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The End of Illusions

Cathleen Lewis guides the reader through thirty years of Soviet spaceflight, secrecy, and social engineering, as well as the evolution of those phenomena as they transitioned to the post-Soviet era. Her intent is this: to understand the limits of the state’s ability to promote its ideal view of its own citizens, and to understand how the former citizens of the USSR reevaluated that state’s history during and after its collapse. In paraphrase: In addition to being a theater for national prestige and East-West competition, the Soviet space program was a vehicle for the Soviet state to tell its people what ideal Soviet citizens should be. This message shifted over time, following changes in leadership and circumstances. However, when the most dramatic changes swept the USSR during its collapse, the Soviet state vision of the cosmonaut was not deconstructed by society at large as thoroughly as the rest of the Soviet propaganda complex, and in post-Soviet cultures some parts of that vision still endure.

Lewis takes the reader through the history of the Soviet space program, examining the personalities involved in its early days (Yuri Gagarin, Gherman Titov, Sergey Korolev, Valentina Tereshkova, and so on), the state’s presentation (or occultation) of them to the public, and their reception by the public. She also examines the people’s absorption of the space program as a whole, discussing its presentation in literature, film, museums and monuments, collectible pins (“znachki,” or little signs), and, in the USSR’s last years, television.

Readers familiar with Soviet history can guess the arc of the story: after the horrors of World War II, the Soviet Union encouraged the masses to feel a triumphantly optimistic trust in the wisdom of the Communist Party. However, stubborn reality whittled away at this image, as people made
mistakes, died, and were removed from power, and as the Union stagnated while a certain other union raced ahead. And eventually, everything fell apart. Lewis's cultural history of the Soviet crewed space program demonstrates that that program was not immune from the same malaises that brought down the rest of the state. Though the Soviet space program had continual success with its space stations even into the era of decline, it never recaptured the triumphalist mood and image that defined its early years.

However, while Lewis's overall story may be somewhat predictable, she still draws out the human stories that are often overwhelmed by the usual narratives of the space race. For example, she notes that the then-secret head of the Soviet space program, Korolev, had grand ambitions for the future. However, Lewis also observes that in the last years before his untimely death he was aware that the Soviet human spaceflight program essentially just staged “the same mission” over and over, with different crew compositions, to create an illusion of progress.

In addition, shortly after, Gagarin's untimely death forced the Soviet state to make concessions to Gagarin's mother's religion, antithetical to the state's ideology. The state's secrecy fomented myriad competing rumors about which part of the state was so incompetent as to allow that death and those of several other cosmonauts.

Lewis further astutely observes that as the Union collapsed, the state media selected Gagarin's famous cheer of "poekhali!" as a unifying symbol to introduce the news, while in those same days each citizen had to pick through the history of all cosmonauts to determine who their own heroes really were, since any given cosmonaut might now be “from” a country other than their own.

Ultimately, the early Putin regime of the Russian Federation almost entirely discarded the image of the cosmonaut from its public memorialization of the space program, choosing to emphasize the hardware instead. These stories leave the reader feeling that the state's portrayal of the space program likely mirrored its mood toward its population as a whole: at first the state might have believed it was the champion of the needs of its people, but it soon felt a desperate need to distract them, and in the end the state instead came to view the people as a nuisance or a distraction from the operation of a failing machine.

I recommend this book to students both of Soviet history and of the history of human space-flight. This book looks at both subjects in a novel way, providing much-needed context and detail to both.

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