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A president dies, a country lives

Apr 15th 2010
From The Economist print edition

The plane crash that killed Poland's president, Lech Kaczynski, could bring good out of tragic loss



NO COUNTRY can endure the loss of dozens of its leading military, political and cultural figures without great pain. And in Poland, a place where history is punctuated by tragedy, it is all too tempting to link the plane crash that killed 96 people on April 10th, including President Lech Kaczynski (see [obituary](#)), with such other sorrows as the wartime Katyn massacre that they were flying to Smolensk to commemorate. But that linkage is both lazy and misleading.

The Katyn killings marked the deliberate decapitation of the pre-war state. The 22,000 prisoners-of-war murdered by Stalin's secret police were not just the military leadership; they were also reservists—doctors, lawyers, teachers, officials—who formed the middle-class backbone of Poland. Stalin knew they were the biggest human obstruction to his plan, cooked up with Hitler, to wipe Poland from the map.

The plane crash was no decapitation. The empty posts are being filled calmly and correctly. Poland's constitutional order has been scrupulously maintained (no Slavik Alexander Haig rushed in front of the cameras to proclaim "I'm in control!"). The markets have been quite unmoved by the news.

A second difference is that Katyn was a crime compounded by a lie. Until 1990 the Soviet authorities blamed the murders on the Nazis. Under Vladimir Putin, the archives stayed sealed, judicial rehabilitation of the victims stalled and the excuses and deceptions crept back. Those trying to raise the issue of Katyn felt that they were fighting a lonely battle. Not any more. The Katyn campaigners and relatives who perished this week have achieved in death a level of worldwide recognition for their cause that they never saw in life.

The crash has also brought unprecedented Russian openness and sympathy towards Poland. Mr Putin, not always this newspaper's favourite ruler, deserves great credit. He had already denounced the Katyn massacre at a joint ceremony a few days earlier. Russian state television screened a gut-wrenching Polish film about the atrocity. After the crash it did so again. And far from covering things up, Russia's co-operation with the Polish authorities in the aftermath of the crash has been exemplary. Even the most determined conspiracy theorists are finding no grist for their mills. Footage of Mr Putin embracing his Polish counterpart, Donald Tusk, at the crash site may come to exemplify a new relationship of trust and friendship, just as the smashed skulls and rotting bodies of Katyn victims of 70 years ago stood for the horrors of the past.

Mr Putin could do more to banish the spectre of Soviet nostalgia from Russia. But the main task is for Poland. Katyn came at the nadir of the country's fortunes; the latest tragedy comes at a time when it has never been stronger, more prosperous or more secure (see [article](#)). Poland was the only European country whose economy grew last year. In 2011 it will hold the rotating six-month presidency of the European Union, preceded by its close ally, Hungary. That will be a salutary shock for those who think the EU is run out of Brussels by France and Germany. Then comes another moment in the spotlight: the 2012 European football championships, shared with Ukraine.

The best legacy

Yet the old stereotypes of a poor, neurotic country still have some claim on reality. A million or more enterprising Poles, fed up with grotty public services and a poor quality of life, have voted with their feet to work abroad. The country needs a dose of energetic reform to give them a reason to return. And a worrying whiff of sleaze hangs over public life. Fighting corruption was one of the things that most animated Lech Kaczynski and his twin brother Jaroslaw. To make Poland a shining success would be the best tribute to those who died in Katyn 70 years ago and at Smolensk airport on April 10th.

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