An enquiry question:

Using the case study of the space race, is it possible for historians to escape the ideology of their era?

“When we attempt to answer the question what is history? Our answer consciously or unconsciously, reflects our own position in time, and forms part of our answer to the broader question what view we take of the society in which we live.”¹

E. H Carr – Historian

“The race between our two countries for superiority in space was intense…For those in the Kremlin and in Washington space was a fierce battleground in technology and also ideology…I was there to prove what human beings are capable of” ²

Alexei Leonov - Russian cosmonaut

“Do you want us to win this race? Do you want to live in a free society? Or do you want us to live under communism?…The bottom line was our profound belief that we had to demonstrate democracy was a better system under which to live” ³

David Scott - NASA astronaut

The debate about the true meaning of history is a sometimes difficult and controversial question to answer. This leads to a number of historiographical issues related to a person’s background and their views on the world. A historian’s background is influenced predominantly by their ideological beliefs which have been influenced by their education, era, class and gender. As a result, a number of views have emerged which have had major influences on the aforementioned debate ‘what is history’. These range from history as absolute truth through to


Alexei Leonov - Russian cosmonaut, page 107

David Scott - NASA astronaut page 241
postmodernist thought which advocates the ambiguous nature of historical interpretation. Given the era in which this project is being written it is difficult to avoid the ideals and features of postmodernist thought. From a postmodernist perspective it seems difficult for historians to escape the ideology of their era. The Space Race that occurred between the Capitalist ideology of the USA (United States of America) and the Communist ideology of the USSR (United Socialist Soviet Republic) in the midst of the politically driven Cold War era from 1957-1969, highlights many of the issues involved in this debate. The historians involved in this event and who have subsequently written about it have been influenced by postmodernist thought. Who are the historians? Examples of people who have written reflectively since the time include John Lewis Gaddis\(^5\), Deborah Cadbury\(^6\), Asif A Siddiqi\(^7\), Jeffery Kluger (in conjunction with James Lovell), Homer Hickam\(^8\) and James Hansen (with the co-operation of Neil Armstrong). All these are historians who have held a long term interest in the events of the space race, many of them who were children or teenagers at the time, and have written accounts influenced by their capitalist ideologies. Likewise Alexei Leonov,\(^9\) one of the few Soviets to write about his

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\(^4\) Cold War era 1957-1969: Despite the fact the cold war started soon after the Second World War and continued until the collapse of the Soviet economy in 1991, for the purpose of this project and the historical context of the space race, these years were chosen due to the fact that Sputnik I was launched in October of 1957. This triggered the beginning of the space race. For the next twelve years the space race was on in earnest between the USA and the USSR to constantly outdo each other and get to the moon first, which occurred on July 20, 1969.


\(^6\) Cadbury, Deborah, *The Space Race*, Fourth Estate, London 2005. Deborah Cadbury’s text “Space Race” has researched the history of the two designers behind the American and Soviet space programs in Von Braun and Korolev. She has focused on the technology and the genuine ‘race’ to space.

\(^7\) Siddiqi, Asif A, *Sputnik and the Soviet Space Challenge*, University Press, Florida 2003 and *The Soviet Space Race With Apollo*, University Press, Florida 2003. Asif Siddiqi was officially commissioned by NASA to document the Soviet space program and he has produced texts on the technological aspect and events from a Soviet perspective. Siddiqi had unprecedented access to Soviet sources and this has helped him publish his 2 books showing the Soviet side of the story. For example he published technical drawings, and information about the launch pad disaster that had been covered up for three decades. This pad disaster occurred on the night of October 24\(^{th}\) 1960 at the Soviet launching facility in Kazakhstan USSR.


In his book Homer Hickam has written about his experiences growing up in a mining town during the Cold War and the impact the space race had on his life. He ended up working for NASA.


Alexander Leonov was a Russian cosmonaut chosen for the Soviet space program in the first group of cosmonauts in 1960 along with such luminaries as Yuri Gagarin. He is best remembered for being the first man to walk in space in 1965 and later flew in the Apollo-Soyuz joint project in 1975. Slated to be the first Russian on the moon, Leonov was denied this opportunity owing to poor design of the space craft. History remembers him as one of the most successful and popular astronauts to be part of the cosmonaut corps.
experiences, is writing from the perspective of a communist ideology. These authors will be referred to collectively as space historians.

Many people from this era have also released memoirs and other personal papers, which have helped historians understand this era of history. These include the NASA\(^\text{10}\) astronauts and officials.\(^\text{11}\) This is in direct contrast to the Soviet Union where only cosmonaut Alexei Leonov has published a text about his experiences. Since the Soviet government adopted the Glasnost\(^\text{12}\) policy in the late 1980’s a handful of designers and engineers have spoken about their memories of Sergei Korolev, the driving force behind the Soviet’s push for space. The highest profile of these being Vasily Mishin\(^\text{13}\), his deputy who did several media interviews in the 1990s.\(^\text{14}\)

To understand how ideology influences historians it is important to understand the concept of Postmodernistic thought. The original concept was an architectural term coined in the 1960’s used to describe an alternative view of thinking. It eventually found its way into academic circles, where it is generally accepted as the school of thought up into the present.\(^\text{15}\) Some examples of historians who have had a major influence on historical postmodernism include Hayden White\(^\text{16}\) and E.H. Carr, which in turn influenced the space historians. Some characteristics of postmodern historical writing include the belief there is no absolute truth, greater use of evidence and the ability to accept new ideas. A postmodernist’s view on history is both abstract and objective. As a school of thought postmodernism has different characteristics from any previous historical techniques, and has a major influence in the modern world. Another example of a school of thought in direct contrast to post modernism is that of viewing history

\(^{10}\) NASA (National Aeronautics and Space Administration) was formed in 1958, partly in response to the Soviet Union’s launch of Sputnik.

\(^{11}\) The astronauts include Neil Armstrong, James Lovell, Michael Collins, David Scott, John Glenn, Alan Bean, Wally Schirra, Gene Cernan, Pete Conrad and Deke Slayton. NASA flight directors Chris Kraft and Gene Kranz have also documented their experiences at NASA.

\(^{12}\) Glasnost was an “open door” policy that allowed an exchange of information and gave historians access to sources from a Soviet Union perspective. Following this policy our view on some history has changed because of revelations made as a result of these new sources. A good example is Blight and Welch’s access to Soviet sources for their 1998 book “Intelligence and the Cuban Missile Crisis”.

\(^{13}\) Vasily Mishin was a Soviet rocket scientist and one of the first Soviet specialists to see Nazi Germany’s V-2 facilities at the end of World War II. He worked with Sergei Korolev and later took over the running of the program after Korolev’s death.

\(^{14}\) Cadbury op cit page 344

\(^{15}\) Dos Santos-Lee, Maria, *What is history, Postmodernism and the point of it all?* (March 2001 Article)

\(^{16}\) Hayden White is an historian in the tradition of literary criticism, most famous for his work *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (1973). He asked that historians become “linguistic skeptics”, and that they question their use of language.
only from a political and military viewpoint. Generally speaking this viewpoint is about absolute truth. This type of historical thought can be traced back to Ancient Historians such as Thucydides.\textsuperscript{17} Today it is very difficult for modern historians, and indeed people of generation Y, to see the past through anything but postmodernist eyes.

The following quote by Carr gives us an insight into postmodernist ideas. “The past is intelligible to us only in the light of the present, and we can only understand the present in the light of the past...”\textsuperscript{18} Interestingly enough this quote was written in 1961, during the space age and at the time of the emergence of postmodernism. Already we can see this school of thought emerging. Despite being born in 1892 and educated in England at the time of the British Empire, Carr has written reflecting the ideology of his times. This quote and idea could be perceived as radical at the time, but has become accepted in today’s society.

Does this mean it is impossible to write an unbiased account of history? Everyone is influenced by the ideologies of their time, historians, academics, politicians, ordinary citizens. For example a whole generation of Americans grew up writing from capitalist ideology creating a stereotypical view of the “red under the bed”. Even Herodotus,\textsuperscript{19} regarded as the father of modern western history, wrote from the ideology of his world in creating a stereotypical view of the “evil Persians”. This is the true ambiguity of history. History as a collection of facts is not all that difficult to understand. As Carr argued, “when Ranke in the 1830’s, in legitimate protest against moralising history, remarked that the task of the historian was ‘simply to show how it really was’, this...had an astonishing success”\textsuperscript{20} But these facts need to be interpreted to be given meaning. To fully understand and appreciate history we need to understand the ideology of the times, the school of thought behind those events that influence those who interpret them as history. History is about interpretation, analysing and evaluating sources and is constantly changing to reflect the ideology of the time. In the case of the space race, it was the beginnings of the postmodernist era and the clash of two ideologies. Given these conditions the historians

\textsuperscript{17} Thucydides (460 BCE –395 BCE) was an ancient Greek historian, and the author of the History of the Peloponnesian War, which recounts the 5th century BC war between Sparta and Athens to the year 411 BCE. He is considered by many to be a scientific historian because of his efforts in his History to describe the human world in terms of cause and effect.

\textsuperscript{18} E.H. Carr. op cit page 55

\textsuperscript{19} Herodotus (484-430BCE) Author of “The Histories”(An account of the Persian invasion of Ancient Greece). He was among the first to approach the reporting of history in a logical way and he tried to separate true events from myth and made a point of identifying and commenting on his sources.

\textsuperscript{20} Carr op cit page 8-9
writing about the space race have struggled to truly escape the ideology and propaganda\textsuperscript{21} of this era.

To fully understand the impact of the space race and the historiographical issues behind the ideology of both the USA and USSR we need to have an understanding of the Cold War era which is at the core of this project. Historically, tensions between the USA and USSR began at the end of the Second World War. The two were allies in both World War One and World War Two. The bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki shifted the balance of power in the world. The nuclear age had begun and politicians around the world realised the potential this “terror weapon” could have.\textsuperscript{22} Cold War historian John Lewis Gaddis had an interesting viewpoint on the ideology of the Cold War era, and this is evident in this excerpt from an interview he gave in 1989.

“The irony in all of this, of course, is that the international system that has existed as a product of the Cold War for the last four and a half decades has been the most stable and the most durable, at least at the level of the great powers, of any in modern history, exceeding even the classical period after the Napoleonic Wars. This is why I’ve come to calling it the “long peace,” that we need to think of the Cold War as a long peace, because historically it has been that. Its very ironic that this should emerge out of what appeared to be a highly dangerous confrontation, but the fact is, it has. And the fact is, it worked better than the system that was so carefully designed at the end of World War I and the Versailles Conference, which lasted only half as long\textsuperscript{23}

Western Historians who have since written about the events of the space race grew up in a world where communism and socialist attitudes were genuinely feared. The space race of the

\textsuperscript{21} While studying advertisements and visual media from the time, we can see propaganda emerge. We can see in news reports how the USA view themselves - “Why haven’t we caught up” “the greatest nation on earth”. The media has always been a spin machine, creating and shaping the ideology of a country. Phrases such as “technologically superior”, “Americans did not want to lose” “astronauts were heroes” are recurring themes in most texts about the space race.

\textsuperscript{22} Germans were indirectly responsible for the development of the space age with the V2 Rocket demonstrating its ability on London in 1940, shattering the city. Despite being on the same side, both the Americans and the Soviets attempted to track down the chief designer of the V2 project, Wernher von Braun, who eventually surrendered to the Americans in 1945. The Soviets, not to be outdone, offered substantial cash rewards and benefits to any German engineer who was willing to work in Moscow.

\textsuperscript{23} John Lewis Gaddis interview May 8th 1989, taken from the website http://globetrotter.berkeley.edu/conversations/Gaddis/gaddis-con3.html
60’s occurred during a period of “limbo”. The ideology of the conservative 1950’s was still dominant and the term postmodernism had yet to be coined. This is reflected in their writing about the event, try as they might they are unable to escape the ideology of their times.

When analysing historians work it is important to be mindful of the political and social environment of both the year the work is published, and the year the historical event occurs in. Questions that can be asked include is there a need for this particular type of work? Why now? What was happening in the world at the time of the event, and the time the text was written?

Asif Siddiqui’s two books were published in 2000, after fifteen years of painstaking research. That means he began work on those books in the late 1980’s early 1990’s when the Cold War was ending and Glasnost allowed him access to the sources. James Hansen’s biography of Neil Armstrong was published in 2005 and this was because Neil Armstrong felt it “was time” to tell his life’s story. The 1990’s saw an unprecedented amount of interest in the space race and there are several reasons for this. Many of the people involved in the original program wanted to tell their story and as they are now retired they feel the time is right to tell their story. With the end of the Cold War people wanted to hear the story from the other side, which meant there was an opportunity in the market for such a book. This highlights the fact that commercial interests can have an impact on history. In the 1980’s when Ronald Reagan was in power, he poured into the American psyche the same enthusiasm and attitude he brought to the screen. He believed in the potential of America and also believed he could end the Cold War single handedly. Your view on Reagan depended on your political viewpoint but he did make Gorbachev “think about the importance of a peaceful world.”

History tends to be written from the “winners” perspective. Historians of the space race see the USA winning because they got to the moon first. It does make it difficult to hear sources from the other side, and thus making it even harder to escape the ideology of your times.

Armstrong felt it was time to tell his story because of his age and he also felt it was a story that needed to be told. He was giving his view on what has become regarded as one of the most important events in history.

25 Ronald Reagan (former Actor) was the 40th President of the United States from 1981-89. He was known as a staunch conservative, a cheery optimist, and an implacable foe of Soviet communism.

26 Mikhail Sergeyevich Gorbachev - Russian; General Secretary of the CPSU 1985 – 1991 Gorbachev’s reforms revolved around the restructuring (perestroika) of the economy and increased freedom of expression (glasnost) in political and cultural affairs. In December 1991 he resigned as President when the Soviet Union was voted out of existence by the representatives of its constituent republics. In 1992 Gorbachev was expelled from the CPSU for causing the collapse of the USSR.

27 John Lewis Gaddis op cit pages 230-36
To see how our interpretation of history can be influenced by the discovery of new sources we can examine sources from the time and compare them to the knowledge that historians such as Siddiqi can access today. The secrecy demanded by the Cold War ensured that public knowledge of the Soviet space program was very limited. Information was censored by the government so that historians were exposed to propaganda designed to highlight how successful Communism could be. For example, the Australian magazine “Everybody’s” ran a twelve page special on space in 1966, and one of its lines was “The Americans then showed they were right on Russia’s heels…”28. They were creating the impression of a race and celebrating the capitalist ideals of America’s program which would be accepted by its readers. As a primary source for postmodernist historians it functions as a glimpse into a simpler history of limited facts and support for ideological viewpoints.29

Telling their story was an opportunity David Scott30 and Alexei Leonov capitalised on in 2004. A joint text written in collaboration with the “enemy” was unthinkable in the pre-Glasnost days especially during the time their careers occurred.31 Another reason could be the quest for space has never failed to fascinate. The space race was symbolic of the human spirit to explore. Yuri Gagarin32 has been called “the Columbus of the cosmos”.33 The image of rockets firing into the sky, with men strapped in as willing passengers always endures in the mind. A renewed interest in space in the 1990’s and continuing on in these early years of the 21st century has created the environment for historians to write about this fascinating event. It is perhaps environmentally that space has created new answers, as humans systematically destroy the earth, possible new planets are being identified, and medical experiments are being tested in space.

28 Everybody’s Magazine. 16/2/1966. “The Story of Space” page 34

29 Ibid. Throughout the “12 page lift out special”, the special article, which was highlighted on the cover, speaks of such instances as John Glenn’s first successful US orbit of earth as “heralding the reality of the Buck Rogers era”, thus linking American progress and ideology with science and popular culture. It was these links that helped create the environment future historians would grow up in.

30 David Scott was an American Astronaut who flew on Gemini 8, Apollo 9 and walked on the moon when he was Commander of Apollo 15.

31 David Scott openly acknowledges in his book “Two Sides Of The Moon” that he never dreamed he would write a book with a Russian cosmonaut. He first heard the name Leonov in 1965 during his historical first walk in space and met him during the Apollo/Soyuz test project.

32 Yuri Alekseyevich Gagarin was a Soviet Cosmonaut. On 12 April 1961, he became the first person in space and the first person to orbit the Earth. He died in a plane crash on the 27th March 1968. The details to the cause of this crash has remained a secret until revelations under Glasnost.

33 Media reports and Cadbury op cit
In terms of the Cold War and our historical understanding of the context from a Soviet perspective, Glasnost is arguably the most important policy which opened up a hidden world and dispelled the last remnants of a hidden ideology. Without Glasnost historians would never have got access to primary information from the Soviet side.

At the height of the Cold War during the Cuban Missile Crisis\(^34\) in October of 1962, it appeared very likely that we would have a nuclear war. We then saw two contrasting attitudes. The west presented capitalism as the most efficient social/economic system under which to live. The communists or ‘Reds’ were branded as people who were misled who would love nothing better than to destroy the freedom that America stood for. On the opposite side of the political spectrum the Soviet government claimed capitalism was at the heart of the world’s problems. Leonov recounts “at the time I genuinely believed the Soviet Union was the richest and most fortunate nation in the world. I took pity on the USA because they could not be as fortunate as us.”\(^35\) This is an example of differing ideology underpinning interpretation of the same event. This is what makes it very difficult to write an unbiased account of history. The only possible way to escape the ideology of the time is to allow the passing of time. This in itself poses problems as historians in the future will reflect on the events from the ideology of their present time.

The space race historians have attempted to write free of the biases and ideology of their countries, although this is not always possible. Of the historians it is Siddiqi who has best escaped the ideology of Capitalism, but even he is not completely free from bias as he has been commissioned by NASA for a specific purpose. In the 1980’s NASA realised they needed to have a “complete” archive of the space race if people were to renew their interest in space. They already had at their disposal the censored sources, memorabilia and other relics from the golden age of space which had been dispersed across the country. What they were missing is what makes history, the chronicling the other side of the story. Siddiqi at the request of NASA, spent sixteen years writing the history of the Soviet space race and was able to translate thousands of previously unseen primary sources into a chronological history of the space race. These documents opened up to the world many secrets of the communist era. Examples include a launch pad disaster during testing of missiles that killed over ninety of the top soviet

\(^34\) On 15 October, 1962, U.S. intelligence discovered Soviet strategic nuclear missile bases under construction in Cuba, leading to the most dramatic and dangerous crisis of the nuclear age. President John F. Kennedy demanded that the missiles be withdrawn and imposed a naval “quarantine” on shipments of “offensive” weapons to Cuba. Kennedy ordered a massive redeployment of U.S. forces to the Caribbean. Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev was furious at what he considered interference in Soviet – Cuban affairs and his violation of freedom of navigation.

\(^35\) Leonov op cit page 24
engineers and military officials and how close Alexei Leonov’s space walk came to disaster. They also revealed how the Soviet lunar program was never going to match America’s and the role that Sergei Korolev played in the pioneering days of the program.

The Cold war ended in 1991 and by this time the postmodernist school of thought was well entrenched into society. Historians agree that this approach to history arose in the 1970’s, when people started to question and once again value education. As historians reflecting on the events of the space race in 2007 we can see the events “through the eyes of our time.” In contemporary history courses we are taught to question. Postmodernists propose the major keywords of history when dealing with the space race what, where, when and why. Why being the most important concept of historical enquiry. These are the fundamental differences between historians of previous years and those of today who write with the influence of postmodernism. This approach to history is not unique to the space race, it can be applied to any field of history. However conflicting ideologies that underpinned the Cold War was a unique time in history, and can be directly linked to the events of the space race. Indeed Deborah Cadbury is quoted as saying “both Wernher von Braun and Sergei Korelov faced enormous pressure from their political masters to win one of the most fiercely contested battles of the Cold War”.

Using the case study of the space race it is possible to see how hard it is to define “what is history”. The ideology of the cold war era has made it almost impossible for historians to escape the ideology of their time. Post modernism recognises this fact, which is history is both ambiguous and clear, an ongoing paradox of our past, present and future.

Source: Liam Howitt

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36 This has been referred to as the Nedelin disaster and occurred on night of October 24th 1960
37 Sergei Korolev or the “Chief Designer” was the driving force behind the Soviet’s push for space but unknown to the West. Korolev’s identity was kept secret until his death in 1966 as the KGB feared the Americans would try to assassinate him.
38 Dos Santos-Lee, Maria, What is history, Postmodernism and the point of it all? (March 2001 Article)
39 Wernher von Braun was head designer of the German V2 rocket program under Hitler’s regime during the Second World War. He was a member of the SS party and surrendered to the Americans so he could continue on his dream of furthering the field of rocketry. He was resented by many of the public because of his Nazi past and is credited with designing the rocket that took the Americans to the moon.
40 Deborah Cadbury’s “Space Race” Pages 1-3 (prologue) is an interesting point of reference and one that needs to be stated… “As the two great superpowers, America and the Soviet Union, the race to the moon became a defining part of the struggle for global supremacy…the space race became an open contest between capitalism and communism. Victory was not just a matter of pride. National security and global stability were at stake.”