

# AIR CRASH REVIVES OLD GHOSTS

Poland lost a significant tranche of its political elite one April morning this year when the Presidential Air Force jet crashed in Russia, killing all on board, reports Lina Kolesnikova

Many heads of state and prominent politicians have been the victim of air accidents since the rapid development of civil aviation after the Second World War. Presidents of the Philippines (1957), Iraq (1966), Bolivia (1969), Ecuador (1981), Panama (1981), Mozambique (1986), Rwanda (1994), Macedonia (2004) and others have all perished in aviation incidents.

This tragic list became longer in April 2010 when the Polish Air Force Presidential Tupolev 154M passenger jet crashed while approaching the Smolensk air base Severnyj (ie North) in Russia. All 96 people on board (88 passengers and eight crew members) were killed in the accident.

It is not an overstatement to believe that Poland lost a significant part of its political elite that April morning. An unprecedented

group of top officials was travelling on board this jet, including the Polish President Lech Kaczynski and his wife Maria, several Members of Parliament, the President of the National Bank of Poland, the Chief of General Staff, the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, generals from the Ministry of Defence, the Chief of National Security Council, senior military officers and other famous public figures.

#### Memorial event

On April 10, 2010, the official Polish delegation was heading towards Smolensk (Russia) for a memorial event in Khatyn. The first jet, a Polish Air Force Yakovlev 40, carrying part of the Polish delegation, landed at Smolensk 90 minutes ahead of the Presidential flight, which left Warsaw at 07:27hrs local time.

When in the air, the crew was in constant contact with the air traffic

controllers in Byelorussia and later on with those in Moscow and Smolensk. The flight deck was also in contact with the Polish Air Force Yakovlev 40 which had already landed at Smolensk

At about 10:14hrs Moscow time, the flight descended to an altitude of 7,500 metres. Minsk Control radioed that visibility at Smolensk air base was just 400 metres owing to fog. The same information was confirmed by the controller at Smolensk when the crew contacted him. At about 10:25hrs the pilot of the Yakovlev 40 on the ground at Smolensk radioed that horizontal visibility was down to 400 metres and vertical visibility about 50 metres. Shortly afterwards, he reported that an Ilyushin 76 transport plane was diverted to the alternative airfield after two failed attempts to land.

The crew continued preparations for an approach, aiming for runway 26 at Smolensk. The cockpit door was open and, during the approach, two passengers – the head of Polish Air Force and head of Diplomatic Protocol – are believed to have been on the flight deck.

Meanwhile, horizontal visibility worsened to 200 metres and the crew received this information at 10:37hrs. Still, they requested permission to attempt a ‘trial’ approach to the decision height (100 metres) and asked the controller to expect a go-around.

The terrain awareness and warning system (TAWS) sound “Pull up” was registered about 18 seconds before the impact. The “Terrain ahead” aural warning

*Thousands of mourners in Poland paid tribute to the political leaders who died in the crash*

*Patryk Korzeniowski*



followed. Around five seconds before impact, the autopilot and auto-throttle were disconnected in order to execute a go-around. It was too late. The aeroplane touched the up-sloping terrain at a distance of about 1,100 metres from the runway and 40 metres to the left of the extended centre line. At the moment of impact, the aircraft altitude was 15 metres below the level of the runway threshold. The left wing struck a large tree, the aeroplane rolled and inverted. The Tu-154 crashed and broke up at 10:50hrs Moscow time.

The investigation was led jointly by both Russian and Polish authorities. In total 319 corpses and body parts were analysed by Russian forensic medical experts and all data was transmitted to the Polish investigative team. The video of the air crash, captured on a mobile phone by an accidental witness, was also transmitted to Poland.

### Witnesses

In total, investigators questioned more than 150 witnesses present on the site – officers from the Ministry of Interior and EMERCOM of Russia, paramedic and medical personnel. On the Russian side, crews from other jets which had landed at Smolensk on the same day, as well as air base personnel, were also questioned and gave statements to the investigative teams. Among those questioned on the Polish side was President Kaczynski's twin brother, Yaroslav, who had spoken to his brother just 30 minutes before the crash.

The Civil Air Research Institute of Russia performed all appropriate and required analyses of fuel and oil from the Polish jet and made a statement confirming that both fuel and oil met national and international standards.

One case of looting was admitted later by the Russian Ministry of Interior after public pressure following accusations in the Polish media. Four soldiers manning the external cordon robbed one body and later withdrew about US\$1,700 using a stolen ATM card. The Russian Ministry of Defence promised to make all necessary compensation payments to the relatives of the robbed victim.

Needless to say, the impact of such a tragedy is widespread and demands



*Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and President Dmitry Medvedev light candles in memory of the victims*

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an accurate and reliable investigation. However, proper investigation of the causes of this crash might be difficult, owing to the huge political pressure on the investigation commission. This is because Russia and Poland have a long history of troubled relationships.

Khatyn and surrounding woods near Smolensk play significant role in this history. In 1940, thousands of Polish officers (most of them originating from noble Polish families), were executed there by the Soviet Secret Services – the NKVD. President Lech Kaczynski turned the demand for an apology for this tragedy into an inter-state dispute. Consequently, the relationship between two countries became practically deadlocked.

The death of the Polish President and such a large number of the Polish political elite in the same place after 60 years seems incredibly mysterious. For both governments it was a serious blow – Poland had to try to calm the voices of those who saw the KGB's hand in the tragedy. The Russians had to prove that it was horrible coincidence. This made both governments willing to co-operate in finding the right wording and building an acceptable investigation report.

There is speculation that crew members were under pressure by some VIP

passengers (maybe indirectly even by the President himself) to land at Smolensk to be on time for the Khatyn memorial event, despite bad weather conditions. It seems like both governments would be satisfied by a finding that confirms human error on the part of the crew.

There has been a considerable amount of information exchanged between the two countries in relation to the crash. As one of the next steps, the Polish government planned to pass all investigation documentation to the Russian public prosecutor's office in September 2010.

**Lina Kolesnikova is a consultant in international relations, security, risk and crisis management and a Member of Crisis Response Journal's Editorial Advisory Panel.**

**The official investigation had not completed by the time of writing, so this article is based on information available at that moment. The author expresses her personal condolences to all Polish people and hopes for impartial investigation of this tragedy in both countries.**