

# The space race

Explore the contest between the USA and the USSR for supremacy in space between 1955 and 1972

### Why?

The space race had ideological overtones. The ultimate winner could claim that their political system (capitalism in the USA and communism in the USSR) was the most effective system in terms of technological and scientific accomplishment. There were also national security dimensions to the contest, since satellites carried not only scientific but also military instrumentation. Space-related technology gave an edge to nations that possessed it.

### How?

The basic technology of space launch rockets was derived from intercontinental ballistic missile rockets developed by Nazi Germany in the Second World War. The allies (the USA, the USSR and the UK) all captured parts of the German rocket technology: plans, data and engineering personnel. The USA captured Wernher von Braun, the technical director of the German ballistic missile programme.

### Kennedy and Khrushchev

After Yuri Gagarin's manned space flight in April 1961, public concern in the USA prompted President Kennedy to re-focus US investments in a way that would display American superiority. On 25 May 1961, Kennedy made a speech to Congress where he argued that the USA should 'commit itself to achieving the goal, before this decade is out, of landing a man on the Moon and returning him safely to the Earth'.

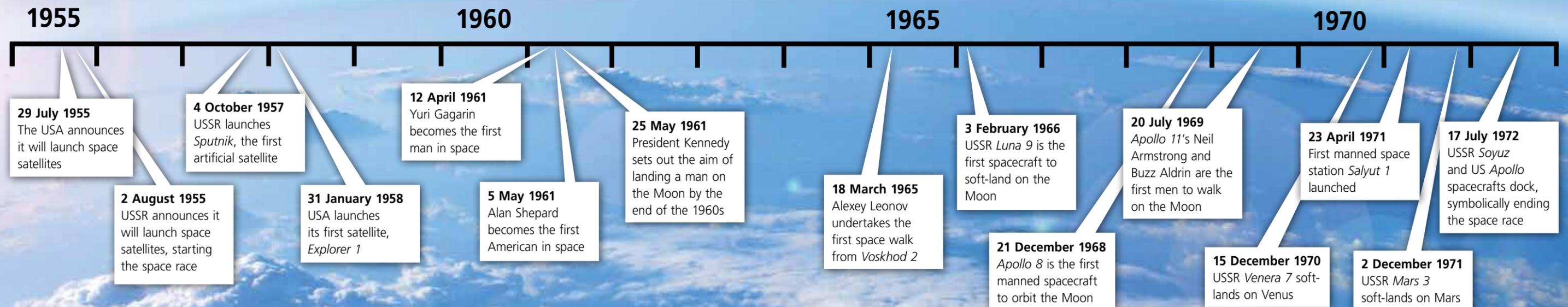
Given the immense cost of a space programme and the savings that could result from collaboration, President Kennedy proposed that USA and the USSR work together on their space activities during a speech at the UN General Assembly on 20 September 1963. Soviet premier Khrushchev initially did not agree and by the time he had had the time to reconsider, President Kennedy was dead. Collaboration between the two nations was delayed until 1972.

### Ending the race

Beginning in 1969, there was an easing of political tensions between the USA and the USSR, known as détente. In this context, in May 1972, US president Richard Nixon and Soviet premier Leonid Brezhnev decided that the two nations would collaborate on a joint mission, the docking of an *Apollo* and a *Soyuz* craft. This took place on 17 July 1972. The American and Soviet crews conducted joint experiments, visited each other's crafts and exchanged gifts. This collaboration marked the symbolic end to the space race.



'Long live the world's first female cosmonaut!' A Soviet poster from 1963, celebrating Valentina Tereshkova



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