The April 2010 issue of the Polish *Biuletyn IPN* is dedicated to commemorating the seventieth anniversary of the Katyń Forest Massacre. The journal opens with Barbara Polak’s interview with IPN historians, Sławomir Kalbarczyk and Witold Wasilewski, who discuss the state of our knowledge about the Soviet mass-murder of 25,700 Polish citizens. While historians know more about Katyń now than, say, twenty years ago, Kalbarczyk states: “It is difficult to ascertain whether the current state of our knowledge is complete and which conclusions can be considered definitive. We will only gain that knowledge when the files of the Russian investigation are finally made accessible. We are only familiar with the contents of some of the files. The sixty-seven files granted us by the Russians have not in the least contributed to the state of our knowledge because the documents are irrelevant.” The historians also express concern over the fact that most publications on the Katyń Forest Massacre appearing in post-Soviet Russia are of a revisionist nature. These range from Yuri Mukhin’s outright denial of Soviet guilt to more nuanced and sophisticated “scholarly” attempts to whitewash and rationalize Bolshevik culpability. These disturbing trends do not bode well for Polish-Russian reconciliation in the near future.

The issue also contains Witold Wasilewski’s short article about Western attitudes towards Katyń. These, the historian argues, were a function of current politics. Thus, as the Second World War raged, the Western Allies refused to accept Soviet culpability for the crime. Further, they castigated the Poles for allegedly jeopardizing the unity of the anti-Axis alliance. However, Western delegates to the Nurnberg Trials defeated the Soviet attempt to pin the blame on the Germans. Afterwards, during the Cold War, the political climate shifted in favor of exposing the truth about Katyń. In 1951 – 52 the U.S. House of Representatives even launched a congressional commission (the Madden Commission) to investigate the communist atrocity. The Western Right generally favored commemorating and publicizing the truth about the massacres. On the other hand, the Left eschewed the subject for fear of straining relations with the communist world and handing political ammunition to the anti-communist Right. Yet, in spite of the fact that not every Westerner wished to hear the truth about Katyń, the West nevertheless provided a venue to speak the truth freely.

Another article by Wasilewski describes various disinformation techniques employed by the Soviet NKVD against their Polish captives. The objective was to prevent thousands of men slated for execution from rebelling and/or escaping. To this end the Bolsheviks disseminated rumors about possible shipments to Germany, France, or neutral countries. The Poles were even asked about their knowledge of foreign languages. The men were also vaccinated. Toward the end the Poles were also isolated from lower-level Soviet personnel to avoid leaks. Much like
Nazis, who told their Jewish victims that the death trains would merely “deport” them to the “East,” the Soviets ensured that their Polish victims would be oblivious to their fate until the very end.

In addition, Krzysztof Persak provides a detailed description of the exhumation work performed during the years 1991 – 96 at Katyn, Mednoye, and Kharkiv, three sites containing the remains of Polish and other victims of the communists. Sławomir Kalbarczyk writes about the so-called Ukrainian List of Katyn victims. The document, listing the names of 3,435 Polish citizens massacred in the Ukrainian SSR in 1940, was presented to the Poles by the Ukrainian Security Service (Sluzhba Bezpeky) in 1994. Aleksandra Pietrowicz from the Poznań branch of the IPN emphasizes that the province of Greater Poland (Wielkopolska) was also impacted by the mass-killing of Polish officers, some of whom were natives of the region. Marek Klecel tells the story of three Polish writers, Józef Mackiewicz, Ferdynand Goetel, and Jan Emil Skiwski, who participated in the German-organized delegation to Katyn in April/May 1943.

Krzysztof Sychowicz describes a resurgent zeal to commemorate the Katyn Forest Massacre in communist-ruled Poland and the counter-measures undertaken by the secret police (SB). The effort to preserve historical memory consisted of two main elements: services held by Catholic priests, and illegal leaflets disseminated by such organizations as the Confederation for an Independent Poland (KPN) and the Movement for the Defense of Civic and Human Rights (ROPCiO). Incidentally, the “reawakening” began in April/May 1980, thereby predating the birth of the “Solidarity” movement though undoubtedly paving the road for its rise.

Monika Komaniecka devotes an article to François Naville, professor of forensic medicine at the University of Geneva in Switzerland. Naville was the only representative of a neutral state at the German-organized International Physicians’ Commission. Afterwards, he also testified in front of the Madden Commission in the United States. Naville was propelled both by a desire to defend the truth and sympathy for Poland as a country torn between two powerful and rapacious neighbors. Grzegorz Kacorzowski, in turn, relates the testimony of Teofil Rubański (b. Teofil Dolata), a forced-worker on a German railroad repair crew (Bauzug no. 2005), who claims to have discovered the bodies of Polish officers buried at Katyn as early as 1942. Last but not least, Leszek Rysak describes the International Motorcycle Ride between various burial sites in Ukraine, Belarus, and the Russian Federation. Such an event, the author argues, provides a wonderful opportunity to popularize Katyn commemoration.

The April 2010 issue will certainly serve as a helpful resource to anyone wishing to learn more about the Katyn Forest Massacre. Seventy years after the tragic act of communist democide, researchers have made considerable headway in expanding the limits of our knowledge about Katyn. Needless to say, the implosion of the Soviet system was the greatest single contributing factor toward this progress. Filling in the remaining lacunae will require two prerequisites: academic freedom for historians, and cooperation forthcoming from the governments in Moscow and Minsk. Unfortunately, the political climate seems unfavorable to
further research. In post-communist Poland, the current governing party resents the IPN’s autonomy and fears any moves which the Kremlin may interpret as provocations. In post-Soviet Russia, a neo-imperial obstinacy and a post-communist version of the Stockholm Syndrome complement each other. Official “historical policy” reflects little or no desire to address the crimes of communism or to come to grips with wounds inflicted on such peoples as the Poles, Ukrainians, or the Balts. We can only hope that researchers will manifest the audacity to overcome these challenges.

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