

2. An Uneasy Invitation

In July 1961, a 27 year old Soviet air force Major, Yuri Alekseyevich Gagarin, arrived in the UK. He was still the only person to have been in Earth orbit. He had flown higher (327 km) and faster (27400 km/h) than anyone before him. He saw the Earth in its entirety, experienced strong, hot sunlight undiluted by the Earth's atmosphere, glimpsed with his naked eye the brightness of stars against the blackest sky whilst subjected to an extended sensation of weightlessness. For many who saw him in London and Manchester, this was a rare encounter. He was a representative of humanity testing a completely new environment from which he could not have been certain of a safe return.

The uneasy friendship between the allies (Britain, Soviet Union, France and the United States) during World War Two evaporated into the Cold War, in some respects even before the War had ended. The Berlin blockade between 1948 and 1949 was the first major dispute, and another was brewing at the time of Gagarin's first visit to the west in 1961. The Soviets in pursuit of their political ideology built a wall around West Berlin, initiating a political stalemate that would endure for almost three decades.

Neil Armstrong, Buzz Aldrin and Michael Collins' world tour after their momentous landing on the Moon in July 1969 was to follow in the footsteps of Gagarin's hectic world tour following his historic space flight on 12th April 1961. Between late April and early August 1961, Gagarin visited ten countries, and a week after his UK visit, Gagarin was in Poland and Cuba. When Gherman Titov took off on Vostok 2 (the second Soviet manned space flight) on August 6th 1961, Gagarin was in

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Canada and headed back to the USSR to be at Red Square for the celebrations on Titov's return.¹ His first trip, at the request of the Czechoslovakian president, was to Prague on 28th April 1961.² That invitation had come from the head of state, but a formal invitation from the UK was problematic in several respects. The Soviets would exploit the visit purely as a propaganda opportunity, it would be incongruous given their almost belligerent behaviour over Berlin, and it would be embarrassing for Britain's American allies.

Communist Party of Great Britain

During the 1960s Communism had a stronger presence within British politics than it has today, and like all other protagonists it intended to exploit the cosmonaut's visit for its own interests. The Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) had been founded in 1920 by the merger of several organisations considered as socialist, Marxist or left wing. Individuals from the Labour Party, members of the "Hands off Russia" campaign, shop stewards and workers' committees and even an elected MP, Cecil L'Estrange Malone from the British Socialist Party, came together to form the CPGB. In January 1921, the CPGB was refounded after the memberships of Suffragist Sylvia Pankhurst's group and the Scottish Communist Labour Party and others agreed to join.

Declassified papers from the Foreign Office (FO), today known as the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), reveal the political considerations behind the reluctance by Her Majesty's Government (HMG) to extend Gagarin a formal invitation. When, or even if, he would actually come to Britain remained uncertain as both governments attempted to secure their own political interests. The declassified papers reveal for the first time the ad-hoc, last-minute arrangements that shaped the

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cosmonaut's first visit to Western Europe. During a visit to London on June 30th, Boris Borisov, the Soviet deputy leader for Foreign Trade, stated that Gagarin will "*probably be at the Trade Fair in London in July*".³ Only a week before his arrival, Soviet officials were still denying that Gagarin would visit the UK,⁴ and then suddenly on July 7th, the day the Prime Minister opened the Soviet Trade Fair at Earl's Court, it was announced that a diplomatic visa for Gagarin to visit the UK had been granted. This was the first indication to the Amalgamated Union of Foundry Workers that the invitation that Gagarin had accepted in May to visit them in their union headquarters in Manchester would actually happen.

Once an announcement was made that his UK visit would proceed, additional invitations from within the UK came from industry, trade unions, businesses, and engineering and scientific institutions. A diplomatic confirmation recorded in Foreign Office memo came from the Soviet Embassy. He would arrive on July 11th with four companions and stay for "*two or three days*".⁵

The Soviet government juggled with the prioritisation, propaganda and sheer logistics, but ultimately there were many more invitations than could have been practically accepted for the envisaged length of the visit. Initially, the confirmation of Gagarin's intention to visit the UK stated that he planned to stay for three days.⁶ During the four days between the issuing of his visa and his arrival at Heathrow he received an invitation from the Prime Minister and so his visit was extended to four days. On his first day in the UK, the 11th July, when he was attending the Trade Fair in Earl's Court, Gagarin received a formal invitation to Buckingham Palace for Friday 14th. So, yet another day was added to his stay in the UK, extending it to five days. These extensions enabled him to accept additional invitations, but amongst those he was unable to accommodate was one to

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Jodrell Bank. He would have personally liked to have visited the radio telescope that had contributed to the Soviet space programme but his itinerary could not accommodate it.⁷

Accordingly, during his five days in Britain the itinerary evolved with many of the visits being offered, changed, and agreed at very short notice. He started and ended each day of his visit at the Soviet Embassy in Kensington.

Soviet Trade

The Soviets' desire to link Gagarin's visit with the Soviet Trade Fair in London in Earl's Court between 7th and 29th July 1961 limited the dates Gagarin could choose for the visit to Britain. Summer 1961 was a time of global political and military unrest, one of the colder phases of the Cold War. Three months earlier the Americans' failed invasion of Cuba at the Bay of Pigs had undermined the credibility of the recently elected President Kennedy. Three months later a disagreement over West Berlin within the erstwhile allies had led to the building of the Berlin Wall. The mutual ban on nuclear testing agreed between the USA and the USSR in October 1958 ended on September 5th 1961 when first the USSR and then the USA resumed nuclear testing. The number and yield of bombs tested introduced a potential for destruction the world never before experienced. These circumstances conspired to set in motion the events leading to one of the most dangerous stand-offs in the twentieth century, the Cuban Missile Crisis in late 1962. At the time of Gagarin's visit, the severe east-west political anxiety and the high likelihood of military action was however not fully appreciated by a wider public, as this, now declassified, Foreign Office memo warned:

“If, as I think, the Soviet Government are anxious that Major

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Gagarin should receive an official invitation to visit the U.K., we should consider what their motive might be. They are well aware that he would be given a hero's welcome and would be feted up and down the country. The first man into space and the personification of Soviet achievements in the field of rockets and ballistic missiles is a young man with a frank and engaging personality. The Soviet Government might well calculate that his appearance in this country at a moment when the issue of Germany and Berlin is moving steadily towards a crisis and when HMG. and allied governments are seeking an answer to the question of whether they are prepared in the last resort to face nuclear war over Berlin, would incline public opinion in this country towards accepting the view that the Soviet case in regard to Germany and Berlin is reasonable and that although the Soviet Government clearly have the capacity to launch nuclear devastation, they have no intention of doing so.”⁸

In the same memo R. H. Mason (head of the Northern department) goes on to report that he had been informed by Mr Yarotsky, Counsellor of the Soviet Embassy, that “*Gagarin had received invitations from over fifty individuals and organisations in this country including the mayor of Newcastle, several trades unions and British Interplanetary Society.*”

Consequently, by June 1961, although willing to welcome him, HMG was unwilling to offer a formal invitation for Gagarin to visit the UK. An invitation is exactly what the Soviets were seeking. An official invitation from Britain would highlight the relatively weak achievements in space by the US, although astronaut Alan Shepard had by then successfully completed America's first sub-orbital spaceflight. A report in the Soviet newspaper *Izvestia* on 19th June 1961 would potentially resolve this quandary. In that report, Sir Fitzroy MacLean, president of the GB-USSR Association, had sent an open invitation for Gagarin to visit the UK whenever he liked and stay as long as

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he liked. The report published details of this invitation, which had been made in conjunction with two other societies associated with Russia - the British Soviet Friendship Society (BSFS) and the Society for Cultural Relations between the British Commonwealth and the USSR (frequently abbreviated to SCR). The BSFS and SCR were considered merely as “*communist front organisations*”⁹ with dubious affiliations and were cast as “strange bedfellows”¹⁰ or “undesirable groups”¹¹ in the Foreign Office papers. In contrast, the GB-USSR Association was a HMG sponsored organisation, and although it had made the invitation prior to consultation with HMG, this indirect invitation obviated the requirement for HMG to instigate an official HMG invitation.

The UK Commonwealth and Foreign Office had funded the GB-USSR Association with a remit to foster contact and dialogue between GB and the then countries of the Soviet Union, which thus formed an ideal group to invite Gagarin under apparently non-political auspices. At its peak, it had a membership of around 1500 members, many of whom were senior politicians and academics. Between 1970 and 1977, the former Prime Minister Harold Macmillan would serve as its president. Following the break-up of the Soviet Union, it was reformed as a non-governmental organisation called The Britain-Russia & British East-West Centres. It restructured again in 2002 with a more manageable name as the GB-Russia Society.

Another invitation had come from an unusual source, and on equally unusual reasons would ultimately fail. Victor Hochhouser and his wife Lillian had been (and still are) involved with promoting artists from around the world to visit the UK. From the early 1960s onwards, their impressive lists include the Bolshoi and Mariinsky (formerly Kirov) opera and

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ballet companies, musicians including the Borodin Quartet and Emil Gilels. They also supported major international companies such as the Guangdong Acrobatic Troupe of China, Paco Peña and his Flamenco Dance Company, the National Ballet of China, San Francisco Ballet and the Spanish Riding School of Vienna. This could have been a non-political platform for Gagarin's invitation, but ultimately politics intervened.

Whilst in Leningrad in April 1961, organising the Leningrad Kirov Ballet for a four-week season in Covent Garden, Hochhouser had invited Gagarin to the UK for the opening performance in June. Convinced by the positive response he went public with his claim that "*Gagarin may come to London on "first night" of the Leningrad Kirov Ballet performance*".¹²

On June 17th the Leningrad Kirov Ballet troupe were leaving Le Bourget Airport at the end of a three-week tour in France to start a four-week season in London. The principal dancer, Rudolf Nureyev, however, chose that moment to seek political asylum. The Soviets did not want Gagarin to be associated with a high profile defection. The Leningrad Kirov Ballet troupe continued their journey to London without their principal dancer, and Hochhouser's efforts to bring the cosmonaut to Britain were wrecked.

Hochhouser's press coverage had led HMG to pre-empt the potentially awkward situation of how the UK might honour Major Gagarin if he were to visit the UK.¹³ The Under Secretary for the Foreign Office Sir Fredrick Hoyer Millar confidentially wrote on 21st April 1961 to the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors (RICS) encouraging them that they, as a private organisation, should consider honouring Gagarin.¹⁴ The RICS had honoured explorers like Edmund Hillary who climbed Everest 1953 and Vivian Fuchs who made the first

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overland crossing of Antarctica in 1958. By keeping Gagarin's diary full with invitations from organisations of which HMG approved, there was less likelihood of Gagarin accepting invitations from "less desirable" groups. A record of the RICS' response is not available in the archives and there is no evidence of Gagarin actually visiting the institute during his five days in the UK.

A British Trade exhibition in Moscow in May 1961, where a meeting between Khrushchev and HMG representatives was inevitable, would have been an ideal moment to extend a formal HMG invitation for Gagarin to visit the UK. The British Trade and Industrial Exhibition in Moscow included a variety of British technical and medical instruments, toys with movable limbs, the latest British fashion, a model of the new BOAC airliner and a model hovercraft. The Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev visited the British Trade and Industrial Exhibition in Moscow accompanied by Reginald Maudling. At the Associated Electrical Industries (AEI) Limited stand Khrushchev met Gilbert Jolly, a Russian-speaking director of exports at AEI Metropolitan Vickers. Jolly would in due course personally welcome Gagarin during his visit to AEI Metropolitan Vickers in Trafford Park during an overcast lunchtime on Wednesday 12th July.

The question of HMG extending such a formal invitation for Gagarin to visit the UK was addressed within a parliamentary question on 27th April from Norman Pentland MP for Chester-Le-Street. He broached the topic by asking "*the President of the Board of Trade whether, on the occasion of his visit to the British Trade Fair in Moscow next month he will extend an official invitation to Major Yuri Gagarin to visit Great Britain*".¹⁵ The president of the Board of Trade responded with "*I understand that an invitation is being offered. I do not think we should butt in, but certainly everybody will be delighted if*

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such an invitation is extended and accepted", skilfully steering away from commenting on the awkward issue of an official government invitation.¹⁶

Throughout May and June, political and diplomatic, mostly unofficial, exchanges referenced indirectly in the Foreign Office papers illustrate the Soviets' eagerness for an official invitation and HMG's reluctance to offer one.

On 7th July, at the start of the Soviet Trade Fair, the Soviets blinked and announced that Gagarin would come to the UK, formally responding to the invitation from the organisers of the Trade Fair. Gagarin officially accepted the invitation from the managing director of Industrial Trade Fairs limited, Mr V.G. Sherren, the company that had organised the Soviet Trade Fair in London. Despite the absence of a formal HMG invitation, the Soviets had perhaps concluded that the propaganda value was substantial enough for the visit to proceed. A formal invitation from HMG was never made.

Throughout his visit, Gagarin would be accompanied by Lieutenant-General Nikolai Kamanin who as the military chief was the head of the cosmonaut training programme, and who would chaperone his new global superstar and provide the necessary security and political guidance. As Gagarin did not speak English, his translator for the duration of his visit was Boris Belitzky. Other members of his team included Nicolay Denisov, his biographer, and since this was an official UK visit, the Soviet ambassador Alexander Soldatov would be present for formal events.

A notable absence from Gagarin's entourage was his wife. On March 7th 1961, Gagarin's wife Valentina had given birth to their second daughter. On later trips Valentina would travel with

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him, but in July she was still at home nursing their five month old daughter Galina.

Lieutenant-General Nikolai Kamanin was a Soviet pilot hero in his own right. He was one of seven pilots who had rescued the one hundred and eleven crew members of the steamship SS Chelyuskin during a hazardous expedition to determine the possibility of travelling by non-icebreaker through the Northern Maritime Route. Although reinforced, SS Chelyuskin was not an icebreaker, and its perilous journey ended when the ship succumbed to the ice fields in September 1933 and drifted for months. Eventually crushed by the icepacks near Kolyuchin Island, it sank. The crew escaped onto the ice and survived in makeshift shelters through the harsh arctic winter. In February 1934, a series of aircraft landed on a primitive landing strip which the crew made with shovels and had to remake several times. Seven pilots using three different aircraft rescued all one hundred and eleven crew; Kamanin was one of the seven pilots flying a two-seater Polycarp R-5 biplane.

For this he was awarded the title “Hero of the Soviet Union”, an award established in April 1934, just in time for these pilots. “Hero of the Soviet Union” was awarded for outstanding feats of distinction in the service of the Soviet state personally or collectively within a group. By the time the USSR ceased to exist on 31st December 1991, 12,745 awards of “Hero of the Soviet Union” had been awarded. Kamanin’s was the sixth. Following his spaceflight Gagarin was also awarded one: his was number 11,175. All flown cosmonauts during the early days of the Soviet space programme received one too. Kamanin went on to win further awards for his combat missions during World War Two in the Soviet Union, Hungary and Romania. His son Arkady at the age of fifteen was the youngest pilot serving in the Soviet air force during the Second World War, winning the Order of the Red Star and Order of the Red Banner, but he died

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in 1947.

As the Director of Cosmonaut Training, Kamanin had been instrumental in selecting Gagarin as the first cosmonaut and would remain in charge through all the triumphs and tragedies of the cosmonaut programme until 1972. He was a man of undisputed courage, a strict disciplinarian and an effective manager with a complex personality. He was described as “*an aging war hero*”, an “*authoritarian space tsar*”¹⁷ and a “*complete Stalinist bastard*”.¹⁸ He would accompany Gagarin to virtually all of his engagements including those in Manchester, the meeting with the Prime Minister and to Buckingham Palace.

Boris Belitzky, a well respected and experienced member of the English department of Radio Moscow, was in London already to cover the Soviet Trade Fair at Earl’s Court, which officially had opened on 7th July for three weeks. It was after Belitzky had arrived and started his preparation for the coverage of the trade fair that he received instructions from the Soviet Embassy in London that he would be Gagarin's interpreter throughout Gagarin's visit in Great Britain.¹⁹ Belitzky as the sole translator accompanied Gagarin through his UK visit and turned his attention to the Soviet Trade Fair only after Gagarin had returned to Moscow.

Belitzky was an experienced journalist and presented a popular programme on radio called “Science and Engineering” on *Voice of Russia*. Not only did he have an excellent command of English but he also had an exquisite voice, which he developed over fifty years as a journalist. Without a hint of an accent, he could easily have been mistaken for an announcer on the BBC. The previous year he had been asked to translate for the high profile trial of Gary Powers, a US air force pilot of a secret high altitude surveillance aircraft that had come down in USSR

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territory during a high-altitude spying mission. Powers' trial in Moscow was a particularly embarrassing episode for the US President Eisenhower and Vice President Nixon, who was quoted to be having a "*nervous fit*"²⁰ because US public opinion considered US foreign policy to be on trial rather than the captured pilot.

Belitzky would be present at all the receptions, including the one at Buckingham Palace. Despite being surrounded by food and drinks at the numerous daily lunches, receptions and dinners throughout the five days, he as the translator would not always have the opportunity to eat and would occasionally go hungry. The ad-hoc, sometimes chaotic, decisions in the end resulted in an entourage comprising a team of Soviets that would successfully extol the values of the Communist party in the heart of Europe.

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- 3 Guardian 30th June 1961.
- 4 Guardian 8th July 1961.
- 5 Mason, R.H.: Foreign Office Papers 371-159606, 7th July 1961, National Records Archive.
- 6 Guardian 11th July 1961.
- 7 Daily Telegraph 13th July 1961.
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- 10 James, C.: Foreign Office Papers 371-159606, 21st June 1961, National Records Archive.
- 11 Mason, R.H.: Foreign Office Papers 371-159605, 1st May 1961, National

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- 13 Thomas, D.: Foreign Office Papers 371-159606, 5th May 1961, National Records Archive.
- 14 Millar, F.: Foreign Office Papers 371-159605, 21st April 1961, National Records Archive.
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- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Oberg, J.E.: Red Star in Orbit, 1981, p. 97.
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