
FROM GEPAN TO SEPRA: OFFICIAL UFO STUDIES IN FRANCE

BY GILDAS BOURDAIS

The publication in July 1999 of the French Cometa Report, *UFOs and Defense: What Must We Be Prepared for?* (*Les OVNI et la défense: A quoi doit-on se préparer?*), triggered a controversy about its status, quasi-official or private. (See Mark Rodeghier, ed., “The 1999 French Report on UFOs and Defense,” *IUR*, Summer 2000, pp. 20–22, 30.) The Cometa report is a private initiative, though its style and contents give it an official look, and several members of Cometa have held (and some still hold) important posts in defense, science, and industry. At any rate, one effect of this document has been to renew interest in the official government research on UFOs in France.

It is well known that France created an official—or quasi-official—organization for the study of UFOs, first called GEPAN in 1977 and later SEPRA in 1988. But the real story is not so well known, even in France, mainly because it was surrounded by controversy. GEPAN/SEPRA has long been suspected of being just window-dressing for the general public, similar to the old Project Blue Book in the United States, with the real study being done elsewhere. Though it may have looked that way at the time, we now perceive it very differently. Yes, there was a genuine effort to set up a serious study of UFOs, but the investigations worked too well for the taste of certain French officials, and after a time the UFO study was reduced in scope. However, it is still there today with a real capability of monitoring UFO sightings.

At the beginning of the 1990s, Jean-Jacques Velasco, the engineer in charge of SEPRA, publicly made known his personal, positive opinion of the physical reality of UFOs—in contrast to the predominantly skeptical attitude of French scientists and intellectuals, as well as a good number of French ufologists. For American readers, this positive view of Velasco was clearly demonstrated by his participation in the workshop conducted by Peter Sturrock, at the invitation of Laurance Rockefeller, at Pocantico Hills, New York, in 1997. Anyone can verify this by reading Sturrock’s book,

Gildas Bourdais is the author of three books on the topic of UFOs, including OVNI, 50 ans de secret (Paris: Presses du Châtelet, 1997). He lives in Paris.



Jean-Jacques Velasco

The UFO Enigma: A New Review of the Physical Evidence (Warner Books, 1999). Velasco finds himself criticized at the same time by both believers and skeptics, in a way comparable to the criticisms leveled at the Cometa report since its publication last year—a peculiar situation and, for me, a good reason in itself to look back at the story and try to put the record straight.

These are the main facts regarding French official UFO studies. All the names and dates regarding GEPAN and SEPRA have been confirmed to me by Jean-Jacques Velasco. But the story of official efforts to study UFOs begins well before the creation of GEPAN in 1977.

BEFORE THE CREATION OF GEPAN

After the Second World War, the first aeronautical sightings of UFOs were collected and archived at the headquarters of the French Air Force, in the Bureau Prospective et Etudes (EMAA/BPE), meaning “Office of Long-term Studies.” The same function is assumed today by the Bureau Espace.

At the beginning of the 1950s, the gendarmes (police officers of the Gendarmerie Nationale) began to record reports of UFO sightings, a copy of which they transmitted to the French Air Force. Like the Italian carabinieri, the gendarmes are military personnel under the authority of the Ministry of Defense, so it was very natural for them to cooperate with the Air Force.

During these early years, some military personnel openly expressed their interest in *soucoupes volantes* (flying saucers). For instance, Lieut. Jean Plantier proposed a theory of UFO propulsion by antigravity in an article published in 1953 by the official *Revue des forces aériennes françaises*. Such initiatives were encouraged by Gen. Lionel Max Chassin, who became (after he retired) president of one of the first civilian groups, GEPA (created in 1962 and not to be confused with GEPAN), until his death in 1970.

A FIRST PROJECT IN THE SIXTIES

In his book *Forbidden Science* (North Atlantic Books, 1992), Jacques Vallée alluded to the interest of some French



Yves Rocard

scientists in UFOs. Through his friend Aimé Michel, he met in 1966 with Yves Rocard (1903–1992), a top French physicist at the Ecole Normale Supérieure and one of the fathers of the French atomic bomb. Rocard was known to have access to the highest levels of the government. (His son Michel was a leftist politician who was prime minister in Mitterrand’s government in the 1980s.) Vallée says that he gave Rocard a copy of outstanding Project Blue Book cases, but he complained that the contact ended there (pp. 201 and 227). In fact, I learned recently that the idea of establishing an official research group on UFOs was indeed under consideration at about the same time by the government, although it is not clear if Vallée’s visit had anything to do with it.

Jean-Luc Bruneau, former inspecteur général at the Commissariat à l’Energie Atomique (CEA), now retired and living near Paris, told me that he had been asked by scientific research minister Alain Peyrefitte to make a proposal for the creation of a research group on extraterrestrial life and UFOs. At that time, Bruneau was transferred from the CEA to work directly for Peyrefitte. The initiative for the proposal came from the military staff of President de Gaulle, with his approval, and it was also supported by Professor Rocard. According to Bruneau, de Gaulle was concerned by the sighting in 1954 of a UFO over the city of Tananarive, Madagascar, a case cited in the Cometa report. In fact, De Gaulle approved the idea of France having its own study group independent from the Americans at the time when the Condon commission was created.

Bruneau’s confidential project was approved in 1967. He proposed three objectives to be studied with the help of experts in various fields:

- the probability of the existence and search for extraterrestrial intelligence;
- what our relations could be with them through space;
- what is going on in our terrestrial environment—in other words, the study of *phénomènes aérospatiaux non-identifiés* (unidentified aerospace phenomena).

Bruneau insisted on that wording (which would be adopted later by GEPAN) because in his view the phenomenon could include both material and non-material objects. He also recommended that the study become first a project of the Centre National d’Etudes Spatiales (CNES), and later a European project. Bruneau recalls that at that time the opinions in scientific circles were about evenly divided on UFOs. (No one dares make that estimate today in France.)

This project, unfortunately, was postponed because of the political crisis of May 1968 in France and never taken up afterwards. Thus it was a missed opportunity that preceded GEPAN by almost 10 years. Bruneau still thinks today that the project, as it was originally conceived, could have included qualified experts like Rocard in the fields of astrophysics, exobiology, medicine, psychology, aviation, and the armed forces.

THE TURNING POINT OF 1973

In 1973, an important wave of sightings attracted media interest. Radio journalist Jean-Claude Bourret made a series of very successful radio programs for the national radio network France Inter, called *OVNIs: Pas de panique!* (*UFOs: No Panic!*). On February 2, 1974, he obtained an interview with Defense Minister Robert Galley, who acknowledged that there were unexplained cases among the gendarmes’ reports, and recommended “keeping a very open mind” on the question of UFOs.

The first book of astronomer J. Allen Hynek, *The UFO Experience* (Regnery, 1972), was translated into French in 1973 and drew much attention at that time. It was well defended on French national TV by astronomer Pierre Guérin when confronted by some skeptical journalists.

In 1974, a decision was made to systematically gather together the reports of the gendarmerie at a national level, under the authority of Commandant (Major) Cochereau and Captain Kervandal. The latter indicated that copies of the reports were being made for CNES.

The same year, a committee of the Institut des Hautes Etudes de Défense Nationale (IHEDN), chaired by Gen. Blanchard (not of the U.S. Air Force!), made recommendations for the organization and study of the UFO data.

At the same time, engineer Claude Poher, who was

head of the systems and projects division at CNES, was already engaged personally in the study of UFOs. He had become interested after reading the Condon report, in which he was surprised to find a lot of unexplained cases. By 1973, Poher had already completed a statistical study of UFOs, which he presented in 1975 at a meeting of the American Institute of Astronautics and Aeronautics. In 1976, he participated in the first technical conference of the Center for UFO Studies.



Claude Poher

In 1976, Poher made proposals to the director of CNES, with the support of IHEDN, for the creation of a UFO study group. He had already been assured of the full cooperation of the Air Force, the gendarmerie, civilian aviation, and the national meteorology office.

GEPAN (1977–1987)

In 1977, the French government asked CNES to put in place a permanent group for the study of UFOs. That was done in May 1977, with the creation of the Groupement d'Etude des Phénomènes Aérospatiaux Non-identifiés (GEPAN), under the direction of Claude Poher.

At an inaugural session, the president of CNES, Hubert Curien, asked GEPAN to study the reports with an open, scientific mind. But this was not an official statement. A Scientific Council was also created, made up of 12 members (not to be mistaken with MJ-12!) to which GEPAN would have to report at least once a year. According to reliable sources, Curien and the Director General of CNES Bignier adopted a neutral attitude on the question of UFOs. The work of GEPAN received support from the secretary of the Scientific Council and general inspector of CNES, M. Gruau.

1977—1979: THE POHER PERIOD

During the period 1977–1979, GEPAN had a staff of six to seven people. It also obtained the cooperation of other personnel and experts, both inside and outside CNES.

The first task of GEPAN was to analyze the many reports coming mainly from the gendarmerie. To the more than 300 reports already handed over in 1974 were now added more than 100 reports a year. Incidentally, Velasco told me that this number has dropped considerably in recent years, to less than 20 cases a year.

A first meeting of the Scientific Council took place in December 1977. According to a former scientific expert of GEPAN, the group was given a two-volume report of 290 pages, including three general presentations, three reports on detailed investigations, an analysis of two alleged photographs of UFOs, and five statistical analyses of samples and various cases. The council made conclusions and recommendations that led GEPAN to undertake complementary studies. These were examined at a second meeting in June 1978. This time, a five-volume report totaling 670 pages was prepared. The first volume was a synthesis written by Poher. Volumes 2–4 contained 10 detailed field investigations, and the fifth volume gathered other studies and less detailed cases. The expert who gave me these details still regrets that these reports were never published so that only insiders have an idea of the important amount of good work done by Poher and his team. Since France has no equivalent of the Freedom of Information Act, it does not seem possible to obtain the release of these documents today.

According to Velasco (at the time Poher's assistant), in the statistical study of 1978, 678 reports were evaluated and classified in four categories:

- A—perfectly identified
- B—probably identified (total of A and B = 26 %)
- C—insufficient information (36 %)
- D—unidentified (38 %)

This report was approved by the Scientific Council, which in turn asked for a number of studies covering several fields, such as statistical methodology, models of propulsion (including magnetohydrodynamics), and the psychology of perception.

It is interesting to note that Claude Poher also tried to cooperate with private ufologists.

In September 1978, GEPAN organized a large gathering of about 100 people from more than 40 civilian UFO groups (many more than exist today). This effort looked promising at the beginning, but it proved too difficult to manage and did not last long. Sharp criticism began at that time, coming from both skeptics and conspiratorial-minded persons. The so-called “psychosocial” trend was already growing in French ufology.

In 1979, Poher came to the conclusion that UFOs are real, and presented his findings to the Scientific Council of GEPAN. His position was not made public, but met with strong opposition from the media. Poher then took a one year's leave of absence from CNES to fulfill an old personal project: sailing around the world with his family on a boat he had built himself. Since returning to CNES, he has not made any public statement about UFOs, but he is known to have kept an interest in the subject.

1979–1983: ALAIN ESTERLE

The new man at the head of GEPAN was Alain Esterle, a sharp young “polytechnician” (graduate from the prestigious Ecole Polytechnique), who rapidly expanded the resources of GEPAN. The staff grew to 10, and it was a also productive period with the issuance of a series of technical notes.

At least two important sightings occurred in that period, which were studied and presented publicly by GEPAN in 1983:

- The famous physical-trace case at Trans-en-Provence in January 1981 (*Note technique, no. 16: Analyse d'une trace*).
- The very intriguing case of a near landing of a small UFO in a private garden in Nancy, in October 1982, with effects on plants (*Note technique, no. 17*, called “L' Amarante” after the type of plant affected).

The Trans-en-Provence case, in spite of bitter criticism by French skeptics, still stands today as one the best UFO investigations ever published. An English version of the study was published in 1990 in the United States (*Journal of Scientific Exploration*), and a complementary study of the plants by biologist Michel Bounias was published in 1994 in the *Journal of UFO Studies*. The case is also presented in Sturrock's book *The UFO Enigma*.

Clearly, these case studies published by Esterle were considered too provocative by many officials and prominent scientists, including the directorate of CNES, as funding was soon reduced for GEPAN. CNES also had budgetary problems at the time, and that was a decisive argument for

cutting support for UFO investigations. Consequently, Esterle left GEPAN for another post in CNES and was replaced by his assistant, Velasco. Resources and personnel were drastically reduced. During the following years, the Scientific Council of GEPAN no longer met, in spite of repeated demands from one of its members, Christian Perrin de Brichambaut, general inspector of the National Meteorology Office. A last meeting of the council took place in 1987, shortly before his death.

SEPPRA REPLACES GEPAN: 1988—

In 1988, GEPAN was discreetly closed and replaced by a new entity, curiously called Service d'Expertise des Phénomènes de Rentrées Atmosphériques (SEPPRA), or the Atmospheric Re-entry Phenomena Expertise Department, which did not refer directly to UFOs any more. The new name referred only to satellite and rocket debris, but Velasco himself had proposed it to allow for the discreet monitoring of UFO sightings. Thus he managed to save UFO research at CNES, although in a very limited way with the same team, at least for a while—Velasco, assisted by a research assistant and a secretary. Later it was reduced further. Velasco found himself alone and only part-time on UFOs. The Scientific Council was completely silenced and no more technical notes were published. On the other hand, all the agreements made for cooperation with the Air Force, the gendarmerie, civil aviation, and other bodies, remained valid. Also, SEPPRA still receives some confidential support from a number of people.

It is clear that a low-profile policy had been implemented and it continues to be applied today, a development that caused great disappointment among ufologists, in contrast to the great expectations of the first years of GEPAN. However, accusations of debunking misinterpreted the real policy, which was one of discretion not one of total denial. No one would take responsibility for completely closing official UFO research. The proof of that is the 1993 publication of a book coauthored by Velasco and journalist Jean-Claude Bourret titled *OVNI: La science avance (UFOs: Science Advances)*, in which Velasco admits the physical reality of UFOs and the great probability of their extraterrestrial origin. He stressed that it was his personal position, but he had been duly authorized by CNES to publish the book. In addition, he had a scientific stamp of approval with a foreword written by astrophysicist Jean-Claude Ribes, president of the French Astronomical Society. Ribes emphasized that it was a truly scientific book, written with the help of experts.

That book shows that the French scientific community was not unanimously hostile to the UFO question. The same may be said of the military, which remained silent on the subject until the Cometa report. However, those who have expressed personal, positive opinions on UFOs, even recently, remain a small minority, either in military or government/civilian organizations. Indeed, the Cometa re-

port has no official stamp of approval. The members of Cometa are independent individuals who decided to publish their report mainly in the hope of giving life again to official UFO studies in France. In this context, the bitter attacks of some ufologists are completely mindless.

LATEST DEVELOPMENTS

In 1995, an informal meeting was organized by the Direction du Renseignement Militaire (DRM), the directorate of military intelligence, for information on UFOs. The DRM was created in 1992 by rearranging all branches of military intelligence, with offices at the airbase of Creil (Oise). A study was produced at about the same time, but these were very limited actions. The study, entitled *Implications militaires du phénomène des OVNI*s (Military Implications of the UFO Phenomenon), was actually prepared by a young university graduate doing his military service. We may suppose that a more serious monitoring of the UFO problem exists at other levels of the military establishment. But there is no indication that deep secrets on UFOs would be buried there. Actually, the Cometa report, by its mere existence, suggests rather the contrary. ♦

LETTERS

1,000 ABDUCTIONS A DAY

To the editor:

Mark Rodeghier's article on "Counting Abductees" (*IUR*, Fall 2000) brings to mind Dr. Gordon's report in the July 2000 *MUFON UFO Journal*. After questioning 1,050 members of his practice, he discovered that 11% had seen a UFO, 0.6% had seen UFO entities without an abduction experience, and 0.8% had reported involuntary UFO contact or an abduction.

This last figure is closer to the NIDS survey. One might also ponder its significance. In the United States alone, this would imply something on the order of 1,000 abductions per day—and mostly in well-inhabited areas. Just why is it that so many UFOs are *not* seen or detected by radar?

Malcolm Smith
Bracken Rudge, Queensland, Australia

REIDING BETWEEN THE LINES

To the editor:

In *IUR*, Fall 2000, p. 28, Frank Reid tells us: "He [Donald Keyhoe] became hypervigilant, never knowing when a minor attack might turn into the point of a killing thrust (even if only from Jim Moseley and the other preadolescents at *Saucer News*)."

Adolescent, but not preadolescent! Reid himself was one of our little group, having made several fine contributions to *Saucer News* in that period—lest we forget!

James Moseley
Key West, Florida ♦