Soviet Cosmonauts and American Astronauts in Yugoslavia

Who Did the Yugoslavs Love More?

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One of the major aspects of the Cold War was the space race in which the US and USSR had the same goal – to conquer space and to be the first to reach certain milestones in space exploration. The space race between the US and the USSR, which had started with the launching of Sputnik in 1957 and which continued with the founding of NASA in 1958, defined the 1960s. During the Cold War the moon became the goal of the rival superpowers, who wanted to prove their scientific, technical, ideological and political supremacy.1 Thus, the space race was not just a race, but a clash of ideologies, political systems and cultures. When the US astronauts planted the American flag on the surface of the moon in 1969 and stated ‘we came in peace for all mankind’, the leaders of the Soviet Union realized that they were not considered a part of ‘all mankind’ in this context.2 In a world that was divided into two different blocks, everyone knew who to favour – the Americans or Soviets. However, in the case of Yugoslavia, it was not that simple, at least at first glance.

To understand the specific Yugoslav position towards astronauts/cosmonauts, or America/the Soviet Union, it is important to understand Yugoslav foreign policy and its relations with the superpowers. After World War II, Yugoslavia became a Communist country and, initially, one of the Soviet satellites. In 1948, the USSR excommunicated Yugoslavia from the international communist community, and accused it of ideological and political deviation. Soviet military forces amassed on the Yugoslav border, threatening invasion.3 In that atmosphere, Yugoslavia started searching for ways to balance its unique position between the East and West. After the ‘historical NO’ in 1948 (as the split with the Soviets was understood in Yugoslavia), Yugoslavia became a unique socialist country, which was deeply devoted to Marxism, but to Western popular culture as well. Although it was one of the world’s largest recipients of American
military and economic aid, it regarded itself as a non-aligned country with a special position between East and West.4

In the 1960s, Yugoslavia, like much of the rest of the world, experienced various phenomena. It was a period of liberalization (more cultural than political) and modernization of everyday life, which led to dramatic changes in Yugoslavia between the 1950s and 1960s. From the harsh suppression in the initial post-war period to slow and then strong and open acceptance of Western trends, Yugoslavia created its own everyday life, moving dramatically from the popular Russian drink kvas, socialist realism and Soviet films, to Coca-Cola, American movies (even the famous Cold War movies Dr. Strangelove and The Russians Are Coming were shown in Yugoslavia in the 1960s), rock ‘n’ roll, jeans, American abstract expressionism and pop-art. The analysis of everyday life – models of behaviour, fashion, nicknames (Jack, Joe, Jimmy and Johnny were the most popular nicknames in the 1950s and 1960s) – show how the ‘Coca-Cola generation’ was created in Yugoslavia. In 1961, the first jukeboxes were installed in restaurants and clubs, playing the sounds of the twist and rock ‘n’ roll. Yugoslavs adored the movie Rebel without Cause; they cried when Marilyn Monroe died; they mourned when John Kennedy was assassinated; and they warmly welcomed the crew of Apollo 11 in Belgrade, only three months after their walk on the moon. In the same decade, Yugoslav factories launched the production of both Pepsi Cola and Coca-Cola.5

At the same time, the 1960s were a period of uncertainty in Yugoslav foreign and domestic policy (love–hate relationship with the USSR, ups and downs in Yugoslav–American relations, economic crisis and growing nationalism). Although Yugoslav–American relations were generally friendly after 1948 and the Yugoslav split with the Soviet Union, they were marked by increasing changes and tensions on both sides. They deteriorated after the Belgrade Conference of non-aligned countries in 1961, when Yugoslav president Josip Broz Tito failed to criticize the Soviet breach of the moratorium on nuclear testing. In such an atmosphere, the American Congress decided to withdraw the most-favoured nation tariff treatment to Yugoslavia. The Yugoslavs were trying to improve relations with the US, but at the same time they were normalizing relations with the Soviets (Brezhnev visited Yugoslavia in the autumn of 1962, and in December 1962 Tito visited Moscow for the first time since 1956). Tito then visited Kennedy in October 1963.6 Later, the Yugoslav role as the ‘mediator’ in the Near East conflict in 1967 and its fierce criticism of the Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia in 1968 created fertile ground for more solid relations with the US and the West at the end of the decade (see Figure 15.1).