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April 16, 2010

Russia and Poland: A Blood Feud Rooted Deep in the Past

By **CLIFFORD J. LEVY**

MOSCOW — Until very recently, President [Lech Kaczynski](#) of Poland was seen here as an especially disagreeable strain of Eastern European leader, one of those Slavic turncoats who demonized Russia and toadied up to its rivals. Then Mr. Kaczynski was killed in a plane crash on Russian soil this month, and Russia choked up.

It was as if estranged relatives suddenly realized that their bad blood was unseemly and petty in the face of tragedy. And at the vanguard of this reversal was Prime Minister [Vladimir V. Putin](#) himself, whose office once accused Mr. Kaczynski of “slashing anti-Russian statements” but who now offered soulful eulogies to him.

Average Russians, too, were touched. All week, thousands showed up at the Polish Embassy here to present flowers and to sign condolence books.

This scene was perhaps unparalleled in the ill-fated relationship between Russia and Poland, long mired in hostility and suspicion. The outpouring was not unified — some Russians, including diehard Communists, said that Mr. Kaczynski was still an enemy. However they reacted, Russians looked upon these events through the prism of the history between these two peoples.

Russians and Poles share linguistic roots and other cultural bonds, whether an affinity for black bread or prowess at classical music. But their rifts are as pronounced.

The grievances extend across the ages, from Polish invasions of Russia in the 1600s to Russia’s

repeated conquests of Polish lands later. The 20th century left particularly throbbing wounds. Russian prisoners of war, taken when Poles fought for their independence after World War I, died en masse in Polish camps in the 1920s. The Soviets conspired with the Nazis to divide up Poland before World War II.

And then Moscow made Poland a vassal state under Communism, even naming the alliance of Soviet satellites in Eastern Europe after the Polish capital. In recent years, it was Russia that felt alienated, as Poland embraced **NATO** and approved plans to host an American antimissile system that the Kremlin calls a threat.

In the background since 1940 was one of the most traumatic events for Poles, the massacre of more than 20,000 Polish officers and others by the Soviet secret police in World War II, compounded by a cover-up by Moscow, which for decades blamed the Nazis.

In fact, it could be argued that Mr. Kaczynski's death on April 10 was set in motion by this legacy. He died in the crash of a plane heading to a memorial service at the Katyn forest in western Russia, where the killings occurred. Mr. Putin had not invited him to an earlier Russian-Polish ceremony; Poland's prime minister, whom Moscow deemed friendlier, was invited instead.

So when all 96 people on Mr. Kaczynski's plane died, the resonance was profound. The Soviets wiped out the Polish elite at Katyn; now more Poles had died there.

Still, Mr. Kaczynski's death came as Mr. Putin had been trying to improve ties with Poland, and through that effort, with the rest of Eastern Europe as well. And when he used the occasion to demonstrate further that Russia was not the enemy, he struck a chord with Poles.

"The reason Putin reacted this way was because he had already visited Poland and he realized that Poles like grand gestures," said Dmitri Babich, a Russian state news agency commentator. Mr. Putin went to the crash site and personally took charge of the inquiry into the accident, which was most likely caused by pilot error. His protégé, President **Dmitri A. Medvedev**, sent a video address to the Polish people.

Russians who hoped for reconciliation saw reason for optimism. Alexey Vasilyev, deputy director of the Russian Institute for Cultural Research, went to Poland's embassy. "This is a

tragedy that can join us, that can unite our two countries," he said. "All of us who love Poland and Russia's friendship with Poland want this to happen."

But other Russians, less sure, worried.

"Relations have been so bad between Russians and Poles," said Konstantin Kostalyera, who arrived at the embassy with flowers. "Then this happens on Russian land. Poles are going to say that it is not by chance."