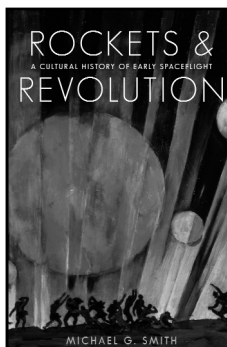


BOOK REVIEW

ROCKETS & REVOLUTION: A CULTURAL HISTORY OF EARLY SPACEFLIGHT



By Michael G. Smith

University of Nebraska Press, 2014

ISBN: 978-0-8032-5522-7

Pages: 448

Price: \$34.95, hardcover

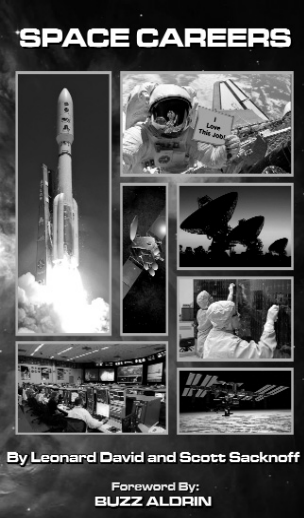
Rockets & Revolution: A Cultural History of Early Spaceflight by Michael G. Smith is a remarkable book. Smith, an associate professor of history at Purdue University with a PhD from Georgetown, has written an overview of the idea of spaceflight from the end of the 19th century to the beginning of World War II from a Russian/Soviet perspective. His story, a study of the rocket as metaphor for human existence, is roughly chronological, following an ascending Russian spiral replete with the chaos of the painful transition to Stalinism. His book, which is divided into three sections: “The Surveillance of Outer Space and the Russian Empire,” “The Mastery of Time and the Bolshevik Revolution,” and “The Rise of Rocket Science and the Soviet Union,” is thorough and thought-provoking.

Smith’s two main successes from this reviewer’s standpoint are the capture of the absolute romanticism of spaceflight and the grounding of the work of Tsiolkovskii, Oberth, and Goddard within the deep international community in which their ideas took root. Not only does Smith cover the writings of the primary rocket-development actors, but also the secondary and even tertiary actors. Tsiolkovskii, Oberth, and Goddard are covered in depth, as are Esnault-Pelterie, N.A. Rynin, N.F. Federov, and others too numerous to list. Cosmism and the belief in the future of humanity’s spirit and body residing in space was tremendous, especially in Russia. Smith spends much time discussing Russian science fiction writers—in particular, Aleksei Tolstoi. As an example of Smith’s level of detail, his ten-page discussion of Tolstoi’s *Aelita* (1923) states that *Aelita* is a reversal of Oswald Spengler’s *Decline of the West*; an echo of H.G. Wells; would have reminded readers of Edgar Rice Burroughs’s *Princess of Mars*; borrowed from Gustavus Pope’s *Journey to Mars* and Edwin Lester Arnold’s *Lieutenant Gullivar Jones*; was a nod to Guglielmo Marconi’s Martian radio signals; advanced Svante Arrhenius’s “panspermia” thesis that organic life traveled through the universe to Earth; was designed around the work of Flammarian, Lowell, and Goddard; and possibly borrowed from *The Prisoner of Mars* by Gustave Le Rouge.

Smith’s book is a real cultural history, not just of science and science fiction, but also incorporates the work of artists and poets. Smith discusses the sculpture of Vladimir Tatlin—in particular his *Monument to the Third International*—an abstract monument to Russian revolutionary culture and ascendancy to the stars. Smith also discusses Russian painters including Kazimir Malevich and El Lissitzkii and their interpretations of human interplanetary travel, and K.F. Iuon’s painting, *New Planet*—an allegory of the birth of communism and the death of capitalism. The ground swell and rich community of space-thinkers in the first half of the 20th century was amazing.

The book ends with the start of World War II—arguably the beginning of contemporary space history. This ending is fitting for Smith’s book, as the development of utilitarian or functional rocketry signaled a death of sorts for the long held dream of ascendancy of humankind to the heavens. From Wernher von Braun’s V-2 through the Cold War, rockets held a more sinister place in the public imagination. Smith posits on why the Nazis did not use the V-2 on Russia and the Eastern Front—his conclusion is that the Eastern Front was so filled with carnage and destruction that additional explosions would be unnoticed—fear and vengeance would be denied. For anyone familiar with the history of spaceflight—particularly in America—this book will be immensely rewarding.

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