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Erik R. Scott. “The Hijacking of Aeroflot Flight 244: States and Statelessness in the Late Cold War.” *Past and Present* 243:1 (May 2019): 213-245. DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.1093/pastj/gty044>.

Published by ISSF on **26 June 2019**

<https://issforum.org/to/iar121>

Review by **Danielle Gilbert**, George Washington University

In October 1970, Lithuanian father and son Pranas and Algirdas Brazinskas hijacked regional Soviet Aeroflot flight 244. Several minutes into the flight between two cities in the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic, the elder Brazinskas handed the flight attendant a message for the pilot demanding that he divert the flight to Turkey and cease radio communications. The crew resisted, and in the resulting melee, the nineteen-year-old flight attendant was shot and killed, and the pilot and another crew member were injured. The Brazinskas soon occupied the cockpit and compelled the pilot to land the plane in Trabzon, Turkey—effectively escaping the Soviet Union and the possibility of extradition.

Thus begins the saga of skyjacking and statelessness that historian Erik Scott explores in “The Hijacking of Aeroflot Flight 244: States and Statelessness in the Late Cold War.” In this meticulously researched account, Scott depicts the first successful hijacking in the Soviet Union and the decades of its aftermath, including the perpetrators’ quest for asylum across Turkey, Italy, Venezuela, and finally the United States, with the help of lobbying efforts by the Lithuanian diaspora and the hijackers’ altered identities. This fascinating episode brings together Cold War politics, international law, and the promises and perils of technological innovation, with media attention to match. It highlights the legal limbo between extradition and citizenship and the idiosyncrasies that distinguish the case—a trial *in absentia*, a commemorative asteroid, and a death by bludgeoning.¹

Scott situates this dramatic affair within the growing global threat of skyjacking, which reached its apex as the Brazinskas men took to the sky. In the early 1960s, airplane hijacking took off as a wave of disgruntled

¹ This footnote contains spoilers. The Soviet Union tried the Brazinskas *in absentia* in 1974 for the crimes of hijacking, murder, and treason; Pranas was sentenced to death, and Algirdas to ten years in prison (19). Slain nineteen-year-old flight attendant Nadezhda Kurchenko was memorialized by a museum at the Soviet flight academy, public parks, and the aforementioned asteroid (20-21). In 2002, Algirdas Brazinskas, who was by then living under the assumed name Albert Victor White, murdered his 78-year-old father in their shared apartment in Santa Monica, California (30).

Americans used commercial flights to defect to Cuba—coercing the flight crew so that they could obtain personal safe passage. This spectacular method of escape quickly caught on around the world, with examples of flights diverted from Romania to Turkey, Czechoslovakia to West Germany, and Yugoslavia to Italy (7). What began as a high-stakes means for escape and asylum was soon adopted for more nefarious purposes, as the dual innovations of commercial air flight and television news forged in skyjacking an attractive option for terrorist groups. Scholars have cited the tactic’s global “contagion” over the subsequent decade, as groups including the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), the Black September Organization, and the Japanese Red Army Faction commandeered commercial planes as a platform from which to make their demands.² In the late 1960s and early 1970s, there was a hijacking every five and a half days (8).

Not all hijackings are created equal, and Scott tests contemporary assumptions by unpacking the complexities of the Brazinskases affair, which transpired mere weeks after one of the most infamous hijackings of the era. On 6 September 1970, the PFLP diverted several New York and London-bound jets to Dawson’s Field airbase in Jordan as a platform to demand the release of PFLP prisoners held in Israel. The Brazinskases cited the PFLP as an inspiration for the attention they might be able to attract to the Soviet occupation of Lithuania. If the PFLP’s hostage taking represents one familiar form of skyjacking, Scott shows how the case of the Brazinskases was more complicated: The pair intended only to use the plane to help them defect, yes—but they ultimately committed fatal violence in the sky. The Soviet Union, too, was in a murky position to respond to the case, given its abstention from international efforts to combat hijacking. It was not a signatory to the 1964 Tokyo Convention against hijacking or the International Civil Aviation Organization’s efforts to coordinate anti-hijacking measures, deciding instead to “maintain sovereignty in determining what exactly constituted ‘air piracy’” (11).³

Yet for Scott, the precipitating events on Aeroflot 244 primarily serve to highlight the contradiction between the optimism at the dawn of commercial aviation and the persistent obstacles to mobility for the politically powerless. From entry and exit visas to the curtains separating first and economy class, air travel replicated and entrenched hierarchies that existed on the ground. Rather than providing freedom of movement, Scott argues, air travel and its discontents presented a platform for states to reassert the “terms of inclusion and exclusion” (5). Thus by exploring this episode, Scott uses the lens of hijacking to study state power: The “history of hijacking shows how states reasserted themselves in the jet age” (4).

For example, this particular case challenged the Soviet Union’s claim of “freedom of movement” (6) and the consequences of Soviet reluctance to join the U.S.-led efforts to regulate travel. As Scott notes, the United States had already begun grappling with skyjacking’s threat to national security—though he does include questionable claims in service of this point. Despite the author’s assertion that by 1977 “[a]irspace had been transformed into a tightly regulated environment protected by airport screenings and in-flight security

² Robert T. Holden, “The Contagiousness of Aircraft Hijacking,” *American Journal of Sociology*, 91:4 (Jan. 1986) 874-904. DOI: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2779961>; Danielle Gilbert, “How a Decade of the iPhone Changed Global Kidnapping,” *War on the Rocks*, 4 January 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/01/decade-iphone-changed-global-kidnapping/>.

³ The former public relations director of Pan American Airways, James A. Arey, first made the comparison between skyjackers and maritime piracy in his book *The Sky Pirates: The Complete Authoritative Story of Aerial Hijacking, Describing What Has Happened and Why* (New York: Scribner, 1972).

measures” (29), readers should be aware that airport security was then only a shadow of its current manifestation: Passenger luggage was not x-rayed until the 1980s, and the Federal Aviation Administration did not take over airport security completely until after 9/11.⁴ In other words, fearful that security would turn passengers away, the airline industry had made no meaningful reforms during the twelve years when hijacking reached its zenith. In fact, it was the airlines’ aversion to potentially inconveniencing travelers that allowed the era of hijacking to continue as long as it did.⁵ In elucidating this particular historical episode, Scott shines a light on the competing priorities of states as they faced new technology and a new means of defection at the boundary of political violence and terrorism.

Fifty years after the Aeroflot hijacking, in an era with far fewer hijackings and much greater airplane security, the themes of Scott’s research remain timely and important. This article touches not only on political violence, technological change, and major power competition, but on issues of diasporas, nationalism, and citizenship. Scott’s research is relevant for an era when questions of border crossing and asylum are of utmost importance in the United States. One can almost detect subtle threads of a contemporary debate: How much power does the state have to reject claims of political asylum when it deems the means of crossing the border to be a crime?

For its substantive importance, Scott’s article also demonstrates methodological mastery as well. Beyond his excellent review of secondary sources—including scholarly, media, and popular accounts of hijacking’s heyday—Scott conducted extensive archival and interview research for this piece. His primary sources include notes from the Georgian KGB located in the Georgian Ministry of Internal Affairs; the National Archives of the U.S. Department of State; and the Archive of the Russian Federation in Moscow, as well as direct written correspondence with Algirdas Brazinskas, who was 64-years-old at the time of publication. This diversity of sources reflects the episode’s international importance behind and across the Iron Curtain.

Nevertheless, despite the article’s strengths, one can question Scott’s framing of the Aeroflot hijacking. He situates the Brazinskas affair as a dialectic between the opportunity of freedom of the skies brought by air travel, and the dilemmas of citizenship, aggravated by Cold War politics, rather than a frightening and problematic form of political violence. For example, Scott opens the article by writing: “For a time, hijacking offered non-elite and often marginal individuals the opportunity to reorder the hierarchies that governed airspace and mount a challenge to Cold War boundaries” (3); he concludes by stating that “For a brief historical moment, hijacking had promised to surmount established political boundaries and transcend the limitations of state citizenship, allowing ordinary people to forge new ties of solidarity across the borders of the Cold War world” (31). Such language perhaps unintentionally conveys sympathy for the men’s method of escape—not just their desire to do so. One would have preferred to see a more deliberate demarcation among modes of stealing airplanes, lest Scott’s exploration of boundaries be muddied. One possible way to do so would be to differentiate hijacking into separate categories of action. That way, one could highlight the very

⁴ National Research Council. “Airline Passenger Security Screening: New Technologies and Implementation Issues.” Committee on Commercial Aviation Security, Panel on Passenger Screening, National Materials Advisory Board, Commission on Engineering and Technical Systems. Publican NMAB-482-1 (Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 1996).

⁵ Brendan I. Koerner, *The Skies Belong to Us: Love and Terror in the Golden Age of Hijacking* (New York: Crown Publishing Group, 2013).

real legal and moral dilemmas of asylum, extradition, and statelessness, without confusing all hijackings with innocuous escape. Just as Clifford Geertz would have us note the important difference between a wink and twitch of the eye,⁶ analysis of hijacking should carefully differentiate among what I suggest are the three central categories of action, even if the different forms possess meaningful similarities: the get-away plane, the hostage taking, and the car bomb in the sky.

The modal hijacking in the 1960s, and the subject of this article, comprise the first category—hijacking as get-away plane. In these cases, the hijacker had no intentions—violent or otherwise—for the plane’s passengers, and instead sought only to use a swift vehicle to cross substantial distance, under force of his command. While all hijackings are inherently somewhat violent (the hijacker does need to threaten the pilot with some form of violence in order to compel him to adhere to demands), the pilot was the sole target of the violence. If he complied by rerouting the plane, he and everyone else on board would escape without suffering any harm, thus creating an effectively victimless crime. Were it not for the injuries and death on Aeroflot 244, that particular hijacking might have been viewed as a bold act of defection, epitomizing the first type of airplane theft.

Second, many of the skyjackings we think of as terrorism were intended as hostage takings: Perpetrators used the threat of violence against dozens or hundreds of captive passengers to demand government concessions, including media attention, ransom payments, prisoner exchanges, and policy changes. Prominent examples in this category include the aforementioned Dawson’s Field hijackings; the 1976 hijacking of Air France flight 139 that resulted in the “Raid on Entebbe” operation; and the two-week affair of TWA flight 847, which was hijacked to Lebanon in 1985. In each case, everyone on board was a victim, but the target was someone not on the flight—often a government official—and the recipient of the hijacker’s demands. Once again, the hijackers used the threat of violence to get what they wanted, but in this case, the stakes were much higher, as they comprised political or monetary concessions from government actors. Moreover, passengers were often killed or injured, or were at least threatened with grave violence.

Neither of these categories describe the 9/11 hijackings, which are better described as a car bomb in the sky.⁷ In this final category, hijackers made no third-party demands, nor did they use the planes as a means of transportation. Instead, they commandeered flights in order to steer large, fast projectiles into a designated target. Once again, the passengers were victims, and the government was the target, but there was no opportunity to respond to hijacker demands. Though similar in form, these three hijacking types are vastly different in function; without delineation, it is difficult to read an analysis of the Brazinskases’ dramatic escape without recent skyjackings in mind.

Ultimately, hijackings fascinate us: The lives of hostages sit in the balance of a drama playing out at 30,000 feet. “The Hijacking of Aeroflot Flight 244” is no exception, and Scott skillfully illustrates that these dramas are often so much more—enduring cases that test the “boundaries of mobility, nationality, and legality in the

⁶ Clifford Geertz, “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture,” in Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 312.

⁷ Mike Davis, *Buda’s Wagon: A Brief History of the Car Bomb* (New York: Verso, 2008).

globalizing world” (6). In exploring the Soviet Union’s first airplane hijacking, Scott has memorialized for a Western audience a flight whose legacy continues to shape the rules of the sky.

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