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**Flying Saucers and UFOs: An investigation
into the impact of the Cold War on British
Society, 1950-1964**



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Flying Saucers and UFOs: An investigation into the impact of the Cold War on British society, 1950-1964

History BA Dissertation

Candidate No.: 54989

Word Count: 9892

**STRANGE OBJECTS
HAVE BEEN SIGHTED
IN THE
SHEFFIELD SKIES**

The Air Ministry cannot explain them

This picture has been analysed by experts. It is genuine, they say

WE SAY: How much longer dare we pooh-pooh stories such as these?



MEN FROM OUTER SPACE:

The photograph above was taken by 14-year-old Alex Birch, using a box Brownie camera, in a field behind his home near Sheffield. Alex is convinced the black shapes are "flying saucers."

And Air Ministry experts who have subjected the snapshot to the most careful scrutiny in addition to questioning young Alex for three hours, refer to the black shapes as "unidentified flying objects" and "aerial phenomena."

They say the picture, whatever else it may be, is not faked.

What are the five objects in the picture? And what is the relation between them and the other strange phenomena that have been seen, night after night, in the sky near Sheffield?

The quick answer is that nobody knows. The existence of flying saucers has never been officially admitted. Governments laugh politely when they are mentioned.

Yet "sightings" continue to crop up.

I have just been to Sheffield. With photographer Bill Orchard, I talked to people who have seen these saucers. I even stayed up all night watching the night sky. I saw nothing.

But Walter Revill did see something a few nights earlier. So did Matt Needham and several others. And unless they are all subject to hallucinations—then something very odd

ARE THEY VISITING BRITAIN?

JOHN BROXHOLME
investigates for
TODAY



Young Alex Birch. With this box camera, he snapped five dark "invaders" in the sky

Walter Revill. An eerie shape showed up in a vanishing point of light on his cine-film

'Men from outer space: Are they visiting Britain?', *Today*, 22 September 1962.

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Introduction

‘We have here a golden opportunity to see how a legend is formed, and how in a difficult and dark time for humanity a miraculous tale grows up of an attempted intervention by extra-terrestrial “heavenly” powers – and this at a time when human fantasy is seriously considering the possibility of space travel and of visiting or even invading other planets.’

C.G. Jung, 1959.¹

An anonymous article from 1957 in the British government’s official Unidentified Flying Object (UFO) policy files observed that ‘man has always looked to the sky for signs and portents, nor has he, even to-day, quite lost his inclination to discern and report celestial manifestations.’² In fact, in the complex global situation that was the Cold War, the sky assumed even more relevance and importance. The world watched as scientists on either side of the Iron Curtain not only developed nuclear weapons, but critically the intercontinental ballistic missiles enabling them to be dropped on any corner of the world.³ Geppert has also drawn attention to the ‘astroculture’ of the mid-twentieth century which notably gave rise to the first satellite, Sputnik, and Apollo, the first civilian space travel programme.⁴ The threats and possibilities that these collective innovations engendered largely originated in the sky. It is therefore unsurprising that people across the world became more attuned to the activity occurring above.

It was against this contextual backdrop that Britain witnessed a wave of interest in UFOs. On 1st October 1950 the front page of the *Sunday Dispatch* declared: ‘The Story that May Be Bigger Even Than Atom Bomb Wars: FLYING SAUCERS - Full Inquiry Into The No.1 Sensation Of The Age.’⁵ Despite the hyperbole, the headline accurately captured the full extent of interest in what was a much wider phenomenon within British society. The allusion to the ‘Atom Bomb Wars’, an early reference to the Cold War, also highlighted the parallels

¹ C.G. Jung, *Flying Saucers: A Modern Myth of Things Seen in the Skies*, translated from the German by R.F.C. Hull (London, 1959) p.14.

² Kew, The National Archives (hereafter TNA): DEFE 31/118, ‘Flying Saucers’, 1957.

³ J.L. Gaddis, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History* (Oxford, 1997) p.226.

⁴ A.C.T. Geppert, ‘Rethinking the Space Age: Astroculture and Technoscience’, *History and Technology*, 28 (2012) p.219-23.

⁵ London, British Library Newspaper Archive (hereafter BL): MLD38, ‘The Story That May Be Bigger Than Atom Bomb Wars’, *Sunday Dispatch*, 1 October 1950.

between the latter and the interest in UFOs – an aspect which was observed at the time by the psychologist Carl Jung. Aware that the fascination with UFOs was shared globally, he looked for a ‘situation common to all mankind’ which he found in ‘the threatening situation of the world today’ as ‘the whole world is suffering under the strain of Russian policies.’⁶ Despite his Eurocentric perspective, his observations illuminate a substantial area where the Cold War had a powerful impact. Yet this surface correlation does not adequately account for the breadth and depth of the interest that the subject garnered.

Therefore, this dissertation will investigate the relationship between the Cold War and UFOs to uncover how and why the former drove the interest in the latter. Emerging in 1950, at the same time as the first ‘hot’ conflict in Korea, the interest in UFOs was sustained consistently throughout the Cold War’s early period, against a backdrop of continual tension, competition and development. Although this interest continued throughout the whole period of the global conflict, after 1964 the situation began to change as tensions dissipated following the nuclear Test Ban Treaty.⁷ Thus, by exploring these early years as a collective whole this study explores how the Cold War instigated, shaped and maintained the ‘UFO mania’ in Britain.

In doing so, it redresses an important historical lacuna. Despite its contemporary prevalence, historians have yet to approach this as a topic for rigorous historical analysis.⁸ Greg Eghigian has written one of the few articles on UFOs during the Cold War, focusing on post-war Germany.⁹ He points out that as a subject it is often dismissed by academics for being ‘too preposterous’ to warrant study.¹⁰ On the contrary, the subject of UFOs offers a valuable lens through which to explore the complex impact of the Cold War on British society. The exclusion of this topic is also symptomatic of the wider trend in the dominant historiography on the Cold War. Whilst the recent post-revisionist trend has endeavoured to broaden both the geographical and thematic scope of the previous historiography, the top down ‘high politics’ approach has remained prevalent.¹¹ As McMahon points out, the domestic

⁶ Jung, *Flying Saucers*, p.8-12.

⁷ R.J. McMahon, *The Cold War: a very short introduction* (Oxford, 2003), p.97.

⁸ A popular account of the subject has been written, however, by journalist David Clarke. See D. Clarke, *The UFO Files: The Inside Story of Real-Life Sightings* (London, 2004).

⁹ G. Eghigian, ‘‘A transatlantic buzz’: flying saucers, extraterrestrials and America in postwar Germany’, *Journal of Transatlantic Studies*, 12, 3 (2014) p.282-303.

¹⁰ Eghigian, ‘‘A transatlantic buzz’, p.282-3.

¹¹ For an overview of Cold War historiography see A. Lane, ‘Introduction: The Cold War as History’ in K. Larres and A. Lane (eds.), *The Cold War: The Essential Readings* (Oxford, 2001) p.1-16. The post-revisionist trend has led to a notable reinstatement of Britain into the Cold War picture, for example, but these works still focus exclusively on the government. For examples, see A. Deighton (ed.), *Britain and the First Cold War* (Basingstoke, 1990); S. Greenwood, *Britain and the Cold War, 1945-1991* (Basingstoke, 2000).

repercussions have received much less systematic attention from scholars than the Cold War's internal dynamics.¹² Nevertheless, this is not to overlook the increasing output of works which have been influenced by the recent 'cultural turn' within the historical discipline.¹³

Positioned at the forefront of this literature is Joanna Bourke's seminal study of fear. Focusing on the prospect of total annihilation, she argues that for many people the Cold War was even more 'frightening' than the Second World War.¹⁴ Her work offers a valuable corrective to those historians who dismiss the people from what they perceive to be solely a specialist's conflict.¹⁵ However, the comparative lack of cultural research into the Cold War has led other historians to sweepingly rely on fear to encompass the conflict's entire domestic impact. Despite only focusing on the government, Hennessey claims it aroused fear on a wide scale.¹⁶ Whilst Gaddis dedicates an entire chapter to the 'return of fear' generated by the onset of the global conflict.¹⁷

These claims are not unfounded; fear was certainly an inextricable element in a conflict in which, as Bourke notes, a new man-made bomb could achieve unimaginable catastrophe.¹⁸ However, reducing the entire domestic impact of the global conflict to this obscures the complexity of both the Cold War and its corresponding impact. Indeed, the Cold War was not a monolithic entity, but a multifaceted global state of affairs involving military conflict, ideological battle and scientific competition.¹⁹ Consequently, as this study demonstrates, its impact was far more broad and diverse than a one-dimensional framework of fear can account for. In the case of UFOs, fear was just one element in a complex web of factors comprising emotion, necessity and opportunity, all wrought by the Cold War.

To demonstrate this, an extensive range of primary and archival materials has been utilised. A large proportion of these sources were only released by the National Archives in 2012. As such, this research has benefitted from relatively recently released material which other

¹² McMahon, *The Cold War*, p.105.

¹³ T. Shaw, 'Introduction: Britain and the Cultural Cold War', *Contemporary British History*, 19, 2 (2005) p.109.

¹⁴ J. Bourke, *Fear: A Cultural History* (London, 2005) p.195-290.

¹⁵ P. Hennessey, *The Secret State: Preparing for the Worst 1945-2010* (London, 2010) p.2.

¹⁶ Hennessey, *Secret State*, p.2.

¹⁷ J.L. Gaddis, *The Cold War* (London, 2005) p.5-48.

¹⁸ Bourke, *Fear*, p.260.

¹⁹ Deighton, *Britain*, p.2; M. Walker, *The Cold War And the Making of the Modern World* (London, 1993) p.5-7.

historians have not previously utilised. The majority of these files comprise the government's official interaction with the subject of UFOs, in conjunction with their correspondence with the public. Whilst they overtly downplayed the subject, a thorough examination of these files reveals that the government, motivated by strategic objectives, placed UFOs high on their agenda. This is also brought to light in various Parliamentary discussions from the Hansard Online Archive, which particularly draw attention to the government's awareness of both the public's and press' interest in the subject.

The files from the National Archives also include letters from the general public reporting objects they have sighted. These letters highlight the variety of emotions driving the public's interest in UFOs. However, engaging with emotions historically can be methodologically complex. As Bourke herself asks: how do historians know what individuals in the past really felt?²⁰ Whilst a difficult task, this does not justify the historical neglect of emotions, as they are integral to master narratives.²¹ Instead, historians must remain conscious of the complexity of emotions, identifying the latter where they have been 'made visible' by people in the past through the things they left behind.²² These letters therefore provide an important insight into the public's emotions, without distorting the past. As Bourke and Rosenwein point out, emotions are largely communicative tools; thus by expressing their objectives or asking particular questions, many individuals revealed their underlying emotions.²³

Whilst these letters offer a rich insight into both public and private interactions with UFOs, they were routinely destroyed until 1962.²⁴ Consequently, they are only available for the final two years under study. This does not present an insurmountable obstacle, however, as the breadth of the interest in the subject caused it to surface widely outside of the official correspondence. Evidence from popular culture, UFO-related publications and research groups have also been utilised to construct a more comprehensive representation of the interest in this subject.

Finally, newspapers are used throughout as they shed light on the involvement of the whole of society. Relevant newspaper articles have been taken from the government files discussed

²⁰ Bourke, *Fear*, p.6.

²¹ B.H. Rosenwein in N. Eustace et al., 'AHR Conversation: The Historical Study of Emotions', *American Historical Review*, 117, 5 (2012) p.1494.

²² J. Bourke, 'Fear and Anxiety: Writing about Emotion in Modern History', *History Workshop Journal*, 55 (2003) p.113-7.

²³ Rosenwein 'AHR Conversation', p.1496.

²⁴ National Archives UFO Official Briefing Document, <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documents/briefing-guide-12-07-12.pdf> [accessed 12/11/14].

above, the Archives for the Unexplained in Sweden, the British Library and a variety of other digital newspaper archives. Although the press coverage of UFOs in this fourteen year period is unsurprisingly vast, this dissertation focuses principally on the popular tabloid press. In part because these were the most widely read and were therefore more reflective of the wider public's engagement; as Shaw points out, sales of the 'populars' forged ahead of those at the 'quality' end of the market.²⁵ However, more importantly because the opportunity generated by the Cold War was only significant for the tabloids, as the final chapter demonstrates.

This dissertation comprises three chapters which are framed around the driving stimuli behind the British interest in UFOs. The first chapter investigates the role of emotion in sparking the public's engagement with UFOs. Whilst Bourke has made a persuasive case for the predominance of fear, in the case of UFOs this constituted just one element in a much broader matrix of emotions induced by the Cold War. Individuals were not simply passive recipients of fear, but active agents also driven by curiosity, fascination and hope. The emotional basis of the public's interest opens the second chapter which explores the government's interest as a product of Cold War necessity. In the precarious global climate the government was forced to engage with the topic of UFOs to prevent potential popular unrest. This necessity extended beyond the home front, however, as observing UFOs became imperative not only for monitoring foreign threats but also global developments. Finally, by stimulating this comprehensive interest amongst British society, the Cold War provided the British popular press with a lucrative opportunity, created by the newly relaxed conditions in which this potentially contentious subject could be freely published. Thus, the collective interest in UFOs was driven by a range of different but intersecting Cold War stimuli.

²⁵ T. Shaw, 'The British Popular Press and the Early Cold War', *History*, 83, 269 (1998) p.68-9.

Chapter One – Emotion

Fear was a core feature of the British interest in UFOs, although it surfaced in different ways. A report in the *Daily Mail* described a reverend who regularly warned his parishioners about them, claiming ‘it is nothing to smile at...they may well land here within 50 years.’²⁶ A reporter later investigated this further by interviewing some of the local parishioners, one of whom admitted ‘it is frightening when you come to think of it. That’s why so many people brush it aside.’²⁷ Another man claimed, after having spotted a mysterious formation in the sky, that, ‘even if I did know what they are, I am too worried to say anything.’²⁸ In some cases, actions spoke louder than words. The day after an object was seen near London Airport, the *Sunday Mirror* reported a ‘999 deluge as UFO spotted’ as ‘police in four counties were inundated with reports of an unidentified object’, including four hundred people who had reportedly telephoned the airport directly.²⁹ Thus, fear was evidently present in the subject of UFOs.

These fears were a product of the Cold War context in which they emerged. Bourke points out that confusion and uncertainty about the nature and intensity of a threat was particularly distressing for individuals in the past, as fear of the unknown greatly contributed to panic states.³⁰ In an unnervingly uncertain global conflict UFOs, by definition unknown and mysterious, therefore assumed a distinctly fearful dimension. Indeed, considering the pace of global developments, an object in the sky could be interpreted as anything from a satellite photographing from above, to a more sinister incoming bomb.³¹ A letter from the public confirms this, as one man asked ‘may we be assured that there is some means of differentiating between such unearthly objects and say the missiles of some foreign power?’³² Whilst objects in the sky remained unidentifiable they therefore remained a source of potential concern. As an article in the government’s files observed, ‘whenever an airborne body is not clearly recognised as something conventional it becomes a mystery whose

²⁶ Norrköping, Archives for the Unexplained (hereafter AFU): ‘Look out for space visitors, warns rector’, *Daily Mail*, 5 July 1954.

²⁷ AFU: ‘SEEN ANY GOOD SAUCERS LATELY?’, *Sunday Graphic News*, 8 August 1954.

²⁸ AFU: ‘Strange Sightings in Sky Baffle War Office’, *Sunday Dispatch*, 7 November 1954.

²⁹ AFU: ‘999 deluge as UFO is spotted’, *Sunday Mirror*, 1 September 1963.

³⁰ Bourke, *Fear*, p.277

³¹ T. Brown, ‘The American and Soviet Cold War Space Programs’, *Comparative Strategy*, 30, 2 (2011) p.177; Gaddis, *We Now Know*, p.111.

³² TNA: AIR 2/16918, Letter from J.L. Otley to Air Ministry, 5 October 1963.

magnitude varies according to the observer's susceptibility.'³³ For some, this magnitude expanded to encapsulate the fears of the situation surrounding them.

In Britain the conditions enabling these fears to take hold surfaced in 1950 when the Korean War began and the ominous state of affairs was confirmed.³⁴ Prime Minister Attlee announced to the nation that 'what is happening in Korea is of such importance to you. The fire that has been started in distant Korea may burn down your house.'³⁵ This metaphorical warning was publicly acknowledged, as a Gallup poll revealed that a sizeable sixty-seven percent of those interviewed believed the distant conflict would escalate into World War Three, which had an alarmingly new dimension: the potential for global annihilation.³⁶ It is no coincidence, then, that when these fearful prospects were confirmed, the interest in UFOs simultaneously emerged in a wave of sightings reported in the same summer of 1950.³⁷

Indeed, the correlation between the two is not simply speculation. Brians argues that the public took the Cold War risks seriously and that popular fiction reflected their fears.³⁸ In view of this, both the proliferation and presentation of UFOs and other space-related objects in science-fiction is highly revealing. *The Black Cloud*, a science fiction book published in 1957, drew direct parallels between the threatening elements of the Cold War and an unidentified object from space. The plot describes a cloud-like object as it approaches Earth threatening to induce global catastrophe; observers endeavour to destroy it with H-bombs to no avail.³⁹ Whilst the catastrophe is narrowly avoided, the plot sheds light on how Cold War fear, represented through the futility of the H-bombs, was being fused with the new interest in objects from outer space.

A contemporary film review explicitly captured this link. Discussing the release of the 1953 film adaptation of H.G. Wells' novel *The War of the Worlds*, which similarly featured atom bomb-resistant spaceships attacking Earth, the reviewer reflected on the aim of these films:

'To take our mind off the war just behind us and the war that we fear is just in front of us, we are getting bigger and better wars of growing incredibility, and,

³³ TNA: DEFE 31/118, 'Flying Saucers', 1957.

³⁴ McMahon, *Cold War*, p.56.

³⁵ 'Mr. Attlee's Call to the Nation: "Let Us Arm Ourselves Against Evil"', *The Times*, 31 July 1950.

³⁶ These polls were based on samples of interviews of one thousand people. See G. Gallup, *The Gallup International Public Opinion Polls: Great Britain 1937-75, Volume 1(1937-1964)* (New York, 1976) p.226; Bourke, *Fear*, p.258; R. Hewison, *In Anger: Culture in the Cold War 1945-1960* (London, 1988) p.ix.

³⁷ TNA: DEFE 19/9, 'Report by the Flying Saucer Working Party', June 1951.

³⁸ Brians, 'Nuclear war', p.254.

³⁹ F. Hoyle, *The Black Cloud* (London, 1957).

indeed after *The War of the Worlds*, mere human atomic war cannot appear as terrifying as before. Propelled by fear, our rioting imagination tears up the universe, as we close our brains on that insistent ticking outside – the normal rhythm of our time.⁴⁰

This reveals that the global situation was creating extensive fear which people were projecting into areas, notably the threatening UFOs in the film, deemed even more terrifying. The appetite for UFOs which proliferated in the popular films and literature of 1950s and early 1960s was therefore being driven by the immediate fears stimulated by the Cold War context. As McCrillis points out, although films cannot be taken as *prima facie* evidence, they are evocative of an era and its cultural mood.⁴¹ In the case of UFOs, this was evidently fearful.

This was not simply reflected in popular culture, it was also voiced by members of the public. The Aetherius Society, a British UFO-inspired religious group set up in 1955, produced a bi-monthly publication, *Cosmic Voice*, which warned its members of the powers of space.⁴² An article purporting to be a message from a satellite cautioned ‘all world Political leaders’ that ‘further atomic testing is bound to make the present dangerous situation much worse...for world crisis will come!’⁴³ Linking this pessimistic prophecy to UFOs, the article predicted the damage that would be wrought from space as ‘meteorological disturbances will shake and shatter the surface of Terra [Earth]’ if the Cold War space and military developments continued.⁴⁴ As Bourke has argued, fear is rendered visible through language and symbols.⁴⁵ The rampant hyperbole and pessimistic prophecies in this example indicate that the fixation with UFOs and space was permeated with fear.

However, whilst fear was an integral part of the British interest in UFOs, it would be misleading to present it as the sole emotion instigated by the Cold War. Rosenwein argues that although there are certain basic emotions true of all humans, different perceptions by different individuals of whether something is likely to be good or harmful will produce very different sorts of emotions in similar situations.⁴⁶ This is imperative when assessing the Cold

⁴⁰ ‘War Martians Invade America!’, *Picture Post*, 21 March 1953.

⁴¹ N.R. McCrillis, “‘Simply try for one hour to behave like gentlemen’: British Cinema during the Early Cold War, 1945-1960”, *Film and History*, 31 (2001) p.6.

⁴² TNA: AIR/2/16918, *Cosmic Voice*, Aetherius Society, 1961, p.14-30.

⁴³ TNA: AIR/2/16918, *Cosmic Voice*, Aetherius Society, 1961, p.14.

⁴⁴ TNA: AIR/2/16918, *Cosmic Voice*, Aetherius Society, 1961, p.12-20.

⁴⁵ Bourke, *Fear*, p.7.

⁴⁶ B.H. Rosenwein, ‘Worrying about Emotions in History’, *American Historical Review*, 107, 3 (2002) p.836.

War as its complexity generated a broad range of emotions which are often neglected from the historical narrative.

The Cold War also inspired hope which drove some people's attraction to UFOs. An article in the *Picture Post* postulated that, with regards to flying saucers, 'adults are only grown up children; and when times are grim, scientific and unromantic, they react to them as children would...For, like our juniors, we all enjoy a little bit of make-believe.'⁴⁷ However, this engagement was not simply playful fantasy; some individuals genuinely hoped that flying saucers would provide an alternative solution to the global conflict. In a letter to the government in 1963, one man asked 'do you also realise what we could learn from such advanced intelligences if only we were willing to learn from them? It would mean an end to war and unhappiness throughout the world.'⁴⁸ Written just months after the near-catastrophic Cuban Missile Crisis, it is clear that some individuals felt a solution could not be found whilst the state of affairs remained.⁴⁹ Rather than fearing this, however, the situation on the ground inspired others to hope that the objects and potential life in the sky would offer an optimistic alternative.

This hope stemmed directly from the Cold War as Jung observed at the time 'it could easily be conjectured that the earth is too small for us, that humanity would like to escape from its prison where we are threatened.'⁵⁰ Accordingly, UFOs became a vehicle through which people could invest their hopes. One woman, convinced that the government were selfishly withholding information about the 'space people' from the public, claimed 'you will have the responsibility of holding back this most wonderful news which would save the world from the destruction to which it is moving.'⁵¹ Thus the negative perception of the Cold War directly inspired some people to embrace UFOs as a source of hope against a situation that appeared irredeemable on Earth.

The fact that these hopes were projected onto UFOs was stimulated by the competitive technological dimension of the Cold War. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s the world watched as satellites, then animals and finally humans were launched into space by both East and West.⁵² As the scientific output increased at an unprecedented rate, so too did the

⁴⁷ 'It's nice to believe in flying saucers', *Picture Post*, 17 December 1955.

⁴⁸ TNA: AIR/2/16918, Letter from Brian James to Air Ministry, 20 March 1963.

⁴⁹ McMahan, *Cold War*, p.90-7.

⁵⁰ Jung, *Flying Saucers*, p.14-5.

⁵¹ TNA: AIR 2/16918, Letter from B.W. James to Air Ministry, 3 October 1962.

⁵² Brown, 'The American', p.177-180.

previously unforeseeable possibilities that accompanied them. As Jung pointed out, ‘the universal mass rumour [of flying saucers] was reserved for our enlightened, rationalistic age’.⁵³ Ultimately, it was only in the new Cold War situation that UFOs were a plausible prospect, particularly as the latter embodied many of these developments which were taking place in the sky. Indeed, it is revealing that the evidence unveiling hope appeared later in the period, after the most significant accomplishments, and thus the biggest possibilities, had been achieved. Clearly, as Eghigian suggests, flying saucers expanded the compass of human imagination.⁵⁴

This same aspect of the Cold War also stirred curiosity and fascination, as one man’s letter to the government highlights. After giving a detailed and technical description of an object, he stated ‘I have read most of the UFO books with scepticism...I should be glad if you could advise me if, in fact, it was an aircraft, or a satellite, or was it a ‘real’ UFO?’⁵⁵ His dismissal of the ‘UFO books’, many of which claimed the existence of extra-terrestrial life, indicates that he was primarily driven by a curious, scientific interest, one which was influenced by the Cold War developments around him, as his references to satellites and aircraft suggest. This was indicative of an inquisitive trend in many letters from the public, the sentiment and tone of which stood in stark contrast to those expressing fear. Thus, whilst Bourke conclusively states that Cold War scientific modernity adopted a distinctly menacing dimension, she overlooks the other emotions they inspired.⁵⁶ The British social commentator, Richard Hoggart, also noted a new atmosphere of ‘incessant change, in which the future automatically supersedes and is preferable to all in the past.’⁵⁷ As this observation suggests, the change and innovation stimulated by the Cold War, also created a positive and exciting environment.

This was conducive to both curiosity and fascination, to which the emergence of a number of UFO-related research groups and journals are testament. An illuminative record from the University of Oxford Unidentified Flying Object Study Group gives an insight into the purpose of these groups. The term card for their inaugural meeting states that ‘the aim of the group is to investigate and correlate the evidence, with a view to determining the true nature of Unidentified Flying Objects’.⁵⁸ Although records for other research groups no longer exist,

⁵³ Jung, *Flying Saucers*, p.16.

⁵⁴ Eghigian, ‘A transatlantic buzz’, p.292.

⁵⁵ TNA: AIR/2/16918, Letter from R.H. Kidman to Air Ministry, 28 July 1962.

⁵⁶ Bourke, *Fear*, p.6.

⁵⁷ R. Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy* (London, 1957) p.192.

⁵⁸ Oxford, John Johnston Collection: Box U1, UFO Study Group, Trinity Term Card, 3 May 1963.

an advert for the newly emerging British UFO Research Association (BUFORA) in 1963 reveals that there were at least eighteen of these groups nationwide, suggesting a sizeable amount of curiosity in the subject.⁵⁹ For similar purposes, a number of UFO-related publications, such as the *Flying Saucer Review*, emerged to provide a serious outlet for those whose curiosity extended beyond correspondence with the government. The first issue, published in 1955, stated that ‘we do not claim to know where Flying Saucers originate...One day we shall know the answer. And when we do, we shall have reached our first goal.’⁶⁰ Thus for a committed section of the public, these objects did not pose a threat to be feared, but an exciting possibility that warranted further research.

Evidently, then, the Cold War did not have a homogenous impact on the public. Instead, it stimulated a range of emotions which accounts for the broad and diverse responses and activity that the subject of UFOs garnered. This was apparent even at the time, as a particular letter brings to light. Asking for further information about UFOs, two individuals claimed they were ‘concerned with experimental work being carried out on various aspects of perceptions in human beings’ and they therefore wanted to investigate flying saucers because they were the ‘subject of much controversy.’⁶¹ Clearly UFOs were a malleable subject that could harness a range of emotions, as the reference to controversy reflects the different, and perhaps conflicting, emotional interests invested in the subject. These were ultimately a product of the diverse nature of the Cold War which, comprising both fearful threats and fascinating possibilities, had a multifaceted impact. Equally, therefore, its impact was not limited to emotion, as the next chapter demonstrates.

⁵⁹ See Appendix 1.

⁶⁰ ‘Editorial’, *Flying Saucer Review*, Spring 1955.

⁶¹ TNA: AIR/2/16918, Letter from E. Bunce and M.A. Black to Air Ministry, 6 September 1962.

Chapter Two – Necessity

It was partly this broad engagement with UFOs that necessitated the government's involvement, as the emotional underpinnings of the public's interest required a pragmatic response. This is because emotions are, by nature, unfixated and therefore volatile; hope can easily deteriorate into fear and fear into mass hysteria.⁶² As such, the emotional response to UFOs presented a potential risk to the government; one which, in 1958, transformed into the tangible prospect of civil unrest. A letter between government departments reported that 'there seems to be a campaign building up to criticise Government policy about the release of information on unidentified flying objects. The authors of the campaign are firmly convinced that extra terrestrial manifestations have appeared.'⁶³ Whilst no further details were given about the proposed scale of this campaign, further private letters to the government indicate that this was a particularly contentious issue. Indeed, one woman claimed 'the population of this planet have a right to know the truth and it is a crime against humanity to try and withhold it from them.'⁶⁴ Of more relevance, however, is the fact that the government was therefore aware of this subject as a provocative area.

Indeed, this was further brought to light during a Parliamentary discussion on the subject. In answer to a question about a UFO which had attracted a lot of interest, the Secretary of State replied that the object was simply 'two hydrogen balloons illuminated by a flash-light bulb.'⁶⁵ Yet the MP who had initiated the discussion suggested that this response was inadequate. He responded to the Secretary asking him 'whether he is aware it is most unlikely that that explanation will be accepted by those who saw the object? Is he aware that, in spite of the light-hearted tone of his reply, there is some general disquiet about these objects?'⁶⁶ These remarks not only reveal that the government was aware of the public's interest in the matter, but they also imply the government's need to adequately handle the matter.

This was directly acknowledged in their comprehensive policy regarding public correspondence. Discussing public reports of UFOs it specified that 'letters will be received at Air Ministry in the first instance by the Public Relations branch who will send off an immediate acknowledgement.'⁶⁷ Following an investigation of the contents of the letter, the

⁶² Bourke, 'Fear and Anxiety', p.126-7.

⁶³ TNA: DEFE 31/118, Letter from D.D.I. (Tech) to S.6, 19 August 1958.

⁶⁴ TNA: AIR 2/16918, Letter from Mrs. J. Harman to Air Ministry, 2 June 1962.

⁶⁵ Hansard Parliamentary Archives (hereafter HC or HL DEB): 20 March 1957, vol. 567 cols.373-4.

⁶⁶ HC DEB: 20 March 1957, vol. 567 cols.373-4.

⁶⁷ TNA: DEFE 31/118, 'SECRET: Unidentified Flying Objects – Policy', 1957.

result was ‘to be forwarded to the public relations department who will write a suitable reply’.⁶⁸ The deliberate reference to immediacy and ‘suitable’ communication draws attention to the consciously careful conduct of the government. This was partly required due to the nature of UFOs, as the original letter discussing the proposed campaign noted ‘as it is not possible to release official information about something which does not exist, it is difficult enough to satisfy those with preconceived ideas to the contrary.’⁶⁹ Evidently to compensate for the lack of conclusive answers about UFOs the government had to carefully manage their responses instead. Indeed, at the end of the Parliamentary discussion the MP proceeded to ask the Secretary if he would ‘make a general declaration that his Ministry is not at the moment involved...in releasing objects which are normally described as flying saucers?’⁷⁰ The need for a general declaration and immediate communication with the public indicates that this was a serious issue that the government was handling carefully.

This was driven by necessity as the government could not afford popular unrest during the Cold War. For a conflict that remained perpetually on the brink of developing into something ‘hotter,’ any form of unrest or mass panic could create a potentially fatal global imbalance. The government was acutely conscious of this, as a discussion within the House of Commons reveals. Talking about the damaging effects of subversive propaganda, for instance, the Earl of Swinton referred to the dangerous ‘unrest and discord’ it stimulated, that ‘has to be counteracted, and counteracted promptly and effectively.’⁷¹ This requirement stemmed directly from the global state of affairs, as he noted, ‘the Cold War is intensified; it has hotted up’.⁷² The need to carefully and promptly deal with issues which could provoke unrest and discord was clearly recognised as a necessity in the Cold War. The government’s careful handling of the subject of UFOs was therefore a product of this necessity, as they were keen to remove the emotional roots of the public’s attachment to UFOs which could escalate into more problematic unrest.⁷³ In the Cold War, as L’Etang points out, managing public relations was a vital means of preventing internal threats.⁷⁴

⁶⁸ TNA: DEFE 31/118, ‘SECRET: Unidentified Flying Objects – Policy’, 1957.

⁶⁹ TNA: DEFE 31/118, Letter from D.D.I. (Tech) to S.6, 19 August 1958.

⁷⁰ HC DEB: 20 March 1957, vol. 567 cols.373-4.

⁷¹ HL DEB: 6 February 1957, vol. 201, col.567.

⁷² HL DEB: 6 February 1957, vol. 201, col.567.

⁷³ TNA: AIR 2/16918, Loose Minute from S.6, 23 July 1962.

⁷⁴ J. L’Etang, *Public Relations in Britain: A History of Professional Practice in the 20th Century* (London, 2004) p.70.

However, the Cold War situation, like the emotional impact it engendered, was complex and therefore domestic stability was not the only necessity driving the government. The need to maintain security on the domestic front naturally extended to the international stage, as throughout the 1950s Britain had become increasingly vulnerable to outside attack. Jones argues that it was a particular Soviet target because of its unique position as America's closest ally in Europe.⁷⁵ This was exacerbated by military developments which saw an extensive network of military bases increasingly deployed in Britain.⁷⁶ Ultimately, from 1948 when American B-29 bombers were stationed in East Anglia and atomically armed, the government became sharply conscious of the vulnerability of the British Isles.⁷⁷ As a result, it became imperative to monitor the sky for any potential incoming attacks; indeed first upon an unordered 'Red List' of foreign warning indicators was 'unusual flight activity.'⁷⁸

Monitoring UFOs therefore became a necessary corollary of this objective. The strategy behind this was well established, as it had been considered as far back as World War Two when unidentifiable 'shadowings' had been spotted by British night bombers. Discussing these, one civil servant noted that 'I hope the investigations have not been dropped as there always seems to be the possibility of these "shadowings" suddenly developing into something more serious and catching us without any effective counter tactics.'⁷⁹ Although UFOs had not entered official language or policy, the correspondence sheds light on the thinking behind the government's pragmatic approach to ambiguous objects. Indeed, this evidently persisted into the new global conflict, as a private departmental document specifically acknowledged that 'we investigate reports of unidentified flying objects because of our defence responsibilities'.⁸⁰ This was reinforced by the high priority UFOs were accorded within official policy. Categorised as a serious intelligence issue, it was discussed alongside other important topical issues such as 'Russian Purchases of Mercury' and 'Vulnerability of the UK to a Knockout Blow by the Soviet Union.'⁸¹

Moreover, the fact that they also monitored UFOs in the colonies confirms that this was an important defence necessity. Although only a few records cover this, perhaps a reflection of

⁷⁵ H. Jones, 'The impact of the Cold War' in P. Addison and H. Jones (eds.), *Blackwell companion to British history: contemporary Britain (1939-2000)* (Oxford, 2005) p.24.

⁷⁶ S.J. Ball, 'British Defence Policy' in Addison and Jones, *Blackwell companion*, p.543.

⁷⁷ Greenwood, *Britain*, p.108.

⁷⁸ TNA: CAB 158/45, 'Indications of Sino-Soviet Bloc Preparations for Early War', JIC, Part I, 1962.

⁷⁹ TNA: AIR/2/5070, Air Ministry File No.58, 10 April 1941.

⁸⁰ TNA: AIR/2/16918, Loose Minute from S6 to A.I. (Tech) 5b, 23 July 1962.

⁸¹ TNA: DEFE 41/74, 'TOP SECRET' minutes from Joint Meeting of DSI and JTIC, 15 August 1950.

the declining number of colonies in this period, detailed documents from Eritrea reveal that they were also observing the Empire. A telegram from the Meteorological Office reported that ‘great excitement was caused throughout Asmara by the appearance of “flying saucers”.’⁸² Of more significance, however, was a separate report which stated that ‘Air Ministry Meteorological Station at airport has kept continuous detailed observation and recordings and is now computing speed and height of two of them.’⁸³ The thorough, technical details that were being recorded indicates the government’s desire to determine their nature and thus identify any potential defence threats. This is unsurprising; the colonies not only constituted part of Britain’s international defence remit, but in the context of increasing decolonisation they assumed heightened protective importance.⁸⁴ Deighton argues that within this early period there was a constant awareness that Britain was a declining power, thus the aim of containing Soviet power and shoring up British power was of prime importance.⁸⁵ Observing UFOs therefore offered an imperative means of upholding this objective, hence why it extended across Britain’s Empire.

But this defence necessity did not merely cover the threat of foreign invasion; it also extended to research and development. As Crowley and Pavitt point out, the Cold War formed an all-encompassing sphere of experience and expectation in which not only signs of military power but also new high-tech developments were deployed by both sides to demonstrate their superior command of modernity.⁸⁶ Keeping up with both military and technological developments was therefore necessary to compete and survive. This was clearly at the forefront of the government’s objectives, as Britain spent a higher proportion of its national income on research than any other Western country during the Cold War, except for America.⁸⁷ As Jones notes, advances in British science, research and development were largely shaped by the country’s ambitious defence strategy.⁸⁸

Consequently, monitoring UFOs was not only a necessity to protect national security, it also provided a means to spot potential foreign innovations. Indeed, an article in the Ministry of Defence’s files acknowledged, ‘there is always the chance of observing foreign aircraft of

⁸² TNA: FO 371/81093, Telegram from Asmara to Meteorological Office, 11 April 1950.

⁸³ TNA: FO 371/81093, Telegram from Asmara to Foreign Office, 6 April 1950.

⁸⁴ Greenwood, *Britain*, p.73-4.

⁸⁵ Deighton, *Britain*, p.4.

⁸⁶ D. Crowley and J. Pavitt, ‘Introduction’, in D. Crowley and J. Pavitt (eds.), *Cold War Modern: Design 1945-1970* (London, 2008), p.13.

⁸⁷ Jones, ‘The impact’, p.28.

⁸⁸ Jones, ‘The impact’, p.29.

revolutionary design.’⁸⁹ This was particularly important because ‘flying saucers’ were being seriously considered as a new type of aircraft worldwide. In 1953 the Canadian government developed ‘Project Y’, a proposal to design a saucer-shaped vertical take-off aircraft in collaboration with Britain and the US.⁹⁰ Despite concerns about rising defence expenditure, the Minister of Supply asked about financially contributing to the project ‘to ensure that, though it would be developed in Canada with American money, we should nevertheless be fully in the picture.’⁹¹ Being kept up to date with what was perceived to be a ‘revolutionary new idea’ was thus a necessity in a Cold War competition premised on continual innovation and development.⁹²

Although the project never fully materialised, the prospect of flying saucers remained a strong possibility throughout the early period of the Cold War, as it stemmed from the conviction that the East had already developed them. An extract amongst the government files from the American magazine, *TIME*, reporting on Project Y stated ‘THE RUSSIANS AHEAD?...it may not be the first. The USAF’s [United States Air Force] willingness to spend money on saucer-plane experiments results from a growing belief that the Soviet Air Force may be ahead of the U.S. in this field.’⁹³ Indeed, a large collection of foreign newspaper cuttings and reports amongst the Air Ministry’s files reveals not only that other countries were indisputably aiming to develop their own saucer-shaped aircraft, but also that this was an area the government was closely monitoring.⁹⁴ The prospect of other countries developing these new aircraft therefore drove the government to maintain a vigilant interest in UFOs.

Thus, just as some of the public were interested in the Cold War scientific developments out of curiosity, so too was the government except out of necessity. This is not to suggest that the individual members of the government were not emotionally interested in the subject, but crucially as a collective unit their interest and involvement must be framed as a product of Cold War necessity. These necessities, like the public’s emotions, were manifold and covered

⁸⁹ TNA: DEFE 31/118, ‘Flying Saucers’, 1957.

⁹⁰ TNA: AVIA 65/33, Letter from the Ministry of Supply to Air Ministry, 8 July 1954. For images of the proposed aircraft, see Appendix 2.

⁹¹ TNA: AVIA 65/33, ‘CONFIDENTIAL: Note of a Meeting on the Future of De Havillands’, 1955; D. Reynolds, ‘Great Britain and the Security ‘Lessons’ of the Second World War’, in R. Ahmann et al (eds.), *The Quest for Stability: Problems of West European Security 1918-1957* (Oxford, 1993) p.309-10.

⁹² TNA: AVIA 65/33, Letter from the Ministry of Supply to Air Ministry, 8 July 1954.

⁹³ TNA: AVIA 65/33, ‘Armed Forces Saucer Project’, *TIME*, 31 May 1954.

⁹⁴ TNA: AVIA 65/33 and DEFE 41/118 contain newspaper cuttings from Germany and the Soviet Union. See Appendix 2 for examples.

some of the most important issues facing the government during the Cold War, including the need to preserve domestic stability, protect national security and monitor global developments. Moreover, taken together with the public's broad interest, the government's involvement provided the basis for the popular press' engagement, as the final chapter explores.

Chapter Three – Opportunity

The Cold War patently stimulated a varied and extensive societal-wide interest in UFOs during the early part of this global state of affairs. Yet just as the government's and public's interests varied, so too did the popular press', which was interested in UFOs as a sensationalist and provocative enterprise. This is demonstrated throughout their coverage of the topic, as they proceeded to hyperbolise, sensationalise and visualise it. As Hodkinson argues, journalists are professional storytellers: headlines, images and commentary can all be viewed as sets of signifiers that invoke particular connotations.⁹⁵ A typical feature of this coverage included dramatic headlines, as reports from an incident in May 1957 highlight. The day after an object had been spotted over the English Channel, a string of headlines from various national tabloid newspapers reported 'R.A.F HUNTS "THE THING"', 'The 1,000mph Wotsit' and 'THAT UFO HAS THEM GUESSING'.⁹⁶ These headlines were often accompanied by photographic 'proof' or drawings of UFOs.⁹⁷ An article in the *Daily Mirror*, for example, about one man's claim to have 'met a Flying-Saucer man from Venus' was embellished with three images: a flying saucer, the man himself and a sketch of the alleged extra-terrestrial being.⁹⁸ Evidently this was a subject that the press were fully engaged with and one which they incessantly sensationalised.

This is unsurprising, considering the lucrative value to be gained from it; as Williams points out, the popular press thrived on sensationalism.⁹⁹ The subject of UFOs therefore represented an advantageous subject as the press could fully utilise and exploit it. Indeed, discussing how flying saucers were 'created' a journalist from the *Picture Post* remarked 'things were very slack – we badly needed a sensation...one of the reporters had been doodling on a piece of paper. Idly I said, "Looks like a flying saucer."...An hour later the Flying Saucer was born.'¹⁰⁰ The authenticity of this anecdote is inconsequential; instead it sheds light on the press' perception of this as a useful subject that they could take advantage of, demonstrating that UFOs equated to a valuable opportunity.

⁹⁵ P. Hodkinson, *Media, Culture and Society: an introduction* (London, 2012) p.135.

⁹⁶ TNA: AIR 20/9321, 'R.A.F HUNTS "THE THING"', *Daily Mirror*; 'The 1,000mph Wotsit', *Daily Sketch*; 'THAT UFO HAS THEM GUESSING', *Daily Worker*, all published 1 May 1957.

⁹⁷ A sample of these have been provided in Appendix 3.

⁹⁸ AFU: 'I Met a Flying-Saucer man from Venus', *Daily Mirror*, 30 September 1953. See Appendix 3.

⁹⁹ K. Williams, *Get Me a Murder a Day! A History of Media and Communication in Britain* (London, 2010), p.48-49.

¹⁰⁰ 'At Last, the Low-down on Flying Saucers – how They were Born, Drawn and Launched', *Picture Post*, 12 September 1953.

Yet this opportunity only emerged because the Cold War stimulated it. Indeed, prior to 1950 they had not expressed a real interest in UFOs. The few articles that were published tended to report on American sightings, or dismissed the topic entirely.¹⁰¹ This was because there was no societal interest in the subject for them to engage with. As Hodkinson argues, rather than being invented out of thin air, media content relates closely to reality.¹⁰² Accordingly, it was only when there was a firm interest in the subject that an opportunity was simultaneously created for the popular press. Indeed, immediately following the first ‘notable outbreak [of reports] during the summer and autumn of 1950’, the press clearly recognised the sizeable opportunity available to them as they reacted quickly and decisively.¹⁰³ Within a couple of months two national newspapers, the *Sunday Dispatch* and the *Sunday Express*, had fully embraced the topic, printing extracts from Gerald Heard’s book *The Riddle of the Flying Saucers* (1950) and serialising Donald Keyhoe’s *The Flying Saucers are Real* (1950) as their front page stories throughout October 1950.¹⁰⁴ By impacting on the public and government, the Cold War therefore also impacted on the press in a separate but inextricably linked way.

Yet crucially their ability to publish this content was also a new opportunity in itself. Prior to the Cold War the press had been greatly restricted by draconian censorship measures.¹⁰⁵ The main constraint, Regulation 2D, gave the government full power to ban any material deemed encouraging to the opposition during World War Two.¹⁰⁶ These measures were not simply threats, but genuine restrictions which were fully enforced. Not only was the *Daily Worker* banned in 1941, and the *Daily Mirror* nearly banned a year later for their perceived anti-government coverage, but one radio journalist, William Joyce, popularly referred to as ‘Lord Haw Haw’, was even executed for his Nazi propaganda reports.¹⁰⁷ Subsequently, anything deemed remotely contentious was prohibited from publication.

¹⁰¹ Between 1945 and 1949 in the *Daily Mail*, for example, only five articles were published on ‘flying saucers’ – three were based on American reports and one dismissed a flying saucer report as a balloon. See Daily Mail Digital Archive.

¹⁰² Hodkinson, *Media*, p.5.

¹⁰³ TNA: DEFE 19/9, Report by the Flying Saucer Working Party, June 1951.

¹⁰⁴ BL: MLD42, ‘Is Another World Watching Us?’, *Sunday Express*, 8 October 1950; BL: MLD38, ‘Flying Saucers: A Complete Investigation Into Today’s No.1 Sensation’, *Sunday Dispatch*, 8 October 1950.

¹⁰⁵ For a further information about censorship during the Second World War see R. Mackay, *Half the Battle: Civilian Morale in Britain During the Second World War* (Manchester, 2002).

¹⁰⁶ Williams, *Get Me*, p.134-6.

¹⁰⁷ Williams, *Get Me*, p.134-6; J. Jenks, ‘The Enemy Within: Journalism, the State and the Limits of Dissent in Cold War Britain, 1950-1951’, *American Journalism*, 18, 1 (2001) p.34-5.

The topic of UFOs was arguably not as dangerous as the pro-Communist content of the *Daily Worker* nor as damaging as ‘Lord Haw Haw’s’ reports on Allied losses.¹⁰⁸ However, nor was it entirely neutral, as the hyperbolic examples cited above suggest. Indeed, as the content stemmed from the public’s and government’s interest in the matter, it directly targeted this. The coverage of a particular sighting in 1962, for example, simultaneously captures how the press played on the public’s emotions and manipulated the government’s strategic involvement. An article from *Today* titled ‘MEN FROM OUTER SPACE: ARE THEY VISITING BRITAIN?’ reported on a boy who had taken a photograph of five objects in the sky.¹⁰⁹ Next to the reprinted photograph the article inquired ‘what are the five objects in the picture? And what is the relation between them and the other strange phenomena that have been seen, night after night...the quick answer is that nobody knows.’¹¹⁰ By asking questions and emphasising the mysterious nature of this incident, the article was provocatively probing into people’s thoughts and emotions. As Critcher observes, the press’ very reporting of certain facts can be sufficient to generate concern, anxiety or panic.¹¹¹ This therefore directly threatened to undermine the government’s efforts to stabilise and reduce the public’s emotional interest, as the previous chapter discussed.

In a similar vein, the article deliberately manipulated the government’s involvement. Printed in bold letters in a box next to the photograph, it claimed ‘The Air Ministry cannot explain them.’¹¹² This not only drew unwanted attention to the government’s involvement, but it also implied that they were incapable of deciphering these objects. This was indicative of a wider trend within the popular press’ coverage of UFOs. The headline of a different article, for example, reported ‘Strange Sights In Sky Baffle War Office.’¹¹³ Further into the article the reporter claimed ‘I was told that the area over which these objects are seen must remain a secret.’¹¹⁴ The idea of governmental secrecy surrounding UFOs was often emphasised; *Today* went as far as asking ‘Do YOU accept the official fob-off?’¹¹⁵ Essentially the government

¹⁰⁸ Mackay, *Half the Battle*, p.176.

¹⁰⁹ TNA: AIR 2/16918, ‘MEN FROM OUTER SPACE: ARE THEY VISITING BRITAIN?’, *Today*, 22 September 1962. See cover image, p.2.

¹¹⁰ TNA: AIR 2/16918, ‘MEN FROM OUTER SPACE: ARE THEY VISITING BRITAIN?’, *Today*, 22 September 1962.

¹¹¹ C. Critcher, *Moral Panics and the Media* (Buckingham, 2003) p.11.

¹¹² TNA: AIR 2/16918, ‘MEN FROM OUTER SPACE: ARE THEY VISITING BRITAIN?’, *Today*, 22 September 1962.

¹¹³ AFU: ‘Strange Sights in Sky Baffle War Office’, *Sunday Dispatch*, 7 November 1954.

¹¹⁴ AFU: ‘Strange Sights in Sky Baffle War Office’, *Sunday Dispatch*, 7 November 1954.

¹¹⁵ AFU: ‘FLYING SAUCERS: IS THE GOVERNMENT HIDING THE FACTS?’, *TODAY*, 7 September 1963.

was being construed as both incompetent and suspicious with regards to UFOs which, as has previously been highlighted, provided fertile ground for popular unrest. Thus, although neither pro-Russian nor anti-British, the press' coverage of UFOs was still largely problematic.

This was confirmed by the government themselves. Discussing the conduct of the press at the very start of the period one MP tellingly announced:

‘I want to mention the misuse of paper...in connection with the daily or weekly newspapers, [they are] concerned with sensational stories that tend to cause great anxiety among those who read them and especially among those who cannot protect themselves against this type of information – things like the “flying saucer” racket and the “invasion of the earth from other worlds” which have been running recently.’¹¹⁶

The government's specific reference to the topic of flying saucers in relation to the misuse of publishing demonstrates that the government identified this as a contentious issue early on. Yet in contrast to their previous actions, they did not censor or restrict the press, as the latter's profuse UFO-related output confirms.

This is because the Cold War stimulated the conditions which relaxed the previous regulations. Jenks has persuasively argued that Britain's involvement in the Korean War led to major changes in the state's perception and handling of media criticism, dissent and subversion.¹¹⁷ As he points out, the approach that had worked in the abnormal conditions of World War II – a strong combination of propaganda, censorship and occasional press suppression – was unsuited for the Cold War's new mix of constitutional normality and undeclared war.¹¹⁸ Indeed the previous draconian measures had been justified due to the requirements of ‘total war’ which no longer existed; a reality that surfaced during this first military conflict of the Cold War in 1950.

This explains the government's official policy on UFOs and the press. Instead of censoring what they had instantly identified as a problematic area, the Ministry of Defence (MOD) was only able to reduce the available content. As an official MOD file asserted, ‘the press are never to be given information about unusual radar sightings. Unauthorised disclosure of this

¹¹⁶ HC DEB: 24 November 1950, vol.481 col.722.

¹¹⁷ Jenks, ‘The Enemy’, p.33-44.

¹¹⁸ Jenks, ‘The Enemy’, p.33.

type will be viewed as offences under the Official Secrets Act.¹¹⁹ This was clearly deemed important as the policy was reiterated a couple of years later, ruling that ‘sightings by Service Personnel, or the action taken as a result of sightings by civilian personnel, are in no circumstances to be disclosed to the Press.’¹²⁰ Evidently the contentious nature of the subject and the press’ frequent exploitation of it necessitated that the government at the very least address it. But critically, in the absence of the previous regulations, they could do little more than limit their flow of information, which, as the volume of stories on UFOs suggests, was largely a futile endeavour.

Thus, whilst the *Daily Mirror* had nearly been banned for printing a playful cartoon perceived to undermine the government during World War Two, less than a decade later the tabloids were able quote an ‘astronomer-rector’ doing just that. Rector Ronald Cartmel was widely reported ‘warning his parishioners: “Don’t believe everything the Government tells you about flying saucers...They can’t all be meteorological balloons.’¹²¹ Despite directly challenging their official line, this story, along with the many others that undermined the government, was left untouched; clearly the rules had been significantly relaxed. This is not to suggest, however, that censorship disappeared entirely from the Cold War. Jenks also points out that with the onset of the Cold War official security censorship actually increased to protect vital technical and military secrets.¹²² However, outside of the specific remit of security, in areas which were still contentious and damaging, such as UFOs, the Cold War created a valuable new opportunity of freedom for the press.

The impact of the Cold War upon the British press was thus twofold. By stimulating a broad interest in this highly exploitable topic it provided the popular press with a lucrative new opportunity which it proceeded to utilise for the whole of the period under study. Equally, however, this opportunity was only cemented when the previous rules were reconsidered and a new precedent set, enabling the press to take full advantage of this contentious subject. Although this impact differed from the public and the government, in that it was a choice rather than an external imposition, it was also deeply intertwined with their interests as it

¹¹⁹ TNA: DEFE 31/118, Headquarters Fighter Command Air Staff Instruction, 1958.

¹²⁰ TNA: DEFE 31/118, Restricted Draft – Part I – Visual Sightings, December 1960.

¹²¹ AFU: ‘Flying Saucers? “Of Course” Says Astronomer-Rector’, *Birmingham Gazette*, 4 April 1954; ‘The “things” from space are coming, says Rector’, *Sunday Express*, 5 August, 1954.

¹²² J. Jenks, *British Propaganda and News Media in the Cold War* (Edinburgh, 2006) p.52.

sought to respond to and utilise them. The press' involvement in the subject therefore helps to draw attention to the breadth and diversity of this subject within British society.

Conclusion

As early as 1952 the Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, asked ‘what does all this stuff about flying saucers amount to? What can it mean? What is the truth?’¹²³ An anonymous civil servant replied that all incidents could be explained by either astronomical phenomena, mistaken identification of other objects, optical illusions, psychological delusions or deliberate hoaxes.¹²⁴ This was a straightforward, technical response and one that, in light of the government’s wider objectives, would probably have satisfied the Prime Minister, who proceeded to ask no further questions on the matter. Yet, as a broader historical inquiry, these same questions yield manifold answers and present a far more complex picture.

Whilst historians have explored the numerous other topics that would have been playing on the mind of the British Prime Minister during the early Cold War, this is one that they have crucially neglected.¹²⁵ This dissertation has therefore sought to address this historical oversight. As the evidence has demonstrated, the subject of UFOs was not just an issue narrowly confined to the apex of government, but instead a phenomenon that absorbed the whole of British society. By investigating this it has argued that not only was the Cold War the prime stimulus, but also that this stimulus was complex and therefore so was its impact. Whilst it is tempting to reduce this to a single factor, such as fear, to present a more satisfying coherent whole, this would be largely misleading. Indeed, the interest in UFOs was far from homogenous. It was driven by a myriad of factors induced by the global conflict, comprising emotion, necessity and opportunity and subsequently garnered a variety of responses from those engaged.

Although this collective interest was driven by separate motivations, these were inextricably linked to and shaped by one another under the shared umbrella of the Cold War. Hence the necessity facing the government was partly derived from the emotions of the public, which together amounted to an opportunity for the press. Thus behind this collective interest lie more intricate relationships, the variety of which tend to get hidden from broader narratives of the Cold War. Indeed, the dominant focus on the governmental ‘high politics’ of the conflict has led some historians to dismiss the people entirely.¹²⁶ The cultural turn has gone

¹²³ TNA: PREM 11/855, Prime Minister’s Personal Minute, 28 July 1952.

¹²⁴ TNA: PREM 11/855, Anonymous Letter to the Prime Minister, 9 August 1952.

¹²⁵ British Cold War historiography has focused largely upon ‘high politics’ topics such as defence, decolonisation and US relations. See Deighton, Greenwood and Hopkins et al.

¹²⁶ Hennessy, *Secret State*, p.2.

some way to remedy this, as recent literature has increasingly restored the everyday ‘history from below’ to the Cold War narrative.¹²⁷ Nevertheless, the binary that has been created between the government and the rest of society has obscured the reality of overlap and intersection which existed between all levels of society. As Kwon argued, the Cold War was waged within communities as well as between them.¹²⁸ By utilising an extensive variety of sources, representative of the public, government and popular press, this study has therefore provided a more comprehensive analysis of the domestic repercussions of the global state of affairs. As Shaw has also concluded, for Britain the Cold War represented every bit a total conflict incorporating the whole of society.¹²⁹

Yet it was not only British society that was affected; as a global state of affairs the Cold War’s impact was equally widespread. Although this study has focused solely on Britain, Eghigian’s study of Germany combined with Jung’s contemporary observations have drawn attention to the global basis of the UFO phenomenon.¹³⁰ As such, this offers a profitable line of future research, as transnational comparisons can deepen our understanding of how the global conflict played out on different national stages. Indeed, an article in the Soviet publication, *Pravda*, reveals that the USSR was also ‘witnessing a lively discussion about mysterious objects supposedly coming from space.’¹³¹ Future research could therefore unveil, contrary to the contemporaneous emphasis upon a dichotomy between East and West, a cultural similarity that has previously been unacknowledged.

Similarly, a broader time frame could offer profitable insight into the changing course of the Cold War and how this mapped out on the domestic front. Throughout the forty year conflict the official handling of UFOs, for instance, evolved from a small investigation into a full-time ‘UFO desk’ which received over six hundred calls in its final year of existence.¹³² This remained in operation until 2009, long after its stimulus had ended in 1989, raising interesting questions about both the cultural and official legacy of the Cold War. Thus, although multiple avenues remain to be explored, considering the previous historical lacuna, this study has provided a useful springboard for future researchers. Moreover, by framing the interest in

¹²⁷ Shaw, ‘Introduction’, p.109.

¹²⁸ H. Kwon, *The Other Cold War* (New York, 2010) p.86.

¹²⁹ Shaw, ‘Introduction’, p.114.

¹³⁰ Eghigian, ‘A transatlantic buzz’, p.282-303; Jung, *Flying Saucers*, p.1-17.

¹³¹ TNA: DEFE 31/118, ‘Flying Saucers’, 8 January 1961.

¹³² ‘UFO Desk: Closed’, <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documents/final-tranche-of-UFO-files-released.pdf> [accessed 12/03/15].

UFOs as a complex product of emotion, necessity and opportunity, it has more accurately captured the broad and complex nature of the Cold War and its corresponding impact.

Appendix 1

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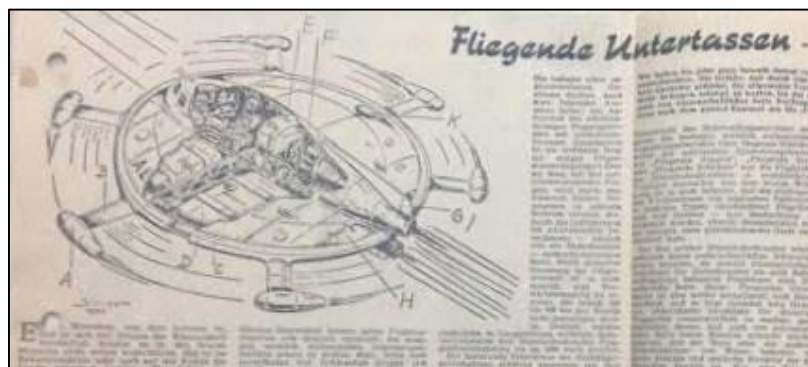
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AFU: Advertisement for BUFORA, 1963.

Appendix 2



Sources 1-4, clockwise from top left:

Source 1 - TNA: AVIA 65/33, photograph of the Avro Canada vertical take-off aircraft, Project Y.

Source 2 - TNA: DEFE 41/117, newspaper cutting from *Hamburger Freie Presse*, 22 April 1950.

Source 3 – TNA: DEFE 41/117, unclassified newspaper cutting, 26 May 1950.

Source 4 – TNA: DEFE 41/118, newspaper cutting from *Der Mittag*, 31 October 1950.

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