: Business Insider, sold at auction.

Ultimately, in contrast to air travel, which offered the opportunity for mass engagement with an efficient and comfortable mode of transportation and “bolstered the new regime’s commitment to raising living standards,” space travel was inevitably a more distant prospect with little to no immediate use in daily life for the overwhelming majority of Soviet citizens.³⁶ Rather, space exploration represented the culmination of cultured and progressive achievement under the leadership of the new intellectual and technocratic elite (another product of Stalin era social advancement), and the opportunities the masses had to aspire to engage with and join with this elite. This mass engagement was presented as an opportunity with the eventual aspiration of serving ordinary people (see figure 5).

³⁶ Steven Harris, “Dawn of the Soviet Jet Age: Aeroflot Passengers and Aviation Culture under Khrushchev,” [unpublished manuscript]. Fredericksburg: University of Mary Washington; 2020, 4.



Figure 5. A. Yakushin, “Space Is Going to Serve the People,” 1971. This image features a picture of Yuri Gagarin as well as his distinctive signature.

As Gerovitch points out “The technical intelligentsia played an active role in reshaping the Soviet social and cultural landscape.”³⁷ It is critical to point out that this “technical intelligentsia” was both the product of and the symbol of upward social mobility and the possibilities for advancement represented by socialism for uneducated and uncultured masses. Boris Berezovsky’s “Glory of the Space Heroes” poster (see figure 6) features a striking visual representation of these possibilities for advancement, featuring cosmonauts and scientists boldly leading the way with farm and factory workers following them into a glorified cosmic future. This representation in particular draws obvious parallels to Stalinist artwork which

³⁷ Gerovitch, *Soviet Space Mythologies*, 29.

frequently featured ordinary workers marching in step behind the visionary lead of Lenin and/or Stalin.



Figure 6. Boris Berezovsky, “Glory of the Space Heroes – Glory of the Soviet People!” 1963. Memorial Museum of Cosmonautics, Moscow.

The dominance of this technology-enthusiast culture is particularly evident when considering mass popular enthusiasm and participation within both space culture and the success of aerospace technology itself. Siddiqi points to what he terms a “science from below” with regard to the space program: “the work of amateur societies, and the handiwork of men and women who built rocket engines out of broken blowtorches in factory workshops...Ideas—some innovative and some not—bubbled up from people with no more than a secondary school education and influenced decades of work. They were aided by a pool of starry-eyed utopians so committed to the cosmic cause that their ardor inspired generations of young Soviet citizens to

anticipate the coming of the space age not with surprise but with expectation.”³⁸ In light of this mass public participation in the efforts to include space exploration as part of the project of building socialism and ascending ladders of prosperity, education and *kulturnost*,³⁹ representations of space culture within the context of upward social mobility must be viewed at least in part as an organic representation of the ideas and aspirations of ordinary citizens, in addition to something the state directly benefited from and engaged with.

It was the famous Konstantin Tsiolkovsky, celebrated as the father (sometimes “grandfather”) of Soviet spaceflight and the “prophet of the age,” who heralded the use of fantastic interplanetary travel as a message that would inspire the Soviet masses to summon their creative energies.⁴⁰ Commenting on the 1936 silent film *Cosmic Voyage*, which is dedicated to him and to which he was the consulting scientist,⁴¹ Tsiolkovsky stated, “Fantastic stories on interplanetary flights bring a new thought to the masses. He who does this does a useful thing: arouses interest, stimulates the brain to work, gives rise to sympathizers and future workers of great intentions...the attention that our Soviet Government devotes to the development of industry in the USSR and all kinds of scientific research, I hope, will justify and confirm these

³⁸ Asif Siddiqi, *The Red Rockets' Glare*, 364.

³⁹ *Kulturnost*, or “culturedness” is a key concept of the Stalin era, described in detail by Sheila Fitzpatrick. Broadly it refers to the Stalinist ideal of a new, educated intelligentsia of refined and elite tastes. In the Stalinist vision, this cultured intelligentsia would be of proletarian origins but in possession of bourgeois refinement, and suited to the top position in the new Soviet hierarchy, in contrast to the capitalist class system. Ideally, attainment of this level of cultured sophistication was open to anyone in Soviet society, and this ideal did in fact manifest in profound ways, most notably through the expansion of basic education and accessibility of higher culture. See Sheila Fitzpatrick, “Becoming Cultured: Socialist Realism and the Representation of Culture and Taste,” in *The Cultural Front: Power and Culture in Revolutionary Russia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992).

⁴⁰ Michael Hagemester, “The Conquest of Space and the Bliss of the Atoms: Konstantin Tsiolkovskii,” in *Soviet Space Culture*, 27.

⁴¹ *Cosmic Voyage* (Kosmicheskiy reys), directed by Vasili Zhuravlov (1936, Mosfilm, 2020), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hDhJKzuOb2w>.

hopes.”⁴² Though spaceflight was not nearly the cultural phenomenon in the 1930s it would become in the 1950s and 60s, in films like *Cosmic Voyage*, which tells the story of a Soviet man, woman and child being the first humans on the moon, spaceflight is directed connected to the overall Stalinist project of industry and science, extended to ordinary people. By the end of the film the astronauts⁴³ reach the moon successfully and are welcomed back to earth. The leader of their mission proclaims to an enormous, cheering crowd of onlookers “The way to space has been opened!” Such a slogan which, through some variation, would be echoed in later Space Age propaganda, such as a poster which proclaims “The way is open for man!”⁴⁴ Stalinist cinema, then, to some degree anticipated the space culture of the 1960s.

Tsiolkovsky himself was in some sense consciously a part of the emergence of the Soviet intellectual class who would proclaim spaceflight as their greatest mission and part and parcel of the overall improvement of human existence. This legacy would stretch far into the Soviet Space Age. The 1957 film *Road to the Stars*, released months after the success of Sputnik, features the rise of Tsiolkovsky, depicted as being from humble roots in rural Russia and marginalized by the Tsarist establishment. Tsiolkovsky’s story is presented as critical to the fulfilment of the dream of spaceflight, which in the film Tsiolkovsky identifies as opening new opportunities for mankind.⁴⁵ A later continuation of the theme of spaceflight as an essential mission for human progress is a scene in the 1974 children’s coming-of-age film *Moscow-Cassiopeia* which

⁴² Konstantin Tsiolkovsky, “Is it just a fantasy?” *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, July 23, 1935, accessed March 28, 2020, <https://tsiolkovsky.org/ru/kosmicheskaya-filosofiya/tolko-li-fantaziya/>.

⁴³ In the film the term *astronaut* (астро́навт) is used rather than *cosmonaut*, which later became the standard term within the Soviet space program.

⁴⁴ “Posters of the Golden Age of Soviet Cosmonauts,” Memorial Museum of Cosmonautics, September 19, 2015, accessed January 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-34281621>.

⁴⁵ *Road to the Stars*, directed by Pavel Klushantsev (1957, Lennauchfilm, 2020), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9CX0oSjwLqI>.

concerns a group of teenagers who travel into deep space. In this scene a scientist speaking to a classroom of young teenagers in Kaluga, which he notes is the city of Tsiolkovsky [where he lived most of his life], states “Today, the problems of space have become our earthly cause.”⁴⁶ Despite the increasing abundance of more pessimistic and complex reflections on the goals and realities of space travel, such as Andrei Tarkovsky’s *Solaris* (1972) and the literary works of the Strugatskii Brothers (works which faced notable censorship difficulties),⁴⁷ the optimism associated with the “mission” of space travel and its involvement of humanity as a whole, which took so many of its cues from Stalinist civilization remained a powerful force within space culture even into the 1970s.⁴⁸

While utopian visions of space were mostly the province of a small and elite group of individuals in the pre-revolutionary context, the Sovietization of space culture, and the scientific sophistication this signified, also represented, to a certain degree, its democratization, following the pattern established by mass literacy and education programs in the Stalin era so well-documented by Fitzpatrick. In addition to the potential accessibility of technical education and engagement with the scientific process and the sophisticated *kulturnost* this entailed, space culture also trickled into the domestic sphere directly through its association with ordinary household objects and collectibles in addition to publicly broadcasted propaganda. As Cathleen

⁴⁶ *Moscow-Cassiopeia* (Moskva Kassiopeya), directed by Richard Viktorov (1973, Gorky Film Studio, 2020), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fRut4Lf0sD0&t=718s>.

⁴⁷ Thomas Grob, “Into the Void: Philosophical Fantasy and Fantastic Philosophy in the Works of Stanisław Lem and the Strugatskii Brothers,” in *Soviet Space Culture*, 44.

⁴⁸ Aside from difficulties Tarkovsky faced with his use of religious iconography, the pessimistic attitude *Solaris* takes to the possibilities offered by space travel was also confronted with resistance I would argue is a direct result of the optimistic and utopian ideals which dominated Soviet space exploration goals in mainstream and officially-sanctioned culture. A notable example of this resistance is found in Nikolai Kamanin, the head of training cosmonauts for the space program, who refused to serve as a consultant for *Solaris* because it “belittles human dignity and denigrates the prospects of civilization.” See Slava Gerovitch, *Soviet Space Mythologies*, 24.

Lewis has pointed out, such objects “came to symbolize the optimism of the era, and each served as a distraction from the realities of Soviet life...by participating in a culture of leisure activities that had not existed before the war, the Soviet population could consider itself modern.”⁴⁹ This inevitably associated the heroic with the ordinary and encouraged the notion so vital to the Soviet project throughout the Stalinist period that mundane, orderly labor was inextricably bound with heroism and promised dreams of a future beyond the wildest imagination. Or, as Victoria Smolkin goes as far as to claim, “Most Soviet people lived somewhere along the spectrum between their everyday existence and the socialist realist ‘dreamworld’ promised by Marxism-Leninism.”⁵⁰ This “dreamworld” would indeed become a powerful visual metaphor for the possibilities that lay ahead for the ever-toiling Soviet people.

Representations of Myths, Dreams and Fairy-Tales

Tsiolkovsky once said, and is quoted in the film *Road to the Stars* as saying, “First, inevitably, the idea, the fantasy, the fairy tale. Then, scientific calculation. Ultimately, fulfillment crowns the dream.”⁵¹ The motifs of fantasy and fairy-tale in Soviet space culture appear in the scholarly literature but are rarely thoroughly explored. Here the presence of space culture and its mass consumption will be examined in the context of the “folklorization” discussed by Enzensberger. It is worth noting a few things about fairy-tales and mythology in the Soviet context generally. The Russian Revolution did not eliminate the importance of fairy-tales and

⁴⁹ Cathleen Lewis, “From the Kitchen into Orbit: The Convergence of Human Spaceflight and Krushchev’s Nascent Consumerism,” in *Into the Cosmos*, 214.

⁵⁰ Victoria Smolkin-Rothrock, “Cosmic Enlightenment: Scientific Atheism and the Soviet Conquest of Space,” in *Into the Cosmos*, 159.

⁵¹ Nola Redd, “Konstantin Tsiolkovsky: Russian Father of Rocketry,” Space.com, February 27, 2013, accessed March 30, 2020, <https://www.space.com/19994-konstantin-tsiolkovsky.html>.

mythology in the USSR. Indeed, the Soviet state embraced the mass reproduction of traditional folkloric culture. As Cherry Gilchrist argues: “Regional craft forms became highly sophisticated, and the most prominent were collectivized under Soviet rule. This had the virtue of keeping the arts and crafts going during an increasingly industrialized period. The craftsmen and women were paid a salary, and worked usually in a large, factory-like building...where they could concentrate on delicate decoration or the painting of fairy tale scenes. Very often, a teaching school was established in the village to train up a new generation.”⁵² Following Siddiqi’s point regarding the intimate engagement of public masses with state-directed scientific pursuits which he terms “science from below,” the reproduction of Russian and other national identities’ folk traditions also implicated the masses in conjunction with the Soviet state.

The use of the fairy-tale motif has important implications for the subject of social mobility, calling on pre-revolutionary Western and Russian traditions and breathing fresh air into them in the context of the opportunities offered by socialism. Enzensberger draws attention to the use of Cinderella as part of the Stalinist “rags to riches” story.⁵³ Native Russian traditions also present an intriguing framework of social mobility in the fairy-tale context. In her analysis of Russian folk traditions, Cherry Gilchrist discusses the tale of *Sivka-Burka*, in which the youngest, ugliest and most stupid brother of a family, Ivan, becomes “transformed into a handsome, intelligent suitor,” changing from a “ragged simpleton” to a “richly-dressed, good-looking prince,” who marries the princess at the end of the story.⁵⁴ She goes on to note that these

⁵² Cherry Gilchrist, *Russian Magic: Living Folk Traditions of an Enchanted Landscape* (Wheaton, IL: Quest Books, 2009), 66.

⁵³ Maria Enzensberger, “‘We were born to turn a fairy tale into reality’: Grigorii Aleksandrov’s *The Radiant Path*,” in *Stalinism and Soviet Cinema*, ed. Richard Taylor and Derek Spring, 100 (London: Routledge, 1993).

⁵⁴ Cherry Gilchrist, *Russian Magic*, 86.

fairy-tales “can be seen as real parables of transformation” and reflect “the changes of state that humans can attain.”⁵⁵ If masses of ordinary people could not readily grasp jargon-laden Marxist-Leninist analyses of the transformation of social consciousness through an alteration of material conditions culminating in the arrival of the “New Soviet Man,” they could certainly grasp the premise of a beloved fable.

In the conclusion of his remarkable volume on Soviet space culture, Siddiqi noted that “*Sputnik* was, for example, both Soviet *and* Russian, its ideological underpinnings had as much to do with Marxism as mysticism.”⁵⁶ Victoria Smolkin also comments on this “paradoxical coexistence” by noting that “the relationship of the magical and the scientific is not only central to human thought about space travel; it is also inseparable from the technological founders of rocket science.”⁵⁷ The relationship between fairy-tale representations of social mobility and Soviet space culture becomes all the more clear in the colorful visual representations offered by Russian miniature artwork, particularly that produced by Palekh, a town which lies to the northeast of Moscow. Art in the Soviet Union was a well-organized enterprise which naturally entailed a great deal of state control and had political implications, with “artists belonging to the Union [of Artists being] committed to certain ethical, aesthetic and ideological objectives,” as a 1979 article explains.⁵⁸ Craft items of this nature continue to make for typical Russian household items.⁵⁹ The parallels between Russian fairy-tales and Soviet cosmonautics are striking in Palekh

⁵⁵ Cherry Gilchrist, *Russian Magic*, 90.

⁵⁶ Asif Siddiqi, *The Red Rockets' Glare*, 363.

⁵⁷ Victoria Smolkin-Rothrock, “Cosmic Enlightenment: Scientific Atheism and the Soviet Conquest of Space,” in *Into the Cosmos*, 169.

⁵⁸ M. Lazarev, “The Organization of Artists’ Work in the USSR,” *Leonardo* 12, no. 2 (Spring 1979), 107.

⁵⁹ Cherry Gilchrist, *Russian Magic*, 66.

miniatures, which were simultaneously representative of pre-revolutionary folkloric and popular impulses as well as the new ideological ambitions of the Soviet state. Miniature depictions of the aforementioned fairy-tale character of Ivan feature him riding his flying horse, Sivka-Burka (see figure 7), through the skies, similarly to the flying car at the end of *The Radiant Path*, revolutionary artwork from the 1920s, and critically, Yuri Gagarin (see figure 8) and other cosmonauts.



Figure 7. A. Borunov, Sivka Burka Folk Tale Illustration. Palekh, 1963. Soviet Postcards.

A key artistic feature of this continuation between Russian folkloric traditions, Stalinist representations of social mobility, and space culture is physical beauty. As previously

mentioned, physical transformation from the position of “ragged simpleton” to “good-looking prince” was a notable aspect of the fairy-tale of *Sivka-Burka*. In *The Radiant Path*, Tanya too becomes more conventionally beautiful and sophisticated as she progresses through the story, with a scene towards the end of the film featuring a direct sharp contrast between the “ragged simpleton” Tanya to the confident and attractive woman she becomes. As Enzensberger points out in her essay on *The Radiant Path*, “her sexual attractiveness, as in a fairy tale, is featured as an inalienable attribute of her high virtue, social awareness and extraordinary diligence, rather than as an asset in its own right.”⁶⁰ It was important that Yuri Gagarin and other cosmonauts also be represented in artistic depictions as physically handsome, strong and confident. These representations formed a sea of “iconic images endlessly reproduced around the world” and were typically glorified and inauthentic.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Maria Enzensberger, “‘We were born to turn a fairy tale into reality’: Grigorii Aleksandrov’s *The Radiant Path*,” in *Stalinism and Soviet Cinema*, ed. Richard Taylor and Derek Spring, 98 (London: Routledge, 1993).

⁶¹ Slava Gerovitch, *Soviet Space Mythologies*, 25.



Figure 8. Kaleria and Boris Kukuliev. Yuri Gagarin riding a flying horse, Palekh Miniature, 1982. Soviet-art.ru.

The image of the flying horse has a recurring presence in Russian mythology, since the horse was traditionally seen as connected with the sky, the place “where ultimate happiness may come from.”⁶² A 1977 Aeroflot certificate (see figure 9) majestically depicts the Earth from space with the resplendent Slavic god Svarog on a blazing chariot with horses, as rockets and

⁶² Cherry Gilchrist, *Russian Magic*, 58, 71.

planes soar through the skies and the cosmos. The certificate promises the protection of Svarog, “the ancient Slavic sovereign of the skies” to the “fortunate holder of this certificate,” for crossing from one hemisphere to another, an experience undertaken only by the most elite Soviet citizens and thus indicative of the fulfillment of upward mobility.⁶³ Though the certificate is intended for Aeroflot passengers, the inclusion of ships, planes and rockets in the design indicate the ever-advancing nature of Soviet modes of transportation. Social mobility and physical mobility are, in a sense, equated, and both understood to be moving in an unambiguously upward direction, following the trajectory of gods.

⁶³ “Svarog Certificate” trans. Steven Harris,
<https://ru.bidspirit.com/ui/lotPage/source/catalog/auction/4175/lot/114758/%D0%93%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%BC%D0%BE%D1%82%D0%B0-%D0%9F%D0%B5%D1%80%D0%B5%D0%BB%D0%B5%D1%82%D0%B5%D0%B2%D1%88%D0%B5%D0%BC%D1%83-%D1%8D%D0%BA%D0%B2%D0%B0%D1%82%D0%BE%D1%80?lang=ru>



Figure 9. D. Dedunik, “Certificate of the Overflown Equator (Aeroflot USSR).”

The launch of Russian folklore into the Soviet Space Age is also notable in the form of New Year's cards. The New Year celebration, a time of joy and prosperity which perfectly served Soviet ideological goals by retaining the celebratory elements of Christmas while abandoning religion, was readily embraced as a time for showcasing the dreamworld of Soviet space advancement. Additionally, it was an excellent opportunity for inspiring the next generation of future cosmonauts—children—to eagerly engage with the latest achievements of socialism and strive for further success in every aspect of life. In her essay on space culture and childhood, Monica Rüthers explains that “the motifs of childhood and cosmos were seen in the context of the re-launch of socialism after Stalin and the rebirth of mankind. They were projects of a bright future. The cosmos referred to the most important achievement of socialism.”⁶⁴ Children and adults alike were greeted with animated images of their favorite cosmonaut heroes as well as child cosmonauts soaring freely with the likes of Ded Moroz (Grandfather Frost), and his accompanying Snegurochka (the Snow Maiden), (see figures 10 and 11).

⁶⁴ Monica Rüthers, “Children and the Cosmos as Projects of the Future and Ambassadors of Soviet Leadership,” in *Soviet Space Culture*, 210.



Figure 10. Bokarev, New Year's Greeting Card, 1964.



Figure 11. New Year's Greeting Card, USSR, "Space New Year in Soviet Postcards. Memorial Museum of Cosmonautics.

The use of divine and heroic imagery was not confined to native Russian traditions; the Greco-Roman pantheon was also readily employed in representations of Soviet space culture. Within the Palekh tradition, it was only natural to depict cosmonauts as Daedalus (see figure 12), the legendary Ancient Greek father of flight. Still others depict flying chariots reminiscent of Apollo or Helios, and even flying carpets in the style of the Arabian Nights. Drawing on these ancient myths was an opportunity for the Soviet state to lend credibility to their idea that they were fulfilling the primordial dreams and aspirations of humanity, as well as representing technological advancement in an aesthetically-pleasing manner suitable to the standards of Soviet *kulturnost*.



Figure 12. “Iuri Gagarin, Son of Russia” (image), “1961: First Cosmonaut; Visual Essays,” Seventeen Moments in Soviet History, Michigan State University, accessed January 2020. In this Palekh miniature Yuri Gagarin is reimagined as the mythic Greek inventor Daedalus.

One of the most important beings from the Greek mythos in the Soviet context is the titan Prometheus. The role of Prometheus in the context of space culture in the USSR touches on a uniquely Soviet vision of modernity and social mobility. In the story of Prometheus, the titan defies the commands of the king of the gods Zeus and steals fire for the sake of mortals, and from this fire originates all of human technology, science, art and civilization.⁶⁵ Critically, it is technology which allows for the use of human upward mobility and in defiance of the will of heaven. The concepts of “Prometheanism” or “Promethean Theomachy,” already of rising importance in pre-revolutionary Russian intellectual circles, became especially important in Soviet intellectual culture, such as the works of Maxim Gorky, in which Prometheus was understood as “human self-divinization.”⁶⁶ Julia Richers and Eva Maurer similarly point out that “the figure of Titan Prometheus became a symbol for the unreserved worship of science and technology and the creative, godlike power of man who would be capable of subjugating and transforming nature, space and time. Even physical laws such as gravity were to be curbed in order to pave the way to self-perfection and self-deification...the ever-present Stalinist motto ‘always higher and higher’ that was used in all possible areas of life paved the way for the future conquest of the higher spheres.”⁶⁷ Iina Kohonen similarly points out that the “myth of Prometheus was often used to celebrate Soviet victories in all fields of science.”⁶⁸ The return of

⁶⁵ *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, s.v. “Prometheus,” accessed March 24, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Prometheus-Greek-god>.

⁶⁶ Mikhail Agursky, “Maksim Gorky and the Decline of Bolshevik Theomachy,” in *Christianity and Russian Culture in Soviet Society*, ed. Nicolai Petro (New York: Routledge, 1990), 84.

⁶⁷ Julia Richers and Eva Maurer, “Introduction to Part I,” in *Soviet Space Culture*, 24.

⁶⁸ Iina Kohonen, “The Heroic and the Ordinary: Photographic Representations of Soviet Cosmonauts in the Early 1960s,” in *Soviet Space Culture*, 118.

the phrase “The fairy-tale became truth,” in a poster featuring Yuri Gagarin as the titan Prometheus holding fire in his hand is emblematic of this trend (see figure 13).



Figure 13. “The Fairy Tale Became Truth.” Memorial Museum of Cosmonautics.

Siddiqi too refers to the “Promethean urge to remake everything that surrounds us” in the context of Russian intellectuals of the late 19th century, but it is critical in the later Soviet context to also recall the role of Prometheus as the free giver of technology.⁶⁹ For Soviet representations of the space program, it was necessary to not only emphasize Gagarin as a larger-than-life hero, but one who, like Prometheus, would raise up millions of ordinary Soviet citizens to this future of human self-divinization. These mythological representations of the space

⁶⁹ Asif Siddiqi, “Imagining the Cosmos: Utopians, Mystics and the Popular Culture of Spaceflight in Revolutionary Russia,” *Osiris* 23 (2008), 266.

program highlight the inextricable relationship of technology and social class relations, going all the way back to Lenin's famous slogan "Communism is Soviet power plus electrification of the whole country."⁷⁰ The representation of Soviet cosmonauts as godlike beings in defiance of all limitations was thus inherently in lock-step with the notion of never-ending progress for ordinary Soviet citizens.

Women's Liberation and Social Mobility

In a special article for International Women's Day in 1929, *Pravda* proclaimed "Working women in all bourgeois countries are economically and politically enslaved...only we in the Soviet Union have at hand all of the preconditions and foundations for the complete emancipation of working women."⁷¹ The USSR—the first country in the world to adopt International Women's Day as an official holiday—made notable strides in the realm of gender equality.⁷² However, it is important to note that women's liberation was not framed as merely an end in and of itself, but rather a part of the process of overall social transformation, including upward mobility. As the same *Pravda* article further states, "We will not achieve the rapid tempo of socialist industrialization if the woman worker turns out to be passive...maximum activism of all women proletarians and conscientious working peasant women is one of the indispensable

⁷⁰ "Communism is Soviet Power + Electrification of the Whole Country" (text), "1921: Electrification Campaign; Texts," Seventeen Moments in Soviet History, Michigan State University, accessed March 2020, <http://soviethistory.msu.edu/1921-2/electrification-campaign/communism-is-soviet-power-electrification-of-the-whole-country/>.

⁷¹ "On the Path to a Great Emancipation," *Pravda*, March 8, 1929, accessed March 23, 2020, <http://chnm.gmu.edu/wwh/modules/lesson11/lesson11.php?s=1>.

⁷² Sarah Pruitt, "The Surprising History of International Women's Day," Inside History, March 6, 2017, accessed March 24, 2020, <https://www.history.com/news/the-surprising-history-of-international-womens-day>.

guarantees of our further successes and our victorious socialist growth.”⁷³ Social mobility was a lived reality for women in the Soviet Union. A 1978 article in Soviet mass media on women in the workforce points out the enormous rise in women’s participation in all sectors of industry, including large numbers of specialists and administrators, noting that “the number of women specialists is 15 times as great as in 1940, and 83 times as great as in 1928. The trend is countrywide. The percentage of rural women engaged in mental labor has risen from 10.5% in 1959 to nearly 18% in 1970.”⁷⁴ Though not without limitations, the Soviet outreach to women undoubtedly played a role in shaping the ethos of the broader society.

Here too, space culture represented an extraordinary part of Soviet presentations of social mobility, most famously in the example of Valentina Tereshkova, who in 1963 became the first woman in space. Tereshkova herself took the progression of women in the Soviet Union generally as indicative of women’s natural equality in the cosmos, rhetorically asking “If women can be railroad workers in Russia, why can’t they go to space?”⁷⁵ A product of a uniquely Soviet upbringing, Tereshkova echoed the 1929 *Pravda* article which urged women to aid in Soviet successes in industry. She similarly made the case with regards to spaceflight, arguing “Human spaceflight cannot develop any further without the active participation of women.”⁷⁶

⁷³ “On the Path to a Great Emancipation,” *Pravda*, March 8, 1929, accessed March 23, 2020, <http://chnm.gmu.edu/wwh/modules/lesson11/lesson11.php?s=1>.

⁷⁴ “Women in the Work Force” (text), “1980: Moscow Doesn’t Believe in Tears,” *Seventeen Moments in Soviet History*, Michigan State University, accessed March 2020, <http://soviethistory.msu.edu/1980-2/moscow-doesnt-believe-in-tears/moscow-doesnt-believe-in-tears-texts/women-in-the-work-force/>.

⁷⁵ Tim Sharp, “Valentina Tereshkova: First Woman in Space,” *Space.com*, January 22, 2018, accessed March 2020, <https://www.space.com/21571-valentina-tereshkova.html>.

⁷⁶ John Uri, “Valentina Tereshkova and Sally Ride - Women Space Pioneers,” *National Aeronautics and Space Administration*, April 5, 2018, accessed March 2020, <https://www.nasa.gov/mediacast/valentina-tereshkova-and-sally-ride-women-space-pioneers>.

Tereshkova's own status as a beneficiary of Soviet social mobility would soon transform her into a representation of that very narrative. A letter written by a Ukrainian girl to Yuri Gagarin in the aftermath of Tereshkova's famous flight illustrates the critical role Tereshkova played in the Soviet imagination:

"I have wanted to ask you for a long time already: 'is it possible for a simple village girl to fly to the cosmos?' But I never decided to do it. Now that the first Soviet woman has flown into space, I finally decided to write you a letter.... I know [to become a cosmonaut] one needs training and more training, one needs courage and strength of character. And although I haven't yet trained 'properly', I am still confident of my strength. It seems to me that with the kind of preparation that you gave Valia Tereshkova, I would also be able to fly to the cosmos."⁷⁷

The narrative of gender equality is complicated here with the emphasis on Gagarin's "preparation" of Tereshkova, reflecting the Stalinist paradigm of men leading the way for women. In fact, neither Tereshkova nor any other woman in the world would enter space again for decades—but official Soviet representations of Tereshkova were quick to capitalize on her inspirational potential. An International Women's Day poster from 1964 by E. Artsrynyan (see figure 14) places Tereshkova in the center of working women from every race and continent, implying her status as the most paramount story of female success, and furthermore cementing the Soviet Union's status as the most progressive and inspirational of all nations.

⁷⁷ Rose Eveleth, "Soviet Russia Had a Better Record of Training Women in STEM Than America Does Today," *Smithsonian Magazine*, December 12, 2013, accessed March 2020, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/soviet-russia-had-a-better-record-of-training-women-in-stem-than-america-does-today-180948141/>.



Figure 14. E. Artsrynyan, “Long live women workers of the world!” 1964. Source: Science Museum, London. <https://blog.sciencemuseum.org.uk/valentina-tereshkova-first-woman-in-space/>

Equally important to consider is the role of cosmonaut “hagiography” in the context of women’s issues and gender mobility. In her essay “She Orbits Over the Sex Barrier,” Roshanna Sylvester explains how Tereshkova was represented in Soviet media. “Early press coverage stressed the virtues of Tereshkova’s family origins, childhood and youth, portraying her as the politically impeccable heroine in a Communist fairy tale ... explaining that she was born in 1937 in the village of Maslennikov of good proletarian stock: ‘Her father was a tractor driver and her mother a worker in a textile enterprise.’”⁷⁸ Indeed, Tereshkova’s path to success from lowly

⁷⁸ Sylvester, “She Orbits over the Sex Barrier: Soviet Girls and the Tereshkova Moment,” in *Into the Cosmos*, 198.

origins, rising up through the ranks of society with the help of hard work, education and the Communist Party, and of course her eventual flight, bears striking resemblance to the “Communist fairy tale” of an earlier period, such as the film *The Radiant Path*. Like Gagarin’s own biographical image, the issue of peasant or proletarian origins was extremely important. Key to Soviet representations was the emphasis that this woman was not just any woman, but a woman of lowly and rural origins raised up through Soviet socialization.

It is also worth noting the manner in which Tereshkova represented herself and was represented by others in public speeches: “Tereshkova [was placed] firmly into the well-established line of inspirational female role models so well known to girls in the early 1960s...in their carefully scripted triumphal speeches in Red Square on June 22, 1963, both Tereshkova and Khrushchev referenced the martyred partisan Zoya Kosmodemyanskaya, the storied tractor driver Pasha Angelina, the hero textile workers Valentina Gaganova and Dusia Vinogradova, and other famous Soviet heroines of the World War II and Stalin eras.”⁷⁹ Representations of the woman cosmonaut, then, must be seen in continuity with Stalinist narratives of selfless heroism in industrialization and war. In her study, Sylvester has also found that overall representations of Tereshkova’s flight successfully produced an enormous degree of cosmic enthusiasm among schoolgirls, which correlated with a substantial increase in the number of Soviet women in STEM fields over the next decade, suggesting at the very least that representations of Tereshkova and women in cosmonautics were internalized in ways that had major implications for education and social mobility in the 1960s and 70s.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ Sylvester, “She Orbits over the Sex Barrier: Soviet Girls and the Tereshkova Moment,” in *Into the Cosmos*, 208.

⁸⁰ Sylvester, “Let’s Find Out Where the Cosmonaut School Is’: Soviet Girls and Cosmic Visions in the Aftermath of Tereshkova,” in *Soviet Space Culture*, 132.

These representations, of course, had international implications worth mentioning. Khrushchev proudly proclaimed the unique success of the Soviet Union's achievement: "I am very happy and proud as a father that one of our girls, a girl from the Soviet Union, is the first, the first in the world, to travel in space, to be in command of the most highly perfected machinery."⁸¹ It is worth noting here the echoes of traditional Stalinist language, as Khrushchev evoked a similar fatherly persona to that of Stalin, with the use of the term "girls" also implying a more conservative notion of gender hierarchy. As in the Stalin era, women were represented as advancing forward into the future too, via a pathway ultimately led by and paved by powerful men, a recurring motif in Stalinist art. These representations of gender equality and mobility thus must be read in the context of the culture from which they emerged.

It is important to emphasize that the symbolic power of a woman in space worked in tandem with Soviet projections of human possibilities for success and the approaching triumph of Communism in the broader Cold War context. As Robert Griswold writes—"Tereshkova's flight became a symbol of possibility, a dramatic, worldwide display of what women—American women—might accomplish if only given the opportunity to do so."⁸² It is relevant to point out that Soviet ideological conceptions of what upward mobility looked like help explain the discrepancies between Soviet and American approaches to women in space. Griswold explains that American press reaction to Tereshkova's spaceflight was mixed, and American leaders were mostly uninterested in women's involvement: "Wedded to more traditional views of women, supporters of NASA's recruitment policies belittled the Soviets' bold stroke. Lieutenant General

⁸¹ Sylvester, "She Orbits over the Sex Barrier: Soviet Girls and the Tereshkova Moment," in *Into the Cosmos*, 208.

⁸² Robert Griswold, "'Russian Blonde in Space': Soviet Women in the American Imagination, 1950-1965," *Journal of Social History* 45, no. 4 (Summer 2012), 882.

Leighton Davis, commander of the Air Force Missile Test Center at Cape Canaveral, dismissed her flight as a publicity stunt and Senator Henry Jackson likewise took a dim view of her voyage. The *Chicago Tribune* suggested Tereshkova's flight was a sign the space race 'seems to be degenerating into carnival ballyhoo.'"⁸³ Though the Soviet space program would in reality also remain almost completely dominated by men, these international propaganda victories would prove critical to another invaluable dimension of space culture and the overriding mythos of social mobility—national prestige.

National Prestige and Modernity as Representations of Upward Social Mobility

The use of the Soviet space program for its international propaganda value and the role it played in scoring symbolic Cold War victories is well-documented. Scholars have focused their attention in high politics and the military dimensions of the international Space Race.⁸⁴ However, in the study of Soviet space culture, it is critical to reorient the discussion on national prestige and Soviet international standing to within the USSR itself. The issue of national prestige has profound implications for the Soviet mythos of individual upward mobility. In certain respects, the link between national prestige and individual perceptions of social mobility is not remotely unique to the Soviet case. In his essay "Nations, National Identity and Prestige," Steve Wood argues that "people want the nations – ethnic, cultural or civic – to which they belong and represent to be held in high regard," and stresses the connection between prestige and

⁸³ Robert Griswold, "'Russian Blonde in Space': Soviet Women in the American Imagination, 1950-1965," *Journal of Social History* 45, no. 4 (Summer 2012), 894.

⁸⁴ Julia Richers, "Space is the Place! Writing About Soviet Space Exploration," in *Soviet Space Culture*, 13.

perceptions of wealth and power.⁸⁵ For Soviet citizens, emerging from centuries of being perceived as backward by the West, the desire to be perceived as part of a modern, successful and powerful country was a paramount feature of Soviet space culture. In his essay documenting the Soviet pavilion at the 1958 Brussels World Fair, Lewis Siegelbaum points out just how seriously the Soviet staff took into account international praise and criticism to inspire continued public faith in the Soviet project: “as if foreign praise were required to persuade a skeptical Soviet public.”⁸⁶

A consistent feature of Soviet representations of national prestige in space propaganda was its focus on reflecting the triumphs of space exploration on to the Soviet people as a whole and elevating their status within the international community of nations. With posters proclaiming “Soviet man – be proud, you opened the road to stars from Earth!” and “Our triumph in space is a hymn to the Soviet country!” (see figure 15) the divisions between ordinary Soviet citizens and the achievements of the Soviet space program were deliberately blurred, inviting ordinary Soviet citizens to fully participate in the prestige their country had acquired. Similarly, posters continued to use the Stalinist phrase “land of heroes” to refer to the Soviet population in the context of space exploration achievements.⁸⁷

⁸⁵ Steve Wood, “Nations, National Identity and Prestige,” *National Identities* 16, no. 2 (2014), 100.

⁸⁶ Lewis Siegelbaum, “Sputnik Goes to Brussels: The Exhibition of a Soviet Technological Wonder,” in *Soviet Space Culture*, 181.

⁸⁷ Laura Sampler, “These Soviet Space-Race Propaganda Posters Retain Their Delusional Intensity 50 Years Later,” *Business Insider*, April 26, 2012, accessed March 2020, <https://www.businessinsider.com/here-are-the-soviets-extremely-intense-space-race-propaganda-posters-from-1958-1963-2012-4?op=1>.



Figure 15. V. Viktorov, “Our triumph in space is a hymn to the Soviet country!” 1963.

In fact, Soviet space culture takes the connection between national prestige and social mobility even further than symbolically elevating Soviet citizens through the achievements of the country’s space program. Soviet space achievements were often directly framed within the context of an upwardly mobile nation—one which had not only far surpassed its former backwardness, but was now the world leader in scientific achievement. This is captured well in a program from the Communist Party (see figure 16) which features a picture of Gagarin with the statement “The country, where the majority of people were illiterate, has made a gigantic leap in science and culture.”⁸⁸ Rather than representing space exploration as simply the product of an inherent national superiority, this image argues for a direct link between the Stalinist conquest of

⁸⁸ “This Soviet Propaganda Portrays Yuri Gagarin as a Demigod,” *Russia Beyond*, March 27, 2019, accessed March 2020, <https://www.rbth.com/history/330138-this-soviet-propaganda-portrays-gagarin>.

illiteracy and the new era of spaceflight—a link that is not necessarily immediately obvious without the context of a grand narrative of upward mobility connected to the space program.



Figure 16. “The country, where the majority of people were illiterate, has made a gigantic leap in science and culture.” Program of the Communist Party.

The aforementioned 1957 film *Road to the Stars* identifies the uniquely Russian genius of spaceflight with breaking free from a state of national degradation. The film's narrator explains: "The official science of Tsarist Russia turned her back to the Russian genius. It bowed subserviently before Europe. Tsiolkovsky wrote then 'The main driving force of my life is to do something useful for people. Not to live my life in vain, but to advance humanity forward...I hope that maybe soon, maybe in the distant future, my work will give society mountains of bread and plenty of power.'" ⁸⁹ The film explicitly aligns Tsarist Russia with both a lack of national prestige ("subserviently before Europe") and an inability to "advance humanity forward," a goal which, though directed specifically towards rocketry and spaceflight, is framed as an advance also towards "mountains of bread and plenty of power," linking national prestige, spaceflight and upward mobility in material prosperity all together. With the Soviet system, so it was proclaimed, the Communist Party and Soviet people had earned the respect of the citizens of the most advanced nations and found the path to material prosperity by following the "Russian genius" of spaceflight.

Soviet internationalism played its role in the domestic sphere as well. As figures like Gagarin and Tereshkova traveled the world, Soviet citizens were reminded that their own citizens with working-class and peasant backgrounds were now global superstars. This also gave Soviet citizens a chance to vicariously experience the grandeur and excitement of travel to exotic lands, similar to the roles played by other elite figures and journalists who flew internationally, bypassing the travel restrictions encumbering most Soviet citizens. ⁹⁰ Soviet hegemony and

⁸⁹ *Road to the Stars*, directed by Pavel Klushantsev (1957, Lennauchfilm, 2020), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9CX0oSjwLqI>.

⁹⁰ Steven Harris, "Dawn of the Soviet Jet Age: Aeroflot Passengers and Aviation Culture under Khrushchev," [unpublished manuscript]. Fredericksburg: University of Mary Washington; 2020, 36-37.

leadership, too, promised future opportunities for Soviet citizens to comprise a new international elite from which individuals of other nations took their cue. For example, in the 1970s and 80s this would become particularly prevalent with the *Interkosmos* program, a project specially designed for taking citizens of various nationalities into space with the Soviet space program.⁹¹ This had obvious importance internationally in representing the USSR as both a scientific leader and a benevolent member of the global community of nations—particularly the recently decolonized nations of the Global South—but was also represented and promoted domestically, such as through posters and commemorative stamps. Far from being the backwards and illiterate nation of mere decades ago, Soviet citizens were reminded, the USSR was now leading the developing world—countries such as India, Cuba and Vietnam—as well as even some developed nations, such as France, into the ultra-modern future of space travel.⁹² *Road to the Stars* even anticipated this show of Soviet international leadership in 1957 through the inclusion of many non-Europeans (and women) in its idealized depiction of an imagined future first space station and manned lunar flight.⁹³ Even in the declining years of the 1980s, Soviet national prestige and a sense of international leadership in space was a way of representing success to ordinary citizens.

⁹¹ “Interkosmos,” Encyclopedia Knowledge.su, accessed March 2020, <http://knowledge.su/i/interkosmos>.

⁹² John Logsdon, “Jean-Loup Chrétien: French Astronaut,” Encyclopaedia Britannica, accessed March 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Jean-Loup-Chretien>.

⁹³ *Road to the Stars*, directed by Pavel Klushantsev (1957, Lennauchfilm, 2020), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9CX0oSjwLqI>.



Figure 17. *Interkosmos* Commemorative Stamp, 1980. The Soviet flag leads the flags of other socialist nations.

Bearing in mind how important the “dreamworld promised by Marxism-Leninism” (as Smolkin put it) was in the minds of millions of Soviet citizens seeking a better future, it is relevant also to consider the role that national prestige had in creating a sense of heightened status and opportunities for global ascendancy. The international reputation of the USSR thus had important implications for civilians at home. This view explains the great lengths undertaken by Soviet media to publicize and widely circulate foreign praise for the space program as well as highlight the Soviet role as a modern and inspirational world leader through the *Interkosmos* program. International prestige, while important to the Soviet Union’s global reputation, was not an end in itself without additionally functioning as a means by which to inspire Soviet citizens to

associate their own personal success with that of the country as a whole, and thus represents a facet of upward mobility in its own right.

Conclusion

The Space Age initiated by the USSR represented an unprecedented series of scientific achievements to millions of people worldwide. It unleashed an enormous cultural phenomenon felt at all levels of life by Soviet citizens, from the media and political discourse they consumed to the art they created. The enormous volume of visual representations—official propaganda, daily consumer items, folk art and film, in addition to public speeches and biographies related to space exploration—contains critical insights into how space exploration was represented in Soviet culture. As this paper has argued, these representations reveal exceptional continuity with the Stalinist discourse on upward social mobility, and directly link space exploration as the ultimate frontier in the fight for material prosperity, education and status. By projecting the achievements of the space program on to the Soviet people as well as promising material prosperity, gender equality, national prestige and education, Soviet space culture became a new mode for expressing the “Communist fairy-tale” which shaped the development of the Stalinist civilization the Space Age USSR followed.

Why does this matter? The gigantic crowd that greeted Yuri Gagarin after his first spaceflight and the enormity of cultural excitement and optimism which illuminated the lives of so many Soviet people begets questions of motivation. The Soviet case, I would argue, is particularly special. Dieter Seitz has pointed out that “space travel moved people in the East

much more strongly than in the West,”⁹⁴ despite the fact that the Soviet economy and quality of life consistently lagged behind the West. It is worth considering the factors which led to these distinct cultural patterns arising. By re-locating the focus from the Cold War to the domestic sphere, we can consider how Soviet space culture was represented and consumed, which sheds light on why space exploration was so important to so many people. It also helps explain how political regimes use and represent scientific achievements in extremely ideologically-charged ways, even to the extent of distorting perceptions of economic success. The Space Race, as it remains known to this day, was not an inevitable event. As a historical process it was contingent on multiple factors and this was in no way exclusive of the efforts and enthusiasm of the masses of ordinary, motivated people. Finally, historical insight is useful in evaluating the political and cultural processes which shape contemporary scientific discovery, including the current and any future Space Race.⁹⁵

The study of space culture in the Soviet Union has seen remarkable growth in the scholarly literature over the past decade alone. Numerous paths for building on previous scholarship offer intriguing possibilities. One potential project would be to go beyond cultural representations and engage in an empirical investigation of the relationship which in fact existed between the space program and social mobility. While the USSR did not ever come close to engaging in the space colonization and resource extraction envisioned in posters and films such as *Cosmic Voyage* and *Road to the Stars*, it is worth considering the various methods by which social mobility enabled by the space program did and did not successfully manifest itself, such as

⁹⁴ Dieter Seitz, *Cosmic Culture: Soviet Space Aesthetics in Everyday Life* (Bönen, Germany: DruckVerlag Kettler, 2019), 57.

⁹⁵ Neel Patel, “Are We in the Middle of a New Space Race for this Century?” MIT Technology Review, February 7, 2020, accessed March 31, 2020, <https://www.technologyreview.com/s/615145/are-we-in-the-middle-of-a-new-space-race-for-this-century/>.

through education, scientific development and job creation, as these effects were not negligible and merit further study. It is also worth considering how these developments were affected by the replacement of socialism with capitalism throughout the former USSR, especially in the context of the economic collapse and political strife which followed rapid privatization in Russia.⁹⁶ Other possibilities include an investigation of the Soviet space program through the eyes of developing nations, especially prominent countries which benefited from the Interkosmos program, such as India, and how this perception influenced the lives and politics of citizens in these countries.

As this essay has shown, the connection between the social mobility narrative and the fairy-tale motif analyzed by Enzensberger in the context of Stalinist cinema in fact reached its culmination in cultural representations of the Soviet space program. “We were born to make the fairy-tale come true!” was ultimately a multi-faceted vision which symbolically encompassed a huge number of aspirations and expectations for an improvement in living conditions in the post-Stalin USSR. The “dream became reality” narrative the Soviet government so heavily promoted rapidly advanced from the flying car of cinematic fantasy to actually sending the first humans beyond earth, inspiring millions of ordinary citizens—most of whom never became the material beneficiaries they anticipated becoming—to look optimistically into a future of boundless possibility.

⁹⁶ Mikhail Sokolov and Anastasia Kirilenko, “20 Years Ago, Russia Had Its Biggest Political Crisis Since the Bolshevik Revolution,” *The Atlantic*, October 24, 2013, accessed March 31, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2013/10/20-years-ago-russia-had-its-biggest-political-crisis-since-the-bolshevik-revolution/280237/>.

I hereby declare upon my word of honor that I have neither given nor received unauthorized help on this work ~Rick Higginbotham

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