

The Washington Post

Out of tragedy, a detente of sorts between Russia, Poland

By Anne Applebaum
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WARSAW

Last Saturday, the Polish president, the Polish national bank chairman, the chief of the Polish general staff and a host of other military and political leaders, some of whom were my friends and my husband's colleagues, died in a tragic plane crash in the forest near Smolensk, Russia, not far from where 20,000 Polish officers were secretly murdered by Joseph Stalin 70 years ago. Yet this time around, nobody suspects a conspiracy.

Of course a few fringe Web sites might make that claim, and the odd politician might voice it. But the Russian and Polish governments, the Russian and Polish media, and the vast majority of Russians and Poles believe the culprits to be pilot error and fog. More to the point, discussion of these potential causes has been open and frank. The Polish prime minister, Donald Tusk, immediately flew to the crash site, accompanied by his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin. Polish forensic investigators were on the ground within hours. The Russian government is offering assistance and waiving visa requirements for all families who want to travel to Russia. There are television cameras everywhere. Russian airport officials have been speaking in

public, answering questions, talking to journalists.

To the Western reader, none of this will seem unusual: Those kinds of things are expected after plane crashes, especially those involving prominent public officials. But in this part of the world -- and especially in this particular piece of haunted forest -- the open discussion of a tragedy represents a revolutionary change. The woods around Smolensk are filled with unmarked graves. They contain not only the bodies of the Polish officers, murdered at Katyn and other sites nearby, but possibly also victims of Stalin's purges, partisans and rebellious peasants. Nobody knows for certain. For decades, the history of these grave sites has been concealed, denied or deliberately manipulated for political purposes. At times, Western leaders went

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along with these lies, too: Although they knew the truth, British and American judges allowed the Soviet Union to falsely list the Katyn massacre among the crimes of Hitler at the Nuremberg trials.

In this part of the world, the sudden death of a politician has often sparked conspiracy theories, too. Poland's wartime leader, Gen. Wladyslaw Sikorski, also perished in a plane crash. His death in Gibraltar, in 1943, removed Poland's most trusted and competent leader at a crucial moment, easing the way for the Soviet takeover of the country. The lack of a proper investigation at the time and the sinister course of subsequent events mean that, rightly or wrongly, an air of mystery hangs over the incident even now.

If they were just bones of contention for cranks and historians, these secrets and distortions might not matter. But they are more than that. For half a century, the failure to tell the truth about Katyn created a profound lack of trust between Poland and Russia, one that continues to hamper political, economic and cultural ties between the neighboring countries even today. The ongoing distortions of Russian history have helped create a climate of public apathy and cynicism in Russia, too. The official lack of frankness in the past and about the past helps explain, for example, why so many

Russians doubt that that their government has told them the truth about the terrorist attacks that periodically shatter the peace. Indeed, Russian officials are showing more transparency in the wake of this tragedy than they have shown after some of their own.

And yet there is no law that says the past has to strangle the present: Countries can change, political cultures can grow more open, politicians can learn not to shroud difficult events in mystery and deceit. Over the past 20 years, both Russian and Polish officials have begun to acquire the art of speaking with the public, even if they don't always choose to do so. This is a real change, and we have seen over the past few days what kind of impact it can have.

Although there is not much to be grateful for this week, I am thankful, at least, that

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the families of the dedicated public servants who died on that plane will not have to wait 70 years to learn what really happened. This terrible disaster, in that strange and bloody forest, contains eerie echoes of the past. But it is not destined to become yet another "blank spot" in this region's dark history.

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