The collapse of the Soviet Union and the historiography of the Katyń Forest Massacre

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MHIS321 Twentieth Century Europe

A great number of wartime events remain secret for decades. While the terrible fate of those buried in the Katyń Forest was announced to the world in 1943, the defining question – who committed this crime – remained unresolved for nearly fifty years. The Germans blamed the Soviet Union; the Soviets blamed the Germans; Poland questioned the Soviet response; and Britain and America were concerned about winning the war, not settling Eastern European relations. It would take the fall of Soviet communism in 1990 for the Soviet Government to finally admit to murdering over 15,000 Polish officers in 1940, of whom roughly 4,500 are buried in mass graves at Katyń. This essay will look at how our knowledge and understanding of the Katyń Massacre and the perpetrators of this crime have changed since the 1940s.

On 23 August 1939, the foreign minister of the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany met in Moscow to sign a Non-Aggression Pact, also known as the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact (after the states’ respective foreign ministers).¹ The Pact stipulated that both parties would refrain from violence against each other, and also refrain from helping a third party, should one of the signatories become involved in ‘belligerent action’ with said third party.² In an additional secret protocol, the two states agreed that should Poland’s borders be ‘rearranged’, Germany and the Soviet Union would share a common border along the rivers Narew, Vistula and San.³

Seven days later, on 1 September 1939, Germany invaded Poland, resulting in Britain and France declaring war on Germany on 3 September. The Soviet Union remained quiet until 17 September, when the Red Army advanced across the Polish-Soviet Union border without a formal

declaration of war on Poland. The Polish government fled, Poland’s army was defeated, and on 4 October 1939, Poland ceased to exist. Germany and the Soviet Union then signed a new agreement that defined their new common border.

Dariusz Tołczyk believes that one of the immediate priorities for both Adolf Hitler and Josef Stalin after the conquest and division of Poland was to ‘clear the country of its elites’. Both the Nazis and the Soviets considered Poland’s elites to be enemies. In Soviet-occupied Poland, the mass deportation of Poles commenced almost immediately, with more than 1,400,000 Polish civilians and Polish military personnel deported to Soviet-run gulags. About 15,000 Polish military officers and enlisted men were held in three ‘special’ camps that were run by the NKVD, the Soviet secret police. Most of the officers in these three camps came from Poland’s reserve forces, so these camps also held many of Poland’s doctors, lawyers, scientists, professors and policemen. Historians estimate that the following numbers of people were sent to the three camps:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Camp</th>
<th>Number of People</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Starobielsk Camp, Ukraine</td>
<td>3,700-4,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kozielsk Camp, Russia</td>
<td>4,400-5,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ostashkov Camp, Russia</td>
<td>6,200-6,500</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In June 1941, Germany launched Operation Barbarossa and invaded the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union, betrayed by the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, joined the Allied war effort against Nazi...
Germany. Included in various agreements between the Allies and the Soviet Union, a Soviet-Polish agreement was signed which stipulated that the soon-to-be-freed Poles imprisoned in Soviet gulags would form a Polish Army.\footnote{Ibid., p.25.} Polish General Władysław Anders was appointed in charge and arranged for the freed Poles to meet at designated locations in the Soviet Union, where they would form the Second Polish Corps.\footnote{Ibid., p.25.} The absence of over 15,000 officers, many of whom were high ranking, was quickly noticed.\footnote{Ibid., p.25.} General Anders, along with the Polish Government-in-Exile in London, repeatedly asked the Soviet authorities as to the whereabouts of the missing officers, but received no convincing reply.\footnote{Ibid., p.25.} Stalin suggested that the missing officers had fled to Manchuria.\footnote{Ibid., p.25.}

The Poles continued the search for the missing officers until April 1943. On 13 April 1943, a news communiqué was broadcast over the radio in Berlin, reporting that German authorities had been alerted to and uncovered mass graves in a forest near Smolensk. The graves contained layers of bodies in military uniform, numbering about 3,000.\footnote{Ibid., p.25; George Sanford, “The Katyn Massacre and Polish-Soviet Relations, 1941-43,” Journal of Contemporary History 41 (2006): p. 104; Polish Cultural Foundation, The Crime of Katyn, p. 78.} The Germans quickly announced that this location, Katyn Forest, was where ‘the Bolsheviks had secretly perpetrated mass executions and where the GPU [NKVD] had murdered 10,000 Polish officers’.\footnote{R. Gillette, “Poland Honors Katyn Forest Dead: Many Blame Soviets for Wartime Massacre of 15,000,” Los Angeles Times, April 9, 1985.} The Germans were well aware of the rift between the Poles and the Soviets and they knew that the Poles were still looking for over 10,000 officers.\footnote{See Appendix 2; Zawodny, Death in the Forest, p. 11; “Document 101: Radio Communiqué on the Discovery of Graves of Polish Officers in the Smolensk Area. 13 April 1943, Berlin, 9:15am quoted in Cienciala, Lebedeva, and Materski, Katyn: A Crime Without Punishment, pp. 305-306.} For Germany, the discovery of a mass grave at Katyn would serve as an opportunity to ‘split the anti-German coalition’.\footnote{“Document 101”, quoted in Cienciala, Lebedeva, and Materski, Katyn: A Crime Without Punishment, p. 305.}

The Soviet government was swift in issuing a response to the German announcement, laying the blame on the Germans.\footnote{Allen Paul, Katyn: The Untold Story of Stalin’s Polish Massacre (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1991), p. 207; Polish Cultural Foundation, The Crime of Katyn, p. 265.} On 15 April in a radio communiqué, the Soviets denied the German allegations of Soviet guilt, suggesting instead that the Polish prisoners-of-war (POWs) had been engaged in ‘construction work’ west of Smolensk and had fallen ‘into the hands of the German-
Fascists hangmen’ when Soviet troops left the area in 1941. Therefore, the Germans were responsible for the deaths of the Poles.\(^{24}\)

In a statement dated 17 April, the Polish Government-in-Exile declared that it was shocked at the news and condemned ‘all crimes committed against Polish citizens’, but it stopped short of laying the blame on either the Germans or the Soviets.\(^{25}\) In the same statement, the Poles also announced their decision to ask the International Red Cross to send a delegation to ‘investigate the true state of affairs’ at Katyn.\(^{26}\) The Poles played into the Germans’ hands, for the Germans quickly announced that they had also asked the Red Cross to visit Katyn.\(^{27}\) Meanwhile, the Soviet Union denied the Red Cross request to visit Katyn because they argued that: (1) the crime was ‘clearly’ committed by the Germans; and (2) the two announcements provided evidence of a ‘hostile campaign between the enemy of the Allies – Hitler – and the Polish Government’ which sought to undermine the Soviet Union.\(^{28}\) On 25 April 1943, the Soviet Union sent the Polish ambassador a note stating that the Soviets intended to ‘sever relations with the Polish Government’ immediately, based on alleged German-Polish collaboration against the Soviets.\(^{29}\)

Having had their Red Cross request rejected, the Germans then sent their own international team of various experts (with members of the Polish Red Cross and the German Special Medical-Judiciary Commission) in a German-led International Medical Commission to Katyn.\(^{30}\) From 29-30 April 1943, the commission exhumed and investigated the bodies in the mass graves.\(^{31}\) The final report stated that 4,143 bodies were exhumed. However, German propaganda stuck to the estimate of 10-12,000 Poles murdered at Katyn since this number consistent with the original German announcement about the number of missing Poles.\(^{32}\) The German-led Commission came to the conclusion that the Soviets had been responsible for the deaths at Katyn because the bodies


\(^{30}\) Zawodny, *Death in the Forest*, pp. 16-17, 50; Malcher, *Blank Pages*, p. 28.

\(^{31}\) Zawodny, *Death in the Forest*, pp. 16-17, 50; Malcher, *Blank Pages*, p. 28.

\(^{32}\) Zawodny, *Death in the Forest*, p. 94.
bore the ‘distinctive markings of NKVD executions’, and because the medical experts had concluded that the men had been killed before June 1941 and therefore before the German occupation of Katyń Forest.  

The Soviet Union responded to the German-led Commission’s final report by launching their own investigation. The Soviet Commission concluded that in 1941, the Germans occupying the area around Katyń had carried out the mass murder of the Poles. The Commission stated that in March 1943, the Germans had ordered the bodies be exhumed so that all evidence that dated after April 1940 could be removed, and the bodies were then reburied. Like the Germans, the Soviets also ‘adjusted’ the numbers of bodies found to remain consistent with the numbers of missing Poles – reporting that 11,000 bodies were buried at Katyń despite the Soviet Commission only exhuming 925 bodies.

There were a number of issues with the Soviet story and their final report at that time. If, as the Soviets announced, the bodies were indeed of the missing Polish POWs who were engaged in construction work and who had fallen into German hands, Polish authorities questioned why the Soviets then failed to mention this to Polish representatives between 1940 and 1943. The Poles also suggested that Germany would surely have reported the presence of more than 15,000 Polish POWs in German camps to the Red Cross because this had been their practice with other Polish POWs in German hands.

The bodies at Katyń had been identified as Polish officers because of the uniforms the men were wearing, as well as the documents that were found on them: identification tags, documents of awards received, diaries, letters and photographs. The crux of the various investigations at Katyń focused on establishing the date of the murder. If the officers were found to have been killed in 1940 or the winter of 1940-1941, when the Soviets held command of the Katyń Forest, then the Soviets would have been responsible. If the officers died in the autumn of 1941 or during 1942 when the Germans held the Katyń Forest, then the Germans would have been responsible for the

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33 Paul Gregory, Lenin’s Brain and Other Tales from the Secret Soviet Archives (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 2008), p. 3.
34 Malcher, Blank Pages, p. 28.
36 Zawodny, Death in the Forest, p. 51.
37 Zawodny, Death in the Forest, p. 94; Polish Cultural Foundation, The Crime of Katyń, p. 244.
38 Polish Cultural Foundation, The Crime of Katyń, p. 113; Zawodny, Death in the Forest, p. 81.
39 Zawodny, Death in the Forest, p. 81.
40 Ibid., p. 21.
The German Commission noted that the documents found with the bodies bore dates no later than April 1940.\textsuperscript{41} Janusz Zawodny notes that the diaries found with the bodies contained the ‘everyday drudgery of internment’ and questions why, if the Soviets were correct in their accusations of German involvement, there were no diary entries written after April 1940, or why there was no mention of significant events, such as the arrival of German troops or the outbreak of the Soviet-German war.\textsuperscript{43}

The British and American Governments (while they made no official comments on the German allegations) found it expedient to assume that the Germans’ story was deliberate disinformation and to believe their ally, the Soviets, who identified the Germans as the perpetrators of the massacre at Katyń.\textsuperscript{44} British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, in a private statement to Polish Prime Minister and Commander-in-Chief General Władysław Sikorski, suggested that the ‘German accusations are probably true’, but then asked the Poles to accept the Soviet version of events. The Poles were older Allies of the British, but the Soviets were stronger.\textsuperscript{45} The Polish Government-in-Exile was shocked that Britain and America were ready to ignore all other alternatives that did not agree with the Soviet version of events.\textsuperscript{46} However, the Allied Governments understood the aim of the German propaganda and were afraid of disintegration within the Allied camp, resulting in a separate German-Soviet peace.\textsuperscript{47}

At the Nuremberg Tribunal in 1945-1946, the Soviet Union again attempted to lay the blame for the massacre on the Germans. America, the Soviet Union, Britain and France had divided the different areas of responsibility of the Nuremberg Tribunal amongst themselves, and the Soviet Union would prosecute for crimes against humanity committed by the Germans in eastern Europe.\textsuperscript{48} This meant that the Katyń massacre would be prosecuted by the Soviet Union, despite the fact that the Soviets themselves had not been cleared of committing the crime.\textsuperscript{49}

\textsuperscript{42} Fitzgibbon, \textit{Unpitied and Unknown}, p. 34.
\textsuperscript{43} Zawodny, \textit{Death in the Forest}, p. 89.
\textsuperscript{45} Toczyński, \textit{Katyń}, pp. 6-7; Bell, \textit{Censorship, Propaganda and Public Opinion}, p. 67.
\textsuperscript{48} Zawodny, \textit{Death in the Forest}, p. 64.
\textsuperscript{49} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 64.
From the beginning of the Nuremberg Tribunal, a British-American proposal favoured the Soviets. The Tribunal accepted a proposal that disallowed ‘attacks by the defence on the Allied powers’, essentially meaning that if the Soviets suggested that the Germans had committed the Katyń Massacre, then the Germans could not argue that the Soviets were responsible.50 Another legal loophole also favoured the Soviets. Article 21 of the Nuremberg Tribunal statutes states that the Tribunal ‘shall not require proof of facts of common knowledge’, allowing the Soviets to charge the Germans with the Katyń Massacre without further evidence apart from the Soviet Commission into the crime, which had already concluded that Germany was responsible.51

The Soviets had requested that the Katyń issue be placed under the sub-section of ‘execution of the Allied prisoners of war’. However, Germany was able to produce witnesses and documentary evidence that proved that the German military could not have committed the crime in 1941 as accused.52 Claudia Weber suggests that one of the reasons why the Katyń crime was not ‘solved’ at Nuremberg was that the Western powers did not have any real interest in further investigation of the crime.53 Bringing Katyń back into the spotlight would have meant discussing the fragility of the wartime Allied alliance and the Allied response to the 1943 announcement.54

The Judgement of the International Tribunal in Nuremberg, released on 1 October 1946, did not mention the Katyń crime.55 The failure of the Soviet Union to pin the responsibility of the Katyń Massacre on the Germans meant that the crime went unpunished and unresolved in the immediate post-war period.56 The inability to lay the crime to rest also ensured that there was lingering suspicion about the Soviets about their involvement in the massacre.57

As no-one had been positively identified as the perpetrators of the Katyń Massacre, the question remained in the news throughout the second half of the twentieth Century. In 1951, in the midst of the Cold War, the American House of Representatives voted to consent to an investigation of the murder of 15,000 Poles in Soviet territory during the Second World War.58 In June of 1952, the Commission concluded, after interviewing numerous persons and reviewing the evidence, that

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52 Szymczak, A Matter of Honor, pp. 36-37.
54 Ibid., p. 302.
57 Szymczak, Cold War Crusader, p. 5; Zawodny, Death in the Forest, p. 77.
the Soviet Union was responsible for the deaths of 4,000 Polish officers at Katyn, as well as another 11,000 other Poles during the war.\textsuperscript{59} No further action was taken apart from concluding Soviet guilt.

In the late 1980s, Katyn was again brought to the forefront of the world stage. Newspapers reported that in May 1988, the Soviet Union had ‘indicated’ that Stalin’s security police may have killed the Polish officers at Katyn.\textsuperscript{60} A defining moment in the quest to uncover the truth about the Katyn Massacre came in early 1989 with the disintegration of communism in eastern Europe.

Newspapers announced in February that a Polish Red Cross memorandum pointed to Soviet guilt for the crime, and for the first time, Poland openly questioned the official Soviet version of events.\textsuperscript{61} In March 1989, the Polish Government officially accused the Soviet Union of committing the Katyn Massacre, arguing that ‘everything indicates’ that the Soviets were responsible.\textsuperscript{62}

The truth about the Katyn Massacre was finally revealed forty-seven years to the day of the German announcement of the discovery of the bodies.\textsuperscript{63} On 13 April 1990, the Soviet Union confessed to the Katyn Massacre. Newspapers carried the headlines: ‘Moscow admits Katyn killings’, ‘Soviets Admit Blame in Massacre of Polish Officers...’ and ‘Moscow apologises for the Katyn Massacre’.\textsuperscript{64} Moscow Radio announced that the NKVD was responsible for the deaths of 15,000 Polish officers in 1940, while The Times and The New York Times reported that Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev handed Polish President Wojciech Jaruzelski documents which ‘indirectly but convincingly’ proved the NKVD’s responsibility.\textsuperscript{65}

The announcement by the Soviet Government raised the question as to the location of the 10,500 or so other missing Poles, given that only 4,500 bodies were found in the mass graves at Katyn.\textsuperscript{66} The Soviet Union ‘unofficially disclosed the probable burial site’ at Kalinin (now Tver) of another 6,200 officers (who had been held Ostashkov camp) to the Polish media in June 1990, with

\textsuperscript{59} “Two Other ‘Katyns’,” The Times, July 3, 1952.
\textsuperscript{60} “Soviet hint at guilt for Katyn,” The Irish Times, May 31, 1988.
\textsuperscript{61} R. Bassett, “Poles blame the Katyn massacre on Russians,” The Times, February 17, 1989.
\textsuperscript{63} Paul, Katyn, p. 339.
\textsuperscript{66} Fein, “Gorbachev Hands over Katyn Papers,” April 14, 1990.
the likely site for the 3,910 officers of Starobielsk camp near Kharkov. During the 1990s, the Russian Government gave permission for the Poles to exhume the victims at Katyn, Tver and Kharkov, to give them proper burials and erect memorials at the three sites. 169 bodies were discovered near Kharkov; what remained of their uniforms proved that they were Polish officers captured by the Red Army in September 1939.

In 1992, Russian President Borys Yeltsin handed over copies of a number of incriminating documents to Polish President Lech Wałęsa. The documents further validated Poland’s long-held belief, that Stalin had direct involvement in the deaths of the Polish officers. Included in the documents was a memorandum from Lavrentiy Beria, commissar of the NKVD, to the Politburo, which proposed the execution of the Polish officers. The memorandum, dated 5 March 1940, and signed by Stalin (amongst others), states that the 14,736 Poles in POW camps were ‘all sworn enemies of Soviet power’ and that they were ‘filled with hatred for the Soviet system of government’. The memorandum suggests that the cases of the Polish officers be examined, and they should then be subjected to the ‘supreme punishment, [execution by] shooting’.

Also included in these documents was a copy of a note dated 3 March 1959 to Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev from Alexander Shelepin (then head of the KGB), stating that on the basis of a decision by the ‘Special Troika of the NKVD USSR, a total of 21,857 [Polish] persons were shot’ by NKVD personnel. The note states that the whole operation was carried out on the basis of the Politburo-approved decision of 5 March 1940. Shelepin revealed that all 21,857 files had been stored in a secret location and argued that, as they are of ‘no operational or historical value’ to the

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67 “Mass war grave site revealed,” The Times, June 20, 1990; Paul. Katyn, p. 339; Toczyk, Katyn: The Long Cover Up, p. 9. The bodies buried in the Katyn Forest were subsequently found to be the officers held in Kozelsk camp.
69 Malczer, Blank Pages, p. 33.
74 Ibid., pp. 118-120.
Soviet Union or to ‘our Polish friends’, all the files should be destroyed to remove evidence of Soviet guilt.\textsuperscript{77}

Paul Gregory gives two reasons as to why it took two extra years for the Soviets to admit Stalin’s direct involvement: (1) many of the signatures on Beria’s memorandum to the Politburo were by high-ranking Soviet leaders; and (2) those who played important roles in the Soviet Commission in 1944 were also Soviet leaders during the 1970s and 1980s.\textsuperscript{78} The reason why it took longer may also be that many Russians found, and still find, it hard to face the truth about the brutality of Stalin’s rule.\textsuperscript{79}

War hides many secrets. Following the invasion and occupation of Poland in 1939, over 15,000 Polish officers were held in three special camps in the Soviet Union until 1940, after which they were never heard from again. The German announcement of the discovery of mass graves at Katyń Forest in 1943 stunned the world and for decades the question of who killed these officers remained unresolved. The Germans claimed Soviet responsibility, while the Soviets claimed the Germans were responsible. The Nuremberg Tribunal could not pin responsibility on the Germans, and so the question lingered. It took until 1990 for the Soviets to admit responsibility, and it was not until 1992 that they revealed Stalin’s direct involvement. For most Poles, this acceptance finally allowed the healing to begin. However, many Poles still question why it took nearly fifty years for the truth emerge from one of the most horrific crimes of the Second World War.

\textsuperscript{77} Ibid., pp. 332-333.
\textsuperscript{78} Gregory, Lenin’s Brain and Other Tales from the Secret Soviet Archives, pp. 13-14.
\textsuperscript{79} Cienciala, Lebedeva and Materski, Katyń: A Crime Without Punishment, p. 262.
APPENDIX

1) Map

Figure 1: The Katyn Massacres, April 1940 (Snyder, Bloodlands, p.136.)


It is reported from Smolensk that the local population has indicated to the German authorities a place in which the Bolsheviks had secretly perpetrated mass executions and where the GPU had murdered 10,000 Polish officers. The German authorities inspected the place called Kosogory, which is a Soviet summer resting place, situated 16 kilometers west of Smolensk, and made the most horrific discovery. A great pit was found, 28 meters long and 16 meters wide, filled with twelve layers of bodies of Polish officers, numbering about 3,000. They were clad in full military uniform, and while some of them had their hands tied, all of them had wounds in the back of their
skull caused by pistol shots. The identification of the bodies will not cause great difficulties, because of the mummifying property of the soil and because the Bolsheviks had left on the bodies the identify documents of the victims. It has already been ascertained that among the murdered is General Smorawiński from Lublin. These officers had been previously in Kozelsk [Kozelsk], near Orel, from whence they had been brought in cattle wagons to Smolensk in February and March 1940 and, further on, taken in lorries to Kosogory, where all were murdered by the Bolsheviks. The discovery for and search for further grave pits is taking place. Under layers dug up already, new layers are found. The total figure of the murdered officers is estimated at 10,000, which would more of less correspond to the entire number of Polish officers taken as POWs by the Bolsheviks. Norwegian press correspondents who arrived to inspect the place, and with their own eyes could ascertain the truth, have reported about the crime to the Oslo newspapers.

3) Communique Issued by the Sovinformburo Attacking the German “Fabrications” about the Graves of Polish Officers in Katyn Forest. 15 April 1943, Moscow  (Document 102, A Crime Without Punishment, pp.306-307)

In the past two or three days Goebbels’s slanderers have been spreading vile fabrications alleging that Soviet authorities effected a mass shooting of Polish officers in the spring of 1940, in the Smolensk area. In launching this monstrous invention, the German-Fascist scoundrels do not hesitate at the most unscrupulous and base lies in their attempt to cover up crimes which, as has not become evident, were perpetrated by themselves. The German-Fascist reports on this subject leave no doubt as to the tragic fate of the former Polish POWs who in 1941 were engaged in construction work in areas west of Smolensk and who, along with many Soviet people, residents of the Smolensk region, fell into the hands of the German-Fascists hangmen in the summer of 1941, after the withdrawal of Soviet troops from the Smolensk area. Beyond doubt Goebbels’s slanderers are now trying by lies and calumnies to cover up the bloody crimes of the Hitlerite gangsters. In their clumsily concocted fabrication about the numerous graves which the Germans allegedly discovered near Smolensk, the Hitlerite liars mention the village of Gnezdovaya. But, like the swindlers they are, they are silent about the fact that it was near the village Gnezdovaya that the archaeological excavations of the historic ‘Gnezdovaya burial place’ were made. Past masters in such affairs, the Hitlerists stoop to the clumsiest forgeries and misrepresentations of facts in spreading slanderous fabrications about some sort of Soviet atrocities allegedly perpetrated in the spring of 1940 and, in this way, try to shake off their own responsibility for the brutal crime they
have committed. These arrant German-Fascist murders [murderers], whose hands are stained with the blood of hundreds of thousands of innocent victims, who methodically exterminate the populations of countries they have occupied without sparing children, women, or old people, who exterminated many hundreds of thousands of Polish citizens in Poland itself, will deceive no one by their base lies and slander. The Hitlerite murderers will not escape a just and inevitable retribution for their bloody crime.

4) Beria Memorandum to Joseph Stalin Proposing the Execution of the Polish Officers, Gendarmes, Police, Military Settlers, and Others in the Three Special POW Camps, Along with Those Held in the Prisons of the Western Regions of Ukraine and Belorussia., Accepted by the Politburo 5 March 1940, Moscow (Document 47, A Crime Without Punishment, pp.118-120)

To Comrade Stalin

In the USSR NKVD prisoner-of-war camps and prisons of the western regions of Ukraine and Belorussia, there are at present a large number of former officers of the Polish Army, former workers in the Polish police and intelligence organs, members of Polish nationalist c-r parties, participants in exposed c-r insurgent organizations, refugees, and others. They are all sworn enemies of Soviet power, filled with hatred for the Soviet system of government. Prisoner-of-war officers and police in the camps are attempting to continue their c-r work and are conducting anti-Soviet agitation. Each one of them is just waiting to be released in order to be able to enter actively into the battle against Soviet power....

The prisoner-of-war camps are holding a total (not counting the soldiers and the NCOs) of 14,736 former officers, officials, landowners, police, gendarmes, prison guards, [military] settlers, and intelligence agents, who are more than 97 percent Polish by nationality....

Based on the fact that they are all hardened, irremediable enemies of Soviet power, the NKVD USSR believes it is essential:

I. To direct the NKVD USSR to:

1) examine the cases of the 14,700 former Polish officers, officials, landowners, police, intelligence agents, gendarmes, [military] settlers, and prison guards who are now in the prisoner-of-war camps

2) and also examine the cases of those who have been arrested and are in the prisons of the western oblasts of Ukraine and Belorussia, numbering 11,000 members of various c-r espionage and sabotage organizations, former landowners, manufacturers, former Polish officers, officials,
and refugees, [and] using the special procedure, apply to them the supreme punishment, [execution by] shooting.

II. Examine [these] cases without calling in the arrested men and without presenting [them with] the charges, the decision about the end of the investigation, or the document of indictment, according to the following procedure:
   a) [examine the cases] against individuals in the prisoner-of-war camps on the basis of information presented by the USSR NKVD UPV
   b) [examine the cases] against individuals who have been arrested on the basis of information from files presented by the UkSSR NKVD and the BSSRNKVD

III. Assign the examination of cases and the carrying out of decisions to a troika [threesome] consisting of Comrades Beria, Merkulov, Kobulov, and Bashtakov (Head of 1st Special Department NKVD USSR).

USSR People's Commissar of Internal Affairs
L. Beria

5) **Note by Shelepín to Khrushchev, 3 March 1959, Proposing to Destroy the Documents of the Operation Sanctioned by the Politburo on 5 March 1940. 3 March 1959, Moscow (Document 110, A Crime Without Punishment, pp.332-333)**

To Comrade Khrushchev, N. S.

Since 1940, records and other materials regarding prisoners and interned officers, policemen, gendarmes, [military] settlers, landlords and so on, and persons from former bourgeois Poland who were shot in that same year have been kept in the Committee of State Security of the Council of Ministers, USSR. On the basis of the decision by the special Troika of the NKVD USSR, a total of 21,857 persons were shot; of these, 4,421 [were shot] in the Katyn Forest (Smolensk Oblast), 3,820 in the camp of Starobelsk, close to Kharkov, 6,311 in the camp of Ostashkov (Kalinin Oblast), and 7,305 persons were shot in other camps and prisons of western Ukraine and western Belorussia.

The whole operation of liquidating the above-mentioned persons was carried out on the basis of the decision of the CC CPSU of 5 March 1940. All of them were sentenced to the highest order of punishment according to the files started for them as POWs and internees in 1939. From the time when the above-mentioned operation was carried out, that is, from 1940, no information has been released to anybody relating to the case, and all of the 21,857 files have been stored in a sealed location.
All these files are of no operational or historical value to Soviet organs. It is also highly doubtful whether they could be of any real value to our Polish friends. On the contrary, any unforeseen incident may lead to revealing the operation, with all the undesirable consequences for our country, especially since, regarding the persons shot in the Katyn Forest, the official version was confirmed by an investigation carried out on the initiative of the organs of Soviet authorities in 1944, under the name of the ‘Special Commission to Establish and Investigate the Shooting of Polish Prisoner-of-War Officers in Katyn Forest by the German-Fascist Aggressors.’ According to the conclusion of that commission, all the Poles liquidated there are considered to have been killed by the German occupiers. The materials of the inquiry were extensively covered in the Soviet and foreign press. The commission’s conclusions became firmly established in international public opinion.

On the basis of the above statements, it seems expedient to destroy all the records on the persons shot in 1940 in the above-mentioned operation.

In order to answer possible questions along the lines of the CC CPSU or the Soviet government guidelines, the protocols of the meetings of the NKVD USSR Troika that sentenced these persons to be shot, also the documents on carrying out this decision, could be preserved. ...

Chairman of the Committee for State Security of the Council of Ministers of USSR
A. Shelepin
3 March 1959

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