

## UFOs over Russia and Eastern Europe

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Start here. Our home is Upsilon Bootes, which is a double star. We live on the sixth planet of seven, counting outward from the sun, which is the larger of the two. Our sixth planet has one moon. Our fourth planet has three. Our first and third planets each have one. Our probe is in the position of Arcturus, known in our maps.

—Alleged message of an unmanned probe allegedly placed in orbit around our moon between 15,000 and 13,000 years ago by the inhabitants of another planet and allegedly translated by British astronomer Duncan Lunan in 1974. (Steiger and Steiger 152)

Since the late 1940s, there have been periodic reports of UFOs in Russia and Eastern Europe (indeed, dating back to 1908, if the Tunguska meteorite is counted as a crashed alien vehicle). Since 1989, particularly after a well-publicized “sighting” in the Russian city of Voronezh, the number of sightings in the region has sky-rocketed. Many ufologists have noted that the dramatic upsurge in UFO sightings in the region coincided closely with the fall of communism, though no one, as far as I am aware, has speculated on any putative connection between the two. More usefully, we may note that the increase in the number of UFO sightings coincides with the recently accelerating development of secret and advanced military technology, and that many UFO sightings occur in the vicinity of top-secret military installations.

Literally speaking, UFO means *unidentified flying object*. If, at a certain distance, one cannot tell if a certain object is a plane or a missile or a helicopter, for example, then it would seem to qualify as “unidentified”—at least for the poor observer on the ground who is wondering what it is. In 1972, Carl Sagan defined a UFO as “a moving aerial or celestial phenomenon, detected visually or by radar, but whose nature is not immediately understood” (Spencer 301). But in practice, the expression is not usually employed in so modest or literal-minded a way. In practice, the acronym UFO is taken to refer to a flying vehicle of extraterrestrial origin. The University of Colorado UFO Project provided a working practical definition of “UFO” in 1969, equating it with,

...the stimulus for a report made by one or more individuals of something seen in the sky (or an object thought to be capable of flight but seen when landed on the Earth) *which the observer could not identify as having an ordinary natural origin*, and which seemed to him sufficiently puzzling that he undertook to make a report of it to [the] police, to government officials, to the press, or perhaps to a representative of a private organization devoted to the study of such objects. (Spencer 301, my emphasis)

The fascination that the UFO phenomenon holds lies precisely in those cases where a completely satisfactory explanation cannot be provided, for whatever reason. By virtue of the lack of some “normal” explanation, the door is opened to interpretation or even to fantasy, whether of a benevolent or of a nightmarish kind.

#### *Communism and UFOs*

The communist governments of the Soviet bloc displayed an ambivalence concerning UFOs. On the one hand, they treated stories concerning UFOs as “bourgeois propaganda”—the Hungarian government claiming (not entirely honestly), in 1954, that all reports concerning UFOs had originated in capitalist countries (Spencer 153). On the other hand, the higher echelons were clearly interested in such reports, and sought to obtain reliable information and interpretations of them. Thus, for example, as early as 1948, Soviet dictator Iosif Vissarionovich Stalin invited Valery Burdakov, a Soviet scientist, to review top secret materials (relayed by Soviet operatives in New Mexico) concerning the crash of an alleged extraterrestrial space vehicle near Roswell Army Air Base the previous year (Birdsall 16). By 1955, Dr. Felix Zigel, a professor at the Moscow Aviation Institute, began to collect information concerning UFOs and, in 1967, formed an unofficial grouping of top Soviet scientists and cosmonauts, who shared a common interest in UFOs (Steiger and Steiger 93).

Meanwhile, in 1959, there were two dramatic sightings—one in Poland and one in the Soviet Union. The Polish sighting, considered to be of dubious reliability by UFO researchers themselves, concerns claims that a UFO crashed into Gdynia harbor on 21 January 1959. According to reports, a small humanoid was subsequently picked up on the waterfront where he had been wandering around “in a confused state.” The alien is said to have been taken to a clinic but to have died in the course of medical procedures. According to reports, the alien’s body was subsequently transferred to a research institute in Moscow (Spencer 125).

The second report from 1959 originated in Sverdlovsk, headquarters of a tactical missile command. UFOs were allegedly seen by ground per-

**Table 1**  
**Basic UFO Vocabulary**

*UFO* - literally an unidentified flying object, but generally understood to refer to a space vehicle manufactured on another planet and designed for interplanetary travel.

*UOV* - unknown orbiting vehicle. Such vehicles are sometimes thought to have been placed in orbit around the earth by the inhabitants of other planets.

*sighting* - any report of a mysterious light or mysterious flying object which is given an extraterrestrial or other non-natural interpretation.

*abduction* - a temporary kidnaping of a person or group of persons, allegedly by space aliens, for the purpose of conducting physical examinations, impregnating fertile women, extracting sperm from males, altering the brain, or implanting devices in humans (also called *Close Encounters of the Fourth Kind*)

*T.I.I.* - temporary involuntary invisibility, generally induced—so it is said—by space aliens using higher technology.

*implant* - a small metal implant, generally inserted into a person's nose, allegedly designed to permit space aliens to track an abductee from childhood to adulthood.

*hybrids* - alleged offspring of aliens and humans, with human eggs fertilized by alien sperm or human sperm used to fertilize alien eggs, with extractions accomplished during abduction episodes. Some sources estimate that there may be as many as 2 million "hybrids" on the earth.

*Roswell Incident* - the alleged crash of a UFO near Roswell Army Air Base in New Mexico in 1947. In its initial statement concerning the incident, the army referred to the recovery of a flying disc; later, it claimed that only the wreckage of a weather balloon was recovered.

*crop circles* - complex designs produced in crop fields by bending the crops, usually associated with dramatic changes in levels of radioactivity in the soil and generally attributed, by believers, to extraterrestrials.

*contactees* - persons who claim to have had an encounter with extraterrestrial beings or non-human but highly intelligent beings living in remote parts of the earth (such as beneath the South Pole).

*temporal lobe seizure* - an affliction affecting the temporal lobe of the brain, induced inter alia by certain frequencies of light or levels of electricity, which is said to cause the victim to experience visions of grey beings grabbing and pulling him or her, in essence triggering the beginning of an abduction "experience."

sonnel in spring of that year, hovering and circling over command headquarters for more than 24 hours. Eventually, the base commander ordered pilots to take to the skies and chase away the intruders (Steiger and Steiger 98-99).

Some of the alleged sightings in the USSR seemed, rather transparently, to have been concocted to cover up local incompetence or negligence. Two examples may serve here. The first dates from 1961, when an explosion reduced a factory manufacturing heavily armoured tanks to rubble. At first, Soviet authorities blamed the explosion on US operatives, but later, local witnesses promulgated a UFO theory, blaming the explosion on a supposed "ball of fire" which allegedly hovered above the scene for a few minutes after the explosion to make sure that its mission had been accomplished. That the UFO story could protect factory workers from charges of gross negligence, while avoiding unnecessary provocation to the US, seems rather obvious.

The second story dates from the Andropov era. On 26 August 1983, or so the story has it, Soviet radar picked up the presence of an undeclared aircraft in the vicinity of their top secret submarine base at Ventspils, on the Latvian coast. Six fighter aircraft with heat-seeking missiles were dispatched with orders to destroy the intruding craft. The intruder was flying at an altitude of 9,000 feet, according to reports, and the Soviet aircraft now fired their missiles. But, according to Russian UFO researcher Dr. Eduard Naumov, the missiles exploded the instant they were launched, thereby destroying the planes which had fired them. Five of the six Soviet aircraft were lost in the operation, with only Second Lt. Mikhail Anisimov returning alive. That the UFO story could have served (a) to protect Lt. Anisimov from a court martial for treasonous action, or (b) to protect field maintenance personnel whose responsibility it was to keep the firing systems in good working order, again is quite clear. But interestingly enough, soon after the story broke, officials revised the story, now attributing the disaster to ball lightning (Steiger and Steiger 97-100). One is entitled to speculate that this may have been a double cover-up, with the ball lightning story designed to cover up the UFO story, which had in turn been concocted to cover up either incompetence or treason. Needless to say, two cover-ups are better than one, insofar as the second cover story makes the first cover more believable.

Other stories dating from this time remain inconclusive. The premature return of the Soviet spacecraft Voskhod I, on 12 October 1964, after remaining only 24 hours aloft, in what had been billed as "a prolonged flight," immediately raised questions. One answer was supplied by S. R. Olinger, writing for a German newspaper, who recounted that his sources in Moscow had attributed the abortion of the mission to

“extremely fast-flying discs which struck the craft violent, shattering blows with their powerful magnetic fields” (Steiger and Steiger 140). A similar encounter awaited Voskhod II which, on 19 March 1965, allegedly sighted an unmanned satellite. There were persistent rumors that this “satellite” was, in fact, an extraterrestrial craft and that it had harassed the Russian space craft, resulting in complications during its return to earth (Steiger and Steiger 140-41). Could the US or some other power have been involved in these incidents? Or should the difficulties experienced in these episodes be traced to natural phenomena? The verdict remains inconclusive.

The foregoing examples all come from military-related operations or spacecraft. But some sightings in the communist era were reported by ordinary citizens. One such sighting involved an eleven-year-old girl in Poland who, in July 1954, had an alien encounter while on holiday at Wegierska Gorka. Invited on board the alien craft, she claimed to have seen several “entities” who looked essentially like humans except for the presence of “humps” on their backs (Spencer 320). Like many such stories from private individuals, it did not serve an exculpatory function for her; indeed, as in many cases involving non-military persons, she did not remember anything of this episode until much later (1986, in her case).

A similar encounter was reported by Polish farmer Jan Wolski on 19 May 1978. Driving his horse and cart near Emilcin, he claimed that he was stopped by “entities” with slanting eyes, taken aboard an alien craft, stripped naked, and given a medical exam. There is no indication as to whether he somehow lost his horse and cart or some of his clothing, but assuming that they were not lost and that he was not inexcusably late in getting home to his family, then his UFO story would seem not to have served any particular purpose for Wolski (Spencer 326).

Perhaps the most provocative UFO story from the communist era dates from 1969 and relates to the American landing on the moon. According to three Russian scientists (Dr. Vladimir Azhazha, Prof. Aleksandr Kazantsev, and Dr. Sergei Bozhich), Soviet intelligence monitoring the event discovered that two extraterrestrial craft were on hand to observe the landing of the Apollo 11 lunar module on 20 July 1969. Soviet intelligence reports allegedly claimed that the astronaut Neil Armstrong informed Mission Control in Houston about the alien craft, and that his companion Buzz Aldrin took pictures of the alien craft from inside the module. Steiger and Steiger write that “...the three Russian scientists charge that NASA censored Armstrong’s verbal report of the two UFOs on the moon’s surface and immediately placed Aldrin’s motion picture film in a top-secret repository after the astronauts returned to Earth on July 24” (Steiger and Steiger 145). Bozhich

allegedly speculated that the extraterrestrials were present as a “back-up,” just in case the Americans should run into any difficulties.

James Oberg, author of *Red Star in Orbit* and a renowned specialist in the Soviet space program, believes that “...most, if not all, of the more sensational UFO incidents to emerge from behind the Iron Curtain in past decades, can be rationally explained” without reference to notions of space aliens (Birdsall 13). For example, on 20 September 1977, TASS reported the presence of a huge glowing object along the Finnish border which “moved slowly toward 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” (Birdsall 13). Azhazha, already one of the leading Russian ufologists, who would go on to establish an interdisciplinary network of UFO societies in 1990, immediately embraced an extraterrestrial explanation, affirming that the object was “either a UFO, a carrier of high intelligence with crew, and passengers, or it was a field of energy created by such a UFO” (Birdsall 13). Soviet science-fiction writer Aleksandr Kazantsev shared this view, declaring that the object sighted over Petrozavodsk was “a spaceship from outer space, carrying out reconnaissance” (Birdsall 13). In actuality, the mysterious object was a secret rocket fired from a military space installation at Plesetsk. The “jellyfish” and “shower” phenomena were the result of a severe malfunction. But clearly it was less embarrassing to Soviet authorities to have locals blame the unusual event on extraterrestrials.

For a brief period in the mid-1960s, the communist authorities of the pre-Gorbachev Soviet Union were willing to allow researchers to discuss UFO phenomena frankly. This brief interlude was probably triggered by a wave of UFO sightings in 1966 across Eastern Europe, the USSR, and China. Be that as it may, on 18 October 1967, a UFO research division was created at the Moscow House of Aviation and Aeronautics, chaired by Major General Porfiri Stolyanov. Although Stolyanov was assisted by Felix Zigel, a research scientist with considerable prestige, the division soon encountered roadblocks as it found itself denied access to official documents (Stonehill 31, Spencer 287). In spite of this, Moscow scientific journals organized a meeting at the Central Journalism House on 5 February 1968, providing an occasion for a frank discussion of UFOs. But shortly after the meeting, the UFO research division was closed down, and on 29 February 1968, *Pravda* published a blistering attack on ufology. From then until 1989, UFO sightings could be mentioned in the Soviet media only to debunk them. The result was the spawning of a UFO underground. In Voronezh in 1978, amateur ufologists defied officialdom by organizing a Group for the Study of UFOs. The following

year a similar group formed in Gorky, and other groups sprang up in other cities. Only in 1982 was the Voronezh group officially registered, and even then only under a euphemism (Stonehill 31-32).

*1989: Sightings in Vologda and Voronezh*

In ufology, as in politics, 1989 was a turning point in the communist bloc. Where the Soviet Union had hitherto enforced strict secrecy where reports of UFOs were concerned, *glasnost* dictated a new openness. The first UFO story to be publicized in the Soviet Union as a result of *glasnost* involved Vologda, in the heart of European Russia, where school-children reported seeing a space vehicle land and an ostensibly headless being emerge and walk around the meadow (*Financial Times* 1989: 3).

But Vologda was only a kind of preparation. The big UFO story of 1989 involved Voronezh, a city with 860,000 inhabitants, located about 300 miles southeast of Moscow. On 9 October 1989, *TASS* released an unprecedented story. The release is worth quoting:

*Voronezh, October 9.* Scientists have confirmed that an unidentified flying object recently landed in a park in the Russian city of Voronezh. They have also identified the landing site and found traces of aliens who made a short promenade about the park.

Aliens visited the place after dark, at least three times, locals report. A large shining ball or disk was seen hovering above the park. It then landed, a hatch opened, and one, two, or three creatures similar to humans and a small robot came out.

The aliens were three or even four meters high, but with very small heads, witnesses say....

In a follow-up report the following day, *TASS* added some details, reporting that the sighting had occurred on 27 September, and that the alien was three meters tall, "had three eyes, was clad in silvery overalls and 'boots' the color of bronze, and had a disk on its chest." *TASS* also reported that when a 16-year-old boy started screaming, he was first rendered silent by the alien and then disappeared as a result of a beam from the alien's ray gun. The boy was said to have reappeared immediately after the alien craft had departed.

The *TASS* reports provoked a rash of ufo-humor across Russia. For example, *Krasnaia zvezda*, the Soviet Army newspaper, editorialized, with mock outrage, "We are disappointed and offended [also]. Why did the UFO not select Moscow for landing instead of a provincial town?" (*UPI* 1989).<sup>1</sup> The paper added, "There are several good airports around Moscow. There is place enough to land. We shall welcome them at any

time” (*UPI* 1989). Subsequently, *Komsomol'skaia pravda*, the newsorgan of the communist youth organization, reported what it claimed was an encounter between its journalist, Pavel Mukhortov, and the extraterrestrials. The encounter was said to have taken place in Perm, where, a few months earlier, a milkmaid had reported an alien encounter (*Los Angeles Times* 10). The paper even provided a transcript of the alleged conversation:

“Where are you from?” journalist Pavel Mukhortov was said to have asked the aliens, who glowed in the dark and were reportedly six to 13 feet tall.

“The constellation Libra, Red Star, our homeland,” replied the creatures, communicating in the form of illuminated letters in the Siberian night.

“Your goal?”

“It depends on the center. We are directed by a central system.”

“Can you take me to your planet?”

“There would be no return for you and it would be dangerous for us.”

“Why would it be dangerous?”

“You might bring thought bacteria.”

(*Washington Post* C1)

Translate “thought bacteria” into “ideological pollution” and you have the vestiges of communist-style thinking.

But not everyone made jokes about the sightings. Amateur ufology groups began multiplying rapidly and before the end of 1989, there were reportedly some 50 such groups across the USSR (*Washington Post*). It was, moreover, in the wake of the alleged incident at Voronezh that Azhazha, Russia’s most vocal UFO enthusiast, organized the aforementioned UFO network (initially called SOYUZUFOTSENTR). Moreover, Soviet sightings themselves multiplied like rabbits. Already on 10 October, the day after its initial report concerning Voronezh, *TASS* reported that a flying saucer had been sighted over Sakhalin. Later, in the village of Kostenki, a mysterious hole about 100-mm. wide, five meters deep, and inclined at a 70-degree angle, appeared in one resident’s garden. Scientists examining the hole found that their magnetometer would not function in the vicinity of the hole, and could not find any stray dirt from the hole anywhere close. When a neighbor offered that she had seen “a huge fireball” the night before, ufologists inferred that space aliens might have taken a sample of dirt for evaluation (*TASS* 1990). And even as these new reports came in, alien visits to Voronezh continued, at least if one takes O. Stolyarov at his word. According to Stolyarov, local schoolchildren even had the opportunity to play soccer with the extraterrestrials (*Vozdushny Transport*).

### *A Proliferation of Sightings*

Since 1989, the region has been witness to a proliferation of sightings, as well as of crop circles. Indeed, this has been a general European phenomenon, with Russia, Hungary, Britain, and Belgium figuring as the sites for some of the more spectacular (and more persistent) reports. On 1 December 1993, Tullio Regge, an Italian socialist and an eminent physicist, even brought before the European Parliament a report which sought to account for the sharp increase in the number of sightings, by alleging that "...people should not rule out the theory 'that [space] aliens have established a base in the asteroid belt'" (*The Guardian* 2 Dec. 1993). But Regge disputed claims by Russian Professor Silanov to have communicated with the aliens in Voronezh by means of mental telepathy (*Calgary Herald*).

A surge of Hungarian sightings began in late October 1989, when Hungarian Air Force pilots claimed to have been followed, during training flights in the vicinity of Kecskemet, in southern Hungary, by "a 'strange, spherical, orange-colored' flying object which did not show up on radar" (*Reuter* 1989). *Nepszabadsag* reported, at about the same time, that a farmer in southeastern Gyomaendrod claimed to have seen greenish beings with long ears. "The man tried to hit them with his shovel, but they paralysed him with an unknown power and disappeared," *Nepszabadsag* reported matter-of-factly (*Reuter* 1989). Soldiers on duty at Kecskemet's military airport also reported seeing a greenish figure, whom they described as four-feet tall and fluorescent and who, according to the soldiers, "beamed himself up into space" (*Reuter* 1990). As the rash of sightings continued, Hungary's Urania Observatory, located in the city of Eger, set up a UFO Data Collection Center.

Meanwhile, there were sightings reported: in the Croatian hamlet of Bobanci, and to an entire Hungarian army unit in Tarnaszentmaria, in 1990; in Bucharest, the Hungarian village of Szecsényfelfalu, and again near Kecskemet in 1991; over central Serbia in 1992; over Sniezka, the highest peak of Poland's Karkonosze mountain range, and over Szolnok and Zadar in 1994; over the Jaslovske Bohunice nuclear power plant in Slovakia, over the Albanian beach at Durres, and around Hungary's Lake Balaton in 1995; and over Vilnius, Galati, and the Croatian village of Bregana Pisarovinska (near Zagreb) in 1996 (*Tanjug*; *The Times* 1991; *Agence France Presse*; *Reuter* 21 Jan. 1991; *Reuter* 30 Sept. 1991; *TASS* 1992; *The Times* 1994; Croatian TV satellite; *CTK National News Wire* 10 Aug. 1995; *Gazeta Shqiptare*; *Pozor* 1996; *TASS* 1996; *Curierul National*; *Vecernji list* ). Not all of these sightings were innocent. In the aforementioned Zadar case, Alan Roberts, spokesperson for UNPROFOR Sector South, told a regularly scheduled press conference on

10 August 1994 that the UN observation posts were under attack by UFOs (Croatian TV satellite). Evidently, Roberts felt that he could safely rule out the possibility that one of the three warring forces in the region might be responsible for the attack.

Colonel György Keleti, appointed Hungarian Defense Minister in summer 1994, takes at least some of these reports seriously. Keleti had earlier written several articles on UFO sightings by members of the Hungarian Armed Forces, for the monthly magazine, *Ufomagazin*. One such article bore the ominous title, "We don't stand a chance in a UFO invasion" (*Daily Telegraph* 1994; Huneeus, *Hungary's Minister of Defense* 30-37). And in 1995, a commission of Hungarian scientists investigating UFOs requested international assistance in verifying sightings of so-called "intelligent plasma balls" (*Reuter* 2 Oct. 1995).

Not all local governments have been understanding, however. In 1992, Vladimir Azhazha, vice president of the All-Union Ufological Association in Moscow, "...responded to the Russian Ministry of Justice's threat to outlaw the Association for financial irregularities by warning that this would severely jeopardize Russia's security and leave its inhabitants exposed to extraterrestrial attacks" (*Russian Press Digest* 31 Aug. 1992). In an effort to drive home the "urgency" of the situation, Azhazha used the occasion of an interview with *Kommersant* to warn that "each year extraterrestrials abduct 5,000 people from CIS territory and kill cattle with laser" (*Russian Press Digest* 31 Aug. 1992). Incidentally, Azhazha's figure is a compilation of the total number of "missing persons" in areas in which UFO activity had been reported (Birdsall 14). Azhazha himself is nothing if not colorful. In a 1995 interview with *Unsolved UFO Sightings*, for instance, Azhazha recounted,

Once I took part in a contact with an invisible entity. It was interesting.... I left a meeting which I was conducting when I was told that a representative of a higher intelligence would like to speak with me. I left and took Sochevanov and Varlamov as witnesses, two extra-sensors, two people who understand their language. Three chairs were placed for the invisible visitors. I did not know how to behave—it is a breakthrough. I never took part in anything like this [before]. And there was a conversation around and around for two hours. There was no concrete proposal. I did not hear any voices.... And I left [thinking] "why was I invited?" (Huneeus 69)

UFOs have entered into popular culture and everyday reality in the Russian/East European area, just as they have in the US and much of Western Europe. Thus, one finds the establishment, in Poland, of a religious cult around an alleged extraterrestrial named Antrovis (See Ramet

324-25), the revelation by Kiki, Plovdiv's advice-dispensing space alien, that Bulgarian is the intergalactic language of choice (*The Independent* 8), rumors that extraterrestrials visiting Germany were eager to learn the Saxonian dialect and local customs in Saxony (*Dresdener Morgenpost*), and claims by three fortune-tellers in Bulgaria that aliens from the Planet Krissi would land in Schtaklevo and give away leva 8 trillion, so that Bulgaria's national debt would be wiped clean and its people elevated, overnight, to prosperity. Incidentally, the Schtaklevo landing, scheduled to occur in September 1995, never took place, and police had to rescue the fortune-tellers from an angry crowd of 1,500 people (*Evening Standard* 19).

With all of this activity in the sky (and on the ground), it came as no surprise to UFO watchers that crop circles began to proliferate—in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, and Bulgaria (*CTK National News Wire* 11 July 1995; *CTK National News Wire* 19 July 1995; *CTK National News Wire* 21 July 1995; *CTK National News Wire* 18 July 1996; *Pozor* 1996, 50; *MTI Econews* 23 Aug. 1996; *The Sunday Times*; and Novak and Lowova). In Germany, crop circles in a cornfield near Hildesheim, south of Hannover, ominously assumed the shape of the communist hammer and sickle. But if the inspiration was socialist, the fall-out was capitalist: the field's owner recognized opportunity when he saw it, and quickly began charging an entrance fee to visitors wishing to inspect his field from close (*Daily Telegraph* 1991).

#### *Possible Explanations*

Most unidentified flying objects, once identified, turn out to be natural phenomena. A luminous object seen in the Budapest skies the evening of 18 January 1991, for example, was later said to have been a meteor (*MTI Econews* 1991). The object seen over Vilnius and mentioned above may have been ball lightning or some other lightning-related phenomenon; the sound that accompanied it was said to resemble electricity crackling. Or again, the scorched earth reported in July 1989 by the Soviet newspaper *Sotsialisticheskaia industriia* was originally attributed by that paper to the blast from a space alien vehicle. It was later revealed that the burned ground had been produced by a haystack fire (*New York Times*; and *Newsday*).

The second most likely explanation for any given sighting is that the craft being viewed is a man-made aircraft, possibly even a secret military aircraft (this latter explanation being more likely in the vicinity of certain top-secret military bases). The "jellyfish" incident at Petrozavodsk in 1977 is one example. The famous 1989 incident at Voronezh also took place near a major Soviet military installation, as did

a sighting in Khabaravosk krai in May 1985 (“Inside the KGB UFO Files” 39-40). In a non-military example of what proved to be a man-made craft, stories circulated toward the end of the 1980s of an alleged space alien vehicle thought to have been shot down by Soviet armed forces over the Stolovaia mountain range in Ordjonikidze on 5 March 1983. Russian UFO researcher Marina Popovich made strong claims on behalf of the authenticity of this “find” at a Munich conference organized by German researcher Michael Hesemann in June 1990. Four years later, Polish UFO researcher Jerzy Sniezawski came upon these allegations and revealed that the alleged UFO was an inoperable stage prop which he had designed for use in a Polish film, *On Silver Globe*, which had been premiered in Wroclaw in 1977 (Birdsall 15).

Third in the order of likelihood is dreaming. Many alleged abduction experiences occur during sleep. Most people have had the experience of having a dream so vivid that they are momentarily unsure whether it was reality or a dream. Under the spell of hypnosis, retrieved memories of forgotten dreams may come to be confused with reality. The frequency of such dreams may, of course, be stimulated by the media. The power of suggestion was amply demonstrated when, in the wake of the release of Steven Spielberg’s film, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, the number of sightings and abduction experiences increased exponentially worldwide (*The Guardian* 1995). Professor Michael Persinger, a Canadian researcher, has simulated abduction experiences in the laboratory and, based on his experiments, attributes the experiences to physically-induced temporal lobe seizures. Persinger cautions, however, that the way in which the brain interprets the sensations of light, grey presences, and strange pains may be affected, to a large extent, by cultural factors, such as the aforementioned film by Steven Spielberg (“Where Are All the UFOs?” 1998). The role of cultural preconditioning is suggested in the following account ascribed to documents from Elizabethan England:

The flying dragon is  
 when a flame kindled apeereth  
 bended, sand is in the middle  
 wrythed like the belly of a dragon,  
 but in the fore part,  
 for the narrownesse,  
 it representeth the figure of the neck,  
 from whence the sparkes are breathed  
 or forced forth with the same breathing.  
 (“Inside the KGB UFO Files” 43)

In addition, sexual deprivation may be a factor influencing who is likely to have such dreams. As Robert Sheaffer points out, “a number of [reported] abductees indicate that their only sex life takes place on board the flying saucers or in their dreams about aliens.”

Fourth most likely is fakery. People may engage in hoaxes for any of a number of reasons, including monetary profit (the most likely motivation for the creation of the alleged documentary film *Alien Autopsy*, which is now generally regarded as a counterfeit [See *Focus* 256, 258]). Some of the crop circles, for example in Bohemia (*CTK National News Wire* 1 Aug. 1996), have been exposed as forgeries, even if others continue to perplex and mystify researchers.

Arguably fifth most likely is the misinterpretation of mundane phenomena. In summer 1996, for example, residents of Hurbanovo, in southern Slovakia, reported strange lights which they ascribed to the work of space aliens. Authorities investigating these reports were able to trace the “strange” lights to the laser lights at a local disco (*CTK National News Wire* 8 July 1996).

Sixth most likely is disinformation whether generated by government officials or promulgated outside the government. Such disinformation could serve to cover up more embarrassing or damaging information; examples of this were provided earlier in the text. Possibly related in nature is the mindless caution cited by *Komsomol'skaia pravda* and attributed to “the staff” of Khankala Airfield, in Chechnya, during Russia's war with that republic, to the effect that the region was a common haunt of UFOs and that “it just could be that some inexperienced Chechen pilot might mistake an encounter with a flying saucer for a ‘hostile act of a neighboring state’” (*Russian Press Digest* 23 Jan. 1992). Better to let 10 Russian bombers pass unhindered than to risk offending the pilots of even one space alien vehicle!

Beyond these six explanations one enters into controversial territory, and most, if not all, of the remaining available explanations will probably strike most people as paranoid. But tastes differ, and people make choices based on widely different experiences. Thus, the BBC World Service did not consider it paranoid to suggest that Russian UFO reports tended to come from areas where salt and sugar were in short supply, thereby inferring that such reports could take people's minds off their economic difficulties (Spencer 153). Mark Rodeghier, director of the Centers for UFO Studies in Chicago, disputes this interpretation, considering UFO stories unlikely to distract people from problems as basic as nutrition and financial solvency (30).

An alternative explanation, which at first sight seems very plausible, but which, on second glance, reveals some features of the paranoid, was

offered by Cosmonaut Pavel Popovich, chair of the (Soviet) Ufological Commission, in 1990. In conversation with *Trud*, Popovich suggested that "...many experts tend to agree that the 'contacts with aliens' occur not in reality, but in human consciousness—under the influence of unknown natural factors. *These 'visions' are caused by something which carries definite information*, and this can only be done by Reason—which means that we have to seek contact with this Reason" (*Trud* 4, my emphasis).<sup>2</sup> Rather than actual UFO sightings, Popovich offers us a notion of "alien-induced" hallucinations. The ubiquitous Azhazha, who was also present for the talks with *Trud*, offered this gloss on Popovich's comments:

It is necessary to find out who is the real master on this planet—we, the humans, or the "intelligent medium" that, entering into contact with us, has been displaying not just a simple curiosity, but also aggressiveness. (*Trud* 4)

From the way in which Azhazha phrased this challenge, it is clear on which side of the ledger he believes the answer can be found.

That American and possibly also Russian engineers have experimented with flying saucers developed from German designs is well known ("Saucer Kraut" 41). The supposition that flying saucers must necessarily come from other planets depends upon the entirely unwarranted assumption that the US and Russian governments keep their citizens fully informed about all technological developments, experimental programs, new weapons systems, and special forces operations—an assumption that most would agree qualifies as naive in the extreme. On the other hand, the utility of this explanation in addressing sightings of mysterious craft flying directly over large population centers is at best limited. But it may not be entirely without its uses. When, for example, Russian researchers discovered, at two alleged UFO landing sites in Siberia, microscopic worms in soil content which were common to Mexico but not occurring naturally in the USSR, it appeared conceivable, assuming the accuracy of the representations concerning the worms, that an American espionage flight might have been involved which, it would follow, had made a landing in Mexico before continuing on to Siberia (Birdsall 56).

There are at least four remaining conceivable explanations, any of which would require a leap of faith. For those inclined to suspicion of the government, UFO mania could be construed as a US government plot to condition people to believe in space aliens so that, at some future point in time, it may use the cover of an "alien invasion" to establish a

world totalitarian state ruled from the Pentagon. Those inclined to this interpretation would then interpret so-called "alien abductions" as abductions by Pentagon personnel masquerading as aliens.

For those inclined to believe in mass hallucinations, it would be possible to speculate about the discharge of hallucinatory drugs into the environment as part of a government program for perfecting mind control or for testing collective behavior in conditions of hallucination. This "explanation" has the advantage of providing an accounting as to why most sightings in Russia, the US, and Britain have been far from major urban centers (Voronezh being an exception of sorts) and, in the most spectacular instances, conveniently close to military installations (Voronezh following the rule here). This explanation has at least two disadvantages: first, it requires that one believe that hallucinogens will, under specified conditions, induce identical hallucinations in all exposed persons; and second, it is overtly paranoid in the extreme.

For those who consider that time travel would be technologically more feasible than intergalactic travel (with its phenomenal fuel and speed requirements),<sup>3</sup> one could *imagine* an "explanation" that what is involved in UFO sightings are human craft from the future, visiting our time zone for reasons best known to future generations. Although I have not come across any ufologist who embraced this theory, it would appear to be compatible with the argumentation of philosopher David Lewis, who has defended the possibility of time travel.

And finally, there are explanations which associate UFOs with space aliens. For some, especially those who have had experiences for which they lack any other explanation they find acceptable, especially if experiences of a frightening or of a harmful nature, the belief that space aliens are visiting the planet assumes something of a religious quality, which is to say, it becomes a matter of faith to which no challenge is brooked.

Not all ufologists adopt a "religious" orientation, of course. Some scientists are skilled researchers who are serious about their work, engage in it with a certain amount of skepticism, but, fascinated by the data, are unwilling to shrug it off with a gasp of "impossible!" But, ufology has also attracted its share of cranks, who have contributed to bringing the field into disrepute in some quarters. Take, for example, Bulgarian-born physicist Vladimir Tereziski, a UFO specialist, who believes that Hitler's scientists landed a man on the moon in 1942 and, in collaboration with the Japanese, sent a mission to Mars. Tereziski also believes that some 2 million people inhabit an underground colony at the South Pole and have been perfecting space travel (*The Guardian* 11 Jan. 1993).

The overwhelming majority of “sightings” turn out to be easily explainable in terms of natural phenomena or man-made craft—or sometimes in terms of local discos—as professional ufologists themselves readily point out. But there are those troubling incidents, for which the “less paranoid” explanations seem entirely inadequate, and some of these incidents have led some serious researchers to speculate about visitors from other galaxies. There is, to date, no case for which there is public information sufficient to “prove” the extraterrestrial nature of the given craft. However, as any UFO enthusiast can tell you, it would take only one authenticated sighting of a space alien visitation to radically change the way in which we view ourselves. And, as the millennium approaches, a certain sector of the public seems increasingly prepared to embrace just such a change of worldview.

### *Conclusion*

UFO clubs and societies have sprouted throughout the region since 1989, not just in Russia, but in towns across the northern part of East-Central Europe. Hungary and Poland seem to be especially important centers for ufology (*MTI Econews* 1992; *The Times* 1994; *PAP News Wire*). According to recent survey data, 20 per cent of Germans believed that extraterrestrials have been visiting earth, while 40 per cent of Czechs consider it at least probable that there is intelligent life on other planets (*Focus* 256; *CTK National News Wire* 16 Dec. 1996). The level of belief in Bulgaria may be comparable since a Sofia insurance company announced in 1995 that it would offer insurance to compensate for “physical and psychic damage” resulting from “alien abduction” (*Financial Times* 1995). In the years 1993-96 alone, international UFO conferences have been held in Kosice, Budapest (twice), and Debrecen (twice) (*MTI Econews* 1993; *CTK National News Wire* 1993; *MTI Econews* 28 Sept. 1994; *MTI Econews* 1 Oct. 1994; *MTI Econews* 16 Nov. 1994; *MTI Econews* 29 Sept. 1996). There has also been a proliferation of popular magazines devoted to extraterrestrials, such as Croatia’s *Dossier UFO*, which bears the subtitle *Misterij letecih tanjura* (Mystery of the flying saucers). The film *Alien Autopsy* was shown in Prague to sell-out crowds (*CTK National News Wire* 7 Oct. 1995). And Polish ufologists showed off their own UFO film in a screening in Lodz on New Year’s Eve 1995/96 (*PAP News Wire*).

UFOs obviously have the power to tantalize, but this power resides precisely in the fact that no one has been able either to completely disprove the existence of space aliens (and it is not clear what kind of “proof” could accomplish that task) or to provide much by way of descriptive information of a definitive nature concerning what must still

be called *alleged* space aliens. If either of these conditions was satisfied, much of the interest in this topic would subside. For if the existence of space aliens could be definitely excluded, then they could scarcely hold more interest than tales of leprechauns and hobgoblins and fairy queens. And if an exhaustive and definitive accounting could be provided, they would merely be added to the list of known species. And who knows, they might even end up on a list of “endangered species!”

Ufology uses scientific instruments. Is it, therefore, a science? Or should it be classed with pseudosciences such as alchemy and astrology which use scientific instruments for non-scientific purposes? For now at least, these, like other questions on this subject, remain open questions, and further, questions upon which the politics of government secrets may turn.

### *Notes*

<sup>1</sup>I have changed “provincial towns” to “a provincial town,” since only Voronezh is indicated.

<sup>2</sup>I have corrected the syntax in this sentence.

<sup>3</sup>Though see the case for alternative propulsion systems in Watts 18-21.

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