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WELCOMING YURI GAGARIN TO THE UNITED KINGDOM, JULY 1961: AN EXERCISE IN
GOVERNMENTAL DECISION-MAKING

Abstract

In July 1961 Yuri Gagarin, first human in space, visited the United Kingdom. It was his first international port of call outside the Eastern Bloc of communist countries. He was afforded a rapturous reception by the British public with thousands lining his routes on the way into London and in Manchester. His packed itinerary included meetings with Prime Minister Harold Macmillan and luncheon with the Queen. And yet his visit had asked awkward questions of Macmillan's government and its officials both in the nature of how Gagarin should be welcomed and by whom. This paper draws on official records to outline the choreography of this governmental decision-making process and how it had to balance political sensitivities at home as well as with its NATO partners abroad in planning for, and then defending the success of, Gagarin's visit.