

# THE RUSSIAN CONNECTION

## UFO UPDATE

By James Oberg

**F**or the past few months, grocery shoppers across the United States have been titillated by banner headlines in the *National Enquirer*. "Crippled UFO Orbits Earth," one proclaims. "First UFO to Inflict Damage on a City," "Aliens on the Moon when We Landed," "UFO Base on Saturn Moon," others announce.

The mainstream UFO movement has had the good sense to ignore these sensational claims (while often trusting the sources on other matters), but the public may well be wondering just what is going on. Few people realize that these headlines can be traced from the *Enquirer's* editorial offices in Florida to suburban Los Angeles, and then across half a world—to Moscow!

UFOs are a sensitive topic in the Soviet Union. Such sensational headlines would never be printed there. The government officially denies alien visitations and blames such tales—with some justice—on "Western yellow journalism." The Soviet public, however, eagerly devours UFO rumors that rank among the

wildest in the world, and in practice the regime appears to tolerate this as a safety valve for ideological dissent.

The reigning czar of the Russian ufologists is Feliks Zigel, an astronomy lecturer at the Moscow Aviation Institute. Zigel has written popular books and articles on UFOs, on a Soviet "bigfoot" in the Caucasus Mountains, and on similar topics. He is also the reputed author of a two-volume UFO "lecture" now circulating in the underground (*samizdat*) literature.

The cast includes some other interesting—even bizarre—characters. Science-fiction author Aleksandr Kazantsev is one. An "ancient-astronaut" enthusiast who predates Von Däniken, he claims that "God" is a case of mistaken identity that originated with alien cosmonauts—a notion encouraged in official antireligious propaganda.

Aleksey Zolotov, a provincial university professor, enthusiastically touts the idea that the Tunguska explosion in 1908 was a spaceship crash. He has vowed not to shave his Tolstoyan beard until the world admits he's right. Zolotov is also into body

auras, faith healing, and altering the speed of wristwatches held in his hands.

Two physicists are also active in the USSR's UFO cult: Vladimir Azhazha and Sergey Bozhich, whose specialty seems to be embellishing foreign UFO reports and fobbing them off as Russian originals.

Reports from these Russian enthusiasts—Western newsmen are delighted to find Russians willing to talk on the record about anything—are considered highly credible by Western ufologists when they appear in UFO magazines and newsletters. They are written up in the *National Enquirer* by the Russians' American contact man, Russian-speaking Henry Gris (pronounced Gree), of Los Angeles. Gris is an editor for the tabloid and coauthor of several books dealing with UFOs and parapsychology.

Gris seems to quote the Russians with substantial accuracy, but he takes liberties with reality. Instead of identifying his sources as a small coterie of obscure enthusiasts, he turns them into "top Russian scientists" and "leading Russian physicists." Check the indexes to the world's scientific literature, however. These men's names are notably absent, though tens of thousands of genuine Soviet scientists are listed.

Their UFO stories are as questionable as their credentials. Take, for example, the flying-saucer attack on the city of Petrozavodsk on September 29, 1977. "First UFO to Inflict Damage on a City," the *National Enquirer* bannered it on April 18, 1978. Within hours after the story broke in the West, it had been solved: The jellyfish-shaped "UFO" was really the sunlit exhaust trails from the predawn launch of a spy satellite at a secret space center nearby.

The Russian populace could never be given that explanation, of course, and UFO buffs in the USSR rushed to embrace the case. "As far as I am concerned, it was a spaceship from outer space, carrying out reconnaissance," said Kazantsev.

Zolotov declared, "In my opinion, the object was a typical flying saucer. The available reports left no doubt whatsoever about that in my mind."



A purported alien craft seen during a peak of UFO activity over Switzerland in 1975.

Zigel agreed. "Without a doubt," he said, "it had all the features." And Azhazha was more specific: "In my opinion, what was seen over Petrozavodsk was either a UFO, a carrier of high intelligence with crew and passengers, or it was a field of energy created by such a UFO."

The tale of the phantom alien satellite ("Crippled UFO Orbits Earth," July 17, 1979) seems to have been simple plagiarism. Bozhich claimed to have spotted fragments of an alien spacecraft circling high above our planet, a derelict that blew up exactly 23 years ago last December 8. Unfortunately, Bozhich was obviously quoting from an American scientist's article, which in January 1969 suggested that a natural moonlet had broken up and left debris in orbit. When another American scientist pointed out the paper — Bozhich hadn't mentioned it — the *National Enquirer* proclaimed that it corroborated the Russian story.

The Apollo UFO fable ("Aliens on the Moon when We Landed," September 11, 1979) went through several metamorphoses across the world. Azhazha was the main source for the *National Enquirer* story of a NASA cover-up; somehow he neglected to mention that his tale of astronauts secretly photographing flying saucers on the moon was derived from a French book by Maurice Chatelain, published here as *Our Ancestors Came from Outer Space* in 1978.

That book, in turn, was based on faked "space photos" released in 1974 by the Cosmic Brotherhood Associates, a fringe UFO cult in Japan. The pictures were forged in order to illustrate an originally Canadian hoax, which was so transparent that most UFO groups in North America rejected it in 1969.

Each of the participants in this fraud added his own personal touches to the story. The result was a family of derivatives, which the *National Enquirer* presented as independent, reliable, mutually corroborative accounts.

Bozhich's fantasies reached a new extreme in the most recent story, "UFO Base on Saturn Moon," published November 13, 1979. According to this tale, Soviet observatories had monitored alien radio signals. Their origin had been pinpointed, he added, by radar that had tracked the direction of ascending UFOs: toward Saturn. One of the major confirmations was the trajectory of the Petrozavodsk UFO — the one that turns out to have been a spy satellite.

Cynics saw that Bozhich's claims were either timed to cash in on the spectacular success of America's Pioneer Saturn probe or were a reaction to the suggestion that Russian radio interference had scrambled NASA's data on Titan, Saturn's largest moon and the alleged site of the UFO base. The more gullible UFO buffs did not.

Standing opposite the USSR's UFO rumor factory is a lone Soviet official, Dr.

Vladimir V. Migulin, of the Academy of Sciences' Ionospheric Physics Laboratory. His job ostensibly is to catalog incoming reports and coordinate Soviet research. He spends much of his time trying to reassure the Russian public — a hopeless task.

The case of the Petrozavodsk UFO has been especially difficult for Dr. Migulin: He denies that it could have been a "true UFO," but state security regulations forbid him to announce that it was a Soviet military spaceship. Poor Migulin is left with nothing but scientific mumbo jumbo about geomagnetic disturbances and chemiluminescent smog. The staid scientist is caught in a UFO-KGB crossfire that cannot end happily for him.

To understand the Russian UFO scene, we must appreciate how small the cast of characters really is. Russian names are spelled so oddly — and are so often misspelled by the American press — that few people even try to read them. Hence, repeated quotations give the false

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◉ Soviet observatories had monitored alien radio signals, and radar used to track ascending UFOs had pinpointed their origin: Titan, a moon of Saturn. ◉

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impression that an entire generation of "top Russian scientists" is taking turns testifying to the reality of UFOs.

Remember that the tabloids are only recycling the same handful of obscure Russian UFO enthusiasts next time the headlines scream about another Earth-shaking revelation from Moscow. Chances are, we'll have seen those names somewhere before.

Back on this side of the Iron Curtain: Drawings of UFOs reported over the last 30 years show almost an infinite variety. Either each UFO pilot has his own customizing kit, or the UFOs, in the words of ufologist Robert Sheaffer, "are made of Silly Putty."

Or maybe the hundreds of UFO sketches on hand don't really show what the witnesses saw. That's the suspicion of Dr. Richard F. Haines, a research scientist at the NASA Ames Research Center, near San Francisco. Haines, author of *Observing UFOs* (Nelson-Hall, Chicago, 1978), is a specialist in visual perception and a scientific consultant for the Center for UFO Studies and the Aerial

Phenomena Research Organization.

Haines believes the UFO phenomenon must be studied scientifically, and he reported one of his most fascinating experiments, a study of UFO perception, at a special seminar presented by the American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics. The experiment was a simple one: Haines asked UFO witnesses to sketch what they had seen and compared the results with UFO drawings by people who had never seen one.

Oddly enough, impartial judges couldn't tell the sketches apart. Drawings from the two groups had the same general features, and those from people who had never seen a UFO contained just as much "information" and detail as eyewitness renderings.

"The similarity of the drawings," Haines believes, "suggests that these participants hold a stereotyped image of what a UFO is supposed to look like. Almost everyone has seen a photograph or drawing of a UFO at some time, and the memory strongly influences subsequent drawings."

But shouldn't someone who has actually seen a UFO be able to give more details about their appearance than people who have seen only a picture? You'd think so.

This brings up an interesting possibility: A UFO skeptic could reasonably suggest that there is no way any preconceived image of a UFO could overwhelm the added details from a sighting unless the UFO is largely made up of preconceived images rather than external data. In other words, something cues the witness's mind to conjure up convincing details from memory. The result would be a truly imaginary UFO sighting whose appearance, honestly reported, had nothing at all to do with the form of the original stimulus.

Haines hopes that this ambiguity can be resolved by preparing recognition charts showing varied UFO shapes and sizes. Witnesses could then select from the charts to compose the image they recall much as a crime witness builds a picture of the criminal with a police identification kit. But if their perceptions of the UFO have already been short-circuited, such a scientific approach may still be worthless.

"It should go without saying," Haines concludes, "that more research is needed on the basic perceptual processes." Such research should go a long way toward demonstrating whether or not many UFOs are "all in the mind" after all.

The pity is, if the research eventually proves that something is there, it will in all probability impede rather than accelerate the process of the acceptance of UFOs by traditional science. This is because the new theories will most likely be championed by those ufologists already badly discredited by too many endorsements of what subsequently turned out to be hoaxes. They would be right only by accident, not by their own merit. ☞