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Polish president, top officials killed in plane crash

By Megan K. Stack
Los Angeles Times

MOSCOW — The plane crash that killed Polish President Lech Kaczynski on Saturday gutted a nation's leadership and silenced some of the most potent human symbols of Poland's tragic and tumultuous history.

It was, literally, a nation colliding with its past: The plane ran aground on a patch of earth near the remote Russian forest glade called Katyn, where more than 20,000 members of Poland's elite officer corps were executed and placed in unmarked graves by Soviet secret police in 1940.

In a bizarre twist, the crash happened at the moment Russia and Poland were beginning to come to terms with the Katyn massacre.

"It is a damned place," former President Aleksander Kwasniewski said. "It sends shivers down my spine."

Along with the president and his wife, the 97 dead included the army chief of staff, the head of the National Security Office, the national bank president, the deputy foreign minister, the deputy parliament speaker, the civil-rights commissioner and members of parliament.

Also aboard the plane were war veterans and surviving relatives of Poles killed by the Soviets. There was Ryszard Kaczorowski, 90, Poland's last "president-in-exile" during the Soviet years. And Anna Walentynowicz, 80, the shipyard worker whose dismissal sparked the Solidarity union protests that eventually led to the collapse of Polish communism.

And Kaczynski: a former Warsaw mayor imprisoned in the 1980s for his opposition to communism.

Outpouring of grief



ALIK KEPLICZ / AP

Polish President Lech Kaczynski and wife, Maria, seen in a March photo, both died in Saturday's crash near the site of the 1940 Katyn massacre of 20,000 Poles.



DMITRY ALESHKOVSKY / MCCLATCHY NEWSPAPERS

Firefighters work Saturday near the smoldering remains of a Tu-154 jet that crashed in Russia's Smolensk region with many top Polish military and civilian leaders aboard.



ALEXEY NIKOLSKY / AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, center, and Deputy Prime Minister Sergei Ivanov, right, visit the crash site Saturday.

Poles united in their grief in a way that recalled the death of the Polish pope, John Paul II, five years ago. Thousands massed outside the Presidential Palace in Warsaw, laying flowers and lighting candles.

Magda Niemczyk, 24, a student, held a single tulip. "I wanted to be together with the other Polish people," she said.

"It's a national tragedy," said Ryszard Figurski, 70, a retired telecommunications worker. "Apart from their official positions, it is also simply the loss of so many lives."

Foreign Minister Radoslaw Sikorski, one of the highest-ranking Polish leaders not on board the plane, told Poland's Radio Zet that he was the one to inform Prime Minister Donald Tusk, who "was in tears when he heard about the catastrophe."

Under Poland's constitution, Tusk exercises primary control over the government, based on his party's majority in Parliament. The president, although the titular armed-forces commander, plays a largely ceremonial role.

Flying on a 26-year-old, Soviet-designed plane, the iconic Polish figures were headed to a Roman Catholic Mass to honor the 70th anniversary of the deaths at Katyn. It was to be a tribute to long-smothered truth.

The massacre was denied for decades by the Soviet Union, and even today, Russian reluctance to open the investigation files on the Polish prisoners remains a sensitive topic between the two countries.

To many Poles, Katyn is shorthand for decades of secret grief and impotence in the face of Soviet power.

"I just have this feeling that Katyn is a sort of diabolical place in Polish history," said Tomasz Lis, a prominent Polish journalist and author. "It's just unimaginable; it's horrible."

The tragic irony of the crash was so complete that it seemed destined for conspiracy theory. Russian officials were careful to vow in the earliest hours to closely involve Poland in the investigation. Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, rushing to the scene of the crash, said he would personally head the probe.



SOURCE: ESRI THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

The dead

SOME OF the most prominent victims of the crash of Poland's presidential plane, according to the official passenger list.

Lech Kaczynski, 60, Poland's president, a nationalist conservative who had been in office since 2005. A founder of the Law and Justice Party, now in opposition, and the twin brother of former Prime Minister Jaroslaw Kaczynski.

Maria Kaczynska, 66, Poland's first lady; an economist and translator of English and French, had carried out charity work in her role as first lady. Her uncle was killed at Katyn.

Gen. Franciszek Gagor, 58, army chief of staff since February 2006. From 2004-06, was Poland's representative at NATO in Brussels.

Gen. Andrzej Blasik, 47, head of the air force since 2007. Received professional military education in Montgomery, Ala., in 2005.

Vice Admiral Andrzej Karweta, 51, navy chief commander since November 2009. From 2002-05 served at the Supreme Allied Command Atlantic in Norfolk, Va.

Gen. Tadeusz Buk, 49, land-forces commander since September 2009. Served in 2007 as commander of Polish troops in Iraq.

Slawomir Skrzypek, 46, president of the National Bank of Poland since 2007.

Aleksander Szczyglo, 46, head of the national security office.

Jerzy Szmajdzinski, 58, a deputy parliament speaker, left-wing lawmaker and the opposition Democratic Left Alliance's candidate for presidential elections this year.

Ryszard Kaczorowski, 90, from 1989-90 Poland's last president-in-exile in London.

Anna Walentynowicz, 80, Solidarity activist. Her firing in August 1980 from the Lenin Shipyards in Gdansk sparked the workers strike that spurred the eventual creation of the freedom movement, of which she became a prominent member.

Piotr Nurowski, 64, head of Poland's Olympic Committee.

Poland was invaded by the Soviet Union during World War II and lived for decades under Moscow's domination. Long after the fall of the Berlin Wall, ties with Russia remain strained.

The Associated Press

Landing attempt in fog

As the presidential plane headed toward the western Russian city of Smolensk on Saturday, thick fog shrouded the city. Air traffic controllers at the Smolensk airport had several times ordered the crew of the plane not to land, warned that it was descending below the glide path and recommended the plane reroute to airports either in Minsk, the capital of Belarus, or Moscow rather than risk navigating the fog, Russian officials said.

But time was pressing. The crew decided to risk the landing and ignored instructions from the controllers, the Russian air force said.

"The Polish presidential plane did not make it to the runway while landing," Smolensk region Gov. Sergei Anufriyev said. "Tentative findings indicate that it hit the treetops and fell apart. Nobody has survived the disaster."

On the ground, about 1,000 people, many of them Poles, were milling around the memorial site. A Polish priest was to celebrate Mass once the presidential delegation arrived.

"We were getting ready for the Mass and everybody was expecting the president to arrive any minute," said Yan Rachinsky of Russia's Memorial human-rights group. "Suddenly people started talking quietly about something. There were many concerned faces. ... Soon people started running around and talking to each other. Everybody was wondering what was going on. It was an atmosphere of tension."

The priest led a prayer. Then the Polish ambassador stepped up to break the news. The presidential plane had crashed, he told the crowd. There were no survivors.

"It was a moment of complete shock," Rachinsky said. "We were standing there speechless. We couldn't believe it."

Tears wetting nearly every face, Rachinsky said, the group went ahead with the Mass.

By late afternoon, 97 bodies were being packed into coffins and flown to Moscow for identification. The flight recorders had been found, and investigators were studying them.

Shortly after the crash, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev was careful to emphasize recent improvements in relations between the two countries.

"These days we conducted memorial events in Katyn together grieving over the victims of totalitarian times," Medvedev said. "All Russians share your grief and mourning."

Last week, Prime Minister Tusk traveled to Katyn to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the massacre. In what was regarded as a turning point in the two countries' often frosty relations, Putin also attended the ceremony.

Kaczynski, a frequent and outspoken critic of the Kremlin, was not invited to that ceremony.

Unlike Tusk's visit, which was given prominent coverage in Russian media, Kaczynski's plans to attend Saturday's commemoration were all but unmentioned. A few weeks ago, the Russian foreign ministry publicly griped that Kaczynski had not sent official word of his planned visit.

Political unknowns

The crash throws Polish politics into uncertainty. Kaczynski was to run for re-election in October; a government spokesman said Saturday night that the country will hold an early presidential election, but no date was set.

The leading left-wing candidate, Jerzy Szmajdzinski, was believed to have been aboard the plane. And Polish law calls for another of the candidates, speaker of the lower chamber of parliament Bronislaw Komorowski, to take over as head of state after the president's death.

The plane was a 20-year-old Tupolev Tu-154, designed by the Soviets in the mid-1960s and operated by the Polish air force. Russia halted mass production of the jet about 20 years ago, and about 200 are still in service around the world, said Paul Hayes, director of accidents and insurance at Ascend, an aviation consultancy in London. He said the Polish presidential jet was one of the youngest of them.

Officials in Poland have repeatedly requested that the government's aging air fleet be replaced. Former Prime Minister Leszek Miller, who survived a helicopter crash in 2003, told Polish news media he had long predicted such a disaster.

"I once said that we will one day meet in a funeral procession, and that is when we will take the decision to replace the aircraft fleet," he said.

Material from The Washington Post and the Los Angeles Times is included in this report.

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