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JOHN HUGHES

Ghost of Flight 7

ON Nov. 8, 1981, a Soviet Aeroflot airliner en route to Dulles Airport, outside Washington, entered US airspace at an unauthorized entry point in New England. Though its demarcated route was over water, it flew a course over Pease Air Force Base and the US naval base in Groton, Conn. Later, on its return flight, it again flew an unauthorized route over New England.

The United States protested, suspending Aeroflot service into Dulles for two flights.

On Sept. 1, 1983, Korean Air Lines Flight 7, en route from Anchorage, Alaska, to Seoul, South Korea, entered Soviet airspace without authorization. There is no evidence that the Korean pilot knew he was off course, no hint that he knew he was over Soviet territory. The Soviets tracked the airliner for 2½ hours and sent planes up that reported visual contact. Then an SU-15 Soviet fighter shot the airliner down with a heat-seeking missile. All 269 people aboard were killed. For five days the Soviets maintained the plane had flown on. On Sept. 6 they admitted that Soviet fighters had "stopped the flight."

The harsh Soviet action, a sharp contrast to the manner in which most other countries handle airspace violations, was the subject of widespread international condemnation. It seemed a clear-cut case of Soviet overreaction and brutality.

Yet still today, most recently in a couple of new books, there are conspiracy-consumed critics who seek to pin the guilt for this horror on the US.

Here I must declare a self-interest in this story. At the time, I was an official of the US government whose responsibility was to dig out the facts and make them available to press and public. As a longtime journalist, however, I had a unique opportunity to be in on developments from the very beginning and to have access to the same data being reported to the highest levels of the government.

The cynics suspect that the Korean airliner was somehow engaged in an intelligence mission for the US. Both inside and outside government, I have discovered not a shred of evidence to bear that out.

There remains the possibility that the Korean airliner was on some kind of mission for the South Korean government. But again, there is no information to support that theory.

Critics find suspicious the fact that air traffic controllers did not warn the Korean plane it was off course. The answer is simple: Radar coverage from Alaska is about 200 miles. In a very detailed statement, the Japanese government has explained similar

radar range limitations at its end of the Pacific flight. In between, the Korean plane was flying a route without navigational aids because the Soviets have consistently refused to cooperate in providing them.

Was not military intelligence aware of the Korean plane's deviation from course? The fact is that military intelligence does not monitor every civilian plane's flight path everywhere around the world. While much monitoring goes on, data are often analyzed later, and not on a flying-time basis.

The real question critics should probe is why, if the Soviets were aware for 2½ hours of the Korean plane's infraction, they did not contact American, Japanese, or South Korean authorities in an attempt to identify the plane and its purpose.

The Korean pilot's communications indicate he thought he was on the right course.

All indications are that the Korean crew made a mistake in the programming of their computers, thereby causing them to fly off course. Skeptics decry this possibility, arguing that highly trained pilots do not make such mistakes. Aviation experts say that, sadly, highly trained pilots are capable of such errors, and do indeed make them.

The weight of evidence is that the tragic end of Korean Flight 7 came about through air-crew error and Soviet overreaction, not American duplicity.

John Hughes, who won the 1967 Pulitzer Prize for international reporting, was assistant US secretary of state for public affairs from 1982 to 1984.