



1965: Astérix Among the Stars

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► To cite this version:

Sebastian Grevsmühl. 1965: Astérix Among the Stars. Patrick Boucheron; Stéphane Gerson. France in the World: A New Global History, Other Press, pp.813-817, 2019, 978-1590519417. hal-02297032

HAL Id: hal-02297032

<https://hal.science/hal-02297032>

Submitted on 25 Sep 2019

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1965

Astérix Among the Stars

In 1965, the cartoon hero Astérix accomplished his fictional tour of Gaul and gave his name to the first French satellite for its inaugural orbit of the earth. The French press was ecstatic. Was the nation's global power about to be relaunched too? Amid the fanfare surrounding the launch, it was sometimes forgotten that the nation's space autonomy owed much to earlier international cooperation.

On November 26, 1965, France officially joined the elite of space powers. With the launch of *Astérix*, the first French satellite, from the military base of Hammaguir in Algeria, France became the third country after the Soviet Union (1957) and the United States (1958) to

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possess its own space agency, the National Center for Space Studies (CNES, created in 1962) and its own access to space beyond the world's atmosphere. This exploit was all the more astonishing in that, prior to the late 1950s, the country had barely engaged in space research at all.

Astérix showed that French technology was capable of tackling a completely new domain, and with a rapidity that beggared belief, by pioneering new methods of organizing scientific research and institutions that would coordinate that research. In purely technical terms, success was sealed by the development of a rocket capable of carrying payload into orbit. The launcher, called *Diamant-A*, was part of a program known as Pierres Précieuses (Precious Stones); it carried a satellite, *A-I*, which the public later came to know under the more telling name *Astérix*. It consisted of a small capsule weighing about ninety pounds whose principal role was to communicate back to Earth a variety of data concerning the launch itself. Even though this capsule soon stopped functioning, it turned France into a serious European competitor in the race for independent access to outer space.

For many years—and this is particularly true of human activity in space—historians have favored a binary interpretative approach that reduced the Cold War to a confrontation between the United States and the USSR. Yet despite the undeniable importance of these two principal world powers, the *Astérix* satellite and French space activity in general make clear that it would be wrong to discount the European nations in the field of space exploration. Viewed transnationally, globally, an intense circulation of techniques and individuals had existed for some time, along with extensive sharing and transmission of knowledge about space. The historian Asif Siddiqi, a specialist in space activities, has noted that, just as in the nuclear domain, "every nation involved [in the development of ballistic missiles and space technology] has been a proliferator and has taken advantage of proliferation."

Informal international space-research networks first took shape in Europe and the

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United States in the 1920s, while the development of ballistic missiles in Germany shortly afterward benefited greatly from exchanges of technology and knowledge with other countries. In the 1950s, German engineers and scientists who had contributed to the construction of wartime V-2 missiles were able to help with the space programs of the two superpowers, with France and the United Kingdom also gaining from their knowledge. Later, China and Japan took full advantage of the new technologies flowing out of the USSR and United States. Thus only ten years after *Astérix* reached orbit, all these countries had become members of the exclusive club of space powers. They were joined in the 1980s by India and Israel, who also relied on the support offered by Western Europe, the United States, and the Soviet Union.

Even so, the scale of transnational exchange should not blind us to the relevance of the nation itself as a basis for analysis. Technologies developed through space research played a vital role in the construction of a new national identity for postwar France. Indeed, the burgeoning space research sector in the late 1950s contributed to a broader venture: the modernization and reinvention of France as a dynamic, diplomatically and militarily autonomous technological power. There was an overriding military imperative to this impetus, embraced by de Gaulle after his election as president in 1958, as demonstrated by the production, in parallel with the development of space technologies, of new nuclear weapons as a means to project French power. France's participation in both the arms and the space races added political and symbolic clout to the country's advances in the postwar decades.

The *Diamant* launcher was the product of this uneasy relationship between military goals and civil applications. Although *Diamant* was a civil project, much of its technology came from the military domain, and more specifically the Pierres Précieuses program that France had put in place in the early 1960s. Persuaded that in the event of a new war it could not depend on the United States or the United Kingdom, de Gaulle's France sought to attain

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its strategic objectives by developing its own nuclear deterrent and its own independent capability to deliver nuclear warheads. When in 1961 de Gaulle gave the SEREB ballistic missile research consortium the green light to continue developing a launcher, French engineers had already successfully tested powder-propelled missiles using trial vehicles. By combining powder-propelled and liquid-propelled stages, they came up with the Saphir guided missile—which became the blueprint for the *Diamant* launcher that blasted *Astérix* into orbit.

Predictably, the French press celebrated *Astérix* as a feat of huge national importance. Yet France had been quietly engaged in a variety of cooperative scientific endeavors from the time of her earliest space forays, beginning with a research program known as the International Geophysical Year (1957–1958). One early French satellite rode on a NASA launcher. Ever since its own creation in 1958, NASA had routinely invited other nations to participate in the conquest of space; France (like several other European nations) had welcomed the opportunity to send engineers and scientists to the United States, where they were able to acquire new knowledge and learn how to orchestrate complex technical projects. All this contributed to the establishment of a common language for the field of space activities on both sides of the Atlantic.

Within Europe, too, thanks to the initiatives of influential scientists like Edoardo Amaldi and Pierre Auger, in the early 1960s efforts in the domain of space research and exploration began to be shared and coordinated. France took part in the creation of the European Space Research Organization (ESRO), which was founded in 1962 in the spirit of the European Organization for Nuclear Research (CERN) in Geneva, in order to pool the European resources dedicated to the development of scientific experiments and satellites for space. The much more sensitive question of a European launcher, which was explicitly excluded from ESRO, was entrusted to another European consortium set up in March 1962

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under the name of the European Launcher Development Organization (ELDO). France pledged to build one of the three stages of this launcher, which was named *Europa*. Even though ESRO had many difficulties and ELDO was ultimately a failure, this dual approach made it possible for France to take the lead in the domain of European space research, notably by militating in favor of a European space agency in the mid-1970s. This brought the two sectors of innovation and research—launchers and satellites—together under a single umbrella organization.

All this stemmed from the original *Astérix*, a modest technological advance that remains to this day the historic symbol of France’s entry into the vast area of space politics and activities, to which it has made significant contributions ever since the 1950s.

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