

The New York Times Plays Games with MH-17 Tragedy

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In its single-minded propaganda campaign against Russia, The New York Times has no interest in irony, but if it had, it might note that some of the most important advances made by the Dutch Safety Board's report on the shoot-down of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 came because the Russian government declassified sensitive details about its anti-aircraft weaponry.

The irony is that the Obama administration has steadfastly refused to declassify its intelligence information on the tragedy, which presumably could answer some of the key remaining mysteries, such as where the missile was fired and who might have fired it. While merrily bashing the Russians, the Times has failed to join in demands for the U.S. government to make public what it knows about the tragedy that killed 298 people on July 17, 2014.

In other words, through its hypocritical approach to this atrocity, the Times has been aiding and abetting a cover-up of crucial evidence, all the better to score some propaganda points against the Russ-kies, the antithesis of what an honest news organization would do.

In its [editorial](#) on Thursday, The Times also continues to play on the assumed ignorance of its readers by hyping the fact that the likely weapon, a Buk surface-to-air missile, was "Russian-made," which while true, is not probative of which side fired it. Ukraine, a former Soviet republic, is armed with Russian-made weapons, too.

But that obvious fact is skirted by the Times highlighting in its lead paragraph that the plane was shot down "by a Russian-made Buk surface-to-air missile," adding: "Even Russia, which has spent much of those [past] 15 months generating all kinds of implausible theories that put the blame ... on Ukraine, and doing its best to thwart investigations, has had to acknowledge that this is what happened."

Though some misinformed Times' readers might be duped into finding that sentence persuasive, the reality is that Russia has long considered it likely that a Buk or other anti-aircraft missile was involved in downing MH-17. That's why Russia declassified so many details about its Buk systems for the Dutch investigation - something governments are loath to do - and the Russian manufacturer issued a report on the likely Buk role last June.

But the Times pretends that the Russians have now been cornered with the truth, writing that Russia "now argues that the fatal missile was an older model that the Russian armed forces no longer use, and that it was fired from territory controlled by the Ukrainian

government.” Yet, much of that information was provided by the Russian missile manufacturer a long time ago and was the subject of a June press conference.

Blinded by Bias

If the Times editors weren’t blinded by their anti-Russian bias, they also might have noted that the Dutch Safety Board and the Russian manufacturer of the Buk anti-missile system are in substantial agreement over the older Buk model type that apparently brought down MH-17.

Almaz-Antey, the Russian Buk manufacturer, [said](#) last June that its analysis of the plane’s wreckage revealed that MH-17 had been attacked by a “9M38M1 of the Buk M1 system.” The company’s Chief Executive Officer Yan Novikov said the missile was last produced in 1999.

The Dutch report, released Tuesday, said:

“The damage observed on the wreckage in amount of damage, type of damage, boundary and impact angles of damage, number and density of hits, size of penetrations and bowtie fragments found in the wreckage, is consistent with the damage caused by the 9N314M warhead used in the 9M38 and 9M38M1 BUK surface-to-air missile.”

Also on Tuesday, the manufacturer expanded on its findings saying that the warhead at issue had not been produced since 1982 and was long out of Russia’s military arsenal, but adding that as of 2005 there were 991 9M38M1 Buk missiles and 502 9M38 missiles in Ukraine’s inventory. Company executives said they knew this because of discussions regarding the possible life-extension of the missiles.

Based on other information regarding how the warhead apparently struck near the cockpit of MH-17, the manufacturer calculated the missile’s likely flight path and firing location, placing it in the eastern Ukrainian village of Zakharchenko, a few miles south of route H21 and about four miles southwest of the town of Shakhtars’k, a lightly populated rural part of Donetsk province that the Russians claim was then under Ukrainian government control.



Calculation by the Buk manufacturer, Almaz-Antay, showing what it considered the likely area of the launch that took down Malaysia Airlines Flight 17.

The area is about three miles west of the 320-square-kilometer zone that the Dutch report established as the likely area from which the missile was fired. In July 2014, control of that area was being contested although most of the fighting was occurring about 100 kilometers to the north, meaning that the southern sector was more poorly defined and open to the possibility of a mobile system crossing from one side to the other.

Almaz-Antay CEO Novikov said the company’s calculations placed the missile site in Zakharchenko with “great accuracy,” a possible firing zone that “does not exceed three to four kilometers in length and four kilometers in width.” However, Ukrainian authorities said

their calculations placed the firing location farther to the east, deeper into rebel-controlled territory.

Thus, the importance of the U.S. intelligence data that Secretary of State John Kerry claimed to possess just three days after the plane was shot down. Appearing on NBC's "Meet the Press" on July 20, 2014, Kerry declared, "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."

But the U.S. government has released none of its evidence on the shoot-down. A U.S. intelligence source told me that CIA analysts briefed the Dutch investigators but under conditions of tight secrecy. None of the U.S. information was included in the report and Dutch officials have refused to discuss any U.S. intelligence information on the grounds of national security.

In the weeks after the shoot-down, I was told by another source briefed by U.S. intelligence analysts that they had concluded that a rogue element of the Ukrainian government - tied to one of the oligarchs - was responsible for the attack, while absolving senior Ukrainian leaders including President Petro Poroshenko and Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk. But I wasn't able to determine whether this U.S. analysis was a consensus or a dissident opinion.

Last October, Der Spiegel reported that German intelligence, the BND, concluded that the Russian government was not the source of the missile battery - that it had been captured from a Ukrainian military base - but the BND blamed the ethnic Russian rebels for firing it. However, a European source told me that the BND's analysis was not as conclusive as Der Spiegel had described.

Prior to the MH-17 crash, ethnic Russian rebels in eastern Ukraine were reported to have captured a Buk system after overrunning a government air base, but Ukrainian authorities said the system was not operational, as recounted in the Dutch report. The rebels also denied possessing a functioning Buk system.

Who Has These Buks?

As for whether the 9M38 Buk system is still in the Ukrainian military arsenal, government officials in Kiev claimed to have sold their stockpile of older Buks to Georgia, but Ukraine appears to still possess the 9M38 Buk system, based on photographs of Ukrainian weapons displays. In other words, Ukrainian authorities appear to be lying about this crucial point.

It should be noted, too, that just because Russia no longer deploys the outmoded Buks doesn't mean that it might not have some mothballed in warehouses that could be pulled out and distributed in a sub rosa fashion, although both the Ukrainian rebels and Russian officials deny this possibility. According to the Ukrainian government, the rebels were only known to have shoulder-fired "manpads" in July 2014 - and that weapon lacked the range to destroy a civilian airliner flying at 33,000 feet.

Yet, rather than delve into this important mystery, The New York Times' editorial simply repeats the Western "group think" that took shape in the days after the MH-17 tragedy, that somehow the rebels shot down the plane with a Buk missile supplied by Russia. The other possibility that the missile was fired by some element of the Ukrainian security forces was given short-shrift despite the fact that Ukraine had moved some of its Buk batteries into

eastern Ukraine presumably to shoot down possible Russian aircraft incursions.

As described in the Dutch report, this Ukrainian concern was quite real in the days before the MH-17 shoot-down. On July 16 – just one day before the tragedy – a Ukrainian SU-25 jetfighter was shot down by what Ukrainian authorities concluded was an air-to-air missile presumably fired by a Russian warplane patrolling the Russia-Ukraine border.

Thus, it would make sense that the Ukrainian air-defense forces would have moved their Buk batteries close to the border and would have been on the lookout for possible Russian intruders entering or leaving Ukrainian air space. So, one possibility is that a poorly organized Ukrainian air-defense force mistook MH-17 for a hostile Russian aircraft high-tailing it back to Russia and fired.

Another theory that [I'm told U.S. intelligence analysts examined](#) was the possibility that a rogue Ukrainian element – linked to a fiercely anti-Russian oligarch – may have hoped that President Vladimir Putin's official plane was in Ukrainian air space en route home from a state visit to South America. Putin's jet and MH-17 had very similar markings. But Putin used a different route and had already landed in Moscow.



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

A third possibility, which I'm told at least some U.S. analysts think makes the most sense, was that the attack on MH-17 was a premeditated provocation by a team working for a hard-line oligarch with the goal of getting Russia blamed and heightening Western animosity toward Putin.

Obama's Secrets

But whatever your preferred scenario – whether you think the Russians or the Ukrainians did it – the solution to the mystery could clearly benefit from President Barack Obama doing what Putin has done: declassify relevant intelligence and defense information.

One might think that the Times' editors would be at the forefront of demanding transparency from the U.S. government, especially since senior U.S. officials rushed out of the gate in the days after the tragedy to put the blame on the Russians. Yet, since five days after the shoot-down, the Obama administration has refused to update or refine its claims.

Earlier this year, a spokesperson for Director for National Intelligence James Clapper told me that the DNI would not provide additional information out of concern that it might influence the Dutch investigation, a claim that lacked credibility because the Dutch investigation began within a day of the MH-17 crash and the DNI issued a sketchy white paper on the case four days later.

In other words, the initial U.S. rush to judgment already had prejudiced the investigation by indicating which way the United States, a NATO ally of the Netherlands, wanted the inquiry to go: blame the Russians. Later, withholding more refined intelligence data also concealed whatever contrary analyses had evolved within the U.S. intelligence community after Kerry

and the DNI had jumped to their hasty conclusions.

Yet, The New York Times took note of none of that, simply piling on the Russians again and hailing a dubious online publication called Bellingcat, which has consistently taken whatever the U.S. propaganda line is on international incidents and has systematically screwed up key facts.

In 2013, Bellingcat's founder Eliot Higgins got the firing location wrong for the sarin gas attack outside Damascus, Syria. He foisted the blame on Bashar al-Assad's forces in line with U.S. propaganda but it turned out that the missile's range was way too short for his analysis to be correct. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[The Collapsing Syria-Sarin Case.](#)"]

Then, earlier this year, Higgins fed Australia's "60 Minutes" program wrong coordinates for the location of the so-called "Buk-getaway video" in eastern Ukraine. Though the program treated Higgins's analysis as gospel, the images from the video and from the supposed location clearly didn't match, leading the program to engage in a journalistic fraud to pretend otherwise. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[A Reckless Stand-upper on MH-17.](#)"]

But the Times' editorial board simply gushed all over Bellingcat, promoting the Web site as if it's a credible source, writing that the Dutch report "is consistent with theories advanced by the United States and Ukraine as well as evidence collected by the independent investigative website Bellingcat.com, which hold that the fatal missile was fired from territory controlled by Russian-backed rebels in eastern Ukraine."

The Times then distorted the findings of the Buk manufacturer to present them as somehow contradicted by the Dutch report, which substantially relied on the declassified information from the manufacturer to reach roughly the same conclusion, that the missile was an older-model Buk.

However, without irony, the Times writes,

"This fact is not something Russians are likely to learn; Russian television has presented only the Kremlin's disinformation of what is going on in Ukraine and, for that matter, Syria. ... Creating an alternative reality has been a big reason for President Vladimir Putin's boundless popularity among Russians. He sees no reason to come clean for the shooting down of the Boeing 777."

Yet, the actual reality is that Russia has provided much more information and shown much greater transparency than President Obama and the U.S. government have. The Dutch report also ignored one of the key questions asked by Russian authorities in the days after the MH-17 shoot-down: why did Ukraine's air defense turn on the radar used to guide Buk missiles?

But the Times remains wedded to its propaganda narrative and doesn't want inconvenient facts to get in the way. Rather than demand that Obama "come clean" about what the U.S. intelligence agencies know about the MH-17 case, the newspaper of record chooses to mislead its readers about the facts.

*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](#)). You*

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