

Russia's near shooting down of UK spy plane used to ratchet up conflict by head of Britain's Defence Select Committee

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At any given moment, NATO's war against Russia could tip into a direct shooting war between nuclear-armed powers. NATO's Article 5, committing member states to mutual defence, has repeatedly been brought close to being triggered in recent months as a result of imperialist provocations.

It has now been revealed that one of these incidents involved what would have been an air-to-air missile strike by a Russian jet against a British Royal Air Force plane. The strike did not occur only due to a technical malfunction.

On September 29, 2022, a Russian fighter jet shot a missile at a British RC-135 spy plane engaged in hovering up communications in the Black Sea region. According to the played-down account provided by the UK government the following month, the incident off the Russian coast was a "potentially dangerous engagement" and the result of a "technical malfunction" by the Russian Su-27 fighter.

In fact, the incident was far more serious than UK Defence Secretary Ben Wallace led Parliament to believe. US military documents leaked this month described the incident as a "near-shoot down".

On April 13, more information was published in the *New York Times*. An article headlined "Miscommunication Nearly Led to Russian Jet Shooting Down British Spy Plane, U.S. Officials Say" cited the leaked document and "U.S. defense officials" speaking "on condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive matters".

The sources said Russian aircraft pilots were "not in visual range of the British patrol," which the *Times* notes is often manned with a crew of 30, "but were equipped with missiles capable of hitting it."

The article explains, "According to two U.S. defense officials, the Russian pilot had misinterpreted what a radar operator on the ground was saying to him and thought he had permission to fire. The pilot, who had locked on the British aircraft, fired, but the missile did not launch properly."

According to the reporters, "One of the officials who was briefed on the encounter called it really, really scary."

The very near shooting down of the spy plane occurred as tensions between the major powers were at boiling point—just 72 hours after the September 26, 2022 blowing up of the majority Russian-owned Nord Stream underwater gas pipelines in the Baltic Sea. Russia later said it had evidence that Britain was "involved in sabotage, a terrorist act against vital energy infrastructure."

Britain has already supplied billions of pounds in offensive military equipment to Ukraine, including Challenger tanks, and has trained thousands of Ukrainian troops. The Conservative government has declared its readiness to step up military support towards an expected Ukrainian spring offensive.

Such acts are carried out under conditions in which the entire region is awash with troops and devastatingly powerful weaponry on high alert. Last October, Wallace made the alarming announcement in response to the spy plane incident, hardly noted in the media, that all further spying missions conducted from the air would be escorted by an RAF Typhoon fighter jet.

With its wanton aggression, British imperialism is courting nuclear war behind the backs of the population.

But this is not enough for the most frothing

warmongers in Britain's ruling circles, represented in parliament by significant sections of the Tory government and opposition Labour Party. Six months after the incident, the spy plane near-shoot down is being used by these forces to demand the government take a harder line against Russia.

On Tuesday, Tobias Ellwood, a former army veteran and the Conservative chair of the Defence Select Committee, was granted an urgent question on last September's incident by the speaker of the House, former Labour MP Sir Lindsay Hoyle. Ellwood used it to accuse Wallace of concealing a Russian "act of war".

Directing his comments at Minister for Armed Forces James Heapey, Ellwood asked, "If a Russian Su-27 jet did deliberately attempt to fire a missile at an RAF Rivet Joint over the Black sea last September, it was an act of war, and the details should surely be publicised, not hidden away in intelligence files."

None of this was based on any conception that the public should have a real picture of the dangers of a global conflagration. Rather, Ellwood was agitating both for an escalation of the war and for even more strenuous efforts to hide the truth of what is happening.

He stated in relation to the heroic leaker of the Pentagon Papers Daniel Ellsberg, who in 1971 exposed a systematic US government campaign to deceive the American public about US involvement in the Vietnam War, "We certainly must avoid another Daniel Ellsberg situation."

Ellwood was "seeking assurances—such as the Minister is giving us today—about the fall-out from the scale of top-secret information that is now in the public domain and from the changes that may be considered to significantly limit the chances such an event being repeated."

He demanded, with the backing of Labour MPs, that Wallace make a full accounting of the near shooting down of the spy plane in order to create a platform to argue for the ramping up of military spending and aggression against Russia—as he has done consistently throughout the conflict and long before.

This January, Ellwood told *Sky News*, "The army is in a dire state... It is up to the Treasury and Number 10 to recognise the world is changing. We are now at war in Europe. We need to move to a war footing."

When Prime Minister Rishi Sunak last month

authorised a further £5 billion in military spending, taking it to 2.25 percent of GDP, Ellwood hit back that Wallace had initially demanded double that amount "just to stay level" after years of military spending cuts.

The rise, he said, was "all smoke and mirrors." He continued: "I welcome the investment in the nuclear deterrent and the replenishment of weapons stocks, but when you take that money out it leaves the MoD with about £1 billion a year, which is in effect a real terms cut."

This "means our conventional forces remain hollowed out as the threats come over the hill," he added. Russia and China, said Ellwood, "will be breathing a sigh of relief that we haven't invested further". The situation facing Britain was "very dangerous indeed," he complained, saying what was needed was more "hard power".

Ellwood and his ilk are the most naked representatives of a war-crazed ruling class, with the Conservatives and Labour functioning—as confirmed in the emergency question debate—as a single party of war. Labour MPs made numerous interventions to back Ellwood and to proclaim the necessity of arming Ukraine to the teeth to conduct a bloody spring offensive.

Labour Shadow Defence Secretary John Healey said of the latest intelligence documents leaks, "Two years ago, UK classified documents on Challenger 2 tanks were similarly reported leaked from an online forum for video gaming, 'War Thunder'. What action was taken following that leak?"

He added, "The secretary of state for defence is in Washington, we are told, apparently to discuss this breach, but will he make a statement to Parliament on his return to confirm the reassurances he has received on how British intelligence is handled?"

Healey concluded, "This is the time when the UK should be accelerating military support to Ukraine, so what assessment have the Government made of the impact of this leak on Ukrainian plans for a potential offensive?"



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