

# The Smolensk Plane Crash Two Years Later: The Unraveling of a Cover-Up?

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By Paweł Piotr Styryna | May 14, 2012



Does evidence – such as Russian attempts to destroy the wreckage or hack into President Lech Kaczyński’s phone – suggest that the Smolensk Plane Crash was an assassination?

More than two years have now passed since the tragic Smolensk plane crash of April 10, 2010, which killed the Polish presidential couple, Lech and Maria Kaczyński, in addition to their entire entourage of Polish military and political leaders - 96 victims in all. As a result, Smolensk became the greatest disaster in the history of post-communist Poland. Hence, many Poles proved unable to simply dismiss the crash as “yesterday’s news.” The difficulty of finding closure was also exacerbated by developments from the very moment of the disaster.

To begin with, the crash itself seemed quite suspicious. The post-Soviet Russians have been evasive and uncooperative from the outset, assigning blame exclusively on the Polish side throughout. Furthermore, their behavior has exhibited many disturbing signs of an apparent cover-up. The liberal post-communist Polish government, in turn, has consistently and pusillanimously sought to accommodate Russia.

For quite a few Poles, the combination of Moscow’s stonewalling and Warsaw’s docility created an unsettling impression of collusion to suppress the truth, not unlike the collaboration between the Soviets and their Polish-speaking vassals to smother the truth about the Katyn Forest massacre. The parallel was reinforced by the fact that on April 10, 2010 President Kaczyński and his fellow passengers were heading to Smolensk, Russia to commemorate the seventieth anniversary of the infamous Soviet genocidal operation in Katyn Forest, only to crash a few miles away from the original mass execution site.

## **New revelations**

Against this backdrop unanswered questions multiplied as the revelation of new facts began to shed a new light on the circumstances of the fatal air crash. For example, discoveries have been emerging primarily because large numbers of Poles simply refused to allow the matter to die away. The *milieu* of the opposition Law and Justice Party – a conservative and anti-communist formation founded by the twins, brothers Lech and Jarosław Kaczyński – took up the cause. Frustrated by the passivity of the Tusk government and its Miller Commission, they established an independent parliamentary committee to investigate the crash, led by the veteran anti-communist dissident and politician, Antoni Macierewicz.

Thus, in late June 2011, the Macierewicz Committee published its findings in the *White Book of the Smolensk Tragedy* (forthcoming in English), which held the Russians chiefly responsible for the crash, while charging the government of Prime Minister Donald Tusk with negligence. A month later, the governmental Miller Commission issued its own report, which (like the Russian MAK Report of January 2011) asserted that the main culprits of the crash were the supposedly reckless pilots and an allegedly intoxicated General Andrzej Błasik, the chief of the Polish Air Force. While nuancing the original MAK narrative, the Miller Report nevertheless admitted that the Russians also bore some responsibility for providing the pilots with false coordinates during the approach (the infamously reassuring words of the Russian air traffic controllers at Severnyi: “you’re on the course and on the path”). With this publication, the Miller Commission considered the case closed (Miller was later nominated by Tusk to the governorship of an important Polish province), but the Macierewicz Committee continued its investigation.

## **Demonizing the inquisitive**

Not surprisingly, the latter has provoked the anger of forces interested in upholding the current “blame Poland first” official narrative of the crash in both Moscow and Warsaw. The post-Soviet Russian press attacked the committee mercilessly, accusing it of Russophobia, “dancing on graves,” and constituting a “sect.” In Poland, where a large share of the media outlets support the liberal post-communist consensus (their founders and owners often enjoying direct or indirect ties to the old communist secret police and/or its assets) and the current government, the campaign against the Macierewicz team seemed to follow an eerily similar script. The “Smolensk Sect” – as the committee and its supporters were contemptuously dubbed – was accused of politicizing the Smolensk tragedy and seeking to divide and polarize the country. They were portrayed as lunatics stoking the fires of fear and driving Poland toward either a civil war, or even a war with Russia. The committee was simultaneously dismissed as a cabal of mentally unstable “conspiracy theorists,” and Antoni Macierewicz and Jarosław Kaczyński were advised by some detractors to seek psychiatric help – a convenient tactic and effective method during the former Soviet Union of disposing of the opposition. In fact, Macierewicz was

ridiculed on the cover of the Polish edition of *Newsweek*, which depicted the former Interior Minister as Osama bin Laden, the caption stating, “Running Amok: Will hate speech spark a real war?” Macierewicz’s tires also had been slashed by unidentified perpetrators.

The Moscow-Warsaw churning that caused this hostile atmosphere has nevertheless failed to deter the independent Macierewicz Committee and its growing body of experts from further exploring the matter. Since the publication of the *White Book* and the Miller Report, many crucial developments and noteworthy revelations have torn away significant aspects of this shroud of mystery surrounding Smolensk.

To date, both the original black boxes and the disintegrated wreckage of the government’s Tupolev 154-M – the rightful property of the Republic of Poland – remain in the hands of the Russian Federation. In April 2012, the Russians also scrubbed the wreckage clean, causing an uproar in Poland, which forced the country’s Chief Military Prosecutor’s Office to inquire into the causes of this sudden concern for cleanliness. During the same month, Moscow announced that it will begin returning the wreckage to Warsaw, but the process is expected to last for several months, i.e. until the completion of an ongoing investigation by Russian prosecutors. This situation continues to pose an obstacle for non-Russian investigators, but it has not discouraged the inquisitive.

### **The “armored birch tree”: Not a cause of the crash**

A case in point is engineering professor Wieslaw Binienda of the University of Akron, a fracture mechanics specialist, and a NASA expert who participated in the inquiry following the space shuttle *Columbia* disaster. He was skeptical of the official version of the crash, whereby the descending aircraft struck a birch tree with its left wing, causing its tip to break off and the entire aircraft to flip over. According to official data, the Tupolev aircraft also seemed to ascend *and* accelerate following its alleged collision with the “armored birch” (as some Poles have sarcastically branded it), which made even less sense from the perspective of physics and thermodynamics.

The curious scientist decided to test the birch-tree hypothesis using a highly credible computer software modeling program, LS-DYNA, which is used to create a realistic 3-D animation sequence, following a complex fracture incident. Using parameters from the governmental Miller Report, Binienda entered the data pertaining to the aircraft. He was forced to estimate the density of the tree because the official investigators failed to analyze the birch. Even when taking into account allowances for a weaker wing and a harder tree, Prof. Binienda’s simulation demonstrated that it would have been impossible for the tree to break off a piece of the airliner’s wing. Given the properties of both, the wing would have sliced through the birch “like a knife,” incurring insignificant damage to the wing’s edge, at most. After all, the expert argued, the

passenger jets which crashed into the Twin Towers during the September 11 terrorist attacks simply cut through an array of steel girders. Furthermore, had the “armored birch” actually broken the wing, it would have landed much farther away from the crash site than it did. Binienda was invited by the Macierewicz Committee to the Polish Parliament (he also addressed the European Parliament in the spring of 2012), where he presented his findings in September 2011, challenging his critics to prove him wrong. So far, no serious contenders have stepped up to the plate.

## **Two jolts detected**

Other scientists have, however, emerged to further challenge the official narrative on the Smolensk air crash. The American manufacturer of the Tupolev’s collision warning system, Universal Avionics Systems Corporation (UASC), of Tucson, Arizona, succeeded in reclaiming and analyzing it, in cooperation with the federal National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB). Prof. Kazimierz Nowaczyk, a physicist affiliated with the University of Maryland, also analyzed these results, arguing that they demonstrate proof of two sudden jolts in the descending aircraft, which might be convincingly interpreted as evidence of an explosion. Prof. Nowaczyk repeated his hypothesis during a European Parliament hearing on Smolensk in March of this year (along with Prof. Binienda). In a sinister turn of events, however, he was rushed to Johns Hopkins University Hospital in Baltimore soon after his return to the United States. Under the care of America’s top physicians, he struggled against sepsis for a two-week period, prompting some to recall the 2006 London poisoning of the former FSB defector Alexander Litvinenko.

## **An explosion?**

While both the UASC and NTSB refused to confirm or deny whether their analysis found evidence of an explosion, Australian-based Grzegorz Szuladziński – a mechanical engineer specializing in blast effects – believes that the two jolts detected by Nowaczyk, coupled with the disintegration of the presidential Tupolev and the state of the bodies of the passengers, certainly point to an explosion. As he wrote in an email conversation with a Cleveland *Plain Dealer* reporter: “Shrapnel equals explosion, and there was plenty of it.”

## **“Russia is a great power!”**

But Polish-born specialists were not the only ones to offer their services. This spring, Prof. Michael Baden – a world-class American forensic pathologist, who participated in the autopsies of John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, and the Romanov imperial family – also offered to help the Poles. Baden flew to Poland and made himself available to participate in the exhumation of the bodies of parliamentarian Przemysław Gosiewski, one of the Smolensk victims. His body was to be examined due to the serious inaccuracies in the original Russian autopsy reports. Yet,

Baden was rebuffed by the prosecutors, even though Gosiewski's wife, Senator Beata Gosiewska, clearly asked for his presence, and the Polish specialists picked to perform the autopsy voiced no objections to the American's participation (even without Baden's participation, the second autopsy nevertheless revealed that the Russians had essentially "desecrated" the body, performing merely a mock autopsy). As Gosiewska testified during a hearing of the Macierewicz Committee in late March, her comments to the media regarding the "inhuman" nature of refusal provoked the ire of the Chief Military Prosecutor and his deputy. Following the official niceties, Gosiewska recalled, the head prosecutor lost his temper and, in a fit of angry self-defense, emphasized that "Russia is a great power! I know that you think I'm a traitor, but it's not so!" implying that any further investigation or questioning of Russia's handling of the Smolensk air disaster was futile and foolishly provocative toward the great power that is Russia.

The outburst is quite characteristic of the present Warsaw government's approach to the Smolensk plane crash. Other offers of assistance forthcoming from certain quarters in the U.S. (including the CIA) and the EU were rejected by the Tusk government in Warsaw. In fact, Prosecutor Marek Pasionek was removed from the case in June of 2011 for maintaining channels of communication with American intelligence regarding Smolensk. Earlier, during the fall of 2010, Donald Tusk's foreign minister, Radek Sikorski, blasted Antoni Macierewicz and Anna Fotyga, Jarosław Kaczyński's foreign minister in 2006 – 2007, for their brief fact-finding mission to the U.S., accusing them of "treason," no less. This disturbing defensive trend indicates that more than twenty years after the implosion of the Soviet Bloc, the post-communists in Poland continue to view the United States as an enemy power and Russia as a trustworthy friend and ally.

### **Who checked President Kaczyński's voice mail in Russia?**

Meanwhile, in early May, the Polish public learned of yet another startling revelation. According to Poland's Agency of Internal Security (ABW), someone in the Russian Federation hacked into President Kaczyński's cellular phone only a few minutes after the crash time (the crash occurred at 10:41 AM Russian time, while the first break-in occurred at 10:46 AM) and checked his voice mail. The phones and laptops of other passengers were also broken into. Further, the ABW analysis revealed another break-in to cover up the previous hacking of Kaczyński's voice mail. The Polish security agency pointed out that whoever broke into the equipment was a high-class specialist. The phone was eventually returned to Poland, albeit in a burned, unusable condition. Polish military prosecutors opened an investigation, although they amazingly chose to pursue only a misdemeanor – the unlawful charging of another individual's cell phone account – which was eventually dropped. At the same time, the Russian rescue attempt on April 10, 2010 was quite sluggish, in spite of the presence of five different Russian military formations – including the elite Spetsnaz - near the crash site.

## **A possible assassination?**

All of the above developments have prompted some to seriously consider the assassination scenario. Antoni Macierewicz asked: “If this was not an assassination, then what was it?” Jarosław Kaczyński, Poland’s main opposition leader, admitted that he suspects that the post-Soviet Russian government simply killed his twin brother and the entire Polish delegation.

It has been suggested that the two jolts Prof. Kazimierz Nowaczyk detected, while reviewing the analysis of the aircraft’s collision warning system, are consistent with the detonation of a thermobaric charge, more commonly known as a fuel-air bomb. In the case of a thermobaric blast, the initial explosion signifies the release of a flammable aerosol, followed by a second one resulting from the ignition of the substance. Such bombs are incredibly destructive, particularly in enclosed spaces. The disintegration of the aircraft and the bodies of the Poles would appear to support the thermobaric explosion hypothesis. Furthermore, both the Soviet and post-Soviet Russian military was quite active in developing thermobaric weaponry, which was utilized in both Afghanistan and Chechnya.

The assassination theory is also publicly endorsed by veteran CIA officer and new technologies expert, S. Eugene Poteat. Having over fifty years of experience with aviation, Poteat argued bluntly that: “They [the Russians] had the means, the will, the knowledge, the background, the assets. Everything it takes to commit a crime like that, they’re past masters at it.”

The famous KGB-SVR spymaster, Sergey Tretyakov, who defected to the FBI, contributed an insider Soviet-Russian perspective. On March 8, 2012, WikiLeaks revealed that Tretyakov, under the pseudonym “Comrade J,” had corresponded with STRATFOR’s George Friedman stating that an assassination was a realistic possibility. Only twelve days following the Smolensk crash, the Russian wrote that his former masters “have such plans (scenarios) to kill other Western leaders, which may be implemented.” Tretyakov died in rather mysterious circumstances less than two months later, in June 2010. Previously, on Christmas Day, December 25, 2011, STRATFOR had sustained a devastating hacking attack that included the loss of confidential emails.

## **Why would Putin kill Kaczyński?**

Supporters of the various shades of the official narrative often argue that the Russians would have been stupid to assassinate Kaczyński. According to historian Padraic Kenney:

...the president [Kaczyński] did tend to make somewhat aggressive statements about Russia. (...) Kaczyński was not dangerous to the Russians. Even if some rogue army officer thought [killing Polish government leaders] was a great idea, Putin certainly knew it wouldn't have

been. You have the president of a country with whom you had a sometimes rocky relationship die on your territory? Not a good thing.

To begin with, Kenney failed to clarify what he meant by Kaczyński's allegedly "somewhat aggressive statements" vis-à-vis Russia, particularly in light of Vladimir Putin's characteristic violent rhetoric, such as his threat to "hang by the balls" the Republic of Georgia's independent president, Mikheil Saakashvili, against whom Putin unleashed 'the dogs of war' on August 8, 2008. Further, Kenney clearly contradicts himself and, in a truly post-modernist fashion, draws a conclusion without examining the evidence. Kaczyński was clearly perceived as "dangerous" in Russia, although not on account of his "somewhat aggressive statements." Rather, his policies at home aimed to curb Russian influence in a country which the Kremlin continually seeks to dominate. In addition, Kaczyński's foreign policy strove to check post-Soviet Russia's neo-imperialist ambitions by consolidating formerly communist countries in the *Intermarium* region (i.e. the Central and Eastern European lands between the Baltic, Black, and Adriatic Seas) into a united bloc allied with the United States. And Putin was not amused.

Had the crash indeed been an assassination operation, the hypothetical Russian downing of the plane on their own territory would have appeared so counter-intuitive and reckless that the very improbability of it would help deflect suspicion. Otherwise, the quite unsophisticated nature of the hypothetical assassination would not necessarily debunk the liquidation theory. It might simply reflect the ham-handed ways of Vladimir Putin and his circle. After all, as a KGB officer he only managed to secure a post behind the Iron Curtain – in East Germany – while the *crème de la crème* of the Soviet secret police was deployed in "enemy territory," i.e. the West. Finally, it is quite imprudent to ascribe purely rational motives – in the liberal and Western understanding of the term – to a regime that is neither liberal nor Western. If Smolensk was indeed an assassination, revenge might have been a likely motive (Kaczyński had dared to cross Putin more than once), and the thirst for vengeance often overrides cool rational calculation – especially, if an opportunity suddenly presents itself (an entire planeload of "Russophobes").

Some have even suggested that while Moscow will adamantly deny and/or ridicule the assassination hypothesis, it nevertheless liquidated the passengers of Tupolev to send a message to other states, especially intransigent and "unreasonable" neighbors in the post-Soviet sphere and the "near abroad." Even so, retaining plausible deniability would be important for the Kremlin.

### **The convenience of the official version**

Thus, while important evidence points toward foul play, many actors have invested substantial political and even economic capital in the "pilot error" version of the Smolensk air crash. It has been quite convenient for both Moscow and Warsaw to pin the entire blame for the crash on the

victims themselves. Thus, decision-makers in both capitals could easily dodge responsibility, some even receiving promotions, while the dead were no longer in a position to speak out.

The Obama administration is reluctant to jeopardize its “reset” policy with Russia – in spite of obvious signals that it has only emboldened the Kremlin’s aggressive demeanor (e.g. Russia’s recent threat to strike elements of a NATO missile shield with nuclear weapons) – although elements of America’s foreign policy and intelligence community have expressed interest in Smolensk. The EU – and particularly Germany and France – is also unlikely to undermine its strategic partnership with Russia and supplies of their natural gas and oil in defense of Poland, especially, if the country’s own government demonstrates little interest in pursuing the case. And, if Smolensk was indeed an assassination, *a unilateral and unprovoked act of war*, Russia would also have a clear and obvious interest in preventing conclusive evidence from leaking out. Definitive proof would further hurt Russia’s already fraying international image, although the question is: just how much? After all, the West has been very tolerant of the Putinist regime’s thuggish tendencies – both at home and abroad – in the name of good relations with Russia. Even so, the Kremlin would certainly wish to avoid an international PR fiasco.

### **Why is the Polish government so passive?**

The attitude of the Polish leadership is even more perplexing, however. On the surface, the pro-Tusk establishment in Poland appears gripped by a paralyzing fear of antagonizing the great Russian “bear,” lest Putin replay the Georgian invasion scenario of August 2008. The defenders of the official version sometimes seem to ask “so what are we to do? Declare war on Russia?!” – as if no other tools of statecraft were available along the wide spectrum ranging from surrender to war.

But is the expectation that a more inquisitive and assertive Polish stance on Smolensk would unleash Russian aggression a realistic one? Poland is, after all, a NATO ally, and is a larger, more populous, and militarily powerful country than “little” Georgia. Russia might easily employ its favorite strong-arm tactics – such as suspending natural gas supplies (or raising prices), an embargo on Polish imports, or cyberwarfare – but a military invasion is quite doubtful – and would be considered uncivilized in the 21st Century – post-Cold War world in which we live, in spite of the Kremlin’s jingoism and saber-rattling.

Can the stubborn refusal to delve into Smolensk, lest it open up a potential Pandora’s Box, be explained by other reasons than a fearful and pusillanimous drive to save Poland from a conflict with Russia? Or, are Polish government officials and prosecutors more concerned about their own lives, hoping to avoid visits from post-Soviet hired assassins or perishing in apparent “accidents”? Or, maybe the Kremlin possesses potentially damaging materials which could seriously compromise powerful players in Poland’s post-communist/liberal establishment? After



all, some secret police documents may have been destroyed and serious de-communication may have been avoided in post-Soviet Poland, but it is very likely that Moscow retained copies of all the secret police materials of its Polish satellite in its archives, leaving plenty of room for blackmail. In addition, the tentacles of the Soviet and post-Soviet *agentura* in Poland, in addition to the native networks, may have been singed under the cabinet of Jarosław Kaczyński (2006 – 2007), but have been slowly growing back under Tusk and Komorowski's watch. Some have even hinted that the Russians potentially activated their SVR/GRU sleeper assets in Poland to help set a trap to kill Kaczyński.

So far, we can only speculate on these questions, as we have done above, for the case on Smolensk nevertheless remains open. If the Russian and Polish governments fail to change their approach toward the air disaster to allay doubts in a convincing manner, suspicions of foul play will continue to grow. Unless an independent, unobstructed, and international investigation of the tragic plane crash is allowed to weigh all the evidence, Smolensk will continue to poison the political atmosphere, potentially leading to international fallout transcending the relations between Russia and Poland.

**Note:** The above article focuses on developments following the publication of the Miller Commission Report and the *White Book* of the Polish parliamentary team to investigate the Smolensk air crash in June – July 2011. For background information and events transpiring prior to July 2011 please see: Paweł Piotr Styrna, “Case on the Smolensk Plane Crash Still Open Despite Polish Government Report,” *SFPPR News & Analysis*, September 2, 2011.

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