

The Katyn Massacre



For Poles, Katyn is a symbol of the criminal policy of the Soviet system against the Polish nation. In the Polish-Soviet relations in the years 1917-1991, Katyn is the culminating moment. The "Katyn Massacre" is a symbolic term, referring to one of the places of extermination of the Polish leading elite during the Second World War, the first to be discovered - the Katyn forest near Smolensk.

The Katyn Massacre was the secret execution by the Soviets of almost 22,000 citizens of the Polish state who - after the Red Army entered Poland on 17 September 1939 - were taken prisoner or arrested. Pursuant to a secret decision of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks) of 5 March 1940, approximately 15,000 POWs, previously held in special NKVD camps in Kozelsk, Ostashkov and Starobilsk, and 7,000 persons interned in prisons of the western district of the Ukrainian and Belarusian republic, i.e. the eastern territories of Poland included into the Soviet Union in 1939, were killed with a shot in the back of the head.

The victims were mainly important citizens of the Polish state: officers of the Polish Army and the Police, officials of the state administration, and representatives of intellectual and cultural elites in Poland. They were buried anonymously in mass graves, in at least five places within the territory of the Soviet Union. In April-May 1940, POWs from three special NKVD camps were transported by trains to the places of execution: Katyn (from the Kozelsk camp), Kalinin (from the Ostashkov camp), from Kharkiv (Starobilsk camp). Those killed in Kalinin (currently Tver) were buried in Mednoye. Others, held in prisons and murdered there, were buried in previously undetermined places; two are known: in the Belarusian Republic and the Ukrainian Republic of the USSR (Kuropaty near Minsk and Bykivnia near Kiev).

After the outbreak of the German-Soviet war and the Polish Government-in-Exile initiating official relations with the Government of the Soviet Union in the summer of 1941, the Soviet authorities failed to provide Poles - despite their efforts - with any information concerning those "missing in action". The Soviet Union broke the alliance in April 1943, when the German Army stationed in the Smolensk region discovered a burial ground in the Katyn Forest and attacked the Soviet Union for propaganda purposes. Soviet authorities responded with the tactic of pinning the

blame on the Germans who had allegedly murdered Poles after entering those territories in 1941. Stalin, using the pretext of "slander against the USSR", broke relations with the Polish Government-in-Exile (in London).

The "Katyn" case was one of the best guarded secrets of the Kremlin during the entire USSR period. When, after the end of the Second World War, during the Nuremberg Trials, the Soviet Union failed to pin the blame for the massacre on the Germans (but at the same time managed to avoid being judged for its deeds), the Soviet authorities permanently adopted the interpretation of the "Katyn lie", in defiance of the facts: the Soviets had nothing to do with the massacre of Polish officers - German fascism is responsible for everything...

The Katyn Massacre was not an isolated event. It was the consequence of system differences, the Soviet attempt at creating a state of the world proletariat, and the growing hostility between the Soviet Russia and the pre-war Poland. When, after the end of the Polish-Bolshevik war in 1920, which was victorious for Poland, the Soviets had to give up the export of the revolution to the West for many years, and Stalin himself was criticised for his significant mistakes on the Polish front - the Soviet authorities accepted their Western neighbour to be their main enemy. During the Great Terror in the USSR in the years 1937-1938, which was aimed at pacifying the anti-Bolshevik mutiny brewing in the whole of Russia, the Soviets fought Polish groups in their territories with extreme fierceness. Over 70,000 Poles (Soviet citizens) were killed with a shot to the back of the head at that time. One in every ten victims of the Great Terror was related to Poland. The mechanism of mass exterminations was fine-tuned in the USSR then.

When in September 1939 Stalin, after entering into an alliance with Hitler, attacked Poland defending itself against the Germans, one of his aims was to permanently destroy the Polish statehood. From the very first moments of that aggression, the Soviets consistently isolated (or killed on the spot) those people whom they regarded to be representatives of the group of leaders of the state that was being destroyed, and particularly the officers. One might imagine that the Soviet authorities planned their systemic elimination in advance - just as it was planned by the Nazis in "their" part of the occupied Poland. With regard to those prisoners the Soviet did not apply the rules of international law, that is why they held on to the lie they devised with such consistency.

After the relations with Poland were severed in 1943, and after the Soviet Union took control of Poland's territory in the years 1944-1945, it controlled the subjugated country, ruled by puppet governments subordinated to the communist empire, well into the eighties. During that period, the demands for the truth about "Katyn" were treated as an act hostile not only against the USSR but also the People's Republic of Poland. This is because the post-war Poland was harnessed to the "Katyn lie".

After the system changes in the entire Soviet bloc (1989-1991), the demand for the explanation of the truth about "Katyn" also appeared on the Russian side. Many Russians helped in discovering the truth about that crime. In the years 1990-1992 the main "Katyn" documents were disclosed, including the decision of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (b) of 5 March 1940, signed among others by Stalin. In August 1993, a group of Russian historians developed an exhaustive expert appraisal in Moscow, presenting honestly the process of the crime and the subsequent lies.

Those guilty of this crime have never been judged. Although the people who made the decision are known, as are over one hundred executioners (the list of persons rewarded for the "camp

clearing" campaign was disclosed). However, the investigation on the Russian side was discontinued, and the Russian authorities refuse to make any comments on this subject. No one has been and no one will be punished for the crime.

There is a material trace of the crime. Three cemeteries built by the Poles - in Katyn, Mednoye and Kharkiv - where each and every one from among almost 15,000 Polish POWs is commemorated by name. This is an exception among the graveyards remaining after the crimes of the Soviet power.

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