

# The Moscow Times

## The Cruelty of Chance

20 April 2010

By Nina Khrushcheva

In Russia, somewhere behind every event lurks the question: Who is to blame? In the tragedy that claimed the lives of Polish President Lech Kaczynski and 95 other Polish leaders, we can answer that question with certainty in at least one respect: History is to blame.



The event is so hideous that it seems like a bad joke, or an evil KGB plot, a mad conspiracy out of James Bond — or some combination of all three. Yet the crash that has sent all of Poland into mourning was none of these things. A tragedy that defies any logical explanation confirms only one thing: the cruelty of chance.

What if no fog prevented the safe landing at Smolensk airport? What if the plane was not a 20-year-old, Soviet-made Tu-154, but a newer and safer model? What if the Polish pilot had obeyed the Russian air traffic controller who tried to divert the plane to Moscow or Minsk?

Unfortunately, the cruelty of chance also lies at the heart of the centuries of mistrust between Poland and Russia. The irony — if there is an irony at all — is that this tragedy came at a time when mistrust seemed, at long last, to be giving way to better, more businesslike relations and greater understanding between the two countries.

After 70 years of denial, Russia's leadership — if not yet ordinary Russians — were ready to admit that Josef Stalin's NKVD slaughtered more than 20,000 Polish officers, intellectuals, and clergy in the Katyn forest in 1940. Indeed, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, a former KGB officer himself, and his Polish counterpart, Donald Tusk, commemorated that tragedy together two weeks ago at the Katyn memorial near Smolensk.

But Kaczynski, a member of Solidarity in the 1980s who was eager to overthrow the Communist regime, was more mistrustful of the Kremlin than Tusk. He put together his own delegation to visit Katyn, and wondered aloud if the Russians would give him a visa. Certainly, no Russians were invited.

When the pilot of the presidential plane was advised not to land in the thick fog, either he, or perhaps even the president himself, may have mistrusted the Russians' willingness to give honest advice. Indeed, they may well have wondered if the cunning ex-KGB men around Putin simply wanted to make Kaczynski's Katyn commemoration a mockery?

Suspicious and disagreements between Poland and Russia date back to the 16th century, when Poland was the far greater power. Indeed, the Grand Duchy of Moscow was a backwater. Across the centuries, there have been wars, started by both sides, and partitions of Poland executed by the Russians, followed by attempts at "Russification," with the Russian Christian Orthodox Empire trying to control the "deceptive," West European-oriented Catholic Poland.

Then there was the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, which the Poles refused to join, and Marshal Jozef Pilsudski's miraculous victory over the Red Army at the gates of Warsaw in 1920. Throughout most of the interwar years, Poland and the nascent Soviet regime had their daggers drawn.

When Stalin signed the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact with Nazi Germany in 1939, it gave him an opportunity to invade Poland. The Katyn massacre was a direct result, with Stalin ordering the mass murder of Poland's elite in order to decapitate Polish society and thus make it more pliable.

Although the Nazi-Soviet pact did not last long — Germany invaded Russia in 1941 —there was no way out for Poland. With Adolf

Hitler's defeat, it once again became part of the Russian sphere, this time of Soviet Russia.

But Poland never stopped striding — and striking — for independence. The rise of the Solidarity independence movement in the 1980s was the earliest and most severe blow to the stagnating Soviet system. The Polish-born Pope John Paul II crystallized the anti-Communist “threat” that Poland now posed to the Soviet Union. The pope's call for religious freedom around the world, including in socialist countries, rubbed the atheistic Soviets — and Orthodox Russians — the wrong way.

Indeed, throughout the 20th century, animosity between Poland and Russia remained at fever pitch, manifested not only in politics but also culturally. This, of course, continued an old pattern, too. Alexander Pushkin, Nikolai Gogol and Fyodor Dostoyevsky were all suspicious of the Poles, calling them “cold,” “distant” and “manipulative.” They saw Poland as always on the side of the West, rather than standing with its Slavic brothers. Indeed, Pushkin's friendship with Polish poet Adam Mickiewicz ended in acrimony over the 1830 Polish insurrection against tsarist rule.

In fact, this animosity ran so deep that when both countries were no longer Communist and Russia was looking to replace its Nov. 7 Bolshevik Revolution holiday, it came up with Nov. 4, the anniversary of the Russian boyars' victory in 1612 over Polish King Sigismund's short-lived occupation of Moscow.

Now there is talk, in both Warsaw and Moscow, that the second tragedy of Katyn might usher in a new era in bilateral relations. Perhaps so, but as the Polish essayist Stanislaw Jerzy Lec said: “You can close your eyes to reality, but not to memories.”

*Nina Khrushcheva, author of “Imagining Nabokov: Russia Between Art and Politics,” teaches international affairs at The New School and is senior fellow at the World Policy Institute in New York. © Project Syndicate*

© Copyright 2010. The Moscow Times. All rights reserved.