

**Russian Image Management --  
Making Unpleasant Historical Truths About  
Poland Disappear:  
The KGB's latest intelligence coup, and NATO's  
latest intelligence disaster**

**By Gene Poteat \***

Times change, but the ways countries hide unquestionable acts of genocide, remain the same. And attempts to force acknowledgement of, or to commemorate, such acts can trigger desperate, sometimes bizarre acts of revenge or disavowal.

Turkey uses their current strategic usefulness to force the U.S. to be equally blind to the Armenian genocide of 1915 to 1923 when 1 million indigenous Armenians were killed, an act perpetrated by the Ottoman Empire, the predecessor of modern Turkey. Japan refuses to acknowledge their atrocious slaughter of hundreds of thousands of Chinese women, children and men in 1937 in the Nanking (China) massacre. The 1994 Rwandan genocide of almost a million Tutsi – a killing of 20% of the population – was denied, then quickly glossed over, and then legally deemed forgotten to hasten a half-baked reconciliation. The 1992 to 1995 genocide of Bosnians at the hands of Serb nationalism resulted in 200,000 killed and 2 million refugees – and constant official renunciation of guilt. The Muslims in Somalia slaughtered the defenseless Somali subsistence farmers to steal land, animals and crops, while the ineffective U.N. waffled, doing nothing, claiming it was relying on assurances by the Muslim government that these were small, harmless skirmishes. The denials continue. Genocide is underway now in Darfur in the Sudan. Even the U.S. downplays its own genocide, two centuries ago, of indigenous American Indian tribes – to steal their land, after slaughtering their animals and people – after decades of white settlers violating treaties, proclamations, and assurances with them.

Into this sordid history comes the recent misbegotten idea by the Polish people to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the 1940 slaughter of 22,000 Polish officers and others in the Katyn Forest [near Smolensk, Russia] carried out by the Soviet secret police: an event long denied by the USSR, and continued by modern propagandistic, Putin-inspired Russian ‘historians.’ The slaughter came under orders from Lavrentiy Beria, head of the NKVD, and endorsed by Stalin and the Politburo. Beria was Vladimir Putin’s KGB predecessor. The Katyn forest victims included 8000 military offices, the rest being doctors, professors, lawmakers, police officers, public servants, landowners, factory owners, lawyers, priests, and anyone considered Poland’s “intelligentsia.”

Poland’s current president, Lech Kaczynski, his wife and twin brother Jaroslaw, along with other top government officials, the chief of the Polish General Staff, senior military officers, president of the National Bank of Poland, the deputy foreign minister, senior members of the Polish clergy, and relatives of victims of the Katyn Forest massacre, gathered at the Warsaw airport, before boarding their official government airplane for Smolensk, Russia. At the last minute, it was decided that Jaroslaw would not board the airplane, but stay behind since their elderly mother was severely ill.

## **The Poles Forgot One Thing... the Russian Motto: Maintain Total Deniability**

The trip to Smolensk was expected to highlight Russia finally admitting culpability in the massacre, after long having blamed it on the Germans, an atrocity they had tried to conceal for over 70 years. As for the reception committee, it had different ideas. Putin wasn't looking forward to such an occasion. Into this poisonous reception brew was President Kaczynski's well-known public criticism of Moscow and Putin, a habit that has ended the lives of others within Russia – and abroad. A few discouraging Russian requirements – that Kaczynski could not attend in any official capacity – did not halt the Poles. Kaczynski would go anyway on non-official, “personal” business. To Russians, such a distinction would be meaningless, not lessening the possible international excoriation of such an event. A problem ripe for a modern, Russian solution: a tragic, ‘natural’ accident.

Yes. The airplane crashed at 8:41 am Moscow time, April 10th, on its final approach to the Smolensk airport, in bad weather, killing all 96 people on board. The crash of the plane decapitated the cream of the top officials who were behind the push to expose the secret police files of past and current collaborators of both the Polish and Soviet/Russian secret police. With these people now dead there is no political top cover in Poland to continue this effort. This is exactly what Putin wanted. Prime Minister Tusk is a weak and manipulable guy who hated the late Polish President. The Russians now have their creature to work in place, with no opposition from a strong anti-communist President. Practically everyone in Poland, and many others around the world, strongly suspected that Russia, especially Putin, must have had a hand in the crash. Not an unusual claim since the same accusations followed the poisoning and/or mysterious ‘natural’ deaths of Putin critics: Anna Politkovskaya, Alexander Litvinenko, among others. The airplane

The airplane was a 20-year-old Russian TU-154M that had been refurbished and upgraded in Russia four months before, and probably completely bugged. The TU-154 is a three-engine model similar to the older Boeing 727. The airplane was equipped with all the necessary electronic navigation and instrumentation to land safely, even in foul weather. The instrumentation was the latest and best, and included a standard ILS (Instrument Landing System) receiver which would guide the airplane to the edge of the Smolensk runway—providing the ILS receiver and ground based transmitters are reliable and working properly. The TU-154M was also equipped with an American made TAWS (Terrain Avoidance and Warning System), latest models called GPWS (Ground Proximity Warning System). During the airplane's refurbishment a satellite phone system was also installed. Satellite phone installations can cause interference with an airplane's other instrumentation, which was encountered, and fixed, during installation. President

Kaczynski used the satellite phone to speak with his twin brother in Warsaw during the flight to Smolensk. The plane was also equipped with two Russian made black boxes that record an airplane's vital signs, one Polish made black box, and a cockpit voice recorder that can give crash investigators clues to the causes of a crash.

### **Smolensk airport**

The ILS ground transmitters at the Smolensk airport is the Russian version of the U.S. ILS system, which transmits two beams; one called the glide slope for the airplane to follow in descending to the runway, the other to keep the airplane aligned horizontally with the centerline to the runway. ILS ground installations can, under certain circumstances, be unreliable, as when an automobile might be parked or moving in front of the transmitting antennas. American pilots landing ILS must be insured by the control tower the ground in front of the ILS antennas are clear of objects, such as parked or moving automobiles.

The pilot of the TU-154, with Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk on board, had successfully landed at Smolensk airport only days before the crash. The pilot, fluent in Russian, had no problems in communicating with the Smolensk control tower. Interestingly, the Russian Prime Minister, Vladimir Putin, had flown into Smolensk three days before the crash—but he arranged to have his own portable landing system brought in, probably a GCA radar (Ground Controlled Approach radar) which can talk the pilot to a safe landing in bad weather. Putin departed after 3 or 4 hours. My guess is that Putin's pilots knew the Smolensk ILS could be unreliable and wanted their own GCA there for safety. Forty minutes before the crash, a Russian YAK-40 airplane with 40 people on board landed safely. Twenty minutes before the crash a Russian AWAC airplane did a touch-and-go at the airport then flew on to Moscow

### **The crash – Katyn Massacre Redux 2010-style**

The Smolensk airport was fogged in, but the airport had not been declared as closed. As the TU-154 approached the airport, the tower suggested the pilot divert to Moscow. This is standard practice by both military and civilian flights around the world. The pilot responded that he would make one attempt to land, but if that failed, he would fly on to another, clear airport. At the outer marker, two kilometers from the runway, the airplane was on track. At the inner marker, one kilometer from the runway, the plane was suddenly 40 to 60 meters to the left of the centerline and 2.5 meters above the ground, below the glide path, and traveling 280 K/hr, with throttles applied (for a go-around) at the time of the crash. The aircraft's reported speed of 280 K/hr has to be an error. This is twice the speed of a normal landing approach. At this point the pilot applied full power to

abort the landing attempt, but it was too late. The plane struck trees, flipped over, and crashed well short of the runway.

### **The aftermath, the Cover-up, Denial and Deception**

Russian president Medvedev announced that Russia would work closely with Poland in the crash investigation to learn the cause— Russian pabulum for Western ears. Immediately after the crash, and before any investigation had begun, the Russian “Minister of Security” in Moscow announced the cause of the crash was pilot error [good of them to wait until the crash happened], and blamed it on the pilot’s poor command of Russian in communications with the control tower. Edmund Klich, chief of Polish investigating committee later revealed to the Polish parliament that the Russian traffic controller who talked with the pilot of the presidential plane had disappeared. The Russians said that he retired. The Polish pilot was known to speak flawless Russian, but in this investigation, a minor technicality. Russians quickly took control of the crash site, recovered the black boxes, and – never to miss an intelligence-gathering opportunity – stripped the 97 dead passengers of personal effects, luggage, laptop computers, flash drives, cell phones, sensitive papers, names, telephone numbers, correspondence, documents, and top secret military and diplomatic codes—a coup for Russia's intelligence service. Because of the intelligence value from the crash, and the need for the smoothest of public sleight-of-hand with the coming denials, Putin placed himself in charge of the Russian crash investigation. A master who knows his craft.

On June 6<sup>th</sup>, Russia announced publically that four of their soldiers had been charged with the theft of credit cards from the bodies of some of the victims and using the cards to obtain cash—within two hours of the crash. This announcement will surely convince the world that Russia has changed its murderous ways and that all their recent murders were just tragic, isolated crimes. Russia also announced that there were two other people in the cockpit during the approach, A Polish Air Force general, the pilot’s boss, who probably urged the pilot to try to land, and an unidentified woman. Although this happens frequently, just to watch—I have done this myself—the Russian message was clear; it was their own fault.

The Russians delayed for weeks before returning the less sensitive items, but kept items of intelligence value. The bodies were shipped to Moscow for “autopsies.” No Polish medical people were permitted as witnesses. Only after six days was Kaczynski’s cell phone returned.

Russian security officers interrogated Polish family members who traveled to Moscow to recover the bodies, sometimes for hours, denying access to the bodies until

after the interrogations. There has been no verification that all the bodies were accounted for. The bodies were returned to Poland in sealed coffins for burial and families of the victims were not permitted to open the coffins. Under Polish law, official permission from the state prosecutor's office is required to exhume a body, and that office has denied family requests, apparently for fear of offending Russian sensibilities.

As for the investigation, the Russians have kept all the airplane's black boxes and refuse to release or comment on their findings, except to say it could be a year before any results are announced. It could indeed take a long time. Putin's 'commission' investigating the crash needs time – for memories to fade and time to concoct a Russian-version of the cause of the crash. Perhaps as long as it has taken Russia to acknowledge responsibility for the Katyn massacre, yet to happen. While the Russian investigation is in violation of a few agreements – the Chicago Convention that governs international air crashes and a bilateral 1993 agreement that joint commissions would conduct investigations of aircraft disasters affecting both countries – Russian violation of agreements is S.O.P. A Polish aviation official, in touch with the Russian investigation, reported to Poland that "We know everything that happened but the Russians forbid us to tell you." So does anyone with room temperature IQ following this event.

### **Merely A Conspiracy Theory?**

Conspiracy theories abound. Looking at the Katyn Forest massacre, the behavior of other countries guilty of similar genocides, the KGB's history of killings, genocides, murders and assassinations to rid itself of rivals, critics or anyone who has become inconvenient or a vocal opponent, it is no wonder the Poles – and others – see the heavy Russian hand behind the crash. There was the Soviet genocide in the 1920s when they starved nearly 20 million Ukrainians to death, killing millions of their own people throughout the life of the USSR. So what is another hundred in a crash to get rid of those pesky Poles, and their temerity at seeking, in Smolensk, to rub in the face of Russia some sordid account of a wartime massacre? And it was payback for Poland's alliance with NATO. For many of us from the intelligence community we well remember the Soviet practice of manipulating navigational beacons to lure American military planes into Soviet territory to be shot down, "for violating sacred Soviet airspace." They thought nothing of shooting down Korean Air Boeing 747, knowing it held several hundred civilian passengers. The Russian solution now is to make it go away quickly – as quickly as that ill-fated commemoration will be forgotten.

Policy-wise, the Russians saw our decision to grovel before them (the "reset", the giving up of ballistic missile defense after we promised the Czechs and Poles, our acquiescence to their activities in Georgia and Ukraine, our begging for their non-help on

Iran, et al.) as a green light to do what they did with the plane crash. They concluded we would say nothing -- and we didn't.

And what, if anything, can America do? Nothing. Their plate is full with wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, a vast ecological disaster unfolding in the Gulf, North Korea starting the next war between the Koreas, and at home, unrest over the illegal invasion of America by Latinos hiding under the misapplied term of "immigrant," a failing economy, and other political tsunamis. Besides, strategic utility isn't reserved only for Turks. Aren't the Russians helping in America's war on terrorism? That means American outrage and concerns over the Polish 'accident' will have to be as hollow and toothless as Russia's 'investigations' to solve the crash mystery. The Poles, however, see this as Yalta II, i.e., another sell-out by the US. Poland is seething over this; the Obamisti may think this will fade away, but the Poles and the rest of Central Europe know better. For them this is a monumental betrayal.

Life – as is history – is unfair. The Poles are in the same spot as the Armenians, the Somalis, the Tutsi, the American Indians, the Incas, the Eskimos, and others. Crucial alliances trump acknowledgement of prior bad acts. I ignore your genocides, you ignore mine. The guilty get a free pass. Or, in the argot of modern TV sitcoms: Nobody Talks, Everybody Walks. And then there is the old KGB saying, "It is no accident, Comrade!"

\* Gene Poteat is an electrical engineer (The Citadel) and a retired CIA scientific intelligence officer. He served abroad in London, Scandinavia, the Middle East and Asia. He is president of the Association of Former Intelligence Officers (AFIO), writes and lectures on intelligence matters and teaches at The Institute of World Politics graduate school in Washington; the IWP is scheduled to award Gene Poteat an honorary doctoral degree on June 5. He may be reached at [G2Poteat@gmail.com](mailto:G2Poteat@gmail.com).