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HOW THE SPACE RACE STARTING GUN WAS FIRED

Gagarin's landmark mission marked 60 years on

By **REN QI** in Moscow
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Sixty years ago this month, young Russian Yuri Gagarin became the first man to travel in space, beginning his mission by shouting *poekhali*, which translates as "let's go".

The Vostok 3KA-2 spacecraft carrying Gagarin, the 27-year-old son of a carpenter and a dairy farmer, took off from the Baikonur Cosmodrome in Kazakhstan, then part of the Soviet Union, on April 12, 1961.

Although the landmark mission lasted just one hour and 48



minutes, it fired the starting gun in the space race in the 1960s, which culminated with United States astronaut Neil Armstrong becoming the first person to step on the moon in 1969.

In early April 1961, the Cold War between the Soviet Union and the West was heating up. An attempt by US-backed Cuban exiles to invade Cuba's Bay of Pigs was just

days away, and four months later, the Berlin Wall closed the Iron Curtain across Europe.

As the capsule carrying Gagarin back to Earth landed somewhat violently in a remote area in the southwest of the Soviet Union, the incident was watched in disbelief by an elderly farmer and her 5-year-old granddaughter.

Minutes later, the astronaut, wearing a silver spacesuit, emerged from the capsule and told the pair he had returned from space.

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Space: Putin pays visit to landing site

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In an interview with the newspaper *Moskovsky Komsomlets* to mark the anniversary of the mission, the granddaughter, Rita Nurskayeva, said that after seeing a flash of light and a spacecraft, her grandmother started to pray and wanted to flee the scene.

Gagarin calmed her down, saying he was human and "came from the sky," Nurskayeva said. Her grandmother then helped him unfasten his helmet.

In his logbook, Gagarin later described the unexpected meeting. "I told them, 'don't be afraid, I am a Soviet like you - I have descended from the space and I must find a telephone to call Moscow.'"

US President John F. Kennedy sent a telegram congratulating Moscow on the achievement, with one Soviet newspaper headlining, "America magnanimous in defeat."

However, a NASA report on Gagarin's accomplishment made no bones about the embarrassment felt in the US.

"About 4 am, telephones began buzzing up and down the east coast of the United States as reporters demanded responses from NASA officials," the report said.

Then-public affairs officer for NASA, John "Shorty" Powers, told reporters, "We are all asleep down here" resulting in a headline later that day stating: "Soviets put man in space: spokesman says US asleep."

Chief Soviet rocket engineer Sergei Korolev said that in choosing the man who would become the first human in space, the Soviet authorities wanted a skilled and experienced pilot willing to break new ground. Above all, they wanted a candidate who was short.

The first manned space mission used the tiny Vostok 1 craft, a spherical vessel just over 2.29 meters in diameter, calling for an astronaut no more than 1.7 meters tall and weighing a maximum of 72.1 kilograms. Standing just 1.57 meters, Gagarin was the perfect height for the spacecraft. His charming smile also set him apart from the other contenders, Korolev said.

Gagarin's charming, engaging personality was reportedly capable of winning over even the sternest, most hard-nosed Russian proving invaluable in improving the image of the Soviet government around the world.

Three months after his flight, Gagarin traveled to the United

Kingdom, where he was given a hero's welcome, being greeted by Queen Elizabeth II and then-Prime Minister Harold Macmillan.

Despite torrential rain that accompanied his visit to the northern English city of Manchester, Gagarin insisted on traveling in an open-topped car without an umbrella. On arrival at his destination, a union headquarters, he waved to the crowds from a balcony. In turn, they greeted him like royalty.

Gurbir Singh, whose book *A Smile That Changed the World* recalls the visit, said, "He had experienced something no one else had experienced."

"Apart from the speed and altitude records he achieved, he'd also experienced a realm - space, microgravity, weightlessness - something no one had ever experienced, and for a few months, no one else would experience."

The pride resulting from Gagarin's mission has remained with his compatriots for decades - through the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the Russian economic crisis in 2014 to the present day.

The Russian space industry has struggled in recent years, experiencing a series of mishaps, but sending the first human into space remains one of the crowning achievements of the Soviet space program.

The day of Gagarin's flight, April 12, is celebrated every year in Russia as Cosmonautics Day. This year, the authorities pulled out all the stops to mark the 60th anniversary, with 24-hour television coverage, murals on high-rise buildings and laser projections of Gagarin's portrait.

The now-rusty Vostok capsule is on display at the Museum of Cosmonautics in Moscow, which is staging a new exhibition dedicated to his achievement.

Visitors are shown documents, photographs and personal belongings, some dating to Gagarin's childhood and school years.

Vyacheslav Klimentov, a historian and the museum's deputy director of research, said, "This (Gagarin) is probably the only surname that everyone (in Russia) knows, from 4-year-old children to people over 80."

Tatiana Brazhnikova, a 49-year-old school teacher visiting the museum, was quoted by Agence France-Press as saying, "That the first manned flight into space was made by the Soviet Union was very significant for



"I told them, 'don't be afraid, I am a Soviet like you - I have descended from space and I must find a telephone to call Moscow.'"

Yuri Gagarin, the Soviet cosmonaut who became the first man in space on April 12, 1961, speaking to an elderly farmer and her 5-year-old granddaughter after emerging from his landing capsule.

our state. I feel great pride in this achievement."

In a message sent from the International Space Station, the four Russians on board saluted "all earthlings" and hailed Gagarin's accomplishment.

Heroic example

Cosmonaut Oleg Novitskiy said, "Gagarin's legendary 108-minute flight became an example of heroism for his successors, including us."

This month, Russian President Vladimir Putin traveled to the southern city of Engels on the banks of the Volga River, visiting Gagarin's landing site, where a memorial stands to honor the historic flight. Putin was accompanied by Valentina Tereshkova, a Soviet cosmonaut and the first woman in space.

After laying flowers on a monument to Gagarin near the site, Putin said: "This is without a doubt a great event that changed the world. We will always be proud

that it was our country that paved the road to outer space."

In the 21st century, Russia must properly maintain its status as one of the leading nuclear and space powers, because the space sector is directly linked to defense."

Putin said Russia should not abandon its advantages in space - although in recent years the country has experienced a number of setbacks, including a lost spacecraft and an aborted take-off during a manned mission in 2015.

Russia's Soyuz rockets are reliable and allow Moscow to remain relevant in the modern space industry, but the country faces key players in addition to NASA.

A major blow came last year when Russia lost its monopoly for manned International Space Station launches after reusable rockets from entrepreneur Elon Musk's Space X, carrying NASA astronauts, successfully docked at

the space station.

Despite funding cuts, Dmitry Rogozin, head of Russia's Roscosmos space agency, has set a series of ambitious goals for the space program in recent years.

On April 12, the US State Department marked 60 years since the first manned space flight, along with "technological progress and international cooperation, which are facilitated by space exploration."

The short post, in Russian, did not mention Gagarin by name. In a post on Twitter, Rogozin used strong language to criticize the State Department for failing to refer to Gagarin, stating, "Superpowers do not behave that way."

In a video message recalling Gagarin's achievement, Rogozin stressed that Russia is "on the cusp of very important changes that will see next-generation spacecraft and lunar missions."

"We believe in our space, in Russian space," he said.

Cosmodrome project injects new life into Russian Far East

By REN QI in Blagoveshchensk, Russia

Sixty years after Yuri Gagarin became the first human in space, most Russians believe their country remains the leader in the field of aerospace.

It was no surprise when Moscow last year named its first approved coronavirus vaccine Sputnik, after the satellite whose launch in 1957 stunned the West.

A Bloomberg report said that while Russian President Vladimir Putin is not an interplanetary travel enthusiast, he is keenly aware of the military and geopolitical implications of a space program.

Soviet rockets and satellites journeyed into space from the Baikonur Cosmodrome in southern Kazakhstan, the world's first and largest operational space launch facility. Following the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Russian government is paying \$115 million annually to lease the site until 2050.

However, in recent years, environmental activists have protested against the use of Baikonur.

Vostochny Cosmodrome, a launch site in Amur Oblast some 5,500 kilometers east of Moscow, may offer a solution. Completion of the project, which has brought new life to the area, has given Russians pride and confidence for exciting economic opportunities as Moscow works to transform the region into the country's space science and industrial hub.

A plaque just outside the entrance to the cosmodrome, a statue of Gagarin stands at the spaceport, and the country is hoping the facility will rebuild its role in developing the region's economy.

In 2016, China Daily was the first Chinese media organization to visit the Vostochny Cosmodrome, where a guide at a small museum explained why the site is shrouded in mystery.

He said that in the 1960s, the area was called Uglegor'sk, which means coal hill. "But there is no coal here. The name was just a cover, as the site was established to serve the nearby intercontinental ballistic missile base of the Soviet Armed Forces," the guide added.

Reaching the rocket and spacecraft assembly area involves a journey through forests, grassland and construction sites. Alexander Molchanov, deputy general of the spaceport, said, "In order to stay safe and avoid getting lost, you can visit any corner but don't open closed doors or press any buttons on the way there."

He added that no staff member at the facility is in the military, and that Russia wants the spaceport to be known to the world. Four kilometers away, the rocket launch tower, which is 53 meters high and weighs 1,600 metric tons, stands in a vast field, with no heavy security in sight.

The spaceport may not yet have played a full role in developing Russia's aerospace industry, but it has significantly helped the region advance.

Thanks to the new facility, the Russian government has poured resources into Amur State University to create a space facility, which is starting to put students through training programs and apprenticeships.

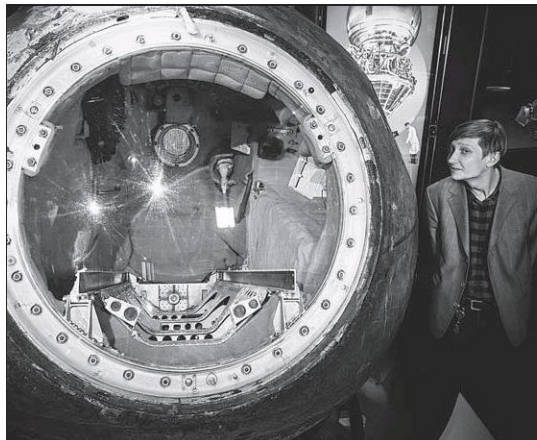
Ilya Oleinik, a student at the university from the eastern city of Blagoveshchensk, said the cosmodrome and education programs at the university have given him a chance to be part of the future.

"Before the cosmodrome was built, nothing really happened here. Now, more attention is being paid to the region. It is being more actively developed," he said.



Top and above: Russia is looking to Vostochny Cosmodrome, a launch site in Amur Oblast some 5,500 kilometers east of Moscow, to play a key role in developing the region's economy.

RUSSIAN SPACE AGENCY ROSCOSMOS



Clockwise from top left: Soviet cosmonaut Valentina Tereshkova became the first woman in space on June 16, 1963. KEYSTONE-FRANCE / GAMMA-KEYSTONE VIA GETTY IMAGES The Vostok capsule that took Yuri Gagarin into space in 1961 is displayed at the Museum of Cosmonautics in Moscow. ALEXANDER NEMENOV FOR CHINA DAILY Gagarin waves after arriving in London on July 11, 1961. AP