

## THE DOUBLE TRAGEDY OF KATYN

In a historic ceremony on 7 April 2010, the Prime Ministers of Poland and Russia marked the 70th anniversary of the Katyn massacre during which Soviet secret police executed thousands of Polish prisoners of war and buried them in mass graves alongside victims of the Stalinist purges.

The belated gesture represented an unprecedented step towards a process of reconciliation between the two nations, one that would never have begun without an acknowledgement of Soviet responsibility for the atrocity. Polish and Russian commentators were optimistic, and expectations abounded of a new era in Russian-Polish relations.

Three days later, the Polish President Lech Kaczyński died in a plane crash en route to the Polish-only commemorations in Russia, along with the last President of the Polish government in exile Ryszard Kaczorowski, the President of the Central Bank Sławomir Skrzypek, the Chief of Staff General Franciszek Gągor, leading politicians from all main parties, journalists, religious leaders and families of the victims of the Katyn massacre.

The accident occurred in Smolensk - not far from the Katyn forest - and it wiped out Poland's elite for the second time, making the symbolism of the crash site undeniable and deeply ironic.

President Lech Kaczyński was often described as a polarising figure. There is no doubt that he was a social conservative: he was perceived as too partisan and preoccupied with promoting his brother's Law and Justice Party. He was often judged abroad as nationalistic and anti-European. But such perspectives, if not missing the point, were often unfair.

Within his own conservative milieu, Kaczyński was a moderating voice. It is certainly true that he opted for a more assertive and nationally focused foreign



The late President of Poland, Lech Kaczyński, holding his granddaughter Ewa, 9 October 2005.

policy. But he did not seek to challenge the key tenets of Warsaw's post-Cold War foreign policy: engagement with the EU and close relations with the United States.

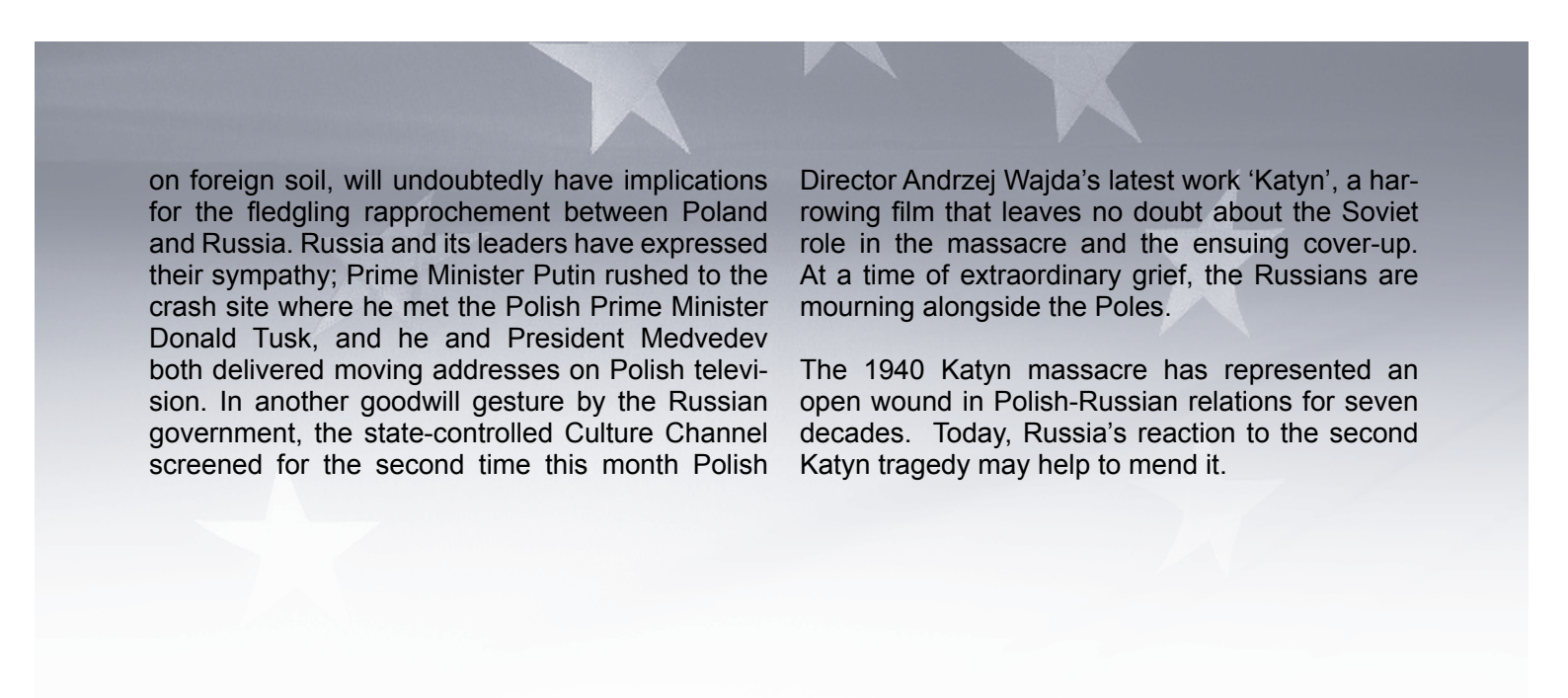
He campaigned for Polish membership of the EU, brokered a deal on and subsequently signed the Lisbon Treaty, and even exerted influence on Czech President Václav Klaus to ratify it. Kaczyński advanced relations with Israel and pursued a policy of engagement with respect to Poland's Eastern neighbours, in particular, Ukraine, Lithuania and Georgia.

Most importantly, President Kaczyński was of great personal integrity, a man who held fast to his convictions with little time for PR manoeuvres. One might have disagreed with his views- but one always knew what to expect from him.

The death of the President, along with so many of the nation's elite in such shocking circumstances



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on foreign soil, will undoubtedly have implications for the fledgling rapprochement between Poland and Russia. Russia and its leaders have expressed their sympathy; Prime Minister Putin rushed to the crash site where he met the Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk, and he and President Medvedev both delivered moving addresses on Polish television. In another goodwill gesture by the Russian government, the state-controlled Culture Channel screened for the second time this month Polish

Director Andrzej Wajda's latest work 'Katyn', a harrowing film that leaves no doubt about the Soviet role in the massacre and the ensuing cover-up. At a time of extraordinary grief, the Russians are mourning alongside the Poles.

The 1940 Katyn massacre has represented an open wound in Polish-Russian relations for seven decades. Today, Russia's reaction to the second Katyn tragedy may help to mend it.