

KAL disaster and the Soviet press

by Larry Black

In an address to the Ninth All-Russian Congress of Soviets in December, 1921, V.I. Lenin cautioned a cheering audience that the first lesson which must be learned by every Soviet worker and peasant was "to be on the alert . . . Remember that we are surrounded by people, classes, governments who openly express the utmost hatred of us. We are always a hair's breadth away from invasion." One can understand Lenin's position at the end of 1921. His new state was then at peace, but only after the Russians had suffered seven years of invasion by Germans, revolution, civil war, foreign intervention — in which French, British, Canadian, American, Italian and Japanese forces actively sought the downfall of the Bolshevik government — and war with the new state of Poland. Less understandable, perhaps, is that in 1975 these very phrases were quoted in the USSR by none other than Marshall Andrei Grechko, then minister of defence and member of the Politburo. Grechko prefaced his citation from Lenin with a comment to the effect that international diplomacy of the 1930s was characterized by "aggressive imperialist encirclement" on the part of Britain, France and the United States, who purposely directed German military ambitions towards the USSR. His remarks appeared in an issue of the *World Marxist Review*, dedicated to the thirtieth anniversary of victory over Germany. The "lesson" of that victory, Grechko said, was that Soviet citizens must still heed Lenin's warning of 1921.

Continuity in Soviet propaganda

In fact, Grechko's message expressed a principle of Soviet ideology which has remained sacrosanct since Lenin's time, that is, the assumption that "imperialism" is "predatory" and that the United States is the leading imperialist power, against which the USSR must always be prepared to defend itself. This theme re-appeared in the Soviet media after a lapse between 1941 and 1945 and has been present in varying degrees of intensity ever since. In a Brezhnev address to the Twenty-fourth Party Congress in 1971, the General-Secretary of the CPSU referred to the "immutability" of imperialism's "reactionary and aggressive nature." Ten years later, at the Twenty-sixth Party Congress, Brezhnev (by then also Chairman of the Presidium of the Soviet government) spoke once again of the "aggressive designs of imperialism," and insisted that the American government was planning a nuclear war to justify its aggressive plans. Brezhnev said also that Washington was manufacturing and spreading falsehoods about a so-called "Soviet threat." He summed up his remarks on foreign affairs by calling for the continuation of the policy of "peaceful coexistence," which he attributed to Lenin,

from the Soviet side. In short, reference to Lenin still predominated as justification for policy — and admonitions about external dangers still served as a means to keep Soviet listeners alert.

Enter KAL

Soviet press reaction to the KAL (Korean Air Lines) affair illustrates very well the continuity in Soviet views of the West. Although there was confusion in Soviet reporting of the matter to its own public, and not a few contradictions, both *Pravda* and *Izvestiia*, the two most widely-distributed organs in the USSR, still relied upon traditional themes to explain the situation to their readers. In these

cases, traditional tenets took the following forms: the "incident" was merely another in a never-ending series of imperialist provocations; the plane was a spy plane trying to locate and test Soviet defence capabilities on its sacred and inviolable borders; and, above all, the capitalist enemies of the USSR were lying about the affair to their own people so as further to spread anti-Sovietism. Although news of the KAL tragedy of the night of Wednesday/Thursday August 31/September 1 was reported in the Western press almost immediately, the first



reference to it in Soviet newspapers did not occur until Friday, September 2. In a very brief, lower mid-page 5 notice, it was reported in *Pravda* that "an airplane" of "unestablished identity" violated Soviet airspace twice, "was flying without aerial navigation lights, failed to respond to inquiries" and — after apparently refusing "assistance" from Soviet fighter escorts — finally flew off "towards the Sea of Japan." The same notice appeared the next day in *Izvestiia*. Since *Pravda* is the organ of the

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