



POLAND'S TRAGEDY

Saturday morning greeted the Polish communities at Harvard and MIT with devastating news. As many of us sat down, cup of coffee in hand, to skim through online editions of Polish papers, we found ourselves utterly speechless at the news of the tragic deaths of Poland's President, Lech Kaczyński, his wife, and some eighty members of the country's political and intellectual elite.

The President and the public officials who accompanied him had been on their way to Russia to take part in the commemoration of the 70th anniversary of the Katyń forest massacre. As the Presidential aircraft began its descent into Smolensk airport, it crashed in thick fog, killing all the passengers and crew.

The frightfulness of this tragedy is beyond anything one could have imagined. It has, of course, a deeply personal dimension: the sudden vacuum thrust upon the families of each of the 96 casualties. Then, there is the barely conceivable communal loss, as so many vital voices in Poland's public life have now been silenced forever. On board the plane were leading politicians and lawmakers, army commanders, the civil rights commissioner, the governor of the national bank, several religious (not only Catholic) leaders, and a few historians. Most of them had critically shaped Poland's democracy. Some had been active in public service since well before the fall of communism twenty years ago. Among the passengers were also figures of historic significance, such as Ryszard Kaczorowski, the last president of Poland's anti-communist, London-based government-in-exile, and Anna Walentynowicz, not as well known as Lech Walesa but an equally important icon of the 1980s Solidarity movement. An isolated death of any of these figures would have been tragic enough.

But what happened on the morning of April 10 is fraught with even more terrible symbolic significance. To understand it one must go back as far as World War II, keeping in mind it was not only Germany that invaded Poland in September 1939 but also the Soviet Union. Prior to the outbreak of the war, the Nazi and Soviet governments had signed a secret agreement partitioning Polish territory. That agreement had been included in what was ostensibly only a treaty of non-aggression signed by the foreign ministers Molotov and Ribbentrop.

The Katyń forest massacre is a name that collectively refers to several acts of mass murder which took the lives of 22,000 Polish prisoners of war, intellectuals, police officers and public servants. Those acts, perpetrated in the early months of 1940 by the Soviet secret police acting on Stalin's orders, were a part of Stalin's plan of wiping out the Polish intellectual, political and military elite in the territories Stalin had claimed as his.

It is the loss of some of the most distinguished leaders of this generation, en route to commemorate that unspeakable disaster of seventy years ago, that makes Saturday's tragedy seem like one of history's cruel ironies. That our present loss should have occurred in *very much the same spot* makes this irony even more horrific.

However, the conflation of these two traumas is not an irony entirely without hope. From 1943, when the mass graves were first discovered in the Katyń forest, until 1990, the Soviets continued to blame the crime on the Germans. To this day the Russian government, while acknowledging Soviet responsibility for the massacre, has resisted classifying it as a crime against humanity and has never offered a formal apology. However, Prime Minister Putin's participation last Wednesday, alongside Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk, in the commemoration of the massacre is a hopeful sign of a changing attitude among Russian leadership. It signals the possibility of a long overdue reconciliation. Even more commendable is the Russian government's reaction in the wake of Saturday's tragedy. Prime Minister Putin immediately visited the site of the crash and stated that he would himself head the investigation commission. Both Putin and President Medvedev made televised addresses to the people of Poland. The Russian president also declared Monday, April 12, a national day of mourning. Finally, state-owned Russian television has screened, in prime time, Andrzej Wajda's film *Katyń*, which graphically depicts the 1940 massacre. The latter step is all the more significant, given that the Russians have for several years tried to divert publicity from Wajda's movie.

As far as the situation in Poland is concerned, the loss does not leave the country's public institutions without continuity. Over the past twenty years Poland has established a stable democracy, guaranteeing continuity even in the face of a tragedy like this one. The Speaker of the Sejm (the parliament's lower house) is now acting president, and the Constitution mandates that new presidential elections be held by June 20.

Still, one can perhaps also express cautious hope that this second Katyń tragedy -- as the Saturday crash is now being called -- will exert a lasting positive influence on public life in Poland. Largely because of his conservatism, President Kaczyński was seen as a deeply divisive figure. The recent commemorations of the Katyń forest massacre, however, managed to bring together at least some on the political scene who ordinarily did nothing but denounce each other's policies. The parliamentarians on board the Presidential aircraft were not only members of the pro-presidential Law and Justice party. The group also included left-wing lawmakers, such as the former deputy Prime Minister Izabela Jaruga-Nowacka, who, unlike the President, was a tireless and outspoken advocate of women's and LGBT rights.

Faced with this second Katyń tragedy, we remain hopeful for continued improvement of Polish-Russian relations. We have every confidence in the institutions of Poland's government. Still, the loss of many talented and experienced leaders cannot but bring on an overwhelming sense of sadness.

The second Katyń tragedy has brought together in an outpouring of grief not just the politicians but the entire nation. We hope this incredible loss will help foster mutual good will and willingness to understand across political and cultural divisions.

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