

Von der deutschen Flugscheibe zum Nazi-UFO. Metamorphosen eines medialen Phantoms, 1950–2020

**By Gerhard Wiechmann. Paderborn: Brill/Schöningh, 2022.
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It was in the summer of 1947 that individuals and the media in the United States first began reporting sightings of so-called flying saucers. The reports were taken seriously enough for the U.S. Air Force and European intelligence communities to track sightings, collect information, and assess what, if any, threat they posed to national security. Throughout the world, more witnesses soon reported spotting the objects, while some enthusiasts founded investigative organizations and periodicals. By the time officials and the press began referring to “unidentified flying objects” (UFOs) in the 1950s and 1960s, a stunning theory had gained traction: the flying disks were the products of advanced alien visitors whose intentions remained a mystery.

What has largely been forgotten is that this extraterrestrial hypothesis about the origins of UFOs has hardly been the only explanation proffered. Far from it. Some immediately suspected optical illusions or meteorological anomalies were at play. Early on, however, the most popular lines of speculation pointed to the prospect of Soviet and American experimental weapons or aircraft. If that were the case, some wondered, who exactly came up with the unusual design of a flying saucer or disk?

Military historian Gerhard Wiechmann has outlined the history of one popular notion that first emerged in 1950 – that it was Germans during the Third Reich who had developed and first operated flying saucers. As Wiechmann repeatedly notes, the accounts of purported German UFO inventors always lacked a paper trail to support them. In the end, based on rumor and the claims of dubious braggarts, they added up to nothing more than legend.

This, then, is a history of that legend. As such, Wiechmann’s focus is on how media in the Federal Republic – particularly print media – spread recurring stories about the German origins of flying saucers. Behind these stories stood a succession of engineers, sometimes with questionable qualifications, who came forward to announce they had played a critical role in designing the machine. Newspapers and magazines proved to be remarkably credulous, sympathetically featuring these figures in sometimes lengthy articles. Illustrators then reinforced their claims by depicting the disks and design plans in elaborate drawings. And in at least one instance in the early 1960s, the recycled assertions found their way into official government documents.

Media interest in the story of the Nazi-era flying saucer ebbed and flowed over the years, with the most intense interest being shown in the early to mid-1950s and then again in the 1970s. Curiosity in the latter decade, Wiechmann explains, was fueled by a number of things: a renaissance of belief in esoterica, a burst of public curiosity about the life of Adolf Hitler, and prominent fictional depictions of attempts at bringing about a Fourth Reich. These eventually helped spark the emergence of a new genre: neo-Nazi science fiction and fantasy novels about flying saucer bases in Antarctica.

At several junctures, Wiechmann addresses the question of why media in the FRG proved so complicit, so uncritical in the face of such extravagant assertions. There were, after all, critical voices out there, but they tended to be drowned out. Wiechmann offers a number of explanations. For one, the press appeared to tacitly accept Joseph Goebbels’s 1944 claim of Germany having secret “miracle weapons” in their possession. In addition, the fact that a good many Luftwaffe documents had been destroyed during the war left doubts that any written evidence about the existence of a flying saucer program could ever be

found. At the same time, by pointing to eminently terrestrial inventors, the reports avoided being lumped together with what seemed to be more unbelievable contentions about alien visitors. And finally, the German flying saucer origin story – with its reliance on the tropes of scientific progress and technological innovation – folded neatly into the modernist self-image of the Federal Republic.

All in all, Wiechmann has done a commendable job in tracing the media threads of a surprisingly resilient legend. At times, the book fixates on the nuts-and-bolts details of the aircraft being discussed – something that the general reader may find of relatively little interest. But with plenty of intriguing images and stories about eccentric characters, this is an engaging foray into the postwar folklore surrounding National Socialism.

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Fear of the Family: Guest Workers and Family Migration in the Federal Republic of Germany

By Lauren Stokes. New York: Oxford University Press, 2022. Pp. 312. Hardcover \$35.00. ISBN: 978-0197558416.

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This much-anticipated monograph investigates the political culture in the Federal Republic of Germany surrounding the “foreign family”: the trailing spouses, children, and relatives involved in care work in the home, who migrated alongside or following so-called “guest workers.” As Lauren Stokes persuasively argues, these “family migrants” and what Germans took to be the distinctively foreign family structures and values that encouraged family reunification in the Federal Republic exercised an outsized hold on the minds of Germans across areas of responsibility and levels of government. For the West German state, it was, as Chancellor Helmut Schmidt put it in 1978, not the “free movement of labor but . . . free movement of the families of labor” (2) that was to be feared. Across seven chapters spanning the 1950s to the 1990s, with a center of gravity in the 1970s, Stokes details how the idea of the foreign family emerged and became an object of fear, justifying extraordinary measures to limit its influence and presence in West Germany even as the courts granted rights to family reunification after the end of labor recruitment in 1973. Thematic chapters touch on different categories of family migrants which the state sought to regulate, ranging from dependent children and men as family migrants to marriage migration or children moving back to Germany after their families had decided to return to Turkey in the 1980s.

Chapters are loosely chronological, beginning with the initial embrace of family migration in the early years of labor recruitment as a “solution rather than a problem” (25), with the German bureaucracy welcoming such migration because foreigners’ “excessive family sense” (20) would encourage them to keep to themselves, avoiding undesired integration. This idea of the family as a self-contained repository of foreign values became a problem for the German state after 1973, and Stokes details how concerns about foreign families encouraged “settlement bans” preventing foreigners from moving to “overburdened” neighborhoods. These bans, which lasted longest in West Berlin, demonstrate for Stokes that, contrary to common assumption, the lessons of the Nazi past often worked to limit rights for foreign citizens because policymakers feared a far-right backlash to too large or visible a migrant population.