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From the Stars to the Headlines: The Propaganda of Yuri Gagarin

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Abstract:

There were no haphazard decisions made by the Soviet Union when it came to choosing the first man to be sent to space. Months of training, careful planning, and well-hidden secrets eventually led to the decision of Yuri Gagarin. This led to the mass production of propaganda to spread, from Yuri Gagarin touring around the world to music being written about him, all centered around his trip to space and Soviet excellency. This propaganda still stands today in Russia, and its God-like idolization of cosmonauts is forever present.

On the 12th of April 1961, Yuri Alexievich Gagarin was sent to space in his small seven-foot Vostok-1 capsule, where he orbited the earth for one hour and forty-eight minutes. (National Aeronautics and Space Association, 2022). From the moment that his Vostok-1 capsule landed back on earth, newspapers were printed, and photographs were taken of Yuri Gagarin, sweaty but giving the world his prized smile. This smile became the face of the Soviet Union, Khrushchev's pride and joy, a symbol of communist victory over the capitalists, who were racing to space just like them. Yuri was a testament to the Soviet Union's technological ability and the might of their common people which he represented.

Beyond his stature and athletic abilities, Yuri Gagarin was chosen to become the first man in space for many reasons. His upbringing and story made him relatable to the proletariat people of the Soviet Union. His background was a testament to the fact that any Soviet citizen could succeed in their society. Yuri Gagarin was born on March 9th, 1934, to a working-class mother and father in Klushino, Russia. He was raised during World War Two with his three siblings. At just the young age of seven, their village was invaded, and they witnessed the great horrors of the Nazis, just as thousands of other Soviet citizens did. Yuri witnessed the near hanging of his brother by a German and his two older siblings being taken by them (Gagarin, 2002, p. 5-15). Along with his modest upbringing, Yuri went to school and learned a trade

before joining the Soviet military to become a pilot, as he always dreamed of. He even had a picturesque family—a wife and two daughters—whom he had many photographs taken with. Yuri even held socialist beliefs, joining the Young Communists League and eventually the Communist party when he was of age (Gagarin, 2002, p. 30-35). Through the military, he was able to apply to the elusive space program. Before training, he was chosen for his physical and mental capabilities, as well as nineteen other men out of the one hundred and fifty-four chosen. Many of these young men would be chosen for space flight, but their legacies were mere shadows compared to Yuri, who on October 11, 1960, would become one of the six men to be handpicked from the other nineteen (Kamanin, 1995). These six men would become known as the Vanguard Six, and all became close. But four of these men especially stood out, especially to Nikolai Kamanin, who headed the Soviet Space Corps. These men were Yuri Gagarin, Pavel Popovich, Gherman Titov, and Adriyan Nikolayev (Kamanin, 1995).

Yuri often mentioned his close friend Gherman Titov within his biography, but only under the name “Cosmonaut Two.” Titov was one of the Vanguard Six, and he was like a brother to Yuri. He was a close second to being the first to space. Though he was nearly perfect in every way physically and psychologically, acing each test he had to take, he did not fit the Soviet Union’s idea of their first cosmonaut (Kamanin, 1995). Many small things accumulated for Titov to not be picked, including his education. Raised by a teacher, he was also believed to be “too bourgeois” or, to put it simply, too educated. He questioned everything and often talked back. He also often had a tendency for rule-breaking (Walker, 2021, p. 211).

Pavel Popovich was one of the favorites amongst the small group of cosmonauts. He was described as a kind man who often sang songs for his comrades in their free time. His popularity amongst his fellow cosmonauts did not mean a thing to the Soviet Union. Though Vladimir Lenin preached equality amongst the Soviet citizens, they wanted a Russian to reach the stars

first to fuel an increase of Russian nationalism (Lenin, 1912, p. 72). Popovich was a Ukrainian. He was born in Uzyn, Ukraine, which was seen as an unchangeable flaw in him. Another issue found with Popovich was his wife. She joined one of the Soviet Union's female pilot regiments at the age of sixteen. After, she became a test pilot. Along with this, she was strong-willed and beautiful. Kamanin saw this as an issue for Pavel, believing that "family problems will hold him back", and that he was too soft on her. They believed that they needed a strong pilot, after all (Kamanin, 1995).

Yuri Gagarin went up to space a Senior Lieutenant and landed back on Earth with the rank of Major (Walker, 2021, p. 362-364). With his new rank and fame, within a few hours of landing, photographs were taken of Gagarin and spread around the Soviet Union and soon, the world. He was taken to Moscow three days after his iconic flight to be named a Hero of the Soviet Union beside Nikola Khrushchev. His parade was the largest in Soviet history at that time, right behind the end of World War Two (European Space Agency, 2007). Within the following months, Yuri Gagarin was on show around the world. At first, the British government refused to make Gagarin's visit official state matters because of the tension they were experiencing with the Soviet Union, but the United Kingdom became enthralled with him. His one-day trip turned into one that lasted multiple. Gagarin toured local Unions and was greeted with a line of excited people, all hoping to catch a glimpse of the cosmonaut (Moskovitch, 2011). But his tour did not stop there. He traveled to Poland, East Germany, Indonesia, and even Sri Lanka. (Sri Lanka Sunday Times, 2021). Yuri even went to Cuba in July of 1961 and took plenty of photographs with Fidel Castro (Barashev, 1961). Three years later, Cuba elected Yuri Gagarin as the official chairman of the Soviet-Cuban Friendship Society, which was a title that he held until his death in 1968 (Smithsonian Air and Space Museum, 2022).

Though the cosmonaut was put on display, the technology used was hidden from the public eye until 1965 (Burgess, 2015, p. 222). The USSR kept their space technology secret, even going so far as not mentioning the man who fathered each technological innovation, Sergei Korolev. Korolev did not match Soviet ideals. He was seen as an enemy of the state and suffered under Joseph Stalin's purges. In March of 1938, he was sentenced to ten years of hard labor due to an accusation of him deliberately slowing down research at the institute he worked at. Korolev spent years in and out of various prisons and even four months in a Gulag before working in a forced labor camp. He was eventually moved to Omsk in 1942 to be allowed to design rockets for the war effort until July of 1944 when he was released. (Siddiqi, 2000, p. 11- 16). His name was not revealed to the public until after his death in 1966. Even within Yuri Gagarin's biography, he was mentioned as the elusive "Chief Designer" (Gagarin, 2002, p.120). This was all done under Nikita Khrushchev, who in 1957 decided that erasing his name from existence would protect him from those who wanted his technological secrets. This was the complete opposite of what the United States did with their designer. The U.S. allowed Wernher von Braun, a former Nazi and SS member, to take in his fame and fortune while working for NASA (Walker, 2021, p. 56).

Yuri Gagarin was truly a symbol of innovation, peace, and power for the Soviet Union, showing that they were able to beat everyone to space first. Soviet people, out of love and respect for Yuri and their country, wrote music about him. In April of 1976, Oleg Alexandrovich Sokolov-Tobolsky wrote a song titled "Gagarin March", which describes his ascent to space and Yuri: "He gave his smile to the entire universe." (Sokolov-Tobolsky, 1975). In the 21st century, songs of Yuri Gagarin are still released, though not by former Soviet citizens. The British band Public Service Broadcasting released a song dedicated to him in 2015 titled *Gagarin* (Hilton, 2014). To forever memorialize Gagarin's flight on the calendar, the Soviet Union made April

12th Cosmonautics Day in 1962 (Kremlin, 1962). Even in the 21st century, Yuri Gagarin is still honored for his achievements. The United Nations made April 12th the International Day of Human Spaceflight in 2011 (United Nations, 2011). As well as on Earth, Yuri can be found honored in space. Cosmonauts have brought many pictures of Yuri Gagarin to the International Space Station throughout the years (Yuri's Night, 2011). There are still missions in Yuri Gagarin's honor as well. Despite high tensions between the United States and the Russian Federation, Oleg Novitsky and Pyotr Dubrov of Russia and Mark Vande Hei of NASA launched from Kazakhstan on April 9, 2021, to celebrate the 60th anniversary of Vostok-1 (Radio Free Europe, 2021). On an individual level, people have created organizations out of Yuri Gagarin's memory like Yuri's Night. Yuri's Night hosts parties on the 12th of April, as well as aim to bring science into people's lives under Gagarin's name (Yuri's Night, 2021). Statues have been erected around the world—from a forty-foot titanium statue of him in Moscow, God-like, as he ascends into the stars one last time, to a bust of him in Cleveland, Ohio (Leonov, 2011). Even in the small town of Klushino, his home was turned into a museum. (Moskovitch, 2011).

Yuri Gagarin's face is permanently etched into the history of the Soviet Union forever. After months of careful consideration of each member of the Vanguard-6, Gagarin was chosen because of how he perfectly fit the Soviet citizen ideal, being ethnically Russian, a strong believer in Communism, and his proletariat background, which he took great pride in. He was a symbol of peace for the Soviet Union, transcending not just space boundaries, but also national ones. Yuri managed to open borders during the Cold War for himself to show the world the Soviet Union's achievement in space travel. The world respected him, and he is still respected through statues, events, and music still being created and held today, and even with the holiday recognized by the United Nations that takes place on the day of his flight (United Nations, 2011).

The Soviets completed their goal of having their first man in space to be remembered forever by all of those who were touched by his story and his character.

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