

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 5, PART IILOS ANGELES TIMES
3 July 1985

Soviets Face Terrorism, but Handle It ... Differently

By DIMITRI K. SIMES

As Americans were preoccupied with the TWA hostage crisis, there were, behind the fast-paced news from Beirut, lingering questions about the Soviets: Were they involved? How would they react if an Aeroflot plane were targeted?

Intelligence experts see no evidence of direct Soviet participation in either the planning or the execution of the actual hijacking. The last proved instances of KGB murder plots go back three decades, and the targets were Soviet political exiles rather than foreigners.

Yet, even if Moscow did not mastermind the TWA disaster, it is hardly in a position to claim complete innocence. The Politburo has never shied away from supporting terrorist nations and groups such as Libya and the Palestine Liberation Organization. While there is no proof of Soviet links to the radical Hezbollah, whose members are thought to have initiated the hijacking, the Soviet Union's firm support of Amal and its Syrian sponsors is on the record.

Without the Soviet Union's patronage of Damascus, Nabih Berri's Amal would not have become a state within the state of Lebanon. If Berri and his associates are flying high today, the Soviet Union cannot deny responsibility.

The Soviet media did not condone the air piracy in Beirut, but, as in the hostage nightmare in Tehran, the principal propaganda fire was directed against alleged U.S. plans of massive retaliation.

The Soviet Union, like the United States, is no stranger to hijacking and terrorism. There was an attempt by a disgruntled military officer to assassinate Leonid I. Brezhnev. An explosion in the Moscow

subway resulted in the deaths of several passengers. And there was the celebrated airliner hijacking in Tbilisi, the capital of Soviet Georgia, 1½ years ago, when a group of alienated intellectuals from prominent families attempted to commandeer a flight in order to escape to Turkey.

Outside Soviet borders, the Kremlin's expansionism generates hate, and Soviet military personnel, advisers and technicians are vulnerable to terrorist attacks. In Afghanistan—including the capital, Kabul—the Soviets are no safer than Americans are in Beirut. Dozens—military and

civilians alike, including the Soviet military attache—have been assassinated. An Afghan airliner, with Soviets among the passengers, was shot at. And recently a number of Soviet and Afghan soldiers kept as POWs at a guerrilla base in Pakistan were massacred during a failed escape.

Afghanistan is no exception. In Mozambique, rebels fighting the Moscow-allied Marxist government killed a number of Soviet mining technicians and kidnaped a few dozen others. There have also been Soviet civilian casualties in Angola. UNTTA fighters have a number of times taken Soviet and East European prisoners. Some were returned, some never heard from again. Even in friendly Damascus there have been attacks on Soviet officers and their dependents. At one point the danger reached such magnitude that all families had to be evacuated. The government of President Hafez Assad put the blame on the fundamentalist Muslim Brotherhood, with which he has long been at odds.

It is a myth that the Kremlin's heavy-handed posture serves as an insurmountable barrier against terrorism. But it is a fact that while individual Soviets, including high-ranking ones, become targets, the government remains unscathed.

The Tbilisi hijacking shows why. The government's priority was to stop the escape rather than to protect innocent lives. Accordingly, Soviet crews are instructed not to cooperate with hijackers. The crews are also armed.

The Tbilisi hijacking started almost like the TWA Athens incident. The Georgians had an airport employee as an accomplice. She helped them smuggle handguns and grenades aboard the plane. In the air, the hijackers made a flight attendant knock in a special way at the cockpit door. The door opened, and the shooting started. A crew member and a hijacker were dead instantly. The pilot managed to lock the door and land the plane back in Tbilisi. One of the hijackers committed suicide. Others were captured hours later by a special anti-terrorist squad that stormed the airliner. More people were killed in the crossfire.

No attempt was made to negotiate. The hijackers were faced with a choice of unconditional surrender or being taken by

force. There was no publicity while the tragedy was in progress. Only after it was all over, and the accused were interrogated and indicted, did Georgian newspapers and TV cover the case extensively.

The outcome: Three crew members, two passengers and three hijackers were dead. Three more hijackers and a priest (who was not among them but allegedly masterminded the operation) were sentenced to death. Their relatives were fired from their jobs and expelled from the Communist

Party. Conversely, Eduard A. Shevardnadze, the Georgian party chief who was in charge of dealing with the incident, was promoted Monday to full membership of the ruling party Politburo and was named Soviet foreign minister.

The message from Tbilisi was clear: Escape through hijacking is doomed to failure, and the authorities will show no mercy to those involved.

The U.S. government cannot and should not act with similar ruthlessness and contempt for the public's right to know. But that right surely does not mean that everything should be known immediately and completely. Otherwise America could neither fight wars nor protect privacy.

And the commendable preoccupation with the fate of innocent victims of terror must not be allowed to turn into hedonistic neglect of the responsibilities of a great state. No number of missiles and aircraft carriers can substitute for an occasional display of brutal resolve. Most regrettable—except that all the alternatives are worse. Being a superpower is not a piece of cake. The Soviets appreciate that. Do we?

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