

MH-17 Slips into propaganda fog

The Dutch investigation into the shoot-down of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 over eastern Ukraine last July has failed to uncover conclusive proof of precisely who was responsible for the deaths of the 298 passengers and crew but is expected to point suspicions toward the ethnic Russian rebels, fitting with the West's long-running anti-Russian propaganda campaign.

A source who has been briefed on the outlines of the investigation said some U.S. intelligence analysts have reached a contrary conclusion and place the blame on "rogue" elements of the Ukrainian government operating out of a circle of hard-liners around one of Ukraine's oligarchs. Yet, according to this source, the U.S. analysts will demur on the Dutch findings, letting them stand without public challenge.

Throughout the Ukraine crisis, propaganda and "information warfare" have overridden any honest presentation of reality – and the mystery around the MH-17 disaster has now slipped into that haze of charge and counter-charge. Many investigative journalists, including myself, [have been rebuffed](#) in repeated efforts to get verifiable proof about the case or even informational briefings.

In that sense, the MH-17 case stands as an outlier to the usual openness that surrounds inquiries into airline disasters. The Obama administration's behavior has been particularly curious, with its rush to judgment five days after the July 17, 2014 shoot-down, citing sketchy social media posts to implicate the ethnic Russian rebels and indirectly the Russian government but then refusing requests for updates.

But why the later secrecy? If Director of National Intelligence James Clapper decided that unverified information about the shoot-down could be released five days after the event, why would his office then decide to keep the U.S. public in the dark as more definitive data became available?

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 had made no refinements of its understanding about the tragedy since July 22, 2014.

I'm told that the reason for the DNI's reversal from openness to secrecy was that U.S. intelligence analysts found no evidence that the Russian government had given the rebels sophisticated anti-aircraft missiles capable of downing an aircraft at 33,000 feet, the altitude of MH-17, and that an examination of U.S. satellite and electronic intelligence instead implicated extremists linked to Ukraine's U.S.-backed regime, although not to Kiev's political leadership.

At that point, admitting to an erroneous rush to judgment would have embarrassed the administration and undermined the "public diplomacy" campaign around the MH-17 case. By blaming Russia and its President Vladimir Putin last summer, the Obama administration whipped Europe into an anti-Russian frenzy and helped win the European Union's support for economic sanctions against Russia. Keeping Putin on the defensive is a top U.S. priority.

As one senior U.S. government official explained to me, information warfare was the only area in the Ukraine crisis where Washington felt it had an edge over Moscow, which benefited from a host of other advantages, such as geography, economic and cultural ties, and military pressure.

‘False Flags’

It also appears that right-wing Ukrainian political forces, which seized power in the Feb. 22, 2014 coup, have understood the value of propaganda, including “false flag” operations that pin the blame for atrocities on their opponents. One of the most successful may have been the mysterious sniper attacks on Feb. 20, 2014, that slaughtered both police and protesters in Kiev’s Maidan square, with the violence immediately blamed on President Viktor Yanukovich and used to justify his overthrow two days later.

Later independent investigations indicated that extreme right-wing elements seeking Yanukovich’s ouster were more likely responsible. Two European Union officials, Estonia’s Foreign Minister [[Urmas Paet]] and European Union foreign affairs chief Catherine Ashton, were revealed discussing in a phone call their suspicions that elements of the protesters were responsible for the shootings.

“So there is a stronger and stronger understanding that behind snipers it was not Yanukovich, it was somebody from the new coalition,” Paet told Ashton, as [reported by the UK Guardian](#). [A worthwhile documentary on this mystery is “[Maidan Massacre](#).”]

Even U.S. officials have faulted the new regime for failing to conduct a diligent investigation to determine who was to blame for the sniper attack. During a rousing [anti-Russian speech](#) in Kiev last month, U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Samantha Power inserted one criticism of the post-coup regime – that “investigations into serious crimes such as the violence in the Maidan and in Odessa [where [scores of ethnic Russians were burned alive](#)] have been sluggish, opaque, and marred by serious errors – suggesting not only a lack of competence, but also a lack of will to hold the perpetrators accountable.”

In other words, regarding the Maidan sniper massacre, the Kiev regime wasn’t willing to reveal evidence that might undermine the incident’s use as a valuable propaganda ploy. That attitude has been shared by the mainstream Western media which has sought to glue white hats on the post-coup regime and black hats on the ethnic Russian rebels who supported Yanukovich and have resisted the new power structure.

For instance, since Yanukovich’s ouster nearly 1½ years ago, The New York Times and other mainstream outlets have treated reports about the key role played in the coup regime by neo-Nazis and other far-right nationalists as “Russian propaganda.” However, this week, the Times finally acknowledged the importance of these extremists in Kiev’s military operations. [See Consortiumnews.com’s “[Ukraine Merges Nazis and Islamists](#).”]

A similar propaganda fog has enveloped the MH-17 investigation, with the lead investigators – the Dutch, British, Australians and Ukrainians – all firmly in the pro-Kiev and anti-Moscow camp. (Specialists from the United States, Russia and Malaysia have also been involved in the inquiry.)

Not surprisingly, leaders in Ukraine and Australia, as well, didn’t wait for the investigation to reach a conclusion before placing the blame on Putin. Last October, Australian Prime Minister Tony

Abbott used an Australian football term in [vowing](#) to “shirtfront” Putin about his supposed guilt in the MH-17 case.

Media Fakery

Keeping the later U.S. intelligence analysis secret also allows for the Putin-did-it propaganda campaigns to go forward in mainstream media outlets and various propaganda fronts. A good example was the Australian “60 Minutes” report in May presenting bogus video evidence supposedly corroborating “Russia-did-it” claims made by British blogger Eliot Higgins.

While the segment appeared to be authoritative – supposedly proving that Putin was responsible for mass murder – a closer examination showed that the program had relied on video fakery to mislead its viewers. The key scene supposedly matching up a video of a getaway Buk anti-aircraft missile battery with landmarks in the rebel-controlled city of Luhansk didn’t match up at all. [See Consortiumnews.com’s “[You Be the Judge.](#)”]

After I revealed the fraud by showing how the two scenes were almost entirely different, the Australian show fell back on a claim that one utility pole in the getaway video looked like a utility pole that its reporting team had found in Luhansk. It is perhaps a sign of how crazy the anti-Russian propaganda has gotten that a major news program could feel that it can make such an absurd argument and get away with it.

In a rational world, matching up the two scenes would require all the landmarks to fit, when in this case none of them did. Further, to cite similarities between two utility poles as evidence ignored the fact that most utility poles look alike and there was the additional fact that none of the area around the two utility poles matched at all, including a house behind one that didn’t appear in the scene of the other. [See Consortiumnews.com’s “[A Reckless Stand-upper on MH-17.](#)”]

However, as long as the U.S. government’s comprehensive intelligence information on MH-17 is kept secret, such sleights of hand can continue to work. I’m told that the Dutch report is likely to contain similar circumstantial claims, citing such things as the possible angle of the fired missile, to suggest that the ethnic Russian rebels were at fault.

Last October, the Dutch Safety Board’s initial report answered very few questions, beyond confirming that MH-17 apparently was destroyed by “high-velocity objects that penetrated the aircraft from outside.” Other key questions went begging, such as what to make of the Russian military radar purporting to show a Ukrainian SU-25 jetfighter in the area, a claim that the Kiev government denied.

Either the Russian radar showed the presence of a jetfighter “gaining height” as it closed to within three to five kilometers of the passenger plane – as [the Russians claimed](#) in a July 21 press conference – or it didn’t. The Kiev authorities insisted that they had no military aircraft in the area at the time.

But [the 34-page Dutch report](#) was silent on the jetfighter question, although noting that the investigators had received Air Traffic Control “surveillance data from the Russian Federation.” The report also 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 may have fired it.

The Obama administration has asserted knowledge about those facts, but the U.S. government has withheld satellite photos and other intelligence information that could presumably corroborate the charge. Curiously, too, the Dutch report said the investigation received “satellite imagery taken in the days after the occurrence.” Obviously, the more relevant images in assessing blame would be aerial photography in the days and hours before the crash.

The Dutch report’s reference to only post-crash satellite photos was also odd because the Russian military released a number of satellite images purporting to show Ukrainian government Buk missile systems north of the eastern Ukrainian city of Donetsk before the attack, including two batteries that purportedly were shifted 50 kilometers south of Donetsk on July 17, the day of the crash, and then removed by July 18.

Russian Lt. Gen. Andrey Kartopolov called on the Ukrainian government to explain the movements of its Buk systems 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 these questions 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.

Lysenko added: “To disown this tragedy, [Russian officials] are drawing a lot of pictures and maps. We will explore any photos and other plans produced by the Russian side.” But Ukrainian authorities have failed to address the Russian evidence except through broad denials.

Where’s the Intelligence?

On July 29, 2014, amid escalating rhetoric against Russia from U.S. government officials and the Western news media, the Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity [called](#) on President Obama to release what evidence the U.S. government had on the shoot-down, 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. His statements seem premature and bear earmarks of an attempt to ‘poison the jury pool.’”

However, the Obama administration has failed to make public any intelligence information that would back up its earlier suppositions or any new evidence at all. One source told me that U.S. intelligence analysts are afraid to speak out about the information that contradicts the original rush to judgment because of Obama’s aggressive prosecution of whistleblowers.

If the Dutch final report emerges with carefully circumscribed circumstantial evidence implicating the pro-Russian rebels, the nuances will surely be carved away when the report is fed into the existing propaganda machinery. The conventional wisdom about “Russian guilt” will be firmed up.

A sense of how that will go can be seen in a recent New York Times [article](#) by David Herszenhorn on June 29: “Pro-Russian separatist leaders in the eastern Ukrainian region of Luhansk have

blocked access to Dutch law enforcement officials pursuing an investigation into the downing of a Malaysian jetliner nearly a year ago, the Netherlands Public Prosecution Office said. ...

“The obstruction by separatist officials prompted the investigators, from the Dutch National Police and Ministry of Defense, to cut short their field work in Ukraine without conducting research into cellphone towers and cellular networks in the region, the public prosecution office said. ...

“Based on preliminary analysis and intelligence, including from the United States government, the aircraft was widely believed to have been destroyed by a surface-to-air missile fired from territory controlled by Russian-backed separatist forces.”

While the thrust of Herszenhorn’s article made the ethnic Russian rebels look bad – and foreshadows some of the points likely to be featured in the Dutch investigative report – perhaps the most significant word in the story is “preliminary.” While it’s true that the U.S. government’s “preliminary” report on July 22, 2014, implicated the rebels, the more pertinent question – not asked by the Times – is why there has been no refinement of that “preliminary” report.

The Dutch Safety Board issued [a brief progress report](#) on July 1 noting that it had submitted a draft of its final report to “accredited representatives of the participating States on ... June 2,” giving them 60 days to submit comments before a “definitive final” report is published in October.

Meanwhile, Dutch prosecutors handling the criminal investigation say they have no specific suspects, but lead investigator Fred Westerbeke claims the probe has a number of “persons of interest.” Westerbeke said the criminal probe will likely run through the end of the year or later.