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Katyn and its prelude

Stalin's Polish policy

On 3 December 1941, Władysław Sikorski, the Prime Minister of the Polish government-in-exile, Władysław Anders Polish general and Stanisław Kot, the Polish ambassador in Moscow visited Stalin. The theme for the discussion was the ways to set up a Polish army that would be made up of the Polish prisoners of war kept in the territory of the Soviet Union. Sikorski presented a list of 4000 names to Stalin and asked about the whereabouts of the persons on the list. The conversation that followed was something like:

Sikorski: These people must be here [in the Soviet Union] because none of them has returned.

Stalin: That's impossible. They must have escaped.

Anders: Where could they have gone?

Stalin: Well, perhaps to Manchuria.

When the Polish visitors pointed out that it was an impossible explanation Stalin came up with the following theory:

“In that case, we must have let them free, but they have not reached home yet.”

Anders returned to talk about the Polish prisoners of war again on 18 March 1942 and stated that “the officers that were kept at Kozelsk, Starobelsk and Ostashkov” have not returned. Stalin responded calmly:

“I have given my orders to let them free. They say that they are in Franz Josef Land, but there is nobody there. I do not know where they are. Why would we hold them back? Perhaps they are in lagers in the German-occupied territory. They ran away.”

Stalin’s cynicism had no limits. He knew that the prisoners they were talking about were executed following Lavrentiy Beria’s initiative and Stalin’s approval in the spring of 1940 and they were in mass graves.

On 13 April 1943, it came to light. German troops invading the Soviet Union excavated the first mass graves. On that day Radio Berlin reported that soldiers „found a 28-m-long and 16-m-wide hole with 3000 Polish officers in it, arranged in 12 layers. They were dressed in army uniforms and some of them were tied up. Everyone had a gunshot wound in the back of their skulls.” The mass grave is in the Katyn Forest. It is likely that the prisoners kept at Kozelsk and transported to Smolensk were killed there. Two days later the world would learn the view of Stalin on the events: “The German fascist executioners did not hesitate to spread the meanest and most uninhibited lies and cover up the crime that – as it is obvious by now – they have committed.” Indeed, the Wehrmacht committed countless crimes in Soviet territory, but the massacre at Katyn is not among these. Yet, the lie that Stalin pronounced was a dogma in the Soviet Union and the Socialist countries until 1990. Even the Western European public was misinformed.

The first deportations

According to the treaty of Riga signed on 18 March 1921, the border between Poland and the Soviet Union east of the Curzon-line, but this still meant that about 1 million ethnic Poles remained in the Soviet Union (the Soviet census of 1937 put this figure at 636 220). In the first half of the 1920s, the Kreml made a couple of apparently significant concessions to the nationalities of the empire. A number of autonomous areas were created. This is how the Polish District came into being

in 1925. It was named after Julian Marchlewski, the Polish communist revolutionary who died in that same year. Its centre, Dovbysh, also adopted Marchlewski's name.) Another Polish National District was created in the territory of the Belarussian Soviet Socialist Republic in 1932. It was named after Felix Edmundovich Dzerzhinsky (A Bolshevik revolutionary of Polish origin who had a pivotal role in setting up the Soviet political police, the Cheka. Its centre, Koydanava, was re-named Dzyarzhynsk and has kept this name ever since. However, the purpose of the Soviet leadership was to educate local propaganda personnel, spread the idea of communism among Poles and carry out collectivization. Yet, this plan failed to materialize because the Polish population resisted attempts of indoctrination and collectivization and also protested against the confiscation of their lands.

The Soviet leadership responded quickly. In the spring of 1935, they began the deportation of the Polish inhabitants of District Marchlewski to the mining zone of Ukraine and then to Kazakhstan. After the systemic change, it came to light that several Russian archives, such as that of the former KGB, the State Archives of the Russian Federation, Russian State Archives of Contemporary History and Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History, contain documents related to the deportation of Poles and other nationalities. These also showed that collectivization had an ethnic component. The People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD) and the Main Administration of Camps (GULAG) accurately registered the nationality of so-called kulaks that were said to be anti-Soviet and anti-revolutionary. It was primarily Germans and Polish that were forced to leave their homes near the Western area of the Soviet Union.

According to the documents of the NKVD, between 1 and 9 February 1935 nearly two thousand families were deported from the Marchlewski District, out of which 681 families were labelled Polish „Kulak and anti-Soviet”. In the next stage, between 20 February and 15 March, 8329 Polish families (cc. 38892 persons) Soviets deported from their homes. As far as researchers could calculate, 21041 „Kulak” families were deported during the first four months of 1935. This means that Polish families constituted nearly 50% of the deported families in those four months. A note sent to Stalin and dated 31 July 1935 said the following: „In the Kiev territory

the Marchlewski District, which is said to be ethnically Polish, is the most anti-Soviet zone and it is full of anti-revolutionary elements” including former members of the Polish army and nationalists that had been de-kulakized (meaning farmers that have been stripped of their land)”. However, leadership was not completely satisfied with deportations. On 27 October, Genrikh Yagoda – who was the leader of the NKVD by then – reported to Molotov that „we managed to clean the borderland of anti-revolutionary nationalist and anti-Soviet elements”, but on 5 March 1936 the same Yagoda ordered the deportation of 15 000 families to Kazakhstan, The operation took place in two stages. Until June 5535 and between June and September another 9465 families, a total of 69283 persons were deported to Kazakh lands.

The Marchlewski District was abolished in August 1935. Its centre was first re-baptized Schorsk and later regained its old name of Dovbysh. As we shall see below, Polish inhabitants of the Dzerzhinsky District did not fare better.

The “Polish Operation” of the NKVD (1937–1938)

Deportation of Polish peasants resisting collectivization was only the first one of a series of violent measures against the Polish inhabitants of the Soviet Union. “Polish Operation” of the NKVD is a subchapter of the Great Terror (1935–1940). A report prepared for Khrushchev summarized the terror during Stalin’s era on 9 February 1956. According to this document, between 1935 and 1940 1 980 635 persons were convicted for anti-Soviet activities, and 688 503 of these were killed. For the period of 1937-38 there were 1 548 366 convictions and 681 692 executions. During the “Polish Operation” that lasted from 20 August 1937 until 1 August 1938 (until 1 September in Belarus) 139 835 ethnically Polish people were convicted and 111 091 of them were shot dead. Thus, while 44% of all convicted persons were killed during the terror, in the case of Polish people this ratio was 77.25%. Also, 16% of all people executed in 1937-38 were Polish.

The anti-Polish operation began with order no. [00485](#) that Nikolai Yezhov issued

on 11 August 1937. This document did not mention Polish as a target group, but the 30-pages-long confidential letter attached to it revealed the real objectives. The letter established six categories for those that were seen as spies or anti-Soviet Poles that NKVD personnel had to capture and execute. (This „secret letter” is located at: RGANI, F. 6. Op. 13. T. 6. L. 8–51. N.V. Petrov – A.B. Roginski discuss it in detail).

The letter classified the entire Polish population as anti-Soviet.

1. It stated that former members of the Polish Military Organization (POW), which operated during World War I in the area under Russian occupation, were the most dangerous for the Soviet Union as they have infiltrated everywhere. Allegedly, they might be found in the Polish Communist Party, in the Polish section of the Comintern and even in the NKVD and Red Army. As a result of this view, nearly the entire membership of the Polish Communist Party was killed, and the party dissolved. However, in reality, the former POW had no influence by that time and the network of intelligence that NKVD painted was mere fantasy.
2. Prisoners of war captured during the Polish-Bolshevik war constituted the second category. Their number was approximately 1500-3000. Later on, the terror reached those that spent too much time as prisoners of war in Poland.
3. The third sub-group within the targeted population were those that escaped to the Soviet Union that were emigrants that opted for Soviet communism. According to Yezhov, these could number several hundred thousand.
4. The fourth category was that of political emigres and the so-called exchanged people. These were those that the two countries exchanged between 1923 and 1932 – it mostly meant the exchange of political prisoners kept in Poland for Catholic priests and prisoners of war held in the Soviet Union. Their count was 425.
5. The fifth group partially overlapped with the fourth one. Those former Po-

lish socialist and members of other parties were grouped here that ended up in the Soviet Union in some way or their home fell on that side after the borders were drawn in 1921

6. Finally, there were those inhabitants of Polish districts (practically only the Dzerzhinsky District by that time) that were labelled anti-Soviet and nationalist. It could be applied to anyone.

In the autumn of 1937, Yezhov further expanded the scope of the operation to family members of the people that had been arrested by then. Women were mostly sentenced to 5-7 years of imprisonment or sent to one of the camps for a similar time period and children below 15 years of age were taken to orphanages.

Order no. 00485 was a model for the „struggle” against other nationalities. Yet, based on the number of those that were killed Polish ranked first as enemies. As we have shown in another post, Stalin planned the annihilation of Poland ever since the treaty of Riga. He found German partners for this plan both during the Weimar era and after 1933. This culminated in the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact signed 23 August 1939, however, it did not end violent actions against Polish people.

Attack against Poland and new deportations

After Germany had launched its campaign against Poland on 1 September 1939, it asked the Soviet Union to take control of the zone that belonged to them according to the secret clause of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact. On 5 September Molotov told via the Germans via their ambassador that the Soviet Union needed some time. He posited that excessive eagerness would harm the cause of the Soviets. Also, he asked the Germans not to cross the designated boundary in case they reach it before the Red Army. On 10 September, Molotov told Ambassador Schulenburg that the Soviet Union would cross the border under the pretext of defending Belarusians and Ukrainians living in Poland. Finally, on 16 September, he said that the following day would be the time to start the invasion. On 17 September 1939, the soviet go-

vernment presented the Polish ambassador to Moscow with a memorandum that stated that the “the Polish state and its government actually ceased to exist.” [...] The Soviet government cannot be indifferent to the situation that Ukrainian and Belorussian that are ethnically related to people of the Soviet Union and that live in Poland have become helpless and subject to an uncertain fate.”

The next day TASS released a communication with similar content. The argument was cynical as usual: Stalin gave the defence of Ukrainians and Belorussia’s as reasons while he ordered the deportation and murder of several tens of thousands of Ukrainians and Belarusians in the previous years. On 31 October, Molotov summarized the success of Soviet policy in the following terms: „A rapid punch from the German army and then another from the Red Army was enough to raze Poland that was founded on the persecution of national minorities and was a monster of the treaty of Versailles. The entire world is aware that there is no way to resurrect the old Poland.” The occupied territories were annexed to the Soviet Republic of Belarus and Ukraine (Wilno/Vilnius was attached to Lithuania then it was Sovietized) and the inhabitants were declared Soviet citizens. Thus, Stalin did not create a security zone or puffer area. He simply enlarged the area of the Soviet Union.

The Polish army did not launch a counterattack. The commander-in-chief called on the army to avoid engagement whenever possible. This is what probably happened since G. Kulik deputy commissioner for defence reported the following to the Soviet political leaders on 21 September: „The Polish army, apart from some clashes with border guards, settlers and retreating units, did not fire at us. We have captured large numbers of privates and officers. [...] We cannot feed them.”

The Soviet Union did not ratify the Geneva Convention of 1929 about the treatment of prisoners of war. Thus, it did not see humane treatment obligatory. It was the so-called Directorate of Prisoners of Wars that dealt with them and it was under the NKVD. Lavrentiy Beria approved of the rules regulating the working of the directorate but it did not say anything about provisions. On 3 October order no. 001177 regulated the release and classification of prisoners. This talked about the release of Ukrainian, Belarus and Czech prisoners and had much to say about the Polish ones, too. This order designated camps to the classes and separated officers from privates.

Although the Soviet institutions were struggling with providing food to Polish prisoners, they embarked on large-scale deportations from the newly occupied territory. They continued the policy that had been in place since 1935 against Poles living in the Soviet Union. The area of the territories occupied on 17 September was about 200 000 km² and the number of inhabitants was 11.5 million. The two largest ethnic groups were Ukrainians (4.4 million) and Poles (4.14 million). Mass deportations took place in four stages. Molotov, the chair of the Committee of Commissioners gave the orders and Beria worked out the details for each stage.

1. According to the decision taken on 29 December 1939, the first one was to take place in February 1940. This impacted 140 000 people 70 % of which were Poles.
2. The second wave began in April. This time it involved the deportation of 61 000 people. 80% of the transports comprised of women as this order was about family members, refugees and prostitutes.
3. After this, in May-July 1940, during the third wave of deportations approximately 80 000 people were deported to the interior of the Soviet Union. They were mostly Jews.
4. The last wave of mass deportations took place in May-June 1941, thus, immediately before the German invasion. Some historians believe that Stalin believed it was necessary to deport these 85 000 people in order to vacate the frontier zone in anticipation of the attack.

According to Western and Polish historians, the archival documents produced by the NKVD are incomplete, thus the figure of 320 000 must be a very conservative estimate. Roger Moorhouse and Norman Davies believe that the number of deported people well exceeded 1-1.5 million. Historians of the Polish Institute of National Remembrance estimate that the Soviets deported between 700 000 and 1 million Polish citizens in four stages.

Katyn, Kharkov, Kalinin, Kiev, Minsk

In the Kremlin, the issue of prisoners of war also awaited resolution. The Soviet leadership had to motives for annihilating the Polish prisoners of war. On the one hand, the Soviets had difficulties providing food to them. On the other hand, they did not consider Poland to be an actor in future, thus, the Soviets thought of them as quasi stateless soldiers from a non-existing state. Soviet leaders did not believe they could integrate the prisoners to the ordinary life of the Soviet Union. Beria's proposal dated 5 March 1940 attests this latter point:

”At present, a large number of former officers of the Polish army, Polish police and intelligence, unveiled members of Polish nationalist parties, refugees and others are kept in camps of the NKVD in Ukraine and in the western part of Belarus. All of them are enemies of the Soviet power and filled with hatred for the Soviet system. Officers and police officers attempt to engage in anti-revolutionary activities and anti-Soviet agitation even at the camps. They await their release only to take part in the fight against Soviet power.”

Beria asked for permission to execute them and he received it. The first point of the decision of the Politburo said that:

„Order for the NKVD of the Soviet Union: Investigate the cases of 1. The 14700 former army officers, bureaucrat, landowner, police officer, intelligence agent, gendarme, settler, prison guard, prosecutor; 2. and 11 000 persons arrested and held in the prisons of Western Ukraine and Belarus a members of various counter-revolutionary and intelligence organizations, former landowners, factory owners, bureaucrats and deserters in an extraordinary manner and apply the most severe punishment that is execution by shooting.”

Stalin, Voroshilov, Mikoyan, Kalinin and Kaganovich signed the proposal, thus they approved of it. The mass murder was committed between 3 April and 16 May 1940 at several sites. 4 410 prisoners were brought to the Katyn Forest near Smolensk from three camps (Kozelsk, Starobelsk and Ostashkov), 3739 prisoners were taken to the Piatykhvatky homestead near Kharkov, and 6 314 were taken to Mednoye near

Kalinin (Tver). They were shot in the back of their head. Apart from the Polish victims, NKVD personnel killed 4181 Ukrainian in Kiev and 4465 Belarussian prisoners were murdered in Minsk.

On 22 June 1941, when the Germans attacked the Soviet Union, the British insisted that Stalin should establish diplomatic relations with the Polish émigré government, and he eventually agreed. This was officially realized with the Sikorski–Mayski agreement signed on 30 July 1941. After this date, the Polish government and military leadership made efforts to recruit an army made up of Polish prisoners living in the Soviet Union. That was when they started looking for the missing, murdered, prisoners of war. Eventually, it was the Anders army that was formed of those that were still alive. They were evacuated to Palestine via Iran in 1942. Subsequently, Polish soldiers took place in operations of the anti-Hitler coalition. Among other deeds, they were the ones that liberated Monte Cassino in Italy.

In 1943, when the Germans discovered the mass graves, the Sikorski government turned to the Red Cross asking for a proper investigation of the graves. In response, Stalin broke diplomatic relations with the Polish government.

Aftermarth

At Stalin's order, the deportations and the murder had to be kept secret. Nikita Khrushchev's so-called „secret speech” that he gave on 25 February 1956, on the last day of the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, was an exception. However, Khrushchev did not give details about the ethnic background of victims and he did not say anything about Katyn. It was only on 13 April 1990 that the Soviet news agency, TASS, published an official press release saying that „On the basis of archival documents, we shall conclude that Beria, Myerlukov and their associates are directly responsible for the crimes committed in the Katyn Forest.” This communication did not say much, but this confession was gratifying for Polish society as Poles have always believed that it was the Soviets that committed the

murder. On the same day, at the meeting of Wojciech Jaruzelski and Mihail Gorbachev, the latter handed over hundreds of pages of documents to his Polish peer. The following day, Jaruzelski paid respect to the memory of victims at Katyn Forest. In October 1992, Boris Yeltsin handed over more documents to Lech Wałęsa, the President of Poland. This package included the infamous decision of 5 March 1940. These were published in four Polish and one Russian language volume. This meant a new beginning for memory politics.

The Poles asked the Russians to excavate all mass graves and to erect a monument above these. Graves at Katyn and Kharkov opened in 2000 to visitors. In 2002, after Vladimir Putin had visited Poland, a „Committee of Polish-Russian Difficult Cases” that consisted of historians, archivists and diplomats and had its first session in 2005. However, the process abruptly ended when Lech Kaczyński was elected president. The Kaczyński brothers were not open to Polish-Russian reconciliation and there were other political and economic issues that prevented rapprochement. The Polish government started insisting that Russia should recognize the murders at Katyn Forest as crimes against humanity. However, Russia is not willing to do so. In 2005, the Chief Prosecutor’s Office of the Russian Federation closed the case without inculpation. The prosecutors did not disclose the material collected during the investigation and did not allow Poland to consult the material. Yet, Polish and Russian historians continued their work. There is plenty of literature on the Polish side while in Russia V.S. Iazhborovskaia, I.S. Iablokov and A. Iu. Parsadanova produced a collective monograph that is an excellent synthesis that uses all accessible archival material from both Russia and Poland.

The Committee of Polish-Russian Difficult Cases restarted its operation in 2007 when the Civic Platform won the election in Poland. This gained momentum following a meeting between the two ministers of Foreign Affairs, Radosław Sikorski and Sergey Lavrov. In 2010, the committee summarized its findings in a large, 900-page-long volume entitled „White spots, black spots. difficult cases in Russian-Polish relations”. It discussed 16 problematic events in a way that a Polish and a Russian historian wrote a study about each issue, thus, the book consists of 32 studies.

In Poland, 13 April is the memorial day of the victims of the massacre at Katyn Forest. This time we also remember all the Polish victims of Stalin's terror.

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