

Vostok, Gagarin, and the Origin (and Persistence) of the “False Baikonur”
Excerpt from Introduction to ‘Star-Crossed Orbits – Inside the US-Russian Space Alliance’, by James Oberg, McGraw-Hill, 2001 [adapted, April 2011].

Going through other people’s attics is one of life’s vicarious pleasures, considering the treasures you might stumble across. For me, going through Russian space attics is doubly so, because of the genuine treasures that you can stumble across and the intriguing new patterns that the new data points fall into. In the basement of an auction office in New York City in 1997, I gained a new appreciation for the scope of what had been an old, vague pattern.

As the Soviet Union racked up one “space first” after another in the 1960s, it also performed the bureaucratic duty of registering many of these firsts. The world body responsible for all flight records was the International Aviation Federation (FAI, from the organization’s name in French) in Paris. Registrations with the FAI took the form of bound, large-format descriptions of the events for which the claims were being made, with appropriate official signatures. One of the most frequent signers for the Soviet claims was Ivan Borisenko, titled “sports commissar.”

Just why he had been chosen I could never figure out. Maybe he owned the stop watch. In any case, a few decades after the Soviet-era glory came the post-Soviet cold and hunger. Struggling on with an inadequate pension, Borisenko produced his own personal archive of two dozen space record claim folders and offered them for sale in the West.

It was this set of handsomely bound documents that I was inspecting and authenticating for my host and paying client, Kaller’s America Gallery. We would catalog each one, and I would read it over in Russian to note the accuracy of its claims. One thing that I noted about the claims was the almost universal insistence that the launch site of these “space firsts,” Baykonur [more commonly but erroneously spelled ‘Baikonur’], was located at precisely 47°22’00’’ north, 65°29’00’’ east. Ever since the first American U-2 spy plane flew over Russia in 1956, however, the launch pad has been known to be at 45°55’13’’ north and 63°20’32’’ east. Foreign observers had always suspected that the error was deliberate, presumably to get the next U-2 spy planes to stray off course. Finally, in an incredibly rich collection of Russian space memoirs published in the same year as the auction, two former Soviet officials independently described how the falsehood originated. It was just as we suspected, but it’s the real inside story.

Vladimir Yastrebov, an expert in spacecraft tracking, wrote about his exact role in the deception: "I was personally involved in naming the Tyura-Tam launch site 'Baikonur' so as to disguise its true location. A few days after Gagarin's flight, my management sent me to one of the central administrations of the Ministry of Defense to meet with Col. Kerim A. Kerimov [the officer in charge of the cosmonaut program]. Together with a senior officer from his section called Alexei Maximov, I was asked to draw up the records of Gagarin's flight in terms of range and altitude for registration with the International Aviation Federation in Paris. Preparing the document was easy enough, but we

encountered a major hurdle when deciding how to identify the site from which the Vostok launch vehicle had lifted off. Since we were not allowed for security reasons to name Tyura-Tam, we studied the map and chose a ballistically plausible down-range alternative in the form of a small Kazakh settlement called Baikonur. And that is what the cosmodrome has been called ever since."

Reading further in the same book, Roads to Space, I found that Aleksandr (not Aleksey) Maksimov, an official of the Ministry of Defense responsible for space activities, had also contributed a memoir. He told much the same story, but slightly garbled with regard to the dates and organizations: "So where did the name Baikonur come from?" he wrote. "In accordance with an international treaty, we had to register our Aug. 21 [1957] ICBM launch with the United Nations, indicating the date, time, and place of launch.

"Since there were no spy satellites in orbit yet, nobody knew where the test range was situated, and we were not keen to divulge that information for security reasons. We therefore decided to indicate a site whose existence the Americans could verify. With their radars they were able to track the flight of our rocket and, by working backward, calculate the approximate location of the launch site. So we decided to give the Telegraph Agencies of the Soviet Union [TASS, the main news agency] and the United Nations the name of a place situated some 250 kilometers from Tyura-Tam. That place happened to be called Baikonur—and ostensibly that is where we have been launching from ever since."

Yastrebov's account is more accurate, since the Baykonur story was associated with the first manned flight aboard Vostok and with the 1961 FAI registration, not with the earlier missile test. But Maksimov's account is essentially corroborative regarding the motivation and the action itself.

So the official claims contained intentional falsehoods. I'd always presumed that the FAI had prohibitions and penalties for submitting knowingly false claims, and there can be no question but that these data were submitted in full knowledge that they were false. Nobody expected the Soviet Union to tell the truth, so we all became accustomed to swallowing lies. In recent years, however, Russia has wanted to become a normal country, to behave by internationally accepted norms, and to earn the trust of the world. Could standards be applied retroactively?

Sure enough, I found the FAI "Sporting Code" on the Internet. It has an entire section on "Complaints," and section 5.2 is entitled "Penalties and Disqualifications." Subsection 5.2.2.3 defines "Unsporting Behavior" this way: "Cheating or unsporting behavior, including deliberate attempts to deceive or mislead officials, falsification of documents, or repeated serious infringements of rules should, as a guide, result in disqualification from the sporting event."

There was no need to withdraw the flight records, since the Soviets really did perform the feats described. But I was hopeful that the false information could at least be expunged from the archives of the world body. I figured that the best way to do that was to have

some official ask the Russians to file a letter of amendment to the original claims.

It wasn't as easy as all that, I discovered. I located the U.S. association affiliated with the FAI, the National Aeronautic Association in Arlington, Virginia, and I proposed to them that the Russians be asked to correct the false information on their original records claims.

On November 21, 1997, association official Art Greenfield (the secretary of the Contests and Records Board) wrote back to me to politely explain why that wasn't going to happen. "I understand that you believe the Russians falsified the coordinates of the launch site of those flights in the record dossiers," he began, adding that since the association didn't have the dossiers on file at its office, he had no way of confirming this.

"Perhaps the Russians did attempt to mislead us about the takeoff location for reasons of national security," he conceded. However, since the actual flights are not in doubt, "we see no compelling reason to confront our Russian counterparts with allegations of wrongdoing dating back to the Cold War era." He concluded by saying that these days, both Russians and Americans "are actively involved" with work that "promotes public understanding and awareness of the importance of space flight," and furthermore, that "we hope that this cooperative effort will continue for as long as we explore space."

Max Bishop, the FAI secretary general in Paris, concurred. "No space records depend on the precise location of the launch site," he pointed out, quite correctly. "Therefore modifying the coordinates of Baikonur will in no way affect any FAI-approved performance. We do not intend to take any action."

Perhaps that's the proper perspective. After all, it is reasonable to question the importance of a 1961 fraud in 2001. That is, is there anybody out there who doesn't already know that the official Soviet location for the cosmodrome is false? Why bother with an official correction?

A compelling reason is that the original deception persists through sheer informational inertia. Even a cursory survey of existing cartographic products shows this. For example, recent world globes from Replogle (such as the World Horizon "Livingston Illuminated" globe) and a World News Map published by U.S. News and World Report show the town of Baykonur in its correct location. But I would argue that nobody looks up Baykonur out of interest in obscure coal-mining towns (in population and genuine importance, it's much too minor a spot to earn its own place on these maps). People look up Baykonur because they want to find out where the famous cosmodrome of the same name is located. If so, they are misled, since it is the erroneous assumption that the cosmodrome is located at the "false Baykonur."

So I play this game whenever I visit bookstores, and you can play too. Check out the latest world atlases to see if they have the cosmodrome at the correct location, on the Syr Darya River just east of the Aral Sea, or if they put "Baykonur" where the original and utterly unimportant town still is. Hammond's New Century World Atlas (1997) has the

false location, as does Webster's Concise World Atlas (1998). So does Rand McNally's Classic World Atlas (1996). The French mapmaker Gabelli issued a map of Asia in 1994, and it showed the false Baikonur.

Even more explicitly, the 1994 Oxford Encyclopedic World Atlas has a special updated section on the new post-Soviet geography. Its feature on Kazakhstan specifies the Baykonur Cosmodrome as one of the most important features of that new country. But the Baykonur shown on the actual map is the deceptive one. And in the Oxford Dictionary of the World, the definition of "Baikonur" on page 63 is, "a coal-mining town in Kazakhstan, n.e. of the Aral Sea. Nearby is the Baikonur Cosmodrome." Neither the Oxford atlas nor the other misleading products show anything at all near the Syr Darya River, where the cosmodrome and its support city of Leninsk are actually situated.

Some do get it right, such as National Geographic. Some list the old "Baikonur" but also have correctly located entries such as the "Space Launching Centre" or "Leninsk" (the city where the space workers live). But they obviously didn't rely on official FAI documents for their information.

Without making too big a deal out of a minor historical falsification, I've always figured that continuing to tolerate such deception is an insult to modern Russia. Isn't it just a condescending way of saying, "We know Russians are liars, so why bother to expect them to tell the truth?" If I were Russian, I would deeply resent such bigotry.

This isn't just ancient space history. The same attitude has persisted all the way into current times. Throughout my 2001 book 'Star-Crossed Orbits', there are many cases in which American officials talked themselves into tolerating Russian deception, since, after all, "they're only Russians" and we needed to get used to it. I argued there that we consequently reaped a frightful harvest from our carelessness towards truth.