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I.H.T. OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

The Past, the Present and the Future of Katyn

By VICTOR EROFEEV

MOSCOW — What will relations between Russians and Poles be like after this disaster? In their response to the tragic air crash that killed dozens of members of Poland’s military and political elite, it was as if the two nations regained their sight and saw each other, for once, as people capable of suffering and compassion. There was a sea of flowers and candles in front of the Polish Embassy in Moscow and selfless Russian assistance for relatives of the victims. Russians and Poles wept together.

Katyn: a curse for the Poles. The same lightning bolt that destroyed the Polish elite struck twice in the same spot. But if 70 years ago the mass execution of Polish prisoners of war on Stalin’s orders made Katyn a symbol of Polish-Russian confrontation, can the latest disaster bring Russia and Poland closer together? After this, will we — neighboring peoples closely related by blood but exceedingly distant in how we see our common history and divided by religious tradition into Catholics and Orthodox — be capable of overcoming all our mutual claims, insults and accusations?

After World War II, we Russians regarded ourselves as liberators; Poles saw us as occupiers. We regarded ourselves as builders of communism; they saw us as a barbaric empire. Throughout history we wanted to teach each other. The Poles wanted to teach us about individual freedom; we wanted to teach them the wisdom of the collective. The Poles stormed the Kremlin in the 17th century; we partitioned Poland several times. Russia in past centuries feared “Asianization,” which it unfairly identified with stagnation, chaos, cruelty and indifference to human life. So did Poland, except that for the Poles Asianization included Russia.

My first wife, a Pole from Warsaw, refused to speak with me in Russian whenever we crossed the border into then-Communist Poland. It was not considered decent. And I remember one old Pole who spat at my car, which had Russian plates, while I stood at a traffic light in Warsaw. The highest compliment I heard from Polish friends was, “Victor, you’re not like a Russian.”

Still, there was much that united us. Ah, we certainly could drink vodka and sing Russian songs together! But there was more. After Khrushchev’s thaw the Russian intelligentsia came to love Poland as a conduit of Western cultural values. We read Polish magazines, watched Polish films — we especially liked Andrzej Wajda’s “Ashes and Diamonds” — in effect, we loved them because they dared not love the Soviet Union. For their part, the Poles were able to distinguish between authentic Russian culture and Soviet ideology. My Polish friends were always ready to sit up all night and discuss Dostoevsky and Chekhov, and they knew dissident literature, from Solzhenitsyn to Joseph Brodsky, perhaps better than we did.

Katyn was the greatest symbol of the divide between us. It seemed to me whenever I came to Warsaw that this word had long fallen out of the sphere of politics, history and the clash of civilizations, and into another dimension; it had turned wild, as a fruit tree can go wild; like malignant cells, it had mutated into a

screaming symbol of pain, betrayal and suffering, intolerable for the national consciousness and incompatible with normal national life.

Every Pole knew about Katyn; the Russians had only a vague idea of it. For Poles it was an event on an apocalyptic scale; for us, it was at most another military tragedy. That is why Russian repentance was too little for the Poles, while the Polish demands were too great for the Russian authorities.

I was always on the side of the Poles. I was disgusted with the outright lies about Katyn in the Soviet era, and the inconsistency of Russian actions in recent years. Then, only a few days before the plane crash, there was a breakthrough, one anticipated already by Gorbachev's perestroika: The prime ministers of Russia and Poland, Vladimir Putin and Donald Tusk, knelt down together in memory of the victims of Soviet state terror. Lech Kaczynski, as it turns out, was carrying a conciliatory speech on that fatal flight.

Katyn now has a chance to go with dignity into the past, to become history. It has not happened yet, but it would be unforgivable to miss the chance. This does not mean that everything will be fine between the Russians and the Poles. Down with empty illusions! Even though we are neighbors — or perhaps because of our geographic proximity and the potential this creates for mutual irritation — we still do not know each other very well. We do not know how we are similar or how we differ. The false friendship under communism humiliated us rather than united us. Russians lack the Polish sense of freedom and self-esteem. Poles are attracted by Russian tenderness in love and friendship.

It is unlikely that we will become closer politically anytime soon. The Russian state is in disarray. Its leaders either reveal imperial sentiments, which does not please the Poles, or speak of the need to draw closer to Europe. We probably don't pose a major threat, but we are swaying so heavily that we cannot even understand ourselves. Russian youth knows almost nothing about Poland, or only snatches — a movie, something from TV, some political disagreement. But many do know that the new Russian national holiday that replaced Revolution Day is Nov. 4 — the day when back in the 17th century Poles were expelled from the Kremlin.

But after the moving display of official Russian assistance following the air tragedy, and the sympathy shown by the many Russians who laid wreaths at the Polish Embassy in Moscow, I believe there is no moral justification to return to open confrontation. The Poles turned toward Moscow and, to their pleasant surprise, saw a human face.

In the future, I hope Katyn will become a sacred place also for a new generation of Russians. Perhaps it can assume a new meaning — the meaning of our common grief.

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