In Russia, the legend of cosmonaut Gagarin lives on

April 7 2021, by Romain Colas

Yuri Gagarin became famous in the Soviet Union and worldwide as the first person to reach space

Sixty years after he became the first person in space, there are few

figures more universally admired in Russia today than Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin.

His smiling face adorns murals across the country. He stands, arms at his sides as if zooming into space, on a pedestal 42.5 metres (140 feet) above the traffic flowing on Moscow's Leninsky Avenue. He is even a favourite subject of tattoos.

The Soviet Union may be gone and Russia's glory days in space long behind it, but Gagarin's legend lives on, a symbol of Russian success and—for a Kremlin keen to inspire patriotic fervour—an important source of national pride.

"He is a figure who inspires an absolute consensus that unifies the country," says Gagarin's biographer Lev Danilkin.

"This is a very rare case in which the vast majority of the population is unanimous."

The anniversary of Gagarin's historic flight on April 12, 1961—celebrated every year in Russia as Cosmonautics Day—sees Russians of all ages lay flowers at monuments to his accomplishment across the country.

The enduring fascination comes not only from his story of rising from humble origins to space pioneer, or even the mystery surrounding his death.

Gagarin, says historian Alexander Zheleznyakov, was a figure who helped fuel the imagination.

"He transformed us from a simple biological species to one that could imagine an entire universe beyond Earth."

Gagarin was aged just 27 when he blasted off in a Vostok spacecraft

Humble beginnings

The son of a carpenter and a dairy farmer who lived through the Nazi occupation, Gagarin trained as a steel worker before becoming a military pilot and then, at age 27, spending 108 minutes in space as his Vostok spacecraft completed one loop around the Earth.

He was lauded for his bravery and professionalism, an example of the perfect Soviet man, but his legend was also imbued with tales of camaraderie, courage and love for his two daughters and wife Valentina Gagarina.

Long a secret, Gagarin wrote his wife a poignant farewell letter in the event that he died during his mission.

"If something goes wrong, I ask you—especially you—Valyusha, not to die of grief. For this is how life goes," he wrote, using a diminutive for Valentina.

In an interview with AFP in 2011, cosmonaut Boris Volynov recalled a man who, despite sharing privileges of the Soviet elite, spent hours on the phone to procure medicine or a spot in a hospital for his less well-off friends.

On his return to Earth, Gagarin found himself at the centre of a propaganda campaign on the superiority of the Soviet model.

Biographer Danilkin says Gagarin was used by authorities as an example to the rest of the world, but also to convince Soviet citizens, who had endured World War II and Stalin-era repressions, "that the sacrifices of the previous decades were not in vain".

President Vladimir Putin, he said, has co-opted that legacy to cement his own hold on power, promoting Soviet victories to encourage support for his 20-year rule.

"The current authorities methodically appropriate popular cults: first that of victory during World War II, then the conquest of space," Danilkin says.

Russians also remember Gagarin as a loving family man

Tragic hero

Like all great Russian heroes, Gagarin is a tragic figure.

His death during a training flight in 1968 at the age of 34 remains a mystery because authorities never released the full report of the investigation into the causes of the accident.

Partial records suggest his MiG-15 fighter jet collided with a weather balloon, but in the absence of transparency, alternative theories abound.

One holds that Gagarin was drunk at the controls; another that he was eliminated by the Kremlin which feared his popularity.

More than 40 years later, many Russians have yet to come to terms with his death.

"How could the top cosmonaut, such a young and kind man, die like that so suddenly?" says historian Zheleznyakov.

"People are still trying to get over it."

Read more: 60 years after Gagarin, Russia lags in the space race

Five things to know about Gagarin's journey to space

Sixty years ago on Monday cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin became the first person in space, securing victory for Moscow in its race with Washington and marking a new chapter in the history of space exploration.

Decades later, his journey has become shrouded in myth after many details about the historic mission were for years kept secret by the Soviets.

Here are five things to know about Gagarin's legendary flight:

'Let's go!'

A trained steel worker turned military pilot, Gagarin was selected from thousands of candidates to undergo the rigorous training required for a space flight.

Apart from showing excellent results in his tests, Gagarin, then aged 27, also reportedly stood out by removing his shoes before entering the Vostok spacecraft designated for the mission, a custom in Russia when entering a home.

On April 12, 1961, as Gagarin's flight took off from the Baikonur spaceport in Kazakhstan, he exclaimed his iconic catchphrase "Poekhali!", or "Let's go!" in Russian.

Risky business

The flight lasted just 108 minutes as the Vostok completed one loop around the Earth.

Once Gagarin safely returned home, the success of his mission outshone the fact that not everything went according to plan.

Among a dozen technical glitches, his spacecraft entered into orbit at a higher altitude than expected.

If its brakes system had malfunctioned, Gagarin would have had to wait for the spacecraft to begin descending on its own. And while the Vostok was stocked with enough food, water and oxygen to last 10 days, the higher altitude meant the wait would have been much longer and Gagarin would have run out of supplies.

Luckily for the Russian cosmonaut, the brakes worked.

Spy suspicions

But Gagarin came down miles away from his expected landing point, ejecting from his capsule over the Saratov region in southern Russia.

He landed in a field where the first people he saw were a young girl and her grandmother digging up potatoes.

Clad in a white helmet and orange spacesuit, he struggled at first to convince them amid Cold War tensions that he was not a foreign spy.

Urination nation

Legend has it that before takeoff Gagarin asked the bus driver bringing him to the launchpad to pull over so he could relieve himself, before urinating on the back right tyre.

For years Russian cosmonauts repeated the ritual before launching into space, but the decades-old superstition may soon be forced into retirement: the new design of the Russian spacesuit presented in 2019 is not equipped with a fly and is too heavy to nimbly remove.

The man behind Gagarin

While Gagarin became a household name in the Soviet Union, for years nobody knew about the mastermind of the country's space programme: Sergei Korolyov.

The Soviets even rejected a Nobel prize awarded to their "Chief Designer", determined to keep his identity a secret. Only after his death

in 1966 was his name revealed.

Under Korolyov's leadership, the USSR sent not only the first person to space, but later the first woman, as well as conducting the first spacewalk.

Liftoff! Pioneers of space

Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin became the first man in space 60 years ago next week.

He was one of several stars of the Cold War space race between the Soviet Union and the United States who would became heroes to millions.

But the technology that sent them into orbit had less glorious origins in the dying days of Nazi Germany.

The Germans

Many of the key rocket scientists behind both the American and Soviet space programmes were Germans, who had worked on Adolf Hitler's "secret weapons", the V-1 and V-2 rockets.

Some 1,600 German rocket experts were secretly taken to the US in the dying days of World War II, while the Russians rounded up about 2,000 in one night at gunpoint and sent them to work in the Soviet Union.

Wernher von Braun

The inventor of Hitler's V-2 rocket—the world's first guided ballistic missile—was the architect of the US Apollo programme that would put a

man on the Moon.

Brought across the Atlantic with his brother Magnus, he came up with the Saturn V rocket that powered the American lunar missions. He died in 1977 still advocating manned missions to Mars.

Kurt H. Debus

A friend of Von Braun, Debus was Hitler's flight test director for the V-1s and V-2s.

In 1952, he began the building of rocket launch facilities at Cape Canaveral in Florida and was later director of operations of what would become the Kennedy Space Centre, overseeing the flight by the first US astronaut Alan Shepard and the Moon missions.

The Soviets

Yuri Gagarin

The first man in space, Gagarin was chosen from 3,000 candidates.

He completed a single 108-minute orbit aboard Vostok-1 on April 12, 1961 after declaring "Let's Go!"

He died in 1968 at the age of 34 in a still unexplained plane crash.

Guerman Titov

Gagarin's understudy for the historic 1961 flight, Titov, never got over the disappointment.

Four months later, he orbited the Earth 17 times on Vostok-2. He was

elected to the Russian parliament in 1995.

Alexei Leonov

The then 30-year-old made the first spacewalk in history from Voskhod 2 in 1965.

It lasted 12 minutes and nine seconds and nearly killed him as his spacesuit inflated due to the lack of atmospheric pressure. He had to bleed off some of the oxygen, risking death.

Leonov later took part in the groundbreaking Apollo-Soyuz mission that opened a new era of space cooperation between the Soviets and the US in 1975.

Valentina Tereshkova

The first woman in space, she spent nearly three days in orbit in June 1963.

She had to overcome a host of problems during the flight, which were not revealed until after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

She remains the only woman to have carried out a solo mission.

Sergei Korolev

Chief Soviet rocket engineer Korolev clocked up successes from the launching of Sputnik 1 to Gagarin's historic flight. His role was only disclosed after his death in 1966.

Vladimir Komarov

Komarov became the first person to die in space on April 23, 1967 after a 26-hour flight on Soyuz 1.

A parachute failed on re-entry, causing his craft to plummet to Earth.

The Americans

Alan Shepard

The first American in space, Shepard's flight on Freedom 7 on May 5, 1961 was suborbital, rising to an altitude of 116 miles (186 kilometres).

He later commanded the Apollo 14 in 1971 and became the fifth person to walk on the Moon, where he played golf.

John Glenn

The first American to orbit the Earth in February 1962, he was later elected as a US senator, serving until 1999.

In 1998, at the age of 77, Glenn became the oldest person to go into space when he journeyed aboard the space shuttle Discovery.

Sally Ride

In June 1983, Sally Ride became the first American woman to be sent into space, on the space shuttle Challenger.

She also took part in a 1986 commission that investigated the loss of the vessel. She died of cancer aged 61 in 2012.

Neil Armstrong

Armstrong was the first human to set foot on the Moon on July 20, 1969.

Despite slightly fluffing his line—"That's one small step for (a) man, one giant leap for mankind"—it has since been etched in history.

His fellow crew members were Edwin "Buzz" Aldrin, who followed 20 minutes later, and Michael Collins, who remained alone in lunar orbit.

Milestones in space exploration

From Yuri Gagarin to the first man on the Moon and the robot that landed on a comet, we look at 10 key dates in space exploration.

1957: Sputnik

Moscow launches the first satellite, Sputnik 1, on October 4, 1957, ushering in the Cold War tussle for the cosmos.

The beach ball-sized aluminium sphere takes 98 minutes to orbit the Earth and sends back the first message from space, simple "beep-beep-beep" radio signals.

A month later Sputnik 2 carries the first living being to fully orbit the Earth, a small street dog called Laika. She dies after a few hours.

1961: Gagarin, first man

On April 12, 1961 Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin becomes the first man in space, completing a single, 108-minute orbit aboard Vostok-1.

Twenty-three days later Alan Shepard becomes the first American in space when he makes a 15-minute trip.

On June 16, 1963 cosmonaut Valentina Tereshkova becomes the first woman in space.

It takes a full 40 years for the old Cold War rivals to be joined in space by a third country, when China sends up Yang Liwei onboard Earth orbiter Shenzhou 5.

1969: Walking on the Moon

US astronaut Neil Armstrong is the first man to step onto the Moon on July 21, 1969, Buzz Aldrin joining him around 20 minutes later.

Between 1969 and 1972, 10 astronauts—all American—walked on the Moon as part of NASA's Apollo programme.

1971: Space station

The Soviet Union launches the first orbital space station, Salyut 1, on April 19, 1971.

Another Russian space station, Mir, follows. It is brought back to Earth in 2001 after 15 years in orbit.

Construction of the still-operating International Space Station (ISS) starts in 1998. The biggest man-made structure in space, it orbits Earth 16 times a day.

1976: Mars

US spacecraft Viking 1 becomes the first to successfully land on Mars on July 20, 1976 and sends back images of the Red Planet.

The robot Opportunity explored Mars between 2004 and 2018, with NASA's Curiosity Rover still active there.

About 40 missions are sent to Mars, more than half of which fail.

1981: Space shuttle

The US space shuttle Columbia, the first reusable manned spacecraft, makes its first voyage on April 12, 1981.

It is followed by Challenger, Discovery, Atlantis and Endeavour, which serve the ISS until the shuttle programme winds up in 2011.

The US has since depended on Russia to transport its astronauts to the ISS.

Two US shuttles were destroyed in flight, with the loss of 14 astronauts: Challenger in 1986 and Columbia in 2003.

1990: Hubble

Hubble is the first space telescope to be placed into orbit on April 25, 1990, 547 kilometres (340 miles) above the Earth.

It revolutionises astronomy, allowing scientists to observe the planets and distant stars and galaxies unimpeded.

2001: Tourism

On April 28, 2001 Italian American multi-millionaire Dennis Tito, 60, becomes the world's first space tourist. He pays Russia $20 million to stay on the ISS for eight days.

In all, seven space tourists have taken Russian flights to the ISS.

The US company SpaceX is planning to launch its first space tourism mission at the end of 2021.

2008: SpaceX

SpaceX becomes the first private firm to successfully launch a rocket into the Earth's orbit in September 2008.

Its Dragon cargo ship becomes the first commercial spacecraft to visit the ISS in May 2012, on a mission for NASA.

Since then, SpaceX has conquered the satellite launch market with its Falcon 9.

After flights in 2020, SpaceX has planned two other manned launches for NASA to the ISS in 2021, including one which will lift off from Florida on April 22 with French, American and Japanese astronauts.

2014: Comet landing

The European Space Agency places a small robot, Philae, on a comet more than 500 million kilometres from Earth on November 12, 2014. The first comet lander is part of a mission aiming to explore the origins of the Solar System.

The manmade object that is furthest away from the Earth is the unmanned US spaceship Voyager 1, launched in 1977 and still travelling.

In August 2012 it made it into interstellar space, about 13 billion miles from Earth.

2021: Moon to Mars

NASA sees the Moon as a pit stop for missions to Mars. It aims to send the first woman to the Moon by 2024.

Perseverance became the fifth rover to set wheels down on Mars on February 18, laying the groundwork for NASA's first attempt at powered, controlled flight on another planet.

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