

## What's Next for Poland

**President Kaczynski's visit to Russia was supposed to help heal a historic rift between the two countries. But as NEWSWEEK's former Warsaw bureau chief explains, that won't be easy. Especially now.**

By **Andrew Nagorski** | Newsweek Web Exclusive  
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In the United States, all you have to do is say "Pearl Harbor," and everyone knows what you are talking about. In Poland—a country that was invaded countless times by Russians from the east and Germans from the west—there are far more names of places that everyone instantly recognizes because of their tragic symbolism. But one stands out above all others: **Katyn**. The fact that the plane carrying Polish President Lech Kaczynski and 95 others, including a who's who of the Polish political and military elite, crashed as it was **attempting to land** in the western Russian city of Smolensk near the Katyn forest, makes this national tragedy overwhelming in its emotional impact.

**Kaczynski and the others on the ill-fated flight** were supposed to go to the Katyn forest to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the execution of 21, 857 Polish POWs and civilians on the direct orders of Joseph Stalin and his Politburo. When I was growing up in our family's new home in the United States, my father—who had served in the Polish Army in 1939 and then fled to the West, joining Polish forces under British command—made sure that his children knew the full meaning of Katyn. Poland hadn't only been invaded by Hitler, he reminded us; it had also been invaded by Stalin's armies, and then they had attempted to wipe out any future source of opposition by executing so many of its top officers and men.

The fact that Stalin and subsequent Soviet and Polish communist regimes insisted on blaming this crime on the Nazis, who invaded Russia only much later, just magnified Katyn's potency as a symbol. When I started visiting Poland as a student and then as a journalist in communist times, people only had to whisper the word "Katyn" to signal their opposition to the government and its wholesale falsification of history. You could talk openly about the truth of Katyn only in the West, where Polish exiles like my father and grandfather, who served in the Polish government-in-exile in London during World War II, kept insisting that the cover-up was as bad as the original crime.

But things began to change after the fall of communism in 1989, triggered by Solidarity's successful battle for freedom in Poland, which included the freedom to tell the full truth about Katyn. In a goodwill gesture to Poland in 1992, Russia's new President Boris Yeltsin finally released the order from Stalin's Politburo that confirmed Soviet responsibility for the murders. While this briefly improved Polish-Russian relations, Yeltsin's successor Vladimir Putin took a harder line on history, initially encouraging a more positive view of Stalin ("the most successful Soviet leader ever," proclaimed a Russian teacher's manual in 2007) and renewed equivocation about his record of mass murder. That included new efforts by some Russians to deny



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the truth about Katyn.

The irony is that this year, on the 70th anniversary of those murders, there was renewed hope that the truth would really set both countries free. Four days before the fatal crash, Putin had accompanied Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk to Katyn and admitted Stalin's responsibility for what happened—although he also tossed in a pseudo-justification by claiming the Soviet leader was avenging earlier mistreatment of Russian POWs by Poles in the two countries' war of 1920.

That was precisely the kind of statement that still infuriated Poles, and particularly someone like President Kaczynski, 60, whose experience as a Solidarity activist in the 1980s made him instinctively distrustful of Russian leaders who weren't willing to come completely clean about their history. When I **interviewed Kaczynski** shortly after Russia's brief war with Georgia in August 2008, he was uncompromising in his language. "There was a test of strength, and Russia showed the face it wanted to show—an imperial face," he told me. He also blasted the West for its passive response.

Yet even Kaczynski, as tough as he was on the Russians, could imagine a better day—so long, as he put it, that the world would "convince Russia that the imperial era is over." And the very fact that such high-level Polish delegations, representing so much of recent Polish history, were flying often to commemorate the Katyn massacre demonstrated how times have changed. Among those who died today was Ryszard Kaczorowski, the last Polish president-in-exile in London, who officially gave up his post when former Solidarity leader Lech Walesa was elected president of a newly free Poland in 1990. Kaczorowski's government was a largely symbolic continuation of the first Polish government-in-exile during World War II, the government my grandfather was a part of. To Poles, all these connections feel personal.

And then there was a whole new generation of parliamentarians and government officials who died today as well. Among them was Undersecretary of Defense Stanislaw Komorowski, a gifted former scientist who then embarked on a diplomatic career. I met him at a small dinner party in Warsaw in October. As he juggled urgent calls on his cell about Vice President Biden's visit to Poland to discuss missile defense plans, he was both witty and highly knowledgeable, covering a broad range of issues in a coolly analytical way that was quite different from the more impassioned style of slightly older ex-opposition activists like President Kaczynski.

But nothing can be coolly analytical about the way Poles are thinking about Katyn. Now it's not only a name that connotes a past tragedy with continuing political overtones; it will also live in the memories of today's Poles as a symbol of the loss of so many of their countrymen who experienced the full range of the country's recent history—and its battles over the meaning of the place where they, too, came to die.

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