

U.S. Anti-Russia Propaganda Machine Rushing to Judgment - Facts Needed on Malaysian Plane Shoot-Down

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A Malaysia Airways' Boeing 777 like the one that crashed in eastern Ukraine on July 17, 2014. (Photo credit: Aero Icarus from Zürich, Switzerland)

As usual, the mainstream U.S. media is rushing to judgment over the crash of a Malaysian airliner in war-torn eastern Ukraine, but the history of U.S. government's deceptions might be reason to pause and let a careful investigation uncover the facts.

It will likely take some time to determine who downed the Malaysia Airlines Boeing-777 over eastern Ukraine on Thursday, killing all 298 people onboard. Initial speculation is that someone with a missile battery mistook the plane as a military aircraft, but the precise motive may be even harder to discern.

Given the fog of war and the eagerness among the various participants to wage "information warfare," there is also the possibility that evidence - especially electronic evidence - might be tampered with to achieve some propaganda victory.

Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko immediately labeled the tragedy "a terrorist act" although there was no evidence that anyone intentionally shot down the civilian airliner. But Poroshenko and others in the Kiev government have previously designated the ethnic Russians, who are resisting the Feb. 22 overthrow of elected President Viktor Yanukovich, as "terrorists" so Poroshenko's bellicose language was not a surprise.

For their part, the separatist rebels in eastern Ukraine denied responsibility for the crash - saying they lacked anti-aircraft missiles that could reach the 33,000-foot altitude of the Malaysian airliner - but there are reasons to suspect the rebels, including their previously successful efforts to shoot down Ukrainian military aircraft operating in the war zone.

On Thursday, Russian President Vladimir Putin deflected questions about who may have fired the missile as he called for an international investigation. But he made a telling point when he noted that the "tragedy would not have happened if military actions had not been renewed in southeast Ukraine."

Those likely to agree with that statement include German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Francois Hollande who, during a lengthy four-way conference call with Poroshenko on June 30, tried desperately to get him to prolong the ceasefire. Only the U.S. voiced support for Poroshenko's decision to spurn that initiative and order Ukrainian forces into a major offensive in the east.

It was in the context of Ukrainian forces using their airpower to strike rebel positions that led to the rebels' efforts to neutralize that advantage by deploying anti-aircraft missiles that have achieved some success in downing Ukrainian military planes. The Ukrainian military is also known to possess anti-aircraft batteries scattered throughout the country.

Raw Meat for Russia Bashing

But the chance to further demonize Putin and Russia will be hard for Official Washington and its corporate-owned press to resist. The New York Times was quick out of the starting blocks on Friday with a lead editorial blaming the entire Ukraine conflict, including the Malaysian Airline tragedy, on Putin:

“There is one man who can stop it - President Vladimir Putin of Russia, by telling the Russian-backed separatists in eastern Ukraine to end their insurgency and by stopping the flow of money and heavy weapons to those groups.”

Among Putin's alleged offenses, according to the Times, has been his “failing to support a cease-fire and avoiding serious, internationally mediated negotiations” - though Putin has actually been one of principal advocates for both a cease-fire and a negotiated solution. It has been the U.S.-backed Poroshenko who canceled the previous cease-fire and has refused to negotiate with the ethnic Russian rebels until they essentially surrender.

But the death of all 298 people onboard the Malaysian Airline flight, going from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur, will surely provide plenty of fuel for the already roaring anti-Russian propaganda machine. Still, the U.S. press might pause to recall how it's been manipulated by the U.S. government in the past, including three decades ago by the Reagan administration twisting the facts of the KAL-007 tragedy.

In that case, a Soviet fighter jet shot down a Korean Air Line plane on Sept. 1, 1983, after it strayed hundreds of miles off course and penetrated some of the Soviet Union's most sensitive airspace over military facilities in Kamchatka and Sakhalin Island.

Over Sakhalin, KAL-007 was finally intercepted by a Soviet Sukhoi-15 fighter. The Soviet pilot tried to signal the plane to land, but the KAL pilots did not respond to the repeated warnings. Amid confusion about the plane's identity — a U.S. spy plane had been in the vicinity hours earlier — Soviet ground control ordered the pilot to fire. He did, blasting the plane out of the sky and killing all 269 people on board.

The Soviets soon realized they had made a horrendous mistake. U.S. intelligence also knew from sensitive intercepts that the tragedy had resulted from a blunder, not from a willful act of murder (much as on July 3, 1988, the USS Vincennes fired a missile that brought down an Iranian civilian airliner in the Persian Gulf, killing 290 people, an act which President Ronald Reagan explained as an “understandable accident”).

But a Soviet admission of a tragic blunder regarding KAL-007 wasn't good enough for the Reagan administration, which saw the incident as a propaganda windfall. At the time, the felt imperative in Washington was to blacken the Soviet Union in the cause of Cold War propaganda and to escalate tensions with Moscow.

Falsifying the Case

To make the very blackest case against Moscow, the Reagan administration suppressed the exculpatory evidence from the U.S. electronic intercepts. The U.S. mantra became “the deliberate downing of a civilian passenger plane.” Newsweek ran a cover emblazoned with the headline “Murder in the Sky.”

“The Reagan administration’s spin machine began cranking up,” wrote Alvin A. Snyder, then-director of the U.S. Information Agency’s television and film division, in his 1995 book, *Warriors of Disinformation*.

USIA Director Charles Z. Wick “ordered his top agency aides to form a special task force to devise ways of playing the story overseas. The objective, quite simply, was to heap as much abuse on the Soviet Union as possible,” Snyder recalled.

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.’”

On Sept. 6, 1983, the Reagan administration went so far as to present a doctored transcript of the intercepts to the United Nations Security Council (a prelude to a similar false presentation two decades later by Secretary of State Colin Powell on Iraq’s alleged weapons of mass destruction).

“The tape was supposed to run 50 minutes,” Snyder said about recorded Soviet intercepts. “But the tape segment we [at USIA] had ran only eight minutes and 32 seconds. ... ‘Do I detect the fine hand of [Richard Nixon’s secretary] Rosemary Woods here?’ I asked sarcastically.”

But Snyder had a job to do: producing the video that his superiors wanted. “The perception we wanted to convey was that the Soviet Union had cold-bloodedly carried out a barbaric act,” Snyder wrote.

Only a decade later, when Snyder saw the complete transcripts — including the portions that the Reagan administration had hidden — would he fully realize how many of the central elements of the U.S. presentation were false.

The Soviet fighter pilot apparently did believe he was pursuing a U.S. spy plane, according to the intercepts, and he was having trouble in the dark identifying the plane. At the instructions of Soviet ground controllers, the pilot had circled the KAL airliner and tilted his wings to force the aircraft down. The pilot said he fired warning shots, too. “This comment was also not on the tape we were provided,” Snyder wrote.

It was clear to Snyder that in the pursuit of its Cold War aims, the Reagan administration had presented false accusations to the United Nations, as well as to the people of the United States and the world. To these Republicans, the ends of smearing the Soviets had justified the means of falsifying the historical record.

In his book, Snyder acknowledged his role in the deception and drew an ironic lesson from the incident. The senior USIA official wrote, “The moral of the story is that all governments,

including our own, lie when it suits their purposes. The key is to lie first.” [For more details on the KAL-007 deception and the history of U.S. trickery, see Consortiumnews.com’s “[A Dodgy Dossier on Syrian War.](#)”]

Reliability of U.S. Intelligence

It was not always this way. There was a time when the U.S. government wouldn’t risk its credibility for a cheap propaganda stunt, knowing that there are moments when it is crucial for the world to believe what U.S. officials say.

Some of us will remember when, in 1962, U.S. Ambassador to the UN Adlai Stevenson showed the Security Council U-2 photographs of fledgling Soviet offensive missile bases in Cuba. It was the perfect squelch to the Soviets and their allies trying to sow doubt about the truth behind President John F. Kennedy’s allegations.

Sadly, the credibility of U.S. officials and American intelligence is now at rock bottom. One need only think back on the evidence adduced to “prove” the existence of WMD in Iraq. “The intelligence and facts were being fixed around the policy” is what the head of British intelligence told Prime Minister Tony Blair on July 23, 2002, after conferring with CIA Director George Tenet at CIA headquarters on July 20.

I also have grown more and more suspicious of the official U.S. government account about the crash of TWA-800 on July 17, 1996. Shortly after departing Kennedy Airport in New York, the plane exploded off Long Island with 230 people killed. More than 100 eyewitnesses reported seeing an object they described variously as a “missile,” “flare” or “rocket” rise up into the sky and merge with TWA Flight 800.

The immediate suspicion was that the disaster was an act of terrorism, although some speculation focused on the presence of U.S. Navy missile-carrying warships in the area. However, after raising much of the plane’s wreckage from the sea bottom, the National Transportation Safety Board and Justice Department/FBI dismissed the eyewitness accounts of a missile and concluded instead that the explosion was caused by an electrical malfunction.

To help in selling this version, the CIA “technical experts” working under CIA Director George Tenet – yes, the same fellow who described the Iraq WMD evidence as a “slam dunk” – were enlisted to prepare a video artfully designed to discredit the missile claims. But the TWA800 Project Investigative Team – a determined group of engineers, scientists, eyewitnesses and journalists – have continued to challenge the official findings, including the CIA video. [To see the team’s rebuttal, [click here.](#)]

Quite aside from the likelihood that CIA exceeded its authority with its involvement in this domestic issue, it pains me as a former CIA analyst that my former colleagues would take part in this kind of deception, producing a video that was unprofessional at best and fraudulent at worst.

So, there is, sadly, additional reason to kick the tires of any fancy truck carrying “intelligence” offered by the U.S. with respect to the Malaysian Airline shoot-down on Thursday.

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