

## Close encounters of a fabricated kind

The worldwide publicity that followed a spectacular Russian UFO posed a problem for Moscow officials. They could not admit it was a spy satellite, but neither do they officially believe in UFOs

**James Oberg**

A well documented "UFO encounter" occurred over north-western Russia before dawn on 20 September, 1977. Residents of the city of Petrozavodsk were terrified to observe, hovering above them, a glowing object that looked like a giant jellyfish; the strange apparition was also seen in the skies over Leningrad and Helsinki.

This frightening event resulted, however, from a mundane enough event—the launch of the Kosmos-955 spy satellite from the secret Soviet "Northern Cosmodrome" near Plesetsk. The base, which began operation in 1966 and accounts for more than half of the world's satellite launchings, has never been officially acknowledged by Moscow. And the real story of the "UFO that never was" has received remarkably little attention.

The true identification of the "jellyfish UFO" (as it came to be called in the Western press) took only a few hours, and was subsequently publicised widely. However, these reports were not circulated inside the USSR, where the encounter had excited tremendous popular interest. Through the embellishments of Soviet amateur UFO buffs, the "jellyfish UFO" story quietly germinated and then burst forth anew in the spring of 1978 in the *National Enquirer*, a popular American newspaper. By the following year, it was firmly enshrined in popular UFO mythology.

For the Soviet government, meanwhile, the case had become an acute embarrassment. However hostile the official propaganda apparatus may be to UFOs, an authentic explanation of the "Petrozavodsk phenomenon" (as it was neutrally known in official Soviet circles) was unthinkable, as the Plesetsk rocket centre was, and still is, a military secret. Consequently Soviet scientists (who are probably well aware of the activities of the Northern Cosmodrome) were obliged to issue a series of lame "explanations" that have been quite ineffective. The impasse seems inescapable as the tale continues to spread inside and outside the Soviet Union: it could well be the most electrifying UFO story ever whispered about inside the USSR.

The earliest published account of the Petrozavodsk phenomenon was written by a Tass correspondent called Nikolay Milov. "On 20 September at about 0400, a huge star suddenly flared up in the dark sky, impulsively sending shafts of light to the Earth," wrote the correspondent in an article headlined "Unusual natural phenomenon observed in Karelia." Milov continued:

"This star moved slowly towards Petrozavodsk and, spreading out over it in the form of a jellyfish, hung there, showering the city with a multitude of very fine rays which created an image of pouring rain. After some time the luminescent rays ceased. The jellyfish turned into a bright semicircle and resumed its movement in the direction of Lake Onega . . . A semicircular pool of bright light, red in the middle and white at the sides, then formed in this shroud. This phenomenon lasted 10 to 12 minutes."

When this report eventually reached Moscow two days



How the residents of Petrozavodsk saw the notorious UFO (left). But other, similarly bizarre, pictures have perfectly rational explanations—witness (below) the "jellyfish" effect caused by a routine Soyuz rocket launch in 1973



later, the Tass international wire editor evidently did not associate it with anything in his thick book of "don't tells", so the story went out that afternoon over both domestic and foreign news lines. Western correspondents quickly dubbed the object a UFO. It was reported as such in a United Press International story from Moscow, which also quoted reports about the event from Helsinki.

On 23 September, 1977, the report appeared in American newspapers under such headlines as "UFO sighted over north-west Russia: similar object observed in Finland." But based on my personal observations of night-time rocket shots and on my familiarity with Soviet space flight operations, I immediately suspected a Plesetsk launching. A quick telephone

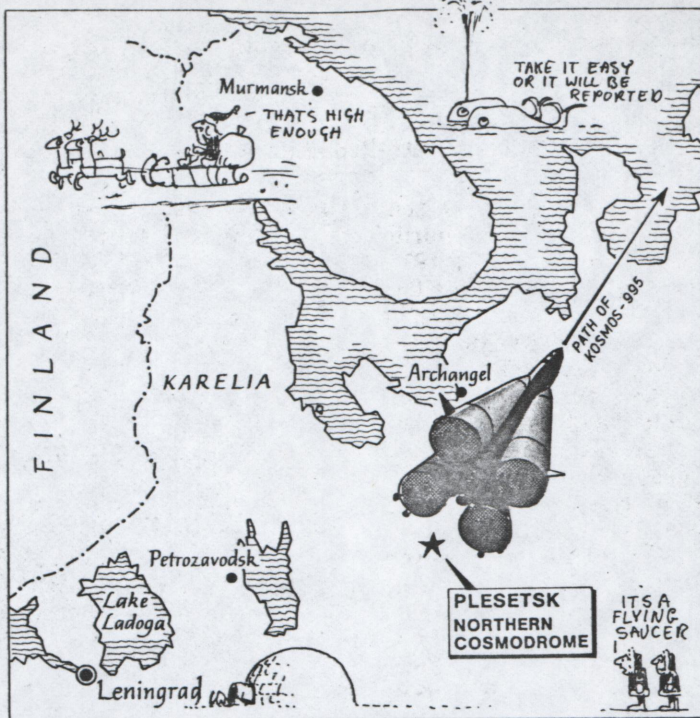
call to the satellite tracking information centre at NASA's Goddard Space Flight Center in Maryland confirmed that a satellite had been lofted into a particularly high orbit from Plesetsk on the morning of 20 September; computations based on detailed tracking data supplied to NASA by the North American Air Defense Command showed that the launch had been at approximately 3:58 am local time.

By 27 September, a UFO research group in the US issued a press release identifying the "jellyfish UFO" with the Kosmos-955 launch. Investigators at the Center for UFO Studies in Evanston, Illinois, had formed similar suspicions and were happy to receive confirmation from my own calculations; on 30 September, a United Press International story from Chicago reported the essence of this explanation.

The story dropped out of the international UFO literature almost as soon as it had sprung up, but it was received very differently inside Russia. There, ardent UFO amateurs began collecting eyewitness accounts and second-hand and third-hand stories of the events that happened that morning in Petrozavodsk. When two American newsmen called on a few of their contacts in the Russian UFO movement the following March, they were presented with incredible tales. The report they eventually filed appeared under this awe-inspiring headline: "The first UFO to inflict damage on a city."

As described by William Dick and Henry Gris in the *National Enquirer* (18 April, 1978), the UFO's rays had drilled holes in paving stones and through windows; as all of this evidence had been taken away by the KGB, there weren't any actual samples to see. A group of longshoremen thought it was an American nuclear attack and screamed, "This is the end!" A doctor reported that his ambulance went out of control when the UFO appeared. The air reportedly smelled of ozone.

All of Russia's leading "UFO experts" endorsed the UFO nature of the encounter, according to Dick and Gris. Aleksandr Kazantsev, famous for his ideas about "ancient astronauts" visiting the Earth, announced that "as far as I am concerned it was a spaceship from outer



The 1977 "UFO" took off from the secret Plesetsk cosmodrome; (above) how it appeared to frightened observers

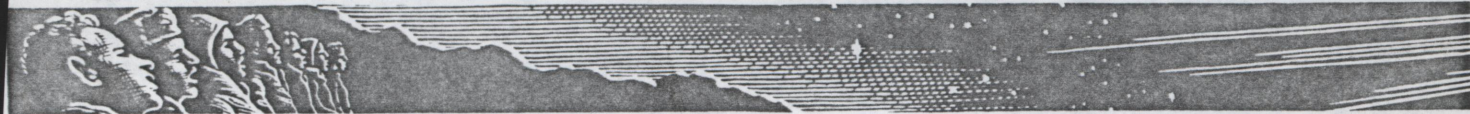
space, carrying out reconnaissance." Vladimir Azhazha, who was recently quoted widely as claiming that Apollo 11 was shadowed by UFOs on the Moon, asserted, "In my opinion what was seen over Petrozavodsk was either a UFO, a carrier of high intelligence with crew and passengers, or it was a field of energy created by a UFO."

The official Soviet reaction to this groundswell of popular interest (bordering on hysteria at times) was to trot out a series of scientists to assure the public that all was well. Vladimir Krat, director of the Pulkovo Observatory, told reporters on 23 September that "at present it is still difficult to explain its origin with complete certainty," but by 12 October he was telling the world that "the phenomenon was probably a rocket stage burning up. The visibility depends on the materials of the sputnik. Sputniks can explode on re-entry sometimes and the products of the explosion can remain in the air for a long time."

When it became clear that this failed to convince anyone, a new explanation was cranked out. In mid-August, 1978, an "M. Dmitriyev, doctor of chemical sciences", published a report in a monthly magazine called *Aviation and Cosmonautics* to the effect that the cloud was a "chemoluminescence zone" enhanced by nitrous oxide pollution from the factories in Petrozavodsk.

Evidently hoping to gain in quantity what was lacking in quality, Soviet press officials issued yet another "explanation" in January 1979, when Dr V. V. Migulin, recently tagged as the Academy of Science's UFO contact man, attributed the phenomenon to "physical changes in the upper atmosphere," probably geomagnetic in origin. Writing in the July-August issue of the French magazine *La Recherche*, Migulin further explained how a shower of solar electrons had been channelled into the upper atmosphere at this point by a magnetic storm.

Such reports cannot shake the ironclad identification of the original phenomenon with the rocket launching, as the times and the details of the best descriptions tally too exactly with the launching for coincidence. The



embellishments of these reports, however, can be useful in gauging the reliability of similar reports of other UFO encounters. This experience confirms the observations of astronomer Frank Drake, whose paper "On the abilities and limitations of witnesses" appeared in 1972. Drake wrote,

"A witness's memory of such exotic events . . . fades very quickly. After one day, about half of the reports are clearly erroneous; after two days, about three-quarters are clearly erroneous; after four days only 10 per cent are good; after five days, people report more imagination than truth. It became clear that later they were reconstructing in their imagination an event based on some dim memory of what happened. This is something that the UFO investigator rarely appreciates."

### Storm in a flying saucer

According to Drake, this "garble factor" will destroy the effectiveness of reports of an object's motion, position and speed unless investigators collect the accounts very quickly. However, the garble factor certainly did not apply at Petrozavodsk. Rather than diminishing, the story grew over the passing months.

For instance, the British periodical *Flying Saucer Review* (widely considered the best UFO journal in the world) printed all the initial wild reports without ever later publishing clarifications or retractions. And *UFO Report*, the most serious-minded of the American pulp UFO magazines, told its readers that the damage to build-

ings was caused by the explosion of a space rocket.

Throughout 1979 and 1980, new information about the "Petrozavodsk phenomenon" continued to appear. "Exciting new information has been seeping through from Petrozavodsk concerning a spaceship that visited the area recently," announced Russian UFO buff Aleksandr Kasantsev. The latest description of the "jellyfish" is that "it hung in the night sky for at least two hours at an altitude of 60 miles." In the words of a Russian journalist, "It was the centre of great activity as much smaller bodies appeared to dart away from it, while others seemed to approach and disappear into immense portholes." Moscow physicist Vladimir Azhazha again endorsed the UFO character of the event. "In my view, it was a mother ship from outer space. Its appearance seems to indicate that an extraterrestrial civilisation is in the final stage prior to direct communication with the Earth."

The truth did come out in some quarters, however. The March 1979 issue of the Finnish astronomy magazine *Tahdet Ja Avaruus* published two charts and several photographs about Plesetsk rocket launchings observed from Finland. The magazine listed an average of two launchings per year—many of which the USSR has never officially acknowledged. In 1977, according to the journal, there were as many as five launchings, including the "jellyfish". So the Finns have published eminently respectable data that explain the background to the "UFO that never was". The only problem is that few people, least of all the UFO enthusiasts in Moscow, have noticed. □