

HERO OF OUR TIME

YURI GAGARIN

On 12 April 1961, he became the first man in space and was celebrated the world over – before his mysterious death just seven years later. We take an in-depth look at the man behind the myth

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Yuri Gagarin inside the Vostok 1 capsule before take-off on what would be his only spaceflight

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Before we had astronaut heroes such as Neil Armstrong and Tim Peake, there was Yuri Gagarin, the very first human in space. He was a Russian cosmonaut with a winning smile, who defied the confines of the Cold War-era Soviet Union to be embraced by the whole world. But the military test pilot turned space adventurer, whose Vostok 1 spacecraft completed an orbit of the Earth on 12 April 1961 – his first and only space mission – died just seven years later under mysterious circumstances, which are only recently thought to have been uncovered.

When Gagarin circled the Earth, space travel was such an unknown quantity, he wasn't technically piloting Vostok himself. With scientists and space experts fearing that zero gravity might lead him to lose control of his body or the threads of his mind, the craft was instead controlled by systems on the ground. The orbit was a success, though the mission came perilously close to disaster: as Vostok began its descent, a technical fault meant the capsule didn't detach fully from the main spacecraft, causing it to spin out of control,

and begin burning up on re-entry. 'I was in a cloud of fire rushing towards Earth,' said Gagarin of the experience.

Yet he emerged unscathed and appeared as cheerful as ever upon landing. His epic feat, along with his affability and thrill-seeking attitude - he famously uttered '*Poyekhali!*' ('Here we go!') as Vostok lifted off, instead of the formal phrase he'd been told to say - made him an instant international star. And as a propaganda tool for the USSR, Gagarin was pure gold. Not only was Russia now ahead of the US in the all-important space race, but it had a handsome poster boy for its success, who travelled the world and appeared on all the major television networks.

His face was on the front cover of newspapers and magazines and on bedroom walls across the world. He met world leaders, was greeted by crowds wherever he went, was kissed by Hollywood sirens, had girls throwing themselves at him (to the chagrin of his wife), and statues appeared of him across Russia. His home town in the Smolensk region was renamed Gagarin.

In a 1961 BBC broadcast co-hosted by Richard Dimbleby (David and Jonathan's father), Gagarin was asked if he'd had

THE EXTENT OF GAGARIN'S INTERNATIONAL IMPACT IS PHENOMENAL, GIVEN THAT HE WAS OPERATING BEHIND THE IRON CURTAIN



butterflies in his stomach during the spaceflight. 'There were no butterflies, moths or anything else,' he replied smoothly, with the help of a translator.

THE MAN WHO FELL TO EARTH

In an age when we have British astronaut Tim Peake beaming birthday messages to the Queen live from the International Space Station, and other astronauts tweeting selfies during spacewalks, the extent of Gagarin's international impact is phenomenal, given that he was operating behind the Iron Curtain at a time when the news and television media travelled much slower than today.

The incredible coup that Gagarin represented for the Soviets was compounded by the speech on 25 May 1961 (just six weeks after his flight) by President John F Kennedy, committing the United States to sending a man to the moon





On his 1961 world tour, Gagarin met Prime Minister Harold Macmillan during a brief visit to the UK in July. Below: Gagarin in 1960 with his wife Valentina and daughter Yelena



DO YOU HAVE TO BE MAD TO BE AN ASTRONAUT?

It's significant that, like those who today are willing to sign up for one-way tickets to Mars, Gagarin agreed to be catapulted into space at a time when the impact on the body and psyche was unknown and mired in negative speculation.

At the time, US Air Force psychiatrists imagined the profile of an astronaut must be 'impulsive, suicidal, sexually aberrant and a thrill-seeker' for them to agree to that level of risk. Certainly, Gagarin's contemporaries noticed a level of recklessness and the almost careless way he threw himself into the unknown. But arguably, without the 'mad ambition' it takes to agree to be strapped into a rocket and go hurtling into space, we'd never make progress in reaching new frontiers.

Nevertheless, scientists have been obsessed with studying the psychological and physical impact on people who reach outer space. Indeed, when Valentina Tereshkova – the first woman in space – had a daughter, Elena, with fellow cosmonaut Andriyan Nikolayev, the child was studied as a medical marvel, being the first child born to parents who had both been in space. Elena became a doctor and no ill effects of having space-travelling parents were ever detected.

and returning him safely before the end of the decade.

Yet details of Gagarin's famous spaceflight were shrouded in controversy. During his BBC interview, Dimpleby asked Gagarin if his journey really was the first undertaken in space – alluding to a report in British communist newspaper *The Daily Worker* that there had been another Soviet space mission, a day earlier, that had ended in tragedy.

'No, I can assure you quite authoritatively that the person who wrote that paper felt he was more informed than the people in the Soviet Union,' Gagarin replied, smiling. 'No previous flight of this kind had ever taken place, either in the Soviet Union or any other country. The flight on April 12 was the first flight of its kind, the first manned spaceflight ever.'

Gagarin's risk-taking personality was such that he probably wouldn't be picked as an astronaut today, when teamwork and steady temperaments are prized. His humble roots may

have been among the reasons he was chosen over the 19 other cosmonauts he trained with. Like Nikita Khrushchev, the leader of the Soviet Union at the time of the space race, Gagarin was a peasant farmer's son. In 1941, Nazis overran his village, forcing the family from their home. They had to build a mud hut to survive the harsh winter, and his brother and sister were later deported to labour camps in Poland.

The family survived the conflict, and in 1950 Gagarin went to Moscow to train as a steelworker before saving enough money to enrol in the brand-new Saratov Technical College where he took up flying. As a military pilot he was stationed in Murmansk. According to his contemporaries, he wasn't all that brilliant a pilot, but he gained a reputation as an unflappable daredevil who grinned through his failures.

The covert Khrushchev-sanctioned bid to recruit military pilots as cosmonauts began in 1959. Gagarin was among those



The funeral of Gagarin and fellow pilot Vladimir Seryogin in Moscow's Red Square. Left: an MiG-15 plane. Below left: Vostok 1

Photographs: Alamy, Science Photo Library, Shutterstock, Getty

who passed the arduous tests. 'They tapped our bodies with hammers, twisted us about on special devices and checked the vestibular organs in our ears,' Gagarin said, according to biography *Starman* by Piers Bizony and Jamie Doran.


Would he go mad? Would he become badly disabled, as the theories of the time suggested? The fact that he risked himself entirely reveals the extent of his devil-may-care attitude. Yet, Gagarin said in his BBC interview: 'I don't think there were any grounds, or any serious grounds, for me to be particularly anxious throughout the flight.'


It's no wonder that we are obsessed with cosmonauts and astronauts, the very few who brave the unknown to experience life outside the sphere we live on. But Gagarin also became a legend partly because he died so young, aged just 34.

On 27 March 1968, just seven years after his Vostok 1 triumph, the MiG-15 fighter jet he was piloting came down outside a small town near Moscow. His death was explained by the authorities in a way that Gagarin's contemporaries didn't buy: the State Commission investigation concluded that the experienced pilot, and his co-pilot Vladimir Seryogin, tried to avoid geese or another unexpected foreign

object, by carrying out a manoeuvre that led the craft to go into a tailspin and crash into the ground, killing both men.

Conspiracy theories have sprung up around Gagarin's death, ranging from suicide and poisoning to a crash with a UFO. But in 2013, the cosmonaut Alexei Leonov – the first man to spacewalk, in 1965 – spoke publicly about a declassified report revealing the connection between Gagarin's death and the testing of a Sukhoi Su-15 twin-engined supersonic aircraft in the vicinity. 'A jet can sink into a deep spiral if a larger, heavier aircraft passes by too close and flips it over with its backwash. And that is exactly what happened to Gagarin,' Leonov told Russia's state-sponsored RT network.

Precisely what happened is still up for debate. But the Soviets would understandably have been loath to admit to having a hand in Gagarin's demise, however unintentional. As a result of his death, the government decided its other most famous cosmonaut, the first woman in space, Valentina Tereshkova, should be grounded. 'They forbade me from flying ever again, even piloting planes. The repercussions of the death of one cosmonaut were so great that they wanted to keep me safe,' Tereshkova said. 



To watch Yuri Gagarin's BBC interview, visit bbc.in/2lqHfp8

STAR QUALITY

To this day, Yuri Gagarin and his epic voyage still draw fans from all over the world. His achievement is commemorated on 12 April every year, as Yuri's Night parties and events (yurisnight.net) are held worldwide to mark his spaceflight, and celebrate our past, present and future in space. And his legacy continues to inspire and influence people the world over...

'My interest in space first stemmed from hearing about Gagarin. To me, he embodies everything fantastic about space exploration. A relatively unknown person who

became a superstar in 108 minutes doing something many had not dared think possible. And at a time when the Soviet Union and the US were at loggerheads. Wherever we go in the

future, we have him to thank for taking that first step into the unknown.' Jonathan O'Callahan writes for IFL Science and is the author of our feature on 60 years of *The Sky at Night*, page 103