VORONEZH: A Personal Reappraisal of Russia's Best Known CE3 Incident
Peter Robbins, for the Crash Retrieval Conference, Las Vegas, NV, November 6-8, 2009

Thank you Ryan, any opening remarks

1. Tass News Wire, 10-9-89
On Monday October 9, 1989, the habitually pragmatic Soviet news agency Tass shocked many of us with a news release stating that "Scientists have confirmed that an unidentified flying object recently landed in a park in the Russian city of Voronezh.
2. South Park close-up
They have also identified the landing site and found traces of aliens who made a short promenade about the park. Aliens visited the place after dark, at least three times, locals report. A large shining ball or disc was seen hovering above the park.
3. Craft and beings illustration
It then landed, a hatch opened and two or three creatures similar to humans and a small robot came out." It continued on from there. More than forty eyewitnesses stood by their accounts and the Soviet government stood by Tass's report. Obsessive American news coverage followed, almost all of it dismissive and condescending. A week later the story was old news and relegated to the realm of myth, confabulation, and to some, fiction.
4. NY Post 10-11 lead
Overall the coverage was fairly merciless, and with one fascinating exception, no where more so than in the pages of The New York Times,
5. NYT 10-11 lead
which ended up devoting more space to the story than they'd given to any UFO report since the 1952 Washington, D.C. over-flights.
This is more a personal reflection on the Voronezh incident than a strict analysis. I'm as curious as anyone about what actually happened there, but I also have a genuine interest in the dismissive cover of he event here, and the unique factors which must have entered into the Soviet government's decision to allow the story to be released internationally in the first place.
6. UFOs Land, Jersey Journal 10-10
I also want you to know something about one of the incident's key investigators, Professor Yuri E. Lotozev, who I was fortunate enough to get to know through our three years of correspondence in the early nineties.
7. Voronezh map

The City of Voronezh is located about three hundred miles due south of Moscow. It's an old city, even by Russian standards, but by 1989 had grown into a large industrial and manufacturing center.
8. Cover, Voronezh tourist booklet
It's depicted in Soviet tourist literature of the period in the 'just-so' manner which the government then insisted upon;
9. Dwelling place
idealized and antiseptic, polished and controlled, with the look and feel of every other Communist Party-approved tourist brochure or picture post card.
10. 19th Cent church
11. historic bldgs
Voronezh does in fact possess noteworthy examples of czarist era architecture
12. Stalinist1
13. Stalinist2
as well as Stalinist period, and socialist modern.
14. Palace of young Pioneers
15. Roussia Dept Store
Such examples of civic stability stand in sharp contrast to the wildly unique UFO related events alleged to have taken place in a city park on Wednesday September 27, 1989.
16. South Park close-up
Almost every aspect of this case is decidedly non-standard, and this in a field defined by the strange.
17. Child witness
17A. Children witnesses
Nor does it does help matters that most of the witnesses were children, or that some of their accounts differ significantly from each other.
18. b&w UFO photo
More, some of the specifics reported by that percentage of witnesses willing to put their accounts and observations on the public record were unique to the individual, or to one group of witnesses and not another.
19. Red light illustration
The first UFO appeared at 6:30 PM, as a red light descending toward the ground. The light then took the appearance of a spherical or egg-shaped object, or by other accounts, objects,
20. Egg-shaped illustration
that circled the immediate area agitating the grass about forty feet below. It then flew off, only to return a few minutes later and hover over the park. A door or hatch was seen to open on the lower half of the object where a being

could be observed. The UFO finally came to settle onto a poplar tree causing that tree to bend under its weight.

21. Being and robot illustration

Child and adult witness accounts have the diameter of the object ranging from thirty to forty five feet. The being observed in the hatchway was very tall, in excess of ten feet by most accounts. It wore a silvery suit and had a very small head, not much more than a bump peeking above the garment. It then climbed out of the craft and down the tree, as did a small robot-like entity, or entities, depending on the account. A luminous rectangle appeared under them when they stepped onto the ground. It disappeared when the taller being made a sound. The being touched some knobs on the robot's chest and the two began to move about the park, or 'promenade,' as the colloquial translation noted in the press release.

22. NYT text box 10-10

As the two progressed through the park, a nearby boy shouted something, possibly in fear, causing the being to stare at him as a light (beam of light?) came from its center eye. The seemingly paralyzed the boy remained motionless until the tall one looked away. It then climbed back up the tree and into the craft to retrieve a pistol-like device which it aimed at a young man walking in the vicinity. Witnesses maintain that he then disappeared as the device was trained on him, and reappeared after the beings and craft departed.

23. red UFO illustration

Witnesses alleged they observed a total of five other landings in the vicinity. Investigators were able to confirm other landing sites, at least one where the grass and sand seemed to have been 'spun' into the ground "converting sand into dust and winding the grass." When the initial object finally flew away it left some sort of platform on the ground where it appeared to have "melted."

24. Beings drawing

Other beings reported were alternately described as "humanoids, robots, shadows, and a TV-set on legs." One craft was seen to fly off in the direction of some electric transmission lines, and then return to the park where two humanoids emerged from it. These visitors were of conventional height with noticeably wrinkled faces. Other stories and accounts were reported as well. A few days after the events in the park, the parents of some of the child witnesses and their neighbors reported an unusual object flying over their houses and the nearby park. As it did, it shone down a reddish light. At least one report I would interpret as abduction related also made its ways to investigators.

25. Masthead1

While the story would not break in the States until October 9,
26. Masthead2
27. Masthead3
it received immediate press and broadcast coverage all over the Soviet Union,
28. Article1
29. Article2
The lion's share of which was respectful and serious.
30. News montage1
31. News montage2
32. News montage3
But there were exceptions. These cartoons appeared in a Russian daily amid the coverage.
33. cartoon1
34. cartoon2
35. cartoon3
Attention on the incident served to galvanize ufologists all over the country as well as among the public at large and investigations commenced almost immediately.
36. Yuri close-up
Yuri Lotosev was among the first on the scene. He is the co-founder of the Voronezh Joint Anomalous Phenomena Research Committee, a non-profit organization dedicated to the study of the unexplained.
37. Yuri & co-authors
Lotosev is a structural engineer and an Associate Professor of Mechanics who was teaching at a nearby technical institute in September 1989. He had been a serious UFO investigator since 1976 and arrived at the park accompanied by fellow members of the Research Committee shortly after the events transpired.
38. Field work
The investigative team worked intently on location, and continued to interview witnesses and collect and classify data and evidence for more than a year.
39. Impression beneath tree
They inspected the area beneath the poplar tree and the tree itself "centimeter by centimeter," finding several ground impressions in close proximity. They were approx 15 cm in diameter and 5 cm deep. They also found a deep, vertical track torn into the bark which they speculated might have been made by some sort of landing related apparatus.
40. Jacques Vallee

The research team also met with Dr. Jacques Vallee at his request during a January 1990 visit he made to the U.S.S.R. When asked his opinion of the case, the noted ufologist answered that it was part of a new worldwide wave of UFO visitations, the largest he'd seen in ten years.

41. Site map

In December 1989 Lotosev and his colleagues appeared in a nationally broadcast two hour television documentary entitled "UFOs in Voronezh" during which they talked about their investigation. Results included the presence of phosphorus in the affected soil one hundred times in excess of that found in control samples.

42. data from "UFOs In Voronezh"

Pressure tests suggested the object that had occupied one of the landing zones weighed about 11,500 kilograms, or approximately 5.75 tons. A two-fold excess of background radiation and a ten-fold lack of microorganisms were found in the soil at the landing sites. Witness photos were also included in the documentary.

43. UFOs in Voronezh1

In December 1990 Lotosev and his co-authors saw the publication of "UFOs in Voronezh." It was published in two editions,

44. UFOs in Voronezh2

one in black and white,

45. b&w illust

with the other featuring highly stylized color illustrations.

46. color illust

While the Voronezh UFO incident was playing itself out in the papers and the public imagination, the Soviet Union was increasingly involved in the process of dismantling itself.

47. NYT cartoon 10-22-89

Almost each day brought with it new reports of revolutionary reforms and all manner of other history making changes. Larry Warren and I were then two years along in our investigation of the Rendlesham Forest incident, and the afternoon of Monday October 9 found me at home in Midtown Manhattan organizing chapter material and doing some re-writing. I had the TV on in the background and stopped what I was doing as soon as I realized I was listening to a report of a UFO landing in Russia.

48. UFOs Over V. rept

I slammed a blank VHS tape and recorded what I could of the report. The tape remained in the machine and I recorded a few other news reports as well. This is what they looked like:

(Broadcast segments here – time & que exact line to cut)

Tass's New York City headquarters were in Rockefeller Center which was not that far from my apartment. It got me wondering if there was a chance that anyone there might be willing to speak with me about this breaking story. I don't think I would have even considered doing so a year earlier, but given the drastic political changes of the proceeding months, I phoned directory assistance and got their phone number.

49. NYT 10-10 text block

The person who took my call was polite, even cordial, and when I identified myself as an investigative writer with a particular interest in the subject – and an American of Russian descent, he invited me to visit Tass's offices and meet with staff members there. Forty minutes later I was doing just that.

50. Newsday 10-10 text block

The reporters and staff I met were most welcoming and seemed decidedly upbeat about the agency's release of the news story with some feeling it might indicate increased journalistic freedom. The reporters expressed a genuine interest in what I did and wanted to know what my initial thoughts were regarding the reports and some discussion followed. I left with the Tass staff's best wishes on the successful completion of *Left At East Gate,*

51. Press release close-up

and with copies of original telexes and news reports. I felt pretty full of myself on the walk back to my apartment, but knew I would not be pursuing this story right now, I had work waiting for me at home. The printouts went into a file folder and it went into a filing cabinet.

52. Telex, 10-9-89

Newspapers all over the country featured the Voronezh story on their front pages the next day.

53. NYT 10-10-89

It even made page one of the New York Times under the title, "A Tass Bulletin: Knobby Aliens Were here." The first sentence set the tone perfectly: "Everyone seems to be coming to the Soviet Union these days: entrepreneurs in search of joint ventures, actors looking for stage sets, heavy metal musicians, arm wrestlers, even aliens." The coverage went down hill from there. Reporter Esther B. Fein had the humanity however to note the Tass report stated that witnesses who saw the aliens ".. were overwhelmed with a fear which lasted for several days."

54. Newsday front pg 10-10

New York Newsday's full color headline read "Close Encounters of the Soviet Kind,"

55. Newsday feature article 10-10

and their first day's coverage was extensive

56. Newsday Tass text 10-10
and included the full text of the Tass announcement.
57. NY Post headline10-10
The New York Post seemed hardly able to restrain its glee in announcing the invasion,
58. NYP article 10-10
and chose an outstanding still from "This Island Earth" to illustrate their article. Regional and local papers tended to treat the story with considerably more respect and focused on the Tass press release.
59. Jersey Journal text box 10-10
Ms. Fein's New York Times article of Wednesday October 11 only made page six, but overnight the reporter seemed to have been transformed from the mocking journalist of twenty four hours earlier.
60. "U.F.O. Landing is Fact, Not Fantasy, Russians Insist" 10-11
"U.F.O. Landing is Fact, Not Fantasy, Russians Insist" opened with this statement: "It is not a joke, nor a hoax, nor an attempt to drum up local tourism by drawing the curious, the Soviet Press Agency Tass insisted today in discussions of what it called an extraterrestrial visit to southern Russia.
61. NYT text box 10-11
Unexplainably, the article was completely serious from beginning to end with respectful attention paid to the children's accounts and Tass's insistence that the report be treated "as a serious scientific phenomenon."
62. NYT text box 10-10
Apparently Ms. Fein's change of heart was not shared by the members of the papers editorial board. She was taken off the story and Thursday's treatment of the case reverted back to Tuesday's condescending tone.
63. NY Times 10-12
The new reporter suggested that Tass itself took the story as something of a joke and contacted Jim Speiser, founder of a national UFO computer network, and quoted him saying "I think Tass is exploring its new freedom and is not used to self censorship. I don't disbelieve, but we have much better stories in this country."
64. Newsday 10-11 article
Newsday's lead line for October 11 was "It Came From Outer Space," while the New York Post elevated its coverage under the banner,
65. NY Post article 10-11
"Three-Eyed Space Geek Zaps Soviet Boy," as fine a headline as any they have generated over the years. National coverage of the story began to drop off toward the end of the week,
66. Newsday 10-10 text box

with most already subscribing to the ‘excessive journalistic freedom’ theory. But on Saturday October 14 The Times published an editorial entitled “The Voronezh Visitors”

67. The Voronezh Visitors editorial

which posed as ‘fair and objective’ commentary. It discussed the unique aspects of the incident and contrasted them with considerably more unnerving accounts of alien abduction as reported in America. The Voronezh visitors, they maintained, should be made far more welcome then their U.S. counterparts. All they did was take a walk around the park. Russians, it stated, have a particular fondness for the supernatural and Soviet editors lacked skeptical armor, but the final zinger was reserved for the last sentence of the final paragraph:

68. editorial, close-up

“..If extraterrestrial visitors have to land somewhere, why not in Voronezh? Skepticism can be taken too far. These very columns, in 1920, poured scorn on the idea of a certain Robert Goddard that rockets could fly in the vacuum of space. Mr. Goddard, the editorial regretted, only seems to lack the knowledge ladled out daily in high schools. It closed by saying, “As sure as rockets can never fly in space, Tass has broken the story of the century.”

“As sure as rockets can never fly in space, Tass has broken the story of the century.” A piece of doublespeak worthy of George Orwell himself.

69. 1-90 from Yuri to Dr. K

Fourteen months later I received a brief letter from my friend Barbara, a psychiatrist who was also Editor of The Journal of Orgonomy,

69A. J of O

a scientific publication devoted to the work of Dr. Wilhelm Reich, She included a copy of a book in Russian called “ UFOs in Voronezh,” and a letter to her from one of its authors, a Prof. Lotozev. He had contacted the editor in search of information on Reich and she responded by sending him a copy of the journal.

70. “UFOs in Voronezh”

Barbara felt I should have the book and suggested I contact Yuri. I wrote him the following week and he responded soon after.

71. PR 1990 letter

Over the next three years our correspondence grew into a valuable professional relationship and a surprisingly warm friendship. Topics discussed included UFOs of course,

72. Envelope2

his work and findings on the Voronezh incident and mine on the Rendlesham Forest UFO incident,

73. Envelope3

Reich's scientific discoveries, A.S. Neill and the Summerhill School, President Gorbachev and President Bush, life in Voronezh vs. life in New York,

74. Envelope4

art, history, our families, and the sweeping changes then going on around us.

75. Envelope5

Yuri sent me Soviet, then Russian UFO newspaper articles and I sent him UFO documents, reports, books and political articles unavailable to him at home.

76. 5-91 letter excerpt

I never had a sense that any of our mail was interfered with, nor did he.

77. Halt doc

During the course of our exchanges new revelations occasionally come to the surface, as in this letter of August 28, 1990. Quoting:

"My special gratitude is for the (Halt) document (on the) Bentwaters incident. It is significant that the landings that are most known outside the U.S.S.R. … also caused heightened radiation. It was less than in England … and recorded in one of the four depressions. … It is striking fact that the initial shape and dimension of the depressions were perfectly identical to England … the visible form and dimension of Voronezh and Bentwaters vehicles were also alike."

I responded, in part:

78. Capel Green 6-90

"Your letter … was .. the first confirmation I have received of the similarities between the Voronezh and Bentwaters descriptions of landing trace measurements and radiation patterns. This as well as similarly described craft."

79. Gorbachev pin

So what exactly happened in that park twenty years ago? Could the whole thing have possibly been some sort of psy-ops operation to gauge the reaction of the average Soviet citizen in the face of the unknown? Just about anything is possible of course, but no evidence or even informed speculation suggests this as a possibility. And given the tremendous strain on the then-collapsing Soviet economy, I would have to question where the necessary funding would have come from, especially in the face of other priorities then facing their crumbling empire.

80. Beings bk illustration

I think the events of September 27, 1989 were genuine, though I cannot explain their uniqueness, or why we have not seen or heard of their like since.

81. NY Post text insert

But there remains no question that the American press and broadcast media made quick work of any serious coverage or investigation of the story by suggesting the cause was an abuse of increasing freedom of the Soviet press, or that the Russian people where just downright superstitious.

82. UFOs in Voronezh cover

For now I can only thank Yuri Lotosev and his colleagues for their hard work and contributions to our field, and hope that “UFOs in Voronezh” is someday translated into English so that we can all learn more about the research and investigation they undertook to assist us in better understanding what actually transpired in that city park during those last days in the life of the old Soviet Union. Thank you.

End