

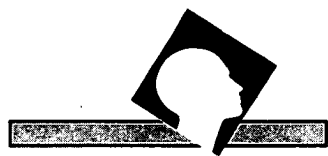
Scientific Investigation of Anomalous Phenomena in Kazakhstan

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Probably, in the not too remote future, the Soviet perestroika will be a subject of interest not only for political scientists but also for psychologists and specialists in paranormal phenomena. While the radical political and economic reforms were happening in 1985-1992, the Soviet people's general outlook also changed. Belief in the supernatural invaded a country of atheists with undeveloped critical thinking.

When the 1980s began, the Soviet people had very little information about paranormal phenomena. There were sometimes vague rumors about "flying saucers" or telepathy. But the majority of people did not consider these seriously, and newspapers, as a rule, kept silent. At that time any publication about the paranormal was possible only with the permission of the USSR Academy of Sciences. This meant almost absolute prohibition, for the small USSR Academy of Sciences Expert Group could not cope with a stream of reports on the paranormal (and, in my opinion, did not make serious efforts to do so).

The academies of sciences in the Soviet republics didn't carry out research into the paranormal. As far as I know, there was no formal prohibition of these investigations, but they were not considered a serious matter. People who tried to deal with unusual phenomena (even from the rational-critical position) were reputed as cranks. The majority of Soviet scientists considered UFOs to be atmospheric phenomena (halos, meteors, and so on), and the "saucer boom" abroad to be the consequence of a cap-



Enormous popular interest in anomalous phenomena and UFO contacts has been unleashed in the former Soviet Union. Scientists in Kazakhstan formed KCIAP to apply scientific methods to investigating and evaluating claims.



italist crisis.

That was the situation before 1988. There were witnesses of unexplained (for them) phenomena, who were ready to believe in any explanation, including a marvelous one. And there were scientists, who were not ready to discuss these phenomena. But the Soviet perestroika had a surprise in store for both the former and the latter.

During the time period from late 1988 to early 1989 the sensational information about alleged crashed "flying saucers" in the United States (mainly about the Roswell incident) and supposed numerous contacts with extraterrestrials aboard was published in the Kazakh SSR newspapers. This information "from foreign sources" was reprinted from Moscow and Leningrad newspapers. These articles

had the effect of an exploding bomb. For the first time such information was given without the prudent scientists' comments, and the extraterrestrial visits were described as doubtless reality. Therefore many people (who had not been accustomed to perceiving newspaper articles critically) came to believe in the "reality" of these reports.

You can remember how that time was. Almost every month people in the USSR were uncovering for themselves new details of their own life and history: Stalin's concentration camps, collectivization, government privileges. And the reports on crashed "saucers" were perceived as one more achievement of Glasnost. [See Paul Kurtz, "Paranormal Pandemonium in the USSR," *SI*, Spring 1990.]

It was a most difficult time for

skeptics. Of course if we were asked, we said that such super-sensations should be discussed in the scientific journals (but that did not occur) and that the information in the newspapers might be far from reality. These, however, were only general responses. At that time we had to counter the claims' "facts." Only in April 1990 did the information about Philip J. Klass's UFO investigations penetrate into the USSR. But that was more than one full year later.

In May 1989 censorship of reports on the paranormal was completely abolished. The newspapers ever since have been filled with information about UFOs, poltergeists, ESP, and other "miracles." The eye-witnesses of the unusual phenomena united and tried to carry out some investigations.

In mid-December 1989 the now-notorious mass observations of UFOs took place in Alma-Ata. These events helped unify all research groups. On January 4, 1990, the Kazakhstan Committee on the Problem of Holonic Systems (CPHS) was founded, and on January 10 the "Hypothesis" club was also founded. It was suggested that the club should be the mass public organization, and the CPHS the union of scientists. V. M. Injushin (the holder of the chair of biophysics at the Kazakh State University) became the head of CPHS.

In the beginning of February 1990 Michail Sergeevich Yeltsin, the leader of SAKUFON (the Russian abbreviation for the Middle Asia Board of UFOlogical Sciences), visited Alma-Ata. Yeltsin, a journalist-UFOlogist from Frunze (now Bishkek, the capital of the Republic of Kirghizstan), delivered several lectures trying to convince people that there was an undeclared war on Earth between the extraterrestrials and the military men and politicians. As confirmation of this thesis he displayed some supposedly

foreign materials: photos of supposed UFOs and reports of crashed "saucers" and UFOonauts who were said to have been taken prisoners.

On February 8, M. S. Yeltsin met with the CPHS members. He promised them an exchange of the data on UFOs and the latest information from abroad, without any restrictions on CPHS activity if they would unite their efforts. After some discussion, this proposal was accepted. As Kazakhstan geographically does not belong to the territory of Middle Asia, this new organization was named SAKKUFON (the Middle Asia and Kazakhstan Board of UFOlogical Sciences).

The CPHS existed for only six months. The Committee organized the All-Union Conference on Holonic Systems Problems (Alma-Ata, April 12-13, 1990), at which a wide range of paranormal phenomena were discussed. But internal conflicts, differences in approaches to the methods of investigation of the unusual phenomena (ranging from the classical scientific methods to their absolute negation), led to CPHS's disintegration. After the summer of 1990 CPHS did not meet anymore.

In the fall of 1990 a number of independent groups were formed. On November 30, the Alma-Ata skeptics also decided to officially set up an organization. The Kazakh SSR Academy of Sciences Commission for Investigation of Anomalous Phenomena (KCIAP) was formed. Its activity is regulated by a charter that states, in particular, the following:

1. The Commission . . . provides the all-round investigation of the reports on anomalous phenomena (i.e., unusual reports that cannot be explained by modern science from a standpoint of a witness). For all this KCIAP applies mainly modern scientific methods. Other results

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obtained using "nontraditional" methods may be applied only "with a deliberative vote."

2. Two main principles of our work are: (a) Tolerance to any opinions, conceptions, hypotheses. Inadmissibility of unfounded accusations toward whoever it may be. All assertions should be argued. (b) "Occam's razor" or "miracle absence presumption": if there are several versions of an explanation of a given phenomenon, we prefer the version of explanation by means of already known processes and phenomena.

The term "anomalous phenomena" includes UFOs, poltergeists, ESP, and many others. However, considering the makeup of our group—astronomers, physicists, and psychologists—it can qualitatively examine only phenomena in which people claim to have had some interaction with alien intelligence. It quickly became clear to KCIAP that to get strict evidence of such events is very difficult. All visual observations of UFOs are subject to numerous errors. The photos of UFOs and dowsing inspection of "saucer landing" spots may also be subject to errors. Material "UFO fragments"? There are still military secrets. We cannot be sure that alleged "matter of extraterrestrial origin" has not been produced instead in the secret military laboratories. Perhaps the only chance to prove contact with alien civilization is to get information from it.

Of course, not just any information would be suitable. It should be verifiable and must almost completely

exclude the probability of an occasional coincidence of data obtained by the contacters and the reality. In October 1990, through the republic newspaper *Leninskaya Smena* (circulation more than 300,000), I suggested that all "contacters" should predict the appearance of ten new comets that will be discovered in the next year. Namely, a day, an hour, and the minute when each comet will pass the perihelion. Since astronomers cannot predict the appearance of new comets, both test conditions are satisfied. Moreover, the "comet test" sidesteps one technical argument, put forward by the "UFO enthusiasts": that verifiable new information may induce some governments to create new destructive weapons. The information about comets is rather safe for our civilization.

Since October 1990, about two years had passed. During this time the "comet test" had been published in the republic newspaper three more times. Nobody was able to get the right information. I suggest to all investigators dealing with "contacters with alien intelligence" to use the "comet test" in their work in order to differentiate genuine contacters (if they were to exist) from those whose "contacts" are induced by internal psychological reasons.

During the period from 1988 to 1994, KCIAP checked up on a number of cases of anomalous phenomena, investigated some photographic special effects that produce "photos of UFOs," and sponsored lectures.

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KCIAP now has information about some one hundred cases of UFO observations in Kazakhstan and is preparing a computer catalogue of such events. KCIAP is not a big group (about five active members, and about ten others taking part occasionally).

And what about other groups? The staff of the biophysics chair of the Kazakh State University continues to carry out investigations of psychic healing. But the healers themselves are very reluctant to undergo any tests. They begin to practice healing people without any preliminary examinations of their alleged extrasensory abilities. All formal obstacles may be easily avoided: newspapers often report that anybody can simply buy the certificate of a healer for several thousand rubles. The state control of healers now is extremely ineffective.

In Alma-Ata there are also some theosophical groups that propagandize Madame Blavatsky's doctrine and Eastern philosophy. There are astrologers and their unions. There are groups that make efforts to unite nontraditional branches of knowledge (for example, "the mathematical synthesis") with philosophy and healing. The "Hypothesis" club and the Kazakhstan branch of SAKKUFON continue their activity. There are similar groups in Karahanda, Chimkent, Petropavlovsk, and some other towns in Kazakhstan.

Since 1990 the ideas of UFOlogists and UFO-enthusiasts have undergone substantial changes. At present even enthusiasts believe only a small frac-

tion of UFOs to be extraterrestrial spaceships. The unknown objects now are believed to be instead signs of supernatural forces, and an "experienced" UFOlogist can observe hundreds of such "signs" every day. Besides, some UFOs are considered to be the exchange of energy clots between Earth and outer space. Other UFOs are said to be the souls of the dead. As a result, there now exists a complicated "cocktail" consisting of the religious doctrines, noncritically assimilated scientific facts (for example, from the Raymond Moody books), and all the unknowns existing in the world. So, at the All-Union Symposium on Nontraditional Sciences (organized by V. Lenskij, September 26-29, 1991, in Alma-Ata) during the UFOlogical session a Christian prayer was read. After that the dowrsers arranged for the appearance of the "energetical phantom" of Jesus Christ in the room.

I am aware of the viewpoint of Dmitry V. Kanashkin on paranormal beliefs in the USSR (*SI*, News and Comment, Summer 1991), but I would like to propose another classification of the inhabitants of Kazakhstan (and the former USSR) according to their attitude toward anomalous phenomena. I believe that all people may be divided into enthusiasts (fans), dilettantes, skeptics, and deniers.

The biggest group (more than half of the population) are dilettantes. They have no clear knowledge of scientific methods and don't actively investigate UFOs. Their viewpoint on

the paranormal is shaped by the mass media, discussions with their friends, and their personal experiences. Two to three years ago they believed in the existence of extraterrestrials, telepathy, new forms of energy, and so on. They hoped that powerful supernatural forces would make their lives easier. But time passed, no changes in their lives have been induced by supernatural forces, and now the dilettantes' attitude toward extraterrestrials is approximately the same as toward the Loch Ness monster: probably they exist somewhere, but they are of no practical use. Now many people treat newspaper information about UFOs, contacts, and other paranormal phenomena simply as interesting tales. However, the firm belief in ESP and astrology still exists due to the fact that these paranormal disciplines provide some positive effect (for example, a psychotherapeutic one).

The second group are enthusiasts. Most of them have encountered something they considered paranormal (UFOs, poltergeists, etc.). The firm belief that they have observed some inexplicable things makes some enthusiasts feel very special. These people do not accept scientific methods of investigation or appreciate their importance. Those who criticize the enthusiasts are considered by them to be "dogmatics," "not intelligent enough," and "not progressive." Compared to the dilettantes, the majority of enthusiasts regard as unthinkable the idea that they can commit errors. In the not too remote future this group of people (there are

scientists among them) may mark the dawn of a new religion.

The deniers group consists mainly of scientists. They have neither the time nor the desire to investigate paranormal claims. They consider that the anomalous phenomena do not exist and think that all people who tell about their contacts with the anomalous are charlatans. The deniers are a good target for criticism by enthusiasts. Criticizing the "inertness and dogmatism" of official science, the enthusiasts are becoming more popular in public opinion.

The smallest group are skeptics. They regard as possible the existence of various phenomena that now are unknown to science (or cannot yet be explained), but they insist that all these phenomena should be scientifically grounded (proved). The skeptics do not deny unusual things; but they try to investigate the unusual, applying scientific methods, without anticipating the results of the investigation. It is an interesting hobby, because investigating some "anomalous" reports is like reading a detective novel. And although this group is not very popular in our country now, I think that if the existence of alien intelligence is ever proved, it will be by skeptics.

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