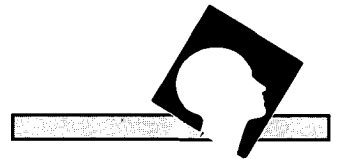


Paranormal Pandemonium in the Soviet Union

PAUL KURTZ

Last summer, I was among the leaders of a dialogue with the Soviet Union held in Moscow.¹ Cosponsored by the International Humanist and Ethical Union and the Soviet Academy of Social Sciences, this dialogue included a delegation of 14 Western humanists. The main topic under discussion was the conflict between humanism and atheism, and the humanist defense of freedom of conscience against religious repression. Our delegation was struck by the tremendous growth of religiosity in the Soviet Union and the apparent shift in Soviet policy to permit religious freedom. Because there was also a noticeable increase in paranormal beliefs, I met with several Soviet scientists in order to establish regular communication between them and the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP). We are of course glad to cooperate with skeptics throughout the world who wish to use scientific methods to examine paranormal claims—although our initial enthusiasm about the growth of such groups in China was later dampened by the Chinese government's repression of the student movement.² We hope that the Soviet skeptical movement will continue to develop under Gorbachev.

Two skeptics groups are being established in the Soviet Union. These groups have expressed the intention of working closely with CSICOP and the SKEPTICAL INQUIRER in scientifically scrutinizing claims of the paranormal. One of these groups is associated with the influential Soviet journal *Science and Religion*, which has been publishing skeptical studies of paranormal claims in its pages and will now do



Magical thinking is on the rise among the Soviet people. Will the formation of two skeptics groups provide an antidote?

so by drawing on the resources of the worldwide skeptical movement. Among the topics they have examined are astrology, parapsychology, and faith-healing. *Science and Religion* has a circulation of more than 500,000 and is published by Znaniye (the Knowledge Society), a large publishing organization. The second group, sponsored by the Perspektiva Scientific Center in Kiev, is still in its formative stage but has requested and been granted permission to translate articles from the SKEPTICAL INQUIRER into Russian.

II

The need for skeptical inquiry in the Soviet Union is apparent to anyone who has followed the reports of psychic phenomena coming from that country—and our efforts are at best only a modest correction to what appears to be a paranormal tidal-wave. For many years stories about “paranormal breakthroughs” behind the Iron Curtain have been filtering through to the West. The book by Sheila Ostrander and Lynn Schroeder, *Psychic Discoveries Behind the Iron Curtain*,³ has been much quoted; moreover, several Western paranormal buffs have warned of the “psychic arms race,” claiming that because of the alleged military use of psychic powers the KGB had been spending large sums of money on paranormal research. For example, Russell Targ and Harold Puthoff, two American psychic researchers, claim that they have been conducting “remote viewing experiments” with Soviet colleagues with significant results. Most of these reports in our view are exaggerated and should be taken with a grain of salt. So far as scientific researchers associated with CSICOP have been able to ascertain, parapsychologists working with the military

on both sides of the former “Iron Curtain” have not made any scientific breakthroughs. The pages of the SKEPTICAL INQUIRER have published reports of these skeptical conclusions.

The Soviet establishment for a long time looked askance at paranormal claims. They are contrary to Marxist ideology and so have been heavily censored. Nonetheless, it is clear that in the Gorbachev era of *glasnost* and *perestroika*, a veritable paranormal avalanche has descended on the Soviet Union. One science writer in Leningrad, a regular reader of the SKEPTICAL INQUIRER, has written to us saying that “paranormal pandemonium” has broken out in the Soviet Union and that he finds the SKEPTICAL INQUIRER a necessary antidote. In many ways the Soviet Union is aping the worst excesses of the sensationalist mass media in the West, which is often more interested in selling bizarre claims to a gullible public than in ascertaining the truth. This is no doubt the price that a freer society has to pay for freedom of expression.

Although the Marxist-Leninist regime for a long time frowned upon paranormal claims as “bourgeois” or “idealistic spiritualism,” such reports are now common in the Soviet media. The popular morning television show “120 Minutes” (equivalent to the U.S. “Today” show) regularly features psychic healer Allan Chumak. *Izvestia* recently reported that “practically every city has its extrasensory healer.” *Soviet Life*, in its January 1990 issue, featured a story about Chumak with the headline “Alan Chumak cures people through his television programs.”

I caught Chumak on television one morning. An owlish middle-aged man with horn-rimmed glasses and a mane of white hair, he flings his hands about and peers into the camera. He has become something of a psychic super-

star and receives thousands of letters, telegrams, even bouquets of flowers, from his fans. Many attest to Chumak's "healing energy." His followers put tubes of cold cream and jugs of water in front of their television sets. Later they rub the cold cream on themselves or drink the water for its healing power. The producers of "120 Minutes" once took Chumak off the air, but after a mountain of mail protesting his removal poured into the station, they brought him back.

According to a story in the *Washington Post* (September 4, 1989) Chumak sometimes holds séances outside his apartment house in Moscow, which people from all over the country attempt to visit.

He also claims to have scattered clouds in Kaunas, Lithuania, and is thinking of using his powers to prevent fruits and vegetables from rotting, thus helping to solve the Soviet Union's food crisis. Another popular healer is hypnotist Anatol Kashpirovsky, from Kiev, who claimed on television to have helped a woman lose 200 pounds. He maintains he can heal broken limbs, scars, blindness, even AIDS, by means of parasuggestion.

The simple question that a skeptic has to pose is whether any of these claims have been corroborated—whether those who claim to have been healed have been diagnosed before and after the fact. Efforts to verify such powers among U.S. healers have had negative results.

Astrology has apparently been revived in the Soviet Union. The December 1989 issue of *Soviet Life* carries an article on astrology. The editor states that "until recently, astrology was considered a pseudoscience and people who consulted their horoscopes were considered foolish. Nevertheless, a Soviet

School of Astrology . . . does exist and a whole number of talented astrologers are coming to the fore."

During my visit I noted astrologers selling horoscopes on Arbut Street, each of them surrounded by dozens of people. Recently, *Moskovskaya Pravda*, the official publication of the Moscow Communist Party, began publishing an astrology column, mimicking Western newspapers. The Soviet government for a long time considered astrology a pseudoscience and censored astrological predictions from publication. Yet the author of the new astrology column is extolled as "a specialist in the arts of white, black, and other magic" and "a master of the magical sciences." The first column to appear claimed that the conjunction of Saturn with the Year of the Snake was a good omen and that 1989 would be favorable for the Soviet environment. And *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, the party newspaper of Komsomolsk, recently announced that the Abominable Snowman had been caught stealing apples in the Saratov region on the Volga.

There has also been a renewed interest in UFO reports in the Soviet Union. According to Professor Vladimir Azhazhei, of Moscow State University, UFOlogy had been considered a "bourgeois science" by Soviet authorities, but now, he said, it is "growing like mushrooms" and some 50 groups of amateur UFOlogists now exist.

According to a story in *Pravda* (October 12, 1989), farmers in the Chernovtsky region said that on July 16, 1989, they had seen "huge headless figures traveling as though on motorcycles."

Last summer a Tass story in *Socialist Industry* reported the sighting of a UFO by Lyubov Medvedev, a dairy worker from the Perm region of the U.S.S.R. According to her, the alien

creature "resembled a man, but was taller than average with short legs . . . and had only a small knob instead of a head."

The Perm Commission on Abnormal Phenomena (PCAP) went on an expedition to an "abnormal zone." Strange phenomena began on July 29, 1989. They reported that some members of the party experienced a "sensation of pressure on their heads as though they were wearing a hat too tight." Aleksander Goryunkhin conducted an experiment in which a mechanical watch was placed inside a thermos bottle and left for a length of time in a zone that Emil Bachurin, a Perm geologist, considered intensive. "The watch lost five hours and 41 minutes in the course of the experiment." (Randi: *Where are you?*) Members of the team offered various hypotheses to explain these phenomena. Bachurin believes that "telepathic contact" with extraterrestrials could have accounted for some of them.

III

A recent UFO flap vividly demonstrated the outbreak of paranormal beliefs and the need for scientific expertise. There were widely reported news stories on October 9 of last year about the reputed landing of extraterrestrial visitors in Voronezh, a city 300 miles southeast of Moscow. According to the Associated Press story, Tass, the official Soviet news agency, reported the following:

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 around the park.

The Tass dispatch claimed that

residents of Voronezh saw a large shining ball or disc hovering over the park. It reported that the UFO landed and that three creatures emerged accompanied by a small robot. "The aliens were three or even four meters tall (9 to 12 feet), but with very small heads." According to Tass, onlookers were "overwhelmed with a fear that lasted for several days." Tass also quoted Genrikh Silanov, head of the Voronezh Geophysical Laboratory, as saying that scientists investigating the area found a 20-yard depression with four deep dents and two pieces of unidentified rock. "At first glance," said Silanov, "they look like sandstone of a deep red color. However, mineralogical analysis has shown that the substance cannot be found on earth." Silanov was further quoted as saying that "additional tests are needed to reach a more definite conclusion." According to Tass, Silanov said that a "biolocation" method of tracking was used to confirm the landing site and the paths taken by the aliens. No date for the sighting was given.

The CSICOP office in Buffalo was immediately bombarded by the press inquiring about the Tass dispatch: This included calls from AP, CNN, ABC Radio, and dozens of other media in the United States; CBC in Canada; the *Times*, the *Telegraph*, and the BBC in London; and many others. Barry Karr, our Executive Director, asked me to deal with the many calls that were coming in.

"What does CSICOP make of this report?" was the usual query. "If Tass reports this, mustn't there be something to it?" Calls to Tass by the media had indicated that Tass was dead serious and that this was not an April Fool's hoax.

"We have not had a chance to investigate the story," I responded.

And I was curious. "Do you accept other stories from Tass as true?" I

asked.

"No," they replied, "of course not."

"Then," I said, "why accept this without further corroboration?"

They replied, "But these reports quote scientists and seem to be authentic."

I said we would try to look into the matter and if we uncovered anything we would get back to them.

I immediately called Philip J. Klass, our veteran UFO investigator, who heads CSICOP's UFO Subcommittee. Phil replied that he was hard at work on a story for *Aviation News & Space Technology*, had a deadline to meet, and did not then have the time to investigate the case.

"Look," said Klass, "if aliens had really landed in the Soviet Union, as reported, and if this has been confirmed by Soviet scientists, it would be a momentous event in human history. And," he quipped "President Gorbachev should immediately call a press conference and proudly announce that at a time when everyone seems to want to leave the Soviet Union, at least someone was attempting to get into it!"

I next called Jim Oberg, a member of CSICOP's UFO Subcommittee who works for NASA. Oberg is one of the leading experts on Soviet satellite launches and UFO reports. He said that he would check the story with his contacts in the Soviet Union. I had tried to call our acquaintances there, but as often happens when telephoning the Soviet Union, the circuits were busy and it was impossible to get through.

Meanwhile, a Tass report published in the newspaper *Sovetskaya Kultura* identified the alleged witnesses of the alien landings: three schoolchildren, two boys and a girl—Vasya Surin, Zhenya Blinov, and Yuliya Sholokhova. They were playing in a park at 6:30 P.M. on September



27, when they "saw a pink object shining in the sky, and then spotted a ball of deep red color" about 10 meters in diameter. A crowd gathered and reportedly saw a hatch opening and "humanoids" in the lower part of the ball. The creatures had "discs on their chests," "bronze boots," and were dressed in "silvery overalls."

Tass said that one of the boys began to scream, but was paralyzed by a stare from the aliens' shining eyes. After disappearing briefly the humanoids returned and one directed a tubelike gun at a 16-year-old boy, who vanished but reappeared after the aliens departed. Telephone interviews with Vladimir Levedev, the Tass correspondent in Voronezh, said that he had conversations with dozens of witnesses and experts who had talked with the children and investigated the evidence. He added that there had been three sightings of UFO landings in Voronezh between September 23 and September 29. Although he had not witnessed any of the strange events himself, he had visited the site

and could see traces of the landing—"holes of a clear shape that resembled the footprints of an elephant!"

What should be made of these accounts? Levedev was apparently indignant when Western correspondents questioned the seriousness of the story.

The *New York Times* contacted Vladimir A. Moiseyev, director of the regional health department, who said despite claims that there was widespread fear in Voronezh, none of the witnesses had asked for medical help. His department planned to examine the children, but still had not done so weeks after the incident.

I had asked Jim Oberg to examine the tracking data available at NASA of all rocket launches and space debris over the Soviet Union to see if there was a possible misidentification that could explain the sighting. He reported that there was no evidence of anything nearby to easily explain the phenomena.

Who were the scientists in the Soviet Union who had studied the evidence? They included members of the "Voronezh Amateur Section for the Study of Abnormal Phenomena," who, according to *Socialist Industry* (October 13, 1989), apparently visited the site a week after the alleged event. The method of "biolocation" they used was "a form of ESP dowsing"—whose effectiveness most Westerners question.

What about the sensational claims made by Genrikh Silanov of the Voronezh Geophysical Lab that the two pieces of rock "were not something found on Earth"? In a subsequent story Silvanov reported that the sandstone was indeed very common in the Soviet Union and was actually a form of hematite. In a follow-up telephone interview with the Associated Press (October 11), Silanov replied in exasperation: "Don't believe

all you hear from Tass. We never gave them part of what they published."

When *Socialist Industry* later (October 11) asked Silanov and Yuluzutzev, a member of his department, "What about the newspaper report that the UFO landing has been confirmed as a fact by specialists?" they replied, "We protest this wording!"

At this point we are unable to say definitively what really occurred. But there is reason to be highly skeptical that there was a close encounter with extraterrestrials. There were apparently two separate incidents. First, some people claimed to have witnessed a strange object in the sky. This object has not yet been identified. Second, three children reported an alien encounter. But they were the *only* witnesses to be found.

James Oberg, after he had made contact with the Soviets, reported to us that Vladimir Posner, the well-known correspondent for the Soviet Union's evening news program "Vremy" ("Truth"), had sent a film crew to Voronezh, apparently in response to the international furor that the reports had raised. But they could find no other "witnesses" except the children. They ended their report on a very skeptical note. I was able to catch this film clip when it was later aired on CNN News. It suggested an alternative explanation: that the creative imagination of young children was perhaps at work. If so, this is not unlike many UFO cases in the United States.

The French Press Agency issued the following report on October 28:

... There exists no verifiable proof of a landing by aliens in Voronezh.

Sixteen radiometric analyses, 19 checks of the ground, 9 tests for micro-organisms, and 20 spectrochemical measurements failed to uncover "any anomaly either in the earth or surrounding vegetation"

that might indicate the landing of an unidentified flying object, the commission reported.

"Igor Sarotsev, vice-rector of the University of Voronezh and chairman of the commission, said that the presence of a larger than normal quantity of the radioactive isotope cesium in the area of the alleged sighting did not constitute proof of a landing.

After Chernobyl, this kind of phenomenon has been found in many areas," [Saratsev said]. . . .

The official commission report was bad news for "Stalker," a new cooperative or private business which opened up after the Voronezh sightings.

The company has set up tours of Voronezh, which it calls the "land of the aliens." A 59 rubles (\$95) fee covers transportation, lodging, and a visit to the landing site. Another two rubles (\$3) provides a conference with talks by specialists and witnesses.

But the fledgling enterprise warns clients: "We cannot guarantee a meeting with aliens, for that is a matter of chance."

IV

The upsurge of reports of paranormal phenomena in the Soviet Union, especially considering its present political, cultural, and economic situation, should be treated with caution.

In the pre-Gorbachevian era, the Soviet Union was a closed society. Rumors circulated among the populace and often spread like swampfire. Moreover, given the hegemony of Marxist-Leninist-Stalinist ideology, any kind of independence of thought or skepticism about the prevailing official dogma was considered dangerous. With such thinking bottled up for so long, perhaps the critical faculties of the Soviets have atrophied.

In an Op Ed piece in *Moscow*



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News (vol. 44, no. 13, November 5-12, 1989), Yevgeiya Albats deplores the influence of Chumak and Kashpirovsky, who under government sponsorship claim extraordinary psychic powers. A lot of people accept this nonsense, says Albats, because the Russian people have been so accustomed to "listening with our eyes closed" to official propaganda. They have only transferred their gullibility from political leaders to paranormal healers, she says.

Some commentators on the Soviet scene have provided an even more cynical interpretation of this phenomenon. *Time* (October 23, 1989) quotes a disillusioned party member who views the state sponsorship of psychic and UFO claims as a new opiate for the masses: "They've been feeding us rubbish about the dreams of communism for years, and we now see they were lying. At least this gives us something new to dream about." Has the Soviet leadership, unable to supply bread and other consumer goods to its populace, thus decided to substitute circuses? I doubt that this is a conscious policy decision.

The resurgence of belief in the paranormal in the Soviet Union may simply mean that in this freer society the "transcendental temptation" has reasserted itself and that attempts to keep it pent up have failed. I have suggested that there is a profound hunger in the human breast for plumbing the mysterious depths of reality, and a tendency to believe in the incredible—the supernatural, occult, and paranormal. As belief in the metaphysical utopian ideal—the

dialectical process—declines in the Soviet Union with the shattering of its official ideological view, new metaphysical ideas filter in.

No doubt the chief defense against magical thinking is the use of critical intelligence. Whether the development of two skeptic groups in the Soviet Union will help to provide at least some critical, scientific antidote and some balance to the rising level of paranormal nonsense is perhaps doubtful. After all, in the United States, a relatively free society, the paranormal upswing continues unabated—given the domination of the public imagination by largely unchallenged psychic claims, on the one hand, and powerful international media conglomerates promoting paranormal claims as true, on the other (e.g., *Time-Life's Mysteries of the Unknown* series). As the Soviet Union begins to enter into the free world can we expect any less of them? Perhaps large segments of the Soviet population getting caught in the paranormal quagmire is the inevitable result?

Notes

1. For a fuller account of this dialogue see my "Militant Atheism vs. Freedom of Conscience," *FREE INQUIRY*, Fall 1989.
2. Paul Kurtz, "CSICOP Visits China," *SKEPTICAL INQUIRER*, Summer 1988.
3. Sheila Ostrander and Lynn Schroeder, *Psychic Discoveries Behind the Iron Curtain*. New York: Bantam Books, 1971.

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