

## **After Polish Tragedy, Katyn Deserves its True Name—Genocide**

70 years ago, genocide was committed that still, to this day, has not been called that by the very people who committed it. During World War II, 20,000 Polish prisoners of war, among them Polish intelligentsia and top military officers, were shot by the Soviet NKVD, upon Stalin's approval. The graves of the Katyn Forest Massacre (thousands of other soldiers had been murdered in nearby camps and prisons, and Katyn has become the symbolic memorial site) were discovered by the Germans in 1943, but the Soviets blamed everything on the Nazis, and thus denied their involvement—until half a century later. In 1990, Russia for the first time acknowledged its responsibility for the massacre, as well as for the cover-up, but stopped short of calling it genocide. This means that no one has been punished for what happened, and the victims' families have yet to receive any sort of compensation. The West, among them England and the US, had secretly agreed that the crimes were committed by the Soviets, but the official version continued the lie of German guilt; and the alliance with the Soviet Union during World War II, and the Cold War that followed, made the massacre an untouchable subject for the world. In Poland, things were even worse. The pro-Soviet propaganda covered up the crimes and one could get arrested for even hinting at any Russian involvement in the killings. And so Katyn remained taboo in Poland until the fall of Communism in 1989.

Recently, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin became the first Russian leader to join Poles in commemorating the victims of Katyn. It is then an irony of fate that the Polish President, Lech Kaczynski, together with top military and political leaders of Poland, died in a plane crash on their way to Katyn, on April 10<sup>th</sup>, shortly before the ceremony for the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the massacre. But the renowned Solidarity leader and Poland's former president Lech Walesa was wrong when he called the accident the second Katyn, despite the obvious analogies: in both tragedies, Poland lost its brightest minds on Russian territory, around Katyn. A plane crash, however, is not a war crime, and therefore should not be compared to one. But there is one good thing that might come out of this awful tragedy: the world must remember the atrocities that occurred at Katyn, and Poland, with the world's support, must fight harder for justice. Russia has to acknowledge the 1940 massacre as indeed genocide, just as the Germans did with regards to the Holocaust. The living Soviet officers who participated in the killings should be held to account in a war crimes tribunal. The Russian government should offer the members of the victims' families compensation. And Putin should not be lauded for calling the execution of 20,000 people "a political crime." The plane crash is not another Katyn, but it will, hopefully, open the door to, at last, calling Katyn by its true name—genocide.