

Social Performance, Cultural Trauma, and the Polish Tragedy in Smolensk

Introduction

When Lech Kaczynski won the presidential election in 2005, Poland had gained a leader well-known to the Polish people for many decades. Lech Kaczynski and his identical twin brother Jaroslaw Kaczynski brought themselves to Poles' notice already in 1962, when they starred in a children's film called *The Two Who Stole the Moon*. Although their film career ended after the single film, these two blond, thirteen-year-old boys were presupposed to change the image of Poland.

As early as during the communist regime, Lech and Jaroslaw Kaczynski participated in the anti-communist movement and after the revolution in the late 80's, they took part in the transformation of Poland. In the 90's, the later president Lech Kaczynski held various high offices in the Polish public administration, including the post of Minister of Justice and the President of the Supreme Control Office. In 2001, the Kaczynski brothers founded the nationalist party, *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* (Law and Justice), and one year later, Lech Kaczynski became the mayor of the city of Warsaw. Already known for his strongly conservative and nationalist views, Lech Kaczynski won the presidential election in 2005. When in 2006 Jaroslaw Kaczynski became the Polish Prime Minister, the coalition of the Kaczynski brothers not only caused a sensation, but also raised doubts about the future of Poland in a part of the Polish public. The president Kaczynski had been criticized for his profoundly conservative thinking, strong homophobic attitudes, and his effort to extend powers of the president. His party Law and Justice tried to restore the death penalty but, on the other hand, strictly followed the moral values of the Roman-catholic Church. Problems in the national political arena were followed by impaired relations with the European Union. Lech Kaczynski was protectionist and Eurosceptic, which brought about severe quarrels on the European political scene.

In 2007, the president's twin brother Jaroslaw lost parliamentary elections, and the post of the Polish Prime Minister gained Donald Tusk. Although this change partly lessened the tension between Poland and its foreign partners, domestic political struggles did not cease and popularity of the Polish president was very low. However, this situation was

about to change. On April 10, 2010, the Polish presidential aircraft crashed just a few minutes before landing close to the Smolensk airport in Russia. All those who were on board, the Polish president included, died. Although Lech Kaczynski was an extremely controversial figure of the national as well as international political scene, this tragedy evoked a wave of solidarity through the Polish nation.

This essay depicts the story not as a human tragedy, but as an event that brought into being something supra-individual in the Polish society. Employing the concept of social performance and cultural trauma, I attempt to explain how the tragic plane crash of the Polish president's plane in April 2010 changed the Polish society, and what happened that the attitude of the Polish public towards the personality of the deceased president radically changed after his death.

The paper has been divided into five parts. The first part gives a brief overview of the theoretical concepts used in the essay, mainly the concept of social performance and cultural trauma which were introduced to sociology by Jeffrey Alexander. The second chapter depicts the historical context of the tragedy in Smolensk. By describing the Katyn Massacre in 1940 it shows, why the tragedy in April 2010 affected the Polish society so deeply. The third chapter deals with the ambiguity of the personality of Lech Kaczynski. It explains the swift change of the public opinion towards the controversial politician, and its development in time. The fourth chapter of this paper examines the old Polish myth of *Jesus Christ of the nations* and shows, how old national traumas and legends can affect contemporary society. Finally, the last chapter examines circumstances of the emergence of counter-performances, the role of mass media, and the further development on the political scene after the tragic death of the Polish president.

1 Social Performance and Cultural Trauma

In the essay, I use two main concepts. The first of them is *social performance*, the second one is *cultural trauma*. The concept of social performance was introduced to sociology by Jeffrey Alexander and his colleagues. It comes out from the Performance Studies, which were established in the second half of the twentieth century by Richard Schechner and Victor Turner. The concept reflects the change of understanding of the role of culture in society, and the "strong program" in sociology. The strong program and the cultural sociology emphasize the hermeneutical and structural aspects (Alexander, Smith In: Alexander, 2003) and as Alexander explains:

“Cultural sociology makes collective emotions and ideas central to its methods and theories precisely because it is such subjective and internal feelings that so often seem to rule the world. Socially constructed subjectivity forms the will of collectivities; shape the rules of organizations; define the moral substance of law; and provides the meaning and motivation for technologies, economies, and military machines” (Alexander, 2003, pp.5)

According to Alexander and Mast, any social performance consists of several elements (In: Alexander, Giesen, Mast Eds., 2006, pp. 33-37). In brief, a social performance can then be described as an interaction between actors and audiences, while their values, norms, and ideas have their origin in collective representations. Employing particular settings of *mise-en-scène*, actors use the means of symbolic production. The success of a social performance is based on existence (or non-existence) of a re-fusion of all the elements, which create the idea of authenticity of a performance. The authors of the concept also put emphasize on the role of mass media, which transmit the performance to multiple audiences, and enable the meaning making process.

Cultural trauma is, as it defines Alexander, “an empirical, scientific concept, suggesting new meaningful and causal relationships between previously unrelated events, structures, perceptions, and actions” (Alexander, 2004, pp. 1). It is based on an idea that some events have a strong traumatic impact on people, although there can exist a spacial-temporal gap between the event and the people’s everyday life. The theory of cultural trauma denies the psychological aspects of such traumas, and suggests that these are socially constructed and have a strong symbolic meaning for people. Cultural traumas are retained in the collective memory and as Eyerman points out: “[Collective] memory is mediated through narratives that are modified with the passage of time and filtered through cultural artefacts” (Eyerman In: Alexander et al., 2004, pp.74).

Employing these two concepts, I would like to explain the events which followed the plane crash with the Polish president aboard, and to narrate a short part of a long *hi-story* of the Polish nation.

2 Polish Tragedies in Russia

April 10, 2010 at 10:56 a.m. Moscow time. The Polish presidential aircraft crashed in thick fog only a few minutes before landing at the Smolensk airport in Russia. All those who were on board lost their lives. This included the Polish president, his wife, several

members of the Polish parliament, ministry officials, experts, representatives of the Church, and relatives of the Katyn Massacre victims. Not only Poland lost its political elites, the tragedy of the death of ninety-seven people was potentiated by the historical circumstances concerning the reasons for the Polish president's journey.

Shortly after the 1939 German military attack on Poland, the Soviet military troops invaded the territory of Poland and in the course of several months, they imprisoned the Polish intellectual and political elites. These people were eventually transported to camps in the former Soviet Union and in April 1940, more than twenty thousand of them were executed by the Soviet secret police. Poland lost its elites; remaining family member suffered from repression not only during the World War II, but even under the communist regime. By its extent, this event deeply marked the Polish national identity, and has been seen as one of the most tragic moments in the history of Poland. It was the point where Poland lost its leaders, its hopes, and those who could help Poland in restoration of the post-war Poland.

For a long time, the mass murder of the Polish elites by Soviets was a source of tension between Russia and Poland. However, in December 2010 the Russian parliament declared Stalin's responsibility for the execution. On the occasion of the 70-year anniversary of the execution usually called the Katyn massacre, a commemoration had been organized with the planned attendance of the Polish president and other Polish representatives. On Saturday morning of April 10, 2010 the whole Poland was about to commemorate the tragic loss of its nation, and to remember those who died seventy years before. The news about the presidential airplane crash came just as a bolt from the blue. The first information was very vague and did not really suggest how unfortunate the reality would be. After tens of minutes, the news was confirmed; the Polish president and all aboard had died.

The Polish public suffered from a terrible shock. Shortly after the confirmation of what had happened at Smolensk, people started gathering on the streets, holding lighted candles, or laying them in front of the presidential palace. They did so spontaneously, even before mass media reported about these mass rallies. The spontaneous gathering presupposed a similar vision of the situation. When people spontaneously went out on the streets, they recognized the importance of this situation, and felt in a similar way. One Polish saying says "If we are scared, we get together", and this saying reflects the common knowledge of how things usually work in the Polish society. In sociological terms, this saying refers to collective representations, which are, according to Alexander (2006), actually based on previous social performances. The shared meaning eventually led to the shared structure and understanding

of the situation. In other words, every time people were experiencing tragedy, they gathered to face it all together.

The importance and seriousness of the situation was also fueled by the seventy years old tragedy in the Katyn forest. The symbolic meaning of the tragic death of Polish elites who went to commemorate the tragic death of other Polish elites was enormous. Not only people in the streets remembered the Katyn massacre, but also the first speech of the Polish Prime Minister brought the same message: after Katyn, Poland lost its elites for the second time.

3 Between the Sacred and the Profane

Although less than one hundred people died in the plane crash, it is an unquestionable fact that it was felt to be an incredible loss for the Polish nation. Nation, state, and the president as a state symbol are among the values shared by members of imagined communities. As Anderson writes, “[t]he nation as an imagined community of freedom and solidarity is one of the strongest belief systems in the modern era” (In: Alexander 2006, pp. 262). And people on board more or less represented the nation, the Poland, the shared values. In the course of several hours, the public opinion on Lech Kaczynski radically changed. Before his death, Kaczynski was an unpopular and controversial politician. When talking about him after the plane crash, people distinguished between his personality and his presidency. Maybe he was not a man they liked – but he was their president after all.

Extension of the tragedy touched not only Polish people, but lots of people in different countries, regardless of the fact whether they had known anything about the Polish president before his death or not. Symbols such as flags and candles, and the shared meaning of presidency or state showed, how similar the representations sometimes are among different nations.

As for Poland, after the first shock, the situation needed to be re-defined. The Polish Prime Minister had a speech when the tragedy had been confirmed. He was talking about the tragedy, remembering the Katyn massacre, and called upon the unity of the Polish nation. In the meaning-making process, there were references to the traditional values of the Polish society, especially to the family and group membership. The president suddenly was not *only* a statesman, but a son, brother, father and grandfather as well. Lech Kaczynski was a devoted son who had a gravely ill mother who had not learnt about his son’s death yet. Lech Kaczynski also had a daughter who had lost both parents in the course of a few minutes. In what I would call a *making-sacred process*, the Polish president was not being described

only as a superior person, it means as a president and a leader. On the contrary, he became *sacred* by being human.

Similarly, other victims from the plane had become sacred. On board, there were relatives of those who lost their lives at the Katyn massacre, which evoked the feelings that history repeats itself. Media were bringing moving stories of families who lost their immediate families again after seventy years, and people paid respect to those they had never heard about before. Even *elites* were suddenly praised, although the relationship towards the representatives had not been so respectful before the plane crash.

The perception of the Polish president swiftly changed – he became a symbol; a symbol that should be respected. As I will propose later, this transition in understanding of the personality of Lech Kaczynski was never absolute, nor permanent. Nevertheless, there was a strong shift from how the Polish people felt about their president before the plane crash, and how they felt about him after his death.

4 “Christ of Europe” and the Polish National Identity

The plane crash of the Polish president’s aircraft and the loss of Polish representatives was a national tragedy. The death of the leader brought about the rise of national unity, and reminded of the common values of people in Poland. This statement – or a similar one - could be written about any other tragedy elsewhere. After all, the death of a symbol always makes a group vulnerable in a certain way, and it always touches something deep in its collectivity. J.F. Kennedy, Princess Diana of Wales, Elvis Presley are examples of how the death of one person changed collective feelings. In the case of the Polish president, however, there was something hidden behind, which could illuminate the great significance of the situation for the Polish people. It could, too, explain the ambiguity of Mr. Kaczynski’s position in the Polish society after the plane crash.

During its long history, the Polish nation experienced many tragedies and defeats. At times of the instability, this traditionally Roman-Catholic nation always searched a relief in the Church. Christianity has a long history in Poland and during hard times, the religion was always a base for national identity. National identity and national pride became inseparable from the Roman-Catholic Christianity, and the Polish nation adopted a very old myth of martyr (Chrostowski, similarly Tokarczuk). This myth was eventually acknowledge during the era of Romanism, and never disappeared.

The myth of martyr, the myth of “Jesus Christ of Europe”, or “Christ for the nations” is an old legend based on the Christian concept of sacrifice for the others. Jesus Christ, the son of God, laid down his own life to repay people’s sins, was resurrected, and thus he gave the hope of eternal life to those who would believe in him. According to the myth of “Jesus Christ of Europe”, there is a nation that has been chosen to sacrifice for others, and this nation is the Polish nation. Similarly as Jesus Christ suffered for all people, the Poland suffers for other nations. This suffering, nevertheless, means that the Poles are the chosen ones, and will be redeemed. The idea of martyrdom has its origin in the Romanticism but as it seems, it did not evaporate and remains vivid in the modern Polish society. As Jakubowska points out:

„The image of a martyr serves as a vehicle for collective and personal political advancement. The candidates for Parliament in the 1989 election campaign effectively capitalized on their history of persecution and internment [during the communist era]. Dates of imprisonment, their own as well as their families and forefathers, membership in the formerly illegal organizations, and participation in the actions of resistance, became key elements in qualifying for office. The image of a patriot expressed through martyrdom was embraced both by the opposition and the government it contested. “ (Jakubowska 1990, pp.12-13).

This myth of martyr eventually gave a new meaning to the situation. What I propose is that the plane crash and the Katyn Massacre were retold and became links in a long chain of grievous events which were the ground of the Polish national identity as such.

After the sudden death of a symbol of the Polish state, people started gathering, shared their emotions, remembered old national tragedies, and mourned their president’s death. It was a situation that corresponds to a concept of cultural trauma. Cultural trauma, according to Alexander, “occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways” (2004, pp. 1). I believe that the Katyn Massacre, as well as the Polish presidential plane crash was a cultural trauma. What I want to suggest is, however, that the situation in Poland differed as for the transformation of national identity. On the one hand, people were experiencing a cultural trauma. On the other hand, the situation did not really *change* the Polish national identity because their identity itself was based on the idea of cultural trauma. Actually, another cultural trauma in the history of the Polish nation just evoked the myth of martyr, the myth of a sorely tried nation. Thus, cultural trauma strengthened

the national identity. At the same time, I believe that the cultural trauma not only reinforces the national identity, but at the same time the cultural trauma as such created means to cope with the tragedy, because the idea of martyr, or Christ of Europe, embraces ideas of Christianity and salvation and gives hope to those who suffer.

What is interesting is that Lech Kaczynski declared national mournings quite often. One of the Wall Street Journal correspondents already in 2009 pointed out (Halaba, 2009) that Kaczynski did so six times during his four years of presidency. She also suggested that so many national mournings would devalue the meaning of these events. In my opinion, in this case the opposite was true. This is by no means to say that people were gathering on the streets after his death just because Kaczynski kind of liked national mournings. Several years of the Kaczynski's presidency could hardly create any traditions, or build up the national pride. However, they were attempts to recall the Polish national identity and unity, and no matter how artificial they could seem to be before, this time it was for real. What I mean to say is that Kaczynski's politics was in a certain way a reminder of the Polish nation, which was at times deeply divided, and this could play an important role in understanding the situation after the plane crash.

Many people did not like the president Kaczynski's politics; they did not like his conservative and nationalist points of view; nor they liked his homophobic attitudes. But when he died, his death might seem to be another tragedy in a long chain of Polish tragedies. He was a nationalist and he died on his way to Smolensk. The notion of the tragic destiny of Poland appeared again.

5 Persisting Ambivalence

In the course of several hours, the position of Lech Kaczynski in the Polish society changed enormously. As I have pointed out in previous chapters this change was, however, neither absolute, nor permanent. After the first shock and relatively homogenous reactions, conflicts and controversies appeared again. What I would like to suggest is that this change was caused by the schizophrenic understanding of the situation. On the one hand, there was Mr. Kaczynski, a politician, a controversial man, loved as well as hated. On the other hand, there was a myth of the tragic destiny of the Polish people, and Mr. Kaczynski, the Polish president, became a part of this myth. Different circumstances led to a distinction between these two men, and brought counter-performances into being. The first counter-performance

appeared very soon after the plane crash, at the time of the national mourning, and the very first actor, that created a counter-performance, was mass-media.

Mass media had played an important role since the very beginning of the event. As Alexander and Mast point out, “[m]edia organizations control the means of symbolic action” (2006, pp. 1), and they actually did in this situation. Shortly after the plane crash, newspapers, television channels, as well as internet sources informed the world audience that “something happened at Smolensk”. Minute after minute, mass media gave precision to information about the crash. The role of mass media continued later, during the funeral, which was broadcast all around the world on television and over the Internet.

At the same time, as I would like to point out, mass media become an active *actor* in the social performance. Although reactions both of the political scene and those of people on the street were quite similar and in favor of the deceased president, it was investigative mass media who reported about how irresponsible the president used to be when he used to force his pilots to land no matter what. It was mass media, too, who almost immediately after the tragedy published speculations about what was the real reason of the plane crash, suggesting it was Kaczynski’s fault. These speculations referred to Kaczynski’s personality and employed the idea of Lech Kaczynski as an ordinary man and an irresponsible politician.

This picture of “Mr. Kaczynski, a controversial politician” was also used later by public before and during the president’s funeral. The reason for another controversy was simple but fundamental. Representatives of the Roman-Catholic Church gave the permission to bury Lech Kaczynski and his wife Maria at the castle of Wawel, which has traditionally been a resting place of the Polish kings and rulers. Many people protested against this decision, claiming that such a controversial figure of the Polish history should not rest at the sacred place. Political opposition and a part of the public emphasized mostly his inability to unite the nation during his presidency, and his authoritarian tendencies. Supporters of the former president, on the other hand, highlighted Kaczynski’s affiliation and faith, and the tragic circumstances of his death. The true is that those who were against this symbolic gesture did not succeed with their objections, and the Polish president and his wife were buried at Wawel at the end. Their protest, nonetheless, shows how thin the line between an audience and actors is. I would define an actor as anyone who has the ability to enter the meaning-making process. People who were an audience at the beginning created a group, a kind of a movement, and did enter the meaning-making process.

The battle over the resting place of the president couple was only a prelude of more extensive battles – the political ones. As I pointed out above, I consider the Polish presidential plane crash as a cultural trauma and cultural trauma, as well as a social performance itself - embraces a conflict. As Eyerman notes, “[c]ultural trauma is mediated and always engages a meaning struggle” (In: Alexander 2004, pp. 62). Similarly Smelser points out that “[c]ultural trauma manifests a tendency toward producing political polarization” (In: Alexander 2004, pp. 55). The loss of high political representatives was thus an ideal breeding ground for several political performances and counter-performances.

At the international level, the performance and counter-performances were based on the international relations and the investigation of the plane crash in Russia. Their actors can be divided into three principal groups and these three groups led what Eyerman calls a “struggle for representation” (In: Alexander 2004, pp. 73). The first group can be called *domestic actors*, and it included Polish public and state officials. The second group consisted of Russian representatives. As the party which was blamed for the first Polish tragedy in the Katyn forest, these were in a very precarious situation. They not only had to defend their own political interests, but also had to guarantee the independent investigation and cooperation with the Polish representatives. The third group was composed of the European representatives. As Kaczynski was Eurosceptic, the relations between him and most European statesmen were cold which surfaced mostly before and during the President’s funeral.

A similar struggle was also seen at the national, Polish level. The struggle between opposition that was created by Jaroslaw Kaczynski’s party Law and Justice on the one hand, and the Polish government on the other hand was sharpened during the presidential elections. They, however, did not cease even in the case of the plane crash. The Polish opposition blamed the government for paying too little attention to how the investigation of the reasons of the plane crash runs. The battles over the former Polish president Lech Kaczynski continued.

Conclusion

The Polish president Lech Kaczynski was not one of those who enjoyed the high popularity during his presidency. On the contrary, he was indeed a figure who deeply divided the Polish nation into two implacable groups. What I want to propose in this paper is that the changing status of the deceased president was affected by three main points.

First, Lech Kaczynski was a president, a statesman, a symbol of an imagined community. He represented the Polish state and its interests. In everyday life, the idea of nation was not evident, but the President's death reminded of "us" and evoked a thought that the nation was unprotected. This notion of vulnerability was supported by the place of the President death which only reinforced feelings of an attack, and gave rise to many speculations about the guilt of the Russian party.

Second, Kaczynski became a link of a long tragic chain of the Polish national history, which was, in my opinion, the main reason why so many people paid respect to him after his death. Poland has embraced the idea of Christ of the nations and the martyrdom is still vivid in the Polish society. Because of circumstances of his tragic death, Kaczynski became a part of this myth.

Third, the transition in appraisal of Lech Kaczynski was never absolute, nor permanent. The real integrity arose only at the very moment of crisis, at the moment of shock and paralysis. At this moment, the Polish public unified and voices of those who did not like the Polish president Kaczynski became quiet. However, the state of peace was disrupted by the decision to bury the controversial politician at the place of the Polish kings and heroes at the castle of Wawel. Drawing a comparison between Kaczynski and Polish kings evoked the old hatred. For many people the tragically deceased president might be *sacred*, but the person was definitely not.

There was always a distinction between Lech Kaczynski, the president, and Lech Kaczynski, the symbol of the tragic destiny. This distinction persists even several months after the tragedy, and only future will show, if anything changes.

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