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Caterina, Gianfranco

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Gagarin in Brazil: reassessing the terms of the Cold War domestic political debate in 1961

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Abstract

This article argues that the visit of cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin to Brazil in 1961 illustrated a change in the perception of part of the Brazilian political elites about the USSR. It analyses how the shift of the Soviet self-representation abroad affected the image of the USSR in Brazil and, consequently, the terms of the domestic debate regarding the Cold War.

Keywords: Brazil; Cold War; Soviet Union; Yuri Gagarin; Modernization.

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Introduction

During the 1950s and 1960s, the Soviet space program played an important role in the USSR's pursuit of global superpower status. Andrews and Siddiqi (2011) highlight the “enormous resources” employed in the space missions themselves, as well as their advertising in domestic and international arenas. The launch of the first artificial satellite, *Sputnik-1*, in 1957, and Yuri Gagarin's pioneering spaceflight in April 1961 would become milestones of the USSR's scientific advancements and international projection. As from 1961, Soviet cosmonauts toured the world, industrial exhibitions displayed Soviet technical-scientific improvements abroad and publications on its space technology emerged continuously.

This article adopts Andrews and Siddiqi's (2011) approach, emphasizing the intersection between the state and culture. More precisely, this text deals with the connection of how material and symbolic elements of the Soviet space program were interpreted by the Brazilian political elite in particular

– especially during Gagarin’s visit to Brazil in July 1961. We argue that his trip illustrated a change of perception by important Brazilian political actors (both civil and military) about the USSR. Therefore, the object of this article is to assess Brazilian elites’ reactions to the cosmonaut’s visit and their relationship with the Cold War domestic debate.

The literature on this topic is, unfortunately, very limited. J. Gregory Oswald (Oswald and Strover 1970), Gouré and Rothenberg (1975), Miller (1989), Blasier (1989) and Mugal-León (1989) were predominantly concerned with geopolitical, economic, and strategic factors in addressing interactions between the USSR and Latin America. This literature examines trade, Cuba/USSR relations, and contacts between communist parties in the region and the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU).

Rupprecht (2015), however, emphasizes Soviet cultural diplomacy in Latin America and analyses the interactions between the USSR and the region’s countries after Stalin’s death in 1953. Under Khrushchev’s new leadership, a significant shift in Soviet foreign policy occurred. In 1956, the new secretary general announced that the USSR was seeking peaceful coexistence with the capitalist powers and voiced its support for the decolonization process taking place in Africa and Asia, as well as national liberation movements, including those in Latin America.

These developments indicated an opportunity for the Soviet Union to increase its influence in Brazil. By changing its self-representation abroad, the USSR changed the perception that the political elites of Third World countries – including Brazil – had of the socialist superpower and its foreign policy. This change altered the terms of the Cold War in the Brazilian domestic debate. The socialist superpower would diminish its official party rhetoric and concentrate its efforts on the diffusion of technological achievements and scientific advances. According to Rupprecht (2015), the space program would thus become “probably the single most successful element of Soviet self-representation abroad” (Rupprecht 2015, 42). The fear of Soviet communism as an ideology in Brazil would be balanced with a fascination by Soviet modernity.

This article intends to bridge the gap between recent literature that deals with Soviet cultural diplomacy and assessments on Brazil-USSR relations focused on geopolitical, economic, and strategic factors like those published in the late 1980s in a Cold War context. We argue that there is a missing link between Soviet cultural diplomacy and modernization efforts in Brazil, which had a lasting impact on bilateral relations.

The attraction of Soviet modernization would generate expectations for economic cooperation within the Brazilian government – especially in the energy field – that would prove unfulfilled in 1963/1964. These high expectations were some of the factors that impelled President João Goulart to threaten the U.S. government with the strengthening of relations between Brazil and the USSR in November 1962. As analysed by Loureiro (2017b), this threat met a blunt response from Washington, which contributed significantly to the collapse of the Three-Year Plan and eventually led to the civil-military coup in 1964.

Despite the emergence of an anti-communist regime, Brazil was still interested in maintaining amicable relations with the USSR, proving that the bipolar conflict in and of itself is inadequate to capture the complexities of the international context in 1964¹. The same can be said for 1961. Moreover, the Cold War in Latin America had gained a clear regional aspect after the Cuban Revolution in 1959. After this event, the possibility of exporting the Caribbean-like revolution to Brazil would gather virtually all the attention of domestic anti-communist political leaders and elites. At the same time, the pursuit of a more independent foreign policy *vis-à-vis* the U.S. and an autonomous path of economic development attracted an important part of the Brazilian elites and technical bureaucrats whose main goal was the country's modernization.

From January 1961, during Quadros' government, interactions between Brazil and the USSR would become frequent². The regional political context greatly favoured a USSR diplomatic offensive in Latin America: Gagarin concluded his historic flight on April 12th, and shortly thereafter a CIA-sponsored operation to seize power in Cuba failed miserably. In the following month, despite some tension with the Kennedy government due to Brazil's position favouring Cuba's right to self-determination, Quadros was able to strike an excellent economic deal with the U.S., rescheduling debts and establishing new loans in more favourable terms for Brazil. Besides Cuba, Quadros' intention to support the admission of China into the UN and the possibility of Brazil strengthening its ties with the Soviet bloc worried American officials³.

Nevertheless, the independent line in Brazilian foreign policy would prevail. Also in May, the head of the Latin America Section of the USSR's Ministry of Culture, Alexander Alexeyev, arrived in Brasilia for a meeting with Quadros.⁴ The press in Brazil and the U.S. State Department sought to scrutinize the reasons for the meeting. At the same time, a Brazilian trade mission, led by Paulo Leão de Moura, was in Moscow negotiating with the Soviet government. Besides an increase in Soviet credits, a protocol was signed to establish permanent trade representations in both countries, and a Soviet Industrial Exhibition was planned to be held in Brazil in the first half of 1962 (Caterina 2019)⁵.

¹ The socialist superpower could play a role in the Brazilian industrialization effort. Focused more on domestic issues rather than propagating communism abroad, the Soviet Union was gradually becoming a status quo superpower and sought to expand economic ties with peripheral countries like Brazil on a pragmatic basis. See Caterina (2018).

² In March 1961, Quadros ordered the establishment of diplomatic relations with Romania, Hungary and Bulgaria (established for the first time). In the following month, according to Leite Barbosa (2007), a Soviet delegation visited Brazil led by the director of trade with the West of the USSR Foreign Trade Ministry. Also in April, Quadros sent journalist João Dantas for a trip to the Soviet bloc. See Hershberg (2015). For Quadros' interactions with Soviet representatives in the 1950s see Caterina (2019, 151-52, 191-95). For U.S./Brazil economic negotiations during his administration see Loureiro (2017a, 65-66, 108-111, 139-141).

³ See Weis (2001, 329-330); Loureiro (2014, 328-329) and Taffet (2007, 98-99).

⁴ Alexeyev acted as a translator during Quadros' visit to the USSR in 1959. See Caterina (2019, 213). In the following year, they met again during the visit of a Brazilian entourage to Cuba. See Arnt (2004, 130-33) and Fursenko and Naftali (1997, 88-89).

⁵ Trade commitments on specific products were also made. See Caterina (2019, 215-16). For the first trade agreement between Brazil and the USSR signed in 1959 see Farias (2017).

Moura was also the emissary of a message from Quadros to Khrushchev. At the meeting with the prime minister, the Brazilian diplomat stated that for ‘internal reasons’ the resumption of diplomatic ties depended on ‘two conditions’: a subsequent increase in the volume of bilateral exchanges and a USSR public manifestation for the restoration of diplomatic relations with Brazil. The latter was promptly answered. The prime minister told Moura that the USSR would be ready to resume when the Brazilian government found it most convenient, and mentioned that he was ready to meet Quadros in Moscow for a visit⁶ (Caterina 2019). The first condition would gain political momentum with the arrival of Victor Azov to inaugurate and head the USSR’s commercial representation in Brazil in early July. On the 17th, a Soviet Goodwill Mission arrived in Brazil led by the Secretary of the CPSU Presidium, Mikhail P. Georgadze. High-ranking officials of Soviet cultural diplomacy were also present (Caterina 2019).

At a meeting with Quadros in Brasília, the group talked about the possibilities of growth in bilateral cultural relations, scientific, and educational exchange. Georgadze took the opportunity to deliver a letter from Khrushchev to Quadros. The Brazilian awarded the head of the Soviet Mission with the title of *Grão Oficial da Ordem do Cruzeiro do Sul* (National Order of the Southern Cross)⁷. Quadros also expressed his interest, without making a formal invitation, to receive Gagarin’s visit soon⁸. To the Soviets, the president of the *Instituto Brasileiro do Café*, Sergio Frazão, voiced his desire to export a new soluble coffee brand to the USSR – named *Gagarin* – in honor of the cosmonaut⁹.

On July 20, Khrushchev’s letter to Quadros was published by the Brazilian press. Five days later, the president ordered the minister of Foreign Relations, Afonso Arinos, to start conversations for the reestablishment of relations with the USSR. Contacts should be initiated in Washington (Caterina 2019)¹⁰. On the 29th, Gagarin arrived in Brazil for a visit.

Regarding primary sources, a difficulty should be mentioned. No records of Gagarin’s visit to Brazil were found at the Russian Federation State Archive (GARF) in Moscow – despite frequent reference to his pioneer flight in various meetings. In Brazil, similarly, no textual documents were obtained at *Arquivo Histórico do Ministério das Relações Exteriores* (AHMRE), in Brasília, and at *Arquivo Nacional*, in Rio de Janeiro. This deficiency has been reasonably addressed by the extensive Brazilian press coverage of the visit and a few U.S. documents obtained at the National Archives (NARA), in College Park.

⁶ “Khrushchev recebe Leão de Moura e fala em reatar” (1961, 1).

⁷ Besides the head of the Soviet Mission, eight members of the visiting group were decorated. See National Archives and Records Administration, College Park (hereafter NARA), RG 59, CDF (1960-63), 632.60/10-1261, box 1328, Despatch 302, Rio-State, Confidential, Rio, 12 October 1961, Enclosure 2, p. 1.

⁸ “URSS: reatamento só depende do Brasil” (1961, 25). According to Ribeiro (2017), on July 16th, the Brazilian Institute of Astronautics and Space Sciences (IBACE) suggested inviting Gagarin for a visit in a letter to Quadros.

⁹ “Brasil venderá ‘Café Gagarin’ para a URSS” (1961, 7).

¹⁰ Brazil/U.S. relations remained friendly in late July 1961. The IMF, however, suspended the stand-by agreement with Brazil because Quadros’ economic policy was in breach of its commitments to the Fund. Loureiro (2017a, 165). At the National Congress, Quadros encountered fierce opposition to his government. Attacked by conservatives for its foreign policy and by the Left for its economic policy, the government tended to become increasingly isolated and depleted of its support base in Parliament. See Ferreira (2011, 223).

This article is structured in four items. First, it presents the space program's place in Soviet foreign policy. Thereafter, Gagarin's visit and its impact on the image of the USSR in Brazil are assessed. Finally, the conclusions are presented.

The space program as an element of Soviet foreign policy

On April 11, 1961, Nikita Khrushchev received a telephone call at his summer residence in Pitsunda, on the Black Sea coast. The director of the Military-Industrial Commission, Dmitri Ustinov, had called to report to the prime minister about the launch of the first spaceship with a human on board the next day. According to Gerovitch (2011), Khrushchev completely refuted Ustinov's suggestion to send Gagarin, after his spaceflight, to Pitsunda. Instead, the first secretary said he would fly back to Moscow, greet the cosmonaut at Vnukovo Airport with "as much magnificence as possible: radio, television and brief speeches" (in the prime minister's words), and then take him to a large reception at the Kremlin.

Arriving at the Red Square, Gagarin spoke to a huge audience waiting for him next to the prime minister. At the Kremlin, a generous reception for 1,500 people, including the entire foreign press and diplomatic corps, would be held to honour him (Gerovitch 2011). For his achievement, the cosmonaut was decorated with the title of Hero of the Soviet Union, a promotion to major (without passing that of captain), the title of First Class Military Pilot (without passing to Second Class), a car, and immediate international fame (Gerovitch 2015).

However, if for the cosmonaut there was publicity, the technical-scientific staff of the space program was surrounded by secrecy. According to Gerovitch (2015), approximately 700 engineers, scientists, and technicians who contributed to the *Vostok-1* flight received titles and bonuses anonymously. In a closed ceremony – not revealed by the Soviet press – the chief engineer, Sergei Korolev, received the Order of Lenin and the title of Hero of Socialist Labour (Gerovitch 2015).

According to another key figure of the Soviet space program, engineer Boris Chertok (2009), there was a "historic paradox of cosmonautics," as advances in missile technology stimulated confrontation between the two superpowers, while the "successes" of manned space missions – based on these same advances – fostered "rapprochement, cooperation, and a desire to exchange ideas and experience." Regarding the former, it is important to emphasize that this constant technical improvement had the potential to carry an intercontinental missile with a nuclear warhead to any part of the world (Chertok 2009).

From the perspective of cultural propaganda though, Gagarin would be the first in a gallery of cosmonaut heroes who would take part in even more ambitious missions afterwards. In August 1961, German Titov orbited for approximately 24 hours around the Earth. The following year, the first cosmonaut duo, Andriyan Nikolayev and Pavel Popovich, was launched and returned safely. In 1963, Valentina Tereshkova became the first woman in space. The first spacewalk would

come two years later with Alexei Leonov (Gerovitch 2011; 2015). Thus, for some time, the Soviet space program seemed youthful, energetic, and boundlessly capable of dreaming of new and more ambitious endeavours (Andrews and Siddiqi 2011).

Brazilian authorities, eager for modernity, industrialization and raising the domestic living standards, were obviously impressed with Soviet space achievements. During João Goulart's visit to the USSR, in August 1961, in a meeting with Brezhnev, the Brazilian Vice-President expressed 'admiration' for the 'exceptionally great progress' of the Soviet Union, a country 'proud of its technical and scientific developments', whose 'grand expression' were the cosmonauts Gagarin and Titov.¹¹ After this meeting, the Brazilian delegation, led by the Vice-President, took part in an event at the Kremlin for welcoming Romanian officials, where they met Gagarin and Titov. Some days later, a picture of Goulart talking to Titov would be published in *Pravda* (Caterina 2019, 236-37).

The appeal of the Soviet space program "enormously enhanced the attractiveness" of the Soviet modernization model, which would "reach its peak" in African, Asian, and Latin American countries, especially after Gagarin's trip in 1961 (Zubok 2007, 338). Brazil, seeking a diplomatic rapprochement with the USSR since the inauguration of Jânio Quadros in January, would be a natural target for this Soviet cultural offensive. Thus, with the negotiations for the resumption of relations with the USSR still not concluded, Yuri Gagarin arrived in Brazil on July 29, 1961. His visit will be thoroughly assessed in the next item.

Gagarin in Brazil: the enchantment with the Soviet modernization changing the terms of the domestic Cold War debate

The literature assessing Gagarin's trip to Brazil is very limited. Vizentini (2004) alludes to it, but does not delve further into the meaning of the diplomatic endeavour for the Brazilian people and its understanding of the Cold War.¹² In a recent article, Ribeiro (2017) argues about the importance of his visit as one of the factors that impelled Quadros to kick start space research activities in Brazil in an institutionalized framework.¹³ Her analysis, though, focuses on the outset of Brazilian space activities and does not assess how the change in the Soviet self-representation influenced the Brazilian political debate.

Rupprecht (2011) is the only author to assess Gagarin's visit to Brazil as part of a Soviet cultural diplomacy effort aimed to present the socialist superpower as a technologically advanced state. His

¹¹ "Zapis Besedi – L. I. Brejneva s vitze-prezidentom Brazilií Joao Goulartomitchlenami Brazilskoitorgovoidelegatzii, napravliaiuchiesia b KNR.GARF, f. 7523, op. 108, d. 274. Moscow, 11 August 1961, p. 37. For more on Goulart's visit to the USSR in 1961 see Caterina (2019, 224-238).

¹² Araujo (1996), Cervo and Bueno (2008) and Ricupero (2017) do not mention the cosmonaut's visit in July 1961. For a bibliographical discussion of the concept of Independent Foreign Policy focused on Brazil/USSR relations see Caterina (2019, 173-76). For an overview of Itamaraty's importance in Brazilian cultural exchange in 1961 see Crespo (2012, 123-27).

¹³ According to Ribeiro (2017), Quadros had received a letter from the presidents of Sociedade Interplanetária Brasileira (SIB), Luiz Gonzaga Bevilacqua and Thomas Bun, suggesting the establishment of a space research institution in Brazil in February 1961.

flight in April 1961 sparked admiration, respect, joy and surprise throughout the world. In Brazil, it would be no different¹⁴. Hailed as the “Columbus of the Cosmos,”¹⁵ the cosmonaut began an intense international tour. Until April 1962, Gagarin would visit Czechoslovakia, Finland, England, Iceland, Brazil, Canada, Hungary, France, India, Afghanistan, Cuba, and Ceylon (present-day Sri Lanka) (Chertok 2009). Only between April and early August 1961 the cosmonaut visited ten countries (including Brazil) (Singh 2011)¹⁶.

For each of these trips, the Presidium issued “specific behaviour guidelines” and “talking points” for the cosmonauts. According to Gerovitch (2011), the director of the Cosmonaut Training Centre, Lieutenant General Nikolai Kamanin, drafted these guidelines and, once approved by the CPSU leaders, he was also responsible for ensuring that they were obeyed¹⁷.

While visiting the UK in July 1961, for instance, Gagarin attended all the events accompanied by Kamanin and journalist and translator Boris Belitzky. In London, the engagements included a meeting with the mayor, an appointment with Conservative Prime Minister Harold Macmillan, and a meeting at the Buckingham Palace with Queen Elizabeth II¹⁸. During his stay, Gagarin repeated the mantra peace, friendship, and cooperation among peoples in virtually all his public appearances (Singh 2011).

His charisma, openness, and friendly tone contrasted with the earlier perception of Soviet man abroad – and therefore of the USSR itself. As Gerovitch (2011) points out, the old depictions of a threatening dictator like Stalin, a dogmatic Party bureaucrat, or a stern Soviet soldier have been replaced by that of a “cheerful and charming young man” (Gerovitch 2011, 89).

Gagarin’s tour would make its first stop in Latin America on July 26 in Cuba. Although Fidel Castro had not yet declared himself Marxist-Leninist – he would do so in December 1961 – the proximity between Cuba and the USSR had intensified. Recent memories of the failed U.S. invasion in April aided the rhetoric grounded in the idea of a common enemy to the Cubans and the USSR.¹⁹ Gagarin delivered a more political speech than in the UK, criticizing the ‘imperialists’, underscoring the role of the CPSU in the USSR’s space program

¹⁴ “Astronauta soviético enviado ao espaço regressa depois de circundar a Terra: a humanidade entra na Idade Cósmica” (1961, 1); “Vencido o Cosmos: a URSS lança o primeiro astronauta ao espaço” (1961, 1); “Ninguém morreu em tentativas, Gagarin foi mesmo o primeiro” (1961, 1). Part of this admiration with the Soviet space program in Brazil started earlier. According to Rupprecht (2011), after the flight of the *Sputnik-1* in 1957, “many ordinary Brazilians” expressed their admiration in telegrams and letters to Moscow. Rupprecht (2011, 519).

¹⁵ See Rupprecht (2015, 42-44) and Rupprecht (2011, 519-20).

¹⁶ Gagarin was invited to visit the U.S. In late June 1961 though, according to Secretary Dean Rusk, the U.S. government “has made efforts to discourage invitation”. NARA, RG 59, CDF (1960-63), box 76, Telegram 1839, State-Paris (repeated to Moscow and Rome), Confidential, Washington, 26 June 1961.

¹⁷ According to Gerovitch (2011), there was a struggle for influence between Kamanin and the CPSU leaders for the content of cosmonauts’ speeches in foreign countries. The former sought to modulate the message by focusing on peace and possibilities for space cooperation, while the latter attempted to link directly the space program successes to Soviet socialism.

¹⁸ For more see Singh (2011, 99-101, 116-120). Gagarin had a warm welcome in Manchester and London, attracting great attention from the British people and press coverage – including giving a live interview to a local TV.

¹⁹ In addition, the date coincided with the celebrations for the anniversary of the July 26 Movement, founded in 1954 by Castro to fight against Batista’s dictatorship. On July 26, 1953, an attack on the Moncada Barracks in Santiago de Cuba led by Fidel Castro ended with his arrest. In 1955, after an amnesty, he would go to Mexico to reorganize the revolutionary movement alongside other exiled elements.

achievements, and even promised ‘armed help from the Soviet people’ in Cuba’s struggle ‘for its freedom and independence’²⁰.

On the same day, Arinos publicly announced Gagarin’s visit.²¹ On July 29, the cosmonaut arrived in Brazil. His program, at first, foresaw two days in Rio de Janeiro, two in São Paulo, and a stop in Brasília²².

In Rio, the cosmonaut would be welcomed at the airport by the secretary general of Itamaraty, Ambassador Penna Marinho, and the ambassadors of Poland and Czechoslovakia. He immediately went to the residence of the businessman and federal deputy for the PSD, Drault Ernanny, where he would stay²³. His mansion, *Casa das Pedras*, had already become a meeting point for politicians, executives, intellectuals, and celebrities (Brazilian and foreign) (Ernanny 1988). It should be noted that Ernanny had no sympathy for Soviet socialism²⁴. At the first dinner shortly after his arrival, the host toasted in honour of the Soviet, evoking love, science, and vows for peace among the peoples. The next day, Ernanny organized a meeting between Gagarin and Brazilian scientists²⁵. Also at the mansion, he would receive warm greetings from about two hundred guests and a *feijoada* was prepared to honour him.²⁶ In the following days, his schedule would be hectic.

Gagarin gave a lecture/interview at the Brazilian Academy of Sciences, attended by the president of the entity, Artur Moses, and Admiral Otacílio Cunha, president of the National Research Council (CNPq)²⁷. Also in Rio, he was received at Guanabara Palace by Governor Carlos Lacerda. In a dialogue surrounded by photographers, the governor stated that the cosmonaut was, at that time, the ‘most prestigious and popular’ man in the world and would need to use these attributes to promote ‘peace and freedom’. Gagarin replied that this was exactly the purpose of the visit. Then, however, when Lacerda asked him to reassure the ‘peoples of America and Berlin of the constant (Soviet) threats’, the cosmonaut just smiled²⁸.

At the Students National Union (UNE) headquarters, he was photographed holding a Brazilian baby named Yuri Gagarin da Silva, in a meeting organized by the president of the entity,

²⁰ “Cuba celebra o 26 de Julho: Fidel anuncia que só haverá um movimento revolucionário” (1961, 8). See also “Gagarin Sábado no Rio a Convite de Jânio” (1961, 4).

²¹ “Calorosamente homenageado Gagarin” (1961, 5).

²² “Gagarin esperado no Brasil sábado” (1961, 56). Before going to Rio, however, the Soviet delegation made a quick stop for refuelling in Brasília. “Calorosamente homenageado Gagarin” (1961, 5). “Gagarin: terça-feira em S. Paulo”. (1961, 34). Gagarin was received at the airport by Arinos accompanied by the ministers of Education and Aeronautics. “O major Gagarin desde ontem no Brasil” (1961, 7).

²³ “O major Gagarin desde ontem no Brasil” (1961, 7).

²⁴ Ernanny was in his second term as a federal deputy. He had refused Quadros’ invitation to run Petrobras and was an influential politician and entrepreneur in the oil and cement industries. See Caterina (2019).

²⁵ “Calorosamente homenageado Gagarin” (1961, 5).

²⁶ “Calorosamente homenageado Yuri Gagarin” (1961, 1).

²⁷ In June, according to Ribeiro (2017), Cunha and the directors of SIB and CTA (Centro Técnico Aeroespacial) suggested the establishment of Grupo de Organização da Comissão Nacional de Estudos Espaciais, under CNPq responsibility. The goal of this institution was to qualify human resources and develop activities connected to space sciences.

²⁸ “Gagarin hoje em São Paulo: alterado o programa no Rio” (1961, 12).

Aldo Arantes.²⁹ In his speech, Gagarin underlined the importance of a closer contact between Brazilian and Soviet students and stated that he was assured that the resumption of relations between the two countries would contribute to the achievement of this objective. He also attended a conference at the Metallurgical Industry Employees Union. The number of people waiting for him (approximately 4,000 at UNE and 3,000 at the Metallurgical Union) and the lack of organization at both events would disturb his arrival and departure. In the evening, he attended a reception at the Ingá Palace, hosted by Rio de Janeiro's Governor, Celso Peçanha, and had a dinner at the Icaraí Regata Club in Niterói³⁰.

The Soviet delegation, alleging tiredness of Gagarin, would alter this frenetic program in Rio. Therefore, a lunch hosted by *O Cruzeiro* magazine, a visit to the *Diário de Notícias*, a conference at the Space Research Association, an interview with TV Tupi, his presence at a premiere of a Russian play, and a visit to the Mangueira samba headquarters were suspended.³¹ At the headquarters of the Brazilian Press Association (ABI) though, Gagarin would give a press conference. Women's screams and autograph requests would interrupt the event several times. His departure from the room was again tumultuous³².

The arrival in São Paulo would be no different. At Congonhas Airport, the governor of São Paulo and the directors of the Brazilian Institute of Astronautics and Space Sciences (IBACE), Flavio Pereira and Roberto Isnard, were waiting for him. The reception hall of the airport's Official Pavilion would be overrun and Gagarin would have to exit through a side door under police protection. Some of the people who came to see him tried to keep up with this movement and smashed glass on the way. He was shoved into a waiting car³³.

The next day, the cosmonaut would meet with Governor Carvalho Pinto at the Palace of Campos Elíseos. When the Governor asked him when a man would land on the moon, Gagarin – though he said it was difficult to set an exact date – estimated that the trip would be ‘within 5 years or less’³⁴. The meeting would also feature a tribute to the cosmonaut by the Brazilian Interplanetary Society (SIB) and a letter addressed to the USSR Academy of Sciences from SIB's president, Thomas Bun, suggesting the establishment of information exchange on aeronautical topics (Ribeiro 2017)³⁵.

In the evening, Gagarin gave a talk to 3,000 people at Ibirapuera Arena stating that the ‘friendship between Brazil and the Soviet Union’ would be strengthened and developed from that moment on. Mayor Prestes Maia handed him a diploma and the *Bandeirante do Cosmos* medal

²⁹ “Calorosamente homenageado Yuri Gagarin” (1961, 1). “Gagarin chega hoje a S. Paulo; almoço e visita” (1961, 44). Another registered boy Yuri Gagarin Gagliano would be baptized in Taubaté (SP) while the cosmonaut was still visiting Brazil. See “Gagarin de Taubaté” (1961, 5).

³⁰ “Calorosamente homenageado Gagarin” (1961, 5). “Gagarin chega hoje a S. Paulo; almoço e visita” (1961, 44). “Gagarin: maior amizade Brasil-URSS” (1961, 4).

³¹ “Gagarin hoje em São Paulo: alterado o programa no Rio” (1961, 12).

³² “Gagarin: perguntas e respostas na entrevista na ABI” (1961, 7). “Gagarin escolheria Gagarin” (1961, 6).

³³ “Pontualidade e atropelos no aeroporto” (1961, 12).

³⁴ “Carvalho Pinto entrevista Gagarin nos Campos Elísios” (1961, 10).

³⁵ “Amistoso diálogo com o governador” (1961, 12).

offered by IBACE. On behalf of this organization, director Flavio Pereira stated that Gagarin's feat should not be related to any system of government, as it was a conquest of humanity. He also mentioned that Gagarin's visit was an 'incentive' for a group of space researchers in Brazil³⁶.

There is important numerical data to measure the interest of the Paulistas regarding Gagarin's visit. The newspaper *Folha de S. Paulo* had a telephone service called *Folha Informações*. It answered about 3,000 questions daily about everyday facts and general news. It is noteworthy that on August 1st, 1961, 90% of the questions that reached this service were, directly or indirectly, about Gagarin: his program in São Paulo, schedule, stature, age, characteristics of his flight, speed of the rocket, travel time, etc³⁷.

In Brasília, before leaving the country, Gagarin met with Quadros. The Soviet handed him a telegraphed message from Khrushchev – which would be published in full by Brazilian newspapers³⁸ – , his book *Road to the Stars* and an autographed photo. He also visited the Ministry of Aeronautics and the Chamber of Deputies.³⁹ At the former, he was received by Minister Gabriel Grün Moss, from whom he received a FAB pennant and answered some questions in the Minister's own office.⁴⁰ At the latter, Chamber's Noble Hall, parliamentarians lined up to greet him, while photographers and people who gained access to the Hall took the opportunity to approach and see the first man in space with their own eyes⁴¹.

After meeting with Quadros, he received the *Ordem do Mérito Aeronáutico* from the president, in a separate ceremony.⁴² An Air Force officer read the citation regarding the award of the title – in the degree of *comendador* – the highest Brazilian aeronautical honour. The text signed by Grün Moss related Gagarin's achievement to that of Santos Dumont – patron of the Force. A cocktail party was offered by the Air Ministry in honour of the cosmonaut at his hotel before his departure for Canada the next morning⁴³.

It should be noted that the following day, the Public Relations Service of the Ministry of Aeronautics rushed to publish a press release explaining the reasons for the award. It considered Gagarin's flight an 'extraordinary scientific feat' with 'an inestimable value'. The text linked again the Brazilian pioneer in the 'conquest of the air [Santos Dumont] with the pioneer of the cosmos

³⁶ Ibid.. "Carvalho Pinto entrevista Gagarin nos Campos Elísios" (1961, 10). The program in São Paulo would also be changed. Commitments to meet Mayor Prestes Maia and visit a refinery in Cubatão would be cancelled at the initiative of the Soviet delegation alleging fatigue from the guest. "Fatigado, Gagarin cancelou parte do programa de sua visita, ontem, a São Paulo" (1961, 2).

³⁷ "90% de Gagarin na 'Folha Informações'" (1961, 10).

³⁸ "Gagarin (condecorado em Brasília) entrega mensagem de Kruchev a JQ" (1961, 5). In it, Khrushchev thanked Quadros for inviting Gagarin, described the cosmonaut as a "messenger of peace" and underlined that the trip would contribute to "the development of friendly relations between the peoples of our countries."

³⁹ Ibid..

⁴⁰ "Gagarin diz que seu voo contrariou somente teorias espaciais dos ocidentais" (1961, 5). See also "Gagarin (condecorado por JQ) agradece acolhida do Brasil" (1961, 4).

⁴¹ "Gagarin diz que seu voo contrariou somente teorias espaciais dos ocidentais" (1961, 5).

⁴² "Gagarin condecorado por Jânio com a Ordem do Mérito Aeronáutico" (1961, 19).

⁴³ "Gagarin diz que seu voo contrariou somente teorias espaciais dos ocidentais" (1961, 5). STF Minister Luís Galloti, Brasília Mayor Paulo de Tarso (PDC), Minister Moss and Senators Mem de Sá (PL-RS), Daniel Krieger (UDN-RS) and Federal Deputy Meneses Cortes (UDN-DF) also attended the hotel to greet the cosmonaut. See "Gagarin (condecorado por JQ) agradece acolhida do Brasil" (1961, 4).

[Gagarin]’. It made clear, however, that the ‘respect and consideration’ devoted to the cosmonaut was related to his roles as a ‘military pilot and scientist’. The release concluded by stating that his feat would be ‘forever etched in the history of mankind’ and that his name would be in a ‘place of honour at the obelisk of modern world heroes’⁴⁴.

The perception that an important part of Brazilians was impressed by the USSR’s scientific achievements was shared by the political advisor of the U.S. Embassy in Brasília. In January 1962, following the resumption of diplomatic relations between Brazil and the USSR in November – already with João Goulart as president – this diplomat stressed that the scientific achievements of the USSR “deeply impressed Brazilian youth” and that even the most conservative Brazilians were also impressed by some economic records of the socialist superpower. In a message to the State Department, he suggested “more and better dramatization” of the U.S. technical-scientific and military achievements and the beginning of “impact projects in key areas such as the Northeast,” so as to nurture “hopes [...] for democratic (i.e., U.S.) solutions.”⁴⁵

Brazilians’ interest in Soviet modernization would be evident during the Soviet Industrial Exhibition held in Rio de Janeiro in May 1962. Khrushchev sent a message on the occasion of the inauguration.⁴⁶ The event was the largest of its kind that the socialist superpower held throughout the year (Blasier 1989). More than 500,000 people attended the fair where models of *Sputnik-1*, *Vostok-1* and *Vostok-2* capsules were shown (Rupprecht 2011). Governor Lacerda welcomed the Soviets mentioning the ‘extraordinary demonstrations of scientific and technical capacity’ that deserved ‘all the respect’ of Brazilians⁴⁷ (Lacerda 1963).

This did not mean, however, that most Brazilians liked or even had a positive view of the USSR. Using survey results from the United States Information Agency (USIA) in Brazil, Loureiro et al. (2015) assert that only 12% of all respondents had a positive impression of the USSR in 1962. Interestingly, the figure remained at 12 percent the following year, according to a survey conducted by the *New York Times* (Rupprecht 2011). This persistence initially suggests that the role played by the USSR in the Cuban Missile Crisis had no major impact on Brazilian public opinion.

However, it is clear from the USIA survey that the rejection of Fidel Castro was substantially higher than of the USSR in 1962 (approximately 70% against 55%) (Loureiro et al. 2015). The governments of Cuba and the USSR had different approaches on how to support the spread of socialism throughout the globe. Since the late 1950s, the Soviet Union had advocated the adoption of a broad leftwing front in peripheral countries to gain power in democratic fashion, while Cuba and China supported revolution. This Soviet guideline somehow indirectly brought

⁴⁴ “Explicações sobre a medalha a Gagarin” (1961, 6).

⁴⁵ NARA, RG 59, CDF (1960-63), 632.61/1-1562, box 1328, Despatch 566, Brasília-State, Confidential, “Brazilian Attitudes Toward Soviet Union and their Influence on U.S.-Brazil Relations”, Brasília, 15 January 1962, p. 2-4.

⁴⁶ “Saudação de Kruchev aos visitantes da exposição soviética” (1962, 5).

⁴⁷ For more on the Soviet Industrial Exhibition in Rio de Janeiro see Caterina (2019, 245-46).

Soviet endorsement to the Brazilian domestic *status quo* with the PCB in illegality and too weak to assume a leading role on the left political spectrum, despite its influence on key unions⁴⁸.

Even though the perception of the USSR in Brazil was still significantly negative when compared to the United States, Rupprecht (2011) correctly argues that there was an important interest in certain aspects of the Soviet Union coming from “crucial sectors” of Brazilian society (Rupprecht 2011, 515). An important part of the political elite, technical, and administrative bureaucracy were the main groups. For them, the country’s backwardness and underdevelopment could be overcome by scientific and technical progress.

Important evidence about this change in perception of the USSR in Brazil can be measured by the reactions to the awards given by Quadros to Gagarin and Guevara (Cuba’s minister of Industry) just eighteen days apart. The respectful reception given by Moss and the Santos Dumont quotation when presenting the title did not cause any reaction from domestic anti-communist groups, unlike the Guevara episode, in which the Minister of the Army, Odílio Denys, warned the president about unfavourable repercussions within the Force (Caterina 2019). Ironically, after Quadros’ resignation on August 25th, Denys, Moss and Heck (Navy Minister) released a “*Manifesto à Nação*” vetoing Labour vice-president Goulart’s return to power – after his Asian tour – questioning his ‘ideological tendencies’ and his ‘unbridled admiration’ for the Soviet and Chinese regimes⁴⁹.

Brazilian conservatives were the only ones allowed to publicly acknowledge Soviet scientific feats. The staunchly anti-Communist Lacerda would welcome the scientific progresses of the USSR at the opening of the Soviet Exhibition in 1962, but would prohibit a Solidarity Congress for Cuba the following year (Caterina 2019).

The Soviet space program continued to be presented as the “success story” of the superpower modernity in the subsequent years. In March 1963, President Goulart welcomed cosmonauts Nikolayev and Popovich to Brazil (Rupprecht 2015, 42-43). Even after the military took power in Brazil, President Castello Branco sent a message to Mikoyan congratulating the Soviets for Leonov’s first ever spacewalk in 1965⁵⁰.

Conclusion

There is an important link between the Soviet space program and the international representation of the socialist superpower after Stalin’s death, as a technologically advanced country capable of great scientific achievements. Gagarin’s flight in April 1961 was the highlight of this new self-representation effort. This new Soviet representation was a good match within the thinking

⁴⁸ For an assessment of the significant divisions within the international communist movement with important reflexes in the Brazilian left see Hershberg, Radchenko (2016, 87-90).

⁴⁹ “Manifesto assinado pelos ministros das Três Armas” (1961, 46). A parliamentary solution was adopted and Goulart took power as prime minister, with restricted powers, on September 7th, 1961.

⁵⁰ AHMRE, Moscou, 2307, Moscou-MRE, “Cópia de notas. Março de 1965”, Moscow, 6 April 1965.

of an important part of the Brazilian political elites, searching for an autonomous foreign policy, economic development, and rapid modernization.

The cosmonaut arrived in Brazil in July 1961 amidst domestic political turmoil. Quadros' difficulties with his own supporters at the National Congress and fierce opposition attacks kept him continually isolated. From the strict point of view of bilateral relations, however, the President played an important role in the rapprochement with the USSR. Despite his resignation in August, his actions eventually helped to re-establish diplomatic relations between Brazil and the USSR, in November 1961.

Regarding the visit *per se*, the cosmonaut was warmly received in Brazil. Evidence shows a perception change amongst certain political actors about the USSR. In Rio, Gagarin was welcomed as a guest of an influential politician with no sympathy for Soviet socialism. Top military leaders did not oppose the decoration of the cosmonaut. Minister Moss even prepared and delivered the commendation with honours comparing Gagarin's feat to Santos Dumont's first flight. Lacerda welcomed Gagarin and a year later, he would personally inaugurate the Soviet Exhibition in Rio acknowledging the USSR's technological achievements. These facts indicate a change of the Cold War domestic debate in Brazil. After Fidel Castro took power in 1959, Cuba turned out to be the main source of worries about the spread of communism in Brazil. The USSR was gradually becoming a *status quo* superpower and a significant part of Brazilian conservatives was fascinated by its modernization appeal. For this reason, among others, Brazil, even after the anti-Communist rupture in 1964, would maintain its ties with the USSR and, in certain areas, even sought to expand them.

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