



## Stalin's Killing Fields The Soviet Union and the Katyn Forest Massacre

The 1984 film *The Killing Fields* recounts the gripping story of Cambodian journalist Dith Pran and the near genocide inflicted upon his people in the aftermath of the Vietnam War. The movie tells his tale of fear, degradation and survival, amidst one of the most egregious examples of man's inhumanity to man in modern history. Though not of the same magnitude, the Katyn Forest Massacre in World War II, is of greater significance because of its ongoing cover-up within the context of the Cold War.

### A Forest of Deceit

The Katyn Forest Massacre, which was one of the earliest mass shootings of prisoners of war during World War II, was a cold-blooded act of political murder. The victims were mostly Polish officers, soldiers and civilians captured by the Soviet Army after its invasion of eastern Poland in September of 1939. The event was even more shameful because the two countries were not yet at war and the Polish general had ordered his troops to stand down.

The slaughter took place in the Katyn Forest, a wooded area near the village of Gnezdovo just 12 miles outside the Russian city of Smolensk, in early 1940. While the total number of executions took place over several months and in different localities, the Katyn Forest was the first, where 4,143 Polish soldiers, mostly officers, were murdered. They were among nearly 22,000 Polish leaders whose names were on death warrants signed by Josef Stalin on March 5, 1940. As a result the Katyn Forest has become the symbolic site of the overall massacre.

It was NKVD chief (Narodny Komissariat Vnutrennykh Del) Lavrenty Beria who drafted the warrants for his secret police to carry out. Stalin wanted to destroy Poland's leadership so as to eliminate any possibility of a Polish uprising against his communist rule. With the stroke of a pen Stalin liquidated the cream of Polish

society and a full generation of its leadership, namely its doctors, lawyers, teachers and political leaders. This ensured a power vacuum that lasted until the Polish Solidarity Movement of the 1980s.

### The Blame Game

According to the June 2012 *Schwarz Report*, Rudolph von Gersdorff, a German intelligence officer, received disturbing reports in 1943 about mass graves of Polish military officers in the Katyn Forest. German soldiers had unearthed several mass graves of thousands of Polish officers. In an effort to drive a wedge between the Soviet Union and its Western allies, the Nazis took several American and British POWs to the Katyn Forest to show them the horrific evidence – thousands of corpses clothed in Polish military officers' uniforms. It was obvious that the bodies had been dead for many months, in an area the Germans had only recently occupied.

German news agencies were quick to claim that this was additional evidence of the war crimes and atrocities committed by Soviet commissars. The Germans' gruesome discovery prompted the London-based Polish government-in-exile to request an immediate investigation by the International Committee of the Red Cross. Stalin quickly blamed the Nazis for the atrocities. The German government countered with a European Commission of 12 forensic experts to complete a more thorough investigation. The reports of these neutral investigators confirmed that the graves contained Polish officers and political leaders.

The issue became moot when the Soviets recaptured the zone in eastern Poland where the massacres had taken place. The NKVD cordoned off the Katyn Forest in order to commence one of the most elaborate cover-ups in history. After exhuming the Polish bodies from the graves, the Soviets forged documents that shifted the blame to the Nazis. They planted scores of bogus documents on the bodies and started to *methodically*

*persuade* the local people who had witnessed the Soviet crimes to change their stories.

### Buried with the Dead

The Soviet deception did not fool the American or British governments. The Polish-Soviet crisis seriously threatened Western-Soviet relations. British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and United States President Franklin D. Roosevelt were torn between their commitment to their Polish ally and their need for Stalin's full military alliance. In private they agreed that *Uncle Joe* had been responsible for the atrocities in Katyn, but their dependence on his military assistance proved to be a deciding factor in their reluctant decision to hush up the soviet war crime.

Thanks to the secret coded messages of several American POWs, the White House had independent knowledge of the Soviet atrocities in the Katyn Forest. Roosevelt had instructed his special emissary to the Balkans, George Earle, to investigate the massacre. Earle submitted his report in 1944, asserting full Soviet responsibility for the executions. By that time, geopolitical pragmatists had dissuaded the Allies from exposing their partner's duplicity in the murders. They summarily buried the Earle Report with the Polish dead.

A British Foreign Office report concurred with the Earle Report. Even before he had read either of the reports, Churchill had written to his Foreign Secretary stating *we should none of us ever speak a word about it*. Churchill went so far as to urge exiled Polish officials, especially the volatile Vladislav Sikorski, to keep the incident quiet, lest the news shatter their East-West alliance with the Soviets. Sikorski's untimely death soon afterwards muddied the waters, giving rise to several conspiracy theories, books and movies about his possible assassination.

### Cold War Heat

After the war, a wall of silence was erected, beginning with the Nuremberg Tribunal of 1945-1946. By that time the *Soviet version of Nazi guilt* for the Katyn Massacre became the *official explanation*. The Soviets made certain that the *murders in the woods* were duly added to the charges against the Nazi leadership. The Americans and British were uncharacteristically silent on this outrageous inclusion.

Everyone who attended or participated in the Tribunal, including the Soviets, knew that the treatment of the Katyn Massacre at Nuremberg had become a judicial farce. The Soviets attempted every trick imaginable at the postwar trials. They shamelessly planted evidence and coerced testimony that painted the Nazis as the perpetrators of the murders. The Poles protested this travesty of justice by erecting memorial crosses on All Saints' Day. The Soviet occupation police simply tore them all down.

The Katyn Massacre also had political fallout in the United States. Leading Poles and many in Congress vigorously accused the Roosevelt administration of covering up Soviet involvement in the grisly deed. A Congressional committee declared there was no doubt of Soviet guilt, and called the massacre *one of the most barbarous international crimes in world history*. After the 1952 congressional hearings it was officially determined in the heat of the Cold War that Stalin had been behind the massacre and the Roosevelt administration was guilty of a coverup, albeit out of military necessity. The committee also recommended that the government bring charges against the Soviets at an international tribunal. Despite the committee's conclusions, the White House continued its *strategy of silence* for decades, exposing a consistent unwillingness to focus on an issue that would have increased political tensions during the Cold War.

### Stubborn Facts

The road to accepting the bitter truth about the Soviet Union's oppression of Poland has been a long and arduous one. Few people spoke of the Katyn incident publicly for 60 years. During the reign of Mikhail Gorbachev the Soviets tenaciously clung to their party line. His trusted advisor Valentin Falin blamed Polish historians for undermining the whitewashing commission which produced the Burdenko Report in 1944. But facts are stubborn. They just refuse to go away.

In 1987 Gorbachev launched his own historical commission in order to manufacture a more refined *Soviet version* of what happened at Katyn. Through his Politburo, he proposed a memorial to the victims of the massacre *executed by Hitlerites in Katyn* alongside a memorial to 500 Soviet POWs who were allegedly killed in Katyn by the Germans. The latter was a myth derived from Stalin's Burdenko Report.

On April 13, 1990, the 47th anniversary of the Germans' gruesome gravesite discovery, Gorbachev relented a bit by releasing two boxes of evidence to the Poles. The documents made it clear that the Katyn Massacre was the work of Lavrenty Beria, the head of the NKVD. True to his nature, Gorbachev did his best to distance the Soviet government from the murders in the forest by spinning the idea that Beria had acted independently of the Soviet Politburo in executing approximately 22,000 Polish leaders.

The following year the Soviet Union's Prosecutor General's Office, in one of its last official acts, finally confirmed Soviet responsibility for the massacres. It released official documents and testimony from witnesses who implicated Stalin and his NKVD directly with the war crime.

However, in concurring with the Prosecutor's Office, the Russian Federation reduced the number of the deaths to 1,803 Polish leaders. They also rejected Poland's claim of genocide. While they did agree to hand over 67 of the 183 volumes of evidence, the remaining evidence remained classified. The Federation also declared the investigation closed on the grounds that Stalin and his henchmen were already dead.

### A Russian Iceberg

Arguments between Russia and the West about who was responsible for the Katyn Forest Massacre continued to cast a giant shadow well into the 21st century. For nearly five decades, the Soviet Union claimed that it was Nazi troops who had committed the massacre, while suppressing historical evidence to the contrary.

In October of 1992, Gorbachev's successor Boris Yeltsin was forced to lower the communist flag, abolishing the Soviet Union. He also handed over *newly found* secret documents from the Soviet Politburo to the Polish president, Lech Walesa. This evidence was only the tip of the Russian iceberg of five decades of deception. Nearly 21,000 case files of evidence had already mysteriously disappeared down the *Soviet memory hole*.

However, what was revealed proved devastating to the Russian excuses. The documents included a Politburo order dated March 5, 1940, entitled Question of the NKVD. In it, Beria informed Stalin that 14,736 Polish officers, officials, police officials, gendarmes and intellectuals were being held in prison camps in occupied Polish territory and that 18,632 like-minded

people were being held in camps in the Western Provinces of Ukraine and Belarus. Beria wanted to shoot them all. In plain sight was Stalin's *in favor*, stamped over his bold signature, at the top of Beria's proposition.

But the bonanza of historical vindication had to wait until September 10, 2012, when the National Archives released 1,000 pages of formerly classified documents. The materials included documents on Polish soldiers sent to prison camps, transcripts of interrogations and death certificates. These documents clearly established beyond any reasonable doubt not only Stalin's absolute guilt, but also the Roosevelt administration's duplicity concerning the atrocities committed in the Katyn Forest.

Under serious pressure from human rights activists later that year, the Russian Duma finally approved a declaration which blamed Stalin and his henchmen for the bloody massacre.

### A New Spirit

Although Russian Premier Vladimir Putin has always regarded the Katyn Forest Massacre as an *inconvenient truth* that blemishes Russia's wartime heroism, by 2010 a new spirit of reconciliation was in the air. Despite his KGB background, Putin had already extended an olive branch to Poland with his condemnation of the Nazi-Soviet pact in 1939 that led to the partition of Poland.

While he personally believed Josef Stalin was responsible for the murders, Putin skillfully avoided apologizing for the atrocities committed against the Poles. He was also careful to emphasize that Katyn graves also held the bodies of *Soviet citizens* who were also Stalin's victims as well as Russian soldiers who were murdered by the Nazis.

Premier Putin and his Polish counterpart Donald Tusk later participated in a memorial service marking the 70th anniversary of the Katyn Massacre. Putin became the highest-ranking Russian official to mark the Katyn massacre while Tusk was the first Polish leader to receive an official invitation to attend. Their joint appearance served as a symbolic event that gave hope for improving relations between Warsaw and Moscow.

Unfortunately, this spirit was nearly extinguished by the untimely death of Polish President Lech Kaczynski and his wife, as well as 87 other important Polish political and military officials, on April 10, 2010 in a plane crash near Smolensk, en route to the Katyn Forest memorial

ceremony. Many Poles, who still remembered the Sikorski assassination in 1943, suspected Russian involvement in the crash.

### Hope Among the Ashes

The new openness about the truth of the Katyn Massacre has eased relations between both countries. In addition to the 2010 memorial service, the Polish film and TV industry produced the 2007 Oscar-nominated film *Katyn* by Polish director Andrzej Wajda, whose father was a massacre victim.

Wajda's graphic film, which premiered on Russia's Kultura television channel, included excerpts from both Nazi and Soviet newsreels shot at Katyn purporting to show who was culpable for the atrocities. Thanks to Wajda, the stoic Poles, long deprived of their history by both Nazis and Soviets, now have a fitting tribute to the slain and to the national spirit that sustained the Polish people during their long 20th-century *dark night of the soul*. The film is also a poignant depiction of the moral tension between loyalty to the dead and solidarity with the living.

On another front, Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill I dedicated a church at the site of the Katyn Forest Massacre on July 15, 2012, saying that with the Russian acknowledgment of serious Soviet duplicity in the execution of thousands of Poles, finally *the truth prevailed over lies*. Patriarch Kirill's four-day visit was a breakthrough in efforts to reconcile the two countries, divided by politics and religion for centuries.

Roman Catholic bishops and members of Warsaw's Orthodox Christian congregation crowded into the city's Orthodox Mary Magdalene Cathedral in order to welcome the Russian Patriarch. Together with Catholic Archbishop Jozef Michalik of Przemysl, the Patriarch signed an unprecedented document of reconciliation on August 12, 2012 in Warsaw in a sincere effort to overcome their historical and religious differences and focus on the churches' common stance on traditional values.

Though not specifically mentioned in that document, the Katyn Forest Massacre haunted it. The prelates' joint memorandum called on Russians and Poles to forgive, but not to forget, saying that historians must continue to search for *unfalsified historic truth*. This remarkable story of hope and reconciliation among the ashes underscores the indomitable Catholic spirit of the Poles and the frustration of those who would destroy it.

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William A. Borst, Ph.D. can be contacted at [BBPROF@sbcglobal.net](mailto:BBPROF@sbcglobal.net).

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Eleanor Schlafly, *Publisher*  
William A. Borst, Ph.D., *Feature Editor*  
*e-mail: [info@mindszenty.org](mailto:info@mindszenty.org)*  
*web site: [www.mindszenty.org](http://www.mindszenty.org)*  
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