

Instead of Landing in Minsk, Kaczyński's Plane Crashed in Smolensk



In September 2009, the President of Poland Kaczyński sent his condolences to the President of Belarus because of the death of two Belarusian pilots in a crash of Su-27 fighter plane at an air show. Today, state leaders around the world are condoling with the Poles at the loss of President Lech Kaczyński and 95 others in a plane crash near Smolensk.

On April 10, Lech Kaczyński was flying to commemorate the deaths of thousands of Poles murdered by the Soviet Union and buried in the Katyn Forest just across the eastern border of Belarus. On March 5, 1940, Joseph Stalin signed an order to execute 25,700 Polish prisoners of war in the camps of Ostashkov, Starobelsk, and Kozelsk. Only in 1990 did the Soviet authorities admit responsibility for the Katyn murders.

Because of the fog, it was difficult for the pilots to land in Smolensk airport, near the Katyn Forest. Polish media report that air traffic controllers had advised the Polish pilots not to attempt to land at the airport, but turn around and head for Minsk, the capital of Belarus. The obscure military aerodrome near Smolensk lacked the necessary navigational equipment to receive planes in heavy fog. Despite these warnings, Polish pilots, apparently under pressure from their VIP passengers, decided to take the risk of landing in Smolensk. Perhaps, the Polish delegation had its own reasons not to land in Belarus.

Few people outside Warsaw and Minsk know that Lech Kaczyński was one of the staunchest defenders of human rights in Belarus and a vocal critic of its president. Just last month, condemning the detentions and trials of activists of the Union of Poles in Belarus, Lech Kaczyński wrote a personal letter to Alyaksandr Lukashenka defending the Polish minority. Having received no response from the Belarusian authorities, Lech Kaczynski appealed to the European Union's institutions through the President of the European Union Herman Van Rompuy and European Parliament President Jerzy Buzek.

Notably, Belarus did not send a delegation to the earlier ceremony in Katyn. This is despite the fact that Katyn's victims included hundreds of Belarusians who served in the Polish Army in 1940 when Western Belarus was a part of Poland.

If the Belarus president were to fly to Smolensk, he would not have used an old Soviet plane for that. Ever mindful of what losing their leader would mean for the Belarusian people, President Alyaksandr Lukashenka has long ago switched to the sleek and safe US Boeing. Lech Kaczyński was flying a 20-year old Tupolev Tu-154. Tupolev's long history of crashes has never been a secret, but the Polish leadership considered buying a new US-manufactured Boeings an unnecessary indulgence during the financial crisis.

Seventy years after the massacre orchestrated by Stalin, the Polish people once again lost some of its best compatriots in the cold foggy forest near Katyn.

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