Katyn Massacre

On September 1, 1939, Hitler's Germany invaded Poland. On September 17, by an agreement with Berlin, units of the Red Army crossed the Soviet-Polish frontier. Within a matter of days these units occupied a territory specified by a protocol in the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact as belonging to the Soviet sphere of interest. Poland as a state ceased to exist.

In the course of the so-called liberation marches into western Belarus and western Ukraine, some 240,000 Polish servicemen were taken captive by the Soviets. There were not enough camps, food, clothing, or drinking water to support such a large number of people, however. As a result, in October of that year, by a decision of the politburo of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), enlisted men and younger officers who were residents of the territories just annexed by the USSR were quartered in private homes, and the same two categories who were residents of the central Polish areas were handed over to Germany. About 40,000 prisoners remained in Soviet captivity. Some 8,500 Polish officers were maintained in the Kozelsky and Starobelsky camps, and about 6,500 Polish police officers were housed in the Ostashkovsky camp. About 25,000 enlisted personnel and noncommissioned officers worked on the construction of the Novograd-Volynsky-Lvov highway and in the Krivoy Rog mines. It soon became clear to the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD) that it had not succeeded in breaking the will of the officers and police in the these three camps to fight for the restoration of Polish sovereignty.

After the reannexation of territories assigned to Poland by the Treaty of Riga of 1921, concluded in the aftermath of the Soviet-Polish war, Cheka operational groups conducted "cleanups" of "socially alien" or "counterrevolutionary" elements. This resulted in the further incarceration of more than 10,000 Poles.

During the first days of December 1939, the politburo of the CPSU's Central Committee sanctioned the arrest of all registered Polish officers along with the massive deportation in February 1940 of "settlers" (servicemen who had been rewarded for their military exploits in the 1920 campaign with allotments of land in the eastern territories which had been attached to Poland in 1921) and their families—a total of some 138,000 people. At this time a brigade of workers of the central apparatus of the Soviet NKVD was sent to the Ostashkovsky camp. They were given the task of formalizing accusations against the whole Ostashkovsky contingent so that they then could be handed over to the Special Conference of the NKVD. By February 1, 1940, the investigation of the Polish policemen was complete, and by the end of February the Special Conference had already decided six hundred cases. The police officers were sentenced to three to eight years of imprisonment in a camp on Kamchatka. Investigative brigades were also sent to both the Kozelsky and Starobelsky camps, but they were not given the task of preparing cases for the Special Conference. At the end of February, Lavrenty Beria suspended the Special Conference's investigation of the police officers. He had a long talk with Stalin. It was apparently precisely at that time that a cardinally different decision was made about the fate of the Polish military and police officers.

Stalin's hatred of the Poles, engendered by the Soviet defeat in the 1920 war with Poland, grew even stronger in the 1920s and 1930s, when Poland was regarded as an outpost of imperialism and as a "cordon sanitaire" against the USSR. Moscow watched Berlin's efforts to induce Warsaw toward common action against the USSR with unease. Then, when Poland linked itself closely to London and Paris, rejecting the postwar guarantees of the Soviet Union, Stalin's enmity toward its western neighbor only grew stronger. He began to regard Poland as an active participant in a western coalition attempting to obstruct the division of Soviet and German spheres of influence. The "supreme leader" was even more angered by the actions of the Polish government in exile. The cabinet of General Władysław Sikorski promoted a liberation movement for Poles in the western areas of the Belarusian and Ukrainian Socialist Republics. It proposed the removal of the USSR from the League of Nations and insisted on the active participation of the Polish military in an expeditionary force being prepared to go to Finland. It also was keen on bringing England and France into a war against the USSR.

The "Winter War," begun by Moscow against Finland on November 30, 1939, had an effect on Soviet-German relations as well. The Hitler leadership became convinced that the USSR was weakly prepared for war and began to move troops toward the Soviet frontiers. The Stalin leadership hurried to take measures to strengthen the security of the border regions. Cleansing these border areas of "unreliable elements" was also important in connection

with the upcoming elections to the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, scheduled for the end of March.

On March 2, 1940, the politburo of the CPSU's Central Committee, pressed by Beria and Khrushchev, rendered a decision titled "On the Defense of Our National Borders in the Western Regions." In addition to the resettling of all residents living in an eight-hundred-meter strip along the borders, it was decided to deport 25,000 families of the captured Polish military and police officers—and also the ordinary inmates of prisons in the western areas of Ukraine and Belarus—to northern Kazakhstan for ten years. On the next day, March 3, Beria sent Stalin a note proposing that the heads of those families subject to deportation be executed by firing squad. The supreme leader signed the document and wrote on it in his own hand, "For (i.e., I'm for the proposal)." Politburo members Vyacheslav Molotov, Anastas Mikoyan, and Kliment Voroshilov countersigned the note, and Beria's proposals were also approved by Mikhail Kalinin and Lazar Kaganovich. On March 5, 1940, the politburo of the CPSU's Central Committee rendered a decision, which read as follows: "1) the files of 14,700 prisoners of war—former Polish officers, officials, landowners, police officers, intelligence officers, gendarmes, osadniks (settlers) and prison guards; and 2) the files of 11,000 ordinary prisoners arrested and now housed in prisons in the western regions of Ukraine and Belarus . . . shall be given special treatment, with the extreme punishment—death by firing squad—to be meted out."

Preparations for the execution of the imprisoned officers, police, and ordinary prisoners as well as the deportation of their families began literally on the day after the decision. The military and police officers were forced to reveal their families' addresses for the purpose of their upcoming deportation. From March 7 to March 15, meetings were held with workers of the central apparatus of the NKVD, the NKVD administrations of the Kalinin, Smolensk, and Kharkov regions, and of others as well. Information was gathered about prisoners of war whose death by firing squad was decreed by the troika of Merkulov, Kobulov, and Bashtakov.

The first lists of war prisoners to be sent to their executions were received by the camps on April 3–5 and by the prisons on April 20. These lists included 97 percent of all the military and police officers. The execution orders were drawn up not on the basis of whom to shoot but rather of whose lives should be spared. Only 395 war prisoners survived. Some were of interest to Soviet intelligence, others were bearers of important information, and still others were German nationals about whom the German embassy and Lithuanian legation had inquired. Some were not officers at all but simply operational agents or employees of ordinary penal organs.

During April and May 1940, 21,964 persons were executed: 8,348 military officers, 6,311 police officers, and 7,305 ordinary prisoners. The bodies of the officers from the Kozelsky Camp were tossed into eight graves in the Katyn Forest, about fifteen kilometers from Smolensk. The bodies of the officers from the Starobelsky Camp were interred in a forest park zone near Kharkov. The bodies of the policemen from the Ostashkovsky Camp were buried near the settlement of Mednoye in the Kalinin (now the Tver) region. Mednoye was never even occupied by German troops. The families of those shot—more than 66,000 people—were deported in the middle of April to northern Kazakhstan, where on instructions from Moscow, they were accorded neither living quarters nor work. Their mortality rate, especially among the children, was extraordinarily high.

The execution of almost 22,000 Poles was kept in the strictest secrecy. Their fate was not revealed either to their families, to the Red Cross, or to Sikorski's government in exile.

German authorities found out about the graves of the Polish officers in Katyn in 1942, but at the time had no interest in them. After the defeat of the Wehrmacht at Stalingrad, though, the Nazis attempted to use the Katyn massacre to undermine the unity of the anti-Fascist coalition. On April 13, 1943, German radio informed the world about the mass burial of Polish officers near Smolensk. Two days later Joseph Goebbels wrote in his diary: "The Katyn affair is becoming a colossal political bomb, yet one which in the present circumstances has not emitted a single blast. Even though we've been exploiting the issue with all the arts at our command."

The USSR's allies in the anti-Hitler coalition divined the goal of the Hitler leadership and did everything within their power to play down the Katyn massacre. Yet the pain felt by the Poles did not permit them to be silent. The Sikorski government appealed to the International Red Cross to investigate the slaughter of its officers. Berlin turned to this organization with the same appeal. The USSR leadership accused the Polish government in exile of plotting with the Hitlerites and immediately severed diplomatic ties.

As time went on, the Kremlin made unbelievable efforts not only to cover up the truth about the Katyn crime

but, if that proved too difficult, to at least lay it at Hitler's door. At the end of September 1943, when the Soviet troops liberated Smolensk, special units of the NKVD entered the Katyn Forest and cordoned off its territory. Their operatives arrested hundreds of collaborationists and, threatening them with hanging, were able to extort false testimony from them. When the well-known neurosurgeon Nikolay Burdenko arrived in Smolensk on a mission from the Extraordinary State Commission for the Investigation of German-Fascist Crimes, he was long prohibited, on direct orders from Molotov, from investigating the Katyn affair. Only after three and a half months, by a decision of the politburo of the CPSU's Central Committee on January 13, 1944, did the Special Commission for Investigation of Hitler's Crimes in the Katyn Forest come into being, with Burdenko at its head. Molotov, with Beria's consent, proposed including in the commission the chair and another member of the Central Directorate of the Union of Polish Patriots, which had been created in Moscow. These two persons, Wanda Wasilewski and Bołesław Drobner, however, were personally deleted from the ranks of the commission by Stalin.

The members of the Special Commission arrived in Smolensk on January 18, 1944, and by January 24 had already approved a report. The document was based on an in-depth account signed by persons who had headed the Katyn massacre—the people's commissar for state security, Vsevolod Markulov, and the deputy people's commissar for foreign affairs, Sergey Kruglov. At the Nuremberg trials, the Soviet leadership attempted to obtain a confirmation of the conclusions of the Burdenko Committee by the authority of the International Military Tribunal, but the tribunal refused to accept its evidence. The Katyn execution did not figure in the tribunal's verdicts.

At the height of the Cold War the U.S. Congress formed a commission, headed by Ray J. Madden, to investigate the Katyn affair. The USSR hurried to file a note of protest. Similar notes were sent to Western countries in the 1970s and 1980s as well. And every newly elected general secretary of the CPSU's Central Committee familiarized himself with the March 5, 1940, decision of the politburo of the Central Committee and gave it top priority.

In pro-Soviet Poland, in spite of the threat of severe reprisals, the truth about Katyn was passed by word of mouth. And the Poles in emigration kept gathering fragmentary evidence about the Katyn crime. Adam Moszyński, by dint of titanic efforts, compiled a list of the executed military and police officers. In 1948, a collection of materials titled *A Documentary Basis for the Katyn Crime* was published. Various reminiscences of the few survivors of the Katyn slaughter came to life, including accounts by Józef Czapski and Stanisław Swianiewicz. Józef Mackiewicz, Janusz Zawodny, and Louise Fitz-Gibbon that contributed major studies of the Katyn massacre. It was not until 1990, though, that the first document on the subject was published from Soviet archives.

International public opinion led by Great Britain, the United States, Sweden, and other countries began demanding renewed investigations of the Katyn affair, and argued for the disclosure of documents regarding the Polish military and police officers.

Beginning in 1981, the subject of Katyn began to be actively raised in Poland by the Solidarity movement. In the second half of the 1980s the controversy hit the pages of the press, television screens, and the radio. Official Warsaw was soon forced to confront Mikhail Gorbachev with the question of finding the truth about the Katyn crime. In 1987, a bilaterial party commission was formed to investigate gaps in history, and it included the extensive "expertise" of the Burdenko Commission's reports in its deliberations. Still, the Soviet representatives received no authorization to cast any doubt on the authenticity of this document.

Alexandr Yakovlev, who supervised the work of the Soviet-Polish commission, wrote: "Prolonged investigative dawdling began. The Polish side of the joint commission was putting pressure on G. Smirnov [director of the Institute of Marxism-Leninism], and he, in turn, called me and asked me to help him in the search for documents. Every time I approached Mikhail Sergeevich, his response to my repeated questions was a simple 'Well, just look for them, then!' . . . It went on like that for quite a while. But at last some of this fog was penetrated. Sergey Stankevich came up to me and told me that a historian named N. S. Lebedeva, while working on documents regarding escort trains, had unexpectedly discovered information about Katyn."

Finally, in spite of the politburo's negative stance, Yakovlev received unofficial consent to open things up, and the basic results of Natalya Lebedova's investigation were published in the weekly *Moscow News*. Then, almost three weeks later, on April 13, TASS published a statement laying responsibility for the Katyn massacre at the door of NKVD organs.

On November 3, 1990, the president of the USSR issued an order to the Soviet Union's chief public prosecutor enjoining him to investigate the criminal matter of the death of 15,000 Polish military and police officers. This investigation lasted fourteen years. In 2004 the case was finally completed, and a decision was made to transfer all the materials, once they had been declassified, to the Polish side. Even so, the Office of the Military Prosecutor, which had been handed the case, never published the results of the investigation on its own.

In 2000, cemetery complexes were set up in Katyn, Mednoye, and Kharkov to memorialize the Polish military and police officers. As of 2006, though, no churchyard cemeteries had been found in either Ukraine or Belarus, where the ashes of the ordinary prisoners, shot on Stalin's orders in April and May 1940, might be interred.

The last volume of a joint four-volume publication of the Katyn documents, to be issued by decision of the presidents of Russia and Poland, is being prepared, and a single-volume work based on the documents is being compiled at Yale University in the United States.

The Katyn massacre was a crime against the world. The Soviet attack on Poland in September 1939 was a military crime. The execution of some 22,000 military prisoners and peaceful citizens along with the deportation of more than 320,000 Poles from the territories annexed by the USSR, including the families of the executed officers, police, and ordinary prisoners, were crimes against humanity.

See also Borders; Deportation of Nationalities in the USSR; Ethnic Cleansing; Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact; Polish-Soviet War; Sovietization.

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