

## Whose fault?

On April 10, 2010, a Tupolev Tu-154 crashed outside of Smolensk, Russia. The chief responsibility for the tragedy rests squarely on the shoulders of the local air traffic control. The fault is inconvertible: in inclement weather, the standard procedure is to close the airport. In fact, it is solely up to air traffic controllers to do so. The crew on the ground in Smolensk failed to do so despite incapacitating fog which had rendered visibility of the landing strip nearly zero. Because the airport remained open, the pilots of the Polish Tu-154 attempted vainly to land four times. Surely, after three failed attempts ground control could have called it quits. Alas, the air traffic controllers were quite cavalier about the weather conditions. They kept the runways open. The pilots attempted once more. They clipped their wings on an airport antenna and trees and pounded into the ground, disintegrating on impact into a fiery inferno. None of the 97 people on board survived. The stubbornness of the pilots did contribute to the tragedy; however, had the airport been closed, they would have been no attempts at landing whatsoever. The Tu-154 would have been forced to re-route to elsewhere.

This is all so painfully obvious, so logically clear; it should not be controversial at all. Yet, it is. This particular air disaster has already been covered by the fog of spin, propaganda, counter-propaganda, and deception. Why? The problem is that this is not an aviation problem; it is a political one. The Tu-154 happened to have been ferrying Poland's President, the populist conservative Lech Kaczyński, and his entourage, some of the leading lights of the nation, to a ceremony commemorating the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Katyn forest massacre. The name Katyn represents a series of murders of some 22,000 Allied POWs and political prisoners, who happened to be Polish (Christians, Jews, and Muslims), by Joseph Stalin's dreaded secret police, the NKVD.

Kaczyński and Katyn constituted a combustible mixture symbolizing the past of unpunished crimes and the present as a quest for justice which both revealed themselves garishly to an astounded world because of this fiery crash. First, let us contextualize both tragedies. Next, we shall look at the disaster.

Hitler and Stalin jointly attacked Poland in September 1939, thus launching the Second World War. Having divided the country between themselves, both commenced repressions. One facet of Nazi and Soviet terror campaigns was to exterminate Poland's elite. Katyn was one of the killing fields, where the Communist secret police shot and buried about 4,000 men. It became a symbol after the Germans discovered their mass graves in 1943. Hitler immediately accused his erstwhile ally; Stalin brazenly denied the truth and blamed the Third Reich. Because the free Polish Government-in-Exile demanded an independent investigation, Moscow self-righteously broke off diplomatic relations with the Poles. The UK and the US covered up the truth for the sake of Allied unity. After the defeat of Germany, however, the Katyn case re-surfaced and, following an inquiry by the US Congress in the late 1940s and early 1950s, it was established beyond any reasonable doubt the Soviet responsibility for the massacre. Now that the West knew, nothing was much was done about it because of Moscow's vehement denials.

The Kremlin stonewalled for over half a century. It spread mendacious lies internationally and persecuted anyone keeping the memory of the massacre alive internally. The initial breakthrough came because of Secretary General Mikhail Gorbachev's "new thinking," and, in particular, his dealings with Pope John Paul II. But even Gorbachev was too reticent to implicate Stalin himself. Only after the implosion of the USSR in the early 1990s, that task was carried out by the newly established Russian Federation's leader Boris Yeltsin. The Russian President came clean; he revealed most available documents on the crime; and the official investigation of the massacre gained steam. However, with the ascendancy of the former Soviet secret policeman Vladimir Putin to Russia's Presidency in 1999, the Katyn denial conspiracy returned to the fore in the Kremlin. At his kindest, Putin has only been able to regurgitate the Soviet propaganda lie about the putative reciprocity between the mass murder of Polish POWs in 1940 and the death of Bolshevik POWs in 1920 because of hunger and diseases, which were also equally the lot of the countless Polish army guards and civilians. This calamity was only halted by the exemplary efforts of the Hoover relief mission and charitable endeavors of the Americans. In fact, the last time Putin showed of this spurious dichotomy was on April 7, three days before the Polish Presidential plane crashed.

The Polish President was not invited to Katyn by Putin. Hence, he was forced to travel to a separate ceremony there, a trip that ended in Lech Kaczyński's death. This is the reasoning behind his twin brother Jarosław's painful outburst blaming Putin for his sibling's death.

For his staunch support of freedom in the post-Soviet sphere, including a quixotic stance for Georgia, President Kaczyński was much maligned by the Kremlin and the Russian media. For his refusal to bend to the *de facto* German supremacy of the European Union and for his warnings about Berlin's Bismarckian drift to embrace Moscow, Kaczyński was the butt of jokes in the Federal Republic of Germany. He was routinely vilified for his Euroscepticism and, most of all, for his staunch Atlanticism and unswerving support of the United States. Clearly, the Polish politician was not on Putin's list of most huggable pals.

Poland's liberal Prime Minister Donald Tusk has tried to be. Hence, he was invited to Katyn on April 7. He and his camp routinely derided President Kaczyński, often on the same counts his detractors in the EU and the Russian Federation did. Tusk's administration was also the latest in line of a number of Polish governments responsible for failing to upgrade the aging fleet of post-Soviet planes to something safer and more serviceable, like Boeing for instance. In fact, there were unbecoming spats between the Presidential Palace and the Prime Ministerial Chancellery about Lech Kaczyński's foreign travel. Constitutionally the Prime Minister holds the purse strings, and liberal Tusk found conservative Kaczyński's peregrinations deeply embarrassing, if not outright infuriating. The President's support for Georgia, Ukraine, and the Baltics, as well as his repeated calls on Putin to end the Katyn denial greatly annoyed the Prime Minister. Accordingly, budget cuts were made to discourage trips; a propaganda campaign conducted to besmirch the President before the domestic and foreign public opinion. He was silly, dangerous, and superfluous, it was charged. Kaczyński was a "pugnacious

nationalist,” as *The New York Times* (10 April) derisively put it, a retrograde Christian, an inveterate homophobe, and, therefore, who knows, wink, wink, perhaps an anti-Semite, his enemies implied. To be sure, most barbs were reserved for the late President’s twin brother Jarosław, who is a much more powerful political player, but both equally felt the brunt of the sneeringly patronizing hatred of Warsaw’s glitterati and their foreign chums.

The above is an indispensable cultural background to understand the impossibly charged context of the fateful crash of April 10. Now it is quite obvious why the Russians instantaneously disavowed any responsibility and blamed the Poles, while the former automatically divided themselves into two camps: the blame-Russia orientation and blame-the-President party. The former, mostly right wing, include legitimate foul play investigators and a few conspiracy theorists. The paranoid include the folks of the fever swamps who circulate on the internet tall tales about a dummy plane crashing near Smolensk, while the presidential plane was brought down elsewhere and the passengers then taken out and shot in cold blood. The legitimate foul play investigators point out that it is unknown in the annals of contemporary world history for so many leaders of a nation to die at once in an accident. Further, they remark, one should wonder why the Poles continue to fly Soviet planes twenty years after their liberation from the Communist yoke. This question impacts issues such as flight safety, counterintelligence protection of the airplanes, the continuity of Communist symbolism, and technological dependence on Russia, which continues to maintain Poland’s official air fleet. For example, the Presidential plane which crashed had undergone a total overhaul in December 2009. Thus, some in the blame-Russia camp are legitimate investigators; others are just Russophobic; while a few tend to be paranoid conspiracy-mongers.

Meanwhile, Poland’s blame-the-President camp is mostly composed of liberals and post-Communists. It tends to repeat the Kremlin’s version of the events, and, in a predictable twist, waxes sagely about Lech Kaczyński’s allegedly decisive role behind the catastrophe. As proof, the President blamers invoke illogically a single incident when the late Polish head of state tried unsuccessfully to make his pilot to land in an unsafe zone in Georgia in August 2009. The pilot refused to accept the order and diverted the craft to Azerbaijan. Once again, had the airport at Smolensk been closed, even a presidential fist over a pliant pilot’s face would not have been enough.

Let us look therefore at the Kremlin spin for it was reflexively regurgitated by most in the Western media in a telling Pavlovian unison. According to the Russian line, the reckless Polish pilots were responsible for the crash. Ground control warned them about the bad conditions, yet they foolishly tried over and over again. Further, the Russian air traffic controllers suggested several times to the Poles to re-route to either Minsk or Moscow. The Polish pilots ignored their suggestions. By some accounts they did not even respond to good advice. Perhaps they did not know Russian? Well, the pilots knew Russian and they ignored the advice because any VIP plane has priority in the air and on the ground to make its own decisions EXCEPT when the airport is closed. Once the airport shuts down, any and all discussion and dispensing good advice is over. A VIP plane simply can’t either land or depart. If it is airborne, it must divert or return home.

According to Poland's leftist *Gazeta Wyborcza* (14 April), the Russian air traffic controllers also claimed, rather disingenuously, that they knew the weather conditions were horrible but they refrained from closing the airport because they wanted to avoid a diplomatic row. Namely, closing the airport was tantamount to barring the Polish President from the Katyn commemorative ceremony. However, this line of defense is quite confusing and unprofessional. First of all, the Smolensk military air traffic controllers are not in charge of diplomatic protocol. The chief duty of controllers is to provide safety and security for aircraft, passengers, and crew, both on land and airborne. Imagine if the U.S. Secret Service eschewed whisking the President of the United States to safety lest some foreign dignitary be offended? Or what if the US Secret Service failed to push a foreign leader out of harm's way to avoid a diplomatic row? That line of defense is just preposterous.

However, it suggests that, perhaps, air traffic controllers in Smolensk kept their supervisors in Moscow apprised of the situation. In fact, knowing the centralized nature of Putin's Russia and the persistence and continuity of post-totalitarian Marxist-Leninist institutions and arrangements there, it is quite possible that the Kremlin was kept informed of the developments in real time. The flight with the Polish President was plainly well above the pay grade of mere Smolensk air traffic controllers. If so, then it was not the ground control which made the fateful decision to keep the airport open; it would have to be Moscow itself. And the Kremlin would not have had to worry about much of a diplomatic row with Warsaw, given the sneering attitude of the Polish Prime Minister and the liberal media against the conservative President. This logical extrapolation has enormous implications for allocating blame for the crash. Of course we cannot be certain, because we do not have the transcripts of the exchange between the bosses and the underlings. And, as usual, we know nothing about the decision making process in the Kremlin itself.

Otherwise, however, by Russian standards, Moscow has been more than forthcoming in its cooperation. For example, it turned over the black boxes. It allowed Polish forensic investigators to operate unimpeded on the ground. So far the Kremlin has accommodated all of Poland's requests, albeit minimal as they were because of the Polish liberal government's reluctance to appear pugnacious. The conduct of Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and his counterpart President Dmitry Medvedev has been exemplary. They have mourned openly Lech Kaczyński and other victims. More significantly, there has been a popular outpouring of sympathy by the Russians, except the Communists and Nazis, for Poland.

Moscow ought to be applauded for eschewing its customary *modus operandi*. Let us hope that there will be no secrecy and all details surrounding the crash of April 10th will be revealed. The investigators must consider all possible angles, including the most fantastic ones, just as with any accident. They must be able to posit bold questions, understand the historical context, and be willing to search and discover the truth.

That means, in addition to appreciating the political and cultural background, the investigators must be able to be very imaginative, including assuming the worst. First, let

us remember, as one of America's top experts on intelligence and counterintelligence has put it, "we are dealing here with the Chekists, post-Soviet secret policemen. The rule is that we must assume that the Chekists are always guilty of the crime until they will have proven to us incontrovertibly that it is otherwise."

Second, the investigators must be warned of mirror imaging. That means they should avoid projecting our Western stereotypes onto an alien situation to make it appear familiar to us and, thus, to force it to conform intellectually and morally with our Western standards. Many in the West will readily admit that Lech Kaczyński was considered somewhat of a nuisance, perhaps even a minor detractor, by the Kremlin. Still, from the Western point of view nothing the Polish President had done warranted killing him. According to this line of reasoning, no one sane at the Moscow center would have committed a vile crime like this against him because the punishment would have been excessively disproportionate to the relatively low gravity of his "transgression." Yet, political murder has been Russia's *modus operandi* for centuries and it virtually became a genetic feature of the Soviet Communists, according to such astute observers as Adam Ulam and Hélène Carrère d'Encausse. In the post-Soviet times the post-Chekists have continued this sordid tradition, albeit on a much smaller scale, as attested by scores if not hundreds of political opponents murdered, journalists in particular, after 1991. Thus, the investigators must not exclude a nefarious motive behind the death of Lech Kaczyński.

Third, let us recall that the Soviet Union excelled in electronic warfare, in particular mastering the MIJI (Meaconing, Intrusion, Jamming, and Interference). Meaconing consists in the intercepting and rebroadcasting of the target's navigation signals on the same frequencies to confuse its crew, which thus unwittingly obtains false navigational data and incorrect geographic bearings. This interference may be employed against ground control stations, ships, or aircraft alike. A bomber can be thus meaconed to drop a payload away from the real target; a pilot can be lured into a trap and destroyed; a ship can be led astray; or a plane can be caused to crash. During the Cold War at least 70 American planes were enticed into the Soviet no-fly zone, essentially the borderland rim around the USSR, and shot down. Many more other Western and allied planes suffered a similar grim lot. For example, meaconing was suspected behind both the horribly fatal downing of Korean Air Lines flight 007 in 1983 and the ultimately felicitous crash-landing of KAL 902 in 1978.

Last but not least, the investigators must remember that sometimes a cigar is just a cigar. Fog happens, and so does gross negligence by ground control and fatal recklessness of the pilots. We just do not know enough at this point. Until all possible scenarios are considered, scrutinized, dismissed, or accepted, we shall have to live with another Gibraltar in Polish history: President Lech Kaczyński has for now joined Prime Minister Władysław Sikorski as a victim of a suspicious air crash.

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