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Death in the Forest

The year 2010 was difficult for Poland. The presidential plane crash on Saturday, April 10, at Smolensk airport, twenty kilometers from the Katyn Forest, claimed the lives of President Lech Kaczynski, his wife, and ninety-four other public figures. The emotional impact of the accident, which took place as the official entourage arrived in Russia to commemorate the seventieth anniversary of the Katyn Massacre—the 1940 assassination of Poland’s officer corps—was profound. As if marking the event liturgically, an ash cloud from the eruption of Iceland’s Eyjafjallajökull volcano floated all week over the funeral proceedings, preventing world leaders from participating in the ceremonies. In May and June historic flooding left swaths of Poland under water, the Vistula fording its banks across the country’s plains. As event followed event, one began to have the impression that, two decades after Poland’s historic rebirth in the June 1989 elections, a strange reckoning was taking place regarding the country’s past, as well as its future. However, like an unfolding story in which difficult trials eventually lead, if not to a resolution, then at least to new perspectives, the end of the year saw a number of unforeseen developments—even if historical clarification is never as tidy or gratifying as what may be offered us by literature.

In Warsaw, in the hours immediately following the airplane accident, there was an outpouring of solidarity that spanned the political spectrum. Although quite a few of the passengers aboard Polish Air Force Tu-154M were from Kaczynski’s Law and Justice party, many had other political affiliations, or had played important roles in Poland’s history, the latter including Anna Walentynowicz, one of the founders of the Solidarity trade union. Others aboard were the commanders of the Air, Navy, and Ground forces, current and former members of the Senate and the Sejm, the last President-in-Exile, and the heads

of a number of governmental organizations, including the central bank. Consequently, for the first days of mourning there was an unspoken policy of restraint, tacitly forbidding inter-party wrangling. During the afternoon hours following the announcement of the crash, crowds began to gather in front of the Presidential Palace, keeping vigil and depositing a veritable landmass of candles. On Tuesday, President Kaczynski's body was flown back to the capital. There, throughout the course of the week, he and his wife would lie in state. By Thursday, dense crowds filled almost the entire length of Warsaw's historic Krakowskie Przedmieście boulevard, masses of people awaiting their turn to file through the Presidential Palace and pay their last respects. Outside the gates, the volume of votive candles grew so immense—and generated so much heat—that it was necessary for them to be tended by volunteers in protective clothing. The sea of melting paraffin filled the air with a wholly disturbing odor that became one of the defining memories of the week. In those hours before the rhetoric of politics returned, one felt that the grief expressed was sincere. And it was as if the red and yellow honeycombs of flames—burning above body temperature—were a sharply poignant, if ultimately failed, attempt to reanimate those lying in state in the formal rooms beyond.

On Saturday at noon an official memorial service provided a focus for collective mourning. A large stage was erected in Pilsudski Square, a green park located a block away from the Presidential Palace. The stage's white risers, bordered by flowers, ascended to a long backdrop displaying black and white photographs of the deceased. The stage was bisected by a three-story-high white cross. As midday approached, buses arrived, moving slowly through the crowds, their windshields clearly marked with insignias specifying the political affiliations of the passengers. Following behind them was a vast procession: enlisted men from all branches of Poland's Army, Navy, and Air Forces, including cavalymen in dress uniforms carrying lances, officials in velvet gowns and three-pointed hats, and foot soldiers in fur caps. As solemn as the occasion was, in the pale April light there were moments when it seemed impossible not to question the excessiveness of the pageantry—even under the circumstances—which might have been drawn from an encyclopedia of Polish history.

Above the procession repeatedly rose the strains of Chopin's *Marche funèbre* with its famous opening dirge and its unexpected, painfully buoyant second theme. The contrast between the two musical themes only seemed to heighten the day's sorrow. For on that morning, it was as if the music strove to convince the crowds that the agony of death and the hope of resurrection could be compressed into half a dozen measures. But for a society that has long identified itself with a virtually messianic level of suffering, it was apparent that "closure," in this case, was not going to be swift. In the next few days the same funeral music was played repeatedly along the boulevard and in the Old Town by military ensembles of various sizes—from full orchestras to small quartets—as the bodies of the remaining politicians and dignitaries were returned from Moscow, where the investigation of the accident was taking place. On Monday afternoon, a week after the crash, two military orchestras arriving from different directions—and playing the same *Marche funèbre*—nearly collided before the black wrought-iron gates of the Presidential Palace, heightening the tragedy's already surreal atmosphere.

While the sentiment of civic solidarity following the accident seemed powerful

and genuine, by the morning of the memorial service it had already begun to be marred by controversy over the planned interment of President Lech Kaczynski and his wife at Wawel Castle in Krakow, the traditional resting place for Polish kings and national heroes. Newspaper editorials and televised images of public protests brought to the surface political rifts that had temporarily been put aside. The accident began to lose its otherworldly cast. That said, the sudden loss of so many public figures continued to resonate unsettlingly. It was unimaginable, in a single plane crash, to lose an entire cross-section of the government; it was simply intolerable to lose them so close to one of the principal sites of the 1940 massacre of Poland's elite officer corps, a place of profound symbolic importance to Poland. In the end, the reaction to the April 10 crash was something akin to a civic seizure. Accordingly, despite the reemergence of political discord, in their eulogies at the memorial service, politicians from all political parties had difficulty in lightly employing the term we use for the "mere" maledictions of chance: the word "accident."

2.

To understand Poland's response to the presidential plane crash in Smolensk and its reverberations with the Katyn Massacre of 1940, one must first return to a few historical facts relating to the onset of the Second World War. For the West, September 1, 1939, is not only remembered as the date of Germany's invasion of Poland, but is seen as one of the major turning points of the twentieth century. For those living in the East, however, September 17, 1939—the beginning of the USSR's invasion of Eastern Poland—is a date of almost equal and perhaps more lasting import. As is well-known, during the month of August 1939, a German-Soviet Non-Aggression treaty was signed by German Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop and Soviet Commissar Vyacheslav Molotov. The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact promised neutrality between the two countries, but also famously contained a secret supplementary protocol that delineated respective spheres of influence in Eastern Europe. It proposed, in the event of war, the division of Poland between Germany and the USSR and the absorption of the Baltic States into the Soviet Union.¹ The document also questioned whether it was "desirable in their mutual interests to preserve an independent Polish state,"² a clause that would haunt Poland for nearly the next fifty years.³

Confronted by these two successive invasions, and without military support from its allies France and Britain, Warsaw surrendered on September 27, 1939. Unlike Germany, the Soviet Union never officially declared war on Poland; instead it claimed that the Red Army was entering Poland due to the dangerous vacuum left by the fall of the Polish government, as well as to protect the Belorussians and Ukrainians living in Poland's borderlands. Initially, it was not clear which side the Soviets were on. However, it did not take long for the Poles to understand that the Soviets were not there to come to their aid. Nearly a quarter of a million members of the Polish armed forces were taken prisoner by the Soviets, including more than 14,000 members of Poland's officer corps, a group that included high-ranking Polish military figures as well as prominent members of society, such as physicians, professors, journalists, priests, and artists serving as noncommissioned officers. Caught within the Soviet sphere, this elite corps, often referred to as the "flower of the Polish nation," was deported to the Soviet Union and to Soviet-occupied territories.

During the autumn of 1939 and up until mid-spring 1940, the officers were principally held in three special prisoner-of-war camps in the USSR: Kozelsk, Ostashkov, and Starobelsk. The Soviets separated the prisoners into lower-ranking officers and commanding staff. As officers, they were not subject to prisoner exchange with Germany to be used as forced laborers.⁴ In addition to this group of officers, more than 10,000 other individuals, primarily political prisoners, were caught up in this first or subsequent sweeps and were held in People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs (NKVD) jails in western Ukraine and western Belorussia. In keeping with NKVD practices of the time, many members of the officers' and political prisoners' families—a group estimated at 200,000 individuals—were also rounded up during the fall of 1939 and the spring of 1940 and deported to Siberia and Soviet Central Asia.⁵

Knowledge of the officers' whereabouts was available to family members, who were allowed to correspond with them until the spring of 1940. However, this communication was abruptly interrupted in mid-March when the NKVD began a "clearing out" of the three camps, as well as of the NKVD prisons in the Ukraine and Belorussia. The prisoners, many of whom believed that they were being released to go home—and in some cases were honored with a military band upon evacuation from the camps—were transported to three separate locations. Prisoners from the Ostashkov camp were taken by rail to the Kalinin NKVD jail and executed; their bodies were then transported to the village of Mednoye for burial. Those held in Starobelsk were taken by rail to an NKVD prison in Kharkiv and shot. They were buried in a wooded park near an NKVD sanatorium. Finally, those at the Kozelsk camp were transported in prison railway cars via Smolensk to Gnezdovo Station, located near the village of Katyn. After execution in an NKVD restricted area, the officers were deposited in mass graves at the edge of the Katyn Forest.

It is at this last location that, in the spring of 1943, the first mass graves were unearthed by German forces occupying the Smolensk area after Germany's invasion of Russia. On April 13, 1943, Berlin radio made an official announcement of the discovery of the graves. Even though only a percentage of the total number of officers' bodies were actually buried in the Katyn Forest, their discovery during the war has led to the convention of the entire historical event being called "the Katyn Massacre," or simply "Katyn."⁶ Following 1989, when the Soviet archives were opened to Russian historians, no exact reason was found concerning the decision to execute this officer corps during April and May of 1940. What is known, however, is that on February 28, 1940, a meeting took place between Joseph Stalin and secret police chief Lavrenty Beria. We do not have a record of what was discussed during this meeting, but on March 5, 1940, a memorandum was drawn up by Beria that described the prisoners as "hardened, irremediable enemies of Soviet power" and urged the NKVD to examine their cases and "apply to them the supreme punishment, [execution by] shooting."⁷ This document was then signed by Beria, and it also bears in pencil the signatures of the Soviet officials Voroshilov, Molotov, and Mikoyan—as well as that of Joseph Stalin.⁸

Confronted with the German army's discovery, the Soviets denied all responsibility, though paradoxically, after the executions were carried out and following Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941—and Stalin's new alliance with the allies—there were some in the Soviet hierarchy who

regretted this act.⁹ On July 30, 1941, General Wladyslaw Sikorski, Prime Minister of the Polish Government-in-Exile and Commander-in-Chief of the Polish Forces, and Soviet Ambassador Ivan Maisky signed an agreement reestablishing Polish-Soviet relations. This agreement invalidated the Soviet-German Treaties of 1939 and granted amnesty to all Polish prisoners of war. In order to render aid to Soviet troops fighting the Germans, the Sikorski-Maisky Agreement also proposed the formation of a Polish army on USSR territory.¹⁰ Many Polish soldiers were freed and began to appear at designated Polish army centers. However, this was not the case with the officers. The first question posed by General Sikorski in negotiations with the Soviets was regarding the exact whereabouts of his officer corps. All requests for clarification received the same response: no information about them was available. Legend has it, though, that in the course of a dinner conversation that took place in October 1940—a conversation not generally known until after 1989—Lavrenty Beria remarked to General Zygmunt Berling, a future commander of the Polish Army in the USSR, “We have made a great mistake.”¹¹

3.

Of course the assassination of Poland’s elite officer corps represents only one of the many atrocities carried out during World War II. In certain ways it might not have held the same level of significance during the postwar period—and up until the present—if subsequent events had unfolded differently. Above all, the almost complete suppression of the crime during the war and into the postwar period meant that in Polish memory Katyn came to stand silently for “all the crimes committed by Soviet totalitarianism.”¹² While the number of victims is relatively small in comparison to that of other mass killings during the period, the massacre is understood as one of strategic “classicide”—the intentional killing of a specific class, i.e., the “decapitation” of Poland’s wartime elite. Along with the untimely death of General Sikorski in 1943, the Katyn Massacre significantly reduced Poland’s resources for strong, independent, postwar leadership. Further, not only did the Soviets deny responsibility for the killings, but following the German discovery of the graves in 1943—and the Polish government-in-exile’s demand for an International Red Cross investigation—the episode was used by the Soviets as a pretext to definitively sever diplomatic ties with the Polish Government in London.¹³ This in turn is believed by historians to have facilitated Moscow’s ability to establish in late 1944 a Soviet-backed puppet Polish government. The British, who during the war were in possession of accurate information regarding the massacre,¹⁴ avoided confronting the Soviets about the events, fearing a rupture of Soviet support for the allied war effort.

From the Polish perspective, not only had the Allies been unwilling to “die for Danzig”—i.e., come to their aid at the moment the war began—but they were also unwilling as the war came to an end to recognize the true nature of the Soviet regime. While for those living in the West the Allied negotiations at Tehran and Yalta became references in history books, for many in Poland and Eastern Europe these major conferences represented the West’s “appeasement” of the Soviets.¹⁵ The following four and a half decades of Soviet rule tend to lend credibility to this perspective. The cursory manner with which the Katyn Massacre was dealt with at the Nuremberg Trials (Soviet prosecutors initially

believed it would be accepted pro forma as a German war crime) and the active cover-up of the events during the Cold War—in Poland prior to Stalin’s death mere mention of the crime could lead to imprisonment—only intensified the event’s significance.¹⁶ This status quo remained in place for fifty years until April 13, 1990, when during *glasnost*, Mikhail Gorbachev gave President Wojciech Jaruzelski the original NKVD officer transport orders. This initial gesture was followed on October 14, 1992, when, on behalf of President Boris Yeltsin, President Lech Walesa was presented with a series of documents that included Beria’s memo of March 5, 1940. With these two acts, Russia assumed responsibility for the crimes.

Despite the admission of Soviet guilt in the early 1990s, however, the Katyn Massacre has continued to haunt the Polish consciousness. Part of the delay in coming to terms with it has been due to the fact that it took more than a decade to carry out the archival research necessary to locate and interpret many of the critical documents, not all of which have been declassified by the Russian government.¹⁷ It also took a number of years to complete exhumations at the three burial sites and to establish official memorial graveyards at Katyn, Kharkiv, and Mednoye. These sites were not formally inaugurated until 2000. In addition, it took more than ten years to prepare scholarly editions, reproducing key exhibits. These events took place incrementally. Perhaps for all these reasons, on April 17, 2010, at the memorial service for the presidential plane crash, there was a palpable overlaying of past and present emotions, as the Polish people grieved their recent dead and finally had a public occasion to mourn what had been kept secret for so long. But even at this strange and sorrowful juncture, there was no question of political neutrality. As the first strains of the ceremony’s music began to rise, a renewed struggle—this time within Poland—over how current and past events would be interpreted was already taking shape.

4.

Over the past two decades, events such as Poland’s entry into NATO in 1999 and accession to the European Union in 2004 have been a reflection of the country’s firm desire to turn toward the West and embrace democracy and a Western economic model. As of 2010, Poland has become one of the most forward-looking and affluent of the former Communist countries, having passed through the recent global recession relatively unscathed. This direction was first initiated during the historic 1989 “roundtable” negotiations between Solidarity dissidents and leaders of the Communist party, which set Poland on a path toward democratization and economic change. However, the successes of the last two decades were not achieved without considerable hardship. As with all of the post-Communist countries, especially in the first ten years, Poland experienced high unemployment, inflation, and economic inequality. During this period, Poland’s political leadership oscillated between political parties stemming from either the former Solidarity movement or the former Communists—the latter having regrouped under the Democratic Left Alliance party (SLD).

While together these parties succeeded in steering Poland through modernization of the State and the economy and the structuring of civic institutions, by 2005 the various parties—the SLD in particular—were tainted by corruption and a number of serious scandals.¹⁸ In response to this, as well as to other changes in the political landscape, the mid-2000s saw the emergence of

two new center-right political parties, both with roots in the original Solidarity movement: the Law and Justice party (PiS) led by the twin brothers Jaroslaw and Lech Kaczynski, and the more culturally and economically liberal Civic Platform (PO) party, headed by Donald Tusk. In 2005, campaigning on an anticorruption and social justice platform, Law and Justice swept both the parliamentary and presidential elections: Lech Kaczynski became President and, after a short time, Jarosław Kaczynski was appointed Prime Minister. Rather than attributing Poland's ills, including high unemployment¹⁹ and voter apathy, to challenges inherent in free-market capitalism, Law and Justice's platform focused on the way in which Poland's past—above all the legacy of the roundtable discussions and the role of former Communists in contemporary politics—was still influencing the direction and power structures of Poland.

But Law and Justice's concern with Poland's post-Communist political class was only one facet of its engagement with history, which earned it in Poland the epithet "the party of the past." Law and Justice also asserted that there existed an ongoing collaboration between the former Communist nomenklatura and a liberal cultural and political elite. In its eyes this had resulted in "a pathological symbiosis of communism and capitalism,"²⁰ from which both of these partners were benefiting. Further, this liberal elite stood particularly accused for the unpatriotic manner in which it was portraying Poland and its history—including World War II—as well as for its endorsement of Western European moral attitudes and practices. Therefore, what was at stake was not only Poland's history in itself, but the light in which this past was being presented and interpreted. Law and Justice argued that history should above all serve to reinforce a traditional Polish identity, based on Catholic ethics, which was being eroded by a culture of free-market capitalism, as well as by other international influences, such as the European Union.

To achieve this "moral revolution" in Poland—and establish "the Fourth Republic"²¹—under the Kaczynskis, Law and Justice began an intensive restructuring of the government, believing that only a strong state could implement its political and ethical program. This comprehensive effort included redefining the role of the executive and judiciary branches and requiring that education play a more active role in reinforcing traditional Polish and religious values. A move in this direction was supported by an initial coalition with two far-right parties, the League of Polish Families (LPR) and the Self Defense party (Samobrona). Other changes included a stricter oversight of the media, a questioning of Western interpretations of human and civil rights, and a reconsideration of the separation of Church and State. The party also aligned itself increasingly with Radio Maryja, a far-right nationalist radio station and cultural movement.²² These policies reflected the mood of a segment of the population that had become disillusioned by post-1989 politics. In November 2005, a survey was carried out asking participants if "a non-democratic system was acceptable under some circumstances." Almost 40 percent of those who responded preferred "strong leadership" to democracy, the highest percentage since 1989.²³

Law and Justice's perspective on history was also grafted onto its foreign policy, in which a distrust of Poland's longstanding enemies, Germany and Russia—as well as the European Union—became the focal point for Poland's approach to international relations. Painful historic events such as the Katyn

Massacre figured strategically in this political approach, serving as examples of historic betrayal. It came to seem to many citizens that Law and Justice's relationship to the past was not about history per se, but rather about what is called in German, *Geschichtspolitik*—the politics of history—that is, a state's promotion of a particular interpretation of history for political ends. In relation to Europe, during the years 2005–2007, Law and Justice's conservatism caused considerable friction. However, the party's platform did result in concrete support for groups such as the Federation of Katyn Families, which, after years of procrastination on the part of the Russians, have taken their case for the rehabilitation of the Katyn officer victims to the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg. Moreover, not all liberals were against Law and Justice's wariness of Russia, and Poland's neighbors, including some Lithuanian diplomats, continue to view Law and Justice's foreign policies as a buffer against Russian expansionist recidivism.

That said, the overall result of Law and Justice's term in power was to polarize the political environment and, in many respects, the country as a whole. In 2007, two years into Law and Justice's mandate, the Kaczynski government collapsed and early parliamentary elections were held. Law and Justice was defeated by Civic Platform by a considerable margin. Many had viewed the direction in which the country was heading with great alarm. While Jaroslaw Kaczynski lost his position as Prime Minister, his brother Lech Kaczynski remained president, as presidential elections were not slated to take place until the fall of 2010. Yet despite the party's overwhelming parliamentary defeat, it continues today to enjoy considerable popular support in rural areas and in those communities most affected by the downside of Poland's transition. Such support is often perplexing to Western and Polish observers, and voting patterns are often ascribed to voters' loss of economic security or nostalgia for the Communist past. However, a slightly more complex analysis reveals that since 1989 no Polish party has emerged to represent the concerns of the working class, leaving—as many have pointed out—a dangerous vacuum. It is ironic that this has happened in Poland, in light of the enormous role that the Solidarity trade union played in overturning Communism. As the sociologist Hanna Swida-Ziemia has written, "People should think of themselves as the heroes of the transformation, and not as beggars for social security"—a statement that deserves some sustained reflection.²⁴

Consequently, due to the polarization of the political landscape and Law and Justice's animosity toward Russia—and owing as well to issues of protocol—in the week leading up to the seventieth anniversary of the Katyn Massacre, there were in fact *two* commemorative ceremonies planned. Because of the subsequent tragedy, this is a fact often glossed over in the media. The first ceremony took place without incident at the Katyn memorial graveyard near Smolensk on April 7, 2010, three days before the presidential plane accident. Prime Minister Vladimir Putin invited his opposite number Prime Minister Donald Tusk to take part in a joint commemoration. This was an unprecedented event, and the first time a Russian leader had paid homage to the Katyn officers.

In his speech, Putin remembered the Polish officers, but equally eulogized victims of Stalinist repression as well as Red Army casualties, all of whom lie buried together in an area that served during the Soviet era as an NKVD killing ground. He termed all these acts "crimes" but, despite the specificity of the

occasion, avoided singling out the Polish dead. Nor did he call the massacre of the Polish officers an act of "genocide"—something called for by various Polish groups—as such a declaration would open the way to rehabilitation and, possibly, claims for compensation. The second, separate commemoration was organized by the Law and Justice party, and was to be attended by an extensive entourage of political, civic, and cultural figures. It was also believed by some to be the beginning of Lech Kaczynski's campaign for the fall 2010 presidential elections—an election that, according to opinion polls at the time, he was very likely to lose.

5.

Along Krakowskie Przedmiescie boulevard on the morning of the memorial service for the plane crash victims, the complicated interweaving of these threads of Poland's past and present are well-known to the general population. Arriving by train from Bialystok, a group of Law and Justice activists waving Solidarity flags speaks about the stature of the dead president. Others waiting in line are critical of his politics but have come to pay their last respects to the many dignitaries and non-governmental figures killed in the accident. Screens show images of protesters in Krakow holding signs objecting to the burial plans in Wawel Castle, plans which are viewed by them as an attempt to deify a controversial figure and once again hijack Poland's history. Like a *memento mori*, in each of the city's news kiosks the rectangular DVD box of Andrzej Wajda's 2007 film *Katyn* is clearly displayed. Similarly, in the window of a small secondhand bookshop, the Polish translation of *Death in the Forest*, the groundbreaking 1962 account of the Katyn Massacre by J. K. Zawodny, is placed prominently against a wooden bookstand.

Standing in the doorway of their bookshop, two young men in their thirties have just watched Wajda's film for the first time and express their general sense of loss but also their anxieties. While not a supporter of the Law and Justice party, one of the two says, "I know it is perhaps childish of me, but I don't trust either Russia or Germany." During an interview later in the week, a political scientist will speak out against Law and Justice's confrontational foreign policy with Russia. However, when the tape recorder is turned off and he is asked, "But do you trust the Russians?" he will answer, "Absolutely not!" but then he will add, "The matter has to be handled correctly." This is a statement I will hear a number of times over the next six months in Poland, though in general younger Poles are more skeptical than their elders about the actual extent of the danger that Russia now poses to Poland. At play here, no doubt, is an older generation's memories of being abandoned by the West and the long years of Soviet domination. And also the question of whether, if ever such a moment should come again, there would be allies ready to defend Poland. More than twenty years have passed since 1989—and seventy since 1940—but in Warsaw in 2010 one is continually reminded of how complex the processes of history and memory are—or more accurately, the dynamics of forgetting.

Given such sentiments—as well as an avalanche of conspiracy theories—the potentially devastating impact of the April 10 accident on Russian–Polish relations was not lost on the Russian government. The already immense reality of the presidential plane crash and its problematic location were further complicated by the fact that a certain percentage of Russians still believe that the Katyn Massacre was committed by the Germans, not by the Soviets. In an attempt to stabilize diplomatic relations, the night after the plane accident

Wajda's *Katyn* was shown on Russia's state TV channel Rossiya²⁵—and certain of the most important documents relating to the massacre, including Beria's memo of March 5, 1940, were uploaded and made available in PDF form on the Russian government's website, www.government.ru.²⁶ After decades of evasion, the Russian government was intent on a policy of transparency. Some of the measures taken by the Russians smelled of political panic. But despite a few unfortunate incidents—like the theft and use by Russian soldiers of one of the plane crash victim's credit cards—there has been no reason to suspect foul play. Nevertheless, the official causes for the accident will no doubt be debated for a long time to come. On January 12, 2011, when Russia's Interstate Aviation Committee delivered its official report on the accident, it was immediately rejected by the Polish government. Both sides agree that adverse metrological conditions—principally dense fog (there was no visibility for landing)—were primarily responsible. However, whether the pilots were pressured to land by Polish officials aboard, whether those officials had been drinking, whether the condition of the airport in Smolensk or the actions of Russian controllers figured in the catastrophe—all of these questions have been advanced as possible, but contentious, factors.²⁷

At the memorial service the grief of the past and that of the present overlapped in odd waves and could not be entirely separated. In Warsaw's center, a few blocks away from the Presidential Palace, men in bright red tracksuits hung in mountain-climbing halters from a new glass office building, cleaning its windows, ascending toward Poland's bright future of economic progress. On the seventeenth-century Krakowskie Przedmiescie Boulevard, crowds flowed like a black and white timeline that moved forward but also doubled back on itself, seemingly unsure of the linearity and direction of time. It is not clear if the two powerful currents in Polish life and consciousness can be reconciled, nor is it clear that they are as mutually exclusive as Poland's different political parties claim. It seems to me that the two phenomena—a contemporary coming-to-terms with Polish identity and history, and Poland's desire for modernization and attachment to Europe—are interrelated and are part of the country's complex emergence from its totalitarian experience.

And as much as reason and historical clarity require that we eschew factors that lie outside the scope of logical probability, in all honesty, there was something entirely inexplicable and altogether eerie about the presidential plane crash, which all present—regardless of political affiliation—readily admitted. And after the accident came the ash of a faraway volcano. And then came the water.

EPILOGUE

In advance of Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev's official visit to Poland on December 6, 2010—the first State visit to Poland by a Russian leader in eight years—on November 26, 2010, the Russian Duma finally passed an official resolution declaring that the Katyn Massacre had been carried out on the direct orders of Joseph Stalin and other Soviet officials. In advance of the visit, Russia presented Poland with additional Katyn files, following similar gestures in May and September. Rehabilitation of the officers and the status of the Case of the Katyn Families at the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg remains unchanged. History, elusive yet exacting, continues to wait.

ENDNOTES

1 The secret protocol of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact, as established on August 23, 1939, was modified on September 28, 1939. Among the important changes was the placing of Lithuania within the Soviet sphere of influence in exchange for Polish territory. See: Alfred Erich Senn, *Lithuania in European Politics* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997) pp. 167–170.

2 For historical background in this section, I am indebted to the definitive account in English of the Katyn Massacre, *Katyn: A Crime Without Punishment* by Anna M. Cienciala, Natalia S. Lebedeva, and Wojciech Materski (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007). The English-language volume is derived from the three-volume Russian and four-volume Polish scholarly editions.

3 "Secret Supplementary Protocol to the Non-Aggression Pact Between Germany and the Soviet Union," reproduced in Cienciala, op. cit., p. 41.

4 J. K. Zawodny, *Death in the Forest* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1962), p. 128.

5 Cienciala, op. cit., p. 121.

6 Located in the Soviet Union, the other two massacre sites were exhumed after 1989.

7 "Beria Memorandum to Joseph Stalin," No. 794/B, reproduced in Cienciala, op.cit., pp. 118–120.

8 Since 1989, research has been carried out to identify the names of NKVD officers who carried out the massacres. Soviet documents show that they were given a monetary reward for participating in these killings. See Cienciala, op.cit., pp. 272–275.

9 The exact reason and timing for this decision have long been debated by historians. For a discussion of various theories see: Cienciala, op. cit., pp. 141–148.

10 "Agreement Between the Soviet Government and the Polish Government," reproduced in Cienciala, op. cit. pp. 281–282

11 Hearings before the Select Committee to Conduct an Investigation of the Facts, Evidence and Circumstances of the Katyn Forest Massacre. U.S. Government Printing Office, Part 4, 1952, p. 555.

12 Delphine Debons, Antoine Fleury, Jean-François Pitteloud, eds. *Katyn et la Suisse* (Chêne-Bourg: Georg, 2009), p. 22.

13 See: Stanislaw Mikolajczyk, *The Rape of Poland: Pattern of Soviet Aggression* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1948.)

14 Dispatches regarding Katyn from the British Ambassador to the Polish Government-in-Exile were presented to Churchill on May 24, 1943. See: *Katyn: Dispatches of Sir Owen O'Malley to the British Government*. Katyn Memorial Fund Commission, 1973.

15 See: Mikolajczyk, op. cit. pp. 91–105.

16 In the early 1950s, a series of U.S. Congressional hearings was held to establish the truth about the Katyn Massacre. Despite extensive witness testimony, and the conclusion that the crime had been committed by the Soviets, no further action was recommended. See: Hearings, op. cit., Vols. 1–7, 1951–1952.

17 There is ongoing debate among scholars about the existence of certain Katyn documents— in particular files containing NKVD interviews carried out with

the officers in 1940 prior to their execution. Though the files were purported to have been destroyed in 1959, no list confirming the destruction of the documents has surfaced in Soviet archives. [Conversation with Colonel Marek Tarczynski, December 2010, Warsaw.]

18 For a discussion of some of the events of this period, including the Rywin affair, see Leszek Koczanowicz, *Politics of Time* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2008), pp 10–13.

19 Poland continues to struggle with deep structural unemployment of 20–25% in areas most affected by the privatization of industry and collective agriculture after 1989.

20 Aleksander Smolar, "Poland: Radicals in Power," eurozine.com, 2006.

21 Poland's First Republic ended in the eighteenth century. The Second Republic lasted from the nation's regained independence in 1918 until 1939. After 1989 the Third Republic was established. The "Fourth Republic" was coined by sociology professor Andrzej Zybertowicz to express the idea of a "post-1989" Poland. See: Koczanowicz, *op. cit.* pp. 12–13.

22 Law and Justice's political program reached its most contentious point when in 2007 a strict lustration law was passed requiring all public officials (as well as professors, lawyers, judges, and journalists) to sign a statement that they had not been secret informers during the Communist period. Although lustration legislation had been established in 1998, its application was considerably less thorough. The new law, which appeared to coincide too closely with the targeting of rival opposition politicians and cultural figures, was eventually judged unconstitutional. See Rafal Pankowski, *The Populist Right in Poland* (London: Routledge, 2010), pp. 179–180

23 Pankowski, *op. cit.* p. 165.

24 As quoted in Smolar, "Poland: Radicals in Power," *op. cit.*

25 On April 2, 2010, preceding the presidential plane accident, the film was aired on Russia's small cultural channel, Kultura. To broadcast Katyn on Rossiya, one of Russia's two main television stations, was understood as a gesture of solidarity with Poland and a reaffirmation of Soviet responsibility for the massacre.

26 After 1989, these documents have been available to the Russian public in scholarly editions. Their posting on the government's website allowed them to be easily viewed by the general public.

27 Russia's Interstate Aviation Committee report.

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