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A somber Poland lays Lech Kaczynski to rest

The president, killed with 95 others in a plane crash, is buried alongside Poland's most revered figures after a funeral Mass and procession to the nation's most sacred cathedral in Krakow.

By Katarzyna Mala and Megan K. Stack

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Reporting from Krakow, Poland, and Moscow

Polish President Lech Kaczynski was laid to rest in a centuries-old crypt Sunday alongside the remains of some of the most revered figures in this nation's often tragic history.

The funeral Mass and procession to the nation's most sacred cathedral put a somber end to a week of mourning in Poland. Kaczynski and his wife were killed last weekend when the presidential plane clipped a tree and crashed while landing at a fog-shrouded provincial Russian airport. Many top Polish military officials, lawmakers and leading figures from the nation's recent history also died in the crash.

The international presence at the state funeral in Krakow was reduced significantly because of the plume of volcanic ash that has engulfed European airspace since Thursday. President Obama, French President Nicolas Sarkozy and German Chancellor Angela Merkel were among the world leaders who canceled their plans to attend.

But Russian President Dmitry Medvedev managed to fly in, underscoring the thaw in the nations' historically strained relations since the deadly crash.

The tragedy has gripped Poland with particular power in part because the plane crashed near a site notorious in Polish history: The forests of Katyn, where Soviet secret police slaughtered thousands of Polish officers and other prisoners and dumped the bodies in mass graves. Kaczynski and his delegation were to attend a Mass to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the Katyn massacre.

The stark irony of the crash elevated Kaczynski's death into an event regarded not only as the loss of a leader, but also as an echo of Poland's most tortured moments.

"To be here is a historical duty," said Pawel Staniszewski, a 22-year-old student who joined the tens of thousands of mourners who milled in the streets outside the funeral Mass. "I feel that we are taking part in a very historic moment, and that we needed to come to tell our grandchildren about it."

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An estimated 150,000 mourners jammed the streets around St. Mary's cathedral, weeping softly and praying rosaries. The bodies, which have lain in state in the Presidential Palace in Warsaw this last week, were flown to Krakow and transported slowly through the streets to the church. Poles lined the roads to see them pass.

Although Katyn has festered at the heart of strained relations between Poland and Russia, Moscow has made a point of accommodating Polish air crash investigators and has welcomed grieving Polish families, expressing sympathy for the tragedy of the Poles.

"The sympathy and help we received from our Russian brothers has breathed new life into a hope for closer relations and reconciliation," Krakow Archbishop Stanislaw Dziwisz said during the funeral Mass.

Controversy had erupted over the decision to bury Kaczynski in the Wawel, the ancient hilltop cathedral where kings, poets and other beloved Polish heroes have been buried over the centuries. Critics said that Kaczynski, despite his tragic death, did not deserve the honor.

But the complaints, in the end, were ignored.

When Sunday's service ended and the coffins reemerged to make the final trip up the Wawel hill to be entombed, mourners in the streets yelled their thanks.

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