

Remembering the Katyn Massacre as an Example of an Effective Struggle against Historical Disinformation

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On 17 September 1939, the Soviet Union, Hitler's ally, attacked Poland.

Approximately 250,000 Polish soldiers found themselves in captivity. Separately, the Soviets imprisoned members of the Polish elite, whom they considered to be their greatest threat: professional officers and reservists, including scientists, artists, journalists, lawyers, teachers, physicians, engineers, clergymen of various faiths, and policemen. In the spring of 1940, by decision of supreme authorities of the USSR, at least 21,768 prisoners were murdered with a shot to the back of the head. The bodies were buried, among others, in deep pits dug in a forest close to Katyn near Smolensk. That crime was to never come to light.

The crime and the lie

As early as 1940, the Polish government-in-exile sought to explain the fate of these missing persons. In 1941, Poland concluded a pact with the USSR known as the 'Sikorski-Mayski agreement' in which the Soviets undertook to release Polish citizens imprisoned in their territory. The Poles began searching for the officers, but in vain. Interventions with Soviet authorities regarding the missing ones were ignored in a devious and deceitful manner. On 11 April 1943, the Germans made a radio announcement about their discovery of mass graves of Polish officers near Katyn. Without delay, the Soviets blamed the Germans for the crime. After the Polish government requested the International Red Cross to explain the circumstances surrounding the massacre, the Soviets accused the government of cooperating with Hitler and broke off diplomatic relations.

The Anglo-Saxon powers had reliable information on Katyn already during the Second World War, but deliberately concealed it. In fear of the USSR leaving the anti-Nazi coalition, they officially accepted its false version and unsuccessfully pressed

the Polish government to do the same. The Soviet lie was also supported by the western media, which organised a hate campaign against those seeking to learn the truth. Western correspondents took part in a show investigation staged in the Katyn Forest by Soviet authorities in 1944. Set up on that occasion, the so-called Nikolay Burdenko Commission falsified the investigation results and announced that the Germans carried out the murder in 1941.

The USSR submitted Burdenko's report as 'evidence' in the trial of Nazi criminals before the Nuremberg Tribunal in 1945. The Anglo-Saxon states feared that the entire trial would be compromised, thus the Tribunal ultimately did not recognise the Germans' guilt. At the same time, however, despite the efforts of Polish émigré authorities, this body did not refer to the Katyn massacre in its judgment.

The truth was still misrepresented in the years that followed. There were still cases of media censorship in the West of information about Katyn in the late 1970s. In the USSR and its satellites, communist propaganda maintained the version of German responsibility for the massacre until the fall of communism.

The fight for truth

During the [Second World War](#), thousands of Poles found themselves outside Poland. After the USSR enslaved the country in 1945, many of them remained in the West for fear of repression. They considered it one of their priorities to investigate the Katyn massacre, to give it global publicity and to try the perpetrators. These actions were supported by the Polish community in the US.

Among the emigrants were survivors of Katyn, for example, the writer and painter Józef Czapski, who took part in the search for the missing. His testimonies published in the West met an unfavourable reception. In France, they were treated as Nazi propaganda. English publishers refused to publish them despite George Orwell's efforts. All copies of the book *The Inhuman Land* (orig. *Na nieludzkiej ziemi*) published in Paris in 1949 were bought by the Soviets.

Audition des témoins du massacre de Katyn (Hearing of witnesses to the Katyn massacre); 01.01.1952 [accessed 20 April 2021]. Available on Institut national de l'audiovisuel: <https://www.ina.fr/video/AF03000902>



↑ Józef Czapski testifying before Ray J. Madden's Committee established in 1951 by the House of Representatives of the US Congress to explain the circumstances of the Katyn Massacre.

A climate change around the Katyn issue came with the Korean War. Information on the shooting of American prisoners of war by communists led the US to break unwritten conspiracy of silence about Soviet crimes. Thanks to the efforts of the Polish community in the US, the House of Representatives appointed a committee in 1951 to explain the circumstances of the Katyn massacre (known as the Ray Madden Committee). The London-based Polish government-in-exile was actively involved in the investigation. Findings were largely based on extensive documentation it had collected since 1943, as well as testimonies of over 80 witnesses, including Czapski and Polish participants in the exhumation of the Katyn graves. In its final report,

the committee ruled on undisputable Soviet guilt, yet the initiative to lodge a complaint against the USSR at the International Court of Justice proved unsuccessful.



Photo: Zdzisław Łożyński / Fundacja Ośrodek Karta

↑ Anti-Soviet demonstration of emigrants from Central and Eastern Europe in London on 22 April 1956; march of the Polish émigrés.

The Polish émigré community sought to intervene in cases of falsified truth in the Western media, as well as to raise interest of Anglo-Saxon politicians and journalists in the crime. The anniversary of the massacre was an opportunity to recall the truth surrounding it. The 1956 anniversary memorial observance coincided with a visit by USSR leaders Nikita Khrushchev and Nikolai Bulganin to the UK. The Polish émigré community saw this as an opportunity to spread the true story. The British media reported on the largest demonstration by Polish émigrés and representatives of other enslaved nations ever, with 20,000 participants, which silently passed through London, as well on submission of a petition to the British Ministry of Foreign Affairs to raise the issue of Katyn, among others, during talks with Soviet representatives. The Polish government-in-exile also submitted a memorandum to the Soviet embassy requesting clarification of the circumstances of this crime. Under pressure from

public opinion, the British passed the note on to the Soviets and raised the matter with Khrushchev.

In following years, Katyn remained constantly present in émigré circles. Thanks to Radio Free Europe and literature smuggled into the country, the truth was reaching Poland.

In the People's Republic of Poland, any challenge to the communist version was firmly quashed by the authorities with repression and surveillance until the fall of communism. It was threatened by labour camp, prison, detention, confiscation of property or intimidation. Illegal publications were confiscated. Nevertheless, there were those who were not afraid to tell the truth. In 1980, in Krakow, Walenty Badylak committed a dramatic act of self-immolation as a call for the truth about Katyn. Starting in the 1970s, the anti-communist opposition fought against the Katyn lie, promoted knowledge of the massacre, staged illegal anniversary observance events and commemorated the victims. In the 1980s, knowledge about Katyn was facilitated by underground publications. The authorities tried to prevent such initiatives. A real battlefield was the 'Katyn Valley' at the Powązki Military Cemetery. Poles secretly commemorated the murdered since the 1950s, despite constant monitoring by the authorities and harassment. Unofficial ceremonies in honour of the victims in the 1980s gathered thousands of people. In 1981, the Security Service seized Poland's first secretly placed monument to commemorate the Soviet crime. In its place, the communist authorities erected a monument in 1985 with a mendacious inscription of German guilt for the massacre. It was only corrected in 1989.



↑ The Katyn monument at the Military Cemetery of Powązki, Warsaw. The two crosses were officially unveiled in 1995. The original grassroots attempts at placing a monument there date back to the late 1970s yet each of them met with strong resistance of Polish and Soviet authorities.

The truth prevails

Many years of fighting for the truth finally brought results. In 1971, the BBC aired a film about Katyn. A call was made in the British Parliament for the government to apply to the UN to investigate the circumstances of the crime. Despite the protests of the USSR, the British authorities agreed to build a memorial to the victims at Gunnersbury cemetery in London, but did not accept an invitation to its ceremonial unveiling in 1976. It was only Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher who began sending government representatives and military assistance. Monuments were also erected in Sweden, Australia, Canada and the US.

On the 35th anniversary of the massacre, the émigré *Kultura* magazine in Paris featured a declaration by Russian writers, including Josif Brodsky and Andrei Sakharov, who assumed blame on behalf of Russia for sins, including Katyn,

committed against Poland. This was the result of lengthy efforts by editor Jerzy Giedroyc, who saw the Katyn case as an obstacle to true reconciliation between the Polish and Russian nations.

In Poland, only after the fall of communism could the truth about Katyn be officially revealed. USSR authorities admitted the crime on 13 April 1990 in a communiqué from the government agency TASS. They confirmed that the massacre was carried out by the NKVD in the spring of 1940 and expressed their regret, calling the Katyn massacre 'one of the grave crimes of Stalinism.' The Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev transferred copies to Poland of some documents relating to the crime. In 1990, the military prosecutor's office in the USSR opened an investigation into Katyn. President Boris Yeltsin revealed further documents important for explaining the crime and in 1993, during his visit to Poland, laid flowers at the Katyn Monument and spoke the word 'forgive' to representatives of Katyn families. In 2010 the State Duma, the lower house of the Russian Parliament, adopted a resolution in which it recognised the murder of Polish officers as a crime of the Stalinist regime. Despite all these gestures, Russia still finds it difficult to accept responsibility for the crime. The lie about Katyn is promoted in publications, the media, the internet and by private individuals. Falsification and relativisation of the truth about the massacre is supported by Russian authorities. The Russian investigation of the Katyn massacre has been discontinued twice (in 1994 and then 2004). Most of the files have been classified. The Russian prosecutor's office has refused to qualify the massacre as a case of genocide, treating it as a common crime subject to becoming statute-barred. Despite state harassment, the Russian 'Memorial' Association, which is active disseminating knowledge about the victims of Soviet repression and defending human rights, keeps calling for the truth about the Katyn massacre and for its remembrance. 'Memorial' has struggled in vain to have the investigation reopened, which would have allowed for not just ascertaining the circumstances of the murder but also the identity of all its victims, as well as for specifying the sites of the Polish prisoners of war's burial sites unknown to date.

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