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Poland's tragedy

In Memoriam: Lech Kaczynski

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The death of Poland's president carries a terrible echo of his country's past



HE WAS a figure from another age. Weekend guests at Lech Kaczynski's presidential retreat on Poland's Baltic coast often found the conversation turning to the opposition politics of 1970s Gdansk.

That is indeed a fascinating subject, though not necessarily the most burning one for the head of state of eastern Europe's most important country nearly 40 years later. Mr Kaczynski, who died along with 95 others, including many of Poland's military and political elite, in a plane crash in Russia on April 10th, epitomised some of the best and the worst features of Polish politics.

He was a man of unquestioned, almost painful, integrity. In 2005 he moved to the presidential palace not from one of the palatial homes favoured by most mainstream Polish politicians, but from the shabby flat in Warsaw in which he and his wife, Maria, had lived for decades. His values, attitudes, habits and behaviour were those of the pre-war Polish middle class: a culture so strong that it survived decapitation and evisceration under Soviet and Nazi occupation, and the regime installed at gunpoint after the war. Obstinate, old-fashioned, provincial, gutsy, rather shy, awkward, suspicious, pernickety and scrupulous, the 60-year-old law professor was utterly uninterested in the tactful doublespeak usually required of politicians in modern Europe.

He was an unabashed and instinctive Atlanticist. When government ministers tried to haggle with America about a planned missile-defence base, he undercut them. Poland would be happy to have the installation on any terms. He took a similar attitude to Lithuania, brushing aside that country's refusal to allow its ethnic Polish minority to write their names in official documents with letters such as w, ł and ń that are not part of the standard Lithuanian alphabet. Other Polish politicians saw Lithuanian foot-dragging on the issue as deceitful and infuriating; for Mr Kaczynski it was merely a pity. His affection for the Baltic states, Ukraine and other ex-captive nations was palpable: had they not suffered, just like Poland? They should stand together.

When Russia invaded Georgia in August 2008, it was Mr Kaczynski who rushed to the rescue, leading a hair-raising trip to Tbilisi with leaders of other sympathetic ex-communist states. He tried to overrule protests by the presidential plane's pilot, that the trip into a war zone was unsafe. Mr Kaczynski was furious at what he

saw as cowardice; the pilot later got a medal for resolutely putting his passengers' safety ahead of prestige. Some suspect that Mr Kaczynski repeated that error in the minutes before the disastrous attempt to land the presidential plane at a fog-bound airport on April 10th.

Human error seems the most likely cause of the crash. The Polish presidential plane was an ageing Tupolev 154: old, noisy and thirsty, admittedly, but also robust and reliable. It had been recently renovated with modern avionics. Russian air traffic controllers seem blameless too. They insisted that the fog at Smolensk airport was too thick and had told the plane to land elsewhere.

Mr Kaczynski's single greatest political mistake was in failing to see that modern Germany, led by Angela Merkel, was a potentially powerful friend for Poland, rather than an adversary that harboured sinister revanchist tendencies. Along with his brother, Jaroslaw, who leads the main opposition Law and Justice party, Mr Kaczynski became a laughing stock in Germany for his dogged hostility and on occasion outright rudeness towards the federal republic. His distrust of Poland's western neighbour was matched by a visceral hostility towards the Soviet Union and its defenders. To Mr Kaczyński, his brother, and many of their supporters, Russia was still a menace, run by the former KGB and with a shameful disregard for the atrocious crimes committed in the past. The complexities of modern Russia were often brushed aside.

His robust attitude to Poland's enemies, past and present, pleased his supporters. But it was compounded by a pronounced tendency to make gaffes, and a staff who frequently seemed overwhelmed by the demands of even daily protocol, let alone strategic thinking. That invited criticism, and sometimes caustic caricature.

After Law and Justice lost power in 2007, a new government, in the hands of his arch-rival Donald Tusk, was pursuing an ambitiously emollient foreign policy. Where Mr Kaczynski stoked rows and fumed about historic wrongs, Mr Tusk, and his high-profile foreign minister, Radek Sikorski, smoothed them over. Poland defused tension with Germany, revived the Visegrad grouping of central European ex-communist states and managed a remarkable breakthrough with Russia.

This centred on the Katyn massacre, of 22,000 Polish officers in the spring of 1940. It was more than the illegal execution of prisoners-of-war. It was the decapitation of the country's pre-war elite. The officers, including many reservists, were the lawyers, doctors, teachers and intellectuals who would have posed the most profound challenge to the cynical division of Poland under the Hitler-Stalin pact of 1939. They included, incidentally, the chief rabbi of the Polish army, Baruch Steinberg.

The crime of their murder was compounded by a grotesque Soviet lie: that the murders were the work of the Nazis, not the NKVD. It was only in 1990 under Mikhail Gorbachev that the Soviet Union finally admitted what Poles and their friends had maintained all along. Boris Yeltsin visited the Katyn monument in Warsaw, as Russian president, and said as he laid flowers "forgive us, if you can".

But that was a high-water mark. Under Russia's president, Vladimir Putin, the clock started running backwards. In September 2007, a Russian government newspaper, *Rossiskaya Gazeta*, published a commentary casting doubt on the idea that Katyn was a Soviet massacre. Sued by relatives of the Katyn victims in the European Court of Human Rights, the Russian government argued that blame for the massacre was unclear. The judicial rehabilitation of the victims has been blocked; the archives are still sealed.

It was therefore a huge breakthrough that, after painstaking and intricate diplomacy, the Polish government was able to bring Mr Putin to Katyń for a joint commemoration ceremony on April 7th. That was preceded by an unprecedented showing on Russian television of a magnificent and harrowing film about Katyń by Andrzej Wajda, Poland's greatest film-maker. The film was repeated, on a more widely watched channel, on the evening of April 11th.

At the joint ceremony, Mr Putin categorically acknowledged that the massacre was a crime of the Stalin regime—although he also brought up the deaths of captured Soviet officers in Polish prisoner-of-war camps 20 years earlier, apparently as a balancing item in the ledger of historical guilt. Many Poles felt that the Russian side had not gone nearly far enough.

It was that feeling which brought Mr Kaczynski, along with almost the entire foreign-policy leadership of his party, the commanders of the army, navy, air force and special forces, senior intelligence veterans and top historians, to board the plane that crashed on April 10th. They were paying their own private visit unencumbered by—in their eyes—the phoney reconciliation and dubious politicking of the event earlier in the week. The Russian authorities' exemplary behaviour since the crash and visible displays of public grief by Mr Putin and others may have assuaged some of those feelings.

Poland is convulsed by the tragedy. Not since the height of Stalinist repressions have so many of the country's best and brightest perished. Some find the conspiracy theories irresistible. Was not General Wladyslaw Sikorski murdered in 1943 for embarrassing the Soviet Union about Katyn? Now the same fate has befallen another brave Polish president. The sinister symmetry of that theory is misleading, though. Despite extensive investigation, nobody has found a credible sign of foul play in the death of General Sikorski. And it seems

overwhelmingly likely that the latest plane crash is a tragic blunder-cum-accident.

For Poland's friends and neighbours, condolences are mixed with questions about the country's future. Mr Kaczynski was already facing an all but insuperable challenge from Mr Tusk's Civic Platform party in the presidential elections in October. They will be held much sooner now. Bronislaw Komorowski, now acting president by virtue of his position as speaker of the lower house of parliament, the Sejm, is also the Civic Platform candidate. Law and Justice will struggle to find a candidate to beat him. Mr Tusk's efforts to consolidate the centre-right of the Polish political spectrum are starting to look unstoppable.

A victory for Mr Komorowski would also make foreign policy run more smoothly. The Polish constitution is unclear about where the real responsibility for foreign policy lies. Who should attend EU summit meetings was a particular bone of contention between the presidency and the government. Mr Tusk's aim is to have a German-style ceremonial presidency, with much reduced powers of veto. He seems likely to get it.

Yet the socially conservative, prickly, ethics-conscious and patriotic constituency that voted for Mr Kaczynski will not go away. And neither will the political ideas and values for which Law and Justice stands. Poland's liberal-minded urban elite, exemplified by Civic Platform, have many qualities. They are able, cosmopolitan and flexible. But the lingering suspicion remains that the country's old communist elite and their children have morphed into a new nomenklatura. Poles call this idea the "Układ", an all but untranslatable word meaning something like "deal" or "arrangement". The price of the communist regime's surrender in 1989 was that members of the elite were able to turn their power into wealth, using their connections, slush funds and privileges to gain a head start in the country's shift to capitalism.

Mr Kaczynski found that idea revolting, and wanted a fresh start: a "Fourth Republic", in his words. During the ill-starred Law and Justice-led government of 2005 to 2007, the atmosphere was more Robespierre than Benjamin Franklin. Prosecutors conducted trial by press conference, denouncing victims on live television on what often seemed the flimsiest and most political of grounds.

An obsessive focus on the military intelligence service (known by its Polish acronym of WSI) also consumed huge amounts of time and energy. Undoubtedly the organisation needed reform. It had survived largely untouched since the collapse of communism. Its links with business and public life were alarming. But the cure proposed by Law and Justice seemed even worse than the disease. A close ally of the Kaczynskis, Antoni Macierewicz, was put in charge of a new military counter-intelligence service, as a political appointee. His investigations into past wrong-doings produced little of substance. But many feared that under his control, the new service would be used to spy on the Kaczynskis' political opponents.

With Civic Platform in charge again, aggressive policies towards the well-connected old guard are off the agenda. People like Jan Kulczyk are finding life easier. A billionaire tycoon whose business career started in West Berlin in the early 1980s—an unimaginable privilege in communist Poland for those without the tightest connections to the old regime—he epitomises to the Kaczynski camp everything that is wrong with their country. While they were in power, he moved to London. Now he is a frequent visitor to Poland.

Poland's economic success under the Tusk government has blunted the edge of public resentment over corruption and unfairness. Unlike any other country in Europe, Poland boasted economic growth last year, of 1.7%. Its banking system is stable; the public finances sound. Road-building—once a signal failure of public administration—has suddenly accelerated thanks to Mr Tusk's ability to push local politicians into speedy agreement.

The new go-ahead Poland is looking forward to some time in the spotlight. It will host the European football championships in 2012, jointly with Ukraine. In 2011, less glamorously but probably more importantly, it will hold the rotating six-month presidency of the EU, preceded by Hungary. As the ex-communist country with the strongest economy, most solid government and most constructive diplomacy, it has gone a long way to dispel the old stereotypes of backwardness and chaos. This month's accident is appalling. But it does not derail Poland's path to success, out of the ruins of the pre-war republic, from the devastation of war and communist rule, and from the grim consequences of this week's crash.