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The Polish Tragedy

By [David Pryce-Jones](#)

April 13, 2010 4:07 PM

The death in a plane crash of Lech Kaczynski, the Polish president, and a large number of politicians and senior military officers with him, would be tragic at any time, but as well as that there's something almost symbolic about it because they were on their way to a memorial ceremony at Katyn. In the woods there, in 1940, the Soviets murdered 22,000 selected members of the Polish elite, and tried to cover it up and pretend that the Nazis were responsible. Communist ideology and Russian anti-Polish sentiment motivated this vile cold-blooded crime. I happened one day to catch a program on Russian television in which the commander of the Soviet execution squad at Katyn, Dimitri Tokaryev — now an old man with a brutal face and the rank of Lieutenant General — boasted about his part in killing these Poles with a bullet in the back of the head. At the end of the day, he said, he had a swollen trigger finger and really deserved his sausage and vodka. But you sound proud about what you did, the scandalised interviewer said. Of course, this assassin answered, the Poles were class enemies, landowners, clerics, professors and so on. This occurred in Boris Yeltsin's time, and it was a major mistake of that strangely ambivalent man not to arrest this brute and put him through the Russian equivalent of the Nuremburg trials.

Lech Kaczynski and his twin brother Jaroslaw came to prominence through the famous Round Table agreement of 1989 when the Communist Party surrendered its monopoly of power. The twins were perhaps the most anti-Communist of all those who were then participating in public life, and that is to say quite something since resentment of what the Communists had done to Poland ran, and still runs, high.

Moreover a plane crash affecting the national life of Poland has occurred once before. General Wladyslaw Sikorski was Prime Minister of Poland in 1943. It was a critical moment, as the Red Army was about to drive the Germans back and take their place in Poland as occupiers. If any Pole could have stood up to Stalin it was Sikorski, a strong personality and representative of the national spirit of independence. That spring, the Germans had discovered the genocidal massacre of Katyn, and they naturally tried to exploit it to

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drive a wedge between the Western Allies and Stalin. When Sikorski's plane then crashed taking off from Gibraltar, conspiracy theories at once bloomed. It suited the propaganda of both Goebbels and Stalin to accuse Churchill and the British of sabotaging the plane. Inquiry showed that the controls had jammed, and the pilot in fact survived to testify that it was a genuine accident. Nobody stands to gain from these latest deaths but conspiracy theories are already in the air again. What is clear is that Poland's sad past still carries into the present.

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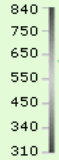
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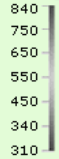
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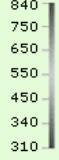
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