

The Molding of the Rising Generation: Soviet Propaganda and the Hero-Myth of Iurii Gagarin

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Cosmonauts made an indelible imprint on Soviet society and enjoyed a far greater degree of popularity than their counterparts in the West. Historian Richard Stites would later describe the space-heroes – or more specifically the mass-produced images of them – as a “new social cement”.¹ Yet of all Soviet cosmonauts, no one’s star rose higher than the first – Iurii Alexeyevich Gagarin. Since his first manned orbit of the earth on 12 April, 1961, Gagarin instantly became one of the most well-known and revered names within the Soviet Union. Reports of the cosmic pilot (*kosmicheskii pilot*) Gagarin and his spaceship *Vostok* (East) literally saturated the Soviet press and broadcast media in the weeks after the landmark flight.²

To the Soviet state, Gagarin’s flight was more than a technical and scientific achievement; in the context of the Cold War, it was an ideological victory which Gagarin’s image was molded to reflect. As with the Arctic aviators of the 1930s, Soviet narratives of space exploration constituted what historian John McCannon termed a “master fiction” and were infused with official values that were expressed in propaganda, ritual, and symbols.³ The successful flight of Gagarin and his spaceship *Vostok* mirrored the Soviet Union’s spectacular launch into modernity. At this dawn of

¹ Stites, Richard. *Russian Popular Culture: Entertainment and Society Since 1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 145.

² The word *Kosmonavt* (cosmonaut) had not yet been coined.

³ McCannon borrowed the term from Clifford Geertz. McCannon, John, *Red Arctic*, 68.

the space age, Soviet propagandists narrated a grand sweep of history from the primordial to the present to illustrate the immensity of the achievement and vaunt Gagarin's achievement as the start of "a new era in the development of mankind."⁴ They placed the Soviet system, as the builder of socialism and the benefactor of the first man in space, at the pinnacle of progress.

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The Gagarin propaganda intended to buttress the Soviet regime's international authority at that time and echoed Khrushchev's calls for international disarmament and decolonization. Domestically, it legitimized the Soviet Union's political system and the October Revolution, associating both with progress through secular, material, scientific rationalism, which were all cultivated by Marxist-Leninism. While Khrushchev used the Gagarin celebrations to accentuate his political program and underscore his own legitimacy as Soviet Premier and a world leader, the image of Gagarin that emerged was an icon of the scientific culture that the Soviet authorities felt would lead to the international triumph of socialism.

This essay first outlines the intensification of propaganda operations in the years before *Vostok*, and shows how the Gagarin propaganda was a culmination of a massive campaign to reorganize propaganda within a context of de-Stalinization. It then investigates various Party resolutions on propaganda from the late 1950s and early 1960s, highlighting those that most affected the content of the Gagarin propaganda. In particular, the "moral code of the builders of communism" included in the 1961 Third Party Program was of particular significance to the Gagarin propaganda, for it outlined the basis for a "new Soviet" person. This essay next

⁴*Pravda*, April 15, 1961, 3.

addresses three major themes within biographical narratives of Gagarin – the concepts of “newness”, “scientific-atheism”, and “selfless labor” – to argue that Gagarin’s image was explicitly directed at youth in a concerted effort to bring about a “new Soviet” generation committed to the cause of building communism. A few concluding remarks explore further how the Gagarin propaganda fit into the context of the early throes of de-Stalinization. | 3

In the Soviet Union propaganda was a noble act, a Communist’s duty, and one of the foundational processes of socialism. Soviet elaborations of the difference between propaganda and agitation usually referred to Georgi V. Plekhanov’s statement that: “the propagandist conveys *many* ideas to one or a few persons; an agitator conveys only one or a few ideas, but to a great mass of people”.⁵ Khrushchev, however, blurred the distinction between the two concepts, indiscriminately swapping one term for the other, or replacing them altogether with the euphemisms “ideological work” or “Communist education”.⁶ Since this trend towards a conflation of terms was reflected in Party literature, this essay considers these expressions as synonymous with “propaganda”.

Agitation and propaganda had long been an important focus for the Soviet state’s energies; decades of theory and practice had elaborated the Agitprop apparatus into a highly organized and efficient system. Regular reforms to the Agitprop apparatus served not only to fine-tune the machine but also to reshape the system according to contemporary propaganda goals. One thing that

⁵ Cited in Prokhorov, A. M. Editor-in Chief, *Great Soviet Encyclopedia*, New York: MacMillan, 1973, 1: 137.

⁶ Hazan, Baruch. *Soviet Propaganda*, (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 1967), 33.

remained constant throughout Agitprop's development, though, was the fundamental principle that propaganda should serve to reeducate society in the communist mold. In his study *How the Communist Press Works*, Antony Buzek summarized how Lenin perceived propaganda as an educational tool for the entire population; "The end product should have been an entirely new man, the Soviet man, the man of communist society."⁷

Between Stalin's death in 1953 and Gagarin's flight in 1961, the Agitprop apparatus underwent a series of reforms as the Soviet system experienced the dual processes of de-Stalinization and later Khrushchevism. Almost immediately after Stalin's death, his successors began to address and attend to the weaknesses within the propaganda system that had gone unchecked under the dictator. Stalinist simplification of propaganda themes, heavier reliance on coercion through mass terror, and the excessive elaboration of Stalin's 'cult of personality', led his successors to realize the necessity for a reinvigoration of propaganda operations. Khrushchev's concept of "peaceful coexistence" also mandated an intensification of propaganda operations by suggesting that communist parties in other nations could gain power without resorting to violence.⁸ At a Central Committee conference in late 1953, Khrushchev said that:

The firmly rooted stereotypes and time-worn methods whereby everything is written according to a single pattern must be vigorously driven from the newspaper pages . . . Material must

⁷ Buzek, Antony. *How the Communist Press Works*, (London: Pall Mall Press, 1964), 28.

⁸ Benn, David Wedgwood, *Persuasion and Soviet Politics*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 135.

be more varied, and more thought must be given to content and form of presentation.⁹

The Central Committee and the three Congresses held between 1956 and 1961 issued several resolutions and decisions on propaganda and agitation.¹⁰ In particular, the XX Congress of 1956 devoted considerable attention to restructuring and revitalizing propaganda operations. The vision set forth at the XX Congress would shape the reformation of the propaganda apparatus in the next years, and would eventually become embodied in the hero-myth of Iurii Gagarin. The Party resolved to “implement thorough measures” to “overcome” and “liquidate” the “cult of personality” that surrounded Stalin.¹¹ In addition to motions to improve the “education” of Party cadres with a “full and all-around illumination” of Lenin, the Congress also approved measures to draft a Third Party Program.¹² One of the most significant aspects of the Gagarin propaganda – its striking correlation to the moral code elaborated in the Third Party Program – was thus connected to the Congress where Stalin was denounced.

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The Party understood that it needed to make propaganda more accessible in order to more effectively communicate the changed face of the regime. At the 1956 Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party Khrushchev’s denunciation of Stalin’s crimes coincided with an attack on the influence of “dogmatists” among propagandists, and calls to “brighten up” propaganda.¹³ In 1956 the

⁹ Buzek, *How the Communist Press Works*, 84.

¹⁰ The XX Congress (1956), XXI Extraordinary Congress (1959), and XXII Congress (1961).

¹¹ Hodnett, Grey. *Resolutions and Decisions of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union: Vol. 4 The Khrushchev Years 1953-64*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974), 52.

¹² *Ibid.*, 81.

¹³ Benn, *Persuasion and Soviet Politics*, 135-36.

CPSU newspaper *Pravda* criticized the Soviet press in general for being too “insipid, lifeless, deadly dull and difficult to read”.¹⁴ In 1960 the Party further attacked propaganda’s narrow “sphere of influence, [...] weak mass character, and its not always intelligible form of presentation.”¹⁵ More than simply removing the “pervasive falsehood and obscurantism” of Stalinist propaganda – as Grey Hodnett defined the de-Stalinization of propaganda – the reform process also saw the introduction of new technologies and methods in an attempt to increase the appeal of propaganda.¹⁶ It was clear to Soviet authorities that broadening the reach of propaganda, and heightening its effect, would require a measurable injection of vitality.

Press reforms in 1953 and 1956 increased the use of pictures and photographs in Soviet newspapers.¹⁷ After 1956, newspapers – especially those designed to attract audiences less likely to respond to dry text, such as the youth paper *Komsomolskaya Pravda* – began to include six to twelve pictures in papers that were typically only four to six pages long. The heightened visuals were not simply for enhanced pleasure; in February 1958, the Agitprop officially condemned ‘content-less’ pictures.¹⁸ Images of Gagarin were ubiquitous in the Soviet press and they often associated him with symbols of science, labor and peace.¹⁹

¹⁴ Buzek, *How the Communist Press Works*, 84.

¹⁵ Benn, *Persuasion and Soviet Politics*, 136.

¹⁶ Hodnett, *Resolutions and Decisions*, 13.

¹⁷ Buzek, *How the Communist Press Works*, 48.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 49.

¹⁹ The satirical magazine was only mildly satiric in its treatment of Gagarin. *Krokodil* The April 20 1961 cover featured a drawing of a celebratory crowd heaving the smiling cosmonaut into the air. The caption cited Gagarin’s actual description of his mission: “The flight continued normally. I adapted well to the conditions of weightlessness.” *Krokodil*, No. 11, April 20, 1961, front cover.

After 1956 the Party energetically campaigned to increase newspaper circulation, which prior to then had been, on the whole, relatively low. By 1961 the total average one-issue circulation of Soviet newspapers reached 68.7 million. In 1961 *Pravda*, the official organ of the Party, had the highest circulation of any Soviet daily at 6 million copies per day and was thus especially significant to the Gagarin propaganda.²⁰ *Izvestiia* tripled its circulation between 1957 and 1961 to reach a daily total of 4.1 million.²¹ Circulation figures for the smaller presses, which were directed towards special groups, also rose through the late 1950s. The *komsomol* and pioneer papers for youth and children, for example, reached an average one-issue circulation of 15.2 million by 1961.²² The revitalization of the press thus extended into the lower levels. Changes in the supply of newspapers reflected the demands of the Soviet state more than it did the demands of the marketplace. For instance, the rise of *Pravda*'s circulation through this period was the result of a concerted effort to increase Party influence on the masses.

The substantial modernization of the *Telegrafnoye Agentstvo Sovyetskogo Soyuz*a (Telegraph Agency of the Soviet Union), or TASS news service 1953 and 1960²³ and the founding of the *Agentstvo Pechati Novosti* (*Novosti* for short)²⁴ both illustrate the reorganization of the propaganda apparatus. In particular, the formation of *Novosti* – with the approval on April 3, 1961 of the APN Charter – has been described by scholars as “a Soviet effort to get away from the gray, dour image presented to the world by the TASS news service”²⁵ and

²⁰ Buzek, *How the Communist Press Works*, 71.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² 1961 figures published in *Sovietskaya pechat*, October 1961, 10-23. Cited in Buzek, *How the Communist Press Works*, 69-70.

²³ Ebon, Martin. *The Soviet Propaganda Machine*, (New York: McGraw Hill, 1987), 179.

²⁴ Prokhorov, *Great Soviet Encyclopedia*, 1: 652.

²⁵ Ebon, *The Soviet Propaganda Machine*, 205.

the “answer” to the problem that TASS was too closely associated with the government and “not geared to deal with new imaginative forms of propaganda.”²⁶ *Novosti’s* “primary task” had been to promote the Soviet Union to the international audience.²⁷ With its own television service, foreign language services, and publishing houses, *Novosti’s* reach was vast.²⁸ While *Novosti* flourished throughout Khrushchev’s reign and beyond, the timing of *Novosti’s* creation in April 1961 made Gagarin’s flight one of the first expressions of the new agency.²⁹

Major *Novosti* organs published the English language version of Gagarin’s 1961 autobiography *The Road to the Stars*³⁰ and journalist Yaroslav Golovanov’s massive, illustrated posthumous tribute *Our Gagarin*.³¹ Other publishing houses attached to the major newspapers also produced substantial materials on Gagarin. The Pravda Publishing House issued Gagarin’s autobiography³² as well

²⁶ Hazan, *Soviet Propaganda*, 43.

²⁷ Burkov, Boris, *Za Rubezhom* (Abroad), January 8-14, 1965, cited in Ebon, *The Soviet Propaganda Machine*, 206.

²⁸ Between 1965 and 1967 *Novosti* published more than 35 million items – including books, newspapers, magazines and albums – in the USSR and abroad. Additionally, the APN photo service prepared vast numbers of photos for the Soviet press. By 1968 APN had offices in all of the Soviet Republics and in 73 foreign countries, was publishing in 56 languages and circulating materials in 110 different countries. [Prokhorov, *Great Soviet Encyclopedia*, 1: 652.] *Novosti* took over the operations of the Foreign Language Publishing House and began publishing large quantities of books. Between 1960 and 1965 Soviet production of books in foreign languages rose from 40 million to 44 million copies. The number of languages also increased over that period from 24 in 1960 to 27 in 1965. [Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, USIF Research Service, Washington, 1972, p. 45. Cited in Hazan, *Soviet Propaganda*, 62-63.]

²⁹ *Novosti’s* official mandate was for: “Expansion of the exchange of various types of information will contribute to establishment of a spirit of mutuality and cooperation in the struggle for peace and friendship between peoples.” Ebon, *The Soviet Propaganda Machine*, 205.

³⁰ Gagarin, Iurii A. *The Road to the Stars*, (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1961).

³¹ Golovanov, Yaroslav K. *Our Gagarin*, (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1979).

³² Gagarin, Iu. A. *Doroga v Kosmos*, (Moscow: Pravda, 1961).

as a 343-page book – *The First Manned Flight in Space*³³ – collecting materials on Gagarin published in the *Pravda* newspaper, while the Izvestiia Publishing House issued *Soviet Man in Space*.

Radio was another attractive option for Soviet authorities to connect with the masses and especially with international audiences. Soviet broadcasting steadily grew and sustained impressive growth rates through the Khrushchev period and beyond. By 1961 Radio Moscow's international broadcasts for the year had reached 1067 hours and 15 minutes.³⁴ On the morning of 12 April, 1961, Soviet radio played the patriotic song *How Spacious is My Country* just before revealing to the world the news of Vostok's launch. Bulletins sustained the suspense as they regularly updated listeners on the progress of Gagarin's flight. Loudspeakers in public squares beckoned Soviet citizens to stop their daily routines to witness history in the making. Streetcars, factories, shops and schools quit their normal operations so that people could follow the radio reports. The 1961 song *Gagarin March*³⁵ was written and recorded especially to celebrate the flight, while the 1962 version of *Glory to the Forward-Looking*³⁶ and Vladimir Bunchikov's 1949 song *We Are High-Flying People* also received much airtime. In commemoration of Gagarin's flight, the Soviet record label Melodiya records also issued one full disc of special music.³⁷

³³ *Pervyi polet cheloveka v kosmos: Material, opublikovannyye v "Pravde"*, (Moscow: Pravda, 1961).

³⁴ Hazan, *Soviet Propaganda*, 66.

³⁵ *Gagarin March* featured the lyrics: "I dlya nas dorogi novye otkryl (and a new way opened for us)".

³⁶ Composed by Aleksandra Pakhmutova with lyrics by Sergei Grebennikov and Nikolai Doboronravov, and singing by Viktor Kokhno.

³⁷ The Melodiya record was called *Towards The Stars: Songs of Cosmos by Soviet Authors* and featured tracks with titles like: *I Believe Friends, The Pioneer Of Starry Tracks, You Dream Of Flights In Space, Gagarin Constellation, Smolensk Road, and How Yura Saw Us Off*. Viktor Kamkin *Melodiya Catalog* 2004, 9: 9100060 Melodiya Code: 33D032813-14. Another Melodiya record – Yaroslav Smeliakov. *Poems* – featured a poem called *Iurii*

Television played an important role in the Party's "ideological work". By 1960, 103 television studios and transmitters operated and daily programming had reached 276.5 hours. The 1960s also saw the rapid development of Soviet television broadcasting intended for foreign audiences. On 14 April, 1961, Western viewers of the Eurovision network saw the Red Square celebration for Gagarin, which was broadcast from Tallinn, Estonia, and relayed at Helsinki to the West. A 1961 newsreel entitled *May Day Strides Across the Land* highlighted Gagarin and Khrushchev riding in a motorcade as well as posters of Gagarin tied to balloons and ascending into the sky. In July 1961, a documentary film called *With Gagarin to the Stars* was produced in both Russian and English that showed the cosmonauts doing physical training and undergoing rigorous tests.³⁸ Television was in itself a symbol of technological progress that reflected the practical applications to be derived from the conquest of outer space.³⁹

The Soviets had a long history of infusing public space with monument propaganda, which was an important tool for ideological education and provided a means to make 'new' the appearance of Soviet cities.⁴⁰ Statues of Gagarin were erected in

Gagarin read by Smeliakov. Viktor Kamkin *Melodiya Catalog*, 190: 9100378 Melodiya Code: 33D31433-34.

³⁸ Fictional films also reflected the new interest in space that *Vostok* had generated. Alexander Rekemchuk's 1962 novel *Molodo-zeleno* (Callow Youth), in which several of the characters are inspired by Gagarin's flight to volunteer for trips to the moon, was made into a movie directed by Konstantin Voinov in 1962.

³⁹ For instance, in 1962 television signals from the spaceship *Vostok 3* and *Vostok 4* were broadcast on Soviet television. In 1965 Moscow and Vladivostok exchanged television signals via the Soviet space satellite *Molniia 1*. Prokhorov, *Great Soviet Encyclopedia*, 25: 484.

⁴⁰ A 12 April, 1918 decree had early on laid out the basis for removing pre-Revolutionary monuments and erecting a Revolutionary civic culture through monuments. The resolution was called: "On Removing Monuments Erected in Honor of Tsars and Their Servants and Developing a Project for Monuments Dedicated to the Russian Socialist Revolution (On Monuments of the Republic)".

many Soviet cities including Moscow, Saratov, Komsomolsk na Amur, and Zvyozdny Gorodok (Star City). In 1964, a 100-meter tall titanium monument – in the shape of a stylized spaceship and its rocket’s trail – was erected to house the Memorial Museum of Cosmonautics on the grounds of the All-Union Exhibition Center (VDNKh) in Moscow. Also in Moscow, on Leninskii Prospekt, stands a highly stylized 30-meter-tall Gagarin. Here the cosmonaut looks like a comic-book super-hero with a rocket’s trail coming out of his feet. A 40-meter high titanium obelisk marks the landing site of *Vostok* in the countryside near Saratov.

Another significant method of infusing Soviet society with a new identity and social code was the celebration of the so-called ‘Special Days’, ritual holidays that served as a focus for agitational campaigns. The establishment in 1962 of April 12 as Cosmonautics Day sparked a trend towards naming Special Days; 13 more were created by 1966.⁴¹ Gagarin’s celebration in Red Square on 14 April, 1961, and the subsequent Cosmonautics Days made use of the well-practiced traditions of mass spectacle and mass agitation that often took the form of parades and rallies or “theatricalized holidays”.

The reorganization of the propaganda mechanism that took place in the late 1950s and early 1960s constituted an intensification of Soviet propaganda operations. Remarkable new technical developments and ideological concepts had been injected

⁴¹ Cosmonautics Day was established on 9 April, 1962. Some of the special days were observed in honor of the toilers within the propaganda apparatus. Indeed, the first of these special Days to be observed was in commemoration of the newspaper *Pravda*; the tradition began even before the 1917 Revolution. On 5 May, 1914, the Bolsheviks began celebrating a “working-class press day” on the second anniversary of the first issue of *Pravda* on 5 May, 1912. The day has been officially observed as Press Day since *Pravda*’s tenth anniversary in 1922. A 1945 decree established 7 May as Radio Day to commemorate A. S. Popov’s demonstration of a wireless receiver on that day in 1895.

into what was already a sophisticated propaganda system. Tactics that had withered under Stalin were revived in a concerted attempt to renew a Leninist mobilization of the masses. Conceptualizations of things “young” and “new” were pushed to the forefront of propaganda operations, and youth involvement in propaganda was stepped up. New media such as radio and television were more vigorously employed. Gagarin propaganda constituted one of the first – and perhaps the most significant – examples of the newly revitalized propaganda apparatus. By the time of Gagarin’s flight the Soviet propaganda system was a highly complex and evolved machine that invested considerable attention to the shaping of Soviet society.

During the late 1950s and early 1960s the Party labored to define propaganda’s content. Various resolutions set forth the specific propaganda objectives necessary to realize the economic targets of the Seven Year Plan as well as the lofty vision for the construction of communism detailed in the Third Party Program. By creating a “hero” out of Gagarin, the Soviet state sought to create a cultural icon, a revered figure who could perform as a role model and a mouthpiece for the general line. So what was the general line at the time of Gagarin’s flight?

Mark Sandle neatly summarized the socio-cultural developments and ideological climate of the Khrushchev era as “*Equality, Atheism and Peaceful Coexistence*”.⁴² Nancy Condee described Soviet culture of the late 1950s in the following way:

The story of Thaw politics is about culture. The story of Thaw culture is about politics. Neither can be told without the other . . . Politics provides the four crucial

⁴² Sandle, Mark. *A Short History of Soviet Socialism*, (London: UCL Press, 1999), 292.

dates, a kind of pulse that drives and accentuates the cultural events: 1953, 1956, 1961, 1964.”⁴³

The four dates correspond to Stalin’s death in 1953, the XX Congress of 1956 (and Khrushchev’s Secret Speech there), the XXII Congress of October 1961 (where the Third Party Program was approved and the decision to remove Stalin’s corpse from Lenin’s Mausoleum was made), and Khrushchev’s sudden October 1964 ouster from power. While Grey Hodnett simplified his breakdown of the same period (1953-1964) into two periods: a succession struggle (1953 – 1957) and the Khrushchev era proper (June 1957 to October 1964), he nonetheless recognized the 1956 XX Congress as the “watershed” of de-Stalinization. To Hodnett, the XXI (1959) and XXII Congresses were the formal testaments of Khrushchevism and the Third Party Program “its most thorough expression”.⁴⁴

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The same day that Khrushchev delivered his Secret Speech, the Congress resolved to draw up the Third Party Program, the first since 1919.⁴⁵ This document – ratified in October 1961 – would outline the future objectives for the Communist Party including a “*moral code of the builder of communism*” which would detail the principles by which the new Soviet citizen should live.⁴⁶ In full, the moral code contained the following points:

devotion to the communist cause; love of the socialist motherland and of the other socialist countries; conscientious labor for the good of society – he who

⁴³ Condee, Nancy. “Cultural Codes of the Thaw”, in Taubman, William, Khrushchev, Sergei, Gleason, Abbot (eds.). *Nikita Khrushchev*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 160.

⁴⁴ Hodnett, *Resolutions and Decisions*, 6

⁴⁵ The resolution “On Preparing a New Programme for the CPSU” appeared in *Pravda* on 25 February, 1956. *Ibid.*, 52-3.

⁴⁶ All italics in quotations are after the originals. *Ibid.*, 247-50.

does not work, neither shall he eat; concern on the part of everyone for the preservation and growth of public wealth; a high sense of public duty; intolerance of actions harmful to the public interest; collectivism and comradely mutual assistance; one for all and all for one; humane relations and mutual respect between individuals – man is to man a friend, comrade and brother; honesty and truthfulness, moral purity, modesty, and unpretentiousness in social and private life; mutual respect in the family, and concern for the upbringing of children; an uncompromising attitude to injustice, parasitism, dishonesty, careerism and money-grubbing; friendship and brotherhood among all peoples of the USSR; intolerance of national and racial hatred; an uncompromising attitude to the enemies of communism, peace, and the freedom of nations; fraternal solidarity with the working people of all countries, and with all peoples.⁴⁷

Although the Third Party Program would not be ratified until after Gagarin's flight it most clearly defined the "new Soviet" citizen that propaganda intended to mold. The Third Party Program did not come out of nowhere, however. Taken as a whole, other resolutions leading up to Gagarin's flight clearly indicated the direction that the general line was taking. It is worthwhile to note that many of these resolutions were published in major Soviet newspapers.

A 1954 resolution specified "an ideological struggle of the scientific, materialistic world view against the anti-scientific, religious world view."⁴⁸ The XXI Extraordinary Congress of 1959

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 247-8.

⁴⁸ "On Errors in the Conduct of Scientific and Atheistic Propaganda among the Populace", 10 November, 1954. *Ibid.*, 36. The resolution appeared in *Pravda* on 11 November, 1954.

reiterated the importance of propaganda and clarified the ideal Soviet citizen that it would help to create. Convened to approve the details of the Seven-Year Plan, the Congress also outlined the Party's ideological goals. A resolution adopted by the delegates on 5 February, 1959 called for an "intensification" of propaganda with a special focus on instilling in young people a "communist attitude towards labor". The Seven-Year Plan outlined the project to build communism, and stressed that "moral stimuli to work for the well-being of society will take on increasing significance" while calling for improved "social relations . . . based on the principles of comradely cooperation, friendship, and mutual understanding."⁴⁹

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The 9 January, 1960 resolution "On the Tasks of Party Propaganda under Present Conditions" – a summation of the achievements, shortcomings and goals of Soviet "ideological work" – was the last key document on propaganda before Gagarin's flight. The resolution outlined four factors influencing the direction of propaganda. In the first place, economic advancement required heightened indoctrination of the workers. Secondly, self-regulation would become increasingly important as communist administration was implemented. Thirdly, propaganda's primary task would be to inculcate a new morality in the Soviet citizen. And finally, ideological work was more, and not less, important within a foreign policy defined by the principle of peaceful coexistence.⁵⁰ The resolutions most clearly stated that ideological education should be intensified and made less theoretical and more functional. Party resolutions demanded that propaganda be

⁴⁹ The resolution "On the Report by Comrade N. S. Khrushchev 'Control Figures for the Development of the Economy of the USSR in the Years 1959-65'" was published in *Pravda* on 7 February, 1959. *Ibid.*, 124-132.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 140.

“imbued with optimism” and “a source of joy and inspiration to millions of people” while propaganda’s effectiveness would be measured by increases in production.⁵¹ It is no wonder then, that the image of Gagarin-the-hero most often portrayed him as a “happy worker”.

16 | In summary, the resolutions on propaganda called for ideological instruction of enough scope and efficacy to replace religious, bourgeois, and other “old” beliefs with a world-view solidly based on the “science” of Marxism-Leninism. In doing so, it strongly emphasized the “future” and the “new”. The future preoccupied the Soviet elite; the ambitious production targets set by the Seven Year Plan required such forward thinking. The constructivist claims of Marxist-Leninism necessitated providing proof of the regime’s progress, both in general terms – such as progressive technology – but more specifically, in terms of progress towards the lofty goal of creating communism.⁵² It was necessary, then, that they incessantly create and recreate a climate and impression of progress. Associating *Vostok* with a “new era” also linked the spring of 1961 to the “new era” that began in 1917, and thus built a bridge between Khrushchev and Lenin. Considering that the brutalities of the Stalin era also provided a powerful impetus for reform, it is clear how necessary it was for Khrushchev to propagate a cult of the new. To historian Nancy Condee,

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 256.

⁵² Engels borrowed the term “Socialism” to describe Marx’s idea of the “lower” phase of Communism – a kind of transitional period between capitalism and communism. Lenin’s innovation had been his argument that the mechanisms of a state committed to communism’s construction could direct this transitional period – rather than waiting for it to unfold through the processes that Marx predicted would naturally occur. Once in power, the Bolsheviks needed to illustrate their successful accomplishment of various stages of this transition period in order to legitimate their rule.

Khrushchev separated the old from the new at 1956.⁵³ As she elaborated, the struggle would not result in the vanquishing of one side but instead prescribed a generational relationship in which ideological and cultural education through propaganda played an important role.⁵⁴

This relationship between new and old manifested itself in the Gagarin propaganda in many ways. Gagarin's life story – exemplifying the virtues of Leninist ideals, scientific-atheism, and the “science” of Marxism-Leninism – illustrated the “correct” way to wage the struggle between the new and old. The Gagarin propaganda projected itself towards youth, instructing them to adopt a scientific-atheistic world-view and enthusiastically engage in increasing production in order to construct the “material basis of communism”. It closely followed the moral principles spelled out in pre-1961 resolutions and foreshadowed the late-1961 moral code. Even as Gagarin set off for the launch pad on the morning of his flight, he allegedly called back to his fellow cosmonauts: “One for all and all for one, lads!” a verbatim quote from the moral code.⁵⁵

Gagarin's various biographies revealed too much of the conspicuous hand of the state propaganda apparatus to be accepted as reliable accounts of the man's life and character. His image nonetheless reflected the political imperatives and ideological currents at work within the Soviet Union. Considering that Gagarin became a Communist Party member in 1960, by the time of his

⁵³ As Khrushchev would later look back on 1956: “We must . . . discard all that is old and rusty, equip ourselves with new and better weapons, and clear the road of all obstructions, all that is dead and useless. In the life of our Soviet state, the period after Stalin's death was just such a period. . . . We did so to get rid of unhealthy and dangerous practices of the past.” Khrushchev, Nikita. *The Great Mission of Literature and Art*, (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1964), 167.

⁵⁴ Condee, “Cultural Codes of the Thaw”, 167.

⁵⁵ Golovanov, *Our Gagarin*, 125.

flight he must have been well initiated into his “fundamental” responsibilities as a propagandist.⁵⁶ Perhaps his selection as the first cosmonaut was in some way due to his reliability as an agitator. It is clear though, that Gagarin’s biography completely conformed to the propaganda resolutions, and that the cosmonaut himself participated in the construction of his image. The Third Party Program and the hero-myth of Iurii Gagarin represented a culmination and a refinement of the Khrushchevian ideals laid out in the late 1950s.

As the Party Program declared, “historic social gains” had made possible “greater opportunities for *educating a new man, who will harmoniously combine spiritual wealth, moral purity, and a perfect physique.*”⁵⁷ Gagarin’s autobiography – essentially a story of youth – reflected the Party Program’s statement that, “Special importance is attached by the party to the molding of the rising generation.”⁵⁸ Biographical narratives of Gagarin focused on the cosmonaut’s formative years to tell the story of a model citizen who embraced the new, and believed in the brightness of the future. Press about him, and especially biographies of him, were often specifically directed towards Soviet youth. Major publications on Gagarin, for instance, included *Est’ plamia!* (There is a Flame!) and *Malen’kie rasskazi o bol’shom kosmose* (Little Stories about the Big Cosmos) both

⁵⁶ The resolutions of the late 1950s sought to increase party supervision of public organizations and at the same time heighten party members responsibility towards “educating” themselves and others. Every Party member was expected to be an active agitator and propagandist. Agitation work was the “most important duty of every Communist” and propaganda a “fundamental . . . party assignment”. Hodnett, *Resolutions and Decision*, 145 & 149.

⁵⁷ Hodnett, *Resolutions and Decisions*, 248. Although frequent reference was made to Gagarin’s less than average stature, he clearly made an appropriate effort to perfect his physique. Iurii’s gym teacher remembered that others found it hard to keep pace with him athletically. Golovanov also related how Gagarin taught his younger cousins how to box. Golovanov, *Our Gagarin*, 42 & 44.

⁵⁸ Hodnett, *Resolutions and Decisions*, 246.

published by Molodaia Gvardia Publishing House (Young Guard) and *Vizhu zemlyu...* (I See the Earth...) published by Detskaia Literatura (Children's Literature).⁵⁹ By far the most significant of the many biographical sketches of Gagarin was his 1961 autobiography *The Road to the Stars* for it provided the basic narrative of Gagarin's life for all of the other publications to follow.⁶⁰ Biographical narratives of Iurii Gagarin closely correlated to the Party's plans to ideologically and culturally educate "new Soviet" citizens.

| 19

Gagarin's status as a hero implied that he was a role model. In his autobiography, Gagarin paid homage to the many other heroes that helped pave his road to the stars. Often, he lapsed into simple lists of names of political, military, and cultural figures – many of whom had been named official Heroes of the Soviet Union. Others were given special treatment; almost without fail, these heroes would articulate thinly veiled fulfillments of the propaganda directives. Providing so many heroes also widened the variety of role models for others to mimic. Gagarin reasoned that the path to heroism was in emulating other heroes: "we tried to imitate our idols in everything".⁶¹ The first "real Soviet hero" mentioned in Gagarin's autobiography, for instance, was an embodiment of the "uncompromising attitude to the enemies of communism" and a horrific example of selfless devotion: a Russian

⁵⁹ *Malen'kiye rasskazy o bol'shom kosmose*, (Moscow: Molodaia Gvardia, 1962).

Iurii Gagarin, *Vizhu zemliu*, (Moscow: Detskaia Literatura, 1968).

Iurii Gagarin, *Est' plamyat Stat'i, rechi, pis'ma, interv'yuu*, (Moscow: 1968).

⁶⁰ Major later works included *My Brother Iurii* first published in 1972 by Iurii Gagarin's older brother Valentin. [Valentin Gagarin, *Moi brat Iurii: dokumentalnaya povyest'* (Moscow: ITRK, 2002).] More recently there appeared *Immortal Gagarin* by Iurii Iustinov. Iurii Ustinov, *Bessmertnye Gagarina* (Moscow: Geroi Otychestva, 2004).

⁶¹ Gagarin, *Road to the Stars*, 45.

pilot who sacrificed his life on a kamikaze-style suicide mission during the war.⁶²

20 | Another Hero of the Soviet Union – Gagarin’s flight commander Sergei Safronov – taught the future cosmonaut a valuable lesson that would ultimately come full circle in the *Road to the Stars*. Gagarin recalled Safronov “using his own interesting biography as an example he tried to show us future pilots how a real Soviet man and a real pilot is made.”⁶³ Having learned this lesson, Gagarin became a ‘real pilot’ and man, and could now dutifully use his own biography to show other future heroes the way to becoming “real Soviet” men. This was just the type of example from “real life” educating the “new man” that the propaganda resolutions had been calling for.

Gagarin’s wide-range of interests as a child was described in such a way as to allow people – and, perhaps, children especially – reading such works to relate to the hero. His teachers “were astonished at the multiplicity of his interests . . . [he] took part in literary debates and math competitions, willingly helped those who had trouble keeping up, was secretary of the Labor Reserves, a voluntary sports society, and was also the Komsomol organizer of the foundry section.”⁶⁴ As a boy he not only made many model airplanes “which really flew”⁶⁵ but also kept a diary of nature observations and collected stones, flowers and grasses.⁶⁶ As a Young Pioneer, Gagarin played in a brass band and took part in amateur theatrical performances.⁶⁷ His instructor at the Air Force School

⁶² *Ibid.*, 12.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁶⁴ Golovanov, *Our Gagarin*, 43.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ Gagarin, *Road to the Stars*, 17.

remembered Iurii not only as an “inveterate sportsman . . . He also sang in the choir and could dance.”⁶⁸ Gagarin’s diverse pastimes let the younger generations see a bit of themselves in the hero while his enthusiasm for public youth organizations would perhaps rub off on them.

The Road to the Stars depicted the future cosmonaut’s excellence as a youth in school. Just like his hero Lenin, Gagarin was a teacher’s dream-come-true. As one of his biographers reported, “All Gagarin’s teachers affirm that he always did equally well in every subject.”⁶⁹ His tutor specifically praised Iurii’s “studiousness” when he wrote that Iurii was “one of our best students.”⁷⁰ Former classmates also remembered Iurii excelling at school.⁷¹ His biographers portrayed Iurii as a precocious boy whose “thirst for knowledge . . . illuminated his face, and people noticed it.”⁷² As a charming role model, Gagarin could hopefully inspire children to apply themselves to their schoolwork.

Gagarin’s biographers described the cosmonaut as riding a “wave of technological, social and general progress” and provided Gagarin’s education as one of many examples of this.⁷³ Associating *Vostok 1* with this “forward march” of history situated the event within a revolutionary moment between the old and the new. Similar assumptions informed the repeated descriptions of Gagarin as intellectually “goal-oriented.”⁷⁴ Iurii’s work ethic was not simply acquired naturally, but rather through willfully and diligently working towards his goals. As Gagarin wrote, “Determination in the

⁶⁸ Golovanov, *Our Gagarin*, 46.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 31.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 18-19.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 40.

achievement of a set goal is one of the distinguishing features of our young people.”⁷⁵ Goals implied duties; everything one did, even in leisure, was purposeful. Or as Gagarin put it, “Sport is made for man and not man for sport.”⁷⁶

Gagarin’s goal-oriented philosophy paid off when he was selected as the first cosmonaut. While diligently applying himself toward his goals Gagarin was rarely ever known to complain, because he was unshakably confident that his government embodied his own hopes and wishes.⁷⁷ His animated and affectionate personality implied his faith and enthusiasm for the values of his society – his “communist devotion”. Gagarin’s exuberance for life derived from his patriotism and loyalty to his nation, which he was joyful to serve. He was portrayed through the tribulations of World War II, its aftermath, and the rigorous trials of cosmonaut training and selection, as someone whose unerring faith in the positive possibilities of the future strengthened him and inspired others. Still, throughout these narratives of Gagarin’s life it was the modesty and selfless labor of others that inspired him.

While the moral code of the Third Party Program specified the basic outline of how the Party wished to “mould the rising generation”, Gagarin symbolized the moral code and brought it to the masses. Indeed, he often made explicit reference to it, for instance when he reminisced that, “Comradely mutual assistance was the general rule at the technical school.”⁷⁸ Gagarin’s generosity, selfless labor, and high sense of public duty perfectly

⁷⁵ Gagarin, *Road to the Stars*, 54.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁷⁷ As his interest in outer space rose, he “knew that the government was sparing no funds for the exploration of space, and I thought that thousands, perhaps tens of thousands of specialists in various fields were working selflessly on the solution of the greatest aim mankind had ever set itself.” *Ibid.*, 84.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 28.

illustrated the “moral purity” and “spiritual wealth” that the Program called for. Regularly reemphasizing that Gagarin was a “Soviet man” signified that Gagarin’s happiness derived from his pride in being a citizen of a socialist state, and therefore from his enthusiasm for socialism. Gagarin was portrayed, even as a child, as extremely conscientious about his public duty to work for the sake of society’s common benefit. One of Iurii’s boyhood friends recalled playing an exciting game with Gagarin, who suddenly exclaimed, “Halt. It’s time for homework”⁷⁹, illustrating how “He seemed to have a sense of duty and responsibility in his very blood.”⁸⁰ The propaganda highlighted Gagarin’s “communist devotion”, describing him as a “convinced Leninist” with unswerving faith in a socialist future.⁸¹

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Iurii’s enthusiasm for labor so filled him with joy that his depiction ultimately blurred the lines between work and leisure. Gagarin’s biographers made sure to emphasize that the hero “even relaxed actively, energetically and purposefully, in the same way as he worked.”⁸² As his brother Valentin remembered him, “both at play and at work . . . he seemed not to know what tiredness was.”⁸³ Gagarin’s indefatigable passion for work extended into his free time where he would apply himself just as vigorously to selflessly bettering society. The Party Program had foreseen greater efficiency in material production affording more leisure time for citizens. The Program ordered that, “People will increasingly

⁷⁹ Golovanov, *Our Gagarin*, 34.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ As Golvanov specified, “Gagarin was a son of the people. In all his actions he stuck to the moral principles of Soviet society and was a convinced Leninist, believing that the path charted by Lenin was the surest and his principles the most just.” *Ibid.*, 17.

⁸² Golovanov, *Our Gagarin*, 31.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 39.

devote their leisure to public pursuits, cultural intercourse, intellectual and physical development, scientific, technical, and artistic endeavor. Physical training and sports will become part and parcel of the everyday life of people.”⁸⁴

This conflation of work and leisure was mirrored in narratives of Gagarin’s schooling. These also reflected reforms to the education system under Khrushchev even though Iurii received most of his education under Stalin. Khrushchev had abolished upper forms of secondary school forcing all 15-year-olds into production for two years, and requiring that students who wished to pursue higher education take up evening or correspondence classes to prepare themselves.⁸⁵ Gagarin remembered, “Although I was at school, I wanted to learn more. I took books on technical subjects from the library, and was angry because there are only twenty-four hours in a day.”⁸⁶ In fact, Iurii’s career in aviation began through just such an extracurricular activity when he attended an aviation class in the evenings while at the Saratov Industrial Technicum between 1952 and 1955. One fellow student in the aviation course remembered Iurii as a tireless worker, noting that Gagarin had been the only student who had the perseverance to complete the program.⁸⁷ The senior instructor at the Saratov flying club that Iurii joined – also an extracurricular activity – remembered Gagarin for his perfect attendance record.⁸⁸

As a student Gagarin also joined the school physics society and gave a talk on Tsiolkovsky. Dedicating his free time to reading science-fiction, and scientific non-fiction, Iurii was especially

⁸⁴ Hodnett, *Resolutions and Decisions*, 249.

⁸⁵ Sandle, *A Short History of Soviet Socialism*, 294.

⁸⁶ Gagarin, *Road to the Stars*, 25.

⁸⁷ Golovanov, *Our Gagarin*, 44.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 45.

interested to read anything about rocket engineering “including its military uses”.⁸⁹ He studied Einstein’s theory of relativity, wanting to understand everything that man had discovered about outer space. Gagarin’s endless enthusiasm led him to pursue things with passion and a restless energy. Propaganda about him endeavored to express this as part of the foundations of his heroic character, and ultimately to use these aspects of his personality to explain how he came to be a much-decorated Hero of the Soviet Union. |25

When he had a break from school Gagarin and the other students would enthusiastically assist farmers with their harvest, and “would have only been too glad to go farther, to the new lands where millions of acres of virgin soil were being brought under the plow and huge fields of wheat were ripening.”⁹⁰ With this remark Gagarin also expressed his enthusiasm for Khrushchev’s Virgin Lands agricultural campaign, begun in 1954.

Gagarin’s renown as a hard worker was offered to explain why he was selected to take the path of heroism. Golovanov concluded that, “Work was the solid framework to Gagarin’s heroism” and cited Maxim Gorky to further illustrate the connection between heroes and their labors.⁹¹ Gagarin’s biographers repeatedly emphasized the cosmonaut’s capability and enthusiasm for hard work. His brother Valentin agreed that Iurii was “Indefatigable, restless and very active, he seemed not to know what tiredness was. He could always find both the time and the desire to do anything.”⁹² One of the most often-reproduced photos of Iurii was an image of him working in a foundry while at the

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁹⁰ Gagarin, *Road to the Stars*, 60.

⁹¹ Gorky wrote that: “All my life I have considered as true heroes only those people who love and know how to work”. Golovanov, *Our Gagarin*, 31.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 39.

vocational school. Images like this revealed an attempt to draw Gagarin as an icon of labor that was mirrored in biographical anecdotes. In one example, his biographers described how he broke a thread wound around his flexing muscles, to the amazement of his cousins.⁹³

26 |

Another attempt to promote productivity – and another way in which Khrushchev invoked a new era to replace the Stalin era – was the reinstigation of an Anti-Religious Campaign in 1959. Stalin had relaxed religious persecution during World War II, but propagandists in the late 1950s were increasingly called upon to instill the masses with “scientific atheism”. Persecution of the church and the religious faithful increased dramatically. Churches were closed or converted for other purposes, such as storage or as garages. A new Criminal Code in 1961 criminalized religious activities and prohibited parents and priests from providing religious instruction to minors. Gagarin was portrayed as an icon of scientific culture and a symbol of scientific atheism. A 30 April, 1961, *Krokodil* cartoon depicted Gagarin aboard a stylized *Vostok* soaring happily through a crowd of angels. While some angels fainted, others fled. One, whose chariot horses were clearly spooked, appeared to be losing his halo in the gust of wind caused by the rocket’s fiery engine.⁹⁴ When asked whether he had brought “any mementos such as photos of [his] dear ones, or any talismans” on his voyage, Gagarin assured reporters that he did “not believe in any omens and talismans, and other such things.”⁹⁵ Upon his return to earth, German Titov, the second Soviet man in

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁹⁴ The *Krokodil* comic drawn by N. Semionov and reproduced in: Marie-Raymonde Delorme, *Krokodil: Anthologie des Textes et des Dessins Parus dans le Journal Satirique Soviétique* (Paris: Editions Seghers, 1964), No page numbers were given.

⁹⁵ *Pravda*, April 16, 1961, 2.

space, publicly shared his conclusion that having visited heaven and finding no God there, He must not exist. The following remark of a peasant from Kalinin *oblast'* recorded in the early 1960s seemed to support his claim:

[I] believe and [I] do not believe in God. For a long time I was religious, but now [I] do not know what to be [they] launched the sputnik- [they] did not find God.⁹⁶

|27

Images of Lenin, the October Revolution, and symbols of space, technology and the “science” of Marxism-Leninism, were increasingly held up as the alternative to religious beliefs. The Gagarin propaganda often cited the science of “dialectical-materialism” as the “main reason” for *Vostok*’s success.⁹⁷ The emphasis on the supremacy of science over religion was merged with the rhetoric of communist theory to forge a new ideology. The Party Program succinctly correlated propagandizing scientific achievements with the campaign against religious beliefs.⁹⁸ Gagarin professed a materialistic philosophy of life,

⁹⁶ Viola, Lynne, “The Peasant Nightmare: Visions of Apocalypse in the Soviet Countryside”, in *The Journal of Modern History*, 62, 4 (Dec., 1990), 754.

⁹⁷ As *Pravda* proclaimed shortly after Gagarin’s flight, Soviet science owed its superiority to being “equipped with the teachings of dialectical-materialism.” Interestingly, dialectical-materialism was also used to assert that extraterrestrial life “definitely exists [...] that there exist a multiplicity of worlds in which the evolution of life, the supreme form of matter, is possible.” *Pravda*, April 25, 1961, 1. Asked to explain the Soviet Union’s lead in the space race, one of the scientists speaking at the Scientists’ Club cited the “main reason [as] the possibility of organizing scientific-technical work in a socialist state with much greater expediency than in a society founded on private property.” *Pravda*, April 16, 1961, 2.

⁹⁸ The Party Program said that: “The party uses ideological media to educate people in the spirit of a scientific materialist world conception, to overcome religious prejudices without insulting the sentiments of believers. It is necessary to conduct regularly broad atheistic propaganda on a scientific basis, to explain patiently the untenability of religious beliefs, which were engendered in the past when people were overawed by the elemental forces and social oppression and did not know the real causes of natural and social phenomena. This can be done by

saying, “We are children of the Earth. To it we owe our lives, warmth and the joy of existing.”⁹⁹ Gagarin’s image embodied the scientific-atheistic “New Man” that socialism had ostensibly created; as Lidia Obukhova related, Iurii and his siblings’ names were symbolically atheist.¹⁰⁰

Gagarin reminisced about how science excited him in school and he expressed his pride at taking part “in a struggle against nature . . . gravity and . . . Mother Earth.”¹⁰¹ He realized that he lived in a new and scientific era, “We realized that in our times, in the atom age, when everything depends on precise calculations, nothing could be done without mathematics.”¹⁰² As his mother proudly remembered, “He has sharpened his teeth on the granite of science”.¹⁰³ Gagarin and *Vostok* symbolized science and machines as an extension of man’s “will” and as a replacement for religious faith.¹⁰⁴ As one of Gagarin’s Air Force Commanders instructed him, “All you need is precise navigation and faith in your instruments . . . In a fighter aircraft, you’re not only king, you’re God – pilot, navigator and gunner – the Holy Trinity.”¹⁰⁵ Persistent references to the “conquest of outer space” reinforced the idea that man must

making use of achievements of modern science, which is steadily solving the mysteries of the universe and extending man’s power over nature, leaving no room for religious inventions about supernatural forces.” Hodnett, *Resolutions and Decisions*, 249.

⁹⁹ Golovanov, *Our Gagarin*, 15.

¹⁰⁰ They “were not the names of the saints for the days they were born. The priest did not even want to christen Iurii, insisting that his name should be Georgi. “Well, as you like, father,” said Iurii’s mother firmly, because even though brought up, like many country people, to keep the rules of religion, she had the courage of her convictions. “We’ve already had him registered at the village Soviet as Iurii, and Iurii he will stay.”” *Ibid.*, 34.

¹⁰¹ Gagarin, *Road to the Stars*, 19.

¹⁰² Golovanov, *Our Gagarin*, 28.

¹⁰³ Gagarin, *Road to the Stars*, 61.

¹⁰⁴ As Gagarin described his first flight in an airplane, “All the parts of the machine became transmitters of my will”. *Ibid.*, 46.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 80.

“put the universe under his control.”¹⁰⁶ Gagarin was repeatedly compared to the Greek myth of Icarus, apparently to illustrate the long and universal “bold dream”¹⁰⁷ of flight. Now, man’s wings were “joined together by that strongest alloy, the laws of science”, and science engineered “dreams” into reality.¹⁰⁸ The space program owed its success to science and the massive propaganda campaign that followed clearly demanded that citizens give up old idols in exchange for new ones. |29

The Party understood that science in general would contribute to expanding Soviet production capacity. As the Third Party Program made clear, “Application of science in production becomes a decisive factor of rapid growth of the productive forces of society.”¹⁰⁹ The Program detailed elaborate visions for the development of the key areas of science but had little to say about the potential uses of outer space.¹¹⁰ Perhaps the Party had not come such a long way since Khrushchev and his colleagues had felt like “technological ignoramuses” when Korolev first showed them his prototype rocket. As Khrushchev remembered, he and his fellow members of the Presidium:

... gawked at what he showed us as if we were a bunch of sheep seeing a gate for the first time. When he showed us one of his rockets, we thought it looked like nothing but a huge cigar-shaped tube and we didn’t believe it could fly. . We were like peasants in a marketplace. We walked around and around the rocket,

¹⁰⁶ *Pravda*, April 16, 1961, 2. & 56.

¹⁰⁷ *Pravda*, April 16, 1961, 2.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ Hodnett, *Resolutions and Decisions*, 252.

¹¹⁰ Only that, “Artificial earth satellites and spaceships have, by enabling man to penetrate into outer space, provided great opportunities of discovering new natural phenomena and laws and of investigating the planets and the sun.” *Ibid.*, 253.

touching it, tapping it to see if it was sturdy enough—we did everything but lick it to see how it tasted.¹¹¹

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In fact, the Program hinted that space exploration was playing more of a propaganda role than anything else.¹¹² Gagarin's enthusiasm for science and his "happy worker" propagated the Party's calls for increased productivity. *Sputnik 1* had shown Soviet authorities that feats in space would attract much attention internationally. Speakers celebrating Gagarin's flight thus consciously addressed a global public and their statements were specially tailored for mass audiences. The authority of science – like the concept of 'newness' and the attention on youth – was promoted to harness the productivity of the masses. Calling for "conscientious labor for the good of society" and "concern on the part of everyone for the preservation and growth of public wealth" the moral code was oriented towards increasing productivity.¹¹³ The "chief educational task" was to cultivate a "communist attitude" in which "Labor for the benefit of society is the sacred duty of all."¹¹⁴ Furthermore, propaganda's effectiveness was to be measured by "concrete production results".

The achievements in space were portrayed in such a way as to inspire ever more heroic feats. As Gagarin remembered he and his fellow students' reaction to *Sputnik*, "Every one of us tried to

¹¹¹ Khrushchev, Nikita S. *Khrushchev Remembers: The Last Testament*, trans and ed. Strobe Talbot, (Boston: Little, Brown, 1974), 46.

¹¹² The Party Program concluded its discussion of "Ties between science and production" by stating: "It is a point of honor for Soviet scientists to consolidate the advance positions which Soviet science has won in major branches of knowledge and to take a leading place in world science in all key fields. Hodnett, *Resolutions and Decisions*, 255.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 248.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 247.

prove worthy of that historic event.”¹¹⁵ These “historic events” and “heroic acts” were thus supplied as a scale for Soviet citizens to measure their worth by. *Vostok* was not only meant to symbolize the fulfillment of dreams of the past. It was meant to stir bolder dreams and inspire the ‘unswerving’ courage necessary to succeed. *Pravda* used Gagarin’s flight to argue not only that the “present rate of scientific and technical progress is remarkable”, but also to predict that this “rate will gain even further momentum.”¹¹⁶ The height achieved by the flight was “unprecedented”, but would rise ever higher. The Soviet lead in outer space suggested the inevitable, intergalactic triumph of communism. In the short term, however, as the 17 April *Pravda* headline and photo of two proud factory workers implied, the “Unprecedented Exploit of Mastering Outer Space Inspires Soviet People to New Working Victories” much closer to home.¹¹⁷

|31

Soviet propagandists clearly understood that the hero, as the personification of an idea, could most successfully communicate the essence of that idea to a large audience. While it is useful to analyze the political and ideological ideas that were attached to Gagarin’s myth, it is also important to recognize the significance of Gagarin’s role in the *personification* of the Soviet myth. In the same way that a manned space flight personified outer space, Gagarin provided a ‘face’ for the regime and a mouthpiece for Party ideology. The elaboration and publication of Gagarin’s character was necessary to embody and personify the achievements of the Soviet system. For Khrushchev, who had denounced Stalin’s cult of personality only five years previously,

¹¹⁵ Gagarin, *Road to the Stars*, 70.

¹¹⁶ *Pravda*, April 16, 1961, 2.

¹¹⁷ *Pravda*, April 17, 4.

the creation of a hero figure outside of politics may have seemed both advantageous and acceptable. At any rate, the Soviet Union under Khrushchev was in a unique position historically to understand and employ the power of the personality cult.

32 | It is vital that anyone interested in Gagarin should read his biographies as Soviet propaganda. Narratives of the cosmonaut's life and propaganda directives of his era too faithfully match to be considered uncritically. Even authors such as Jamie Doran and Piers Bizony, whose account makes the most ambitious Western attempt to differentiate between the "truth" and the "legend" of the cosmonaut, accepted unquestioningly the official portraits of Gagarin's early life. Examining major propaganda resolutions of the late 1950s and early 1960s, and comparing them to biographical narratives of Gagarin, the intimate connection between the two becomes quite apparent. Some specialists in Soviet propaganda, such as Frederick Barghoorn or John McCannon, recognized the mythical role assigned to Soviet cosmonauts. As yet, however, an in-depth study of cosmonaut hero-myths and their implications for late- and post-Soviet culture has not appeared.

As perhaps the most visible positive Soviet symbols of the period, cosmonauts provided a powerful image for an era that, at least in terms of culture, might have truly seemed 'new'. But was it the cosmonauts themselves who made it so? Historical analyses of changes in Soviet society through the late 1950s and early 1960s often label the period "post-Stalinist". Indeed, one can frame the context of the construction of Gagarin's image between significant de-Stalinizing moments in 1956 and 1961. Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin's cult in 1956 was not put before the general public until the October 1961 XXII Congress, by which time the space heroes were firmly in the popular imagination. At this same

Congress the Third Party Program and its moral code were adopted, and on 31 October a resolution was passed to remove Stalin's sarcophagus from the Lenin Mausoleum. That same night his body was moved. The early Soviet space age thus coincided with this significant transfer of power and the reorientation of post-Stalin society, in which Stalin's death and the immense human losses of the Great Patriotic War produced what Condee noted as the "*bezotsovshchina*" (fatherlessness) of the post-war Sixties generation.¹¹⁸ The "newness" of the space era may in many ways have been a response to the final closure of the Stalin period. The cult of Gagarin is perhaps most relevant to these first steps towards de-Stalinization. |33

The post-Stalin Soviet Union was in a unique position historically to understand and potentially utilize the personality cult. Khrushchev's political star rose under Stalin and was consolidated when Khrushchev denounced the dictator's "cult of personality". Once firmly in power Khrushchev understood that he needed to distance himself from the dictator's crimes and image. For Khrushchev, the benefits of creating a hero figure outside of politics were perhaps quite apparent. It was important for Khrushchev to accentuate his own legitimacy, to forge a connection between his current regime and that of Lenin. Here, the cosmonaut served a useful purpose. Comparing Gagarin to "Lenin, the immortal leader of the working class and the Communist Party", Khrushchev linked the victory in space with the victory of the Revolution—another "exploit unparalleled in history".¹¹⁹ As the paternal master of Gagarin's ascendancy to immortality, Khrushchev could benefit by association.

¹¹⁸ Condee, "Cultural Codes of the Thaw", 165-166.

¹¹⁹ *Pravda*, April 15, 1961, 2.

In the end, it was Gagarin who came closest to sharing something of Lenin's symbolic immortality. On 30 March, 1968 Gagarin's body was interred in the Kremlin wall behind Lenin's Mausoleum, a far more honored resting place than that granted both Khrushchev who was buried in Novodevichy Convent and Stalin who was laid under a concrete slab outside of the Kremlin. Gagarin's image also remained largely untarnished through the fall of the Soviet Union. One post-Communist writer has remarked that during perestroika:

. . . all the heroes of the previous years had been shattered to dust, the only remaining, real, tangible hero was Gagarin the first man in space, and a good guy whom both the elderly and the young trusted¹²⁰

The "immortality" of Gagarin's image makes a critique of the relationship between his representation and state prerogatives more vital. Through his performance as a role model and mouthpiece for the state, the image of Gagarin that emerged was of an ideal citizen of an ideal state. The mortal Gagarin, we can only suppose, was far less than this ideal – and far more human.

¹²⁰Yurchak, Alexei. "Gagarin and the Rave Kids: Transforming Power, Identity, and Aesthetics in Post-Soviet Nightlife", in *Consuming Russia: Popular Culture, Sex, and Society Since Gorbachev* (London: Duke University Press, 1999), 94.