

52nd IAA HISTORY OF ASTRONAUTICS SYMPOSIUM (E4)
"Can you believe they put a man on the moon?" (3B)

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THE BEGINNING OF THE SPACE AGE: WAS IT JUST A RACE? SPACE SCIENTISTS,
ADMINISTRATORS, DIPLOMATS AND SCIENTIFIC CONFERENCES BETWEEN 1958 AND 1970

Abstract

Generally speaking the period that saw the birth of the space age, with the soviet Sputnik in 1958, until at least mid-70s is regarded as a mere competition between the two super-powers. The continuation of the cold war with different means. Space was the additional dimension of the confrontation between US and URSS. There is, of course, a degree of truth in this reading of that period. For instance, space activities were used by each country to support their propaganda. A finer analysis of that period however shows a more articulated reality. Along with technical programmes also the institutional organisation of space activities came about from late '50s, both at national and international level. Following the establishment, in 1955 of the International Geophysical Year (IGY) for 1957-58, COSPAR, for instance, was created in 1958. These international fora allowed for platform where space scientists and representatives from national entities responsible for space activities would meet and discuss. Because of the international climate this was not without difficulty or frustration but it was, to some extent, a permanent thread, a communication channel and a basis where contact and exchanges could take place. The paper will give an account on how these exchanges between scientists, administrators and diplomats took place in the field of space activities in an attempt to add to the narrative of a race between to non-communicating rivals the dimension of communities of individuals that sought to explore ways to keep cooperation alive in the interest of science and peace. All this against a very tense international scenario. It will also briefly dwell on the reactions in the international scientific circles to the Moon landing and discuss how this played out for the continuation of cooperation. Furthermore the paper will try and bring to light the role and perspectives of space scientists from countries other than US and URSS in those years, in particular from Europe.