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### **Atrocities in Ukraine and the Katyn Analogy**

Allegations that Russian soldiers have massacred civilians in Ukraine and then covered up their crimes by burying the bodies in unmarked graves have stirred historical memories of the Katyn massacre – the Soviet mass murder of more than 20,000 Polish prisoners of war (POWs) in spring 1940.

The mass graves of the Polish POWs were unearthed by the Germans in a forest near Smolensk in spring 1943, who then enlisted international experts to help conduct a forensic examination of the murder site. Berlin's finding that the victims had been killed by the Soviets was denounced by Moscow as Nazi propaganda.

When the Red Army re-captured Smolensk in January 1944 the Soviets conducted their own investigation, which concluded the prisoners had been killed during the period of Nazi occupation. Lending credibility to this false claim was a staged wartime visit to the site by a group of American journalists, together with Kathleen Harriman, the daughter of the US ambassador to Moscow. Presented by the Soviets with fraudulent but plausible evidence, both she and the newsmen were convinced the Germans were guilty. These waters were further muddied by the West's postwar weaponization of the Katyn killings as cold war propaganda.

But the Katyn comparison with present-day Ukraine should not be pushed too far. For a start, it was not a wartime atrocity as such and nor was it perpetrated by the Soviet army. The victims were, for the most part, military and police personnel, not civilians. The crime was committed by Stalin's security police, the NKVD, which by this time was well-versed in mass executions, having already shot hundreds of thousands of Soviet citizens. Importantly, the Poles were killed for political and ideological reasons, not out of vengeance, ethnic hatred or as part of some programme of genocide

Some Russian nationalists continue to believe in Soviet innocence but there is overwhelming documentary evidence – from Russia’s own archives - that the Polish POWs were executed upon the specific instruction of Stalin and his Politburo.

While President Vladimir Putin accepts Soviet responsibility for the Katyn massacre, he has speculated that Stalin authorised the executions as revenge for the Poles’ killing of thousands of Russian POWs during the Russo-Polish War of 1919-1920.

The origins of the Katyn murders lay in the Soviet invasion of Eastern Poland in September 1939, an attack conducted under the auspices of the Stalin-Hitler pact, which had allocated Poland’s eastern territories to a Soviet sphere of influence. The lands occupied by the Red Army were seen by the Soviets as Western Belorussia and Western Ukraine – territories that had been illegally occupied by Poland as result of its successful war with Bolshevik Russia.

Soviet re-occupation of these territories entailed not just annexation but forced communization and their incorporation into the USSR as part of the Belorussian and Ukrainian socialist republics. The extremely violent process of Sovietisation included the imprisonment and deportation of some 400, 000 Polish POWs. Included among them were those officers and officials who were to perish at Katyn. Because of their rank or official status, they were separated from the mass of ordinary Polish POWs, who were mostly released from incarceration after the German attack on the USSR in June 1941.

The original Soviet intention was not to murder the Polish officers but to re-educate them into acceptable citizens of the new Soviet order in Eastern Poland. It was the abject failure of the NKVD’s indoctrination program in its POW camps that set the scene for their execution. Another crucial contingency was the Soviet-Finnish ‘Winter War’ of 1939-1940. By early spring 1940 there were well-founded rumours that Britain and France were preparing an expeditionary force to aid the Finns. The main Anglo-French mission was to deprive the Germans of access to the resources of neutral Sweden’s iron ore fields, but the prospective intervention was relished by the Polish POWs, who looked forward to escaping captivity and re-joining the fight against the Soviets.

It was against this backdrop that Stalin's security chief, Lavrenty Beria, sent the Soviet dictator a letter recommending that 14,700 Polish POWs together with another 11,000 Polish 'counter-revolutionaries, spies and saboteurs', should be summarily tried and executed by the NKVD. Stalin agreed, and, according to NKVD records, in March-April 1940, 21,857 Polish prisoners were executed at Katyn and camps and prisons in Ukraine and Belorussia.

Presaging that monstrous action was another Politburo resolution of early March 1940 that mandated the deportation to Kazakhstan of 25,000 families of these same Polish POWs. Among the authors of that vile policy was Nikita Khrushchev, who was destined to denounce Stalin's terroristic dictatorship at the 20<sup>th</sup> congress of the Soviet communist party in 1956.

The Katyn massacre was framed by the Soviets' class struggle ideology. Hence the separation and isolation of the Polish army officers and state officials, the aim being to contain their insidious class influence. While the indoctrination of such hostile class elements was considered difficult by NKVD officials, it was not seen as impossible, and in different circumstances they might well have persevered with this task.

Admittedly, as well as the class-political dimension of the Katyn murders, there was an ethnic aspect. The Polish officer prisoners were targeted for liquidation because they were Poles as well as bourgeois and politically recalcitrant. That same ethno-ideological rationale was prevalent during Stalin's Great Terror of the 1930s when hundreds of thousands of people from a variety of ethnic groups – Balts, Chinese, Finns, Iranians, Koreans, Kurds, Turks, Ukrainians – were ethnically cleansed from Soviet borderlands because they were identified as potentially disloyal and treasonous nationalists.

Katyn was not a particularly heinous atrocity by Soviet standards: some 700,000 people were shot for political reasons in the 1930s alone. But it was the one that Stalin came to regret the most, not least because of its propaganda value to the Nazis during the war and to the West during the cold war.

The undeniable documentary evidence that crimes were committed at Katyn does not, of course, automatically validate atrocity stories emanating from Ukraine. Their veracity is a matter for rigorous independent investigation, verification and prosecution. But Katyn does show the grotesque atrocities that can be perpetrated in extreme circumstances when fanatical belief systems hold sway.

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