

Truth under Attack, or the Construction of Conspiratorial Discourses after the Smolensk Plane Crash

Alois Streicher

Keywords

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1. Introduction: On the Genesis of Conspiracy Theories

In a 2001 essay about conspiracy theories in Poland, journalist Teresa Bogucka writes that the word *conspiracy* does not have a bad connotation in Polish, quite the opposite. Since the eighteenth century, the country's history has abounded with conspiracies, both real and fictitious.¹ After describing a series of real and alleged conspiracies involving Freemasons and Jesuits during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Bogucka mostly dwells on the avalanche of anti-Jewish propaganda launched by the Polish communists in 1968. This campaign dealt with an alleged plot by the enemy of the classes—including Jewish residents who remained in the country after the Holocaust—against the Polish state. Bogucka proclaims that after the fall of communism, the era of politically instrumentalized conspiracy narratives had come to an end in Poland. Fortunately, the times in which the government actively reinforced hatred in public campaigns, fueling unjustified fears against whole groups of the population are long gone.² But is this statement, made in 2001, still true today in a country that has undergone significant change?

1 Cf. Bogucka 2001: 125.

2 Cf. *ibid.*: 135.

In this chapter, I contend that Poland's present situation does not allow one to diagnose the end of conspiracy theories or their instrumentalization for political purposes. Quite the converse, conspiracy theories have been *en vogue* in Poland again since at least 10 April 2010. On that day the plane TU-154M, which was supposed to carry Polish President Lech Kaczyński to the city of Smolensk in Western Russia for a commemoration ceremony, crashed in the course of a tragic catastrophe, claiming the lives of all 96 people on board. The fact that an important part of Poland's military, political, and religious elite fell victim to the catastrophe was a huge shock for the Polish public. After a phase of mourning, however, the length of the investigation, the inefficient cooperation between Polish and Russian authorities, as well as political strife within Poland all contributed to a heated atmosphere; finally, it was claimed that the plane crash had actually been the result of a plot. Different theories emerged to explain the catastrophe in the wake of the investigation, each supported by different political and social groups. The decisive question was of course: was it an assassination attempt or just a mere accident?

The following analysis does not try to answer the question of which version of the events about the Smolensk plane crash is true or false. Such an undertaking would go far beyond the scope of this chapter and the expertise of its author. This chapter's objective is rather to shed light on the genesis of discourses commonly labelled as *conspiracy theories*, and to do so under a variety of different aspects. The Smolensk catastrophe and the conspiracy theories it spawned are suitable for conducting such an analysis for a simple reason. The Smolensk incident is a single, distinguishable event that happened quite recently. This makes it easy to access contemporary reactions, media reports, and other publications about it. This enables us to document various stages of the event's coverage in the media, speculations about the course of events, and eventually the emergence of two opposing theories, each accusing the other of a lack of truth. Thus, the following pages are an initial attempt at describing and analyzing discourses that can be described as being at least partially conspiratorial.

In order to achieve this objective, the first part of the chapter contains a theoretical overview of the concept of a *conspiracy theory*. This analysis aims to refrain from any form of value judgement and—drawing on an approach adopted by the sociology of knowledge—to define conspiracy theories as an additional form of knowledge or discourse existing alongside other forms.³ The following section deals with the historical context of the Katyn massacre, which plays an important role in the construction of conspiratorial discourses surrounding the

3 Cf. Anton/Schetsche/Walter 2012.

2010 plane crash. Then follows a description of the catastrophe based on the Polish Lasek report (at the time of its publication, the official government version). In the course of the lengthy investigations, this initial document was followed by many other reports and commissions that were increasingly characterized by political conflicts, including accusations that important information had been concealed or destroyed and that the plane crash was in fact an orchestrated operation planned by a foreign power. Thus, the present chapter aims to give a comprehensive overview of the whole process of the genesis of a conspiracy theory: from the event itself until the complete discourse that develops its own dynamics within society and media.

2. Conspiratorial Discourses and the Smolensk Plane Crash

2.1 Conspiracy Theories as a Form of Unorthodox Knowledge

Conspiracy theories are a topic that is hard to deal with in a neutral way. Therefore, the academic treatment of this phenomenon has frequently been characterized by the preconceived notion of conspiracy theories as morally “wrong” or manipulative knowledge. This kind of knowledge not only serves as a fertile ground for all kinds of political and religious extremism, it also allows for rather explicit conclusions regarding the intelligence, rationality or even assertions about the mental health of its adherents.⁴ This view of the term *conspiracy theory* is also popular outside of the academic context, where such theories are often qualified as “bizarre private opinions” whose followers advocate “stereotypical and monocausal worldviews”; many critics argue that it would be better if these people did not take part in public debate in a rational society.⁵ Thus, the fact that people increasingly accuse each other of believing conspiracy theories is an indicator of increased aggression in current public discourse today. If conventional criticism does not suffice, then it is still possible to accuse your opponent of believing in conspiracy theories, trying to completely exclude them from the discussion.

Let us now take a closer look at the structural features of conspiracy theories and conspiratorial discourses. Historical experience, ranging from the plot against Julius Caesar to the Watergate affair, shows that the topic of such theories—i.e., conspiracies—is a very real phenomenon. Conspiracies, defined as “secret, planned agreements between a group of several participants, aiming at

4 Cf. Anton/Schetsche/Walter 2014: 10.

5 Cf. Lau 2016: 11.

their own advantage to the detriment of the majority of people” have always been a part of human life.⁶ Knowledge about real conspiracies inevitably leads to speculations about other, more secret ones which have simply gone undiscovered to date. These speculations are referred to as *conspiracy theories* in everyday language as well as in academic discourse. However, the expression *theory* is actually a misnomer, since they are not theories in a strictly scientific sense: conspiracy theories cannot be disproven by falsification, as is the case in natural sciences. Instead, more or less empirical data are connected into statements that are not to be doubted and single incidents are often read as indicators for all-encompassing conspiracies.

Therefore, it is not surprising that some researchers prefer the term *conspiracy myth* to the conventional *conspiracy theory*.⁷ Here, the term *myth* should be associated with a pre-scientific, quasi-religious, and uncritical worldview. This automatically stigmatizes the search for alternative explanation models of events practiced by conspiracy theorists as dubious, if not outright dangerous. The same theorists often attribute the development of conspiracy theories to psychological or social effects, like e.g., *cognitive dissonance reduction*.⁸ This term, taken from psychology, means that certain individuals—overwhelmed by the complexity of the modern world—search for simple explanations and solutions to their problems. As a consequence of this, multi-faceted phenomena like wars, economic crises or catastrophes are often viewed as elements of a ‘big plan,’ while certain social minorities, e.g., Jews, communists or Freemasons, are blamed as having orchestrated these situations.

However, this depiction of conspiratorial thought presents two significant weaknesses. The first problem is concerned with the relationship between reality and fiction in a broad sense, the second one arises because the expression *conspiracy theory* is not a neutral term, but a derogatory term. As for the first point, Karl Hepfer in his introductory work *Verschwörungstheorien. Eine philosophische Kritik der Unvernunft (Conspiracy Theories: A Philosophical Critique of Irrationality, 2015)* remarks that since the time of René Descartes, the question of truth can no longer be answered unequivocally. Descartes, by systematically questioning the validity of human perception and empirical knowledge, left humanity his famous *cogito ergo sum* as the only and last certainty, shattering the then-prevailing notion that one only had to find out the truth about the world by

6 Johannsen/Röhl 2012: 24–25.

7 Cf. Lau 2016: 11.

8 Cf. Anton/Schetsche/Walter 2014: 11.

means of empirical observation.⁹ Today it is a commonsense notion that human beings—up to a certain degree—construct their subjective realities and truths themselves. Consequently, no propositions can be made with absolute certainty, which also holds for the perception of the world surrounding us every day. There always exists a possibility of deception, inaccuracy of our own perception or of misinterpretations. Taking this into account, Hepfer arrives at *two* remarkable conclusions. First, he does not view conspiracy theories in an entirely negative light, asserting that—with their doubt of firmly established beliefs and narratives—they stand in a long tradition which he connects with Descartes and to other rationalist philosophers.¹⁰ Thus, it is possible that at least *some* conspiracy theories are triggered by emancipatory thinking in accordance with the values of the Enlightenment. Second, in a world without final certainties, it is logically impossible to completely and absolutely refute conspiracy theories. As Hepfer stresses, there always remains a lingering doubt as to whether the conspiratorial interpretation of an event might be true after all, even if it sounds outrageously ridiculous in the beginning.¹¹ Moreover, as historical experience shows, there are numerous examples of unlikely scenarios and interpretations that nonetheless eventually turned out to be true.

The second drawback of the conventional understanding of conspiracy theories is that researchers always *a priori* depict them as a reaction by individuals unable to cope with the complexity of the world, or as a consequence of social disappointment. In other words: the world is evil, unfair and meaningless, which is why people come up with their own simple explanations. However, this claim is not valid for two reasons: first, the complexity or simplicity of a theory does not contain any direct information about its probability. Simple explanations for complex events, such as plane crashes, economic crises or military conflicts are not automatically wrong, nor can they always be excluded as improbable. Furthermore, an approach that categorically rejects alternative explanations as pathological, supports the development of unreflective political and psychological ideas of normality. Thus, the participants in the discourse—implicitly or explicitly—adopt common sense classifications offered by mainstream media and the majority culture.¹²

What follows from this? It is of crucial importance that we be aware of the fact that neither conspiracy theories nor their academic treatment in the humani-

9 Cf. Hepfer 2015: 52–53.

10 Cf. Hepfer 2015: 54.

11 Cf. *ibid.*: 55.

12 Cf. Anton/Schetsche/Walter 2014: 12.

ties are located outside of social reality. The mere labelling of ideas and opinions as a *conspiracy theory* already has a delegitimizing effect, striving to exclude adherents of such theories from public discourse. The analysis of conspiracy theories should, therefore, observe one basic principle: conspiracy theories, as with any other form of discourse, cannot be evaluated by an ideal and neutral “außersoziales Realitätsverständnis” (*extra-social understanding of reality*), operating with absolute values of truth and fiction. Conspiracy theories are part of social knowledge inventories and, therefore, we always have to analyze them in relation to this knowledge.¹³ This leads us to a notion of conspiracy theories as just one more type of social knowledge among many others.

In their monograph on the sociology of conspiratorial thought, Anton/Schettsche/Walter describe conspiracy theories as nothing other than a *heterodox* form of knowledge, one that is in contradiction to socially recognized and conventional forms of knowledge, which they call *orthodox*.¹⁴ Hence, a sociological approach to conspiracy theories has to place its focus on the processes which generate and facilitate differences between heterodox and orthodox—i.e. alternative and conventional respectively—forms of knowledge in discourses. In this context, concrete social factors always play a crucial role: which population groups and/or institutions are involved in the creation of heterodox forms of knowledge, who tends to adopt them and who rejects them?¹⁵ In conducting such an analysis, one has to keep in mind that it is not possible to confirm or refute a discourse—be it heterodox or orthodox—simply by analyzing it. Instead, the sociological approach presumes that knowledge in the form of public discourse is produced throughout the course of a social process, one which is not directly linked to the extra-discursive world.

Taking the abovementioned points into account, this chapter is based on three main methodological principles. The first principle is the impossibility of proving or refuting assumptions about the real world with absolute certainty. Therefore, the focus of this chapter rests on the origin and the structure of conspiracy theories as *discourse*, rather than the relation of this discourse to the extralinguistic world to which it refers. Second, it is necessary to liberate the term *conspiracy theory* from its negative connotation as deliberately wrong, potentially extremist manipulation. Rather than that, we have to view them as a special type of socially constructed discourse concerned with the interpretation of historical events or current processes, described by them as the direct results of con-

13 Cf. *ibid.*

14 Cf. *ibid.*: 13.

15 Cf. *ibid.*: 14.

spiracies. Conspiracy theories are also subject to the same processes that any other form of discourse is. The only difference is that a conspiracy theory per definition represents a discourse that is publicly unaccepted and, hence, constitutes a form of alternative or *heterodox* knowledge. The third principle of the present analysis is its diachronic approach. As Johannen and Röhl remark, conspiracy theories always have to fit into the collective imagination of a certain group or society in order to tap into previously existing fears and stereotypes.¹⁶ Hence, the analysis of a conspiracy theory originating in Poland should take the prevailing moods, underlying sentiments, social fears and the attitude towards conspiratorial ideas within Polish society into account. Without such information, any description of conspiratorial discourses will be incomplete. Therefore, the next section begins with a short historical contextualization of the dramatic events of 10 April 2010.

2.2 Katyn: Trauma with Consequences

It seems necessary to first provide a short historical overview of the massacre of Katyn, a Soviet war crime committed during World War II, given that is not only directly connected to the Polish President's journey to Smolensk on 10 April 2010, but also plays at least an indirect role in the emergence of related conspiracy theories.

The massacre of Katyn is the most prominent incident in a series of politically motivated war crimes committed by the Soviet People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD) in April and May 1940 against more than 25,000 Polish citizens—mainly soldiers, but also representatives of the social elite.¹⁷ The reason for this war crime can be found in the aftermath of the Soviet annexation of Eastern Poland in 1939, in accordance with the German-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact. 250,000 Polish soldiers found themselves in Soviet camps, causing problems for the Soviet authorities who were not prepared for such high numbers of prisoners.¹⁸ The head of the People's Commissariat, Lavrenty Beria, turned to the Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin, asking him for permission to execute the Polish prisoners by firing squad in a letter dated 5 March 1940. Stalin and the Politburo gave their consent and ordered Beria to treat the cases of 25,700 Polish prisoners of war by means of a special procedure—i.e., without any legal procedures at

16 Johannen/Röhl 2010: 29.

17 Cf. Zaslavsky 2007: 9.

18 Cf. *ibid.*: 21.

all—and to apply the maximum sentence: death by firing squad.¹⁹ Immediately, the Poles were removed from the camps. More than four thousand Polish officers were brought into a forest near the village of Katyn in the Smolensk district from one of the main camps in the Russian city of Kozelsk; here NKVD officials killed 4,143 Poles through shots in the back of the head.²⁰ Moreover, the Soviets killed many more Polish prisoners in other places throughout the Soviet Union.

The propagandistic abuse of the massacre that followed can be taken as a typical example for the deliberate construction of orthodox discourse in a totalitarian society, showing that the mainstream interpretation of an event does not necessarily have anything to do with historical facts. When Nazi-German soldiers discovered the mass graves in Katyn in the course of their war against the Soviet Union in 1943, they announced this to an international public, hoping to instrumentalize the massacre for their own propagandistic purposes.²¹ Among the Western allies, neither the US nor the UK were interested in an investigation of the matter—the alliance with Stalin to fight Hitler was more important. When the Prime Minister of the Polish government in-exile confronted the British Prime Minister Churchill with proof that over 15,000 Polish officers had been killed by the Soviets, the latter is reported to have answered: “If they are dead, there is nothing that will bring them back to life. ... We must beat Hitler, this is not the right time for bickering and accusations.”²²

Still during the war, two investigative commissions—one that was set up by Nazi Germany and one by the Red Cross—arrived at the same conclusion: the Polish officers were shot in the spring of 1940, i.e., at a time when the area was still under Soviet rule.²³ Soviet authorities appointed their own investigation committee immediately after the Soviets had liberated the region from the Nazis, which carried the lengthy name *Special commission for the assessment and investigation of the circumstances leading to the shooting of Polish prisoners of war by fascist German invaders in the Katyn forest*.²⁴ Unsurprisingly, this commission came to the conclusion that the executions were carried out over one year later by the Germans. In the course of events, this version became part of

19 Cf. *ibid.*: 43.

20 Cf. Roth 2015: 99.

21 Cf. Zaslavsky 2007: 63.

22 Cf. *ibid.*: 64.

23 Cf. *ibid.*

24 Cf. *ibid.*: 67. «Специальная Комиссия по установлению и расследованию обстоятельств расстрела немецко-фашистскими захватчиками в Катынском лесу военнопленных польских офицеров».

official Soviet as well as official Polish (communist) historiography. Until the end of the 1980s, it was not possible to officially and publicly talk about the causes for the massacre, neither in the Soviet Union nor in Poland. It was only Mikhail Gorbachev that publicly declared the NKVD's responsibility for the executions.²⁵ In 1989, the Russian public office of military prosecution even undertook steps to resume the investigation of the massacre. However, this came to an abrupt halt in 2004, the justification being that investigative action had not confirmed that a genocide of the Polish people had taken place.²⁶

It is not hard to understand that this event, along with the subsequent efforts to cover up everything, have remained in the collective memory of Polish society up until today. Zaslavsky, among many other researchers, contends that the Poles never believed the Soviet version. An overwhelming majority of the Polish population never doubted that the Soviets were responsible for the killings.²⁷ Their experience of a historical truth was suppressed and could not even be mentioned, while the official version was a blatant lie. This went down in Polish history as the 'Katyn lie.' It is a topic that still casts its shadow upon Polish-Russian relations today. Moreover, the history of the Katyn massacre serves as bitter proof that cover-ups and historical lies *do* exist in the real world and that one should never blindly believe in an official version, simply because it comes from the authorities. In this context, knowledge of the Katyn massacre is necessary for an understanding of Poland's reactions in the aftermath of the 2010 Smolensk plane crash.

2.3 The Plane Crash of 10 April 2010—an Overview

The immediate cause for the Polish President Lech Kaczyński's journey to Russia was the seventieth anniversary of the Soviet massacre of Katyn. The Polish government decided to hold the official ceremony on 7 April 2010 in the course of a meeting between the Prime Ministers of both countries—Vladimir Putin and Donald Tusk. Since this event was scheduled to take place in the absence of the President of Poland, Lech Kaczyński had scheduled his own visit to take place three days later.²⁸ Commentators attributed the reason for the President's and his Prime Minister's separate visits to the existence of a political conflict between them. Tusk, a member of the liberal-conservative *Platforma Obywatelska* (PO,

25 Cf. Roth 2015: 102.

26 Cf. Zaslavsky 2007: 9–10.

27 Cf. *ibid.*: 77.

28 Cf. Roth 2015: 109–10.

Civic Platform), advocated a more moderate relationship towards Russia, while Kaczyński of the *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* (PiS, *Law and Justice*) party was known for his anti-Russian sentiment. There were reports circulated in the media that talked about political games through which Tusk and the PO wanted to harm the President to keep him away from the remembrance ceremony. In a report published by Antoni Macierewicz, a PiS politician and member of the Polish Parliament, it states:

From 2009 onwards, the Polish council of ministers was playing a game together with the Russians in order to prevent President Kaczynski from taking part in the Katyn anniversary. The representatives of the council of ministers agreed to a script devised by the Russians only to denigrate the President of the Polish Republic.²⁹

Roth also writes that the Tusk government actively tried to exclude the President—who was known for his anti-Russian stance—from the meeting in order to improve Polish-Russian relations.³⁰ In any case, the question of setting the date for the visit was already a matter that gave rise to speculations and heterodox explanatory models.

According to official information, the president's plane, a Russian Tupolev TU-154M, took off from Warsaw Chopin Airport at 7:27 AM (Central European Time). Its destination was the military airport Smolensk-North located near Katyn. At about 10:24 AM (Moscow Time), the aircraft was approaching the destination airport for landing; however, the ground personnel informed the crew that a landing was not possible at that moment due to bad visibility conditions. Nonetheless, the captain asked the head of the tower crew for permission to try out a landing approach in order to determine the exact conditions. At the same time, however, he informed the diplomatic chief of protocol that they probably had to prepare for a landing in one of the Belorussian airports of Minsk or Vitebsk, as the weather conditions and especially the thick fog did not allow for a landing.³¹

Nonetheless, the aircraft tried out a landing approach with the consent of the Russian ground crew. Problems arose during the initial descent towards airstrip D 26. The internal TAWS (*Terrain Awareness and Warning System*) indicated a

29 "Od połowy 2009 r. Rada Ministrów RP prowadziła grę ze stroną rosyjską zmierzającą do wyeliminowania Prezydenta RP Lecha Kaczyńskiego z udziału w katyńskich uroczystościach Przedstawiciele Rady Ministrów RP przystali na scenariusz rosyjski w celu dyskredytacji Prezydenta RP." – Pechowicz/Pacewicz 2016.

30 Cf. Roth 2015: 111.

31 Cf. Komisja Łaska 2015.

higher flight altitude than was actually the case. At 10:40:50 local time, the pilot eventually wanted to end the landing approach, giving the order “Initiate a go-around.”³² Only a few seconds later, at 10:41:00, the plane came into contact with objects on the ground, due to its low altitude. Despite a slow rise in altitude, the relative height of the plane did not increase due to the composition of the terrain. At 10:41:02, the plane hit a birch tree that ripped off about a third of the left wing and made the aircraft unmaneuverable, tilting it to the left. After a final order by the ground crew to abort the landing approach, the plane hit the ground at 10:41:07 at a speed of 260 km/h. It was completely destroyed through the collision and none of the crew or the passengers survived the accident; 96 people died, including the President of the Republic of Poland.³³

This version is a broad summary of the results published by the Polish federal commission for the investigation of the catastrophe; it is, however, not the only version of the events, as will be shown in the following section.

2.4 A War of Commissions: Conflicts about the “Truth of Smolensk”

Although not everybody would agree with the description of the events provided above, it is largely based on observable data such as recordings of the communication between the plane crew and the ground personnel or the technical instruments of the plane. Of course, this version does not provide a full explanation for the reasons for the catastrophe. Many questions remain unanswered: why did the pilots try to land despite the bad conditions? What exactly was the effect of the damaged TAWS system? Might there have been any other factors that played a role? Moreover, one has to take into account that in the days and weeks directly after the plane crash, there had not been any official version yet. From a sociological view, this is an interesting point in time: a tragic event took place, the interpretation of which is still completely open. There are no orthodox mainstream versions and no heterodox alternatives to them. Society awaits a narrative that consistently explains how the tragedy could happen.

A common means to fabricate such narratives are investigative commissions. They are not only official in nature, but also consist of reputable experts and politicians who do extensive research into the matter and publish a report at the end of their work that sums up their findings. These reports have a huge influence on

32 “Odchodzimy na drugie zajście.” – I.e., abort the landing and gain altitude again. – Komisja Łaska 2015.

33 Cf. *ibid.*

the way certain events are perceived in public—one might think about the report by the Warren Commission about the assassination of President Kennedy or the 9/11 Commission Report. Nonetheless, it is clear that all of the different groups that were somehow involved in the plane crash immediately started to support a discourse that would show themselves in a more positive light. Therefore, the best way to conduct an investigation into a matter like the Smolensk plane crash is to call upon an uninvolved third party, which can best guarantee the neutrality and independence of the process. However, in the case of the Smolensk incident, no investigation was carried out by a third party, e.g., an international commission. On the contrary, it was a federal Russian commission that mostly did the work of investigation. This in turn led to constant skepticism on the part of the Poles who questioned the neutrality of the Russian experts from the outset.

The first Russian commission that dealt with the Smolensk plane crash was set up by the Russian civil aviation committee MAK.³⁴ It presented its final report on 12 January 2011 in Moscow.³⁵ This report was neither accepted by the Polish public nor by the Polish political elites, since it placed the sole responsibility for the accident on the Polish pilot and the cabin crew. According to the MAK report, the main reasons for the catastrophe were failure to abort the landing approach earlier, in spite of bad weather conditions, ignoring the internal warning systems as well as psychological pressure exerted on the pilot by the Diplomatic Chief of Protocol, Mariusz Kazana, and the Commander of the Polish Air Force, Andrzej Blasik. Moreover, the speed of the descent was much too high. Apart from that, Commander Blasik supposedly had alcohol in his blood.³⁶ The commission asserted that Blasik had a blood alcohol level of 0.06 percent when he forced the pilots to try a landing approach. The tower crew in Smolensk also offered the Poles an alternative airport. They had not given explicit permission for landing.³⁷ Prime Minister Donald Tusk described the MAK-report as incomplete: “The MAK-report is incomplete, there will be talks with Russia about the creation of a common version. ... The other side should also have the courage and readiness to show the whole picture.”³⁸ Jarosław Kaczyński, member of parliament and the late President Lech Kaczyński’s brother, called the MAK-

34 Межгосударственный авиационный комитет.

35 Cf. Roth 2015: 191.

36 Cf. Wassermann/Rymanowski 2015: 134.

37 Cf. Roth 2015: 191.

38 “Raport MAK jest niekompletny, [będą] rozmowy z Rosją o ustalenie wspólnej wersji. ... Druga strona powinna także mieć tę odwagę i gotowość do pokazania całości obrazu.” – Wassermann/Rymanowski 2015: 134.

report a “derision of Poland” and the then Defense Minister Klich stated that the MAK-report was politically motivated and that its aim was to embarrass the Polish nation by depicting one of the most important commanders of its army as a drunkard.³⁹ Despite this harsh criticism, the MAK-report quickly obtained a quasi-official status, not only in Russia but also in a broader international public. In Poland, however, it was not only members of the national conservative PiS that rejected the Russian report, but the ruling Civic Platform also expressed its dissatisfaction.

In addition to the investigation of the plane crash undertaken by the Russian MAK, the Poles set up their own federal commission to look into the case—the Committee for Investigation of National Aviation Accidents.⁴⁰ This commission—better known by the name of its chairman, Jerzy Miller, minister of the interior at the time—published its own closing report about the causes of the plane crash on 29 July 2011.⁴¹ Although the report does not substantially differ from the Russian MAK commission’s findings, it does place an emphasis on the partial responsibility of the Russian ground crew, due to inadequate communication between the tower crew and the pilot as well as the airport’s bad equipment.⁴² As opposed to the Russian version, the Miller Commission was not able to detect any direct psychological pressure that was exerted on the pilots. However, the Polish report mentions indirect pressure because of the importance of the state visit:

What can, however, be confirmed, is that there was pressure which influenced the crew in an indirect way, and was connected with the rank of the flight, presence of the most important people of the state onboard and importance of the ceremonies in the Forest of Katyn.⁴³

The publication of the Miller report represents an interesting point in Poland’s internal debate about the Smolensk plane crash. While most Polish experts and all political parties had agreed upon the incompleteness of the MAK-report, there were very different positions concerning the validity of its findings after the publication of the Miller report. These differences are mostly connected to

39 Cf. Roth 2015: 192–93.

40 “Komisja Badania Wypadków Lotniczych Lotnictwa Państwowego” (KBWLLP).

41 <https://wayback.archive-it.org/all/20120906032711/http://mswia.datacenter-poland.pl/FinalReportTu-154M.pdf> (English language version)

42 Cf. Roth 2015: 194.

43 Komisja Millera 2011: 235.

the political or ideological opinions of groups and institutions. Liberal media like the newspaper *Gazeta Wyborcza* and government politicians praised the commission's work, highlighting in particular the independence and high qualifications of its members who investigated the catastrophe for over a year and who were on the site of the plane crash in Smolensk only a few hours after the disaster took place.⁴⁴ However, the conservative PiS and other opposition parties harshly criticized the report from the very beginning. The main reason for their discontentment was the fact that the members of the Miller Commission were, to a large extent, the same politicians that were politically responsible for, or at least involved in, the president's flight to Smolensk—among others the Chief of the Chancellery of the Polish Prime Minister, the Minister of the Interior, and the Minister of Defense. They should not have been chosen for these positions, since this entailed a conflict of interests.⁴⁵ Moreover, Russian authorities had not enabled Polish investigators to access the original flight recorders, which led to the Polish commission writing its report without the original equipment at hand. The Russian MAK also withheld numerous documents and means of evidence necessary for a detailed investigation.⁴⁶ Therefore, some political commentators described the Miller report as, at best, worthless if not actively manipulated: the daughter of one of the victims stated in an interview: “The whole report belongs in the trash can.”⁴⁷ Without any access to original documents and evidence, the commission had not even properly conducted any investigative action, some claimed: “This is probably the only commission of this type in the whole world that investigated a catastrophe without even getting up from their desks.”⁴⁸

Dissatisfied with the investigations' development, and skeptical about the actions of the Russian side, the opposition party PiS initiated its own parliamentary committee for the investigation of the TU-154M crash in Smolensk. This group was led by Antoni Macierewicz, PiS politician and member of the Polish Parliament. It published its first report, entitled *Biała księga smoleńskiej tragedii* (*White Book of the Smolensk Tragedy*), on 29 June 2011. Although it did not offer any new narratives or changes to the findings of the previous reports, the basic message of the *White Book* was that the MAK report, as well as the work of the Miller Commission, were incomplete and faulty. According to the opposition

44 Cf. Roth 2015: 195.

45 Wierchołowski/Misiak 2013: 18.

46 Cf. Roth 2015: 195–96.

47 “Cały raport nadaje się więc do kosza.” – Wassermann/Rymanowski 2015: 161.

48 “To chyba jedyna taka komisja na świecie, która badała katastrofę, nie odchodząc od swoich biur.” – Wassermann/Rymanowski 2015: 163.

report, the government either had not taken into account serious facts or—worse still—had deliberately suppressed them. In the report, it states:

Polish public opinion and the parliament were systematically given wrong information by the Russian side and by the government of Donald Tusk, concerning the catastrophe and the course of the investigation. This behavior points towards a deliberate cooperation between the government of Donald Tusk and the authorities of the Russian Federation to the detriment of Polish investigative efforts in order to make it impossible to find the truth.⁴⁹

With this document, the open conflict about the truth of Smolensk and—consequently—the orthodox explanation of the plane crash gained momentum. In the beginning, the main goal of Macierewicz's parliamentary group aimed mainly at refuting the findings of both the MAK report and the Miller Commission, e.g., the notion that psychological pressure on the pilots had contributed to the catastrophe or the assertion that the Commander of the Polish Air Force had alcohol in his blood. However, in the course of its existence, Macierewicz's group conducted a variety of (sometimes controversial) experiments, published interviews with scientists and other experts and offered a number of alternative scenarios concerning the course of events leading up to the plane crash. All of these efforts were intended to disprove the official, governmental version about the pilots' main responsibility. Among these efforts were some that were viewed as respectable and reasonable by the public. Other efforts, however, instead served the opposite purpose and made the group a laughingstock in the media; their attempt to simulate the plane crash using sausages and empty beverage cans for example. The Polish journalist Bogdan Rymanowski described the government's and of parts of the public reaction, towards these experiments in the following way: "They are pseudo-scientists compromising themselves with experiments using sausages and empty cans of energy drinks."⁵⁰

It is important to note that from that point onwards both narratives, the version of the government and the opposition's alternative, were developing more

49 "Polska opinia publiczna i Sejm RP były systematycznie dezinformowane przez stronę rosyjską i rząd D. Tuska w najistotniejszych kwestiach dotyczących katastrofy oraz badania jej przyczyn i okoliczności. Takie postępowanie wskazuje na w pełni świadome współdziałania przedstawicieli rządu D. Tuska z władzami Federacji Rosyjskiej na szkodę polskiego śledztwa w celu uniemożliwienia dojścia do prawdy." <http://static.presspublica.pl/red/rp/pdf/kraj/bialaksiega.pdf>

50 "To pseudonaukowcy, kompromitujący się doświadczeniami z parówkami i puszkami po napojach energetycznych." – Wassermann/Rymanowski 2015: 169.

and more in different directions. The first version—supported by the ruling PO party, Prime Minister Donald Tusk, and many of the country’s most important media outlets—talked about the primary responsibility of the Polish cabin crew and about an unfortunate landing approach that was not stopped until it was too late. The second version—advocated by the largest opposition party PiS, some scientists, as well as the conservative Catholic environment—emerged as a critical response to the government report and the report by the Russian MAK Commission. Even after the government’s official conclusion of the investigation, the Macierewicz group carried on its work, introducing a further element into the debate that can probably be described as the focal point of most alternative explanations of the plane crash. The group raised the question: “Was there an explosion onboard the plane that led to the crash?”⁵¹ In order to promote and discuss his theories, Antoni Macierewicz has regularly held so-called “Smolensk Conferences” since 2012. After the first conference, his parliamentary group published a new report titled *28 Months after Smolensk*, in which he claimed that the plane had not crashed because of bad weather or the pilots’ mistakes, but because of explosions in the aircraft.⁵²

Macierewicz’s parliamentary group’s actions forced the government to defend its own version of the events, as described in the Miller report. Consequently, the Prime Minister set up another government commission in 2013, headed by engineer Maciej Lasek. This commission was expected to answer the last remaining questions concerning the Smolensk catastrophe beyond any doubt.⁵³ The name of the commission “Parliamentary group for the clarification of public opinion, information, and materials concerning the reasons and circumstances of the Smolensk catastrophe”⁵⁴ already hints at the fact that the sole purpose of this commission was to inform the public about the ‘real’ background of the events. Since the Lasek Commission, as it came to be known, did not conduct any new investigations, the opposition did not take it seriously and ignored its reports. Thus, the frontlines between the government and the opposition were hardening even more.

After a PiS victory in the parliamentary elections of 2015, Antoni Macierewicz became defense minister and turned his parliamentary group for the investigation of the plane crash into an official commission run by the defense minis-

51 Cf. Roth 2015: 204.

52 Cf. *ibid.*: 205.

53 Cf. *ibid.*: 208.

54 “Zespół do spraw wyjaśnienia opinii publicznej treści informacji i materiałów dotyczących przyczyn i okoliczności katastrofy pod Smoleńskiem.”

try; its task has been to continue investigating the matter and it is still in operation today.⁵⁵ In an article published on the Polish news site *oko.press*, the authors list twenty four conspiracy theories, most of which are supposed to have been influenced directly or indirectly by Antoni Macierewicz. They write: “Without doubt, most credit for the creation, finding and propagation of conspiracy theories must go to Antoni Macierewicz. For five years he has been looking for an appropriate explanation for the tragedy.”⁵⁶ It is also interesting which of the Polish media outlets are associated with the propagation of various conspiracy theories. Apart from the Macierewicz commission’s website, they also list some very right-wing newspapers and magazines like *Nasz Dziennik (Our Daily)*, *Gazeta Polska (Polish Newspaper)* or the online portal *wPolityce.pl*. These conservative media outlets have supposedly adopted the ‘Smolensk tragedy’ as one of their main topics in order to gain political capital from it.⁵⁷

The basic situation has remained more or less unchanged in Poland. However, the change of government in 2015 initiated an interesting turn concerning the interpretation of the events in the Polish public from a sociological point of view. Whereas the theory of an assassination attempt was only supported by opposition parties and some experts prior to 2015, now it was the Polish government that officially casted doubt upon the findings of the Miller Commission published by its predecessor. Jarosław Kaczyński, Chairman of the ruling PiS party, continues to speak of a conspiracy in his speeches, stressing that the truth has not yet been uncovered: “Truth is constantly concealed We know with a high degree of certainty that it came to an explosion.”⁵⁸ Thus, an alternative theory that emerged out of doubt towards an official version has itself become official. A heterodox version has become orthodox. At the same time, however, the Civic Platform clings to the version of the events as described in the Miller report and defended by the Lasek Commission.

In conclusion, two possible observations might be made here. First, the Smolensk catastrophe is being instrumentalized in the current political climate in Poland, a climate characterized by grave tensions and severe conflict. Second, the last word about the events leading to the Smolensk plane crash has not yet been

55 Cf. Pechowicz/Pacewicz 2016.

56 “Największe zasługi w wytworzeniu, tropieniu i propagowaniu teorii spiskowych ma bezsprzecznie Antoni Macierewicz. Od pięciu lat szuka odpowiedniego wyjaśnienia tragedii.” – *ibid.*:

57 Cf. *ibid.*

58 “Prawda jest ciągle odsłaniana. . . . Z bardzo wysokim stopniem pewności wiemy, że doszło do wybuchu.” – Skarżyński 2017.

uttered. It seems that a lot of time will have to pass until Polish society can agree upon one version of the events. At present, political conflict and mutual suspicion prevent the responsible forces from such an agreement.

3. Conclusion and Outlook

In a 2010 monograph, Wolfgang Reintaler put together a collection of twenty-six theses concerning conspiracy theories. One of them reads: “Conspiracy theories are no impartial instruments of knowledge, but rather ideological and political tools serving to determine one’s enemies.”⁵⁹ This thesis is true in a double sense: first, it depicts conspiracy theories as ‘instruments of knowledge’ by means of which we are enabled the construction of meaning from the often enigmatic events and phenomena surrounding us. Second, the thesis disputes the impartiality of these instruments—they *a priori* always respond to an internal scheme of ‘friend’ and ‘enemy.’ It has not been my objective in this chapter to refute this thesis, but rather to extend it in order to include not only conspiracy theories but—at least partially—all forms of discourse. In the first section, the difference between heterodox and orthodox ‘instruments of knowledge’ turned out to be a merely gradual one. Even theories that are socially endorsed and supported cannot be completely impartial and always carry traces of ideological and political influences within them.

The topic of the Smolensk plane crash as well as the ensuing controversies concerning the investigation of the catastrophe, the supposed or real motives behind different social and political groups, and the alleged hush up of important information, work well to illustrate this point. Taking the burdensome historical background of the Katyn massacre as described in the first section into account, the death of many members of the Polish elite in the Smolensk plane crash and the complex judicial, political, and medial aftermath provided a fertile ground for the emergence of conspiratorial discourse. The political constellation of two rivaling parties, gradually building up and promoting their own version of the events, just accelerated this process. The *Civic Platform* (PO) stressed its excellent cooperation with the Russian authorities and the responsibility of the Polish pilots; the *Law and Justice* (PiS) party in turn sharply rejected this version. The main responsibility for the tragedy, they maintain, lies with Russia and the

59 “Bei einer Verschwörungstheorie handelt es sich nicht um ein unparteiisches Erkenntnisinstrument, sondern um ein der Feindbestimmung dienendes ideologisch-politisches Werkzeug.” – Reintaler 2010: 150.

Polish government who obstructed a full and effective investigation for political reasons. Eventually, the *Law and Justice* party came up with an alternative explanation model: there had been explosions onboard the plane. PiS is striving to prove this version even today, with the help of parliamentary commissions and conferences.

One of the most striking turning points in the aftermath of the Smolensk catastrophe is the rise to power of the *Law and Justice* party in 2015. Thus, a party promoting a heterodox explanation model for the Smolensk tragedy—in other words, a conspiracy theory—took over the government. Time will tell if the PiS will be able to turn its narrative of the explosions and of a political assassination into a dominant, orthodox discourse. In this context, it would be interesting to conduct further research into the social preconditions for the genesis of conspiracy theories. Which conditions must be fulfilled in a society to make it vulnerable to conspiratorial thinking? Which types of discourse spread particularly fast? And which factors decide if a theory is heterodox or orthodox? It is especially the more recent cases of conspiracy theories—the Smolensk plane crash for example—that are suitable for the examination of these types of question.

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Abstract

There has probably been no event more tragic in Poland's recent history than the crash of the presidential airplane, Tupolev TU-154M, that took place near the Russian city of Smolensk on 10 April 2010. The aircraft was supposed to carry the Polish President Lech Kaczyński along with a delegation of politicians, military officers, and state officials to Smolensk. Kaczyński travelled there to attend a ceremony marking the seventieth anniversary of the Katyn massacre, a series of mass executions of members of the Polish mass executions of Polish military

officers carried out by the Soviets in 1940. However, after a series of unfavourable circumstances including thick fog, technological trouble and communication problems with the ground crew, the aircraft descended far below the expected approach path, collided with a tree and crashed into the ground. All members of the delegation—including President Kaczyński and his wife—died in the crash. Poland declared a three-day national mourning period; for once, the Polish people as well as members of all political camps were united in sorrow and remembrance of the dreadful events. Yet, when it came to examining the exact course of events and answering the question of who was responsible for the tragedy, a bitter conflict ensued over the causes of the tragic plane crash. While some believe that the Polish pilots were responsible, others maintained that the catastrophe could not have been a mere accident and that there must be more to the matter. Many people believed an act of political violence or a terrorist attack had taken place, one that had probably been coordinated by Russia. Thus, the question of the truth behind the Smolensk plane crash has not only become a question of political beliefs in today's Poland, but it is also a fertile ground for alternative explanation models and conspiracy theories. This chapter takes a closer look into the creation and circulation of some of these narratives and poses the question of how a certain discourse can change its status from a marginal one to a dominant one and vice versa.

