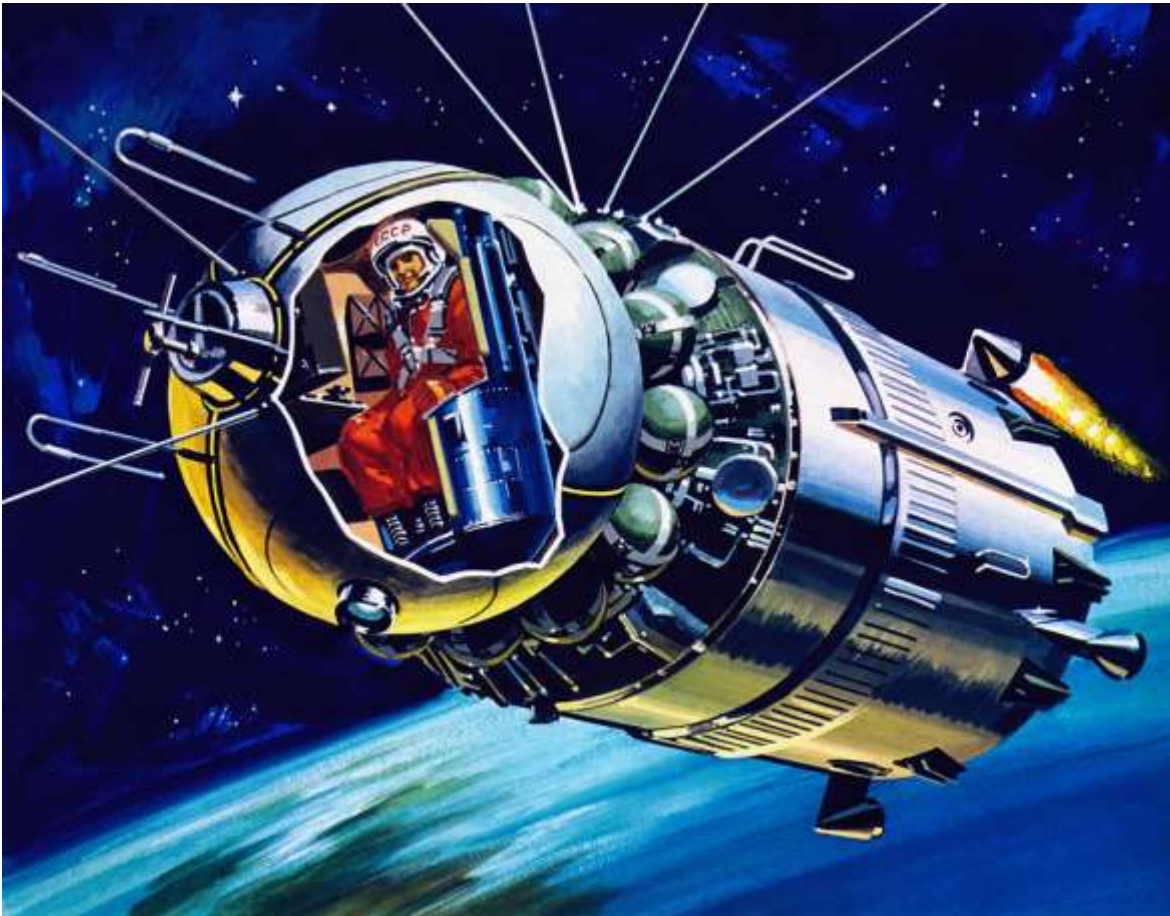


February 2024



"It's your New York!"

The Rondout Reader



“To boldly go!”

By Kevin Ahearn



ПЕРВЫЙ





My country is history, and so am I. Never did I dream that one day, either one of us would be.

Learn history well, comrade, for without its truth, you'll lack the wisdom to face up to *your* story.

As for mine...



*"The Earth is the cradle of the mind,
but one cannot live forever in the cradle."*



*"How many things have been denied one day,
only to become realities the next!"*



"Revolutions are the locomotives of history."



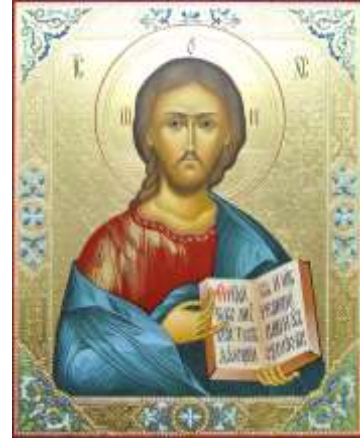
***Klushino*, a little village 100 miles from Moscow in Smolensk Oblast, was famous as the site of a major battle of the Russian-Polish War in 1610.**

Until March 9th 1934, when I was born.



I started growing up on a collective farm. My father was a carpenter and bricklayer. Mama worked as a milkmaid.





Baptized in the Orthodox Church, I believed very early that God had a special plan for me; because he made me small. Never would I ever be more than five foot, two inches tall.



"Every religious idea, every idea of god, every flirtation with the idea of God is unutterable vileness."

I was very proud to be a 'New Soviet Boy'. My country wasn't that much older than I. The Bolshevik Revolution delivered us from the Czar and the First World War. Then the Civil War killed millions more.



For so long there was famine and 'saboteurs' and 'traitors' everywhere. The State Police rounded them up and took them away to the GULAG.



And when we believed life could get no harder, on June 22, 1941...



"Just kick in the door and the whole rotting structure will come tumbling down!"



The Hitlerites stormed into *Klushino* and took over the collective farm and kicked us out of our house.



Again I thanked God for creating me small. Papa, Mama, my bother Boris and I dug a 'mud hut' three square meters in the back yard; for a year and a half.

The 'New Soviet Family' lived like moles with a small table, two narrow bunk beds where Mama and Papa and my brother Boris and I slept, and a heater which could also be used as a bed.



And early in the morning, when I crawled out, I'd be 'greeted' by Nazis!

The Fascists drove the Red Army back, further and further as the weather got colder.



"Moscow's fall is imminent!"

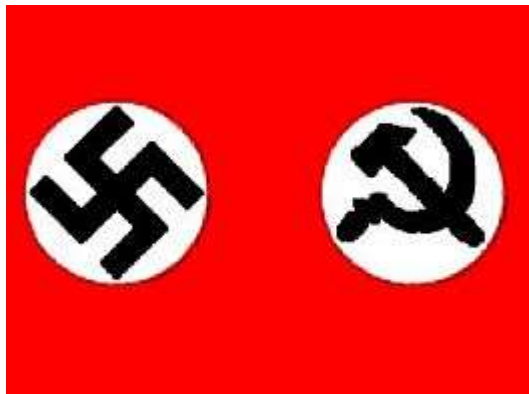
The whole world gave up on us. The Nazis had conquered one democracy after another. What chance did the primitive Communists have?

Capitalists never understood. We are the Soviet Union! We will never be beaten, never surrender!



"Let dog eat dog!"

Years later I would read H.G. Wells...



And realize that I had lived through *War of the Worlds*. Yet so few Westerners knew or cared how much my country and my people had suffered.



"As if everything east of Chicago had been lain to waste."

For those who survived to grieve and rebuild, the Great Patriotic War would never be over. We had saved the West only to have it unite against us.



Paper and pencils were hard to come by in school. Adding and subtracting spent bullet casings, I took to math and physics. I trained in tech school and became a metal molder in a foundry.



At the Saratov industrial school, during my fourth year I started taking flying lessons. Thank God I was small. Compared to my old 'mud hut', every cockpit felt like a *dacha*.



That first flight filled me with pride and gave meaning to my whole life and I couldn't wait to join the Red Air Force.

At the Orenburg Aviation School I learned to fly combat aircraft.



On the ground, I met Valentina. The day I graduated and became a lieutenant in the Soviet Air Force, we married.



Suddenly, the sky was no longer the limit. On October 14th, 1957, *Sputnik* started the 'Space Age'.



"Beep, beep, beep."



“An intercontinental outer-space raspberry to a decade of American pretensions that the American way of life was a gilt-edged guarantee of our national superiority.”



“The Soviets will soon be dropping bombs on us from outer space like kids dropping rocks unto cars from freeway overpasses.”

Soon I was a father with a new dream: to be part of the Soviet Space Program. Approved for Cosmonaut training, we moved to Star City, a secret complex near Moscow.

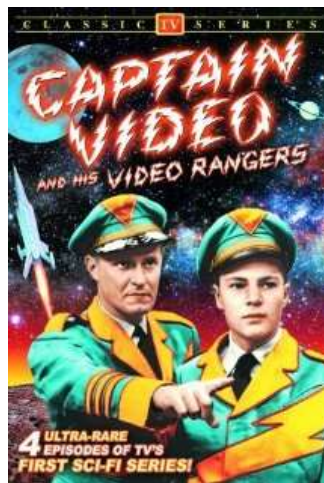


Cosmonaut training was tough—experiments with weightlessness, heat endurance, stress tests and having to spend long periods of time in a sensory deprivation chamber.

My trainers rated me a top achiever 'with a calm persona and always having a sense of humor.' Of course! Soviet writers and filmmakers had already paved the way.



Our competition had also been encouraged....



"We were put here as witnesses to the miracle of life. We see the stars, and we want them. We are beholden to give back to the universe... If we make landfall on another star system, we become immortal."

But unlike the Americans, I was being prepared for much more than a cosmic quest; the Soviet cosmonaut will not merely be a victor of outer space, not

merely a hero of science and technology, but first and foremost a real, living, flesh-and-blood *archetype*, rising up from the ruins of the Great Patriotic War, imbued with all the invaluable qualities of the Soviet character.



"The human species, the sluggish Homo sapiens, will once again enter the stage of radical reconstruction and become in his own hands the object of the most complex methods of artificial selection and psychophysical training... Man will make it his goal... to create a higher socio-biological type, a superman, if you will."

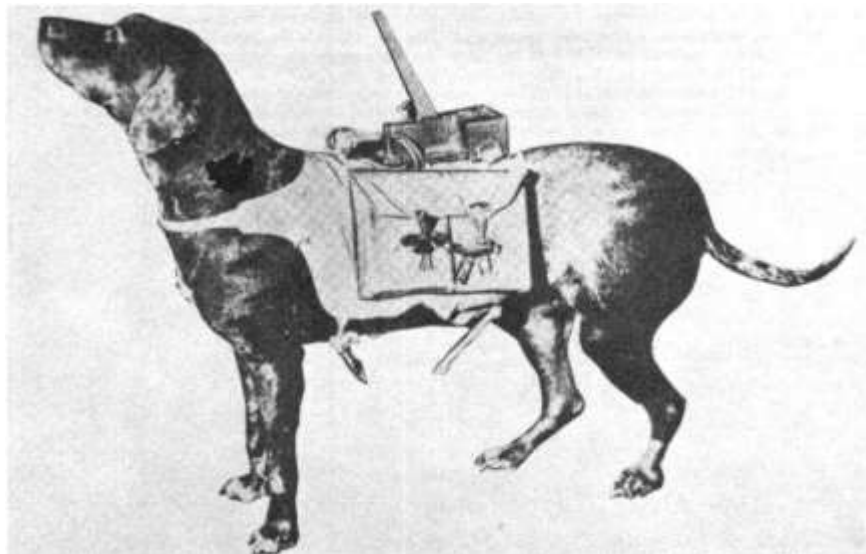
I would become the 'New Soviet Man'!



But I would not be the first to orbit the earth...



The USSR had a tradition of heroic dogs who gave their lives for their country.



During the war, specially trained dogs would run under the Nazi tanks, tripping a lever that set off a bomb and blow up the enemy vehicle and unfortunately, the animal as well.

Laika, a stray from the streets of Moscow, would not survive the trip; her oxygen would run out after six days. She was painlessly euthanized before that happened.

Or so we were told. Not until the New Millennium was it revealed that Laika had died within hours after launch from overheating possibly caused by a failure of the central R-7 sustainer to separate from the payload.



My government had no choice. Had we cosmonaut trainees been told the truth, we might have felt differently about following Laika into space.



“It is not heroes that make history, but history that makes heroes.”

Soviet aviators had always braved danger in their quest to break altitude barriers. In January 1934, the crew of the *Osoaviakhim* stratosphere balloon, dedicating their feat to the Seventeenth Party Congress, set a new world record.



But they had pushed too hard and the balloon crashed. At the funeral, Stalin personally carried the ashes through Red Square.



October 24, 1960 was a 'black day' in space exploration. A launch accident at the main flight center caused a massive explosion which killed 124 people.

"Those responsible," judged the investigating committee, "Have already been punished."



*"You don't concentrate on risks. You concentrate on results.
No risk is too great to prevent the necessary job from getting done."*



None of us future cosmonauts wavered for a moment. We had supreme confidence in ourselves and in our country. One of us was going into outer space. God willing, one of us would become the New Soviet Man!



"God has no intention of setting a limit to the efforts of man to conquer space."

On April 9, 1961, three days before the scheduled liftoff, I learned that I had been chosen.

Galochka, my second daughter, was a happy baby. My last night home before the mission, while my dear wife was out shopping...

Galochka began to smell unhappy.

'Thoughtless child!' I giggled as I changed her, 'Your daddy is about to go up in space, and you dirty your diaper!'



I slept well the night before, my body laced with wires monitored by a team of doctors. I got up early, showered and shaved, then ate breakfast, 'space food', squeezed from tubes.



Then...

"Dear friends, both known and unknown to me, fellow Russians, and people of all countries and continents...What can I say to you in these last minutes before the start?...Everything I have experienced and done till now has been in preparation for this moment...I don't have to tell you what I felt when it was suggested that I should make this flight, the first in history.



"Was it joy? No, it was something more than that. Pride? No, it was not just pride. I felt great happiness. To be the first to enter the cosmos, to engage single handed in an unprecedented duel with nature - could anyone dream of anything greater than that? But immediately after that I thought of the tremendous responsibility I bore: to be the first to do what generations of people had dreamed of; to be the first to pave the way into space for mankind. This responsibility is not toward one person, not toward a few dozen, not toward a group. It is a responsibility toward all mankind - toward its present

and its future. Am I happy as I set off on this space flight? Of course I'm happy. After all, in all times and epochs the greatest happiness for man has been to take part in new discoveries. It is a matter of minutes now before the start. I say to you, 'Until we meet again,' dear friends, just as people say to each other when setting out on a long journey. I would like very much to embrace you all, people known and unknown to me, close friends and strangers alike. See you soon!

"Poyekhali!"



APRIL 12, 1961





"Following the light of the sun, we left the Old World."



"To boldly go where no man has gone before."



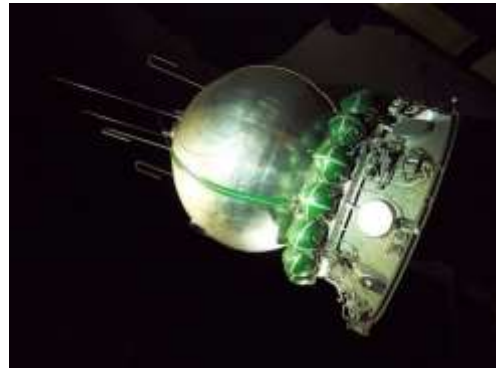
"All or nothing? - Which shall it be?"



***Vostok* put in orbit, and the carrier-rocket separated, weightlessness set in. At first, an unusual sensation, but I soon adapted myself.**

The grand steppe, the infinite road from earth to the stars. The footprint of this little farmboy more than a hundred miles high makes me the tallest man who ever lived.

A new age, a new hope, the New Soviet Man has entered the cosmos. Follow me, everybody. I am first, *first!*



***"The Motherland hears, the Motherland knows,
Where her son flies in the sky!"***

The Earth is blue. How wonderful. It is amazing. Clouds and their light shadows on the distant dear Earth...Water looked like darkish, slightly gleaming spots...the horizon... abrupt, contrasting transition from the Earth's light-colored surface to the absolutely black sky...the rich color spectrum of the earth, surrounded by a light blue aureole that gradually darkens, becoming turquoise, dark blue, violet, and finally coal black.

Rays were blazing through the atmosphere of the earth, the horizon became bright orange, gradually passing into all the colors of the rainbow: from light blue to dark blue, to violet and then to black.



*"I owned the world that hour as I rode over it.
Free of the earth, free of the mountains, free of the clouds,
but how inseparably I was bound to them."*

As soon as braking engine shut down, there was a sharp jolt. The spacecraft started spinning about its axis with very high speed. The Earth was passing in the window from top to bottom and from right to left. The speed of rotation was around 30 degrees per second, no less...Everything was spinning.



One moment I see Africa – another the horizon, another the sky. I barely had time to shade myself from the sun, so the light did not blind my eyes. I put my legs toward the bottom window, but did not closed the blinds. I wanted to find out myself what was going on.

On the phone I reported that the separation had not taken place. I decided that the situation was not an emergency, with the code system I transmitted '*Vse Normalno,*'

Re-entry heated up the inside of *Vostok*. Crimson flames raged outside. I was in a cloud of fire rushing toward Earth.

I would not land with my spaceship, the impact might have been fatal. Instead, I bailed out at 20,000 feet. But we couldn't tell anyone that. Due to international rules for aviation records: "The pilot remains in his craft from launch to landing".

Had the Americans found out, they would have "disqualified" my flight.



As I neared the ground, I saw an old woman, a young girl, and a dappled calf.



"I'm a friend, comrades. A friend!"

"Can it be that you have come from outer space?" the woman asked.

"As a matter of fact, I have!"



*'I aim for the Stars'
(And sometimes I hit London.)*



*"I'm taller than the
first man in space!"*

I missed my landing site by 300 kilometers. A helicopter came and took me to a nearby small airport. The medical team caught up with me on the second floor of the terminal.

Pulse, blood pressure, vital signs, doctors, doctors, *doctors!*



Examined me before I went into space, the first and the last to see the old world. ...Again they were preparing me; the earth I had orbited was no longer the same.

For the next two days, I sat waiting in local dacha while the Party readied for my arrival. My flight to Moscow was escorted by a formation of MiGs, maybe pilots I knew. I still felt like one of them.



Red Square was a sea of cheering people, wave after wave after wave. I stepped from the helicopter onto the red carpet. Later I'd see that my shoelaces were untied. (Mama wouldn't have liked that.) Imagine 'The Columbus of the Cosmos' suddenly falling to earth on his face.



Nyet! God had been with me from the very start, would be with 'The New Soviet Man' forever.





"Here is Gagarin, who flew up to space, and yet, even he didn't see God anywhere."

What prophet or Pope or politician believes that because I came one hundred and fifty miles *closer* to the Creator of The Infinite Universe that I, former farmboy and foundry worker, *needed* God to make an appearance, to put on a show?



A cosmonaut cannot be suspended in space and not have God in his mind and his heart.

My God is within me, a guide, a hope, deep in my immortal soul!



"All gods are homemade, and it is we who pull their strings, and so, give them the power to pull ours."



"If you want to prove that God is not dead, first prove that man is alive."

After going around the world, I got to do it again: Italy, Germany, Canada, Brazil, Japan, Cyprus, Hungary, Egypt, and Finland.



"Putting a man in space is a stunt: ...the propaganda aspects of the program leaves me entirely cool."



"Now that the Soviet scientists have put a man into space and brought him back alive, I hope they will also help to bring the United Nations back alive."



"When I orbited the Earth in a spaceship, I saw for the first time how beautiful our planet is. Mankind, let us preserve and increase this beauty, and not destroy it."



Cuba was the closest I ever got to the United States. A missed opportunity. Not that I wanted to visit Disneyland and Times Square, but the chance to talk one-on-one with the American who would soon follow me.

KGB had the pulse of the American space program, bombarding us with NASA reports, newspapers, magazines, films, TV tapes. I felt I already knew him.



"I must admit, maybe I am a piece of history after all."

He was twenty years older than I, but we were both fighter pilots. If war came, and we went head-to-head...



A dogfight for the ages!

Each of us had beaten out the other trainees not just because of our skills, our stamina, and maybe a little luck...because of the *dream*, to fly up there beyond the sky and above the earth, higher and farther away, alone, alive and pushing through a dark, endless 'no-life zone' all humanity longs to experience.



"Welcome to the future, Captain!"

No 'skip across space', *Vostok 2* made 17 orbits, The first to work, take photographs, and sleep in outer space, and then suffer from space sickness, Titov was the first to pilot a spaceship on his own.



"In orbit now we have a small but harmonious collection of Soviet people."



Finally, an American astronaut joined us around the earth



"The most important thing we can do is inspire young minds and to advance the kind of science, math and technology education that will help youngsters take us to the next phase of space travel."



Vostok 3 and Vostok 4 were launched a day apart to come close together in orbit. The cosmonauts performed the first ship-to-ship communications in space, giving us controllers vital experience in dual spacecraft operation.



As the United States was coming apart, the Soviet Union came together like the Great Patriotic War, ahead of the world's greatest superpower, we were *first* in outer space!



On June 16, 1963...



"If women can be railroad workers in Russia, why can't they fly in space?"

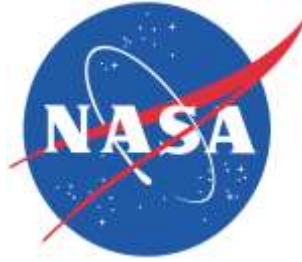


"The most effective way to do it, is to do it."

Voskhod 1 - A three-man ship!



The Americans were being left far behind.



*"A significant space accomplishment
A clear indication that the Russians are continuing a large space
program for the achievement of national power and prestige."*

Voskhod 2- October 10-12, 1964...



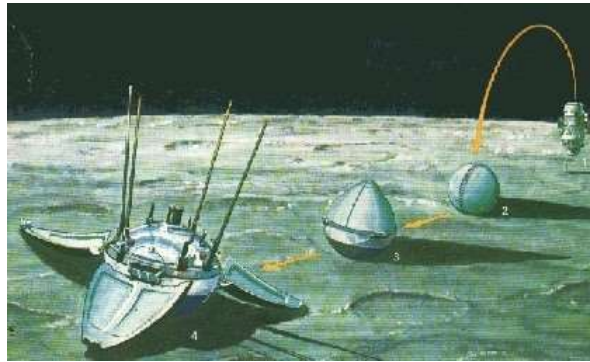
*"Remember that time -- the insane mistrust,
not just for people but between countries."*

KGB has a 'special treat' for the cosmonauts and their families: complete with a pretty translator, the premiere of a US 'space TV show',



'Lost in Space' indeed! We cosmonauts burst out laughing. If this was the 'American Family of the Future', the United States would never get to the moon.

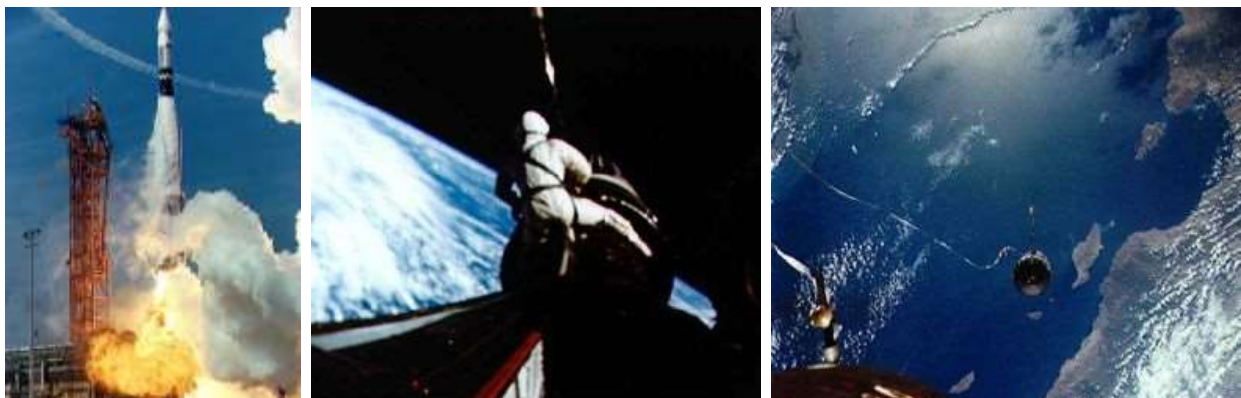
February, 3rd, 1966: The Soviet Union is *first* again. The *first* soft landing, Luna 9 'faxed' back images of the lunar surface, the *first* transmission from another world.



Luna 10 - the *first* lunar orbiter!



The Americans were desperate to catch us. *Gemini* 10 and 11 achieved a couple of minor 'firsts': docking with another spacecraft on first orbit after launch, and a tethered spacecraft.



To us and the Party, the American space program, though they had made some progress, was still 'Lost in Space'

On September 10th, 1966, KGB had another 'special presentation' delivered via diplomatic pouch. This time around, we left our families at home and set up the vodka.



"Space, the final frontier'," said our translator and the lot of us were instantly locked in: "To seek out new life and new civilizations..."

The ship, the characters, the music, the.... *vision!* People of all races and creeds on a quest to explore the universe. And I was *first!* From that day on, week after week, KGB had a new 'Prime Directive':



"Fascinating."



Gemini had come to an end. The Americans' new program: *Apollo*. We'd be watching very closely. Unfortunately, NASA wasn't.

January 27, 1967



A flash fire erupted in the command module during a launch pad test of the Apollo/Saturn space vehicle. The astronauts never had a chance.

We knew the tragedy would set the Americans back at least a year, but took no joy. Those men were us, fueled by the dream. To die on the ground was the cruelest of fates.

There would be changes made, major design and engineering modifications, and revisions to test planning, test discipline, manufacturing processes and procedures, and quality control.

Apollo 1 served as a warning we'd be fools to ignore.

Great news! I have been reinstated as a cosmonaut to serve as a backup pilot on the next space flight. For Vostok 1, my 'alternate' had been with me every step of the way, including on the bus, fully clad in an identical spacesuit. If, for some reason, I faltered at the last moment, Titov would have jumped in the capsule; he would have been *first*.



The three-man *Soyuz* was designed to beat the Americans to the moon. The new spacecraft could actively maneuver in orbit for rendezvous and docking, a necessary ability for circumlunar flights and eventual lunar exploration.



My good friend Vladimir Komarov would perform the first test flight solo. As Deputy Director of Cosmonaut Training, I was determined that the Americans had not died in vain. Technicians would inspect every inch of *Soyuz*.

Their report...



*"More than two hundred violations.
The ship's a death trap!"*

It is better to be wrong too soon than right too late. I had to go to the top.



"God will not forgive us if we fail."

The new First Secretary was more interested in headlines than humanity, insisting on launches to coincide with historic dates or events. Missions were scheduled as part of a grand national ceremony.

The Kremlin would not listen, not even to 'Columbus of the Cosmos'.



"This is starting to get... very Russian."

April 23, 1967

Vladimir and I marched in step from the launch elevator to the waiting rocket. We both felt he was going to his doom. To save himself, all he had to do was feel a 'sudden stomach cramp' and I would go in his place.

A 'New Soviet Man' to the end. He boarded the spacecraft as if he were taking a bus.



The liftoff was flawless, but Komarov soon experienced severe problems with the *Soyuz* attitude control system.

"Devil-machine, nothing I lay my hands on works!" he called down.

We had to get him home. The first attempt to fire retros failed; orientation could not be determined. The ship was passing through an "ion pocket." Komarov fired the retro rockets on his seventeenth orbit, and he began his descent into Earth's atmosphere, piloting the craft towards the landing site.

Unfortunately, one final problem occurred. The drag chute deployed successfully, but due to a failure of a pressure sensor, the main parachute would not deploy. The reserve chute then became tangled with the drag chute.



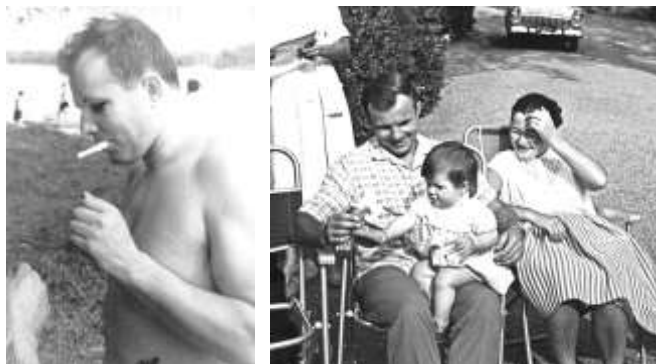
Soyuz crashed into a field near Orenburg. Komarov's ashes were buried in the Kremlin Wall.

My protests came with the harshest of consequences: I was removed from the cosmonaut program, forbidden to go into space again. Except as a 'figurehead' passenger flown to Party functions, the Kremlin would make sure I'd never fly again.



"In a pig's eye!"

Some bigshot I've become. Stuck on the ground, I felt like *Moby Dick* without an ocean. I continued to drink and smoke more and more. And cheat on my wife.



And who would blame me? I was *first!* Every woman in Russia wanted to boast that she'd made love to a national hero!



"Drifting severely off course."

Not since I was a child did the sky seem so far away. Where I went, who I was...a thousand short Soviet pilots could have sat in *Vostok*, and been automatically ejected and celebrated by the whole world.

A man is what he *does*. One miraculous flight and I'd been falling ever since. I had to fly again. I had to be Yuri Gagarin!



I applied for retraining as a fighter pilot. The Party knew better than to deny me, but I could only fly with an instructor. The first time was a bit humiliating, after all...

I stowed my pride and kept at it. My second 'lesson' went well. The third would qualify me to fly solo.



The weather appeared good. My instructor complimented me on take-off, but the sky soon turned against us.

"Done," I radioed after only four minutes in the air. "Returning to base."

Then something went wrong.



"All communication has been lost."



*"Another dream that failed.
There's nothing sadder."*

MARCH 30, 1968





"Apollo in 1969. Shuttle in 1981. Nothing in 2011. Our space program would look awesome to anyone living backwards thru time."



"I don't think the human race will survive the next thousand years, unless we spread into space."



"I don't believe in no-win scenarios."



In 1991 the USSR plunged headlong into Trotsky's 'dustbin of history'. There are more statues, monuments, and memorials for Yuri Gagarin than for all the Soviet Union's creators and rulers put together.



Since his death, *Federation Aeronautique Internationale* has been awarding the *Yuri A. Gagarin Gold Medal*.



The town of Gzhatsk, adjacent to his birth town of Klushino, was renamed Gagarin in 1968.

Gagarin Training Center in Star City is the school for cosmonauts.

Numerous streets, avenues and squares bear Gagarin's name throughout Russia.

His boyhood has been turned into a museum, one of many.





Soyuz flight crews observe a number of ceremonies before they leave the Star City training complex outside Moscow. They leave red carnations at the Memorial Wall, which commemorates Yuri Gagarin and the four cosmonauts who died in the course of space missions. Then they visit Gagarin's office at *Zvyozdnyy Gorodok*, which is preserved as a shrine, untouched since his death, and sign his guest book.

On the way to the pad, cosmonauts get out of the bus near the rocket and urinate on its right rear wheel. The rite dates back to Gagarin himself, who reportedly did not want to soil his space suit during takeoff.

In Space...

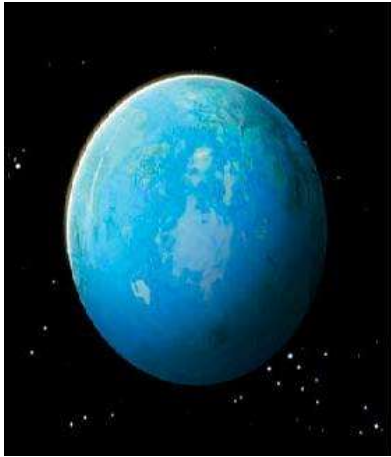
On Apollo 11 astronauts Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin left a memorial satchel containing medals commemorating Gagarin and fellow cosmonaut Vladimir Komarov on the surface of the Moon.



Fallen Astronaut is an 3-inch aluminum sculpture of an astronaut in a spacesuit commemorating astronauts and cosmonauts who died in the quest of space exploration, placed there by the crew of Apollo 15.

A crater on the far side of the Moon and an asteroid, **1772 Gagarin**.

In the **STAR TREK** Universe...



Gagarin IV

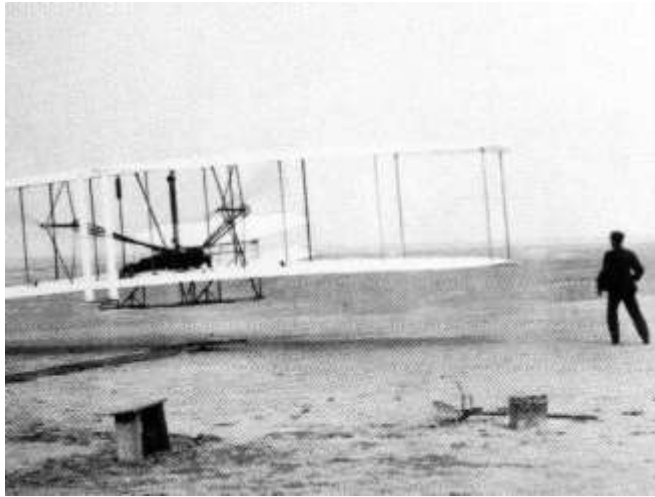


USS *Gagarin* (Saber-class)

IN 2001...



The 'historic' series, dating back to the early days of Starfleet, opens with a catchy tune and cameos of pioneers of aviation and space exploration, including...



Also Lindbergh, Earhart, Yeager, Shepard and...



Yuri Gagarin was nowhere to be seen.



2010 SPACE FOUNDATION SURVEY OF SPACE HEROES

Tied for sixth place: Fictional character **Capt. James Tiberius Kirk** of the starship *USS Enterprise* from the 1960s television series, *Star Trek* and **Russian Cosmonaut Col. Yuri Gagarin**, Soviet Air Force, the first human in outer space.



"Poyekhali!"