

# Starman: The Truth behind the Legend of Yuri Gagarin

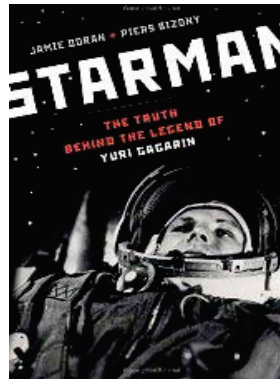
Reviewed by Roger D. Launius

*Starman: The Truth behind the Legend of Yuri Gagarin*, by Jamie Doran and Piers Bizony. New York: Walker and Company, 2011. 256 pages. ISBN: 978-0802779502. \$16.00 (paperback).

Let me see if I've got this right. According to authors Jamie Doran and Piers Bizony, Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin, the first human to fly into space, died in mysterious circumstances. He crashed during a training flight in an underpowered MiG-15 along with his instructor on March 1968. His colleague, Vladimir Komarov, also apparently died mysteriously later in 1968, even though the details of that Soyuz 1 accident have been understood for decades. That he died cursing the program's leaders who sent him on his space mission over the radio as he crashed to his death should not be surprising to anyone.

These are two of the key incidents presumably elucidated in this new biography, *Starman: The Truth behind the Legend of Yuri Gagarin*, which the authors claim is based on newly available sources. In reality, it is based on a 1999 Bizony and Doran biography of Gagarin that had its own difficulties, adding to that a few additional sources and outlandish stories. The most important of those sources is the testimony of two witnesses unavailable in 1999: a KGB operative named Venyanmin Russayev, and the American Winslow Peck (aka Perry Fellwock), who claimed to have worked for the U.S. National Security Agency near Istanbul in the 1960s. Collectively, this version of the Gagarin biography reveals an individual facing powerful political and emotional pressures, a private life in ruins, and depression fueled by alcoholism. That might be fine, but *Starman* goes much farther and outruns credible sources in the process.

Most controversially, the authors assert that Gagarin's death was no accident but a "political elimination," an assertion that has not stood up to scrutiny even as it has elicited a broad debate in cyberspace. Weaving together a narrative based on basic materials long available, as well as comments from cosmonaut Aleksei Leonov, engineering



professor Sergei Belotserkovsky, and former KGB agent Nikolai Rubkin, Doran and Bizony present a conspiracy theory on how the world's first individual in space died in an aircraft crash while in a training mission. The suggestion that this was a political assassination is a remarkably thin explanation of what remains a sad mystery. There has been a cottage industry for many years in spinning wild conspiracy theories about Gagarin's death. To their credit, the authors avoid the most hyperbolic theories that have been floating around even as they propound a theory of his death that moves from accident to murder.

Most of the book, of course, is not in this category. The sections dealing with the early life and career of Yuri Gagarin – his birth and education, air force career, and flight into space – follow closely the long-established Soviet narrative of his experiences, along with some additional interviews and post-Soviet documentation. It essentially extends and deepens the story as we have long understood it, rather than revises it. I was struck, however, by the number of small errors in this section – such as placing Oleg Gazenko at the head of the Institute of Bio-medical Problems in 1960 when he did not take over there until 1969 – that also make me question other issues raised in this biography.

The authors also repeat the now familiar story of Gagarin's Vostok 1 and the problems that took place on the mission, even though these difficulties were covered up during the Soviet era. Since the end of the Cold

War, increasing amounts of information have confirmed what some analysts believed all along—that Gagarin's flight had nearly been a disaster when the capsule spun dangerously out of control while beginning the re-entry sequence. Gagarin told officials during a post-flight debriefing, "As soon as the braking rocket shut off, there was a sharp jolt, and the craft began to rotate around its axis at a very high velocity." It spun uncontrollably as the equipment module failed to separate from the cosmonaut's capsule. After ten minutes the spacecraft stabilized somewhat from its dizzying spin. Nevertheless, Gagarin ejected from the capsule and parachuted safely to Earth while the capsule came down elsewhere, dangling from its own chutes. To ensure the official record as the first human into orbit, the Soviet Union suppressed this information for some thirty years.

Overall Jamie Doran and Piers Bizony have written a flawed biography of Yuri Gagarin. It relies too extensively on a few interviews that counter the preponderance of reliable documentation available from other sources. It repeats broad and highly suspect assertions about Gagarin and the nature of the Soviet human spaceflight program. As journalists they seem more interested in telling an engaging story than in carefully evaluating sources. The repetition of a spectacular story, it appears, was more important than verisimilitude. Accordingly, I cannot recommend this book. Instead, I am looking forward to the biography of Gagarin written by Russian historian Andrew Jenks of California State University, Long Beach, that is forthcoming from Northern Illinois University Press. It promises the most in-depth research into the subject yet undertaken as well as an erudite analysis by a seasoned historian of the Soviet Union.

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