

Slow and limited unfolding

sion of events and then answered questions for reporters. The press conference had been televised and Ogarkov used large maps and diagrams to illustrate his remarks. New releases containing his full statement were issued by Soviet embassies around the world.

This, then, was the first full-scale official Soviet response to Western charges of infamy. It is worth noting that the counter-attack came from the military and not from Andropov; but the gist of Ogarkov's message differed little from earlier official statements: the flight had been on a spy mission and its "termination" had been proper. In keeping with previous practices, the daily cartoon portrayed a "western centre of disinformation expanding the psychological war against socialist countries." The birds flying off the "assembly line" are quacking "Soviet threat!"



All subsequent stories in *Pravda* and *Izvestiia* (and caricature) have merely confirmed everything printed up to September 10. The fact that there were 269 people on board the aircraft was reported in the Soviet Russian national newspaper, *Sovetskaya Rossiya* (September 9) and two days later *Pravda* went so far as to intimate that American citizens had been among the victims of the "provocation" which caused Soviet pilots to "terminate" the flight. But both notices were almost in passing and were so buried within a barrage of anti-American invective that a reader would have to be especially astute to recognize them as jarring notes in the by-then patented Soviet version of events. The widely-quoted suggestions by Soviet delegates (including *Pravda's* own Chief Editor, Victor Grigor'evich Afanas'ev) to various meetings outside of the USSR to the effect that the destruction of the plane had been an error in judgment have not even been hinted at in the Soviet media.

Belief-systems versus facts — there and here

Does this mean only that the Soviet government is afraid of admitting mistakes and of telling the truth to the public? Perhaps; but such reporting is also a product of a belief-system. Accusations which strike Western readers as ludicrous may not seem so far-fetched to Soviet editors, writers and their audience. By way of explanation, let us recall observations published nearly a quarter of a century ago by an American social psychologist who visited the Soviet Union in 1960, one month after the U2 incident.

The American professor, who spoke Russian fluently, took advantage of his stay in Moscow to undertake wide-ranging talks with Soviet citizens with whom he struck up conversations in parks, on the street, in restaurants and on the metro. From these discussions, he came to what were for him startling conclusions, that is, that "the Russians' distorted picture of us was curiously similar to our view of them — a mirror image." Almost all of the images which he and other Americans had of the Soviet Union in 1960 were that it was aggressive; that the government exploited and deceived people; that the mass of people were not sympathetic to the regime; that Russians could not be trusted and that their policy "verged on madness" — were almost exactly the impression that the ordinary Soviet citizen had of Americans and their government. Moreover, the visitor, Urie Bronfenbrenner of Cornell, found to his amazement that the great majority of people to whom he spoke demonstrated a genuine pride in the accomplishments of the system and were convinced that communism was the way of the future. Whatever the merits or weaknesses of Bronfenbrenner's findings, his conclusions about the tendency of most distant observers of societies other than their own to assimilate new perceptions to old ones, or readily to believe evidence for viewpoints already held, warrants recollection.

The U2 incident, in fact, marked the first occasion on which many United States citizens realized that their own government was capable of systematically lying to them. In the Soviet case, however, the media and government treatment of the KAL affair will not have the same consequences. In sequence. With few exceptions, the conditioned and isolated Soviet reader will assume the version it reads to be accurate, and will pay little attention to rumors or foreign broadcasting to the contrary. He or she will accept caricature as fact and Lenin's warning of 1921 will continue to have as much validity for the Soviet media and public as it did over sixty years ago.