1 Introduction

A Malaysian Airlines Boeing 777–200ER, en route from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur (the Malaysian capital) on July 17, 2014, was flying at 33,000 feet over separatist-held territory in southeastern Ukraine when it broke apart in mid-air and crashed outside of Hrabove, near Torez in eastern Ukraine’s Donetsk Oblast, killing all 298 passengers and crew members. Victims came from 10 nations. Almost two-thirds, 193, were Dutch; 43 were Malaysian and 28 Australian. An investigation into an event of this kind is the responsibility of the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO). On this occasion and under Washington pressure, investigation was entrusted to the Netherlands, on the grounds that two thirds of the passengers were Dutch (Parry 2016a).

In the immediate aftermath and before any investigation, Kiev authorities, supported by the USA and allied powers, accused Russia or Russian-supported separatists/rebels in eastern Ukraine, or both. Of all possible scenarios this refrain echoed most loudly in western mainstream media (WMM) during the lead-up to publication some 15 months later of the report of the official investigation into the cause of the tragedy, conducted by the Dutch Safety Board (Dutch Safety Board 2015), the preliminary findings of the criminal inquiry of the Dutch-led Joint Investigation Team (JIT) in September 2016 and the JIT’s final report in May 2018. The DSB pronounced on the cause (a ground-to-air missile) but not the culprits. The JIT declared that the missile came from Russia, but left identification of individual culprits to a final report due in 2018. This “final report” said that several dozen suspects were under consideration, related to Russia’s 53rd Anti-Aircraft Rocket Brigade based in Kursk, and promised future indictments (surely knowing that the chances of any persons indicted would ever appear in court or that the JIT’s evidence would ever be subject to detailed interrogation were slim).

I shall argue that the MH17 tragedy has been exploited as atrocity propaganda in much the same way as other classic instances of the genre. To be effective, atrocity stories need to be perceived as real by the majority of their listeners. They do not have to be either true or false to work as tools for the
propagandists (Jowett and O'Donnell 2015). Their purpose is to smear opponents as ruthless and barbarous. They excite compassion for victims, and provoke hatred for alleged perpetrators. Such raw emotions are resources on which a government may draw for popular support as it prepares for war or its possibility. They are common in periods leading up to war, and often contribute prominently in pretexts given for war (such as “humanitarian intervention”) that are used to mobilize public opinion, annihilate anti-war sentiment and threaten the enemy. Examples cited by Jowett and O'Donnell include false stories of German soldiers killing and eating babies, in the lead-up to World War One. In 1990, PR corporation Hill and Knowlton constructed a narrative, wholly or mostly false, that Iraqi soldiers occupying Kuwait City removed babies from incubators and left them to die. The story helped the administration of George H.W. Bush arouse outrage among a hitherto apathetic public in anticipation of the 1991 US-led liberation of Kuwait and invasion of Iraq. The George W. Bush administration manufactured an alarm in 2002–2003 about wholly or mainly non-existent “weapons of mass destruction” that it claimed Iraqi President Saddam Hussein had amassed, falsely branding Hussein as an immediate threat, thus preparing the world for the US-led invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003 (Jowett and O'Donnell, 2015).

Regardless of who was actually responsible for shooting down MH17 – the case is deeply contested and will likely continue to be such – the tragedy was exploited by the post-coup regime of Ukraine, the USA and its allies, as part of a broader campaign to demonize Russia and in particular its President, Vladimir Putin. In addition to standard propaganda tactics of personalization and simplification (focusing public outrage on one highly visible leader deemed “authoritarian” or worse), MH17 provided a high-profile event that could be drawn upon to mobilize outrage. It was simpler to grasp and less morally ambiguous than either Russia's annexation of Crimea or its mainly indirect support for the separatists/rebels in eastern Ukraine. Its main flaw was that even if culpable, Russia had no motive to have acted with intentionality – had less motive, even, than Ukraine itself. By pointing the finger more or less exclusively toward Russia, propagandists could assign blame and make Russia look obdurate and defiant whenever it protested its innocence.

2 Study Objectives

My overriding objective to which this study is a contribution is to understand the propaganda strategies that lie behind the construction of pretexts for war, both in general and with specific reference to the evolution of US foreign policy since 2001. There is a rich literature on propaganda (see, for example, Jowett