



Why the Polish plane crash is called "Katyn 2"

The divided commemorations of a 1940 massacre underscore persistent divides between Russia and Poland.



By Patrice Dabrowski — Special to GlobalPost
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CAMBRIDGE, Mass. — On Saturday, a painful sense of déjà vu enveloped Poland. News quickly spread of a terrible tragedy that had taken place in the forests near Smolensk in Russia, not far from the border with Belarus, where [a plane crash](#) killed Poland's president and 95 others.

In an ironic twist of fate, this group of dignitaries was traveling to commemorate those whose lives had been cut terribly short in that very region 70 years ago. The place they were headed — Katyn — had been one of the sites where some 22,000 Polish officers were killed by the Soviet NKVD, the precursor to the KGB. Stalin had sought to decapitate the Polish nation by eliminating these Polish prisoners of war, officers and reservists who in times of peace comprised Poland's elites — the individuals most likely to oppose the imposition of communism on Poland.

Now members of a new generation of Poland's best and brightest have met untimely deaths in a place that the former president of Poland, Aleksander Kwasniewski, has called "a cursed place." In some cases, children or grandchildren of the dead officers perished in the same forests. Their compatriots who had fortunately taken the train to the commemorative site, where they awaited the arrival of the dignitaries on Saturday morning, immediately labeled the disaster "Katyn 2."

Although most Poles have been united by a spontaneous outpouring of unalloyed grief at this national loss, uncanny echoes of past Polish tragedies have left some to formulate conspiracy theories. After all, the double decapitation of the cream of the Polish elites, in 1940 and 2010, took place both times in Poland's neighbor to the east. And was not the fate of President Lech Kaczynski, a staunchly anti-Russian politician, similar to that of the head of the Polish government-in-exile, Wladyslaw Sikorski, who perished in a mysterious airplane crash near Gibraltar in 1943?

Sikorski was the first public figure to press the Soviets to explain the Katyn killings, which Stalin claimed had been the work of the Nazis. After all, the Soviets were ostensibly on the same side of the war as the Poles, despite their invasion of the country on Sept. 17, 1939. The lies about Katyn continued until 1990, when Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev admitted that the Polish POWs who inexplicably disappeared that fateful spring had been the victims of Soviet, and not Nazi, totalitarianism.

Just last week Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin met with his Polish counterpart, Donald Tusk, at the site of the monument to the victims in Katyn. This unprecedented meeting-cum-joint commemoration bespoke an improvement of relations between the two countries. Yet it did not deliver on two issues important for many Poles: Putin did not apologize for the killings — something desired by the majority of Poles, according to a recent survey. Nor did he agree to open classified Soviet documents on the massacre to Polish scholars and/or family members of the deceased. That meant the already elderly children of the officers killed in Katyn and elsewhere (for all the burial places have not been identified) would likely never learn precisely when and where their fathers had been killed, nor would scholars be able to investigate not only the details but also the actual motives behind the killings. A step in that direction, incidentally, might likewise help

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Russians come to grips with their own problematic past — with the totalitarianism that Putin himself blamed for the deaths of so many, Russians and Poles alike.

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This is where the second, fateful trip to Katyn comes in. Kaczynski represented a different approach to Russia and to the past than did the more forward-looking Tusk (of a rival political party). The Saturday commemoration was to be a counter-commemoration, one led by the president of the Polish political party that stood steadfastly by its memories of a more threatening Russia, memories that Poles — although not allowed to publicly commemorate the Katyn killings during the communist period — had kept alive in their hearts. In a way, they continued to take advice offered the nation two centuries earlier by Jean-Jacques Rousseau: He had exhorted the Poles to “establish the Republic so firmly in the hearts of Poles that she will maintain her existence there in spite of all the efforts of her oppressors.” This they did, over centuries of foreign domination.

Yet times have changed — in part thanks to those who dared to remember. Poland is now a free, independent and resilient democracy, one able to survive even the decapitation of its national leadership. Russia too appears to be changing, as witnessed by the commemoration a week ago by the two countries’ prime ministers, and Putin’s weekend visit to the site of plane crash. One hopes that the active and seemingly heartfelt interest by Putin in the double Katyn tragedy will be followed by a greater understanding among all Russians of the country’s totalitarian past. Ironically, it has taken the death of Poland’s president at the site of the 1940 killings to bring this long suppressed event to the world’s attention — out from the obscurity of history into memory.

Might not some good come of this? In the last days, the Russian people have had two occasions to watch Andrzej Wajda’s 2007 film “Katyn” — previously banned — on television. The first showing of the film, prior to the Putin-Tusk commemoration, took place on a minor television station. The second was scheduled for the day after the plane crash on one of Russia’s major television networks, doubtless to explain the circumstances that led Poland’s president to make the ill-fated trip — and why Russia’s president Dmitrii Medvedev had declared a day of national mourning. A genuine improvement in Polish-Russian relations as well as further steps on the road to coming to grips with the totalitarian past would be the best tribute to the lives lost in the forests of Smolensk.

Patrice Dabrowski is director of the Harvard Ukrainian Summer Institute and the author of "Commemorations and the Shaping of Modern Poland."

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