

SOVIET "UFOs" IDENTIFIED AS SATELLITE LAUNCHINGS

Notes concerning the "Petrozavodsk Phenomenon" and the sighting of June 14, 1980

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ABSTRACT: It is pointed out that according to well-established facts both the so-called Petrozavodsk Phenomenon and the more recent sighting of June 14, 1980, reported from the Soviet Union, were caused by launchings of Soviet satellites from the northern Soviet space rocket station close to the town of Plesetsk. It is to be expected that such light phenomena will add "noise" to Soviet UFO reports, even in future, because the Soviet press does not publish detailed information on the launchings.

Introduction

In recent years, considerable attention has been paid to some reports from the Soviet Union, describing impressive night-time light phenomena in the sky, witnessed simultaneously by large numbers of people over large areas of the country, and in some cases also in the neighbouring country of Finland. Especially, I refer to two incidents which have been described in FSR: the Petrozavodsk Phenomenon of September 20, 1977,¹ and the sighting of June 14, 1980.² In fact, there is no reason to suppose that either of these sightings is due to anything more fantastic than the launching of Soviet satellites. The fact that some Soviet ufologists seem to have erroneously emphasised the importance of these reports must indicate the limited flow of information in the Soviet Union concerning the launches.

It may sound strange that Soviet UFO proponents, among them scientists, are so ignorant of the great activity of the northern Soviet space rocket centre about 300 kms south of Arkhangelsk. However, we should remember that the existence of this cosmodrome, from which more than half of the world's satellites have been launched in recent years (one or two per week), has not been publicly discussed in the Soviet Union, although its activities have been closely followed by western experts since its operation was started in 1966. Because of the close-by town of Plesetsk, this space centre is usually referred to in the West as Plesetsk.

Well, the reader may reply, how can we be sure that these two incidents really were due to launches from

Plesetsk? In fact, casual reading of the published eyewitness accounts may not immediately bring such an explanation into mind, especially if one does not know how impressive the sight of an ascending rocket may be (also, such accounts necessarily contain inaccuracies and unintentional distortions). I will first discuss in some detail the Petrozavodsk phenomenon. It should be noted that soon after the incident Hynek's *International UFO Reporter* offered the launch of a Soviet satellite as an explanation,³ following the reasonable identification proposed by J. Oberg in ref. 4.

The Petrozavodsk phenomenon: the launch of Cosmos 955

I will list some arguments in favour of the rocket explanation:

1. The Petrozavodsk phenomenon was observed all over Finland, even in the western parts, simultaneously with observations in the Baltic and Karelia. This proves its high altitude, and is compatible with a rocket.
2. Its outlook as observed here, and direction of movement, were exactly as expected from a rocket launch from Plesetsk — in good weather these launches have been many times observed from Finland.
3. What is important is that the phenomenon exactly coincided in time with the launch of the Cosmos 955 satellite from Plesetsk, as shown by western analyses.⁴ It should be noted that *Pravda* publishes short notices of Soviet satellite launches within one or two days of the launch. This was the case also with Cosmos 955. However, *Pravda* usually gives only the name of the satellite, the date of the launch and some technical details, but omits the exact time of the launch and the name and location of the cosmodrome (if it is Plesetsk). Because of this latter fact, it is understandable that Soviet people may be confused as to the real nature of the related light phenomena.
4. One can safely conclude that the Petrozavodsk phenomenon was due to the exhaust flames and gases from the rocket which took Cosmos 955 into orbit. However, one may ask, what about the curious details

of the reports, e.g. claims concerning low-flying glows, "rays" extending down to the ground etc. In fact, Cruikshank and Swift,⁵ in their analysis of the incident, emphasised such details.

As regards the "low-flying glows," such reports probably are due to the well-known fact that it is difficult to estimate distances of unfamiliar phenomena, for example, close to Turku, a Finnish town in the south-western part of the country, two men came to believe that the Petrozavodsk phenomenon had a diameter of 10 metres and was situated only 300 metres from these witnesses (actually the distance was many hundreds of kilometres!). They thought it was approaching them, got frightened, and drove away.⁶ Similarly, when an Estonian journalist, Jyri Lina, describes the Petrozavodsk phenomenon in his book "On the UFO Research in the Soviet Union" (published in Finnish only),⁷ the colourful collection of statements from the witnesses is characterised by many analogous and necessarily quite unreliable estimates.

As regards the "rays" or "golden streams of light" (typical formations of exhaust gases), these were observed (and photographed) also by Finnish witnesses, hundreds of kilometres from Petrozavodsk. These were described using phrases similar to those used by witnesses in Petrozavodsk. Hence, the (incorrect) impression of rays extending *locally* down to the ground in Petrozavodsk is not so surprising.

When discussing such peculiar details, Cruikshank and Swift⁵ suggest that "we have a kind of paradox where the last few details of the sighting transformed it from an apparently identifiable event into one that appears to remain unidentified." I cannot see here any serious paradox. The quite questionable significance of these details which probably are due to poor observing (low-flying glows, rays extending down to the ground) or are totally unrelated to the light phenomenon (holes in the window glass) cannot be reasonably compared with the well-established evidence that the primary phenomenon was a rocket launch.

Another kind of confusion arises if the statements in newspapers as regards the places of observation are interpreted as conveying the track of flight of the phenomenon. For example, in FSR 25, No. 1, p. 25, TASS was quoted as saying that "At 3.00 a.m. a UFO, in the shape of a fiery ball, appeared at a great height in the sky over Helsinki. After hanging for a few minutes over the centre of the City, it then flew off at high speed towards the East." Now, I can assure the reader that this phenomenon was not observed *over* the centre of Helsinki, but it was positioned rather low over the eastern horizon, just like the exhaust flames from a Plesetsk rocket should be. The time of observation given, 3.00 a.m., refers to the Finnish official time, one hour behind the Soviet (Moscow) time. Thus, when the report continues that "at 4.00 a.m. there was

a UFO over Petrozavodsk," it refers to exactly the same time of observation and the same event.

The sighting of June 14, 1980: the launch of Cosmos 1188

When I read the description of the phenomenon which was observed from Moscow and surrounding cities,² it immediately struck me that this might be another launch from Plesetsk. The statement by S. Bozhich was especially revealing: "Indeed, this one was extraordinarily similar to the one that flew over Petrozavodsk." It remained to be checked whether this observation coincided with any of the known launches. And in fact, from the monthly catalogue of satellite launches published by the British journal *Spaceflight*,⁸ it was found that *exactly* at the time of sighting (11h 50min p.m. Soviet official time) the satellite Cosmos 1188 was launched from Plesetsk, and a short announcement was again to be read in *Pravda* (June 17, 1980). The description of the phenomenon, as given by FSR, very well fits with a rocket launch, and the drawings based on photos are quite similar to the appearance of an ascending rocket (as e.g. observed and photographed a few times in Finland). Cosmos 1188 went into an orbit with the inclination angle of 63 degrees, which means that it was launched quite closely in the eastern direction. This general movement to the East can be discerned in the description given by FSR, though the apparent track of the object on the map given in page 14 of ref. 2 cannot be its true track relative to the ground (which was much more north of Moscow; here I refer to what I said concerning the Petrozavodsk phenomenon "over" Helsinki).

Two additional reports from Dr Zigel's files are presented as indicating that small craft were released from the "Glavnny Ob'ekt" and landed on the streets of Moscow. However, there does not seem to be any evidence which links these reports with the primary light phenomenon. As in the case of the Petrozavodsk phenomenon, these details do not in the least affect the conclusion that the phenomenon of June 14, 1980, was most probably due to the launch of Cosmos 1188.

Concluding remarks

It is to be hoped that the present discussion enhances healthy criticism as regards the nature of UFO reports received from the Soviet Union. Because of the limited information concerning the launches of satellites, ordinary people and even newspapermen and scientists in the Soviet Union are prone to be confused as to the origin of the related light phenomena. This noise factor should be kept in mind when considering Soviet UFO reports, especially those which have been simultaneously observed over large areas. It should be noted that the most interesting

UFO observations concern quite local incidents, with a small number of witnesses, as emphasised e.g. by J. A. Hynek.⁹ In general, one should be cautious of night-time light phenomena simultaneously observed over large areas, because these usually are due to either astronomical phenomena or our own space-technology.

Acknowledgement: I would like to thank Dr H. Oja from the Observatory and Astrophysics Laboratory of University of Helsinki, who kindly helped me to locate information concerning Cosmos 1188.

References

- 1 FSR Vol. 23, No. 4; Vol. 24, No. 3; Vol. 25, No. 1
- 2 FSR Vol. 27, No. 4.
- 3 IUR Vol. 2, No. 10.
- 4 *Science News*, 112, October 8, 1977.
- 5 *Journal of UFO Studies*, Vol. II, p. 91.
- 6 *Ultra* 11/1977.
- 7 Jyri Lina: *Ufotutkimuksesta Neuvostoliitossa* (Alea-Kirja Oy, 1979).
- 8 *Spaceflight* Vol. 22, No. 11-12, 1980, p. 350.
- 9 J. A. Hynek: "Estimate of the Situation," IUR Vol. 1, No. 1 1976.

MORE ON THE AZORES LANDING OF SEPTEMBER 1954

Gordon Creighton

IN my letter to the Editor in FSR Volume 27, No. 4 (page 23), I gave some details of the Azores Incident to which our lady correspondent had referred in her report of the gigantic "cigar" that she saw from an aircraft while crossing the Atlantic. As readers will recall, she said that the incident took place on September 20, 1954, at Santa Maria Airport in the Azores, and that it was the case listed as No. 14 in Dr. Jacques Vallée's study, "The Pattern Behind the UFO Landings," which forms part of *The Humanoids*, edited by Charles Bowen and first issued in 1966.

Our friend and reader Sr. Joaquim Fernandes of Oporto (Northern Portugal), who is himself a professional journalist on the important newspaper *Jornal*

de Noticias, and also the Director of the review *Insólito* and a member of the "OURANOS" UGEPI UFO INVESTIGATION GROUP, has now written to me a very interesting letter enclosing the full text of the original press report of November 21, 1954, as it appeared in the Azores newspaper *Ocorrencia*. Readers will undoubtedly be interested to see this, so I give below my translation of the complete Portuguese text. Our thanks for this go not only to Senhor Joaquim Fernandes, but also to Senhor Teixeira Pombo and his colleagues of the Azores Branch of CEAFI (*Centre for the Study of Astronomy and of Unwanted Phenomena*), of Apartado 3, Aeroporto de Santa Maria, Azores, who were good enough to send the text to Sr. Joaquim Fer-

