ROCKLAND POST - UNBIASED AND ACCURATE NEWS AND INFORMATION

Were there 'lost cosmonauts' in the early Soviet space program?

BY: Micah Hanks

At the height of the Cold War, two amateur radio operators alleged they intercepted signals from Soviet cosmonauts who perished during missions that remained secret.



(Image credit: SSPL/Getty Images)

In the final weeks of 1960, two young radio enthusiasts were monitoring transmissions from a home-built listening station on a rooftop in Turin, Italy, when the brothers detected something extraordinary: a faint signal that bore the hallmarks of one originating from space. That wasn't the only surprising thing about the alleged signal:, the transmission carried a very familiar message: it was Morse code for the international distress signal SOS.

As the youths listened, the signal seemed to grow weaker. This raised a troubling possibility: could it be that the signal's source was moving farther away from Earth? And if so, was it possible that this concerning signal was of Soviet origin — perhaps a spacecraft drifting helplessly into space, carrying a cosmonaut on board whose doomed mission had never been publicly acknowledged?

These strange events from November 1960 became the first in a series of alleged radio signal interceptions that would form the basis of an enduring Cold War-era mystery involving so-called "lost cosmonauts" — early Soviet space travelers rumored to have died during secret spaceflight missions before Yuri Gagarin's historic flight the following spring, in April 1961.Today, more than six decades later, the story remains one of the most haunting legends of the Space Age. Were there truly early Soviet space missions — with tragically ill-fated cosmonaut crews — that remain undisclosed to this day?



Interception at Torre Bert

The peculiar story began in October 1957, as the Italian brothers Achille and Gian Battista Judica-Cordiglia learned, along with the rest of the world, about the Soviet Union's successful launch of Sputnik 1, Earth's first artificial satellite.

Immediately, the two became fascinated with the idea of trying to listen in on signals from such spacecraft and began working to assemble their very own radio tracking station, which they put together mostly from secondhand military surplus equipment. What they couldn't easily find and purchase, the brothers would often assemble themselves. They built an improvised tracking station in an abandoned World War Two bunker, which the brothers dubbed Torre Bert, that eventually became a fully functional radio facility with an antenna they built from salvaged materials like chicken wire and scraps of metal.

CHECK OUT THESE SPACE MYSTERIES



Did the Soviet Union really fire a cannon from a space station?



The Vela Incident: Did an American satellite detect a secret nuclear test in 1979?



What causes mysterious long delayed radio echoes in Earth's atmosphere?



The Judica-Cordiglia brothers, Achille (left) and Giovanni Battista (right). (Image credit: Public domain)

Whatever it lacked in aesthetics, the station made up for in functionality, and soon the brothers' amateur efforts reportedly allowed them to successfully intercept transmissions associated with Sputnik 2, the first Soviet spacecraft to carry a living creature into orbit: a dog named Laika, who became a one-way passenger on the mission. Later, the boys also said they were able to track transmissions from America's Explorer 1 satellite.

Some of what the Judica-Cordiglia brothers were able to achieve could be chalked up to being in the right place at the right time. Specifically, their location in northern Italy was advantageous, since it allowed them to monitor signals from Soviet spacecraft passing overhead.

A distress call from space

By late November 1960, the Judica-Cordiglia brothers learned of reports from a West German observatory suggesting there may have been an unidentified satellite in orbit, raising an intriguing possibility: could there have been a spacecraft launch that had not been disclosed to the public?

Intrigued, the brothers began spending their evenings at Torre Bert scanning the skies for radio frequencies in search of the alleged mystery object. Eventually, they claimed to have detected a signal that differed significantly from those they had tracked in the past. Unlike the familiar electronic beeps they had intercepted from other satellites, this transmission seemed unmistakable: it was Morse code for SOS.

According to their account, as the pair listened to the alarming transmission, the signal gradually began to fade, raising a disconcerting possibility: what if the spacecraft they were monitoring hadn't merely been traveling through orbit, but had been drifting away from Earth?



Soviet Communist Party artwork celebrating the first four Vostok missions, the first human spaceflights in history.
(Image credit: Pierce Archive LLC/Buyenlarge via Getty Images)

If correct, the implications were staggering: the Soviet Union may have launched a secret space mission, but this time with a human cosmonaut on board — and something had gone terribly wrong, ending with a spacecraft and its occupant becoming lost in space.

Significantly, the brothers appear to have reached this conclusion independently, and no verified evidence has ever surfaced establishing that the transmission they claimed to have intercepted originated from a crewed spacecraft, let alone one associated with an unacknowledged Soviet mission that somehow escaped Earth's gravitational influence, with tragic results.

Nonetheless, the brothers' claims would soon help give rise to a disturbing possibility: that there had been unknown "lost" cosmonauts who perished during missions that remained hidden from public knowledge.

Heartbeats and ghostly voices

The alleged distress signal was only the beginning of a series of unsubstantiated claims the Judica-Cordiglia brothers made, and by the first days of February 1961, the amateur radio sleuths would claim to have intercepted another odd signal. This time, the pair claimed to have heard labored breathing coming across the airwaves, and even what resembled the strained moans of a person aboard an orbiting spacecraft.

In an equally eerie recording the brothers produced, what sounded like a rapidly beating human heart could be heard. The brothers shared the recording with Italian cardiologist Achille Dogliotti, whose examination reportedly led him to conclude that the sounds were consistent with strained breathing and an elevated human heartbeat.

With time, more recordings would begin to appear, featuring transmissions the boys believed to be evidence of unsuccessful Soviet missions that preceded the successful spaceflight of Yuri Gagarin, whose 108-minute journey around Earth in 1961 made him the first human to travel into space.

However, what may be the brothers' most controversial claim involved a recording they believed captured the final moments of a female cosmonaut whose ill-fated journey allegedly occurred prior to the historic 1963 spaceflight of Valentina Tereshkova, the first woman to travel into space. However, experts have pointed out that these transmissions do not follow typical military communications prtocols, further casting doubt on their legitimacy.


Major Yuri Gagarin, the first human to fly into space.
(Image credit: Bettmann/Getty Images)

Alleged Soviet surveillance?

As the Judica-Cordiglia brothers' notoriety increased, journalists and curiosity-seekers weren't the only ones whose attention they reportedly began to attract; their activities also allegedly garnered interest from intelligence officials.

In one instance, the brothers claimed a man identifying himself as a Russian reporter had visited them. Shortly thereafter, another individual — this time claiming to be an Italian counterintelligence agent — warned them that the "journalist" who had come to see them was a KGB agent.

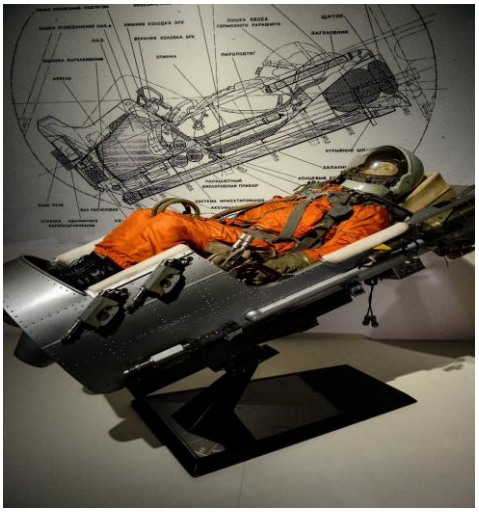
The Judica-Cordiglias and their unconventional hobby, it seemed, had now placed them in the crosshairs of Soviet intelligence officials.

An unusual twist in this part of the Italian brothers' story would eventually emerge decades later, when London-based journalist Kris Hollington began reinvestigating their claims for a feature story that appeared in the paranormal-focused magazine Fortean Times. According to Hollington, a former Soviet KGB operative who later served as a Russian ambassador to a European country had reportedly confirmed (on condition of anonymity) that Moscow was indeed interested in the Judica-Cordiglias and their claims.

"Our cosmonauts were warned to be careful what they said while in space after this and we had the brothers followed," the former KGB agent reportedly told Hollington.

Things could have ended tragically for the brothers if it were not for the fame they achieved at the time for their alleged radio interceptions. As the former KGB agent told Hollington, it was believed for a time that the brothers "had to be dealt with — an accident perhaps," although after they appeared on a television program that brought them significant attention, any Soviet plans that would have endangered the brothers became impractical.

"That saved their lives," the former KGB agent reportedly told Hollington, who expressed gratitude for the circumstances that may well have saved the Italian brothers, with the former agent confiding to Hollington that he thought "they were good kids."



The Vostok VZA ejection seat and SK-1 space suit, as used in the Soviet Union's first five Vostok missions in 1961, are displayed in London on Sept. 17, 2015. (Image credit: LEON NEAL/AFP via Getty Images)

Unanswered questions

Of course, the claims of alleged Soviet surveillance are difficult to verify given the anonymity requested by Hollington's source. The same must be said of many of the claims made by the Judica-Cordiglias — even if the brothers were successful in intercepting Soviet transmissions at the time, that alone does not prove that they uncovered evidence of unacknowledged missions during which cosmonauts may have perished.

Some, like spaceflight researcher Sven Grahn, have acknowledged the genuine tracking capabilities the brothers possessed while remaining skeptical of the more sensational "lost cosmonaut" claims, suggesting the brothers might have misinterpreted some of the transmissions they recorded.

"I think that the Judica-Cordiglia brothers did run a tracking station and picked up signals from various spacecraft," Grahn said in an assessment of the brothers and their claims. "However, for some reason they thought that they needed sensational stories [to] maintain their image of a 'hot-shot' operation," he adds. "Once they over-interpreted some receptions and made fantastic claims they were 'trapped' and had to continue to produce sensations."

There is also the possibility that the recordings were hoaxes, of course. Whatever the case, there are no independently verified launch records, authenticated communications, or other evidence from the period that provides additional support for what the brothers claimed to have intercepted.

Something that can be verified, however, is the Soviet Union's well-documented secrecy, adding a further layer of complication to matters. As space historian James Oberg has observed, there are verified instances in which Soviet officials altered photographs and records from the early years of human spaceflight, a fact that has perhaps helped fuel rumors about alleged missing cosmonauts. It is also known that the Soviet space program covered up several deadly disasters, such as a launch pad explosion on Oct. 24, 1960 that killed a high-ranking Soviet military officer and at least 100 others. At the time, Soviet state news outlets reported it as a plane crash.

No verified evidence has emerged to support claims of failed, unacknowledged Soviet crewed spaceflights of the kind described in the lost-cosmonaut legends. Yet the Judica-Cordiglia brothers' accounts have drawn attention for decades and remain among the strangest stories in the lore of the early Space Age — a fact that illustrates humanity's enduring fascination with Cold War mysteries and phenomena that exist beyond Earth.