



The Katyn Forest Massacre

September 1939 was a tragic time in Poland's history. On September 1st the country was attacked by Germany and on September 17th - by Russia. In September 1939, a group of Polish officers were taken prisoner by the invading Red Army and put in camps at Ostashkow, Starobelsk and Kozelsk, USSR. Most of them were not professional soldiers, but reserve officers mobilized during the German offensive. They were well-trained graduate teachers, civil servants, businessmen, doctors, scientists. From the Soviet point of view, they were the top-class enemy. For eight months, until May 1940, they were able to correspond with their families at home. And then the correspondence suddenly ceased.

On June 22, 1941, Hitler launched operation Barbarossa, and as the Soviet Armies disintegrated under the impact, Stalin became more amenable. On July 30, 1941, an agreement was signed whereby Poland and the Soviet Union became allies. All Polish citizens imprisoned in Russia were to be released and formed into a Polish Army that would fight alongside the Red Army. The army was formed in southern Russia under the command of General Wladyslaw Anders. As time passed, General Anders grew puzzled and then uneasy about the fate of some of his colleagues. He had drawn up a list of those officers he knew had been captured by the Soviets in 1939. As the last prisoners trickled in from camps in the far north, it became clear that some 15,000 officers, including several generals and an admiral, were unaccountably missing. General Sikorski personally took the matter up with Stalin and was fobbed off with a promise to investigate and a profession of friendship to the Poles.

On April 11, 1943, German radio announced that mass graves had been discovered in the forest of Katyn near Smolensk containing the bodies of 4,231 Polish officers. Most had their hands tied behind their back, and each had a bullet in the base of their skull, dumped in mass graves. Many had

decipherable documents in their pockets so there was no doubt who they were. The Germans claimed that they had been killed by the Soviets in April 1940. The Soviets claimed that they had been killed by the Germans in the winter of 1941. One International Commission assembled by the Germans supported the German claim that the Soviets killed them. Russia made every effort to prove that the massacre was committed by Nazi Germany, and the Soviet government wove a blanket of lies which tried to conceal the truth of the case for the next 50 years. Finally, in April 1990, USSR President Mikhail Gorbachev admitted the Soviet Union's responsibility for the killings. Shortly after his announcement, the bodies of the officers from the prison camps at Ostashkov and Starobelsk were discovered in mass graves. The prisoners from Kozelsk had been taken to the Katyn forest in April and May of 1940. The order for this genocide was signed on March 5, 1940, by Stalin.

Soviet documents released after 1990, revealed the number of 21,857 Polish internees executed in the Katyn Forest Massacre: 4,421 from the Kozelsk camp, 3,820 from the Starobelsk camp, 6,311 from the Ostashkov camp, and 7,305 from prisons in Belorussia and Ukraine. Altogether, during the April and May 1940 massacres, the Soviets murdered almost half of the Polish officer corps, including 14 generals, 281 colonels and lieutenant colonels, and 2,080 majors and captains. The victims were members of Polish intelligentsia and are estimated to have represented 44 different professions. They were outstanding doctors, lawyers, generals, lecturers and professors, scientists, political leaders, and artists. They were well-educated, intelligent, open-minded, prominent, distinguished people, and the final report of the Madden Committee (an American committee established pursuant to Resolution No. 390 of the U.S. Congress) stated "there can be no doubt this massacre was a calculated plot to eliminate all Polish leaders who subsequently would have opposed the Soviets' plan for communizing Poland".

References:

Norman Davies, *God's playground, A history of Poland*, vol. 11, revised edition, Columbia University Press, New York, 2005;

Monika Brzozowska-Pasieka, Ph.D., former VOC Polish Studies Senior Fellow, *Who were the victims of the Katyn Massacre?* <https://victimsofcommunism.org/who-were-the-victims-of-the-katyn-massacre/>