

# Glasnost unleashes media tales of UFOs

By Carey Goldberg  
The Associated Press

MOSCOW — It was a close encounter of the communist kind.

Towering, tiny-headed humanoid from outer space landed their UFO in the Russian city of Voronezh and emerged for a promenade around the park, spreading fear among residents.

At least that's what the official Tass news agency said Monday.

Tass, contributing to a string of weird tales that have crept into the formerly stuffy state-controlled media in recent months, said in a straight-faced report that Soviet scientists vouched for the UFO's landing.

"Scientists have confirmed that an unidentified flying object recently landed in a park in the Russian city of Voronezh," Tass said. "They have also identified the landing site and found traces of aliens who made a short promenade about the park."

A Tass duty officer, contacted Monday evening by telephone, refused to identify the reporter who sent the dispatch from Voronezh but stood by the story. "It is not April Fools' today," he said.

The Soviet media, unleashed by the Kremlin's policy of glasnost — greater openness — feel free now to hype incredible stories that seem more at home in the supermarket tabloids of the West. Recent examples have included other accounts of UFOs, sightings of abominable snowman-type creatures, and a tale about a young mystic who goes into a trance and flies about the cosmos. A rash of mystics and extrasensory-perception artists also have invaded state TV.

In New York state, the chairman of the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal, Paul Kurtz, said Monday: "We're extremely skeptical of this claim. It's not the first one [in the Soviet media]. There's many. There seems to be a rash of reports, largely uncorroborated."

"Since the press freedoms in the last year, increasingly it seems to be open season," said Kurtz, a professor of philosophy at the State University of New York at Buffalo. "Paranormal pandemonium has broken out in the Soviet Union, not only with UFOs, but

faith healers, astrologers, and so on. In a closed society such as the Soviet Union, you don't get the development of critical reason."

He said the account "has all the characteristics of science fiction."

According to Monday's Tass report, Voronezh residents saw a large shining ball or disk hovering over the park. They saw the UFO land, and as many as three creatures similar to humans emerge, accompanied by a small robot, Tass said.

"The aliens were 3 or even 4 meters tall [almost 10 feet to slightly more than 13 feet], but with very small heads," the news agency quoted witnesses as saying. "They walked near the ball or disc and then disappeared inside."

The report resembled a story last summer in the daily newspaper Socialist Industry, which depicted an alleged encounter between a milkmaid and an alien in Central Russia's Perm region.

In that report, milkmaid Lyubov Medvedev was quoted as saying she saw an alien creature "resembling a man, but taller than average, with short legs." The creature, she said, had "only a small knob instead of a head."

The Tass report, which did not give the date of the purported landing in Voronezh, said onlookers were "overwhelmed with a fear that lasted for several days."

"If this were true," Kurtz remarked, "I think chairman [Mikhail] Gorbachev would call a press conference and proudly announce that with everybody attempting to get out of the Soviet Union, at long last here are some extraterrestrials in that union."

Russians have long been fascinated by the weird and the occult, but formerly they could glean their information only from rumors and underground copies of everything from palmistry guides to books on Eastern mysticism.

The Kremlin's economic reforms, with their emphasis on each enterprise paying its own way, have also given the official press more incentive to cater to readers' tastes in order to increase circulation.