

Russia at the Heart of a Conspiracy Theory Dividing Poland

The plane crash that killed a Polish president isn't going away.

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People carry portraits of Polish President Lech Kaczyński, wife Maria and 94 other victims of the presidential plane crash in Smolensk, Russia, that killed all on board, during all day celebrations marking the sixth anniversary of the tragedy, in Warsaw, Poland, April 10, 2016. **Alik Keplicz / AP**

Polish Defense Minister Antoni Macierewicz held a press conference on Thursday, Sept. 15, to discuss the findings of a commission he formed to reopen the investigation into the 2010 plane crash that killed President Lech Kaczyński and 95 others near a Russian military airport in Smolensk. Macierewicz, who blames Russian officials for the tragedy, is the government minister most closely associated with the Smolensk conspiracy theory that has divided Poland for six years.

Macierewicz rejects previous independent investigations, which ruled that the crash was the

result of pilot error in poor visibility. Instead, he has long pointed the finger at the Kremlin and at Poland's former prime minister and the current president of the European Council, Donald Tusk.

The new commission formed by Macierewicz says the recordings recovered from the plane's black boxes were manipulated before being turned over to Warsaw. Kazimierz Nowaczyk, the commission's deputy head, says "three seconds were cut out from the Polish recordings, and five seconds from the Russian one." Earlier this week, the commission's chief, Waław Berczyński, said the Russian control tower in Smolensk misled the Polish flight crew. "We don't know if it was intentional, though," he added.

On Wednesday, Russia's Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova said that officials should release the data "immediately" if Warsaw has any information about Moscow being involved in the crash. "These are very serious matters," she added.

In response, Macierewicz promised to deliver the commission's research just as soon as Moscow returns the wreckage of Kaczyński's plane, which is still in Russia. "I'm glad that the Russian side, for the first time, has showed readiness and an interest in helping," he said.

Moscow has repeatedly refused to return the wreckage until Russian investigators have concluded their own probe into the crash.

Earlier this week, President Andrzej Duda, Prime Minister Beata Szydło and the leader of Poland's ruling party Jarosław Kaczyński (the identical twin brother of the late president) attended the premiere of a new government-funded blockbuster film about the plane crash. The trailer shows an explosion on board the plane and follows a journalist seeking to uncover the truth about what really happened in Smolensk. "I invite every Pole who wants to know the truth to watch this film," Kaczyński said after the screening.

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A Conspiracy Theory Dividing a Nation

When the terrible news from Russia reached Poland early on the morning of April 10, 2010, a shocked nation initially stood united in grief. Warsaw witnessed some of the biggest crowds in its history, as people marched in vigils for their late president.

But it didn't take long for cracks to appear, and the crash offered the perfect ingredients for a gripping conspiracy theory.

On the day of the tragedy, the Polish delegation was traveling to mark the 70th anniversary of the 1940 massacre in Katyn, where Soviet secret police slaughtered 20,000 Polish officers in a forest outside Smolensk. The Kremlin blamed the Nazis for the atrocity until as recently as 1994.

Kaczyński's visit was supposed to be a significant step in (historically difficult) Polish-

Russian relations. Russian state television covered the event extensively, and many Russians learned about what happened in Katyn for the first time.

In the late 2000s, during Dmitry Medvedev's presidency, there was a brief warming of relations between Warsaw and Moscow. As part of that thaw, the Kremlin opened some of its archives, and released hitherto secret documents about the Katyn massacre. A few months before the crash, speaking in Gdańsk at a memorial event marking the 70th anniversary of the start of World War II, then-Prime Minister Vladimir Putin surprised many Poles when he spoke of the "immoral character" of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. "We need to remember these mistakes and what our country has done," Putin said, in a speech unthinkable today.

Hopes for more historical reconciliation died with President Lech Kaczyński and his crew in the forest outside Smolensk North Airport, not far from Katyn — a place many Poles consider to be cursed. The tragedy reopened deep historical wounds.

Initially, Poles stood united in grief. But a heated conspiracy theory was born almost as soon as the terrible news from Russia reached Poland.

Before long, the victims of the plane crash were being called the "fallen," and compared to those exterminated in Katyn in 1940. The president and his crew, so goes the theory, were fatalities in yet another crime that Poland's domestic and foreign enemies want to conceal. "Before, we weren't allowed to talk about Katyn, and now we're not allowed to talk about what happened in Smolensk," says an actress in the trailer for the new Smolensk film.

The conspiracy theory also accuses the West of complicity, arguing that it has historically sided with Moscow. Lech Kaczyński, according to this hypothesis, is a martyr: the only post-1989 Polish leader who wanted a truly independent Poland, and for that he paid the ultimate price.

Macierewicz, one of the Kaczyński brothers' longtime allies, was among the first to endorse the conspiracy theory publicly. Shortly after the crash, he suggested openly that the Russians were responsible for an onboard explosion that downed the plane. He has dismissed every investigation into the crash, except his own, as "biased."

Few believed Macierewicz in 2010, but a relentless media campaign by the Polish right-wing media has transformed the Smolensk conspiracy theory into a powerful political tool. The conservative wing of the powerful Polish Catholic Church was also quick to support the theory.

A Theory Welcomed by Moscow

Six years after the crash, Kaczyński's nationalist Law and Justice Party is back in power and many government ministers openly support the idea that Moscow orchestrated Kaczyński's death, or they at least question the results of past investigations of the crash.

Officials in Moscow, meanwhile, rarely react to the accusations. Polish liberals accuse Law and Justice of playing into the Kremlin's hands: the Smolensk conspiracy theory makes Poland's broader security fears about Russian aggression seem like a farce.

The Polish opposition says reopening the probe into the plane crash is more about purging the country's previous centrist officials than it is about accusing Moscow. On Thursday, Sept. 15, opposition leader Ryszard Petru said the new commission is about "revenge" on the former government. Former President Aleksander Kwaśniewski also commented on Macierewicz's press conference, saying Russia had no reason to feel threatened by Lech Kaczyński.

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