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# QUEST

THE HISTORY OF SPACEFLIGHT QUARTERLY



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HEXAGON CAPSULE  
FROM 16,400 FEET  
BELOW THE  
PACIFIC OCEAN

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# SOVIET SPACE CULTURE: COSMIC ENTHUSIASM IN SOCIALIST SOCIETIES



Edited by Eva Maurer, Julia Richers, Monica Rüthers, and Carmen Scheide.

Palgrave Macmillan, 2011  
 ISBN 978-0-230-27435-8  
 Pages: 344  
 Price: \$85.00, hardcover

When I remarked to a couple of colleagues that the cultural history of Soviet space activities was ahead of the same genre regarding the American program, they dismissed it as a side effect of the difficulty of researching in Russian archives. In fact, it is possible to do original archival research, although I would not describe it as easy. Rather, the efflorescence of cultural history is a manifestation of a larger trend in Russian and East European area studies. Coming out of a vibrant interest in the cultural and propaganda dimensions of Stalinism, scholars have turned their attention to the Nikita Khrushchev “thaw” period, in which the early spectacular space successes induced a “cosmic enthusiasm” in the general public that was not just the product of official propaganda. With the subsequent loss of space leadership and decline and fall of the Soviet empire, that enthusiasm became a nationalist nostalgia for an era when everything seemed possible and Russia led the world.

My remark was occasioned by reading *Soviet Space Culture*, and the near-simultaneous publication of *Into the Cosmos: Space Exploration and Soviet Culture*, edited by James T. Andrews and Asif A. Siddiqi (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2011). Despite the nearly identical topics, there is not much overlap in authors and topics among them. The only noticeable difference is the presence of European scholars in *Soviet Space Culture* (the editors are all connected to Swiss or German universities). Together the two books provide a rich smorgasbord of recent research into what Alexander C. T. Geppert has called “astroculture” in another recent edited volume, one he edited, *Imagining Outer Space: European Astroculture in the Twentieth Century* (London/New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

There are 21 contributions (including introductions to the four parts) in *Soviet Space Culture*. It is a cliché when one reviews edited volumes to say that they are uneven. Among the subjects covered are Konstantin Tsiolkovskii’s philosophy, the science fiction of Stanislas Lem and the Strugatskii brothers, scientific atheism as propagated in Soviet planetariums, the representation of Sergei Korolev and the cosmonauts in Soviet and post-Soviet media, the regional efforts of space

organizations in the Kuban (east of the Black Sea), the Soviet space exhibit at the 1958 Brussels world fair, cosmonaut versus astronaut visits to Yugoslavia, space travel in Soviet popular science journals, and cosmonaut images in Estonian art. On the negative side, one of the articles on the Kuban is written by a local Russian activist who is obviously not a historian and does not think outside Soviet categories. The article about Soviet atheist propaganda is useful, but planetariums are barely mentioned. And an article comparing Soviet and Western space songs and space films turns out to be about one of each from West and East, an arbitrary sample that is nowhere adequately rationalized.

Several articles are important and valuable, however. The one that stood out for me was Michael Hagemeister’s “The Conquest of Space and the Bliss of the Atoms: Konstantin Tsiolkovskii.” I guarantee that, after reading this article, you will never think the same way about the oft-sainted pioneer again. Tsiolkovskii, as Asif Siddiqi has discussed elsewhere, was an adherent of the Russian mystical philosophy of cosmism, which posited spaceflight as necessary to the resurrection of the dead and the perfection of humankind. One third of his writings, according to Hagemeister, was devoted to this topic. Among other things, humankind’s evolution into perfect forms of pure energy would entail, in Hagemeister’s summary, the elimination of “all imperfect, useless and harmful forms of life... which Tsiolkovskii defines as all animals... and most plants, as well as physically and morally impaired humans” (31). Tsiolkovskii included the “lowest races” (32) of humans as worthy of extermination. Hagemeister calls his version of cosmism as “monstrous” (33) and one can understand why. At the very least the Russian space pioneer has to be considered a full-blown crackpot who happened to produce some important spaceflight ideas on the way. More than ever, a full biography of Tsiolkovskii is needed that takes all three primary obsessions—cosmism, spaceflight, and the metal airship—equally seriously.

Asif Siddiqi’s epilogue, “From Cosmic Enthusiasm to Nostalgia for the Future: A Tale of Soviet Space Culture,” is also important. He lays out the full trajectory of devolution of space enthusiasm in the Soviet Union and Russia from spaceflight’s place in the revival of utopian hopes in the Khrushchev period (at one point a communist utopia was promised by 1980) to a post-Soviet “nostalgia for the future.” He discusses the creation of a “usable past” [sic] (289) by Soviet space advocates (among other things through the cult of Tsiolkovskii as a rational, scientific space pioneer) and its post-collapse degeneration into often warring cults of personality around various space industry figures like Korolev and Valentin Glushko, as the secret history of the program’s infighting was revealed. Nationalist nostalgia thus turned out to be not just warm feelings about the glorious past.

Let me just mention three more articles here. Slava Gerovitch’s discussion of the Korolev cult is noteworthy for

its in-depth exploration of one example of Russian memory culture in the framework later elaborated by Siddiqi. Lina Kohonen usefully examines the photographic representation of cosmonauts in the major Soviet picture magazine *Ogonek*. And editor Monica Rütters discusses the role of spaceflight in the post-Stalinist shaping of childhood comparatively, in the Soviet Union and the German Democratic Republic. The editors' introductions are in general helpful in describing the state of the literature. In sum, *Soviet Space Culture* is a valuable

collection for those interested in Soviet space history and in the cultural history of spaceflight. Unfortunately, as is too often the case recently, it is priced at a level only university libraries can afford.

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## BOOK REVIEW

### THE SPACE SHUTTLE: CELEBRATING THIRTY YEARS OF NASA'S FIRST SPACE PLANE



By Piers Bizony

Zenith Press, 2011  
ISBN 978-0-7603-3941-1  
Pages: 300, illustrations  
Price: \$40.00, hardcover

With the retirement of the Space Shuttle in 2011 a slew of books commemorating its 30-year flight history have either already been published or are in the works. Many of these are celebratory, and *The Space Shuttle: Celebrating Thirty Years of NASA's First Space Plane* is certainly in that category; it offers truth in advertising by even saying so in the title. Many of these are well-illustrated large-format "coffee table" books, and this book satisfies that need as well. Some of these works are thoughtful and reflective, seeking to understand and explain the Space Shuttle sojourn in the history of the space age. But this book is not in that category, and I recommend you look elsewhere for serious discussions of the program's history.

If you want pretty pictures, this book is adequate, but there are a number of other books in a similar vein that I would recommend. One of the most significant of these is Tony Reichhardt's compilation, *Space Shuttle: The First 20 Years—The Astronauts' Experiences in Their Own Words* (DK Publishing, 2002), which contains not only stunning imagery but also stories from 77 astronauts who have flown on the Space Shuttle since 1981. Of course it does not include the last few years of the Shuttle program.

But then again, neither does *The Space Shuttle: Celebrating Thirty Years of NASA's First Space Plane*. I am perplexed by the decision to omit the last missions of the Space Shuttle program, and I can only conclude that the publisher chose to steal the march on other publishers seeking to produce an illustrated history of the program by going to print before that information was available. That is not a fatal flaw, but it is

a grating one.

One flaw that I find more troubling is that author Piers Bizony failed to offer much of anything in the way of serious discussion about the program. While he has at the beginning of each chapter a narrative about selected aspects of the Shuttle history, the majority of the pages are dedicated to collections of photographs on the various missions. Bizony also includes a description of these missions and a few basic facts about each, all easily found online. Sometimes these are lengthy discussions, but for the Department of Defense classified missions there is only a sentence or two; again, this is information easily obtained online. Piers Bizony is a talented and attentive analyst of the U.S. space program, and I am disappointed in what is contained in this book on one of the mainstays of the American human space effort.

Now that we have given the Space Shuttle an honorable retirement after flying for 30 years, it is high time to record its history in an honest, straightforward, and sophisticated manner. We are not anywhere near the completion of this task, and *The Space Shuttle: Celebrating Thirty Years of NASA's First Space Plane* does not even begin to aid in furthering this objective. I await others to pursue this important challenge in capturing the complex and significant history of the Space Shuttle. We must do so in the near term; beginning by interviewing key personnel before the program fades too far into history.

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