

A Time of Redemption For Russia and Poland

by Rachel Douglas

April 16—Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin has led his country's official mourning of the death of Poland's President Lech Kaczynski and 95 other Polish officials, military officers, and other public figures, whose plane crashed on the morning of April 10 outside Smolensk, Russia. Sympathy for Poland has poured out in Russia, in a great array of demonstrations of solidarity after the tragedy, which, in turn, was linked with one of the darkest phases of relations in the long history of these two Slavic countries: the execution of over 22,000 Polish officers by Soviet security forces in Katyn Forest and other locations in the Spring of 1940, just a few months after the September 1939 Nazi invasion of Poland.

The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, then in effect, had allowed delay of a German attack on the Soviet Union (which did come, in June 1941), in favor of German preparations to move against the West; in the interim, Germany annexed the western parts of Poland, and Soviet forces occupied its eastern areas. President Kaczynski and other officials, including the upper echelon of Poland's military commanders, were en route to pay tribute to the victims of the Katyn massacre on the 70th anniversary of their deaths.

Prime Minister Putin had already stepped to the fore in this commemoration, joining with Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk in a joint Polish-Russian government ceremony near Katyn on April 7. Though the long-secret Soviet dossier on Katyn was opened in 1992, Putin was the first Russian President or Prime Minister to attend an official event in honor of those killed in the massacre.

Lyndon LaRouche observed April 12, about the joint Polish-Russian mourning, that "this is redemption," in view of such a difficult history. It is important, LaRouche said, that, led by Prime Minister Putin, officials as well as Russians in the streets are expressing a sense of solidarity with the suffering of the Polish nation as a result of this tragedy.

Russia's recent relations with NATO and EU



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Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk (left) and Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin honor the victims of the Polish plane crash, near Smolensk on April 10.

member Poland have been less than smooth, although they have improved since Tusk succeeded the late President Kaczynski's twin brother, Jaroslaw, as prime minister. In 2008, Kaczynski gave ostentatious support to President Michael Saakashvili of Georgia, when the latter sent his troops to attack the province of South Ossetia, and Russian peacekeepers stationed there. Nonetheless, Putin led Russian officials in expressing unqualified sympathy for all the victims of the still-unexplained crash.

Outpouring of Sympathy

On April 12, before departing for Washington and South America, President Dmitri Medvedev was one of hundreds of Russians who laid flowers and signed a book of condolences at the Polish Embassy in Moscow. That day was a national day of mourning in Russia, with black-clad announcers on First Channel TV introducing footage of the flowers, candles, and flags at half-mast, as Chopin's music played. Striking interviews with ordinary Russians were included, such as a woman in tears who told of her decades-long fear of visiting the Polish Embassy until now, because in 1937 her Polish-born mother had been arrested and sent to a Siberian prison camp for a decade, after going to the Embassy to seek asylum. A Polish journalist, interviewed on Russian TV,

expressed amazement at the outpouring from Russians, and commented that "this is some kind of very important moment in our history."

Russian TV showed Putin embracing Tusk, as they visited the crash site near Smolensk on the night of April 10, and played Putin's impromptu interview to Polish TV, in which Putin told the Poles, "We are grieving and suffering alongside you.... We are praying with you." Other footage from that evening included Putin and Tusk scrutinizing a laptop computer in the makeshift operations headquarters set up in Smolensk, as the Polish and Russian prime ministers took part in a Russian government task force meeting by video conference. They discussed with Russian Minister of Health Tatyana Golikova and Moscow Vice Mayor Pyotr Biryukov provision of accommodations and support for the hundreds of Poles who were on their way to the Russian capital to help identify their relatives, dead in the crash. This video clip reportedly has been widely circulated on the Internet with a Polish voiceover.

On April 11, Putin and Polish Ambassador Jerzy Bar saw off the plane which carried Kaczynski's body home. The Polish Air Force jet was escorted to the border by Russian fighters, in a sign of respect.

Chairing a Russian Government Presidium meeting April 12, Putin again expressed condolences to Poland, and took additional reports on the investigation, which he officially heads.

In Sweden, leading Swedish-Polish intellectual Maciej Zaremba said that Russian reactions to the tragedy in Smolensk have moved Poles profoundly. Besides the outpouring of sympathy from ordinary Russians at the Embassy, Zaremba pointed to three signs which have been well-received by the Polish people: Putin's putting his arms around Tusk at the crash site; Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov's provision of free hotel rooms and meals for the 400 Polish relatives of crash victims; and Medvedev's reference to the historical connection between the plane crash and the Katyn executions. The Russian President called Katyn "a place of mystery"—using a word which, Zaremba noted, has "a spiritual depth and seriousness" in Russian, which Poles also understand: "a space for contemplation, wonder and wordless community." In a TV interview, Zaremba said he thought the mourning would "have great political effects in the future."