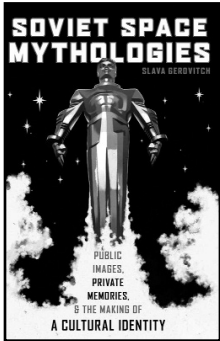


BOOK REVIEW

SOVIET SPACE MYTHOLOGIES: PUBLIC IMAGES, PRIVATE MEMORIES, AND THE MAKING OF A CULTURAL IDENTITY



By Slava Gerovitch

University of Pittsburgh Press, 2015

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Soviet Space Mythologies approaches the history of the Soviet space program using a combination of cultural history and memory studies. Memory, in Gerovitch's analysis, is both a private and public affair. Interpretations and representations of the past help to fashion both selves and social identities. Cultural myths—including space mythologies—become the foundations for national and group identities. We are what we remember, and what we remember changes with time and context. Because we are continuously constructing ourselves and our societies, the plasticity of our memories—which are reformed in every remembering—allows us to reconcile our present and past selves. Thus memory is an important site of analysis for understanding individual and collective identities, social relationships, and the role of history (or versions of it) in defining them.

While all cultures create their own collective memories and mythologies, the Soviet case is especially compelling for two reasons: first, the state-approved and disseminated master mythology to which people publicly adhered existed side-by-side with privately held and shared counter-mythologies; second, these mythologies have had to be reimagined and repurposed at least three times, first in the de-Stalinization campaign of Khrushchev, then under Gorbachev's glasnost, and finally in the post-Soviet era, each time to meet very different societal needs.

Gerovitch is primarily interested in the myths at work within the space program. He begins his with a presentation of the program's key myths. Here he addresses the Chief Designer, Sergei Korolev, as well as Yuri Gagarin. While Korolev worked in obscurity, his identity a state secret until after his death, Gagarin and his fellow cosmonauts became the public faces of the program and its successes. Korolev (who became myth himself) learned to use Soviet mythologizing to his advantage, presenting his own space projects—including the *Sputnik* satellite—as celebrations and continuations of already propagan-

dized myth. Cosmonauts, meanwhile, had to conform to carefully constructed identities—identities that bore both a striking similarity to historic heroes of Soviet aviation and the prototypical vision of the “New Soviet Man.” The official mythology surrounding Korolev and the cosmonauts came not solely from above, but from the contributions of historical actors at various places within the state, the space program, and society at large.

Myth was a tool in solidifying the cultural identities of the various professions involved in the space program. In chapters two and three, Gerovitch outlines the professional cultures of the rocket engineers and the cosmonauts. He gives a brief but detailed description of the professional culture of Soviet rocket engineers beginning with Korolev, demonstrating how they understood and navigated the organization of the space program, developing strategies to circumvent the often cumbersome bureaucracy of Soviet management in advancing their own projects. There was a culture based on technocratic values, a faith in automation, and a techno-utopian vision of the future. He follows this with a summary of cosmonaut professional culture and its relationship to the public perception of the cosmonauts. The actual identities of the cosmonauts were at odds with their public personae. Here the cosmonauts were figuratively boxed in and programmed by the Soviet propaganda machine, and literally so by the engineers who considered the cosmonaut a backup system that could not be trusted to pilot the craft.

Having established their professional identities, the next chapter demonstrates how engineers, cosmonauts, and other participants formed their own myths and meanings from the historic events of the space program. Put simply, they remembered and mythologized these events differently. Gerovitch compares the official narrative of the first flight of Yuri Gagarin, the documented events of that day, and the personal accounts of the various participants to highlight what was at stake in the various versions of events. In chapter five, Gerovitch looks deeper into the seemingly technical debates between engineers and cosmonauts over automated versus human piloted spacecraft. At stake, of course, are the competing professional identities of the engineers and the cosmonauts as well as the public image and broader meanings of the cosmonauts and their achievements. In chapter six Gerovitch returns to the tension between the public image and professional identity of the cosmonauts. Here, propaganda dictated that the cosmonauts could not openly share their actual experiences of spaceflight, and that the selves they presented to the public had to conform to the biographies that had been written for them.

In the book's conclusion, Gerovitch turns his attention to the post-Soviet period. Here, the focus is on how Soviet-era

achievements like Gagarin's flight are being reclaimed, re-remembered, and re-mythologized as Russian triumphs. The myths and symbols of Soviet history—including those of the space program—are the material from which present Russian memories are being formed, and from which understanding of the past and its connection to the present is being built. Regrettably, this is the shortest chapter of the book and does not really amount to a full analysis of the post-Soviet life of the space mythologies traced throughout the book. Despite this shortcoming, the book is a strong example of synthetic history,

drawing upon existing histories of the space program and mining them for insight into the cultures of the Soviet space program and the myths that constituted and sustained them.

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BOOK REVIEW

GERMAN ROCKETEERS IN THE HEART OF DIXIE: MAKING SENSE OF THE NAZI PAST DURING THE CIVIL RIGHTS ERA



By Monique Laney

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Monique Laney considers a seemingly simple question: Why did residents of Huntsville, Alabama, rally to the defense of former resident and German-émigré Arthur Rudolph when he was accused of Nazi war crimes? Laney surveys the sociocultural landscape of postwar Huntsville to find some explanation. This effort adds to a small but growing subfield in space history that does not consume itself with recounting launches, technical specifications, and triumphs. Instead, Laney reminds us that spaceflight ambitions are controlled by and impact people.

Postwar socioeconomic change in Huntsville, Alabama, occurred much as it did in other American cities. Previously rural towns experienced rapid growth during and after World War II, spurred by lavish amounts of federal dollars dedicated to pursuing wartime and later Cold War imperatives. Laney's contribution adds valuable nuance to existing urban histories describing this process, because Huntsville was located in a part of the South still deeply entrenched in Jim Crow practices, and many of the new German residents were known to have supported Nazi development of V-2s.

When the rocket development program came to town, "Many citizens of Huntsville [saw] Redstone Arsenal and its employees as part of the community and believe[d] that Huntsville would not be as prosperous...without the close relationship with the arsenal." Huntsville would soon embrace monikers such as "Rocket City, U.S.A.," and when NASA opened the Marshall Space Flight Center in 1960, it was cause

for even more enthusiasm. The addition of this industry, however, came with an addition to its local population. About 110 German families, including iconic rocket program leader Wernher von Braun, relocated to Huntsville in 1950. By conducting an impressive number of oral histories, Laney details how Huntsville residents reacted to this sudden shift in demographics.

Most non-Jewish white residents noted that the newcomers were considered above suspicion. At worst they were considered, particularly by American veterans, "former enemies from a distant war or outsiders." White Jewish residents were more leery of their new neighbors due to the horrors of the Holocaust, but they tended to downplay their suspicions so as to not draw attention to their community, which was small, precarious, and had often had to navigate anti-Semitic local feelings. While Jewish whites could make assimilation efforts, the African American community did not have that option. Laney notes that prosperity in postwar Huntsville was only for particular groups, and discusses the challenges faced by African Americans in acquiring the training and skills necessary to find jobs in Huntsville's new rocket-centric economy. The Germans, for their part, remembered a "warm welcome from their American neighbors." Within this setting, Laney returns to her initial inquiry of why many Huntsville residents rallied to the defense of a German emigrant when he was accused of supervising horrific slave labor at Mittelwerk.

German Rocketeers in the Heart of Dixie succeeds because it is an exposition on memory. Laney avoids potential pitfalls by placing her emphasis on collecting and analyzing memories and embracing ambiguities. This survey of what the groups in Huntsville "now think" about the past demonstrates how narratives become privileged.

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