

Malaysia Airlines Crash in Eastern Ukraine: MH-17's Unnecessary Mystery

By [Robert Parry](#)

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Nearly 18 months after Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 crashed in eastern Ukraine, one of the troubling mysteries is why the U.S. government – after rushing to blame Russia and ethnic Russian rebels – then went silent, effectively obstructing the investigation into 298 deaths, writes Robert Parry.

As the whodunit mystery surrounding the shoot-down of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 nears the 1½-year mark, the Obama administration could open U.S. intelligence files and help bring justice for the 298 people killed in eastern Ukraine on July 17, 2014. Instead, a separate mystery has emerged: why has the U.S. government clammed up since five days after the tragedy?

Immediately after the crash, senior Obama administration officials showed no hesitancy in pointing fingers at the ethnic Russian rebels who were then resisting a military offensive by the U.S.-backed Kiev regime. On July, 20, 2014, Secretary of State John Kerry appeared on TV talk shows claiming there was a strong circumstantial case implicating the rebels and their Russian backers in the shoot-down.



Secretary of State John Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov.

After mentioning some information gleaned from “social media,” Kerry said on NBC’s [“Meet the Press”](#): “But even more importantly, we picked up the imagery of this launch. We know the trajectory. We know where it came from. We know the timing. And it was exactly at the time that this aircraft disappeared from the radar.”

Two days later, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence released a “Government Assessment,” also citing “social media” seeming to implicate the rebels. Then, this white

paper listed military equipment allegedly supplied by Russia to the rebels. But the list did not include a Buk missile battery or other high-powered anti-aircraft missiles capable of striking MH-17, which had been flying at around 33,000 feet.

The DNI also had U.S. intelligence analysts brief a few select mainstream reporters, but the analysts conveyed much less conviction than their superiors may have wished, indicating that there was still great uncertainty about who was responsible.

The Los Angeles Times [article](#) said:

“U.S. intelligence agencies have so far been unable to determine the nationalities or identities of the crew that launched the missile. U.S. officials said it was possible the SA-11 [the designation for a Russian-made anti-aircraft Buk missile] was launched by a defector from the Ukrainian military who was trained to use similar missile systems.”

That uncertainty meshed somewhat with [what I had been told](#) by a source who had been briefed by U.S. intelligence analysts shortly after the shoot-down about what they had seen in high-resolution satellite photos, which they said showed what looked like Ukrainian military personnel manning the battery which was believed to have fired the missile.

There is also an important distinction to make between the traditional “Intelligence Assessment,” which is the U.S. intelligence community’s gold standard for evaluating an issue, complete with any disagreements among the 16 intelligence agencies, and a “Government Assessment,” like the one produced in the MH-17 case.

As former CIA analyst Ray McGovern [wrote](#): “The key difference between the traditional ‘Intelligence Assessment’ and this relatively new creation, a ‘Government Assessment,’ is that the latter genre is put together by senior White House bureaucrats or other political appointees, not senior intelligence analysts. Another significant difference is that an ‘Intelligence Assessment’ often includes alternative views, either in the text or in footnotes, detailing disagreements among intelligence analysts, thus revealing where the case may be weak or in dispute.”

In other words, a “Government Assessment” is an invitation for political hacks to manufacture what was called a “dodgy dossier” when the British government used similar tactics to sell the phony case for war with Iraq in 2002-03.

Demonizing Putin

Yet, despite the flimsiness of the “blame-Russia-for-MH-17” case in July 2014, the Obama administration’s rush to judgment proved critical in whipping up the European press to demonize President Vladimir Putin, who became the Continent’s *bete noire* accused of killing 298 innocent people. That set the stage for the European Union to accede to U.S. demands for economic sanctions on Russia.



Russian President Vladimir Putin during a state visit to Austria on June 24, 2014. (Official Russian government photo)

The MH-17 case was deployed like [a classic piece of “strategic communication”](#) or “Stratcom,” mixing propaganda with psychological operations to put an adversary at a disadvantage. Apparently satisfied with that result, the Obama administration stopped talking publicly, leaving the impression of Russian guilt to corrode Moscow’s image in the public mind.

But the intelligence source who spoke to me several times after he received additional briefings about advances in the investigation said that as the U.S. analysts gained more insights into the MH-17 shoot-down from technical and other sources, they came to believe the attack was carried out by a rogue element of the Ukrainian military with ties to a hard-line Ukrainian oligarch. [See, for instance, Consortiumnews.com’s [“Flight 17 Shoot-Down Scenario Shifts”](#) and [“The Danger of an MH-17 Cold Case.”](#)]

But that conclusion – if made public – would have dealt another blow to America’s already shaky credibility, which has never recovered from the false Iraq-WMD claims in 2002-03. A reversal also would embarrass Kerry, other senior U.S. officials and major Western news outlets, which had bought into the Russia-did-it narrative. Plus, the European Union might reconsider its decision to sanction Russia, a key part of U.S. policy in support of the Kiev regime.

Still, as the MH-17 mystery dragged on into 2015, I inquired about the possibility of an update from the DNI’s office. But a spokeswoman told me that no update would be provided because the U.S. government did not want to say anything to prejudice the ongoing investigation. In response, I noted that Kerry and the DNI had already done that by immediately pointing the inquiry in the direction of blaming Russia and the rebels.

But there was another purpose in staying mum. By refusing to say anything to contradict the initial rush to judgment, the Obama administration could let Western mainstream journalists and “citizen investigators” on the Internet keep Russia pinned down with more speculation about its guilt in the MH-17 shoot-down.

So, silence became the better part of candor. After all, pretty much everyone in the West had judged Russia and Putin guilty. So, why shake that up?

The Ukrainian Buks

Yet, what has become clear after the initial splurge of U.S. blame-casting is that U.S. intelligence lacked key evidence to support Kerry's hasty judgments. Despite intensive overhead surveillance of eastern Ukraine in summer 2014, U.S. and other Western intelligence services could find no evidence that Russia had ever given a Buk system to the rebels or introduced one into the area.



Russian-made Buk anti-aircraft missile battery.

Satellite intelligence - reviewed both before and after the shoot-down - only detected Ukrainian Buk missile systems in the conflict zone. One could infer this finding from the fact that the DNI on July 22, 2014, did not allege that Buks were among the weapons systems that Russia had provided. If Russian-supplied Buks had been spotted - and the batteries of four 16-foot-long missiles hauled around by trucks are hard to miss - their presence surely would have been noted.

But one doesn't need to infer this lack of evidence. It was spelled out in [a little-noticed report](#) by the Netherlands' Military Intelligence and Security Service (MIVD) that was made public last October when the Dutch Safety Board issued its findings on the causes of the doomed MH-17 flight. (Since the flight had originated in Amsterdam and carried many Dutch passengers, Netherlands took a lead role in the investigation.)

Dutch intelligence, which as part of NATO would have access to sensitive overhead surveillance and other relevant data, reported that the only anti-aircraft weapons in eastern Ukraine - capable of bringing down MH-17 at 33,000 feet - belonged to the Ukrainian government.

MIVD made that assessment in the context of explaining why commercial aircraft continued to fly over the eastern Ukrainian battle zone in summer 2014. MIVD said that based on "state secret" information, it was known that Ukraine possessed some older but "powerful anti-aircraft systems" and "a number of these systems were located in the eastern part of the country."

But the intelligence agency added that the rebels lacked that capacity:

"Prior to the crash, the MIVD knew that, in addition to light aircraft artillery, the Separatists also possessed short-range portable air defence systems (man-portable air-defence systems; MANPADS) and that they possibly possessed

short-range vehicle-borne air-defence systems. Both types of systems are considered surface-to-air missiles (SAMs). Due to their limited range they do not constitute a danger to civil aviation at cruising altitude.”

MIVD noted that on June 29, 2014, “the Separatists captured a Ukrainian armed forces military base in Donetsk [where] there were Buk missile systems,” a fact that was reported in the press before the crash and attracted MIVD’s attention.

“During the course of July, several reliable sources indicated that the systems that were at the military base were not operational,” MIVD said. “Therefore, they could not be used by the Separatists.”

In other words, it is fair to say – based on the affirmative comments from MIVD and the omissions from the U.S. DNI’s “Government Assessment” – that the Western powers had no evidence that the ethnic Russian rebels or their Russian allies had operational Buk missiles in eastern Ukraine, but Ukraine did.

It also would have made sense that Ukraine would be moving additional anti-aircraft systems close to the border because of a feared Russian invasion as the Ukrainian military pressed its “anti-terrorism operation” against ethnic Russians fighters. They were resisting the U.S.-backed coup of Feb. 22, 2014, which had ousted elected President Viktor Yanukovich, whose political base was in the east.

According to the Dutch Safety Board [report](#), issued last October, a Ukrainian warplane had been shot down by a suspected air-to-air missile (presumably from a Russian fighter) on July 16, 2014, meaning that Ukrainian defenses were probably on high alert. The Russian military also claimed that Ukraine had activated a radar system that is used to guide Buk missiles.

Gunning for Putin?

I was told by the intelligence source that U.S. analysts looked seriously at the possibility that the intended target was President Putin’s official plane returning from a state visit to South America. His aircraft and MH-17 had similar red-white-and-blue markings, but Putin took a more northerly route and arrived safely in Moscow.



A side-by-side comparison of the Russian presidential jetliner and the Malaysia Airlines plane.

Other possible scenarios were that a poorly trained and undisciplined Ukrainian squad mistook MH-17 for a Russian plane that had penetrated Ukrainian airspace or that the attack was willful provocation designed to be blamed on the Russians.

Whoever the culprits and whatever their motive, one point that should not have remained in doubt was where the missile launch occurred. Remember that just three days after the crash, Secretary Kerry had said U.S. intelligence detected the launch and “We know where it came from.”

But last October, the Dutch Safety Board still hadn't pinned down anything like a precise location. The report could only place the launch site within a 320-square-kilometer area in eastern Ukraine, covering territory then controlled by both Ukrainian and rebel forces. (The safety board did not seek to identify which side fired the fateful missile).

By contrast, Almaz-Antey, the Russian arms manufacturer of the Buk systems, conducted its own experiments to determine the likely firing location and placed it in a much smaller area near the village of Zaroshchenskoye, about 20 kilometers west of the Dutch Safety Board's zone and in an area under Ukrainian government control.

So, with the firing location a key point in dispute, why would the U.S. government withhold from a NATO ally (and investigators into a major airline disaster) the launch point for the missile? Presumably, if the Obama administration had solid evidence showing that the launch came from rebel territory, which was Kerry's insinuation, U.S. officials would have been only too happy to provide the data.

A reasonable conclusion from the failure to share this information with the Dutch investigators is that the data does not support the preferred U.S. government narrative. If there's a different explanation for the silence, the Obama administration has failed to provide it.

Amid the curious U.S. silence, the most significant public finding by Western intelligence is that the only powerful and operational anti-aircraft-missile systems in eastern Ukraine on July 17, 2014, belonged to the Ukrainian military.

Nevertheless, the mainstream "conventional wisdom" remains that either the ethnic Russian rebels or the Russians themselves shot down MH-17 and have sought to cover up their guilt.

Some of this certainty comes from the simpleminded game of repeating that Buk missiles are "Russian-made," which is true but irrelevant to the issue of who fired the missiles, since the Ukrainian military possesses Russian-made Buks.

But much of this "group think" can be credited to the speed with which the Obama administration got its narrative out immediately citing dubious "social media" and exploiting the West's disdain toward Russian President Putin. He was a ready-made villain for the story.

Lying First

A similar case occurred in 1983 when Korean Airlines Flight 007 penetrated deeply into Soviet territory and was pursued by a Soviet fighter that - after issuing warnings that were ignored - shot the plane down believing it was an enemy military aircraft. Though the Soviets quickly realized they had made a terrible mistake, the Reagan administration wanted to use the incident to paint the "evil empire" in the vilest of tones.

So, Reagan's propagandists edited the ground-control intercepts to make it appear that the Soviets had committed willful murder, a theme that was presented to the United Nations and was gullibly lapped up by the mainstream U.S. news media.

The [fuller story](#) only came out in 1995 with a book entitled *Warriors of Disinformation* by Alvin A. Snyder, who had been director of the U.S. Information Agency's television and film division. He described how the tapes were edited "to heap as much abuse on the Soviet

Union as possible.”

In a boastful but frank description of the successful disinformation campaign, Snyder noted that “the American media swallowed the U.S. government line without reservation. Said the venerable Ted Koppel on the ABC News ‘Nightline’ program: ‘This has been one of those occasions when there is very little difference between what is churned out by the U.S. government propaganda organs and by the commercial broadcasting networks.’”

Snyder concluded, “The moral of the story is that all governments, including our own, lie when it suits their purposes. The key is to lie first.”

In the case of MH-17, however, the falsehoods and deceptions are not simply some spy-vs.-spy propaganda game of gotcha, but rather obstruction of justice in a mass murder investigation. Whatever evidence the Obama administration has, it should have long since been made available to the investigators, but – so far – the official Dutch reports have indicated no such assistance.

While the U.S. government maintains its official silence, the Russian manufacturer has tried to provide details about the functioning of various generations of Buks and challenged the conclusion from the Dutch Safety Board of precisely which model likely brought down MH-17. The Dutch Safety Board cited a 9M38M1 missile using a 9N314M warhead that dispersed “butterfly or bow-tie” fragments that ripped through MH-17’s fuselage.

But Almaz-Antey reported that only older warheads and missiles of the 9M38 type have that signature. “The 9M38M1 missile has no H-shaped striking elements,” Almaz-Antey executive Yan Novikov said. According to the manufacturer, the Russian army had phased 9M38 missiles out years ago, but they remained part of Ukraine’s arsenal.

On Jan. 14, the Russian aviation agency [issued](#) its own report critical of the Dutch Safety Board’s understanding of the Buk models, saying that “the strike elements” in the 9N314M warhead did not match the composition of what was recovered from MH-17. Yet, the Dutch-led criminal investigation, which is being partly run by the Ukrainian government, has shown little interest in the Russian information.

‘Citizen Journalists’

The inquiry has been much more welcoming of leads from Bellingcat, a group of “citizen journalists” led by British blogger Eliot Higgins.

Despite having made significant mistakes in an earlier investigation of the Syria-sarin case in 2013 – including misstating the range of suspect missiles – Higgins has been treated as something of a savant on the MH-17 case, basing his analysis on photographs that popped up the Internet purportedly showing a Buk missile system heading eastward from Donetsk shortly before MH-17 was shot down.

Although one of the first lessons anyone learns about the Internet is to be cautious about what you find there, Higgins and Bellingcat relied on the images to conclude that this battery was dispatched from Russia under the command of Russian forces. The bloggers went so far as to send a list of Russian soldiers’ names as suspects to the MH-17 criminal investigators.

There are, of course, problems with this sort of theorizing. First, it assumes that the photos

on the Internet are genuine and not cleverly photo-shopped fakes. The Internet can be a devil's playground for both amateur and professional disinformationists.

But even assuming that the photos are real, there is the question of why - if this cumbersome weapons system was lumbering around eastern Ukraine apparently for weeks - did Western intelligence services not detect it from overhead surveillance either before or after the shoot-down? From Bellingcat's Internet photos, it appears there was no effort to conceal the Buk system, which curiously was headed eastward toward Russia, not westward from Russia.




Correspondent Michael Unsher of Australia's "60 Minutes" claims to have found the billboard visible in a video of a BUK missile launcher after the shoot-down of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 on July 17, 2014. (Screen shot from Australia's "60 Minutes")

Higgins also directed an Australian TV film crew to the supposed site in Luhansk where the Buk battery, minus one missile, supposedly made its getaway back into Russia. However, the location that the Australian crew filmed clearly was the wrong place. None of the landmarks matched up, but this journalistic fraud did nothing to diminish Bellingcat's sterling reputation with mainstream Western news outlets which routinely repeat the group's allegations. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[A Reckless Stand-upper on MH-17.](#)"]

It turns out that it is an excellent business model for "citizen" bloggers to find "evidence" on the Internet to reinforce whatever the U.S. government's propagandists are claiming. Since the U.S. government's credibility is shaky at best, young hip Internet readers are more inclined to trust what they hear from bloggers - and when the bloggers echo what Washington claims, the mainstream media and well-funded think tanks will join in the applause.

Latest Speculation

 Earlier this month, Bellingcat's speculation identifying Russian soldiers as MH-17 suspects based on their assignment to a Buk battery was splashed across the international press, including Dutch television, London's Telegraph and the British Guardian. The U.S.-funded Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty headlined [its story](#), "Russian Soldiers Said Involved in Downing of MH17 Airliner," complete with photos of Russian soldiers with their eyes blacked out, courtesy of Bellingcat.

"The Britain-based Bellingcat group said it had identified up to 100 Russian soldiers who may have knowledge of the movements of the Buk missile launcher that destroyed the Boeing 777 on July 17, 2014, killing all 298 on board," RFE/RL reported, citing a quote that Higgins gave to the Telegraph: "We have the names and photos of the soldiers in the June convoy who traveled with the MH17 Buk, their commanders, their commanders' commanders, etc."

Higgins told Dutch TV channel NOS that Bellingcat believed that at least 20 soldiers in an air-defense unit based in Kursk "probably" either fired the missile or know who fired it.

The Dutch-led prosecution team, which collaborates with the Ukrainian government and nations that suffered large numbers of deaths from the crash including Australia and Malaysia, welcomed the Bellingcat information and promised to “seriously study it.”

Not that the prosecution team has asked or appears interested, but one could also give the sleuths a list of Americans who almost certainly have knowledge about who fired the missile and from exactly where: CIA Director John Brennan, DNI James Clapper, Secretary of State John Kerry and President Barack Obama.

Any one of those officials could end the strange silence that has enveloped the U.S. government’s knowledge about the MH-17 shoot-down since five days after the tragedy and – by doing so – perhaps they could finally bring some clarity and justice to this mystery.

*Investigative reporter **Robert Parry** broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his latest book, America’s Stolen Narrative, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)).*

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