

MH-17 Mystery: A New Tonkin Gulf Case?

consortiumnews, July 17, 2015

Exclusive: In 1964, the Tonkin Gulf incident was used to justify the Vietnam War although U.S. intelligence quickly knew the facts were not what the U.S. government claimed. Now, the MH-17 case is being exploited to justify a new Cold War as U.S. intelligence again is silent about what it knows, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

One year ago, the world experienced what could become the Tonkin Gulf incident of World War III, the shoot-down of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 over eastern Ukraine. As with the dubious naval clash off the coast of North Vietnam in 1964, which helped launch the Vietnam War, U.S. officials quickly seized on the MH-17 crash for its emotional and propaganda appeal – and used it to ratchet up tensions against Russia.

Shocked at the thought of 298 innocent people plunging to their deaths from 33,000 feet last July 17, the world recoiled in horror, a fury that was then focused on Russian President Vladimir Putin. With Putin's face emblazoned on magazine covers, the European Union got in line behind the U.S.-backed coup regime in Ukraine and endorsed economic sanctions to punish Russia.

In the year that has followed, the U.S. government has continued to escalate tensions with Russia, supporting the Ukrainian regime in its brutal “anti-terrorism operation” that has slaughtered thousands of ethnic Russians in eastern Ukraine. The authorities in Kiev have even dispatched neo-Nazi and ultranationalist militias, supported by jihadists called “brothers” of the Islamic State, to act as the tip of the spear. [See Consortiumnews.com's “Ukraine Merges Nazis and Islamists.”]

Raising world tensions even further, the Russians have made clear that they will not allow the ethnic Russian resistance to be annihilated, setting the stage for a potential escalation of hostilities and even a possible nuclear showdown between the United States and Russia.

But the propaganda linchpin to the West's extreme anger toward Russia remains the MH-17 shoot-down, which the United States and the West continue to pin on the Russian rebels – and by extension – Russia and Putin. The latest examples are media reports about the Dutch crash investigation suggesting that an anti-aircraft missile, allegedly involved in destroying MH-17, was fired from rebel-controlled territory.

Yet, the U.S. mainstream media remains stunningly disinterested in the “dog-not-barking” question of why the U.S. intelligence community has been so quiet about its MH-17 analysis since it released a sketchy report relying mostly on “social media” on July 22, 2014, just five days after the shoot-down. A source briefed by U.S. intelligence analysts told me that the reason for the intelligence community's silence is that more definitive analysis pointed to a rogue Ukrainian operation implicating one of the pro-regime oligarchs.

The source said that if this U.S. analysis were to see the light of day, the Ukrainian “narrative” that has supplied the international pressure on Russia would collapse. In other words, the Obama administration is giving a higher priority to keeping Putin on the defensive than to bringing the MH-17 killers to justice.

Like the Tonkin Gulf case, the evidence on the MH-17 case was shaky and contradictory from the start. But, in both cases, U.S. officials confidently pointed fingers at the “enemy.” President Lyndon Johnson blamed North Vietnam in 1964 and Secretary of State John Kerry implicated ethnic Russian rebels and their backers in Moscow in 2014. In both cases, analysts in the U.S. intelligence community were less certain and even reached contrary conclusions once more evidence was available.

In both cases, those divergent assessments appear to have been suppressed so as not to interfere with what was regarded as a national security priority – confronting “North Vietnamese aggression” in 1964 and “Russian aggression” in 2014. To put out the contrary information would have undermined the government’s policy and damaged “credibility.” So the facts – or at least the conflicting judgments – were hidden.

The Price of Silence

In the case of the Tonkin Gulf, it took years for the truth to finally emerge and – in the meantime – tens of thousands of U.S. soldiers and millions of Vietnamese had lost their lives. Yet, much of the reality was known soon after the Tonkin Gulf incident on Aug. 4, 1964.

Daniel Ellsberg, who in 1964 was a young Defense Department official, recounts – in his 2002 book *Secrets* – how the Tonkin Gulf falsehoods took shape, first with the panicked cables from a U.S. Navy captain relaying confused sonar readings and then with that false storyline presented to the American people.

As Ellsberg describes, President Johnson and Defense Secretary Robert McNamara announced retaliatory airstrikes on Aug. 4, 1964, telling “the American public that the North Vietnamese, for the second time in two days, had attacked U.S. warships on ‘routine patrol in international waters’; that this was clearly a ‘deliberate’ pattern of ‘naked aggression’; that the evidence for the second attack, like the first, was ‘unequivocal’; that the attack had been ‘unprovoked’; and that the United States, by responding in order to deter any repetition, intended no wider war.”

Ellsberg wrote: “By midnight on the fourth, or within a day or two, I knew that each one of those assurances was false.” Yet, the White House made no effort to clarify the false or misleading statements. The falsehoods were left standing for several years while Johnson sharply escalated the war by dispatching a half million soldiers to Vietnam.

In the MH-17 case, we saw something similar. Within three days of the July 17, 2014 crash, Secretary Kerry rushed onto all five Sunday talk shows with his rush to judgment, citing evidence provided by the Ukrainian government through social media. On NBC’s “Meet the Press,” David Gregory asked, “Are you bottom-lining here that Russia provided the weapon?”

Kerry: “There’s a story today confirming that, but we have not within the Administration made a determination. But it’s pretty clear when – there’s a build-up of extraordinary circumstantial evidence. I’m a former prosecutor. I’ve tried cases on circumstantial evidence; it’s powerful here.” [See Consortiumnews.com’s “Kerry’s Latest Reckless Rush to Judgment.”]

Two days later, on July 22, the Director of National Intelligence authorized the release of a brief report essentially repeating Kerry’s allegations. The DNI’s report also cited “social media” as implicating the ethnic Russian rebels, but the report stopped short of claiming that the Russians gave the rebels the sophisticated Buk (or SA-11) surface-to-air missile that the report indicated was used to bring down the plane.

Instead, the report cited “an increasing amount of heavy weaponry crossing the border from Russia to separatist fighters in Ukraine”; it claimed that Russia “continues to provide training – including on air defense systems to separatist fighters at a facility in southwest Russia”; and its noted the rebels “have demonstrated proficiency with surface-to-air missile systems, downing more than a dozen aircraft in the months prior to the MH17 tragedy, including two large transport aircraft.”

Yet, despite the insinuation of Russian guilt, what the public report didn’t say – which is often more significant than what is said in these white papers – was that the rebels had previously only used short-range shoulder-fired missiles to bring down low-flying military planes, whereas MH-17 was flying at around 33,000 feet, far beyond the range of those weapons.

The assessment also didn’t say that U.S. intelligence, which had been concentrating its attention on eastern Ukraine during those months, detected the delivery of a Buk missile battery from Russia, despite the fact that a battery consists of four 16-foot-long missiles that are hauled around by trucks or other large vehicles.

Rising Doubts

I was told that the absence of evidence of such a delivery injected the first doubts among U.S. analysts who also couldn’t say for certain that the missile battery that was suspected of firing the fateful missile was manned by rebels. An early glimpse of that doubt was revealed in the DNI briefing for several mainstream news organizations when the July 22 assessment was released.

The Los Angeles Times reported, “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 was launched by a defector from the Ukrainian military who was trained to use similar missile systems.” [See Consortiumnews.com’s “The Mystery of a Ukrainian ‘Defector.’”]

The Russians also challenged the rush to judgment against them, although the U.S. mainstream media largely ignored – or ridiculed – their presentation. But the Russians at least provided what appeared to be substantive data, including alleged radar readings showing the presence of a Ukrainian jetfighter “gaining height” as it closed to within three to five kilometers of MH-17.

Russian Lt. Gen. Andrey Kartopolov also called on the Ukrainian government to explain the movements of its Buk systems to sites in eastern Ukraine and why Kiev's Kupol-M19S18 radars, which coordinate the flight of Buk missiles, showed increased activity leading up to the July 17 shoot-down.

The Ukrainian government countered by asserting that it had "evidence that the missile which struck the plane was fired by terrorists, who received arms and specialists from the Russian Federation," according to Andrey Lysenko, spokesman for Ukraine's Security Council, using Kiev's preferred term for the rebels.

On July 29, amid this escalating rhetoric, the Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity, a group of mostly retired U.S. intelligence officials, called on President Barack Obama to release what evidence the U.S. government had, including satellite imagery.

"As intelligence professionals we are embarrassed by the unprofessional use of partial intelligence information," the group wrote. "As Americans, we find ourselves hoping that, if you indeed have more conclusive evidence, you will find a way to make it public without further delay. In charging Russia with being directly or indirectly responsible, Secretary of State John Kerry has been particularly definitive. Not so the evidence."

But the Obama administration failed to make public any intelligence information that would back up its earlier suppositions.

Then, in early August, I was told that some U.S. intelligence analysts had begun shifting away from the original scenario blaming the rebels and Russia to one focused more on the possibility that extremist elements of the Ukrainian government were responsible, funded by one of Ukraine's rabidly anti-Russian oligarchs. [See Consortiumnews.com's "Flight 17 Shoot-down Scenario Shifts" and "Was Putin Targeted for Mid-air Assassination?"]

Last October, Der Spiegel reported that the German intelligence service, the BND, also had concluded that Russia was not the source of the missile battery – that it had been captured from a Ukrainian military base – but the BND still blamed the rebels for firing it. The BND also concluded that photos supplied by the Ukrainian government about the MH-17 tragedy "have been manipulated," Der Spiegel reported.

And, the BND disputed Russian government claims that a Ukrainian fighter jet had been flying close to MH-17, the magazine said, reporting on the BND's briefing to a parliamentary committee on Oct. 8, 2014. But none of the BND's evidence was made public — and I was subsequently told by a European official that the evidence was not as conclusive as the magazine article depicted. [See Consortiumnews.com's "Germans Clear Russia in MH-17 Case."]

Dog Still Doesn't Bark

When the Dutch Safety Board investigating the crash issued an interim report in mid-October, it answered few questions, beyond confirming that MH-17 apparently was destroyed by "high-velocity objects that penetrated the aircraft from outside." The 34-

page Dutch report was silent on the “dog-not-barking” issue of whether the U.S. government had satellite surveillance that revealed exactly where the supposed ground-to-air missile was launched and who fired it.

In January, when I re-contacted the source who had been briefed by the U.S. analysts, the source said their thinking had not changed, except that they believed the missile may have been less sophisticated than a Buk, possibly an SA-6, and that the attack may have also involved a Ukrainian jetfighter firing on MH-17.

Since then there have been occasional news accounts about witnesses reporting that they did see a Ukrainian fighter plane in the sky and others saying they saw a missile possibly fired from territory then supposedly controlled by the rebels (although the borders of the conflict zone at that time were very fluid and the Ukrainian military was known to have mobile anti-aircraft missile batteries only a few miles away).

But the larger dog-not-barking question is why the U.S. intelligence community has clammed up for nearly one year, even after I reported that I was being told that U.S. analysts had veered off in a different direction – from the initial blame-the-Russians approach – toward one focusing on a rogue Ukrainian attack.

For its part, the DNI’s office has cited the need for secrecy even as it continues to refer to its July 22 report. But didn’t DNI James Clapper waive any secrecy privilege when he rushed out a report five days after the MH-17 shoot-down? Why was secrecy asserted only after the U.S. intelligence community had time to thoroughly review its photographic and electronic intelligence?

Over the past 11 months, the DNI’s office has offered no updates on the initial assessment, with a DNI spokeswoman even making the absurd claim that U.S. intelligence has made no refinements of its understanding about the tragedy since July 22, 2014.

If what I’ve been told is true, the reason for this silence would likely be that a reversal of the initial rush to judgment would be both embarrassing for the Obama administration and detrimental to an “information warfare” strategy designed to keep the Russians on the defensive.

But if that’s the case, President Barack Obama may be acting even more recklessly than President Johnson did in 1964. As horrific as the Vietnam War was, a nuclear showdown with Russia could be even worse.

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).