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Russia-Baiting and Risks of Nuclear War

Ray McGovern
10/13/2016

of extinction, it is tempting to view the ongoing propaganda exchange over who shot down Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 in July 2014 as a side-show. That would be a huge mistake – easily made by President Obama’s wet-behind-the-ears sophomoric advisers who seem to know very little of the history of U.S.-Russia relations and appear smug in their ignorance.

Adult input is sorely needed. There are advantages to having some hands-on experience, and having watched how propaganda wars can easily escalate to military confrontation. In a Sept. 28 interview with *Sputnik Radio*, I addressed some serious implications of the decision by the U.S. and two of its European vassal states (the Netherlands and Ukraine) to stoke tensions with Russia still higher by blaming it for the downing of MH-17.

In short, there is considerable risk that the Russians may see this particular propaganda offensive (which “justified” the European Union’s economic sanctions in 2014), together with NATO’s saber rattling in central Europe, as steps toward war. In fact, there is troubling precedent for precisely that.

A very similar set of circumstances existed 33 years ago after the Soviets did shoot down Korean Airlines Flight 007 on Sept. 1, 1983, when it strayed over sensitive military targets inside the Soviet Union and the KAL-007 pilots failed to respond to repeated warnings. After the tragic reality became obvious, the Soviets acknowledged that they had downed the plane but said they did not know it was a passenger plane.

However, 1983 was another time of high tensions between the two superpowers and President Ronald Reagan wanted to paint the Soviets in the darkest of hues. So, his administration set out to sell the storyline that the Soviets had willfully murdered the 269 passengers and crew.

U.S. government propagandists and their media stenographers laid on all the *Sturm und Drang* they could summon to promote the lie that the Soviets knew KAL-007 was a civilian passenger plane before they shot it down. As Newsweek's headline declared, "Murder in the Sky."

Exploitation of the tragedy yielded a steep rise in tensions, and almost led to a nuclear exchange just two months later. There is an important lesson, now three decades later, as Western governments and the mainstream media manufacture more endless fear and hatred of Russia.

The Dutch/Ukrainian Follies

On Wednesday, new "evidence" blaming Russia for the downing of MH-17 over eastern Ukraine was made public – brought out of the oven, as it were, at a Dutch Maid bakery employing Ukrainian confectioners. A bite into the evidence and it immediately dissolves like refined sugar – and leaves an unpleasant artificial taste in the mouth.

The Dutch-Ukrainian charade played by the "Joint Investigation Team," on which Belgium, Australia and Malaysia also have members, is an insult to the relatives and friends of the 298 human beings killed in the shoot-down. Understandably, those relatives and friends long for truth and accountability, and they deserve it.

Yet, as happened in 1983 with the credulous acceptance of the Reagan administration's version of the KAL-007 case, the mainstream Western media has embraced the JIT's findings as "conclusive" and the evidence as "overwhelming." But it is in reality extraordinarily thin, essentially a case of deciding immediately after the event that the Russians were to be blamed and spending more than two years assembling snippets of intercepted conversations (from 150,000 provided by the Ukrainian intelligence service) that could be stitched together to create an impression of guilt.

In the slick video, which serves as the JIT's investigative "report," the intercepted voices don't say anything about Russian Buk missiles actually being deployed inside

Ukraine or shooting down a plane or the need to get the Buk missiles out of Ukraine afterwards. One voice early on says he'd like to have some Bucs but – after that – Bucs aren't mentioned and everything in the video is supposition. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[Troubling Gaps in MH-17 Report](#)."]]

There's also no explanation as to why the Russians would have taken a bizarrely circuitous route when a much more direct and discreet course was available. The JIT's embrace of that strange itinerary was made necessary by the fact that the only "social media" images of a Buk system traveling on July 17, 2014, before the MH-17 shoot-down, show the Bucs heading east toward Russia, not west from Russia. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[The Official and Implausible MH-17 Scenario](#)."]]

In other words, to make the storyline fit with the available images, the JIT had to take the alleged Russian-Buk convoy on a ridiculous trip far out of the way so it could be photographed in Donetsk before doubling back toward the alleged firing site near Snizhne, which could have been reached easily from the Russian border without the extensive detour through heavily populated areas.

Ignoring Inconvenient Evidence

The JIT also had to ignore its own evidence that on the night of July 16-17, 2014, Ukrainian military convoys were pressing deep inside what has been called "rebel-controlled territory." The obvious implication is that if a Ukrainian convoy could move to within a few miles of Luhansk, as one of the intercepts described, a Ukrainian Buk convoy could have traveled to the east as well.

And, the JIT's presumed motive for the Russians taking the extraordinary decision of supplying a Buk battery to the rebels – that it was needed to shoot down Ukrainian warplanes attacking rebels on the front lines – doesn't fit with the placement of a Buk system on farmland south of Snizhne, far from the frontlines. Indeed, very little about the JIT's case makes sense.

It also appears that the JIT devoted no effort to examining other plausible scenarios regarding who might have shot down MH-17. The JIT video report makes no reference to the several Ukrainian Buk systems that were operating in eastern Ukraine on the day that MH-17 was shot down.

The Dutch intelligence service MIVD, relying on NATO's intelligence capabilities, reported earlier that the only anti-aircraft-missile systems in the area on July 17, 2014, capable of shooting down MH-17 were under the control of the Ukrainian military.

But the JIT's report offered no explanation of where those Ukrainian Buk systems were located or whether Ukraine had accounted for all the Buk missiles in those batteries. The JIT's blinders can be explained by the fact that it was coordinating

with (and relying on) Ukraine's SBU intelligence agency, which has among its responsibilities the protection of Ukrainian government secrets.

The shocking reality about the JIT is that one of the major suspects for having shot down MH-17, Ukraine, was pretty much running the inquiry.

Yet, since the JIT's accusations on Wednesday, the West's mainstream media has put on its own blinders so as not to notice the gaps and inconsistencies in the case. But what should be apparent to anyone without blinders is that the JIT set its sights on blaming the Russians for the MH-17 shoot-down in 2014 and nothing was going to get in the way of that conclusion.

That predetermined conclusion began with Secretary of State John Kerry's rush to judgment, just three days after the shoot-down, putting the blame on the Russians. It then took the JIT more than two years to scrape together enough "evidence" to "confirm" Kerry's findings.

The Near-Nuclear Clash

As a longtime CIA analyst covering the Soviet Union, the MH-17 case immediately brought to my mind the exploitation of the KAL-007 tragedy for propaganda purposes in 1983. After KAL-007 went down, the U.S. propaganda machinery, led by the U.S. Information Agency, went into high gear, even doctoring evidence for a U.N. Security Council meeting to "prove" the Soviets *knew* KAL-007 was a civilian aircraft and still shot it down deliberately.

"Barbaric" was the word used then – and in recent days U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. Samantha Power has applied that epithet again to the leaders in the Kremlin.

The same sort of anti-Russian hysteria is in play today as it was in 1983. And we now know based on declassified records that the extreme vilification of Moscow back then led Soviet leaders to believe that President Reagan was preparing for a nuclear war, a conflict that almost got started because of the harsh propaganda, combined with unprecedented military exercises and other provocations.

Last year, a former CIA colleague and senior manager of Soviet analysis, Mel Goodman, wrote about the "war scare" in the Kremlin in the fall of 1983, and asked if history may be repeating itself. Goodman personally helped persuade Reagan to ratchet down the tension, but it's less clear if any adult remains who could tell President Obama to do the same now.

Goodman wrote: "1983 was the most dangerous year in the Soviet-American Cold War confrontation since the 1962 Cuban missile crisis. President Reagan declared a political and military campaign against the 'evil empire' ... Soviet leaders believed that the 'correlation of world forces,' Soviet terminology for the international

balance, was unfavorable to Moscow and that the U.S. government was in the hands of a dangerous anti-Soviet crowd.

“In response to Reagan’s references to the Soviet Union as the ‘focus of evil in the world’ ... the new Soviet general secretary, Yuri Andropov, a former KGB chief, suggested that Reagan was insane and a liar ... Andropov would take no chances. Soviet leaders believed the Reagan administration was using a mobilization exercise called ‘Able Archer’ in November 1983 to prepare a nuclear surprise attack. The KGB instituted a sensitive collection effort to determine if the United States was planning such an attack. ...

“In addition to the Able Archer mobilization exercise that alarmed the Kremlin, the Reagan administration authorized unusually aggressive military exercises near the Soviet border that, in some cases, violated Soviet territorial sovereignty. The Pentagon’s risky measures included ... naval exercises in wartime approaches to the USSR where U.S. warships had previously not entered. Additional secret operations simulated surprise naval attacks on Soviet targets.”

Reining in Reagan

Goodman continued: “One of the great similarities between Russia and the United States was that both sides feared surprise attack. The United States suffered psychologically from the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor; it has still not recovered from 9/11. Yet, the United States has never appreciated that Moscow has similar fears due to Operation Barbarossa, the German invasion in the same year as Pearl Harbor, a far greater nightmare.

“Russia’s fear of surprise attack was accentuated in 1983, when the United States deployed the Army’s Pershing-II missile and land-based cruise missiles in West Europe as a counter to the Soviet Union’s SS-20 missiles. The SS-20 was not a ‘strategic’ weapon because of a limited range (3,000 miles) well short of the United States. The P-II, however, could not only reach the Soviet Union, but it could destroy Moscow’s command and control systems with incredible accuracy. Since the Soviets would have limited warning time – less than five minutes – the P-II was viewed as a first-strike weapon that could destroy the Soviet early warning system.

“In addition to the huge strategic advantage from the deployment of P-II and numerous cruise missiles, the U.S. deployment of the MX missile and the D-5 Trident submarine placed the Soviets in an inferior position with regard to strategic modernization. Overall, the United States held a huge strategic advantage in political, economic, and military policy.

“The Pentagon’s psychological warfare program to intimidate the Kremlin, including dangerous probes of Soviet borders by the Navy and Air Force, was unknown to CIA analysts. Thus, the CIA was at a disadvantage in trying to analyze

the war scare because the Pentagon refused to share information on military maneuvers and weapons deployments.

“In 1983, the CIA had no idea that the annual Able Archer exercise would be conducted in a provocative fashion with high-level participation. The exercise was a test of U.S. command and communications procedures, including procedures for the release and use of nuclear weapons in case of war.”

Goodman continued: “I believed that Soviet fears were genuine and Reagan’s national security advisor, Robert McFarlane, was even known to remark, ‘We got their attention’ but ‘maybe we overdid it.’ ... [CIA Director William] Casey took our analysis to the White House, and Reagan made sure that the exercises were toned down.

“For the first time, the Able Archer exercise was going to include President Reagan, Vice President Bush, and Secretary of Defense Weinberger, but when the White House understood the extent of Soviet anxiety regarding U.S. intentions, the major principals bowed out. ... Soviet military doctrine had long held that a possible U.S. *modus operandi* for launching an attack on the USSR would be to convert an exercise into the real thing.

“Three decades later, history seems to be repeating itself. Washington and Moscow are once again exchanging ugly broadsides over the confrontations in Ukraine and Syria. The Russian-American arms control and disarmament dialogue has been pushed to the background, and the possibilities of superpower conflict into the foreground. Pentagon briefers are using the language of the Cold War in their congressional briefings, referring to Putin’s Russia as an ‘existential threat.’”

(END of excerpts from Mel Goodman’s account of “Able Archer.”)

The KAL-007 Prequel

As I wrote after the MH-17 shoot-down in 2014:

The death of all 298 people onboard the Malaysia 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.

To make the blackest case against Moscow, the Reagan administration suppressed 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. ...

“The tape was supposed to run 50 minutes,” Snyder said about the 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 [Snyder] 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 *abarbaricact*,” Snyder wrote.

Seeing the Whole Story

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 Reagan’s people, 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.”

[End of my excerpt]

In 2016, as we deal with the West’s new hysteria regarding Russia – complete with rehashes of prior propaganda themes and military escalations – the pressing question is whether there are any adults left at senior levels of Official Washington who can rein in the madness before things spin entirely out of control.

Santayana famously noted, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” But the real danger now is that history won’t stop at repeating itself but will continue beyond, plunging over the nuclear precipice.