

## Grieving Poles look to lessons of history

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By Jan Cienski in Warsaw

Published: April 16 2010 18:29 | Last updated: April 16 2010 18:29

Poland's bloody history has taught people how to react to tragedy. Those instincts have kicked in over the past week as the country has dealt with the trauma of losing its president and many other senior officials in last Saturday's air crash.

The atmosphere in the country has been remarkable. Although the stock market continues to function, and shops are open, the crash and the 96 dead are the only subjects of television, newspapers and most conversations.

Almost every building in the country is flying the Polish flag, decorated with a black ribbon of mourning, and the funeral march played at Warsaw's airport to greet aircraft filled with coffins is Poland's best-known tune.

Warsaw's main street has become a pedestrian zone, with tens of thousands of people waiting patiently to be allowed to file briefly past the coffins of Lech Kaczynski, Poland's president, and his wife Maria.

"I saw the whole of Poland passing by. It made me want to cry," said Krzysztof Opolski, a member of the president's panel of economic advisers who spent 15 minutes as part of the honour guard by the presidential couple. "People are coming to pay their respects to the institution of the presidency and to the country."

The mood is in some ways similar to that of the US after the September 11 attacks, when a feeling of grief and national unity swept the country, but with the difference that there is no enemy attack. Aside from a few cranks who see the hand of Moscow in the disaster, the vast majority of Poles accept that their president died in an accident.

What has overlaid the grief with an aura of patriotism is the haunted place where the airliner crashed. It came down in Smolensk, western Russia, carrying a delegation that was heading for the nearby Katyn forest, one of the places where Soviet secret police executed 22,000 Polish officers in 1940, each killed with a bullet to the back of the head.

"There is a very deep symbolism to it. In some ways it was a second Katyn," said Joanna Mroczkowska, standing near the presidential palace and watching the line of waiting people stretching off into the distance.

The crash has provoked an enormous interest in Katyn, with the result that the 2007 Oscar-nominated film *Katyn*, by director Andrzej Wajda, is being shown around the world, and especially in Russia, which broadcast it on the country's main television channel after the crash.

Russia's leaders, in the past reluctant to accept the Soviet Union's responsibility for the crime, are openly heaping the blame on the USSR, which many Poles hope means that the often fraught relationship between the two old enemies may change permanently for the better.

"The catastrophe in Smolensk has made something move in Polish and Russian hearts," wrote Adam Michnik, the editor in chief of the *Gazeta Wyborcza* newspaper in an editorial written in Polish and Russian.

The feeling of national unity was shaken by the unexpected decision to bury the presidential couple on Sunday below the Wawel royal cathedral in Krakow, the resting place of Poland's kings and many national heroes. The location outraged many people who felt that Kaczynski, who had a generally lacklustre presidency, did not merit such an honour.

Mr Wajda put out a statement calling for the decision to be rethought.

"Burying them in the Wawel burst the bubble for me," said Maria, a Warsaw office worker. "Before that I had been crying in front of the television, but this is just a political decision. Kaczynski's backers want to turn him into a national hero."

Bronislaw Komorowski, the parliamentary speaker and acting president, will announce the timing of early elections on Wednesday, with the likeliest date being June 20.

Two parties lost their candidates in the crash: Law and Justice, which Kaczynski helped found together with his twin brother Jaroslaw, and the post-communist Democratic Left Alliance, whose nominee was Jerzy Szmajdzinski. They are both hunting for replacements, but the likeliest victor remains Mr Komorowski, the candidate of the ruling Civic Platform party.

But most Poles are not thinking about politics.

“Our hearts are broken. We have no more tears left to cry,” said Maria Teresa Kubicka, who had waited for 10 hours to pay her respects in the presidential palace.

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