
Siddiqi’s book is a must-read for anyone interested in the history of rocketry and space exploration, as well as for anyone interested in the workings of Soviet technology. Using material from the recently-opened archives, Siddiqi gives us a detailed look at the development of the Soviet space program from the amateur rocket groups which flourished in the twenties to the massive state-run operation of the 1960s and 1970s. From letters, diary entries, photographs, transcripts of the dialogue between the cosmonauts and the ground controllers, and frames from launch footage, Siddiqi takes us behind the hitherto closed doors of the design and manufacturing teams who built the early engines, as well as to the launches themselves. The triumph of Sputnik, the tension leading up to Gagarin’s flight, the horror of the Soyuz I crash which killed Vladimir Komarov, and the R-16 explosion which killed 127 technicians on the ground, are all described with a strong sense of immediacy. We sense the political pressure being exerted on the designers, often to the detriment of safety and sound engineering, to launch certain missions for reasons of international prestige.

Siddiqi gives us an intimate portrait not only of the machinery and technology, but also of the men and women who designed, built, and flew it. We see Gagarin change from the good-humored, affable cosmonaut he was prior to his flight as he succumbs to the pressures of fame, sinking into alcoholic excess, then restoring himself to flying sharpness, only to be killed in a training flight attempting to avoid a MIG-21 which had strayed into a restricted area.

Extensively indexed, and with more than 100 pages of tables, *Challenge to Apollo* is much more than the Soviet version of *The Right Stuff* (and every bit as thrilling to read). It is the extensive history of a large space program with its successes, failures and personalities.