



The Minsk UFO Case

Misperception and Exaggeration

The 1984 Minsk sighting serves as a case study for flying-saucer sleuthing and demonstrates how UFOs can be created from mundane phenomena.

JAMES OBERG

The highly publicized releases of “UFO files” from France and Britain provide more puzzling tales about the “appearance” over the years of anomalous aerial objects. But the real stories behind some of the most spectacular sightings in UFO history will come to light only when the Russian Ministry of Defense opens up its files.



Consider one of the most sensational UFO stories in Soviet history—a story that has been enshrined in the most high-quality data files of world UFOlogy as a classic that cannot be explained in any prosaic terms. It really is an important case study, because the tale of the Minsk UFO sighting can teach a lesson about the irremediable vigor of unidentified flying objects as a cultural phenomenon.

A passenger jet is flying north on September 7, 1984, near Minsk, in present-day Belarus. Suddenly, at 4:10 AM, the flight crew notices a glowing object outside their forward right window. In the ten minutes that follow, the object changes shape, zooms in on the aircraft, plays searchlights on the ground beneath it, and envelops the airliner in a mysterious ray of light that fatally injures one of the pilots. Other aircraft in the area, alerted by air traffic control operators who are watching the UFO on radar, also see it.

Respected British UFOlogist Jenny Randles, in *The UFO Conspiracy* (115) described it this way:

A radar visual case from the USSR began on an evening in 1985 [sic] at 4:10 AM when Aeroflot flight 8352 observed a strange yellow light while cruising at 30,000 feet in clear conditions. A “blob” shot out and downward from the light, and projected a cone of brilliant (greenish?) light at the ground below. Two additional beams appeared, and features on the ground could be seen to be illuminated.

One beam then swung around and illuminated the aircraft cabin. The light appeared to approach and resolved into a greenish luminosity as much as several degrees in extent, which then paralleled their course. There were multiple lights of different colors and fiery zigzags that crossed the vapor.

At this point, the aircraft was coming within range of the ground controller, who could then also see the object. The object seemed to change shape, [and according to a quoted report] “it developed an ‘appendage’ and then ‘became’ a wingless cloud-aircraft with a pointed tail (the spike?). The yellow and green glow, like phosphorescence, was eerily intertwined.” A second aircraft was vectored nearby and also could see the object near the first aircraft. Tallinn approach radar detected the aircraft and the object, and also experienced unusual radar interference. (www.ufocasebook.com/ussr-radar1985.html)

James Oberg, a founding fellow of CSI, was a professional space engineer at NASA's Mission Control in Houston, Texas, and is now a writer and news media consultant. He has decades of experience in sleuthing out “space secrets” about Soviet, American, and Chinese space programs and modern space-age legends in general. His web site is www.jamesoberg.com. A shorter version of this article was published on the MSNBC.com science Web site in May 2008.

The incident also figures prominently in *UFO Chronicles of the Soviet Union* (Ballantine, 1992, pp. 128–9), a 1992 book by Jacques Vallee, who was the real-life inspiration for the fictional UFOlogist in the movie *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. Valle reports in the book that “Two military pilots saw an object that hit them with a beam of light. One of the pilots died; the other managed to land the plane, although he had also suffered psychological effects from the light.” Vallee said that he learned the story from Yevgeniy Kolessov in January 1990 during a visit to the “Kosmos” pavilion at the “VDNKh” exhibits park in northern Moscow.

On page 201 he categorizes the case as an “encounter” in which “witnesses suffer significant injury or death—one of only three in Russian UFO history.” The story is based on a “firsthand personal interview with the witness by a source of proven reliability,” with the “site visited by a skilled analyst,” and the conclusion was that “no natural explanation [was] possible, given the evidence.”

A leading Russian UFO expert, Vladimir Azhazha, reported in “UFOs: Space Aliens?” in *Soviet Soldier* magazine, December 1991:

Any meeting with or even sighting a UFO is fraught with danger. Let us consider the following case. On December [sic] 7, 1984, a liner flying from Leningrad to Tbilisi came across an unidentified flying object.

For some time the plane accompanied the alien craft, illuminating it with a searchlight. The outcome of the contact was tragic. Half a year later, V. Gorridze, the crew commander, died of cancer; Yu. Kabachnikov, the second pilot, had a serious mental derangement. The encephalogram of his brain was not of an “earthly” character, as he lost memory for long periods of time. Now he is a “first group” invalid; naturally, he cannot fly. The hostess, who was in the control room [i.e., cockpit] at the moment of the UFO “attack,” fell ill too. She developed a heavy skin disease of unknown character. Perhaps somebody [sic] of the passengers was also affected. Regrettably we have no information to this effect.

Ukrainian-born author Paul Stonehill has written many books on Soviet UFOlogy. In his version,

The greenish cloud suddenly dropped below the altitude of the aircraft, ascended vertically, moved to the left and right, and then stopped right across from Tu-134A [flight 7084]. The cloud was chasing it.... Lazurin shouted the object was teasing them.

Then another Tu-134A entered the control tower area. The distance between the two aircraft was [100 km]; one could not miss the giant cloud from such a distance, yet the commander of the other airplane did not see anything. Only at [15 km] did he see the UFO....

The captain of flight 7084, V. Goridze, died in 1985 as a result of electromagnetic radiation. Kabachnikov, the pilot, was fired because he developed heart disease.... The Tallinn crew suffered one casualty, a steward, who developed similar ailments as the pilots of Flight 7084.

This is certainly a story that “has everything.” It’s no wonder it achieved such elevated status—and absolute credibility—in UFOlogy. And as we shall see, it fully deserves such elevated status but for absolutely opposite reasons.

This combination of perceptions from multiple witnesses and sensors, together with the serious physiological effects, makes for a dramatic event that on the face of it defies any earthly explanation. It was just as amazing that the official Soviet news media, long averse to discussing UFO subjects, disclosed the story in the first place. So it was no mystery that over the years that followed, the story was never actually checked out. It was only retold again and again.

Weighing the Pilots' Evidence

However much we are comfortable with entrusting our lives to airline pilots, a blind trust in their abilities as trained observers of aerial phenomena is sometimes a stretch. For a number of excellent and honorable reasons, pilots have often been known to overinterpret unusual visual phenomena, often underestimating their distance from what appear to be other aircraft.

Think of it this way: you *want* the person at the front of the plane to have hair-trigger alertness for visual cues to potential collisions so that avoidance maneuvers can be performed in time. A worst-case interpretation of perceptions is actually a plus.

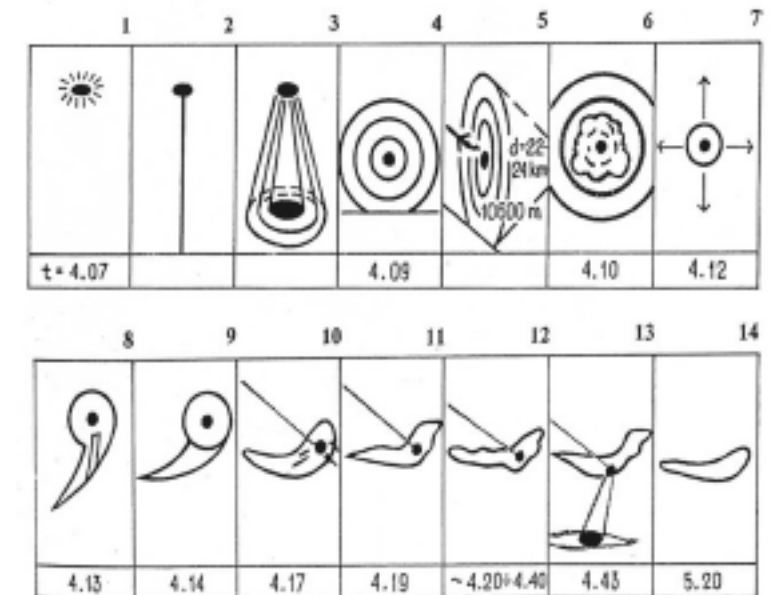
So it’s no surprise that pilots have sent their planes into a dive to avoid a fireball meteor that was really fifty miles away or to dodge a flaming, falling satellite passing sixty miles overhead. Even celestial objects are misperceived by pilots more frequently than by any other category of witnesses, concluded UFO investigator J. Allen Hynek over thirty years ago. Since the outcome of a false-negative assessment (that is, being closer than assumed) could be death and the cost of a false positive (being much farther away) is mere embarrassment, the bias of these reactions makes perfect sense.

What Could Have Caused It?

Was there anything else in the sky that morning that the Soviet pilots might have seen? This isn’t an easy question, since the Moscow press reports neglected to give the exact date of the event, but I could figure it out by checking Aeroflot airline schedules.

It turned out that early risers in Sweden and Finland had also seen an astonishing apparition in the sky that morning. These are the report summaries Claus Svahn, an experienced researcher and writer for UFO-Sweden, published in his group’s magazine:

- Truck driver Jan Åke Jansson, heading ENE between Örebro and Arboga, observed a “very strong globe of light” just over treetops in the north, which vanished in twenty seconds.
- Policeman Mikael Smitt in Örebro received a radio call from a patrolman of a very strong light in the sky with “a skirt” under it, which slowly moved east. Smitt called Swedish Air Force in Uppsala and Arlanda airport; both sites confirmed observing the light in the ENE direction.



Pilot's sketch — September 7, 1984, from *Science in the USSR*

- Train engineer Ingvar Finér reported to UFO-Sweden that while driving a train south of Stockholm he observed a very bright light moving in the NNE “at a very high altitude.” He wrote that the light hit the ground in front of him, making it possible to see features he had not seen before.
- Olof Baard was driving a newspaper van near Sävsjö when he saw a strong light in the north. He stopped his van and got out for a better look. The object was soundless and looked “like a diamond in fog.”
- “UFO Research of Finland,” Annual Report 1984, stated: “Fifteen different locations all over Finland—phenomenon started as a bright rising object. Later there was a flash



of light which created red, green, yellow and purple colors around the object. The skies were clear and therefore the phenomenon could be seen all over the country.”

The immediate disconnect that I found was that the Scandinavian witnesses were not looking southeast toward Minsk (where the airliner was flying with its terrified crew). Nor were they looking eastward, toward the top-secret Russian space base at Plesetsk, where launchings sparked UFO reports starting in the mid-1960s. They were looking to the northeast, across Karelia and perhaps farther.

The direction of the apparition being seen simultaneously near Minsk provided another “look angle.” If the vectors of the eyewitnesses are plotted on a map, they tend to converge over the Barents Sea, far from land. This made the triggering mechanism for the sightings—if they were all of the same phenomenon—even more extraordinary.

Still, some implications were attractive. If the two groups of witnesses were observing the same apparition (as subsequent evidence will support), then all interpretations of the UFO’s close proximity to the Minsk witnesses can be dismissed as misinterpretations, and all interpretations that the UFO was local to witnesses there and responding specifically to them can be dismissed as baseless.

Preludes and Precedents

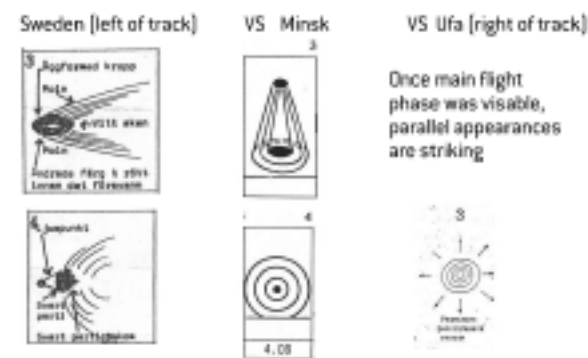
Whatever the stimulus behind the 1984 Minsk airliner story turned out to be, I already knew that many famous Soviet UFO reports were connected with secret military aerospace activities that were misperceived by ordinary citizens. I’ve posted several decades of such research results on my Web site.

In 1967, waves of UFO reports from southern Russia and a temporary period of official permission for public discussion created a “perfect storm” of Soviet UFO enthusiasm. But it was short-lived—the topic was soon forbidden again, possibly because the government realized that what was being seen and publicized was actually a series of top-secret, space-to-ground nuclear warhead tests, a weapon Moscow had just signed an international space treaty to outlaw.

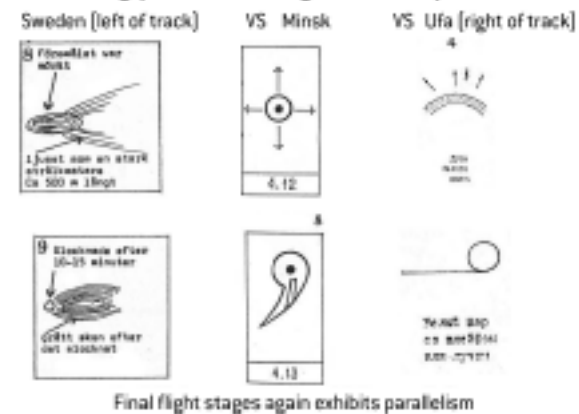
Once the Plesetsk Cosmodrome (south of Arkhangelsk) began launching satellites in 1966, skywatchers throughout the northwestern Soviet Union began seeing vast glowing clouds and lights moving through the skies. These were officially nonexistent rocket launchings. “Not ours!” the officials seemed to be saying. “Must be Martians.”

Other space events that sparked UFO reports included orbital rocket firings timed to occur while in direct radio contact with the main Soviet tracking site in the Crimea. Such firings and the subsequent expanding clouds of jettisoned surplus fuel weren’t confined to Soviet airspace. One particular category of Soviet communications satellites performed the

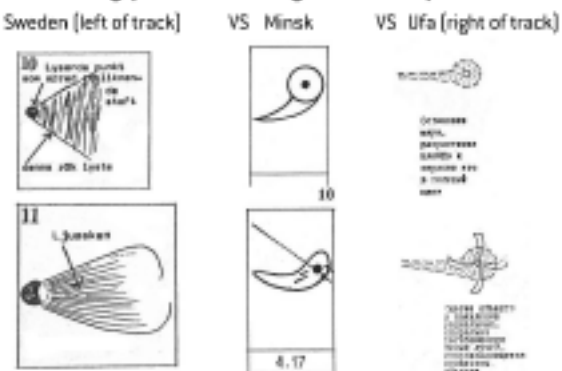
Phase-by phase side-by-side comparison



Phase-by phase side-by-side comparison



Phase-by phase side-by-side comparison



Sketches of the Minsk UFO as perceived from three different locations.

maneuver over the Andes Mountains, subjecting the southern tip of South America to UFO panics every year or two for decades.

As the Soviet Union lurched toward collapse in the 1980s, its rigid control over the press decayed. This allowed local newspapers, especially in the area of the Plesetsk space base, to begin publishing eyewitness accounts of correctly identified rocket launchings. The newspapers sometimes printed detailed drawings of the shifting shapes in the light show caused by the sequence of rocket stage firings and equipment ejections.

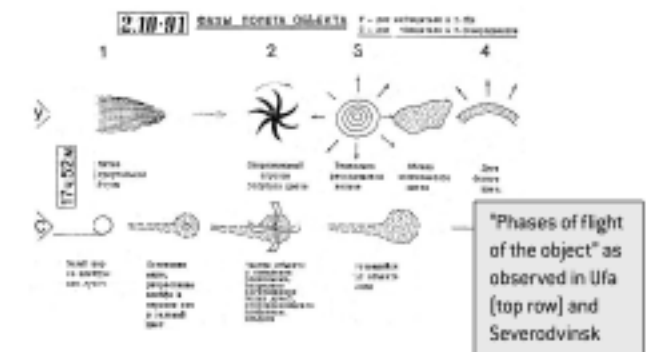
Skywatchers throughout the northwestern Soviet Union began seeing vast glowing clouds and lights moving through the skies.

The Evidence Comes Together

Still, I wasn’t willing to wave off the elaborate extra dimensions of the Minsk UFO case as mere misperception and exaggerated coincidences. Even though none of the most exciting stories, such as one pilot’s death half a year later from cancer, could ever be traced to any original firsthand sources, they made for a compelling narrative.

Fortunately, the Soviet Union’s collapse provided the open-

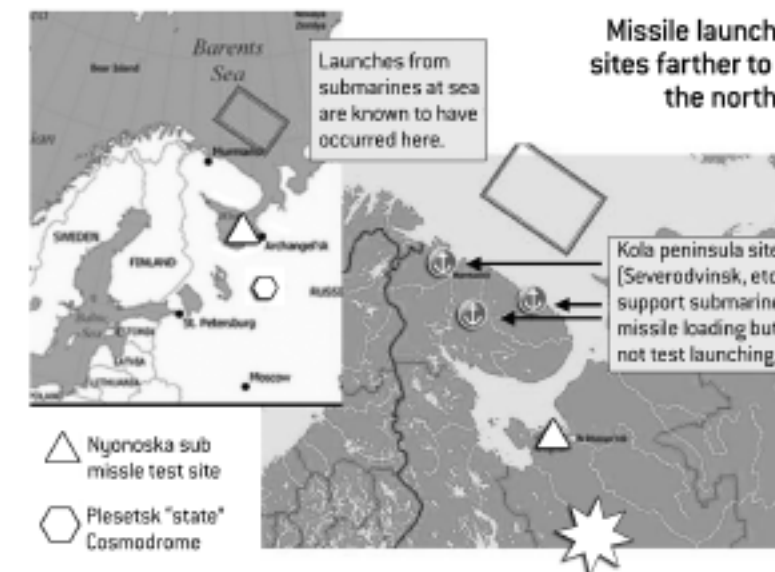
October 2, 1991 missile launch



ing for the collapse of the UFO story. The May/June 1991 issue of the magazine *Science in the USSR* contained an article that reprised the story with one stunning addendum from the co-pilot’s [Gennadiy Lazurin] flight log. As it was happening, he sketched the apparition, minute by minute, as it changed shape outside his cockpit window. Now, fourteen of the drawings have been published for the first (and as far as I can tell, only) time.

The graphic sequence of bright light, rays, expanding halos, misty cloudiness, tadpole tail, and sudden linear streamers may have looked bizarre to the magazine’s readers, but they looked very familiar to me.

I dug out the clippings from Arkhangelsk newspapers mailed to me by an associate there. I looked up the other articles from recent Moscow science magazines that showed how





Submarines have launched military missiles and even satellites from the Barents Sea.



Nyonoska missile test site observed by U.S. *Corona* spy satellite, 1971.

beautiful these rocket launches looked. I also found the set of sketches made by a witness in Sweden of what was immediately recognized as a rocket launch. I laid the separate sketches out on a table.

They all clearly showed the same sequence of shape-shifting visions, as viewed from different angles to the rear and off to the side of the object's flight. The more recent accounts were of nighttime missile launches—and the impression was over-

whelming that the Minsk UFO, as drawn in real time by one of the primary witnesses, looked and visually evolved just like the Swedish sketches.

So what happened? Here is a prosaic hypothesis:

- The flight crew was unexpectedly treated to a spectacular naval missile test launch from the Murmansk area
- Interpreting the apparition as a structured craft that was a threat to their own aircraft (the proper instinct), they grossly misperceived its range and imagined its “intentions”
- Alerted by radio, other people in the area looked for weird apparitions in the sky or on radar—and a few found them
- Unusual in such cases, one witness took the opportunity to make real-time sketches of the developing phenomenon, and the record became public
- Amazed by the unprecedented experience, primary witnesses and their interviewees wove every coincidental occurrence into a single coherent narrative
- Media coverage was filtered to remove specific identifying details (e.g., exact date and possible simultaneous sightings in northern Russia) that could connect the UFO to a real event

Case Closed—Or Minds Closed?

Without Lazurin's detailed, minute-by-minute drawings, any claim for solving the case would have been tentative and circumstantial at best. Even now, the case isn't quite closed. Until the Russians release the records for the test launch of a submarine-based missile—as we now know often happened from that region of the ocean without official acknowledgement—the answer to the mystery will remain technically unproven.

But the answer is compelling enough to remind us of wider principles of investigating—and evaluating—similar stories from around the world: there are more potential prosaic stimuli out there than we usually expect. Precise times and locations and viewing directions are critical to an investigation. The temptation to fall into excitable overinterpretation is almost irresistible. Myriads of weird but meaningless coincidences can be combined to embellish a good story.

What have we learned from this experience? What do “pseudo-UFO reports” (such as this one) sparked by military space and missile events teach us about world UFOlogy?

- “Control experiments” (albeit unintentional ones) underscore how extraneous details and exaggerations intrude on and pollute raw perceptions
- Almost without exception, the more “research” done to currently accepted UFOlogical standards, the greater the introduction of obscuring and misleading, garbled information



Immediate implications of Scandinavian sightings

1. Witnesses did NOT report UFO in direction of witnesses on airliners near Minsk (Southeast)
2. Narrative features (bright light cloud, timing and motion, even ground illumination) establish same identity of stimulus
3. All interpretations of UFO close proximity to Minsk witnesses can be shown as misinterpretations
4. All interpretations that the UFO was local to witnesses and responding specifically to them can be shown as baseless
5. Plesetsj cosmodrome NOT likely as stimulus point of origin

- The world's “best UFO experts” usually failed to identify and learn from the prosaic stimuli behind most top “Russia UFO” stories and aren't likely to do so
- It is fair to generalize that this failure is endemic to the attitudes and capabilities of UFOlogy and that “arguments from incompetence” (“We can't explain it—hence it cannot have an explanation”) are unworthy of general belief
- Contemporary UFOlogy has gotten the legitimate notion of “government UFO secrets” completely backwards (governments sometimes opportunistically exploit the public's misinterpretations of their secret aerial activities in order to camouflage the truth about such activities,

and UFOlogists are the unwitting tools of this deception)
 • Reports of this type are not evidence for “alien visitations”

The most important factors for cutting through the misperceptions are having the good fortune to come across enough original evidence and having enough time to make sense of that evidence. The degree to which pure luck is critical to arriving at a persuasive prosaic explanation is humbling. That's one of the biggest lessons to be learned from the Minsk UFO case: as long as those factors are in short supply, it's no mystery why there are so many amazing UFO stories—and so many enthusiasts willing to endorse them. □