

Interview with Gen. Walter Jajko

Nasz Dziennik, 5-6 March 2011

Piotr Falkowski: How did you hear about the Polish plane crash on April 10th, 2010? What was your first thought?

My first reaction was that the crash was probably due to pilot error. This is often the case with military aviation accidents in the U.S. However, knowing that the crash took place on Russian territory, apparently at a secondary airfield, that Russian equipment is often either inoperable, unreliable, obsolete, or poorly maintained, that Russian operators are often sloppy in their work, that they often are poor in the use of the English Language, the lingua franca of international aviation, and that the Polish state leadership was in effect decapitated, I was suspicious of the Russians' explanations. What also bothered me was that the Russians were suspiciously fast in providing an explanation and subsequently refusing Polish participation in the investigation, publicly providing some contradictory explanations as to details of the crash, refusing to hand over the "black boxes" (two flight recorders) to Polish authorities, and then delaying the investigation, although I know that aircraft crash investigations in the U.S. will sometimes take months and even a couple of years. I also should mention that I have heard that the Russians did not have the most up-to-date landing instrumentation system at that airfield or that it was functioning intermittently. I am astonished that the Russian air control authorities did not close the airfield because of the landing conditions *in toto* and require, not merely suggest, that the aircraft divert to a first class airfield with all the standard international landing instrumentation and, of course, safe weather conditions. I am particularly suspicious of this failure to insist on diversion to another airfield because of the importance and number of the passengers aboard the aircraft, whether or not the Polish President did not want to land at Moscow and or to meet, especially in an official capacity, with Russian authorities. If a crash did occur, suspicion as to the circumstances and motivation for permitting the landing, together with a large share of the blame, would have fallen on the Russians in any case. Apparently, they were willing to take this risk. However, knowing how calculating the Soviets were in such kinds of incidents and that Soviet interests, ambitions, resentments, attitudes, policies, practices, traditions, and values continue into the current Russian state and administration, I would speculate that the Russians might be willing to provide the conditions for, though not necessarily cause, an accident particularly because of the political advantages they would reap. My personal opinion is that, based on history, for example the KGB-sponsored attempted assassination of Karol Wojtyła, His Holiness The Blessed Pope John Paul II the Great, and many other great crimes committed by the Soviet leadership, the current Russian leadership is sufficiently ruthless to have staged the conditions so that a fatal accident was almost certain. The Russians are simply not to be trusted.

What is the significance for a nation's military and the NATO alliance to lose so many senior military commanders?

I think that the loss to Poland, NATO, and the U.S. was devastating. I would hope that the Polish Government has trained deputies well so that they could easily step into the positions of those who were killed. The main difficulty that I see is that the Polish leaders who were killed had a realistic appreciation of Russia, Poland, Europe, and NATO. This appreciation could not have been friendly to Russia because of Russia's past and present behavior towards Poland, not because of Polish animosity toward Russia, though, God knows, there is more than enough cause in Russian behavior for that. Parenthetically, it should be stressed that the entire Russian behavior, pronouncements etc. following the crash and until this day demonstrates at the very least an underlying hostility to Poland. Moreover, as usually evidenced in the past, the Russians accept no responsibility or blame and usually assign blame, often in a malign manner, to the victims. The Russians, as were the Soviets, are unrepentantly ruthless, even vicious, when it is in their political interest to act thus. It must always be kept in mind, that, in one way or another, Russia's route to Europe, its ambitions on the Continent, always proceed through and against Poland, and, therefore, against Western Civilization. Russian behavior will not change because of one or another policy or one or another treaty. Russian foreign policy and behavior towards its neighbors will only change fundamentally when Russia accepts Western values in its polity. As to the substance of your question, the loss to Poland, Europe as a whole, NATO, and to the U.S. is profound because collectively, if not individually in each case, the fallen Polish leadership had a realistic and strategic appreciation of Russia *vis-a-vis* Europe, Poland, and NATO. Both Europe and the U.S. could use a stiff brace of this Polish understanding to replace their feckless wishful thinking, moral weakness, and self-disarmament towards Russia. The Polish leadership saw the world as it is, not as Europe and the U.S. do, as they wish it were. It is the fallen Polish leadership, the first generation, that threw off Russian slavery and negotiated the return to the West and made those fundamental defense, intelligence, and diplomatic agreements that, if they are implemented by the West as intended, can provide the basis for remaking "New" Eastern Europe and firmly uniting it with the West. I am in no position to be so presumptuous as to offer the Polish People advice as to their independence, freedom, sovereignty, and basic long-term interests, but I suggest, and hope, that Polish state institutions under the successors to the fallen leadership, particularly the several political parties and the foreign policy, defense, and intelligence establishments, educate the people in the strategic realities and necessities of Poland's position. No state in the West ought to pursue the chimera of a genuine, lasting, trusting strategic relationship with Russia founded on friendship until Russia changes, such an expectation is self-delusional. After so much tragic history and so many bloody sacrifices, a Polish relationship with Russia ought to be characterized by "cooperate but verify."

Should the United States or NATO analyze this case from the point of security procedures? Is it important to them? Are there any standard procedures in similar cases?

I should think that the obvious, even startling, lesson is that not only Poland, but also other European states, immediately improve their continuity of government plans in case of a catastrophe. The unexpectedness of such an event is itself a paralyzing shock. Nevertheless, states have to put in place successors and working state bodies immediately to counter or mitigate any profound and lasting negative consequences. Yes, Poland, NATO, and the U.S. need to examine this crash and to make a damage assessment as to any security breach. I don't know what documents or cell phones were aboard the aircraft, but steps to minimize damage should have been taken immediately. It may be that the United States National Security Agency

may have had some communications intercepts and that if these exist they might contribute to both a security damage assessment and to some information about the crash itself. I assume that such inquiries were made and answered long ago.

What information about the case and investigations provided by the [Russian-dominated] International Aviation Committee (MAK) and the Russian Prosecutor's Office has made its way to Washington? Are you interested in it? What do you think about the case?

I have no information in response to this question.

Do you know about similar events in air traffic in or near Russia? What is your experience with the attitude of the Russian air force? How do they treat "hostile" planes?

I have no information about any similar incidents. The Russians generally are very defensive, uncooperative, and belligerent in their behavior as to foreign aircraft intruding into their airspace inadvertently; on the other hand, they are deliberately offensive and aggressive in their violations of other countries' airspace. They seem to abide by only one consideration, no matter what the international law, and that is their immediate self-interest. In my personal view, I would not be surprised if at some time in the future the Russians shot down a civil airliner or a U.S. reconnaissance aircraft in international airspace, similar to the Soviets' shooting down of the Korean airliner.

Aren't you surprised that Poland actually waived the right to her own investigation and surrendered it to the Russian? Does such behavior cause the loss of credibility for our Western allies?

Absolutely yes, Poland's abdication from the investigation was a shocking subordination to Russian interests and acceptance of the legitimacy, truth, correctness, and acceptability of Russian explanations, findings, and behavior. I think that the Polish failure to participate in the investigation is a self-inflicted blow to Polish sovereignty. Such kowtowing can only lead the Russians to assume and continue to act on a view of Polish subordination. The Polish failure simply buttresses Russian disdain for Polish interests and reinforces the Russian view of Poland's second class, inferior relationship to Russia. If Poland does not stand up for itself vigorously, determinedly, and consistently, it cannot expect France and Germany especially, NATO in general, and the U.S. to stand up for it.

The current Polish government focuses on reconciliation and rebuilding relations with Russia (similarly to American "reset"). Is it good policy after the crash?

It is my opinion that each one of the European countries and the U.S. would be inclined, although it won't admit to it, if and when it is would be faced with a choice in some critical event, to sacrifice Poland's interest, indeed the interests of all of "New Europe", to the fantasy of a strategic partnership with Russia. It is not the U.S. relationship or the European relationship with Russia that needs to be "reset"; it is Russia's relationship with the rest of the world that needs to be "reset". It is imperative that Poland maintain a realistic view of strategic political

relationships and actively defend its interests. It is good that Poland can act reasonably with amity towards its Russian neighbor, but a genuine reconciliation between them has to be founded on reality and the truth. It is Russia that has to overcome its history, not Poland, and to walk the extra mile. It is not Poland that owes Russia; it is Russia that owes Poland. Until the Russian Government gets it out of its head that it is not an empire and that it is not owed a special, superior, privileged position towards its neighbors, Poland will not be safe and should be wary. In the end, as in 1939-1945 and afterward, no one will look out for Polish interests especially if there is a cost to be paid; only Poland can and must assert and protect its own interests. With the decline of Atlanticism and NATO and the increase in the pacifism and demilitarization of NATO, the United States is losing the Continental pillar of its superpower status and is rapidly ceasing to be the paramount European power. It is ironic, sad, and unfair that Poland reenters the West just as the West is no longer interested in its own - and Poland's - defense. Caveat emptor, look to your own house!

Immediately following the disaster, the Russian the Russians have pinned the guilt squarely upon the shoulders of the Polish crew of the Tu-154M (accusing them of “carelessness”). Eventually, the report of MAK (Russian-dominated “International Aviation Commission”) confirmed these allegations. All Polish notices, objections regarding the airport, and ATM issues were ignored. What do you think about this?

Of course, naturally. This is exactly what one would expect from the Russians. A secondary lesson from this tragedy is to get rid of all Russian transport aircraft and buy Boeing.

It is alleged that late General Blasik (Have you known him personally or something about him?), Polish Air Forces commander-in-chief, was present during the tragic landing in the cockpit. And they charge that he pressured the crew to land regardless anything. How can such a claim be justified?

I don't know whether General Blasik entered the pilot's cabin and whether he pressured the pilot or gave a direct order to him to land. I haven't seen any evidence on that point. I simply know from experience in the USAF that the aircraft commander is in complete charge. No passenger would force an aircraft commander to land at a particular airfield. It is the aircraft commander who is responsible for the safety of the aircraft, crew, and passengers and for completing the mission. He or she is held responsible.

What kind of assistance in the investigation of the April tragedy can Poland expect from her allies?

As to assistance from allies in the investigation, Poland should have requested that immediately after the crash. U.S. Federal Aviation Authority expert investigators could have assisted, but, of course, all was dependent on Russian cooperation, particularly on acceptance of outside investigators and the conditions of their participation. I don't think that the Russians would have accepted any outside assistance. I think that Poland has missed its opportunity. Unfortunately, I think that it is much too late to ask for outside assistance and all that the Poles can hope for is some modicum of cooperation from the Russians in a reopening of the investigation by Poland alone, which I think is highly unlikely. Of course, the Russians will take

umbrage and will be offended, claiming that even the broaching of a suggestion to reopen the investigation is an unfriendly act and will have consequences. Tough! I think that Poland should go ahead and reopen the investigation. I do not think that the Russians will cooperate. I think that the Russians gained too much advantage from this "accident" to have anyone examine it closely. The Russians gained by the fatalities because they or the accident eliminated a leadership that regarded Russia realistically and would not suppress Polish history or interests for some Russian "friendship". Poland, under the dead leadership, was an obstacle to Russia's advancement of its interests in Europe. The Russians got rid of a Polish national leadership that had some backbone just as they got rid of the Polish national leadership following 1944. Moreover, Russian behavior after the crash, however motivated, throws sufficient suspicion so that it tends to split the present Polish leadership and the Polish political class in its response and attitude towards Russia. If nothing else, the crash and Russian behavior has accomplished this much. Polish speculation about a Russian conspiracy and a wholesale assassination has, to Russia's advantage, effectively split the Polish political class and weakened any opposition to Russian policy *vis-a-vis* Poland. In my personal opinion, the Russian leadership and the KGB are more than capable and willing to commit a crime of this magnitude, this does not mean that they did so.

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Disclaimer: The views of Gen. Walter Jajko do not reflect the views of the US Government or the Department of Defense.