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ASTRONAUTICS

Russia Hits Moon

A successful strike on the moon has been achieved by Russian Scientists in what they describe as an interplanetary victory that will lead to international cooperation in space.

NOW THAT the moon has been hit by a missile from the earth, scientists are worried about possible contamination of the moon by viruses and bacteria from the earth.

If the Russians did not sterilize effectively the inside of their moon rocket before firing it, mankind may never know whether the moon, prior to the Russian hit, had viruses upon it as dormant molecules.

International Negotiations

Last year when serious plans for hitting the moon were being made by both United States and Soviet scientists, there were negotiations between the Soviet and U. S. scientists to prevent importation upon the moon of biological material from earth. (SNL, May 24, 1958, p. 323). The Soviet scientists are reported to have taken the precaution of having their space instruments sterile, just as instruments in a hospital operating room are germ-free. U. S. scientists hope that this was done, for the sake of future scientific studies.

The friction of the air would make the outside skin of the rocket missile sterile but the inside should have been fumigated prior to launching.

The moon is lifeless, scientists are quite sure, unless there are viruses there surviving from a time when the moon may have been part of the earth and therefore in contact with possible life in the early stages of the solar system several billions of years ago.

Contaminating the Moon

If the Soviet missile did dirty the moon, it may never be known for sure whether this was the case.

Another fear of scientists, that the first rocket to the moon would set off a gigantic explosion of powerful lunar chemicals, seems to have been disproved by the lunar missile landing. (SNL, July 12, 1958, p. 22.)

It was considered that the otherwise barren surface of the moon is coated with a highly reactive cosmic "dust" consisting in large part of unstable free chemical radicals, frozen out of action against the moon's extremely cold surface. A foreign substance might trigger these unfinished compounds into violent reaction, particularly if the substance were organic, like rubber or plastics.

Cosmic Explosion

That a major explosion did not occur from the impact of the Soviet rocket does not necessarily disprove this theory as the suitable triggering kind of earthly chemicals may not have been in the missile. Later reports may even indicate that there was more effect from the landing of the rocket than could have been caused by the impact alone.

Details currently available as this issue of the SCIENCE NEWS LETTER went to press are the following:

Size and shape: 854.8 pound sphere.

Time of moon hit: 5:02:24 p.m. EDT, Sunday, Sept. 13. The Russians are said to have placed the USSR emblem of the hammer and sickle on the moon's surface.

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