

Eight Years to an Apology: Russia's Reaction to MH17 and KAL007

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I was conscripted into the Soviet Army in November 1983, barely two months after the tragic night of Sept. 1, when a Soviet Su-15 interceptor jet downed a Korean civilian airliner (KAL007) over the Sea of Japan. By coincidence, my regiment was one of the units directly responsible for the tragedy. Back then, it took eight days for the aging Politburo to agree that Soviet Air Defense had committed a dramatic mistake. Western sanctions (including a suspension of Aeroflot flights to America) soon followed.

Moscow responded by using a UN Security Council veto to block a condemnation resolution, and subsequently blamed U.S. intelligence for the tragedy. It took eight years for the Soviet Union to issue a full apology to South Korea in 1991, and 10 years for Boris Yeltsin — then president of the Russian Federation — to release classified Soviet communication transcripts of the incident. Between the accident and the apology, the Soviet Union ceased

to exist.

The MH17 incident, where a civilian airliner was shot down within Ukrainian airspace in July 2014, has many similarities. But it also has one stark contrast. Unlike KAL007, whose passengers fell victim to the geo-strategic grandstanding of the Cold War, the MH17 airliner was the victim of a new type of “hybrid war” in rebel-controlled territory. Technically speaking, the Russian state had nothing to do with it.

In 1983, Soviet government decided to accept the KAL007 incident as damaging to the Soviet Union's reputation. Their decision to admit the mistake was not a sign of weakness, but a declaration of might. Soviet leaders clearly understood the importance of maintaining the Soviet Union's global brand. In summer 2014, however, the Russian state could not afford to admit the accident. Such an admission would expose the regime's direct and unlawful involvement in the Donbass war, but also because it would demonstrate the weakness of a regime that leases lethal anti-aircraft weapons to rebel warlords.

In outlining the MH17 incident, I will refrain from providing a complete timeline of versions that originated in the Russian media, government, and military sources. Instead, here are some plain facts about the incident. Within minutes of MH17's downing, rebel commanders and some Russian media outlets reported separatists had hit a Ukrainian transport plane. In less than 30 minutes, it became clear that the plane was civilian, and that the number of victims was one of the largest in history. Later, experts confirmed a Boeing-777, which flies above 10,000 meters, could only be hit by a surface-to-air missile.

Within hours, the MH17 drama became a major global issue, resembling KAL007 in every detail, except one — the culprit's recognition of an unintended crime. Ukraine became an aviation pariah; and Russia became increasingly subject to international condemnation. In addition, the incident became a key front in the rapidly developing “information war” between Russia and the West. In general, Western media sources usually sympathized with the “democratic” Ukrainian side of the conflict. Russia was portrayed as an aggressor state. Sanctions were generally presented as an anodyne to Russian intervention in a sovereign's affairs.

Russian mass media, predominantly state-controlled or state-aligned, had an opposing perspective on events in Ukraine. “Crimea is ours” euphoria from March mutated into a gloomier concept of “Novorossia” (the new Russia), and even to the idea that Putin had somehow spared Kiev “from a 2-hour invasion.” Major newspapers and TV stations agitated for Donbass rebels, who were “liberating their land from a fascist junta in Kiev.”

While Russian officials routinely denied the Kremlin's involvement in the MH17 tragedy, Russian propaganda outlets served multiple post-truth versions of the same drama. They ranged from stories about Ukrainian fighter jets that fired a missile on MH17 “in order to blame Russia,” to the utterly conspiratorial theory of a planned terror attack. Days of sorrow and anger were thus transformed by outlets such as RT, Rossyia-1, Vesti-24, KP and Life into a textual collection of explanations — each stranger and more colorful than the last.

With the Kremlin firmly entrenched in a denial narrative, pro-governmental media chose a propaganda technique that precedes the Cold War. This method, known to professional

agitators and propagandists as a “rotten herring,” was first described by the British politician and historian Lord Arthur Ponsonby, who had analyzed World War II propaganda.

The method is simple: insert unrelated truths into every denial. Alongside the fresh “herring” truth the propagandist must provide barrels of lies (rotten herrings) which preserve the national narrative whilst simultaneously vilifying oppositional narratives. As Sir Arthur summarized: “When war is declared, truth is the first casualty.” Following the Crimean annexation, the Kremlin has invested considerable resources into maintaining anti-Western and anti-Ukrainian indoctrination. Whereas the Soviet Union relied on crude radio jammers to prevent citizens from listening to the international media, the modern Russian state constructs a sophisticated white noise of conspiratorial narratives. The jammers of a post-modern dictatorship are thus the “unmasking” stories that mix CIA, MI5, freemasons, Bolsheviks, and 'Jewish perpetrators.' At the same time, objective, investigative reports are rejected as "biased," "Russophobic," "subjective," and "amateurish."

State institutions were even more aggressive in the denial. After the Netherlands expressed displeasure with the Kremlin's position over MH17, Russia's Foreign Ministry summoned the Dutch ambassador to voice their displeasure at a “biased investigation” and lack of attention paid to “evidence supplied by the Russian side.” The moral decay of the official who delivered such a rant to the ambassador of a country that lost 189 citizens is quite unfathomable. Come to think of it, the Russian state never did send condolences to the people of the Netherlands ...

One strange quality is consistent among Russian power mongers: they utterly dislike making apologies regardless of evidence, court decisions, or common sense. And, in Putin's emergent pariah state, an apology is nothing more than weakness.

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