

# The dawn of the atomic age



in the mid-20th century inspired new fears and new questions about what was possible—from science, from governments, and from the universe itself. Greg Eghigian, a Penn State professor of history and bioethics and a UFO researcher, says that more than 70 years later, the lens through which we see unidentified objects in the sky is still colored by whatever’s happening on the ground at the time.

A historian of both modern Europe and the human sciences, Eghigian has been enlightening Penn State students since 1999 in classes with titles that read like documentaries: History of Madness, Mental Illness, and Psychiatry; History of Medicine; and, most recently, History of Monsters, Aliens, and the Supernatural. But he has also spent the last decade researching a side project of astronomical proportions: a book about the history and social phenomenon of UFO sightings and claims of alien contact around the world.

Tentatively slated for publication next summer, the book will focus on a subject that has long carried a stigma in academia. Eghigian believes the “pseudoscience” is slowly moving in the direction of serious inquiry, and he hopes his critical look at its trajectory will add context for the next generation of ufologists, more conventional researchers, and anyone who just loves a good sci-fi story.



**PENN STATER:** How did you get interested in researching UFOs and alien sightings?

**EGHIGIAN:** I’m primarily a historian of science and medicine. I’m really interested in the ways in which certain ideas, people, or behaviors have been understood as deviating from the norm outside what is considered acceptable or right or healthy. Much of my research was on things like physical disability, criminality, mental illness. This is a slightly different shift, but I got here out of an interest in that kind of stuff, and then an awareness that historians have not been writing about this. We have a reputation for studying all sorts of different things, so it is a bit odd that it has been neglected as something to get into, and that’s part of what motivated me.

**PS:** What do you think you can add as a historian?

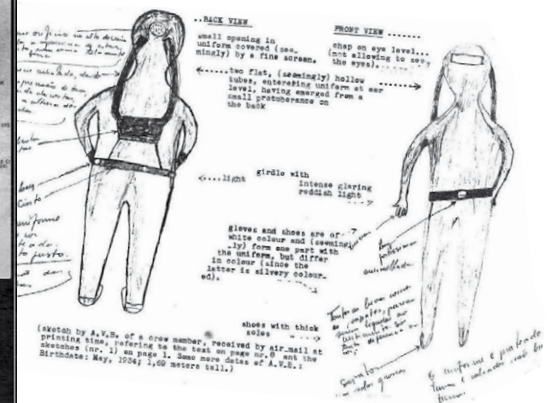
**EGHIGIAN:** I think, because it is a social phenomenon, there’s so much baggage that it carries. And one of the things we historians do effectively is say, It wasn’t always like how we think of it now. It could have gone other ways, or just disappeared. People have made choices to steer how we see and talk about UFOs, and what I think we historians can do really well is talk about how, at various moments, there were forks in the road, and each choice carried social consequences. That is what I’m trying to track.

**PS:** That sounds like a lot to wrangle, especially because you’re not just talking about it in terms of America’s history with this stuff. You’re covering the global history of UFOs and alien contact?

**EGHIGIAN:** Yeah. It’s the biggest thing I’ve ever done. I started this around 2013, and two things gave me pause. One was knowing that there is a stigma, that if you’re studying this it must mean you are some sort of true believer. The other part was, I knew how big this was, and how many rabbit holes there were.

**PS:** There are a ton of rabbit holes about alien contact and abductions and UFOs. Articles and documentaries with alleged eyewitness accounts, declassified government documents, ex-officials disclosing “insider knowledge” of things like alien autopsies or flying saucers at Area 51. Are you including everything with a big caveat, or are you trying to get to the truth of each claim?

**EGHIGIAN:** A lot of people will be disappointed, because my approach is to study this as a social phenomenon. The veracity of it is another question. If you believe in all of that, and that aliens are behind the technology of UFOs, I’m not writing something that sets out to justify your beliefs. At the same time, I’m not a debunker. I’m not in this to talk about how



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From secret military aircraft like this 1950s-era experimental prototype (left) to eyewitness accounts of fantastical humanlike ETs, reality and imagination alike fuel tales of alien visits.

foolish people are. I’m interested in looking at this like an anthropologist would, like a journalist would. I am asking questions about how certain people and organizations do things or don’t do things, and the consequences they have.

But we know, and I talk about them in my book, that there are people who deliberately have lied. For instance, the stuff you just mentioned is based on second-, third-, fourth-hand accounts and rumor-mongering. The people who often make these elaborate claims never have any decisive, conclusive evidence to support it, certainly none that convinces more skeptical researchers. So it is a world that’s shrouded in uncertainty and hearsay. And in a way that’s what makes it fascinating, but that’s also what makes it really hard to study. Getting to the truth, even as a social phenomenon, can be very tough. That’s one of the things I’ve spent most of my

time doing—trying to find the original document or the original moment when something gets said or done. And there are things where we just don’t know, and that’s also very common in history. Ancient historians have that problem all the time, because there’s so little material to work with.

**PS:** You’re also adding context about what else was happening in the world that may have contributed to the way people reacted to UFOs at various times in history.

**EGHIGIAN:** Yeah. And the context is sometimes immediate, and sometimes it’s broader. For instance, if you want to understand the way in which the military or the government has or has not talked about this stuff, you can’t do that without understanding the Cold War, or understanding the nature of espionage, or the nature of intelligence gathering.

**PS:** Take us back to the beginning: How did the idea of an unidentified flying object—something people have been seeing in the sky for thousands of years, I’m sure—become associated with alien technology?

**EGHIGIAN:** It really started in the late 1940s, when people were searching for answers very much informed by their experience in World War II. The bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki showed that governments can have secret weapons that nobody had ever imagined. And then around 1950 you get some writers who stated that government officials were actually convinced that these flying discs were extraterrestrial in origin. Soon after that, some civilians starting coming forward saying, “Actually, [these UFOs] are aliens. I know because I’ve met them.”

Most people have historically dismissed that first cohort of people claiming to have met aliens, a group called “the contactees.” But you can’t ignore them historically, because they were the first, they were very widely published, they

