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# Fault in Soviet plane hushed up

From Mary Dejevsky  
Moscow

A potentially lethal design fault in a Soviet aircraft went unacknowledged for more than seven years because the information was withheld from the courts, a Soviet newspaper reported yesterday. As a result, at least one pilot had been wrongly convicted for negligence.

*Sovetskaya Kultura* said the fault — a propensity for the wing flaps on the Antonov 24 to change position by themselves — had been observed on several occasions between 1978 and 1980, but the information never went beyond the narrow circle of crash investigators. The Antonov 24, a turbo-prop plane capable of carrying about 100 people, is still widely used on domestic flights.

The paper related the case of Captain V. Belugin, whose Antonov 24 crashed shortly after take-off from Bykovo airport near Moscow in 1980. No one was killed but the plane was severely damaged in the ensuing fire and all the passengers' luggage was lost. Captain Belugin's competence was called into question and he was charged with causing the accident by violating the safety regulations.

The pre-trial investigation began in 1981. Five years later Judge R. Nazarov

of the Moscow regional court found the case against Captain Belugin unproven.

Judge Nazarov is the real hero of *Sovetskaya Kultura's* article. He was not satisfied that Captain Belugin, a pilot with 15 years experience and an excellent mark in his refresher programme less than a year before, would have failed to take elementary safety precautions.

During the five years between receiving the papers and giving his not proven verdict, he made himself familiar with every aspect of the plane and the case. He spoke to passengers who told him the plane had taken off correctly. He talked to other pilots who told him of the risk with the wing flaps and he discovered that the black box had been first lost and then incorrectly decoded. His attention was drawn to unpublished information incriminating the wing flap mechanism.

His verdict, however, was not accepted by the Moscow procurate which had brought the case, and they lodged an appeal on the grounds that the previous verdict had relied on unwarranted assumptions and hearsay evidence. The Supreme Court of the Russian Federation overturned the verdict of the lower court and found Captain Belugin guilty. He was sentenced to three years in a labour camp.

Judge Nazarov heard the verdict with sorrow. He conceded that Captain

Belugin had broken some of the regulations. He had flown too many hours without a break, but not doing so when the timetable required it would have been tantamount to mutiny. He had failed to observe a number of the myriad minor regulations. But, as the paper said, the whole crew had already been punished by losing their licences to fly and their special pensions. What punishment could be more severe?

*Sovetskaya Kultura* did not stop at criticizing the investigation process as it applies to air crashes, however. It went on to question the justice of holding the crew of a plane almost automatically accountable for an accident.

Coming less than a week after the end of the Chernobyl trial, when the director and two senior engineers at the power station were sentenced to 10 years in a labour camp for causing the worst ever nuclear disaster, the article makes instructive reading. The parallels are unlikely to be lost on Soviet readers.

● **Mongolia crash:** A Soviet-made Mongolian Antonov 2, a large single-engine biplane passenger aircraft, crashed yesterday in the territory of Hovsgol, a sparsely-populated, mountainous area of northern Mongolia. Some passengers were killed, Tass said (AP reports).