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### 'A transatlantic buzz': flying saucers, extraterrestrials and America in postwar Germany

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## ‘A transatlantic buzz’: flying saucers, extraterrestrials and America in postwar Germany

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The years 1946–1960 saw a wave of reports of flying saucer sightings on both sides of the Atlantic. To date, however, few scholars have examined how the phenomenon moved across states and regions, what responses it garnered and what impact it had on contemporary thought and values. This article examines how the mainstream press and public intellectuals in postwar West and East Germany reported on and discussed flying saucer reports. The evidence shows that both cold war geopolitics and the occult were used to explain sightings, but that suspected American influences and anti-American sentiments figured heavily in how most reports were interpreted. Flying saucers thus functioned as cyphers for considering alien influences in postwar society.

**Keywords:** UFOs; flying saucers; press; Germany; anti-Americanism

From May until November of 1946, thousands of Swedes were joined by residents in Norway, Finland and northern Germany in reporting having seen cigar-shaped or circular wingless missiles, often with bright lights, moving at very fast speeds in the skies overhead. The Ghost Rocket Scare of 1946, as it came to be known, caught the interest not only of the European lay public. The American and British intelligence communities at the time also took notice and were divided on what to make of these reports. While some experts believed that the rockets were figments of the nervous imaginations of European citizens, others considered the missiles real and likely Soviet in origin.<sup>1</sup>

Reports of unidentified flying objects (UFOs) were, of course, a prominent part of popular media and public life following the Second World War – nowhere more so than in the USA. In fact, by 1996, a Gallup poll revealed that 51% of American men and 40% of American women believed that UFOs had visited the earth in some form or another.<sup>2</sup> This result squares with the evidence of US government officials, journalists, historians and social scientists, who have documented the precipitous rise in reported sightings of UFOs during the second half of the twentieth century. Since 1946, the general public have been joined by pilots, radar technicians, celebrities and even politicians in claiming to have seen and/or had contact with alien spacecrafts and their crews.

The ubiquity of sightings and belief in extraterrestrial encounters, however, stands in marked contrast to the social study of the UFO phenomenon, which has been relatively scant and often skewed. Academics have very often either dismissed

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the subject as too preposterous to warrant study or ridiculed believers as crackpots and simpletons. Religion scholar Brenda Denzler, sociologist Erich Goode and political scientists Alexander Wendt and Raymond Duvall, however, have rightly argued that the perceptions, theories and activities surrounding UFO sightings represent complex and consequential social phenomena meriting social scientific examination.<sup>3</sup>

Denzler and others have been attentive to another, often neglected, aspect of strange aircraft sightings: they have a history. There have been changing patterns in reports and conjectures about UFOs, patterns which can be chronicled and analysed using conventional historical methods. During the late 1940s and early 1950s, for example, accounts of sightings rarely reported physical encounters with aliens, and even then, the latter were most often considered to be beneficent. Over the course of the 1960s, however, an increasing number of stories emerged of abductions by merciless extraterrestrials.<sup>4</sup>

Examining the reports of UFOs and extraterrestrial encounters in the USA, scholars have consistently interpreted them against the backdrop of the cold war. The 'flying saucer myth', Curtis Peebles has argued, reflected the peculiar suspicions, exaggerations and paranoias characteristic of cold war anxieties.<sup>5</sup> Thus, accounts of alien encounters can be seen as part of a more general culture of conspiracy, as narratives expressing and providing an explanation for the feelings of vulnerability and powerlessness experienced by many Americans during this time.<sup>6</sup>

Yet, one other aspect of UFO and alien sightings, however, has largely been ignored altogether until recently: the fact that they have been a global social phenomenon. Though often linked most closely to the USA, sightings have been reported across the globe, and support groups have sprung up throughout the entire world.<sup>7</sup> The spread in popularity since 1950 of films, television shows, toys, comic books and stories featuring UFOs and extraterrestrials has helped ensure continued worldwide interest in the subject. Yet still, we know very little about the history of how the phenomenon moved across states and regions, what responses it garnered and what impact it had on contemporary thought and values.<sup>8</sup>

How then did reports of UFOs and alien encounters play out elsewhere in the world? Was there much interest in the subject? If so, what aspects of these reports drew the most attention? And is there evidence that cold war concerns directly influenced the reception of reported UFO sightings?

This essay attempts to begin addressing these questions by examining how UFO sightings were reported and discussed in one of the central theatres of the cold war, Germany, from the end of the Second World War until around 1960. This period is an especially critical one in the history of UFO sightings, for it coincides with what is widely referred to as the 'flying saucer era', a time when the term 'flying saucer' was first coined and became largely synonymous with strange airship sightings.<sup>9</sup> It is also distinctive in that, throughout much of this period, film and UFO communities played far less of a role in shaping public perceptions than would become the case from the late 1950s onwards. Similar to what historian Brett Holman has observed in the case of interwar air panic in Great Britain, the press was the public's main source of information about flying saucers in postwar Germany.<sup>10</sup>

My aim, then, is to consider how flying saucers were discussed and understood by those taking up the subject in newspapers, magazines and books, as part of what historian Alexander Geppert refers to as the 'astroculture' of the twentieth century.<sup>11</sup>

Those doing so were primarily journalists and public intellectuals, along with a handful of writers and researchers, on both sides of the iron curtain. And they proved quite willing not only to debate the veracity of claims, but also to reflect on the broader meaning of the sightings being made. No matter whether one believed in their extraterrestrial origins or considered them the invention of one or both of the superpowers or shrugged them off as figments of wild imaginations, virtually all commentators held the view that flying saucers carried something other than crews: they carried meanings.

In the end, study of the flying saucer phenomenon<sup>12</sup> in postwar Germany reveals that reports and coverage were far more diverse in content than is commonly acknowledged. Nevertheless, most secondary accounts did explicitly link sightings to some of the most pressing geopolitical questions of the time. The civilian bombing campaigns of the Second World War, the spread of American influence, escalating tensions between the USA and the USSR and the emergence and proliferation of nuclear weapons were all regularly part of how flying saucer reports were interpreted. Indeed, the USA played a pivotal role in the German reception of sightings, widely understood to be the chief catalyst of events. In Germany at least, UFOs were a decidedly transatlantic phenomenon, one that prompted speculation and debate about the influence of alien and foreign powers.

### **The arrival of the flying saucers and the history of strange airship sightings**

The history of central Europe's postwar preoccupation with flying saucers can be traced back most directly to the Ghost Rocket Scare of 1946. But what kept UFOs alive in the public eye was a steady flow of news reports, military investigations and announcements and speculative books, most originating in the USA. Especially critical was an event that took place several months after the Ghost Rocket Scare. In June 1947, a private pilot by the name of Kenneth Arnold was flying over Washington state in the USA when, as he recounted, he saw what looked like nine odd-shaped aircraft flying in formation at around 10,000 feet. Arnold described them as 'flat like a pie pan and somewhat bat-shaped'. Interviewed by the press soon afterwards, he explained that the objects 'flew like a saucer would if you skipped it across water'. Though never uttering the phrase 'flying saucers', newspapers throughout the world rapidly adopted the term, and a Gallup poll published a few weeks after Arnold's encounter revealed that 9 out of 10 Americans were already familiar with the moniker. Within months, the expressions 'flying saucer' and 'flying disk' had become not only ubiquitous, but synonymous with sightings of unusual aircraft.<sup>13</sup>

While the Ghost Rocket Scare of 1946 and the Arnold incident in 1947 marked the beginning of postwar accounts of UFOs, it needs to be acknowledged that reports of strange airships were hardly new. In fact, some of the earliest reports of odd flying machines date back to the early nineteenth century. Analysts, however, have focused on several waves of well-publicised airship scares taking place in Africa, Great Britain, New Zealand and North America during the years 1896–1918.<sup>14</sup> The UK appears to have been especially prone to these scares, with one taking place over several months in 1909 – a decade after the first zeppelins were developed in Germany – and again during the First World War, when there were numerous reports of 'phantom' dirigibles and strange airships in the skies. As British

historians have noted, a common element to most of these panics was widespread fear of invasion by foreign countries.<sup>15</sup>

Notable scares and peculiar aerial observations took place also before and during the Second World War. Orson Welles' Mercury Theater on the Air radio production of *War of the Worlds* on 30 October 1938 famously provoked many residents of the northeastern USA to call police and newspapers in a panic convinced that poison gas was quickly moving to engulf their neighbourhoods.<sup>16</sup> In the last several years of the Second World War, American bomber crews over Germany and, later, in the Pacific, reported encountering strange fireballs during some of their nighttime raids. These 'foo-fighters', as airmen dubbed them, appeared to track, dive and zoom with enormous velocity. At the time considered to be either a new German anti-aircraft weapon or simply a natural phenomenon (such as St. Elmo's Fire), a report of the Office of Scientific Intelligence of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in January 1953 later concluded, 'if the term "flying saucers" had been popular in 1943–1945, these objects would have been so labelled'.<sup>17</sup>

### **Early postwar German reactions to flying saucer sightings**

Thus, when details about ghost rockets and flying saucers began publicly circulating in 1946 and 1947, they did not simply light on empty ground. Earlier precedents had already established some conventional terms by which these oddities could be understood and discussed. As previous claims had shown, strange airships were characterised by having uncanny, yet not altogether unfamiliar, shapes and exhibited extraordinary movements. Though there were isolated cases of purported encounters with the pilots of some of these remarkable vessels, almost all reports were of simple sightings of aircraft: the identity of the crews inside remained shrouded in mystery. With a large number of observations taking place in volatile political climates, where the spectre or reality of war was palpable, explanations tended to run along two lines: while some believed the curious aircraft were weapons of foreign powers, others chalked the observations up to natural phenomena and human misperception.

Western German press coverage of early UFO sightings largely followed these patterns. Two things, however, set postwar reports apart from earlier ones. First, the features attributed to the aircraft were somewhat consistent with rockets and missiles, though the talk was repeatedly of 'flying saucers' and 'flying disks'. Some of the earliest sightings in Germany were made in the summer of 1947, with newspaper readers in Passau reporting having seen 'a wide elliptical object with a long red, fiery tail' and large lights.<sup>18</sup> Around this same time, mountain climbers recounted observing two odd flying objects crash and explode in the Pyrenees Mountains.<sup>19</sup>

The rocket-like features of flying saucers reflected a second unique aspect of early postwar reports; they were directly influenced by the experience of the Second World War and the cold war. By 1946, inhabitants of Europe were well familiar with the Third Reich's use of ballistic V-rockets starting in 1944. At the same time, they were equally cognisant of American and Soviet rocketry and each country's quest for military superiority. It therefore was hardly surprising that many UFO accounts at the time described flying saucers as exhibiting rocket-like features.

This frame of reference also contributed to the emergence of two common explanations for the phenomenon. A sceptical perspective held that the sightings

were merely concoctions of the over-heated imaginations of Americans and Europeans craving novelty and excitement during an otherwise slow summer news cycle.<sup>20</sup> Reports of flying saucers in China, Denmark, Germany, Iran, Italy and Sweden were, as the magazine *Der Spiegel* put it, the result of ‘a transatlantic buzz’ emanating from the faddish USA.<sup>21</sup> Others, however, took the sightings more seriously and held that observers were witnessing captured V-rockets being tested by the Soviet Union.<sup>22</sup> This viewpoint was also held by many in the American intelligence community at the time, which regarded the presence of flying saucers to be primarily a security matter.<sup>23</sup>

A piece on the Ghost Rocket Scare in the weekly *Die Zeit* from August 1946 perhaps best captures the peculiar state of bemusement in which many Germans found themselves during these early days of the flying saucer era. Reports of ‘aircraft of unknown origin having flown over Swedish territory’ is something ‘we were able to read about any number of times during the war’, the paper noted. ‘But doesn’t peace now prevail in the world? Hasn’t a new order been established by the UN, in order to make war impossible once and for all?’ America’s atomic bomb tests perhaps held the key. ‘Already reports from military sources have circulated about remote-controlled atomic projectiles that can be fired from the United States to reach any point on earth’, the story went on. ‘A musical accompaniment to the peace conference? A warning shot for anyone considering using these weapons in the future, or a demonstrative return of power until a new rearmament once again flourishes?’<sup>24</sup>

The article gives voice to a historically unique kind of bewilderment, and it reveals just how *underdetermined* – in contrast to reported sightings after 1960 – the flying saucer phenomenon could be during its early years. Questions, possibilities, alternatives: a flexible multiplicity of lines of speculation coexisted in response to the first wave of reports. Set against the backdrop of memories of a violent recent past and plans for a new international peace, however, flying saucers were especially effective in serving as a kind of a material cypher onto which anxieties about the looming cold war and America’s ascendancy could be projected. Even with so little known about them, these flying objects were seen as exposing the precarious position of postwar Europeans situated between peril and hope.

### **After the aliens arrived I: flying saucers as an American disease**

The earliest reports about UFOs in postwar western Germany made little, if any, reference to aliens from another world. Explanations remained terrestrially grounded in geopolitics, weather and human sensory perception. While the identity of the objects remained a mystery, newspapers showed little interest in paranormal interpretations, with the exception of occasional invocations of the Loch Ness Monster craze by way of comparison.

Things quickly began to change, however. Once again, reports from abroad – especially, the USA – provided the impetus. First came word of the first fatality associated with UFOs. US Air Force pilot Thomas Mantell died in January 1948, after his plane crashed while pursuing a UFO. While it would later be revealed that Mantell had lost consciousness while chasing a high-altitude balloon, officials at the time offered the less-than-convincing explanation that he had mistaken the planet

Venus for an aircraft.<sup>25</sup> All this helped fuel speculation that UFOs were significant enough for US officials to disseminate misinformation.

This was followed by the publication of two books garnering a good deal of international attention. In 1950, former US marine Donald Keyhoe made headlines with *The Flying Saucers Are Real*. In it, Keyhoe detailed UFO sightings considered by the US Air Force to be still unexplained, including the Mantell case, and argued that American authorities were investigating reports of flying saucers, but were engaged in a cover-up, in order to stem a mass panic. In addition, he drew three conclusions which were widely circulated by the media: that flying saucers were interplanetary spaceships, that the earth had been under observation by other planets for centuries and that atomic bomb explosions in 1945 had precipitated an increase in these extraterrestrial observations.<sup>26</sup>

Then, in 1953, Desmond Leslie and George Adamski published *Flying Saucers Have Landed*, a book which recounts Adamski's purported encounter with a flying saucer and one of its crew members, a Venusian named Orthon.<sup>27</sup> According to Adamski, Orthon communicated with him through telepathy and sign language, warning him about the dangers of nuclear weapons and eventually taking him on a tour of the solar system. The book included a photograph of what Adamski said was a genuine flying saucer, seeming to lend credence to his incredible story.

The claims of Keyhoe, Leslie and Adamski drew worldwide attention. By 1960, *Flying Saucers Have Landed* had sold over one million copies and had been translated into 50 different languages. The success of the two books, as David Clarke and Andy Roberts have argued, helped spark the birth of a historically new endeavour: the dedicated, mostly amateur, study of UFOs and of their investigations, also known as UFology.<sup>28</sup> Together, the three authors contributed new elements to the flying saucer story: saucers as extraterrestrial in origin, their appearance being linked to atomic weapons, and their occupants as enigmatic figures with arcane knowledge. At the same time, Keyhoe, Leslie and Adamski ushered in a new and enduring way to investigate and read reports of flying saucers by gaining access to classified sources of information, critically questioning official explanations and speculating on the meaning of UFOs and the intentions of their crews.

The stories of Arnold, Mantell, Keyhoe and Adamski enjoyed regular press coverage by the West German press in the years 1950–1954.<sup>29</sup> Although most articles expressed varying degrees of scepticism about claims of alien visitation, the UFO reports aroused consternation. Citing Keyhoe, an article in the *Mittelbayerischen Zeitung* made the point that 'the methods of the unknown beings who have developed these airships on a planet far away square with the astronomical knowledge of American scientists, who will only be able to first realise their plans over the next fifty years'.<sup>30</sup> Hallucinations, optical illusions and pranks simply could not account for all the reports coming in, wrote journalist Claus Jacobi in the spring of 1950.

For today, three years after the appearance of the first "Flying Plates", already thousands have seen "Flying Saucers", with and without binoculars, in America, China, Turkey, Persia, Mexico and Uruguay, during the day and at night, officers and meteorologists, pilots and simple folk. There is already "something to this", something

to these “Flying Saucers”. The question is no longer: do they exist? Rather: what’s behind all this? No one knows.<sup>31</sup>

Reports of the first sightings of flying saucers over Germany and the rest of Europe only added to the unease and speculation.<sup>32</sup>

Conjectures continued to run the gamut of an albeit increasingly standardised range of explanations. For those unwilling to chalk up the incidents to optical illusions and unusual weather, the cold war provided the most compelling framework for explaining the wave of sightings. As had been the case during the Ghost Rocket Scare of 1946, some continued to suspect that the Soviet Union was experimenting with captured German V-rocket technology. Most observers, however, looked to the USA for terrestrial explanations, with arguments generally running in one of two directions. Either the UFOs were secret – most likely nuclear – weapons of the US Air Force, intended to convince the Soviet Union that it possessed rocket-propelled planes, ‘which can deliver atomic bombs to their destinations with the greatest precision’.<sup>33</sup> Or the reports were an expression of America’s characteristic susceptibility to crazes, what one paper referred to as the country’s ‘flying saucer disease’.<sup>34</sup> American consumer culture – the marketing of toys, comics and children’s books with flying saucer themes – coupled with its residents’ anxieties about the USSR and recent communist victories in east Asia were credited with promoting a veritable mass hysteria there.<sup>35</sup> This latter line of speculation squared especially well with anti-American currents in European conservative and highbrow thought at the time that considered Europe to be the bastion of western, high culture in opposition to a naive and uncultured American way of life.<sup>36</sup>

To some observers, the real threat posed by flying saucer sightings lay in the fear they generated. As University of Hamburg astronomer Hans Haffner summed up in the fall of 1954, ‘Reports of flying saucers have produced confusion, doubt, panic, and hysteria throughout the western world’.<sup>37</sup> Haffner’s worry was that the phenomenon was contributing to the erosion of scientific rationality. A similar concern was expressed by the Viennese artist and social critic Karl Bednarik, who took the UFO craze to be a symptom of a contemporary state of pervasive anxiety (*Lebensangst*), one caused by a postwar interpersonal isolationism that threw people into the waiting arms of gags and fads.<sup>38</sup> If one could rightly speak of an evolving European solidarity in the wake of the Second World War, Claus Jacobi argued in April 1950, flying saucers revealed the true nature of that solidarity. After reports of UFOs over London and Munich stirred unease and disorder there, Jacobi lamented,

Sure it exists, this oft-invoked solidarity of Europe. It exists in an abundance of fears. What happened yesterday in Munich and London can be repeated in Hamburg and Paris. While ideas have become rare on this continent, pipe dreams grow wantonly.<sup>39</sup>

And though virtually no one ever directly mentioned National Socialism and the carnage of the Second World War, concerned observers saw in the spread of fear, irrationalism and anxiety the roots of something potentially lethal: violence. Stories of individuals responding to flying saucer sightings by firing guns at the aircraft and their crews were taken at times as cause for derision.<sup>40</sup> The Austrian writer and

journalist Grete von Urbanitzky, however, saw in the story of one French farmer's firing on an apparent UFO a chilling statement about contemporary life.

Is the response of today's human being to something unfamiliar to deliberately shoot it? Does it appear natural to our way of thinking to exterminate everything alien and unusual? ... Even more amazing is the blind trust that earthlings today have in their technical achievements like the gun. Perhaps the gun is the very last thing which he trusts and in which he believes ... Monsieur Faisan – that is the name of the fellow who did not know anything better to do than shoot at someone whom he took to be a Martian – appears to be, to a frightening extent, a product of our time.<sup>41</sup>

Flying saucers not only elicited fear, but they also promoted distrust, especially distrust towards authorities. Government and military behaviour and explanations were especially greeted with suspicion. American officials were accused of deliberate obfuscation and of orchestrating a conspiracy designed to hide the truth from the public about UFOs.<sup>42</sup> Reports that a special US Air Force commission and leading German space researchers had concluded that at least some of the flying saucers were likely reconnaissance aircraft sent by inhabitants from another planet only added to the baffling nature of things.<sup>43</sup> The incredibility of the claims, the seeming lack of reliable information and the furtiveness with which the superpowers were operating left many in a state of perpetual puzzlement. Little wonder that references to flying saucers often spoke of them as holding 'secrets' and posing 'riddles'.<sup>44</sup>

#### **After the aliens arrived II: flying saucers as an occult and esoteric phenomenon**

If UFOs presented the world with an enigma, not everyone in the 1950s greeted their appearance with dread or considered them American in origin. For some, the cryptic nature of flying saucers and their creators was a source of marvel.<sup>45</sup> Viewed from this perspective, the arrival of flying saucers was something full of meaning, perhaps a harbinger or a warning or a reminder of some kind. In any event, similar to other occult artefacts and events, UFOs were believed to require interpretation, and their meaning, according to some, could only be read by those initiated into the appropriate form of communication and knowledge.<sup>46</sup>

One writer wondered whether flying saucers might not hold the key to solving the world's energy problems. Citing the work of Austrian inventor and naturalist Viktor Schauberger, who had designed a flying disk out of copper in 1940 and advocated the widespread adoption of implosion technologies, the writer raised the possibility that the 'repeatedly observed mysterious projectiles' represented the application of just this very technology.<sup>47</sup> Schauberger himself was not questioned on the subject.

Others, however, were drawn to ruminate about the sacred significance of UFOs. The repeated claims of alien reconnaissance missions to earth prompted journalists to ask scientists about the likelihood of intelligent life on other planets and the feasibility of humans themselves inhabiting such planets.<sup>48</sup> These possibilities carried with them, to the thinking of some, theological implications about the status of aliens. One American theologian laid out a number of possibilities. Perhaps the beings enjoyed a certain special, supernatural grace from God; or perhaps they had sinned and had fallen out of grace with the Lord. Maybe they were pure and innocent like children, or maybe they ruled over paradise on other planets.<sup>49</sup> Whatever the truth, religious thinkers in Germany took the prospect of alien life

forms seriously. A survey of Protestant and Catholic theologians in West Germany in 1954 found that neither tended to rule out the prospect that intelligent, reasoning beings were behind the appearance of flying saucers.<sup>50</sup>

Still others sought answers not in the stars, but in the past. Russian academic M.M. Agrest, for instance, argued that evidence indicated that aliens had landed in Palestine during biblical times and that the Baalbek temple complex had served as one of their launching pads.<sup>51</sup> Fantastic stories emerged out of more recent history as well. German and Italian engineers and scientists came forward claiming exclusive, insider knowledge that both Hitler and Mussolini had sponsored the development of flying saucer technology during the Second World War.<sup>52</sup> These accounts were taken by some as evidence lending credence to contentions that Hitler and a group of his scientific advisors had somehow survived the war and were designing and testing UFOs from a base in the Himalayas or the South Pole.<sup>53</sup>

Esoteric speculation about extraterrestrials could also follow transatlantic colonial pathways as well, as a work by UFOlogist Edgar Sievers (1916–?) demonstrated. Sievers was a product of Imperial Germany's legacy of colonialism, born in the diamond town of Lüderitzbucht in German South-West Africa (present-day Namibia), near the concentration camp on Shark Island, where the German colonial government had organised the detention and extermination of the Herero and Nama during the uprising there in 1904–1908.<sup>54</sup> By the time Sievers was growing up, however, both South-West Africa and his hometown were undergoing profound changes. As a result, Lüderitzbucht became a transcolonial meeting place for speculators and labourers from the region looking for opportunities in the booming diamond, railway and shipping businesses.<sup>55</sup>

After spending his youth in South-West Africa, Sievers studied philosophy and psychology at the University of Würzburg, going on to try his hand at writing poems, plays and stories. At some point after the Second World War, his interest in UFOs was sparked. He then became a member of the British Flying Saucer Bureau, an organisation founded in November 1953 and dedicated, in the words of its first president, to assist 'in dispelling any feelings of anxiety or hysteria consequent upon the arrival of visitors from space'.<sup>56</sup>

In 1955, Sievers published *Flying Saucers Over South Africa*, his reflections on the meaning of the worldwide appearance of UFOs and the first German-language book-length contribution to the burgeoning field of UFology. In Sievers' view, UFOs presented humanity with a series of riddles, and official pronouncements on the subject hardly cleared up matters. 'There are Flying Saucers, yet Flying Saucers are not Flying Saucers. What is going on here? Does this really only revolve around optical illusions, misunderstandings, misguided beliefs, or political machinations?'<sup>57</sup> Sievers drew from a famous biblical parable in observing that flying saucer sightings had created as many 'doubting Thomases' as believers. As a result, the mystery surrounding UFOs had divided the world into those who 'believe and [those who] cannot believe', a fissure that cut across families, associations, companies, authorities and agencies.<sup>58</sup>

In aiming to help repair this split, Sievers relied on the books of Keyhoe, Leslie and Adamski as well as news reports for his source material. In *Flying Saucers Over South Africa*, he begins by first considering natural explanations offered for the sightings, such as weather and Soviet rocket testing, but dismisses each one as unpersuasive. Following the methods of other first-generation UFOlogists, Sievers

then analyses reports of flying saucer sightings for consistencies and patterns and then speculates on the possible energy source being used to power the aircraft (e.g., magnets, fuel, levitation).<sup>59</sup>

Sievers eventually concludes that the only feasible explanation for the flying saucer phenomenon was visitation by beings from outer space, whom he referred to as 'planetides'. This, of course, raised its own question: why were they here? The answer, he contended, could be gleaned from the testimony of those witnesses claiming to have had alien contact.

In recent years, a staggering number of claims have accumulated about the saucer problem, in which what is contended is nothing less than the fact that there has been direct and constant contact with saucer pilots and beings from other worlds. The latter have offered tidings, pronouncements, and explanations, whose content is of absolute, signal importance for the salvation of humanity.<sup>60</sup>

But these alien declarations came with an added twist. 'At closer inspection, we find that the logic in these pronouncements leaves much to be desired. Instead of conceptual clarity and genuine meaning, we encounter obscurity and meaningless nonsense'.<sup>61</sup>

Thus, according to Sievers, the extraterrestrial visitors were undoubtedly heralds, but ones whose messages remained frustratingly opaque and mystifying. And therein, in this fundamental miscommunication, resided the true purpose of the recent encounters with flying saucers. The aliens were preparing the groundwork for human beings to be able to 'occult-psychically' understand their message. 'They are waiting', Sievers concluded. 'They are waiting for our sign and our call'.<sup>62</sup> More likely than not, he predicted, they would now be appearing more frequently, in an effort to help earthlings accustom themselves to their presence. And over time, the division between human believers and unbelievers would simply disappear.

Sievers focus on communication was perhaps, in part, a function of his status as a *Südwester*, a product of the colonial minority's peculiar sensitivities to language and community-building following the First World War.<sup>63</sup> In any event, however, Sievers effectively gave voice to the sentiments of many who were convinced that flying saucers were extraterrestrial in origin and that they presented the world with a mystery requiring interpretation. What he offered was an eschatological and Christian reading that would become a standard part of the repertoire of narratives about UFOs in the 1950s, one that treated the flying saucer phenomenon as a matter of faith and placed UFOs and their creators in the position of superhuman heralds bearing a message of hope and salvation.

It needs to be kept in mind, however, that while the mainstream press and public intellectuals in West Germany heeded fanciful stories like these, they just as – if not more – often dismissed as preposterous claims of alien or resurrected Nazi reconnaissance missions. Ridicule often came in the form of puns in humorous cartoons or derisive stories about 'flying bananas' and 'flying teacups' being reported.<sup>64</sup> Analyses by scientists and military investigators concluding that flying saucers were nothing more than optical illusions, confabulations and hoaxes were regularly cited.<sup>65</sup> Popularisers of astronomy were especially vocal in relegating claims of extraterrestrial visitations to the status of chimaeras.<sup>66</sup> And the famous V-2 rocket engineer and American space programme developer Wernher von Braun even

went on record to vent his disdain for wild claims about UFOs, stating, 'I am convinced that in our era, which is so proud of its scientific enlightenment, it should be completely absurd to call upon medieval methods of magic, when one does not fully understand a natural phenomenon'.<sup>67</sup>

Thus, during the 1950s, the West German press offered an open forum for discussing and weighing the reality and meaning of flying saucers. While an attitude of scepticism was perhaps most prominent, there was no clear consensus on what to make of the UFOs and their makers. Journalists, scientists, engineers, government officials, publishers, and public intellectuals of all sorts offered a range of viewpoints and narratives, extracting lessons from the mystery. Were flying saucers a case of irrational superstition run amok? A demonstration of human technological achievement? A warning of impending catastrophe? An augury of hope?

While there was no single, homogeneous message in all this, what many West German sources expressed was the sense that a familiar world was disappearing and a new one fast approaching. Some greeted this with a sense of nostalgia and alarm. Writing in 1960, the physician and conservative cultural critic Siegfried Georg Fudalla situated the flying saucer craze alongside the contemporaneous enthusiasm for astrology, hypnotism and reincarnation. The popular interest in such esoterica, according to Fudalla, represented nothing short of a pathological attempt at ameliorating the 'profound dissatisfaction' experienced by many at the time, a malaise created by a society 'lacking organic structure'.<sup>68</sup>

Others, however, saw reason for optimism. Flying saucers expanded the compass of human imagination, according to one essayist in 1957, blurring the distinction between fact and fiction, reality and utopia. 'Outer space is getting closer', the 'distinction between a "Martian" and an airplane pilot' becoming harder to draw.<sup>69</sup> To the folklorist Hermann Bausinger in 1960, flying saucers were an 'exotic' expression of a more pervasive 'dissolution of the horizon', as he described it. 'Disempowerment, aestheticisation, expatriation, liberation' were the new engines of change, thrusting contemporary culture into a utopian world with fewer spatial or creative boundaries.<sup>70</sup>

### **An American panic: East German perspectives on flying saucers**

Flying saucers indeed knew no boundaries. A global phenomenon, UFOs were also sighted and reported on the eastern side of the iron curtain as well.<sup>71</sup> In East Germany, however, where the mass media was strictly censored, press coverage of flying saucers was homogenised to suit overtly political purposes.

Three East German newspapers provide a glimpse into the ways in which observers operating within 'real existing socialism' made sense of the UFO phenomenon during the GDR's first decade. *Neues Deutschland* was the official party organ of the Socialist Unity Party (SED). *Neue Zeit* served as the Christian Democratic Union's (CDU) party paper and enjoyed the strongest circulation among the four non-socialist 'block parties'. Finally, there was the *Berliner Zeitung*, a newspaper, though subordinate to the SED, which was more open and critical than the various party newspapers and with a circulation of several hundred thousand.

The tone and thrust of East German press coverage of UFOs was set already in June 1949 in what may be the first public reference to the phenomenon there. In a piece in the paper *Neues Deutschland*, the wave of flying saucers sightings in the

USA since 1947 – some 250, according to officials – was portrayed as nothing more than a hysterical response to meteors and weather balloons. The resulting panic, however, was considered to be the fault of the American government and media, which sought to whip up anti-Soviet sentiment, in order to justify the country's rearmament and weapons export programmes. The article concludes by referring to the well-publicised case of the former Secretary of Defense James Forrestal (September 1947–March 1949), who was committed to a psychiatric facility and later committed suicide after, it was falsely reported, running out onto the streets of New York City one night shouting that the Russians were attacking. 'Maybe there is something to this [flying saucer] thing, after all', the paper sarcastically explained.

There once was a man in the USA who crawled under the bed and committed suicide because he saw the Red Army marching down 5th Avenue. That man was the War Minister. Shouldn't we expect there to be 250 of just these very types among the lower ranks? 250 Forrestals – that wouldn't be a terribly large number, given the size of the anti-Soviet hub-bub in the American press.<sup>72</sup>

Time and again in East Germany, flying saucer sightings and alien encounters were characterised as a manifestly American proclivity, a kind of popular delusion.<sup>73</sup> UFOs were, as one article put it, America's 'newest sport'.<sup>74</sup> *Neue Zeit* relegated its first story on the subject on a report of an American man's encounter with a flying saucer and its crew to a section of the paper dedicated to weird and humorous news items from the world press.<sup>75</sup>

The American craze was apparently infectious as well. When it was reported that West Berliners in the American sector of the city were claiming to have witnessed silver disks hovering in the skies overhead, the *Berliner Zeitung* mockingly questioned their sanity. 'Well', the paper noted, 'we've known for a long time that some of the people in West Berlin no longer have all their saucers in the cupboard (*nicht mehr alle Tassen im Schrank haben*)'.<sup>76</sup>

By the late 1950s, the association of flying saucers with American and capitalist excess and superficiality had become commonplace enough for films and stage productions to regularly use the trope of visiting aliens from another planet to satirise the West.<sup>77</sup> And when the first European Congress of UFOlogists convened in Wiesbaden in October 1960, *Neue Zeit* covered the event and proved especially dismissive of claims by contactees that aliens had come to help save earth from nuclear destruction. Apparently there was no longer any reason 'to rack one's brain about banning nuclear weapons or to even worry about such trivial matters like worldwide disarmament', the paper caustically pointed out. 'For the beings from outer space will take care of it anyway one day, and everything will turn out for the best!'<sup>78</sup>

As laughable as all this was supposed to seem, however, something quite ominous supposedly lay behind this folly. In communist East Germany, the flying saucer phenomenon was easily fit into a Marxist–Leninist global binary world view at the time, according to which America represented an exploitive, warmongering and conspiratorial force with imperialist ambitions.<sup>79</sup> Citing a Moscow newspaper as its source, an article in 1950 explained, 'The reports about "Flying Saucers" have been deliberately spread by American military officials, in order to extort larger amounts from American taxpayers'.<sup>80</sup> Placing an article about a UFO sighting

around Munich alongside pieces on allied army exercises in Lower Saxony and the founding in Bochum of a new version of the veteran's organisation Stahlhelm, the SED's party organ effectively linked the flying saucer phenomenon to reactionary militarism.<sup>81</sup>

This East German view of the flying saucers as the brainchild of American warmongers found its literary expression in writer Friedrich Wolf's (1888–1953) final novel *Menetekel or The Flying Saucers*. By the time it was published in 1952, Wolf had established himself as a leading cultural voice in the German communist movement. A practising physician, he had become a well-known dramatist during the Weimar Republic. Joining the Communist Party (KPD) in 1928, Wolf was active in writing and staging anti-fascist works. With the Nazi seizure of power, he left Germany, first going to Moscow, then working for the International Brigade in Spain. After spending some time in a French detention camp, he went back to the USSR in 1941. Wolf eventually returned to Germany in 1945, where he played a prominent role in the reconstruction of the arts in East Germany and served as the GDR's first ambassador to Poland.

Set against the contemporary backdrop of the cold war, *Menetekel or The Flying Saucers* tells the story of the American industrialist Cecil Clerk and the powerful company he runs, the Cecil Clerk Corporation (CCC). A producer of bomb shelters and bunkers, Clerk is inspired to adopt a new and aggressive marketing campaign after reports of flying saucer sightings spark a panic in the USA. Clerk and his associates exploit news stories about UFOs, subway explosions, the Korean War and Soviet atomic bomb tests to deliberately fuel Americans' growing sense of insecurity. In a newspaper ad, CCC tries to steer consumers to their bomb-proof shelters:

Million of American ask themselves, when I hear a quiet, invisible buzzing in the sky that's not like our airplanes, what is it? Is it Flying Saucers? And why is it always coming from the east? The government says nothing. It has its reasons. But you, what do you do? Of course, you run to the cellar when the alarm goes off. But will this cellar really provide you protection, when the first atomic bombs fall on our city?<sup>82</sup>

CCC's plans are eventually thwarted, however, by a growing group of young peace activists, who make common cause with disgruntled American workers and soldiers.

The title of the novel draws on a famous scene in the biblical *Book of Daniel*. While attending a banquet of the Babylonian king Belshazzar, the prophet Daniel proves able to decipher the meaning of strange writing – the words 'Mene Mene Tekel Upharsin' – suddenly appearing on the wall to be a warning of the impending doom of the sovereign and his empire. Wolf used this legend to fashion a modern-day allegory of American capitalism's cynical appetite for profit and domination. In a climactic episode, a fiery preacher warns a crowd,

Our age itself writes its *Menetekel* in the skies, over Hiroshima, Bikini, over Korea. And already "Collier's Magazine" openly threatens Moscow with atomic bombs. Do you want to wait until such bombs blaze over New York, Chicago, Boston, and Washington? ... That's the very reason we must let *Menetekel* blaze in our hearts, before it's too late!<sup>83</sup>

Wolf clearly kept up with the flying saucer phenomenon in the USA. Famous UFO sightings near Fort Knox and Tucson make an appearance in the novel, along

with a reference to the rumoured James Forrestal incident. To Wolf, the belief in flying saucers was but an extension of American red-baiting. Contrasting the attitudes of, on the one hand, industrialists, astrologers and scientologists with those, on the other hand, of scientists and young people, his novel understands cold war hysteria as a product of the ruling bourgeoisie's attempt to undermine rationality. As one character puts it, 'Panic also has its system in the human psyche. Familiar logic is thrown overboard. The ludicrous becomes the probable. Reason is thrown back and forth like a plank being tossed by waves of rumour'.<sup>84</sup>

As it was in the West, then, the appearance of UFOs was explicitly historicised in the GDR in relation to the cold war, with the wave of sightings routinely dismissed as the manifestation of an American frenzy. East German commentators consistently appealed to both longstanding stereotypes and communist doctrine to contrast American – and, by extension, West German – ballyhoo about flying saucers with Soviet bloc cultural achievements like Sputnik.<sup>85</sup> As the Christian Democratic newspaper *Neue Zeit* explained in April 1950, the self-appointed 'West', with its dreams of 'superbombs and "Flying Saucers"' and its culture awash with 'filthy literature', could hardly lay claim to being the guardian of civilisation.<sup>86</sup> The paper made the point even more forcefully a few weeks later:

In the GDR, there are no crime films that can be used by the likes of the Gladow Gang [a famous Berlin gang] as a kind seminar [in crime], no pornographic literature, no women's wrestling and dance marathons, no abuse of hypnosis and suggestion, astrology, palm-reading, and clairvoyance. There is no mass hysteria over dubious prophets like Gröning, no mania over 'Flying Saucers' and similar delusions. The key for the cultural will of the GDR is more the endeavour to let the mass of working people take part in the products of culture, to which no one here any longer enjoys any special privileges.<sup>87</sup>

### **Alien influences and the early career of a transatlantic rumour**

In 1958, Swiss psychologist Carl Jung (1875–1961) published *A Modern Myth: Of Things Seen in the Sky*, the first scholarly German-language monograph on the subject.<sup>88</sup> By that time, Jung had been collecting information about flying saucer sightings for about a decade. As he explained to a Swiss newspaper in July 1954, he himself never personally saw a UFO, but he was convinced that 'it is not just a rumour, *something is seen*'.<sup>89</sup> In a subsequent letter Jung wrote in August 1958 to Donald Keyhoe, author of the *The Flying Saucers Are Real*, Jung described his perspective on the subject. 'As I am a scientist', he explained, 'I only say what I can prove and reserve any judgment in any case where I doubt my competence. Thus I said: "Things are seen, but one does not know what"'.<sup>90</sup>

For Jung, the fact that appearances of flying saucers were frequent, strange, indeterminate and contradictory made them ideal objects for fantasy and speculation. The rumours, visions, dreams and graphic representations of these 'things seen in the skies' were all instances of these flights of conjecture. In turn, they served as sources providing insight into the state of mind of the contemporary world.<sup>91</sup>

Like so many others, Jung explicitly historicised the flying saucer phenomenon by linking them to American faddishness and the cold war. Nevertheless, relying on published reports, conversations with witnesses, historical texts and interviews with

patients about their dreams, he found certain elements repeated in narratives about these 'visionary rumours' of UFOs. UFOs moved in a superhuman fashion and could appear weightless, they refrained from doing harm, and they frequently appeared near airfields and nuclear installations. Together, these components helped shape a widely circulated account of flying saucers and their creators. The objects were – so the stories went – the achievement of highly intelligent beings from another world, who, having witnessed the carnage of the Second World War and the proliferation of nuclear weapons, were poised to benevolently intervene in human affairs.<sup>92</sup>

Such speculation, according to Jung, represented nothing less than the making of a modern myth or legend. The fact that this 'living myth' revolved around a promise of redemption was no accident, Jung contended, given the dire state of the cold war world. 'The present world situation is calculated as never before to arouse expectations of a redeeming, supernatural event', he noted. And though contemporary individuals sought metaphysical hope in the face of nuclear catastrophe, secular modernity was ultimately resistant to occult and mystical forms of religious reassurance. The flying saucer phenomenon, then, provided a relatively rational and necessarily scientific cover to express the hope in rescue from God. 'Undeterred by rationalistic criticism, it thrusts itself to the forefront in the form of a symbolic rumour, accompanied and reinforced by the appropriate visions, and thus activates an archetype that has always expressed order, deliverance, salvation, and wholeness'.<sup>93</sup>

Jung's book was greeted mostly positively by the mainstream German press, which considered him to be an esteemed elder statesman of psychology.<sup>94</sup> His perspective was coloured, of course, by his analytical project and his own affinity for mystical experiences.<sup>95</sup> But his take successfully captured something often overlooked by those who have emphasised the cold war roots of the UFO phenomenon: the speculation, hope and enthusiasm frequently surrounding flying saucer sightings during the late 1940s and 1950s. My survey of German coverage of UFOs during the first decade and a half following the end of the Second World War reveals that early interpretations of the phenomenon were, in fact, more substantively diverse than has been commonly acknowledged. Rather than offering a relatively uniform narrative grounded in cold war fear and paranoia, as Americanists have sometimes claimed, German accounts exhibited a range of attitudes.

To be sure, international relations and the cold war figured prominently in German responses to sightings. The very earliest reports demonstrate that flying saucer sightings were not indigenous to Germany. Initial accounts came from abroad, with the widespread assumption being that the UFOs were the products of foreign – either American or Soviet – technology. And even after the first sightings began to pop up in Germany from summer 1947 onwards, much of the publicity surrounding the flying saucers was generated by foreign reports and reportage.

The USA was the primary vector in disseminating the notion of flying saucers and visitors from outer space, and it was widely perceived as being so at the time. Again and again, stories and images from American civilian and military sources served as the inspiration for observers in central Europe to report on and analyse UFOs. Differing assessments and conflicting information from official sources only helped fuel public speculation and debate about UFOs. Moreover, it is clear that longstanding stereotypes and anti-American attitudes persistently played a formative

role in how the flying saucer phenomenon was understood. Throughout the late 1940s and 1950s, many in Germany considered flying saucer sightings to be a characteristically American craze, attributable to that society's supposedly deep-seated shallowness, gullibility and excitability.

Geopolitics were also a factor in why UFOs were so closely associated with America. The flying saucer phenomenon was not only global, it was decidedly political. From the start, flying saucers were understood in relationship to war, specifically the aerial warfare conducted during the Second World War. The American and British bombing campaigns, Nazi V-rocket technology and the Soviet capture of Peenemünde were regularly invoked to help explain UFOs. The cold war, especially the spectre of nuclear war, however, increasingly assumed the spotlight. Both believers and sceptics alike of extraterrestrial visitation saw in the development and proliferation of atomic bombs a key reason for the sudden appearance of flying saucers.

One can draw comparisons here with another defeated postwar nation – Japan – where the release of the science fiction film *Gojira* (*Godzilla*) in 1954 likewise offered an opportunity to publicly question American power and nuclear proliferation.<sup>96</sup> But whereas *Gojira* also gave voice to pent up Japanese nationalist sentiment, the anti-Americanism surrounding UFOs in West Germany was expressed not in nationalist, but rather in cultural, terms, contrasting a sober and civilised Europe with a fickle and superficial USA. Only in East Germany were flying saucer sightings linked to America as a way to underscore the legitimacy and superiority of its postwar socialist state.

The flying saucer phenomenon in Germany thus represented a transatlantic cold war rumour. It was, however, a rumour of unusual resilience – especially in comparison with earlier airship scares – one whose attributed meanings extended beyond its immediate cold war context. It is this durability and plasticity that gave flying saucer accounts the weight of folklore and legend, with the capacity to offer multiple lessons for a variety of audiences, lessons often more subversive and populist than official and elite versions of the truth.<sup>97</sup>

Studying successive accounts of the supposed UFO crash around Roswell, New Mexico in 1947, anthropologist Charles Ziegler found that the story was transmitted in a punctuated fashion, with written, secondary versions effectively refining, standardising and rationalising oral versions.<sup>98</sup> A similar dynamic was at work in how tales of flying saucers were reported in postwar Germany. While strange airship sightings and scares had a history dating back at least a century, the term 'flying saucer' quickly became an international meme, a publicly acknowledged 'black box' into which strange things in the sky could be fit and classified. Media coverage at the time shows that information about UFOs spread through an interplay of word-of-mouth, press articles, novels, reportages, advertisements, comics and films. As accounts circulated and moved from rumours to news to editorials to marketing tools, the written and visual shorthand of 'flying saucers' provided a stabilising narrative influence on the centrifugal forces inherent to reports coming from multiple, international and often spurious sources.

Shrouded in mystery, flying saucers were seen by many as posing unanswered questions, the holders of vital secrets. Some believed these secrets to be more or less mundane (the products of pranksters, weather patterns or military R&D), while others treated UFOs as sacred signs of paranormal or metaphysical significance.

And the rise of sightings provoked a range of responses, from marvel to dread to dismay to derision. Across this spectrum of reactions, certain themes reappeared time and again: war and peace, destruction and survival, despair and hope. Still, while it is partly true that ‘by translocating its earthly obsessions into the infinite vastness of the universe, postwar West-European society entertained and acted upon the hope of retrieving cosmic transcendence’,<sup>99</sup> for many early observers, the secrets flying saucers held were decidedly more terrestrial and pedestrian than that.

Thus, explicitly geopolitical, mundane and supernatural stories and explanations about flying saucers coexisted alongside one another in postwar Germany. At times, these narratives clashed with one another: believers in alien visitation, for instance, expressing doubts about natural or purely political interpretations, while sceptics disparaged conspiracy and extraterrestrial theories. Similar to what has been found to be the case in the USA at the time, however, the cold war was almost always present in discussions, most often quite overtly. But what both terrestrial- and extraterrestrial-based accounts of UFOs in Germany generally shared – and in contrast to the USA – was an abiding invocation of ‘America’ as the source and driver of the flying saucer phenomenon.

Arguing that a prevailing ‘UFO taboo’ has all but squelched any serious investigation into the status of UFOs, political scientists Alexander Wendt and Raymond Duvall have recently asserted that reports of UFOs were historically met by consistent denial and silence from government and scientific authorities. ‘UFO ignorance’, they insist, ‘is not simply a gap in our knowledge, like the cure for cancer, but something actively reproduced by taboo’.<sup>100</sup> The case of postwar Germany, however, gives reason to question and qualify their portrait of knowledge about UFOs.

For one thing, if there has been a general ‘UFO taboo’, it must be conceded that it has hardly been anywhere near as historically effective as other kinds of cultural taboos, as the massive literature on the subject attests.<sup>101</sup> And while there is evidence of states denying knowledge of UFOs and scholars dismissing the phenomenon as unworthy of investigation, this has not stopped any number of other recognised and self-identified experts from offering their insights and speculations. Far from ignorance or comprehensive silence, the flying saucer phenomenon already during its first decade and a half generated highly public musings among journalists, public intellectuals, scientists, engineers and military and civil officials about the nature of these objects and about standards of proof.

Wendt and Duvall are quite correct, however, in noting that the mysterious and random qualities of UFOs have given them a haunting aura that appears to challenge national sovereignty. From the first reported sightings after the Second World War, their uncanniness has helped reinforce the view that UFOs are alien or foreign (*fremd*) in some manner. Little wonder then, as anthropologist Christopher Roth has observed that the discipline of UFology has had much in common with anthropology, particularly in the mutual interest in understanding racial diversity and difference.<sup>102</sup>

A look beyond the USA and the field of UFology, across a range of responses to reports of UFOs in Germany during the late 1940s and 1950s, reveals another aspect of the phenomenon. It is clear that German observers were, like others, stirred by the alien nature of flying saucers. Their interest in the objects, however, remained firmly anchored in a disquiet about the recent war and its cold aftermath. In the two

Germanies at least, flying saucers primarily functioned as cyphers for acknowledging, interpreting, and debating foreign – and most of the time, specifically American – influences on postwar societies having recently been forced to surrender much of their former ability to shape their own collective fates.

### Acknowledgements

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