

ISIS, Assad & Putin's  
Surprising Arch-Nemesis:

# A Picture Is Worth 1,000 Spies

Aviva Sternfeld

**When the world wants to know who unleashed chemical warfare in Syria or who downed a civilian airliner in Ukraine, they turn to a man named Eliot Higgins.**

*Eliot Higgins has no background in military intelligence, yet today he is recognized as the world's top expert on espionage. He studies publicly-available photos and videos that people take for fun and extracts valuable intelligence information from them. In the last three years this young man has succeeded in extracting evidence from casual pictures that solved numerous mysteries, unmasked many criminals and revealed who was behind gruesome crimes, some involving mass murder.*



It was a hot and humid day in July 2014 when chaos descended on a small village in eastern Ukraine. Debris suddenly rained down from the sky on the wheat and sunflower fields. Those who witnessed the scene will never forget it.

For a while no one could comprehend what had occurred. International news stations soon began reporting that Malaysia Airlines Flight 17, a Boeing 777, had crashed. Something terrible had occurred; the plane disintegrated in midair and plummeted six miles to the ground. It soon emerged that the 298 people aboard the airplane—including the 15 crewmembers—had not perished in a crash as a result of an error or malfunction. They had been murdered.

MH17, as the airplane became known (Malaysia Airlines adds an H to its flight numbers, standing for Hospitality), did not suffer any mechanical problems and the pilots did not make any emergency calls. Rather, the crew and passengers of Flight 17, cruising blissfully at 33,000 feet, became unwitting victims in the ongoing conflict in eastern Ukraine. The government of Ukraine, which seeks closer connections with the Western world, is battling pro-Russian separatists in the eastern region of the country who want to maintain traditional ties with Russia.

As if the tragedy alone wasn't bad enough for the victims' families, the news that the civilians had been shot out of the sky poured salt on the wounds. Calls came from all sides to identify who was behind this dastardly act and what their motive was.

## Pro-Russian Government Falls

July 17, 2014 marked exactly 17 years since Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 had entered into service, though this whimsical bit of trivia probably did not occur to anyone as they boarded the airplane that fateful day at Schiphol Airport near Amsterdam, the capital



Damage inflicted by the downed airliner on nearby farms.



A pro-Russian guerrilla at the crash site.



A small section of the scene at the site after the crash.

of the Netherlands. Everything was running like clockwork and there was no indication that an ominous fate awaited them.

It was the beginning of the summer vacation season and a large portion of the passengers were Dutch families who were looking forward to getting a break from their daily hassle. There were also 43 Malaysians, 27 Australians and 10 British citizens on the

plane. Their destination was Kuala Lumpur, capital of Malaysia, a distance of 6,000 miles and about 13 hours from Amsterdam.

Just five months earlier, anarchy reigned in Kiev, the capital of Ukraine. The unrest began after President Viktor Yanukovich turned down an offer from the European Union to institute trade relations between Ukraine and Europe. Instead, Yanukovich decided to pursue closer economic cooperation with Russia. The general turmoil that followed his announcement led to the deaths of dozens of people and the disappearances of dozens more. Eventually, Yanukovich's pro-Russian government was toppled and the president himself fled, finding refuge in Russia.

As many pundits predicted, Russian President Vladimir Putin was unable to allow such a popular uprising against Russian hegemony to pass without a protest. Within a month, he responded by invading Crimea, a pro-Russian peninsula that belongs to Ukraine, and annexing it.

At the same time, pro-Russian rebels in eastern Ukraine, acting under direct orders and receiving financial support from Putin, declared independence in the provinces of Donetsk and Lugansk. These two provinces, which share borders with Russia, now declared themselves the Donetsk People's Republic. To date, no government other than Russia recognizes the state's existence. The declaration led to a civil war between the Russian-backed rebels and government forces.

Three months later, Flight MH17 was flying over this disputed region on its way to Malaysia. The skies above those two eastern Ukrainian provinces were the most dangerous for a civilian airline anywhere in the world. In just the six weeks prior to the incident, 68 people had died in airplanes that were shot down. The rebels used rockets to shoot down Ukrainian military airplanes that flew at low altitudes.

Three days before Flight MH17, the rebels dramatically increased their offensive

capabilities and for the first time shot down a military airplane flying at 21,000 feet. The following day, Ukraine closed the skies above the rebel-held territory below an altitude of 32,000 feet and issued a warning to airlines around the world not to fly there, although they did not explain why.

Just 10 hours before Flight MH17 took off, Russia issued a similar ban on airplanes flying over its side of the border near the



Independence Square in Kiev. Left: During peaceful times. Right: During the unrest.



Pro-Russian rebels take control of a government building in Donetsk.



Separatists riding a tank in Donetsk that bears a Russian flag alongside the flag of the newly created, and as yet internationally unrecognized, Donetsk People's Republic.