

# NEWLY DISCOVERED "AIRSHIP" WAVES OVER POLAND

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This article concerns a wave of "phantom airship" sightings over Russian Poland in 1892, and the recurrence of similar phenomena over that same region in 1913. Mr Eddie Bullard, of Bloomington, Indiana, USA, states that, so far as he knows, he is the first investigator to have drawn attention to these interesting reports. — EDITOR

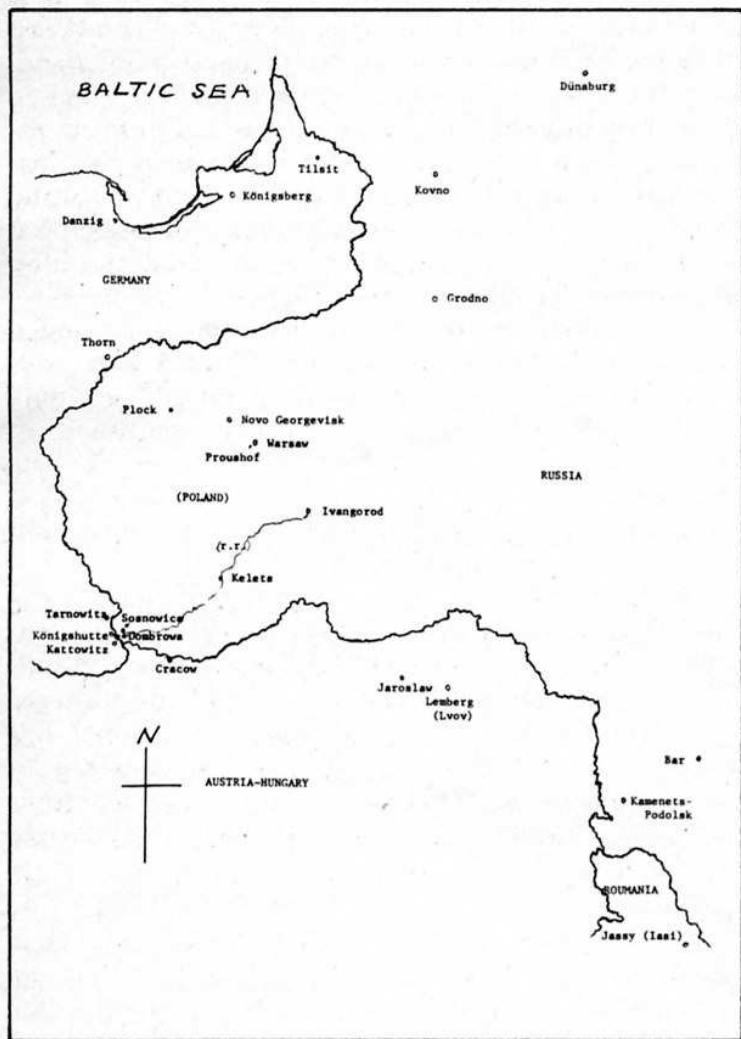
Phantom airships mark a turning point of abiding interest in UFO history. For the first time reports assume a distinctively modern tone with their description of structured aircraft appearing in wide-spread waves and displaying recurrent features, most notably the brilliant searchlight which settled in as standard equipment during the waves of 1896-97, 1908-10 and 1913, and continued as a hallmark of phantom airplanes in the World War I era and again during the "ghost flier" activity of the 1930s. Just when the age of airships began still remains a mystery. True, researchers have tracked phantom flying machines back as far as 1880, but the familiar cigar-shaped dirigible with a searchlight seems to have risen full-blown into Californian skies in November of 1896 and persisted with

few changes for decades. The question of antecedents is clearly an intriguing one for ufologists, and here I offer evidence to backdate the appearance of airships in the familiar mould by four years, to a substantial wave over Russian Poland in 1892.

## The sightings of 1892

The chronic border tension between Russia and Germany grew so intense during the late winter and early spring of 1892 that a war seemed assured. Newspapers claimed a build-up of as many as 850,000 Russian troops in Poland, and while the Russians denied having anything more sinister in mind than spring manoeuvres for defensive manpower, correspondents read significance into the fact that the men drilled constantly in spite of hardships caused by the lingering snow. Russian anxiety over military secrets ran high at this time too, as indicated by accusations that Jews were spying for the Germans and again by reports of an even stranger nature, which claimed that the Germans had intruded directly over Russia in steerable balloons.<sup>1</sup>

On March 26 the *New York Tribune*, *New York Times* and *Manchester Guardian* printed Russian dispatches which stated that a large balloon had floated above the fortress at Kovno a few days earlier. The balloon came from the direction of the German frontier and soldiers opened fire on the intruder, but the occupants used glasses and continued their investigations undisturbed. After hovering for considerable time the balloon returned to Germany and appeared to travel under perfect control.<sup>2</sup> These same dispatches repeated a notice from a Warsaw newspaper about an earlier sighting far removed from Kovno.<sup>3</sup> On March 7 a balloon approached the south-western border town of Dombrova, again from the direction of Germany, and headed to the north-east along the Ivangorod-Dobrova railroad against a strong northeasterly wind. About 5.45 p.m. the balloon disappeared behind some clouds and reappeared 45 minutes later with a light burning, at which time the invader retraced its earlier course.<sup>4</sup> The *Frankfurter Zeitung* passed along information from Polish sources in this border region that back-and-forth flights over Sosnowice, Dombrova and Stremeszice were almost daily events. Flights commonly began about 9 p.m.



Area of the "airship waves" of 1892 and 1913.

when a powerful light appeared, proceeded to the north-east to reach Stremeszice about midnight, then reversed to reach Germany by morning.<sup>5</sup> According to a Vienna paper, on one of these flights the balloon hovered over military camps near Dombrova and again ignored shots fired at the order of the border commandant. Many miles to the north yet another front in this aerial war seems to have opened, since this same Viennese paper mentions that Prussian soldiers at Thorn ascended in a captive balloon equipped with a large electric light for nightly reconnaissance of the Russian frontier.<sup>6</sup>

Even more sensational incidents came to light on March 31. Reports from St. Petersburg declared that the appearance of spy balloons over forts and encampments in Poland was not only frequent but also a great annoyance to Army officers, who could only stand by helplessly while they lost military secrets to the high-flying Germans. The Synod (council) demanded vigorous measures against this aerial espionage.<sup>7</sup> On the night of the 23rd occurred a scene familiar from later airship waves, as the *Tribune* reported that

the people of Warsaw were startled by an intensely bright light in the sky. All eyes were turned upward, but nothing could be seen save a path of light that ended in a small focus. Suddenly the ray of light swept in another direction, and, when their eyes became accustomed to the darkness that followed, the people could see, far up in the sky, a balloon.

The light, which witnesses attributed to a German searchlight, appeared at an unspecified hour in the evening and remained till 1 a.m., when the spies extinguished their light and sailed westward toward the frontier.<sup>8</sup> According to the *Tribune*, a balloon later hovered over the Proushof railroad station, then moved off to Kelets and hovered there some time before returning to Germany, while the *Manchester Guardian* dates this event on the 22nd and sends the balloon to the fortress at Novo Georgevick as well as to Kelets. Meanwhile, flights in the area of Sosnowice seem to have continued with the balloons flying at great heights, projecting a powerful searchlight in every direction, and hovering for up to 40 minutes at a time.<sup>9</sup>

No reports of further incidents appeared and no war broke out. For the *New York Times*, the first dispatch was "a fishy story that comes from Russian sources", and this paper did not bother to print the second dispatch, while the *Frankfurter Zeitung* commented that "the whole thing seems a bit marvellous." At the other extreme of concern, the Russians suspected that the Germans had solved the problem of aerial navigation, accused both the Germans and the French of operating an extensive balloon spy network, and worried about the danger of aerial warfare. Memory of these reports persisted, as notices appeared in

at least two magazines within a few months,<sup>10</sup> and an editorial in the *Deseret Evening News* (Salt Lake City, Utah) for April 30, 1897 defended the reality of that year's airship on the grounds that someone might have obtained the secret of the German balloons which flashed their searchlights on the Russians "some years ago". In *Nature* 58 (1898): 353, the writer comments on a cloud which resembled a balloon by saying that "the observation suggests an origin for strange war balloons and other aerial machines occasionally reported", so perhaps sightings of this type were recurrent during the 1890s.

Descriptive details are unfortunately scarce in the newspaper accounts. We know the balloons could fly above the range of bullets and carry several passengers as well as a powerful, directable searchlight believed to have an electrical power source. Admiration echoed through these reports for the perfection of the steering mechanism, which allowed examination of specific targets and operated against the wind at a time when experimental airships barely could manoeuvre in calm air. Even more remarkable were the nocturnal habits of the fliers and the assurance with which they penetrated as far as Warsaw, 70 miles from the nearest German frontier, and returned home all in a single night. If we take these reports at face value, strong and reliable engines must have propelled these balloons. They never receive the name of airship and no description specifies an elongated gas bag, though judging by most experimental designs the cigar shape was a general assumption for any dirigible. In any case these balloons represent a flying machine such as no nation possessed, a machine which witnesses described as manoeuvrable, able to fly hundreds of miles and equipped with a brilliant light under apparently intelligent direction, so here we have the first known airship wave of major proportions involving numerous witnesses, and a direct predecessor of the 1896 and later waves.

### The Sightings of 1913

This same East European border region hosted yet another series of mysterious sightings early in 1913, when tensions were again high and conventional spy stories abounded. A December 31, 1912 dispatch reported that two Austrian airplanes flew over the Russian town of Kamenets-Podolsk, and just over a week later the military forbade aviators to violate Russian territory under pain of severe reprisals. The order responded to several attempts at reconnaissance of Poland by Austrian aircraft.<sup>11</sup> Then on February 24, 1913 a dirigible appeared over Dünaburg (Dwinsk) at 8 p.m., while the Polish town of Kelets received aerial visitors as it did in 1892, according to a March 29 dispatch which claimed that first an Austrian balloon and then, half an hour later, an airplane entered



Russian territory until shots drove it away.<sup>12</sup> Blame shifted to the Russians in a January 18 dispatch which said their airplanes had crossed the Austrian border several times on the same night and used a powerful searchlight to inspect the forts in and around Jaroslaw. Then last night a plane had crashed outside that city and the pilot, a Russian officer, was killed.<sup>13</sup> At 8 p.m. on January 30 an airplane with a brilliant searchlight flew over Jassy (Iasi), Roumania, a town near the Russian border, and manoeuvred for some ten minutes before heading toward the barracks. When the aviator failed to obey signals to land, troops fired two guns at the machine. The aviator put out his lights and disappeared.<sup>14</sup> One day later another night-flying airplane of supposedly Russian origin hovered over Lemberg, in Austria, and shone a searchlight on fortifications there until shots drove the flier away.<sup>15</sup> Meanwhile Austrian frontier guards often reported Russian airplanes and authorities issued orders to fire on intruders.<sup>16</sup> A sensational story with modern parallels came from a town near Plock, in Russian Poland, where about the end of January an Austrian plane landed late at night in a field and the mayor set out to capture the two airmen, "armed only with the insignia of his office". The two Austrians captured the mayor instead, bound him hand and foot and tied him to a wing of the aircraft. Then the airmen resumed their flight and delivered their terrified prisoner to the town of Bar, 60 miles away, after which they escaped before he could sound the alarm.<sup>17</sup> Germany's turn at the receiving end began on the night of March 4 when a mysterious airship appeared over Tarnowitz, and the military governor of Silesia offered a reward for these supposedly Russian spies. The famous story of a crashed dirigible outside Potsdam appeared on the 13th, accompanied by allusions to other airship reports from eastern German provinces.<sup>18</sup> These eastern borders had no monopoly on phantom airships, however. On February 24 the passage of a large airship over Poperinghe, Belgium, caused great excitement among the populace, while three days later came a report from Holland that no less than six dirigibles bearing the German flag sailed over Noord-Brabant and ascended as they went.<sup>19</sup>

Of course, by 1913 flying machines were not only a reality but an active part of German, Austrian and Russian military forces. When aircraft from time to time descended by accident in another country and the authorities quickly confiscated the machine and arrested the pilot, no doubt about the nature of the sighting remains. On the other hand, when searchlights figure into reports at a time when such appara-

tus was cumbersome, of limited utility and likely to make a target of the carrier, we have reason to suspect another phantom. The mounting evidence demonstrates that the 1913 airship wave was not exclusively English but world-wide, and I hope researchers with access to East European newspapers and languages will seek out further information.

#### Notes and References

1. *Manchester Guardian*, March 31, 1892, p8. Map adapted from Richard Andree, *Andrees Allgemeiner Handatlas* (Bielefeld & Leipzig: Verlag von Velhagen & Klasing, 1887), 73.
2. *New York Times*, March 26, p3: verbatim *New York Tribune*; *Guardian*, same date, p8. *Le Temps* (Paris) and *Neue Freie Presse* (Vienna) carry brief notices.
3. The *Warschawskij Dnewnik*, according to the *Guardian*.
4. *New York Times*, March 26, p3; *Manchester Guardian*, same date, p8.
5. *Frankfurter Zeitung*, March 28, pt1, p1. Stremes-zice not located.
6. *Neue Freie Presse*, March 18, p6; March 26, p4. The March 7 date for a sighting over Dombrova is suspect, since judging from this newspaper, the second incident over Dombrova must have occurred on the 17th. Only one incident and a mistaken date may be involved.
7. *New York Tribune*, March 31, p1; *Neue Freie Presse*, March 26, p4.
8. *Tribune*, March 31, p1.
9. *Tribune*, March 31, p1; *Guardian*, March 31, p8.
10. *American Advocate of Peace*, November 1892, p195; *Fire and Ice* (London), May? 1892.
11. *Le Temps*, January 1, 1913, p6; January 11, p6.
12. *Wiener Zeitung*, February 26, p10; *Neue Preussische Zeitung* (Berlin), March 29, pt1, p3.
13. *Journal des Débats* (Paris), January 20, p2.
14. *Manchester Guardian*, January 31, p9.
15. *Daily Express* (London), February 3, p7. This incident bears a suspicious similarity to the Jassy incident.
16. *Journal des Débats*, January 20, p2.
17. *Daily Express*, February 5, p1. The only Plock I find lies about 65 miles north-west of Warsaw, while the only Bar is several hundred miles south-east, so the geography makes no sense.
18. *Daily Telegraph* (London), March 6, p13; March 14, p15.
19. *Neue Preussische Zeitung*, February 25, pt2, p2; *Journal des Débats*, February 27, p2; and see also *Berliner Tageblatt*, February 25.

# SIGHTINGS AND STRANGE DOINGS IN OXFORDSHIRE

*The Reverend Donald Thomas (Long Hanborough, Oxford)*

A FORMER sergeant in a famous British regiment, "John" (not his real name) had served his time with the Forces in Northern Ireland, and the year 1978 found him living, with his wife and child, in a village in West-Oxfordshire. The village lies on the Witney-Faringdon road, and is consequently not far from the great British and American Air Force Base at Brize Norton.

## Events in 1978

John first came to see me at the Long Hanborough Rectory in September 1978 to tell me about a recent experience.

Between 0015 and 0130 hrs. on the morning of August 16, 1978, he had been driving through Witney, when his eye caught an unusually bright light with a flash of red. He quickly pulled up at the side of the road and, as he fortunately had his camera with him, he aimed it skywards. Having a colour film loaded, he caught the large glowing area, blood-red at the centre and surrounded with orange turning to yellow, and took two photographs. But when in due course transparencies had been made and were thrown on to a screen, what raised the eyebrows was the little cluster of very small but intensely bright pin-points of light, and the pictures began to look even more interesting when they had been enlarged and the jerky streak of light joining up the pin-points came into clear view.

About a month later, in September 1978, John had a second sighting, this time on the narrow country road linking Freeland with Barnard Gate, an area some four miles to the east of Witney. (See *Ordnance Survey Map, One Inch, No. 145.*)

The third — and most unexpected — sighting occurred at about 11.30 p.m. on Saturday, September 23, 1978. John was driving along the A338 road towards Wantage. When he was on the Lambourne Downs, some 2½ miles south of this town, at about 700-720 ft. above sea-level, in the vicinity of Angel-down Farm, he declares that he clearly saw an enormous craft not very far from the ground. "It took up three-quarters of the width of my four-foot wide windscreen," he said.

He said the craft crossed the A338 road on a course that appeared to be from S.E. to N.W. It produced a noise louder than that of the average car engine, and he described the sound as "like a mixture of an oscillating radio and the shsh of a car-washer". Moving much

more slowly than an aircraft, the machine was illuminated not only by the Moon but also by its own lights. These were very bright "laser-type" lights, all white, coming from three or four separate rows of portholes. Some of these portholes were larger than the others. John unfortunately had no camera with him on this occasion, and, equally unfortunately, no companion to corroborate his amazing story.

He described the colour of the craft as brownish-bronze.

I asked John what effect this experience had had upon him, and he commented that he had not been at all tired at the end of that day — "not as I should normally have been". He said that he also discovered next day that he was adding up figures (Pounds and Pence) a great deal more quickly and more easily than before.

He said his vehicle appeared to have been largely unaffected as regards either engine or headlights, but he found that the interior car-light seemed to have ceased to work properly. The clutch also appeared to

