

**Brian Crozier**  
**Remembering Katyn**

*In Soviet documents recently obtained by the Hoover Institution, the details of one of the bloodiest crimes of Stalin's reign of terror have come to light.*

For those who lived through World War II, and for many who did not, the Katyn Massacre carries a sinister resonance. The most notorious of Stalin's wartime atrocities, the massacre was falsely attributed to Hitler through a scarcely credible but widely believed piece of Soviet disinformation.

In April 1940, nearly twenty-two thousand Polish prisoners were rounded up, transported to Katyn and various other sites, and executed. They included army officers, civil servants, landowners, policemen, ordinary soldiers, and prison officers. They were lined up, made to dig their own mass graves, and shot in the back of the neck. The victims were never tried or presented with any charges. The executions were ordered personally by Stalin in a memorandum dated March 5, 1940, to Lavrenti Beria, the head of the NKVD (predecessor of the KGB). Per Stalin's instructions, the prisoners were to receive the "supreme measure of punishment—shooting."

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The full facts became widely accessible to researchers with the acquisition of millions of sheets of Soviet secret documents by the Hoover Institution, known as *Fond 89*. Many of these documents were made available to me while I was at work on *The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Empire*. The full story is worth telling.

The mass grave in Katyn Forest was discovered by the occupying Nazi forces in 1943. The disinterment of more than four thousand corpses was an unexpected gift to Goebbels's propaganda machine, which broadcast the story to the outside world—to the embarrassment not only of Stalin but of his wartime allies Roosevelt and Churchill. Roosevelt dismissed the Nazi claims as "German propaganda and a German plot." Churchill was less explicit: "The less said about that the better."

There the matter lay—until March 3, 1959, when Aleksandr Shelepin, then head of the KGB, gave full details in a secret memo to Krushchev of the numbers executed. The total was 21,857 killed:

4,421 in the Katyn Forest (Smolensk region)  
3,820 in the Starobelsk camp (near Kharkov)  
6,311 in the Ostashkovo camp (Kalinin region)  
7,305 in other camps and prisons in western Ukraine and western Belorussia

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A curious but related episode deserves notice. In 1972, a private group in London resolved to build a monument to the victims of Katyn. The original plan was to place the monument in Kensington, one of London's best-known tourist areas. At first, the Council of the Borough of Kensington and Chelsea gave permission for the plan to go ahead. Permission was withdrawn, however, under pressure from the Foreign Office.

It is now known, through the Hoover Institution's Soviet archives, that the Foreign Office pressure was itself the outcome of pressure from Moscow. There was an exchange of telegrams on September 7, 1972, between the Soviet

Politburo and the Soviet ambassador in London. The Kremlin's message started as follows:

Reactionary circles in England are again undertaking attempts for anti-Soviet purposes to stir up the so-called "Katyn Affair." To this end the campaign to collect funds for the construction of a "Memorial to the Victims of Katyn" in London is being made use of.

In his reply, the Soviet ambassador stated that the attention of the British government had already been drawn to attempts to whip up an anti-Soviet campaign based on "the inventions—long ago exposed—of the Goebbels propaganda machine concerning the so-called 'Katyn affair.'"

On September 8 the Politburo drafted a further statement, which contained the following passage:

The above-mentioned anti-Soviet campaign cannot but arouse justified feelings of profound indignation in the Soviet Union, whose people made enormous sacrifices for the sake of saving Europe from fascist enslavement.

Foreign Office pressure on the borough resulted and permission was withdrawn. Four years later—in 1976—the Katyn memorial was in fact built, in the cemetery at Gunnersbury on the outskirts of London. The project was supervised by the National Association for Freedom (later, the Freedom Association). Presumably under pressure from the Foreign Office, the British Defense Ministry forbade former members of the British armed forces to don their uniforms for the launching ceremony. This negative order was ignored by several ex-servicemen, without further consequences.

On April 13, 1990, the Soviet authorities at last admitted responsibility for the massacres at Katyn and elsewhere, although the figure cited in the relevant statement—"around 15,000"—fell short of the real total by more than 6,000. The admission came in a statement by the Tass news agency, with the personal authority of then Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev. The statement referred to only three of the prison camps involved: Smolensk, Voroshilovgrad, and Kalinin. It claimed that the authorities had knowledge of the killings through "recently discovered documents." "Direct responsibility for the crime" was ascribed to Beria. The statement ended "The Soviet side, expressing profound regret over the Katyn tragedy, declares that this was one of the gravest crimes of Stalinism."

At a meeting in Moscow that day, Gorbachev presented Polish president General Wojciech Jaruzelski with copies of the NKVD's lists of names of Polish internees in the three camps mentioned. The Polish government issued a statement declaring that the question of responsibility for the massacre had "weighed particularly painfully" on Polish-Soviet relations and that the "long-awaited" Soviet admission made possible a relationship based on "partnership and true friendship." The statement went on: "Reconciliation can only be built on truth." It is surely fair to add that the Tass statement—although useful for relations between the ailing Soviet Union and its Polish satellite—was true but not the whole truth. Only three of the localities involved were named, and the total given fell short of the true figure.

The Polish statement was striking not only for its content but because it had been drafted under the authority of Jaruzelski—a communist leader installed under Soviet protection. In September of that year, he was forced to resign and in December he was replaced as president by the elected anticommunist leader Lech Walesa.

[Postscript](#)

In his 1959 memo to Krushchev, KGB head Shelepin noted that Soviet propaganda efforts to blame the Katyn massacre on the Germans had "taken firm root in international public opinion." To keep the truth from coming out, Shelepin recommended that all records pertaining to the murdered Poles be destroyed. In other words, "We did it, but the world believes the Germans did. Therefore, leave the story as it stands." Thankfully, the documents were not destroyed and we now know the truth about Katyn.

## **Terror in Poland, Polish Campaign 1939 subpage**

Almost each European nation suffered from the Second World War, but there were nations which were the victims of exceptional barbarism. A few nations on which extermination was concentrated by Nazi Germany were: Jews, some nations from Slavonic group: Poles, Russians and some from Yugoslavia nations and also the Gypsies.

Poland was the country which suffered the most from the war: not only lost 6 million of its 35 million citizens but being the war "victor" (at the end of the War Poland was the 4th Allied force: almost 20 divisions on all fronts having a place after Soviet Union, USA and Great Britain and before France which was let on victory parade and Poland was not) Poland was given to Stalin's generosity and the new occupation of Poland started and new victims of communist (this time) terror were taken including patriots, Home Army soldiers, Polish Army on the West soldiers. Also "Pogroms" on Jews were provoked and made by NKVD and the servant Polish Security Bureau to force them to leave the country. Poles really lost this war. Poland became the free country in 1989 after 50 years from the war end.

I present the population losses in the countries under German occupation (losses per 1000 citizens):

Poland	220
USSR	124
Yugoslavia	108
Greece	35
Albany	24
Holland	22
Czechoslovakia	21
Luxembourg	16
France	13
Belgium	12
Norway	3
Denmark	0.3

About 6,000,000 Polish citizens died during the war. Only about 450,000 - 640,000 people lost their life because of direct war operations. 4,500,000 people died by extermination, and about 500,000 - 1,000,000 because of hunger and cold. The victims were Polish citizens but their nationality was: 3,000,000 Poles, 2,500,000 Jews, 500,000 Ukrainians and Byelarussians.