The Crime and the Lie

Anna M. Cienciala et al. have diligently selected, edited, and rendered into English a collection of documents pertaining to the so-called Katyn affair, the mass murder of Allied POWs by Soviet leadership under Stalin in the spring of 1940. As the principal American editor, Cienciala footnoted the collection and introduced each section. *Katyn: A Crime Without Punishment* is divided chronologically in three parts. Part I concerns “Prisoners of an Undeclared War, 23 August 1939-5 March 1940;” Part II focuses on “Extermination, March-June 1940;” and Part III regards “Katyn and Its Echoes, 1940 to the Present.”

The documents contained in *Katyn: A Crime Without Punishment* have been known to the specialist for some years now in their Russian original and Polish translation. The first records were released in the late 1980s, the last were made public in the early 21st century. This is a crucial compilation, which dots the “i” about the identity of the perpetrators and the dynamics of the cover-up. Yet, in general, it is really nothing new. The English-speaking public has been familiar with the basic facts at least since the 1950s, when the Congressional hearings were held, to determine the responsibility for the crime. And in the 1960s J.K. Zawodny published his magisterial monograph *Death in the Forest* that unequivocally pointed to the Soviet leadership and its secret police as the perpetrators. Now we have it all in black and white, including the Politburo decree of March 5, 1940, signed by Stalin and others, “to shoot the Polish prisoners of war” as well as “documents on the Soviet cover up” (p. xv).

*Katyn: A Crime Without Punishment* is both a harrowing microstudy of the massacre and an incisive macrostudy of its historical, political, and international context. Cienciala recounts ably the story of the Russian aggression against the Poles, starting with the partitions of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the 18th century. She stresses poignantly the relevance of the Polish-Bolshevik War of 1920, the only time the Red Army was decisively defeated in the field, to the Katyn affair; she demonstrates clearly the baselessness of the myth, which still enjoys wide currency in Western academia, that in September 1939 the Soviet Union approached Poland to render jointly military assistance to Czechoslovakia against the Third Reich. “No Soviet military plan to carry out such an action has come to light” (p. 13). However, when on August 23, 1939, Stalin and Hitler signed a secret pact, it did call for a joint Soviet-Nazi attack on Poland in September 1939. Having conquered the Polish Republic, the Nazis and Communists divided it into two occupation zones. Repressions promptly commenced in both. These included forced deportations, expropriations, ethnic cleansing, and mass executions. The numbers repressed by both totalitarian regimes were comparable at the time. Although ethnic Polish elites were targeted most, citizens of all backgrounds were represented proportionally among the victims of the Nazis and Soviets between September 1939 and June 1941. The Jewish refugees from western Poland were the exception as they were overrepresented among the deportees to the Gulag.

The Polish officers constituted a distinct category of victims. Most were captured during the war in September 1939. Others were picked up in the round-ups that followed the establishment of the Soviet power in Poland’s eastern borderlands. Most were reserve officers, members of the Polish elite, a cross-section of its citizenry. They were of a variety of ethnic and religious backgrounds, including Catholic, Protestant, Uniate, and Orthodox
Christians, as well as Muslims and Jews. For example, the chief rabbi of the Polish army Baruch Steinberg was among the Katyn victims. Most were professionals, doctors, lawyers, engineers, entrepreneurs, and teachers. But there were also professional military men, policemen, and prison guards. A few were members of the Polish landed nobility. All were males, except for Second Lieutenant Janina Lewandowska, a pilot downed by the Soviets.

“The vast majority of captured Polish officers viewed the USSR as no better than Nazi Germany” (p. 27).

Most were imprisoned in three camps: Starobielsk, Ostashkov, and Kozelsk. The captives were then subjected to the interrogation by the NKVD. The investigation was headed by Vasily Zarubin, soon-to-be a top Soviet spy in the United States. In fact, it was an intelligence operation *par excellence*, including agent recruitment. All information thus obtained was used against the Polish officers and their families. The latter were deported to the Gulag, including little children, where many perished. Their property was confiscated. And their fathers, brothers, and sons – the Polish officers – were shot. According to the order of March 5, 1940: “Prisoner-of-war officers and police in the camps are attempting to continue their c-r [counterrevolutionary] 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… apply to them the supreme punishment, [execution] by shooting” (p. 120).

In addition to the POW officers, others of similar (“counterrevolutionary”) background were sentenced to die. Over 20,000 victims were taken out in batches to several execution places, shot, and buried in secret. The standard explanation for the Politburo decision is that Stalin wanted to decapitate Poland’s elite to facilitate the Communist rule over the captive population. Anna Cienciala, however, believes that the Soviets simply decided that the Polish POWs were superfluous because they failed to facilitate the fulfillment of Moscow’s foreign policy objectives of switching alliances and securing the recognition of the USSR’s new borders. Further, the Politburo resolved to vacate space in POW camps for the anticipated influx of the Finnish prisoners. According to Cienciala, “The news of a forthcoming peace with Finland could have triggered Stalin’s decision to shoot the Polish prisoners. There is no direct evidence of such a connection, but there are strong indications that Stalin had kept the prisoners alive as a bargaining counter in possible negotiations with the Polish government in London on the postwar Soviet-Polish frontier. In Anna Cienciala’s opinion, this theory provides the best answer to the question of why Stalin did not decide to murder the Polish prisoners until early March 1940 – when the Finns were ready to surrender and the Polish government, far from indicating readiness to discuss postwar frontiers, had even agreed to send a brigade with the proposed but abandoned Allied Expeditionary Force to Finland” (p. 144). Cienciala argues rather oddly that the Soviets were hoping that the Free Poles would both agree to the Soviet occupation of eastern Poland and facilitate the rapprochement of Moscow with the Western Allies. “It is more than likely that there was a connection between these Soviet policy objectives and what was happening with the prisoners of war in the three special camps” (p. 145).

Thus, the Poles were executed. What had appeared as a convenient solution soon became “a mistake,” as Molotov put it, following the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union in
June 1940. Cienciala’s interesting extrapolation tallies well with the customary callousness and ruthlessness of the Communists, but it does not exclude the class struggle and genocide factors behind the Politburo decree to murder the Poles. Yet, we have no evidence whatsoever concerning the motives of Stalin and his comrades to perpetrate the dastardly deed. One can even argue the opposite of Cienciala: The Kremlin believed that the disappearance of Poland was desirable and permanent. Moscow anticipated a protracted war in the West. It intended to sit it out, while continuing to supply Berlin. Naturally, the Soviets counted on the Germans to become boggled down on the Western Front as they had during the First World War. The repetition of the horror of trench warfare would cause a collapse of Germany, France, and Great Britain and the USSR would move into the breech to Communize Europe. Why would Stalin need Poland or Polish officers for such a gory scenario? They were more than superfluous; they were a positive impediment to the spread of totalitarianism. In any event, we do not know what foreign policy options the Soviet leadership considered seriously between 1939 and 1941. Its doubtful that a rapprochement with Poland and the Western Allies was the Kremlin’s top priority between the fall of 1939 and the summer of 1940. Only in the wake of the collapse of France, did Stalin begin to have second thoughts about his Western strategy. This will continue to be a topic of legitimate inquiry.

And the Katyn affair will remain notable for several reasons. First and foremost, after the crime site had been discovered by the Germans in the spring of 1943 and exploited by Nazi propaganda, the Katyn murders briefly threatened to jeopardize the Allied unity during the Second World War. Second, the Nazi revelations led the Polish Government-in-Exile in London to turn to the International Red Cross for an official investigation, which prompted the Kremlin to break off diplomatic relations with the Free Poles. That, once again, was amplified by the media around the world and secured notoriety for the Katyn affair. Third, afterwards, practically until the demise of the USSR, the Soviet propaganda consistently blamed the mass shooting on the Nazis, thus underscoring the consistently ruthless mendacity of the Communist regime. Fourth, although a drop in the bucket of Stalin’s crimes, the Katyn massacre occurred at the time when the Soviet Union was allied with the Third Reich, which was carrying out identical executions of the Polish elite, thus vividly illustrating the totalitarian compatibility of the perpetrators. Fifth, the Western Allied leaders, including Franklin D. Roosevelt and Winston Churchill, knew or suspected the truth about the sordid business from the start; yet they suppressed the truth and “media coverage of Katyn in 1943-1945 in the interest of Allied unity.” Sixth, the Katyn execution and its cover-up have functioned among the Poles at home and the Polish émigrés abroad as a symbol of Poland’s martyrdom by the Communists and of her betrayal by the Western Allies. Seventh, for all the reasons mentioned above, the Katyn affair has served as moral indictment of the Communist system for assorted anti-Communists, most notably the conservatives in the United States.

In the 1980s Pope John Paul II worked incessantly behind the scenes to bring the truth about Katyn to light. Some believe that it was he who prevailed on the Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev to reveal the truth. Secretary Gorbachev and, later, Russia’s President Boris Yeltsin, successively, released top secret documents confirming the guilt of the Communists, Stalin in particular. The Soviet and, then, Russian authorities launched a criminal investigation into the murders.
However, just when we thought that the Katyn case was closed and solved we were forced to focus on it once again for several reasons. From the late 1990s, a number of writers, pundits, and politicians, riding a wave of neo-Stalinist revisionism in Russia, has commenced to deny aggressively that the Soviet Union was responsible for the murders. Instead, they blamed the Germans. The Kremlin under Vladimir Putin initially supported them. To boot, Moscow resurrected a spurious case (first brought up by Gorbachev) of the Bolshevik POWs who perished of diseases and hunger, while in Polish custody in 1920. The Russian side argued about the alleged parity of both cases. However, lately the Kremlin has backtracked somewhat. Most notably during his speech of April 7, 2010, Putin reaffirmed the Soviet guilt, but stressed the secret police, rather than Stalin, as the perpetrator. That was a welcome sign, all things considered, and a step closer to a closure of sorts.

Then on April 10, 2010, the world was reminded about the importance of the Katyn affair once again. A plane carrying Poland’s President Lech Kaczyński and his entourage of notables, some of the most important officials of the Polish state, on route to the Katyn commemorations, crashed outside of Smolensk, killing all aboard. Although no foul play was ever proven, some in Poland dubbed it “a second Katyn,” underscoring the irresistible symbolism of the original tragedy. Thus, Katyn will continue to be relevant until there is full and unrestrained Russian-Polish reconciliation with all that it entails, including full access to the archives, a clear acknowledgement of guilt, and a compensation for the families of the victims.


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