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Soviet Union: Military Plane Crashes in Norway

The crash of a Soviet military reconnaissance aircraft on a remote Norwegian island in August strained Soviet-Norwegian relations during October. A Norwegian investigating team began October 12 to transcribe the contents of the aircraft's flight recorder (the so-called black box) over vehement objections from Moscow.

The plane, an early model TU-16, had disappeared August 28 in the waters off Hopen Island, southeast of Spitsbergen. Wreckage from the crash was discovered two days later by a four-man Norwegian weather-forecasting team, who were the only inhabitants of Hopen.

A subsequent search by Norwegian investigators recovered the bodies of the seven Soviet crewmen of the TU-16 and its flight recorder. The aircraft was identified as a reconnaissance craft used by the Soviet naval command at its base in Murmansk.

Moscow had refused to acknowledge that one of its aircraft had crashed until the bodies of the crew were turned over to Soviet authorities. When Norway announced that it had recovered the flight recorder and intended to open it, Moscow delivered a protest note to Oslo calling the opening of the black box an "unfriendly action." The protest note was made public October 6 by the Norwegian Foreign Ministry.

Norway asserted that it was legally entitled to open the black box, since the TU-16 had crashed on its territory. In addition, Oslo charged that the plane had violated Norwegian territory by flying over Hopen without permission.

Tension between the U.S.S.R. and Norway had grown during the summer over repeated Soviet violations of Norwegian territorial waters in the Svalbard area, which comprised the Spitsbergen island group and Bear Island. According to a report October 12 in the Los Angeles Times, Soviet ships had repeatedly halted in Norwegian waters instead of passing through as required by international law. The ships had explained the actions on grounds of bad weather, injury to crewmen or engine trouble.

The Norwegian Foreign Ministry confirmed September 28 that the Soviet Union had installed a satellite tracking station at Barentsburg, its coal-mining area on Spitsbergen. According to previous reports, the Soviets also had installed radar equipment and a landing strip in Barentsburg during the summer.

Under the terms of a 1920 treaty recognizing Norway's sovereignty over Svalbard, the U.S.S.R. and a number of other nations were permitted to exploit the area's resources and conduct scientific research. Military activities in the area were prohibited. Although Oslo had no proof that the new Soviet installations were of a military nature, it was feared that the equipment could be used in support of Soviet naval activities in the Barents Sea.

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