
Reviewed by Rick W. Sturdevant


It might seem impossible that space historian Asif Siddiqi could surpass the amazingly high quality of scholarship exhibited in Challenge to Apollo: The Soviet Union and the Space Race, 1945–1974, for which he received this society’s Eugene M. Emme Astronautical Literature Award a decade ago. Yet, he has done it in The Red Rockets’ Glare: Spaceflight and the Soviet Imagination, 1857–1957. For a second outstanding contribution to the historical literature, he has received his second Emme.

As one might expect, the chronological overlap of a dozen years in these two narratives results in some factual repetition, but Siddiqi’s recent volume displays a more nuanced analysis of Soviet space activities between the end of World War II and launch of the world’s first artificial satellite. While Challenge to Apollo concentrated on shattering the myth of a monolithic Soviet space program by exposing the complex internal politics underlying postwar Soviet space technology innovation, The Red Rockets’ Glare delves deeper into the Soviet Union’s Russian past to find space technology development heavily intertwined with the course of both social and political history. Through exhaustive research and skillful analysis, Siddiqi highlights how a fairly widespread, abiding popular scientific interest in cosmic exploration; informal, local groups of star-struck rocket enthusiasts; and a few independent individuals with scientific expertise or engineering skills kept dreams alive and, ultimately, did more than the cumbersome, secretive Soviet bureaucracy to produce the successes of the late 1950s and 1960s.

Another Emme award winner, Howard McCurdy, showed in his 1997 book Space and the American Imagination how important key personalities generated public enthusiasm to help strengthen political support for an American space program. In The Red Rockets’ Glare, Asif Siddiqi does the same for the Soviet space program making it clear the latter really was a Russian program. Particularly instructive in this regard is his third chapter, titled “Imagining the Cosmos,” where he elaborates on the extraordinarily broad artistic scope and diversity of the Soviet “space fad” during the 1920s. By examining literature, films, and paintings from this period, he concludes, “Like their more ‘scientifically’ minded space enthusiast colleagues, the artists produced their populist work largely isolated from the elite Soviet scientific and technical intelligentsia” (p. 97). He probes the intellectual underpinnings of Russian technological utopianism and Cosmism to reveal a shared number of basic elements for societal transformation not in keeping with Soviet doctrine. “Through the decades after the 1930s,” he explains, “Soviet space advocates altered their strategies to fit the needs of practical science and industrialization” (p. 113), but even then, new popular science journals and the resurgence of science fiction in the 1950s fueled mass enthusiasm for space exploration.

While most students of Soviet space history know the roles played by key individuals, Konstantin Tsiolkovskii and Sergei Korolev being preeminent, The Red Rockets’ Glare casts each under a historical light more intense than previously used. Consequently, Siddiqi’s narrative imparts to each actor more complexity than in earlier histories. This results, at least partially, from Siddiqi’s access to formerly closed archives. One should not discount, however, his remarkable ability to dissect complicated historical patterns, thereby magnifying fundamental relationships among individuals or informal groups. His skill in this regard becomes quite apparent in Chapter 6, which casts a revealing spotlight on how German rocket expertise and hardware from World War II influenced postwar Soviet rocketry.

After digging further than his predecessors into primary sources, both manuscript and printed, Siddiqi concludes, “The accepted notion that Soviet science was essentially state science merits rethinking” (p. 369). In the realm of pre-Sputnik Soviet rocket science, The Red Rockets’ Glare unquestionably dispels that notion. It replaces the image of a formal state program with one of informal networks and influential foreign factors.

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