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April 1940: Katyn massacre

Once the Red Army marched into Poland on 17 September 1939, Polish soldiers were disarmed and taken captive on USSR-occupied territories. Formally, they were not even prisoners of war as the USSR did not declare war on Poland and some soldiers did not fight the Russians respecting the order of the commander in chief. Over 10,000 Polish officers and thousands of privates were arrested.

That was not enough, though. Stalin was aware that depriving a nation of its elite helped manipulate people and intimidate them. That is why tens of thousands of Polish intelligentsia were arrested: scientists, physicians, lawyers, policemen, engineers, teachers, pre-war political and social activists, clergymen, public officials, and those in liberal professions. With particular intent the Soviets were cracking the heroes of the war of 1920, Polish patriots and culture creators known for their anti-Bolshevik inclinations. Most frequently the detainees' families, including children, were taken away with them. They were moved inside the USSR to Soviet prisons and forced into labour camps.



When the Sikorski-Mayski agreement was concluded in 1941, the so-called 'amnesty' (the word typically referring to criminals is applied here to illegally imprisoned Poles) was to cover over 380,000 Polish citizens imprisoned in the USSR. Among those joining the Anders' Army senior officers were still missing.

From 1941 to 1943, the Polish government sent more than 200 diplomatic notes to the Soviet authorities demanding that the soldiers be searched for and released. Cynically, Stalin claimed that their location was unknown to him and since they had not reached Anders they must have escaped. Further diplomatic efforts were futile. The search for the prisoners of war in the USSR was led by the government's envoy Józef Czapski, one of the survivors from Starobielsk, who had no way of knowing what had become of his co-inmates, yet he knew for sure that they had fallen into the hands of the NKVD. The prisoners of war maintained correspondence with the families until the spring of 1940 and then no letters reached their addressees and mail sent to the camps in Kozelsk, Ostashkov and Starobilsk was returned to the senders.

On 13 April 1943, the Germans announced that they had found graves of Polish officers murdered in Katyn. Over successive days, German propaganda press issued in Polish started to publish the names of the recognised victims. The Germans called upon the International Red Cross to visit the site of the

murder and demanded the presence of the Polish Red Cross. Stalin tried to block the exhumation but the Germans carried on, hoping to be able to use the uncovered crime in their propaganda against Stalin. 4,143 bodies were exhumed and then the area was controlled by the Red Army. After that, Stalin started to disseminate the 'Katyn lie' – that it was Germany that was responsible for the crime committed in 1941 – while the NKVD began to produce false documents and prepare witness testimonies to confirm that lie. One of such 'witnesses' was supposedly Zygmunt Berling, a former inmate at Starobilsk released from the camp by the NKVD.

Over the life of the Polish People's Republic the Katyn lie was the official explanation for the tragic end of nearly 22,000 Poles. At that time, Polish émigrés in western Europe and the USA made efforts so that the search could continue and the truth about Katyn be revealed. The fault of the NKVD was mentioned officially for the first time by Mikhail Gorbachev in 1991.

In 1994, Poland managed to set up Polish war cemeteries at the sites of the burial of the murdered: Kharkiv, Katyn, Mednoye and Bykovnya. Not all the bodies of the victims have been found yet and Polish authorities continue to work in various places indicated as possible burial grounds.

Successive investigations of the Katyn massacre conducted in Russia have been closed or discontinued due to the absence of the perpetrators (or their deaths). The Russians also question calling the Katyn massacre a 'genocide,' as it is recognised by Poland.

The Soviets murdered 22,000 Polish citizens, carefully selected representatives of the nation – patriotic intelligentsia, including more than 7,000 civilians – shooting them in the back of the head and burying them in large pits dug up in advance. The murders were committed in NKVD prisons or already in the forest at the pits. In order to make sure the crime was hidden the forest was planted immediately the pits had been filled.

It is a sad paradox of Polish history that crimes committed by the Soviet occupier were discovered thanks to the German occupier. The first lists of identified Katyn victims were published in the German newspaper Nowy Kurier Warszawski, the so-called 'reptile press.' The families who waited for any signal from their loved ones and found their names on the list had no doubts that they were not among the living.

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References: