Katyn: the long cover-up

by Dariusz Tołczyk

Are we finally getting the facts straight about the Soviet massacre?

On April 7, 2010, Vladimir Putin traveled to the Katyn forest in Western Russia, in order to join the Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk in commemorating Stalin’s victims shot and buried there seventy years earlier. Three days after this commemoration, the world was shaken as the plane carrying another Polish delegation to Katyn, headed by President Lech Kaczyński, crashed en route, killing everyone aboard. The catastrophe has sent Poland into mourning, and the events that precipitated it need to be remembered as well. In the spring of 1940, the Soviet political police, NKVD, carried out a secret killing of at least 22,436 Polish prisoners; 4,421 of them were executed in Katyn. Among the countless crimes of World War II (some of them much greater in scope), this mass murder has become subject to arguably the most persistent cover-up in the twentieth century—not only by the Soviets but also, initially, by their wartime Western allies.

The fall of Communism and the collapse of the Soviet Union led Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin to the disclosure of some key archival evidence and admission of the Soviet responsibility. But under Putin, the Kremlin has fallen silent on the issue, reclassified many documents, and halted further investigation. At the same time, the cult of Stalin, encouraged by the government, enjoyed its renaissance in Russia. Does Putin’s long-overdue admission of truth in Katyn mark the end of this charade? Does it indicate the definitive departure from Stalinist nostalgia and initiate a new assessment of Russia’s totalitarian past?

In order to understand better both the Katyn crime and its cover-up, we need first to take a look at the nature of the Soviet regime back in the 1930s—a decade marked by Stalin’s monumental crimes against his own people, such as the Great Famine and Great Terror. Under Stalin, public memory was supposed to resemble a blackboard on which the authorities could write, erase, and

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write again according to their changing political agendas. By the end of the 1930s, Soviet citizens were so well trained in the Orwellian art of forgetting that they did their best to avoid asking unnecessary questions upon learning, in late August 1939, that their Communist homeland had a new friend and ally: Nazi Germany. The September invasion of Poland by Hitler and Stalin did not raise any public discussion either. Celebrating the successful end of the military operations in Poland, Pravda simply stated on September 30 that “now, the German-Soviet friendship was cemented forever.” Less than two years later, when Hitler violated this friendship by invading the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941, Soviet public memory was ruptured again. This time, nobody was supposed to remember that Nazi Germany had ever been anything other than a mortal enemy of both the Soviet Union and humanity itself. Once again, yesterday was simply erased from the blackboard and replaced by today.

A phenomenon not entirely unlike the Stalinist rupture of memory occurred during World War II in the countries boasting the greatest freedom of public discourse: Great Britain and the United States. The way in which most Westerners seem inclined to view World War II up to this day—as a morally unambiguous struggle of good against evil—has its sources in a peculiar operation performed on public memory by the British and American governments and most of the media during the war.

In the period of the Soviet alliance with Hitler, from August 23, 1939 to June 22, 1941, the British and American publics followed news of Stalin’s invasions against Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Finland, and Romania just as they followed news of Hitler’s aggression against Poland, Denmark, Norway, Belgium, Holland, France, Greece, and Yugoslavia. On January 1, 1940, Time magazine put Stalin on its cover, and characterized him as an ominous character who “matched himself with Adolf Hitler as the world’s most hated man.”

But on June 22, 1941, everything changed. In the wake of Hitler’s attack on Russia, yesterday and today became mutually incompatible in much of Western public discourse on the Soviet Union. Stalin became a natural ally of Great Britain and (soon) the United States. In order to construct an unambiguous image of the war, based on a clear moral dichotomy of us (now including the Soviet Union) versus them, a new image of Stalin and his regime was generated by British and American governments and developed by the media in both countries. And so, The Commonweal described Stalin’s political order as “something like a combination of Washington’s, Jefferson’s, and Lincoln’s, and functioning under a similar constitution,” while Life informed its readers that Soviet people “look like Americans, dress like Americans and think like Americans.” Those readers who might have heard horror stories about the NKVD were informed that this was nothing other than “a national police similar to the FBI” and it was concerned simply with catching traitors.

By January 4, 1943, many Americans might have felt déjà vu as they were looking at the cover of Time magazine and seeing the face of Stalin, just like three years earlier. But the new Stalin no longer resembled the old one. The new Stalin was a heroic leader of the free world and a great friend of democracy. By then, the Western black-and-white myth of World War II was so well
entrenched in the public discourse that perhaps those who remembered the Stalin of 1940 might have wondered whether their memories were playing tricks on them.

Even President Roosevelt, who played a central role in developing this new image of Stalin, became so attached to it that he seemed genuinely to believe in it. He confessed to his former Ambassador to Moscow, William Bullit: “I just have a hunch that Stalin doesn’t want anything but security for his country, and I think that if I give him everything I possibly can and ask nothing from him in return, noblesse oblige, he won’t try to annex anything and will work for the world of democracy and peace.”

On April 13, 1943, however, the newly woven cloak of wishful thinking, in which Stalin had just been dressed in the West, suddenly ripped. German radio announced that German soldiers had discovered mass graves in the Katyn forest near Smolensk in western Russia. The graves were filled with the bodies of Polish army officers who surrendered to the Soviets in 1939. Forensic specialists strongly suggested that they were killed in the spring of 1940. The evidence pointed towards the Soviets as the perpetrators of this crime.

The Western public had no clue how to understand this shocking information. The news was reported by the Germans and therefore it was not supposed to be true. Only the Soviet leadership knew exactly the origins of the Katyn mass graves. These origins reached back to the period pushed into oblivion by the new allied myth of World War II, namely to the time of Stalin’s partnership with Hitler. Only some among these dead officers were professional military men. Most were members of the Polish educated elite mobilized for war and given officer’s ranks—professionals, teachers, doctors, lawyers, civil servants, engineers, scientists, journalists, and artists.

One of the first priorities of both Hitler and Stalin after their joint conquest of Poland was to clear the country of its elites. The Soviets immediately isolated the captured Polish officers in three special camps. On March 5, 1940, Lavrenty Beria, the chief of the Soviet security apparatus, presented to the Politburo of the Communist Party a formal resolution to kill the inhabitants of these camps in conjunction with 11,000 other Polish political prisoners—altogether 25,700 people. Of course, Beria would not have proposed such an important step without an original order or suggestion from Stalin. The Politburo swiftly approved Beria’s resolution. Stalin signed first, followed by Voroshilov, Molotov, and Mikoyan. Kaganovich and Kalinin gave their approval by phone.

The decision was carried out without delay. At that time, before the Holocaust overshadowed all the records of mass murder, the NKVD executioners were the most accomplished killers in the world. In the years 1937–1938, the most intensive period of the Great Terror, they managed to execute 689,692 people (according to the most conservative count). Most of the Polish officers were shot in the back of the head and secretly buried in mass graves near Tver, Kharkov, and Katyn. By
the end of May 1940, the operation was completed, and in October Beria ordered 124 executioners and organizers of the killings to be paid monetary awards: officers received additional monthly wages, and ordinary NKVD men got 800 rubles each.

When the Germans announced their discovery in Katyn on April 13, 1943, all major Western media waited for the Soviets to comment. It took two days for the Soviet Bureau of Information to come up with its statement: “In launching this monstrous invention the German-Fascist scoundrels did not hesitate at the most unscrupulous and base lies, in their attempts to cover up crimes which, as has now become evident, were perpetrated by themselves.” The American and British leaders must have felt relief. But the Polish government-in-exile based in London and headed by General Władysław Sikorski did not consider the case closed and asked the International Red Cross in Geneva to conduct an investigation of the Katyn massacre. The Germans, eager to exploit the Katyn revelations, filed a similar petition on the same day.

Each party—the Poles, the Germans, the Soviets, and the Western allies—knew that the black-and-white myth of World War II could not survive a confrontation with the truth of Katyn. On April 19, Pravda published an article with a telling title, “The Polish Helpers of Hitler.” In it, the Soviet propagandists stated:

The slander escalates quickly. Before the ink dried on the pens of the German fascist slanderers, the disgusting fabrication of Goebbels and company about the alleged mass murder of Polish officers by the Soviet authorities in 1940 were followed not only by Hitler’s lackeys but, strangely enough, by the circles of the government of General Sikorski…. Those Poles who willingly accepted the Nazi lie and are ready to collaborate with the Nazi executioners of the Polish people will be remembered by history as helpers of the cannibal Hitler.

Two days later, Stalin sent Churchill and Roosevelt a secret wire, in which he concluded that the Polish attempt to let the International Red Cross investigate the Katyn massacre proves that there is “a contact and a collusion between Hitler and the Sikorski Government…. At a time when the peoples of the Soviet Union are shedding their blood in a grim struggle against Hitler’s Germany and bending their energies to defeat the common foe of the freedom-loving democratic countries, the Sikorski Government is striking a treacherous blow at the Soviet Union to help Hitler’s tyranny.”

The Western leaders immediately started playing Stalin’s game. Roosevelt wrote to Stalin: “I fully understand your problem… . Churchill will find ways and means of getting the Polish Government in London to act with more common sense in the future.” Churchill seemed to have little doubt as to who killed the Polish officers in Katyn. In a private conversation with Sikorski, he said: “Unfortunately, the German accusations are probably true. The Bolsheviks are capable of the worst atrocities.” But in an official meeting with Sikorski, Churchill’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, Anthony Eden, asked the Polish Prime Minister to issue a statement confirming that the Katyn massacre was a Nazi fabrication. Sikorski refused.

Both Churchill and Roosevelt were better informed about the Katyn massacre than they were
willing to admit. In 1943 and 1944, secret investigations were conducted on this matter by both the American and the British governments. In June 1943, the British Ambassador to the Polish government-in-exile, Sir Owen O’Malley, concluded his investigation with a report pointing unambiguously to the Soviets as the perpetrators. In it, he described ways in which many victims were murdered in Katyn:

If a man struggled, it seems that the executioners threw his coat over his head, tying it around his neck and leading him hooded to the pit’s edge, for in many cases a body was found to be thus hooded and the coat to have been pierced by a bullet where it covered the base of the skull.

Having read O’Malley’s report, Churchill said to Eden: “we should none of us ever speak a word about it.”

The British Foreign Office shared its knowledge about Katyn with the U.S. State Department. “The Soviet government severed its relationship with the Poles in order to conceal its own responsibility for the crime,” a secret message reads. The Germans let an international committee conduct an investigation from April to June 1943. They did not even have to manipulate it. The Polish Red Cross sent its own group of specialists, who confirmed these findings. In 1944, an American secret investigation led to the same conclusion. The report was locked in an archive and its author, George Earle, was sworn into secrecy and sent to the Samoa Islands for the rest of the war.

O’Malley, a seasoned diplomat, analyzed the dilemmas which the Katyn massacre caused for the Western allies. He wrote in his report to the British Foreign Office:

we have been constrained by the urgent need for cordial relations with the Soviet Government to appear to appraise the evidence with more hesitation and lenience than we should do in forming a commonsense judgment on events occurring in normal times or in the ordinary course of our private lives; we have been obliged to appear to distort the normal and healthy operation of our intellectual and moral judgments; we have been obliged to give undue prominence to the tactlessness or impulsiveness of Poles, to restrain the Poles from putting their case clearly before the public, to discourage any attempt by the public and the press to probe the ugly story to the bottom… . We have in fact perforce used the good name of England like the murderers used the little conifers to cover up a massacre.

The British Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sir Alexander Cadogan, commented on O’Malley’s report:

How many thousands of its own citizens has the Soviet regime butchered? … And one other disturbing thought is that we may eventually, by agreement and in collaboration with the Russians, proceed to the trial and perhaps execution of Axis “war criminals” while condoning this atrocity. I confess that I shall find that extremely difficult to swallow.

The allied governments did everything possible to support the official Soviet lies. But how did the British and American media react to the whole story? It is quite striking how little interest was demonstrated by the media in establishing basic facts about the Katyn massacre. Instead, as if
taking its cue from the angry Soviet rhetoric blaming the victim, most of the prominent American and British press joined the Soviet-led attack against the Polish government for asking questions about the whole matter.

On May 10, 1943, Life called the Poles “the most chip-shouldered chauvinists in Europe,” and Newsweek ridiculed the Polish attempts to find out the truth about Katyn as evidence of “that curious trait of unrealism that still permeates Polish politics.” The New Statesman did not shy away from implicitly justifying the Soviet crime (without admitting that it happened): “The Soviet government, often with reason, would regard the landed aristocracy and the officer class in Poland in the light of Fascists and class enemies.” This implies that the Bolshevik category of “class enemy” should suffice for a justification of killing thousands of people. (At the same time, similar semantic operations were used by the Nazis to justify the killing of their “racial enemies” such as Jews). The Spectator, meanwhile, came to a more “philosophical” reason why no investigation of the Katyn massacre should be pursued: “There is more to be said for leaving the dead to their sleep. No amount of investigation will bring them to life.” To put it briefly, the truth about Katyn could not be told because it would expose the most protected taboo of the war—that the democratic West, in order to liberate the world from one criminal, allied itself with another.

After the Soviet forces regained control of the Katyn area, Stalin conducted his own “investigation,” which declared the Germans culpable. It could not have been otherwise—even the very name of the Soviet committee set up for this purpose was “The Special Committee for Finding and Investigating the Circumstances of the Shooting of the Prisoners of War, Polish Officers, by German Fascist Invaders in the Katyn Forest.” In January 1944, the Soviet authorities staged a show in Katyn for the benefit of Western reporters. Kathleen Harriman, daughter of the American Ambassador, and John Melby, the Third Secretary of the U.S. Embassy in Moscow, visited the site, accompanied by seventeen journalists.

The show, despite the Soviets’ experience with this type of theatrics, was less than convincing. John Melby reported: “It is apparent that the evidence in the Russian case is incomplete in several respects, that it is badly put together, and the show was put on for the benefit of the correspondents without opportunity for independent investigation or verification.” But this did not stop Melby from drawing the only politically correct and admissible conclusion that “despite Each party—the Poles, the Germans, the Soviets, and the Western allies—knew that the black-and-white myth of World War II could not survive a confrontation with the truth of Katyn.
these shortcomings the Soviet version is convincing.” Later, in 1952, Melby stated in the House of Representatives that he changed his mind and believed the Soviets committed the crime. But, by then, it was a different era.

At Nuremberg after the war, Sir Alexander Cadogan, who had regarded the prospect of collaborating with the murderers of Katyn in delivering justice to the Axis war criminals “extremely hard to swallow” as early as 1943, had to swallow perhaps even more than he could have expected. The Soviet chief prosecutor in the trials, Roman Rudenko, included the Katyn massacre among the Soviet accusations against the Nazi leadership. If there were ever a moment in Nuremberg when Hermann Goering could have felt a modicum of moral superiority over his accusers, this was probably it. “I didn’t expect that the Russians would be so impudent to mention Poland,” he reportedly commented. The “evidence” brought up by Rudenko was easily disproved by the defendants’ lawyers, and the American lead prosecutor, Robert Jackson, pleaded with his Soviet colleagues to drop the whole thing quietly in fear of major public embarrassment. Finally, in the sentence, the Katyn charge was never mentioned. But in Minsk, the Soviets managed to try and execute some German soldiers for the Katyn massacre anyway. Among those executed were officers who had discovered the Katyn mass graves back in the spring of 1943.

The quick deterioration of the wartime alliance of the Big Three caused a sudden change in the official Western political rhetoric. Yesterday and today were disjointed once again and “Uncle Joe” was turned into an ominous totalitarian enemy. But Katyn did not receive much publicity. In 1951–52, Polish-American organizations succeeded in pressuring the U.S. Congress into investigating the Katyn massacre. Government-sponsored American media, including the Voice of America radio, however, sometimes tried to censor references to Katyn. They did it as late as 1978. It took the collapse of Soviet Communism for a large body of secret archival evidence of Katyn to be revealed by the Russian authorities under Gorbachev and Yeltsin. Only then were the hitherto secret mass graves near Tver and in Kharkov also discovered. During the 1990s, the government of Poland, permitted by the authorities of the Russian Federation, exhumed the victims of the Katyn, Tver, and Kharkov massacres, gave them proper burials, and erected memorials on the sites. Groups of the victims’ relatives and other visitors traveling to the Katyn forest to pay homage were learning that mass graves of Stalin’s Russian victims were also discovered nearby but hardly anybody in Russia seemed to remember them. But the twentieth century was coming to its end. It seemed to be the time for the world finally to get over the unfinished business of World War II and face the new future. Or was it?

In 2004, under Putin, the investigation by the military prosecutor was secretly stopped and 116 out of 183 volumes of the documents collected by the investigators were locked up as a state secret. The mass murders in Katyn, Tver, and Kharkov were now officially defined neither as crimes against humanity nor even as political crimes. This meant they were subject to the statute of limitations and nobody could be prosecuted for them (nobody ever was). This surprising verdict overturned the old Soviet tradition, which had always treated the Katyn massacre as a
crime against humanity (as long as the crime was supposedly committed by the Germans). Then, in March 2009, a petition for rehabilitation filed by the Memorial Society in Russia on behalf of families of several victims shot in Katyn was rejected by the Military Prosecutor’s Office for lack of sufficient evidence. The bodies of these victims, found in the mass grave with their skulls shot through, apparently did not provide the sufficient evidence.

In this context, Putin’s recent trip to Katyn can be viewed as both a surprise and perhaps a long-awaited sign of change. In his Katyn speech, he paid homage to both Polish and Russian victims buried in its mass graves. Five days earlier, Russian government-controlled television aired the 2007 Oscar-nominated Katyn. This film—directed by Andrzej Wajda, whose father had been shot in Katyn—had never been distributed in Russia before. Does this all mean that Russia is getting ready to face the truth about Stalin—the murderer of not only Poles in Katyn, Tver, and Kharkov but also millions of Soviet citizens?

Perhaps not so quickly. On a sobering note, just days before Putin’s Katyn address, the Russian authorities—in response to a suit filed at the European Tribunal in Strasburg by relatives of Polish victims of Katyn—once again questioned both the crime and the Soviet responsibility for it. In a public opinion poll conducted in Russia one day before Putin’s trip to Katyn, 45.9 percent of the respondents stated that he should not apologize for the crime (18 percent said he should). The Russian Prime Minister confirmed Soviet responsibility but did not apologize. He also disappointed those who expected him to declassify secret evidence of the crime, including documents indicating the whereabouts of several thousand of Poles killed in the spring of 1940 in Soviet Belorussia and Ukraine. Seventy years after the massacre, Putin made a potentially important step in the right direction. While he deserves credit for this, he still has a ways to go.

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This article originally appeared in The New Criterion, Volume 28 Number 9, on page 4
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https://newcriterion.com/issues/2010/5/katyn-the-long-cover-up