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Report: Russia's Defense Ministry Doctored MH17 Satellite Images

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One of the satellite images used by the Russian Defense Ministry showing locations of Ukrainian Buk anti-aircraft missile launchers.

Images used by the Russian Defense Ministry to accuse Ukraine's military of downing a Malaysia Airlines passenger jet last year were edited using Adobe Photoshop, claimed an investigative report published by citizen journalists at the investigative news site Bellingcat on Sunday.

July 21, 2014, "the Russian Ministry of Defense presented digitally modified and falsely dated satellite images to the international public in order to implicate the Ukrainian army in the downing of [Malaysia Airlines Flight] MH17," the report said.

In a bid to place the blame on Ukrainian Buk anti-aircraft missile launchers, the Russian Defense Ministry released three satellite photos purportedly showing the units parked at their base north of Donetsk on July 14. Three days later, a photo seemed to show the base empty,

the Buk missiles having apparently been relocated to a field in the vicinity of MH17's flight path.

But Bellingcat's report asserts that "forensic analysis of all three images clearly and unequivocally shows that these images have been altered."

Metadata tags found in the photos of the Ukrainian military base show that the images had been edited and compressed using Adobe Photoshop CS5, a powerful image editing program, the report said.

The images appeared to have been altered to include cloud cover obfuscating terrain features that might help determine the actual date the photos were taken, the report said.

But certain clues remained.

For example, in comparing Google Earth satellite photos of the base taken at regular intervals between May and July 2014, a leaky military vehicle can be seen generating an increasingly large pool of fluid.

The size of the pool in the Defense Ministry photographs most closely matches Google Earth images taken in June — a month before the destruction of MH17 — the report said.

In another photo, crop patterns were compared over the same period to show that the images were taken a month before the date the Defense Ministry attributed to them.

The Defense Ministry did not respond to a request to comment on the Bellingcat report.

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