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KAL Conspiracy Theorists Distort Facts, Experts Say

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WASHINGTON—Two years after a Soviet fighter downed a Korean Air Lines jumbo jet in Soviet airspace and plunged 269 people to their deaths in the Sea of Japan, a handful of skeptics claim to have unearthed tantalizing new evidence that the airliner's fatal course, far from accidental meandering, had a far more sinister purpose—spying.

Their startling assertions, outlined in articles and letters, include Japanese radar data suggesting that the jet misled Tokyo air controllers about its altitude and course, as well as maps portraying KAL Flight 007 as veering over Soviet East Asian military bases.

There is even a recording of an American controller supposedly saying, "We should warn them," seconds after the doomed jet left U.S. airspace near Alaska.

It is damning stuff indeed, except for one problem: On closer scrutiny, U.S. officials and other experts say, none of it appears to be true. The revelations that are not false on their face are distortions of innocuous facts, they argue.

"It's a great story," said Thomas R. Maertens, a former State Department intelligence analyst now with the department's Soviet affairs office. "But it doesn't hold together."

"Once you get into the technicalities of it, the conspiracy theories fade away," agrees Murray Sayle, a Tokyo-based journalist and former Newsweek magazine reporter who has studied the KAL disaster almost since it occurred Sept. 1, 1983. "Where's their evidence?" he said.

Yet, troubles with the facts have not prevented spy buffs and dedicated researchers alike from elevating the KAL 007 disaster to a stellar level—a level once reserved for the likes of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, the Rosenberg spy trial of the early 1950s and the Lindbergh kidnapping.

Although congressional intelligence experts have derisively rejected any hint of a secret U.S. link to the tragedy, a House transporta-

tion subcommittee this fall began collecting data on the disaster after accusatory articles in The Nation magazine and reports by New York Times columnist Tom Wicker expressing skepticism about official accounts.

In Japan, backbench legislators and grieving families of crash victims still hope to pry loose government secrets they believe will prove that the South Korean jet was spying for the United States. In Korea, where the topic remains unofficially taboo, many citizens owe a "general belief" that the downed jet deliberately flew over the Soviet Union to save fuel.

But nothing has emerged to shake the conclusion of major aviation bodies, including the U.S. Air Line Pilots Assn. and the International Civil Aviation Organization, that the KAL disaster probably stemmed from pilot error, mechanical failure or both. The explanation is bolstered by sobering data that show that pilots in general stray from their assigned flight paths more often than has been assumed.

Still, no one has yet offered an ironclad explanation of how an error could have carried the Korean jet on the exact course that it took over the Soviet Union's militarily sensitive Kamchatka Peninsula and Sakhalin Island. The only sources of the most definitive answers to that question—the "black boxes" that recorded KAL 007's flight path and cabin conversations—lie under water in the Sea of Japan.

The refusal of U.S., Japanese and Korean officials to release more of their own files on the downing—and their occasional denials that more exist—only deepen the suspicions of conspiracy advocates.

"The government apparently has a very, very strong interest in keeping this case closed," said David Pearson, a Yale University sociology student who has written two often-quoted articles on the shooting for The Nation magazine and who now plans a book.

Pearson and John Keppel, a retired U.S. Foreign Service officer

who is also investigating the KAL affair, are the leading American skeptics. Last month, they concluded in The Nation that the airliner "could not have accidentally or unknowingly flown its dangerous course" over the Soviet Union and that the Reagan Administration probably "has covered up vital evidence about the downing."

Normal Reports

Korean Air Lines Flight 007 left Anchorage, Alaska, on a nonstop flight to Seoul at 3 a.m. (local time) and was shot down by one or two Soviet air-to-air missiles 5 hours, 26 minutes later as it left Soviet airspace over Sakhalin Island.

Between the jet's takeoff and its 12-minute spiral into the Sea of Japan, the 747's three-man cockpit crew reported a normal flight to ground controllers, radioing their position as they passed computer-set "way points" along their North Pacific route and receiving permission to ascend from 33,000 to 35,000 feet only minutes before being shot down.

Despite the routine reports, the jet actually had strayed from its assigned path only 10 minutes after takeoff and was more than 300 miles off course by the time it was shot down—so far that it sometimes was out of radio range and had to relay its position reports to the ground via a second KAL jet flying nearby.

All experts agree that an alert crew should have discovered such a Gargantuan misstep, either through ordinary double-checking of data in flight or by sighting unexpected land masses on the jet's weather radar. The International Civil Aviation Organization concluded in its analysis of the disaster that the sort of inattention required to fly in the wrong direction for more than five hours is rare, "but not to a degree unknown in civil aviation."

One Senate staff expert, who was briefed by the CIA in September, 1984, after the first round of accusations surfaced that Flight 007 was on a spying mission, said he has "zero reason to believe that the Korean Air Lines tragedy was the result of anything but a terrible pilot error."

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