

Polish plane crash: country has shown resilience since President Kaczynski's death

For Anne Applebaum, the crash that killed the Polish president Lech Kaczynski and his entourage was a personal tragedy as well as a blow for Poland. But she believes the country is emerging stronger.

by Anne Applebaum in Warsaw
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By the time I met Ryszard Kaczorowski, he was an elegant, elderly man, with no air of tragedy or trauma about him. Yet at the age of 21, he had been arrested by the Soviet secret police – this was 1940, in Soviet-occupied Bialystok – and sent to Kolyma, one of the worst camps of the Gulag.

Kaczorowski's story helps explain why Poles have been so traumatised since last Saturday's plane crash near the Katyn forest, why air raid sirens wailed at 8.56 on Saturday morning, marking a week since that fatal moment, why at least 100,000 people

came to Saturday's public memorial service in Warsaw - and why more are expected to converge on Krakow on Sunday, despite the clouds of volcanic ash drifting across Europe.



A sombre procession of thousands upon thousands of mourners from all over Poland made their way to Pilsudski Square Photo: AP

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Though sentenced to 10 years forced labour, Kaczorowski never served his whole term. In 1941 Hitler invaded

the USSR, and Stalin decided to allow the hundreds of thousands of Poles in his labour camps to form an army. Kaczorowski marched out of the USSR under the command of General Wladyslaw Anders, travelled through Persia and Palestine, and fought at Monte Cassino in Italy.

After the war, Kaczorowski did not go home. Like many others in what became known as Anders' Army, he stayed in London, not wanting to return to a Soviet-dominated Poland. But he maintained ties with the Polish government-in-exile, a group of men who had been Britain's allies during the war, but who quickly turned into an embarrassment afterwards.

Following the Soviet occupation of Poland, these "London Poles" became irrelevant: Britain, like every other country in the world, recognised the new communist government as legitimate, not them.

Nevertheless, the government-in-exile remained in place, symbolically preserving the memory of free Poland. In 1986, Kaczorowski accepted the honorary post of president-in-exile. He held that title until 1990, when he transferred the insignia of office to Lech Walesa.

Last weekend, Kaczorowski died in the plane crash that also killed the Polish president, Lech Kaczynski. Both were on their way to honour the 20,000 Polish officers murdered by Stalin in the Katyn forest and at other places nearby. That act of mass terror, which took place 70 years ago this month, could easily have killed Kaczorowski too. He did not escape death in Russia a second time.

Contrary to some reports, there was not an unusual number of VIPs on board, given that it was the president's plane, and given where it was going, and there were no members of the cabinet. Nevertheless, there were many people whose names appear halfway through newspaper articles, people whom "everybody knows" in political circles - people like Ryszard Kaczorowski who had played important symbolic roles in public life, people who do the groundwork for the politicians whose names are more familiar.

I knew or had met about a dozen people on the plane. My husband – the Polish foreign minister, Radek Sikorski - knew almost all of them, stewardesses included. Among them were people like Stanislaw Komorowski, the deputy defence minister and former ambassador to London. He recently negotiated a defence treaty with the United States, and he also laid the diplomatic groundwork for Poland's presence in Afghanistan. I last saw him a few weeks ago at the opera, with his wife.

Andrzej Kremer, my husband's deputy, was also on the plane. Kremer helped organise the joint visit of the Russian prime minister, Vladimir Putin, and the Polish prime minister, Donald Tusk, to Katyn 11 days ago, just shortly before the President was due to visit. I met him several times at dinners and parties.

Another passenger was Andrzej Przewoznik, whose job it was to look after Polish cemeteries and monuments in places where awful things had happened.

The Katyn memorial, being the most awful of them all, was his organisation's responsibility. I saw him recently at a conference in Budapest, where he explained his work to a crowd of Hungarians.

All of these people were civil servants, politicians and public activists, the sorts of professional who, in both Anglo-Saxon and Polish political culture, do not always receive much respect. We make fun of them (Yes, Minister) or we investigate them, usually starting from the assumption that they have something to hide.

Yet when a large group of them tragically die, one suddenly realises how much, as group, they had accomplished, and how valuable to the nation they are. Not only Komorowski, Kremer and Przewoznik, but also Arkadiusz Rybicki, the MP who fought for a better understanding of autistic children; General Franciszek Gajgor, who prepared the Polish army for Nato accession; Janusz Kochanowski, the ombudsman for civil rights. These men and women were working hard on behalf of the country, and not necessarily gaining much money or glory in

recompense.

The loss of such people – and so many of them, all at once – explains part of why Poland has been in deep mourning since the plane crash last weekend.

But of course the national trauma is tripled and quadrupled because the plane crash also killed the head of state. To some, Lech Kaczynski will now be a martyr: he died on the way to Katyn, itself a place of martyrdom, doing his patriotic duty.

Others will treat his legacy with more ambivalence. For those who live in a monarchy, the concept of a profoundly partisan head of state might seem odd. But President Kaczynski's twin brother, Jaroslaw Kaczynski, was the leader of the opposition in Poland, so it would never have been easy for him to remain a benign and neutral figure, even had his temperament allowed it.

The events of this week have ensured that controversy will continue to follow him, too.

If on the first two or three days after the crash, the nation was united in mourning, the announcement that the president was to be buried in Krakow's Wawel Cathedral, and not in Warsaw, where he was born and lived – and where other Polish presidents are buried - brought politics back into the atmosphere. By way of comparison, try to imagine what would happen if a recent British prime minister (Tony Blair, say, or Margaret Thatcher) had died in office at the height of the Iraq debate or the poll tax crisis, and the Church of England had suddenly announced that they were to be buried next to Queen Elizabeth I in Westminster Abbey.

That was the effect of the Polish Catholic church's announcement, that President Kaczynski and his wife were to be buried in Wawel near Queen Jadwiga, Poland's 14th century monarch and saint.

Strangely, nobody now seems to want to take responsibility for a decision which, at a rough guess, 80 per cent of the country probably opposes. A few protested against it, spoiling the mood. This week, when real politics start up again, the rhetoric might grow even uglier. After all, Poland will tomorrow find itself at the beginning of a very strange election campaign, one in which the late president's brother may well be a candidate.

And yet – despite this trauma, despite these losses, and despite what could be a very nasty political season to come, the past week in Poland has been in one sense very reassuring. To put it bluntly, Poland's post-communist constitution worked. In the wake of the crash, the president's responsibilities were immediately taken up by his constitutionally-designated successor, the speaker of the parliament - even though the current speaker would have been the president's main opponent in elections in the autumn. Deputies immediately took the place of the national bank chairman and the chief of the general staff. Procedures have been set in motion to replace the 15 MPs and senators who were on the plane.

Since last Saturday, the institutions of the state have, in other words, operated no differently from how they would operate in a far more mature democracy.

Despite Poland's old and now undeserved reputation for instability, there was no talk of military coups or martial law, both of which would have seemed absurd. Extraordinarily, there were no objections to the Speaker becoming acting president, even though he does not come from the late president's political camp.

Given the strange circumstances of the plane crash, there was surprisingly little talk of a plot to kill the president either. British newspapers have placed far more emphasis on the possible "conspiracy theories" which might emerge from this accident than have their Polish equivalents.

Far from working themselves up to blame outsiders, people in both public and private have expressed gratitude to the Russians for the swift and transparent way they dealt with the aftermath of the accident. Polish forensic

investigators were on the ground within hours. Russian officials made themselves available for questions.

All of the Polish newspapers reprinted the photographs of Prime Ministers Putin and Tusk, embracing at the crash site. In the wake of their own tragedies – bombs on the Moscow underground, hostage-taking in schools and theatres – the Russians have not always been so open.

But in the 70 years since Katyn, the Russians seem to have finally acquired some respect and understanding of their Polish neighbours. And so, it seems, has everybody else. An extraordinary number of foreign heads of state this week declared their intention to come to today's funeral, at least before those clouds of volcanic dust began spreading across Europe: Barack Obama, Prince Charles, Angela Merkel, Nicholas Sarkozy, Silvio Berlusconi and the Kings of Spain and Sweden.

These dignitaries planned to come not only for the sake of President Kaczynski, but for the sake of this new Poland – modern and democratic, governed by institutions and not individuals, following rules and not emotions – which has slowly been taking shape over the past two decades.

This is the Poland of people like Komorowski, Kremer, Przewoznik, as well as the distinguished military men and the elected politicians on that plane: dedicated patriots who for two decades have been able to work to build up the state, and are no longer forced to work in exile or underground against it.

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