

The Katyn Syndrome

ANNA M. CIENCIALA

Iazhborovskaia, I. S., A. Iu. Iablokov, and V. S. Parsadanova. *Katynskii sindrom v sovetsko-pol'skikh i rossiisko-pol'skikh otnosheniakh*. Moscow: Rossiiskaia politicheskaia entsiklopediia (ROSSPEN), 2001. 495 pp. ISBN 5-8243-0197-2.

The authors of *Katynskii sindrom* are eminently qualified to write a study of this heinous Stalinist crime: the Katyn–Kharkov–Kalinin/Tver massacres of Polish prisoners of war in spring 1940, now subsumed under the name “Katyn.” Inessa Iazhborovskaia and Valentina Parsadanova are both historians of Poland (the former is also a political scientist) who have written on the Polish prisoners of war and Katyn, while Anatolii Iu. Iablokov was the prosecutor in charge of the Soviet, then Russian, Katyn investigation from August 1990 to June 1994. This book received some favorable reviews in Russian and Polish periodicals, but it has thus far passed unnoticed in major English-language Slavic Studies journals.¹ The authors aim to inform the Russian reader of the crime and explain the Polish point of view; thus, they set Katyn in the context of Soviet-Polish, then Russian-Polish relations beginning with the Secret Protocol to the Nazi-Soviet Pact of August 23, 1939, and ending in the year 2000.

Katyn, a sleepy Russian village located just north of Smolensk, first appeared in the world press on April 13, 1943, when Berlin radio announced that the corpses of ten thousand Polish officers had been found in Katyn wood. This figure was soon corrected to around four thousand, or just under half the number of officers estimated to be held in the USSR. They were part of the some two hundred thousand POWs taken by the Red Army after it attacked and occupied eastern Poland on September 17, 1939, as per the Nazi-Soviet Pact. All contact with the prisoners broke off in mid-March 1940, but the return addresses on the letters and postcards sent to their families and friends gave the location of three POW camps: Kozelsk (southeast of Smolensk), Ostashkov (west of Kalinin/Tver), and Starobelsk (southeast of Kharkov). They were missing when a Polish army was raised in the USSR in August 1941–September 1942, but Soviet authorities answered all Polish military and diplomatic inquiries with the statement that all prisoners had been released.²

¹See Olga Velichko and Margarita Orlova in *Ab Imperio*, 2003, no. 1:597–602; V. D. Oskotskii, “Katyn: Imia naritsatel'noe,” *Voprosy istorii*, 2003, no. 6:597–602; and Piotr Lossowski, review in *Polski Przegląd Dyplomatyczny* 3:12 (2003): 137–45.

²On Soviet policy toward Poland in 1939 see *Katynskii sindrom*, chap. 1. On the estimated number of missing POWs and Polish inquiries see Polish communiqué, London, April 17, 1943, *Documents on Polish-Soviet Relations, 1939–1945*, vol. 1 (London, 1961), doc. no. 307.

Three on-site investigations, including exhumations, were conducted after the discovery of the Katyn graves: by a German Military Field Police Commission, an International Medical Commission, and a Polish Red Cross Technical Commission from German-occupied Poland. All three concluded that the massacre had taken place in spring 1940, and all three attributed the crime to the Soviets. When both the Polish Government-in-Exile (London) and the German Red Cross requested separately, but on the same day, that the International Red Cross (Geneva) conduct an investigation, Moscow broke off relations with the Polish Government, accusing it of collaboration with the Germans. In January 1944 a special Soviet commission of investigation, chaired by academician Nikolai N. Burdenko, examined some exhumed corpses and concluded the massacre was carried out by the Germans in summer 1941, later changed to fall 1941. At the Nuremberg War Crime Trials in 1946, the Soviet prosecutor tried but failed to pin the Katyn massacre on the Germans as a crime against humanity. In 1951–52 a U.S. congressional committee of investigation—known after its chairman Ray J. Madden (D-IN) as the Madden Committee—conducted an investigation and concluded in late December 1952 that the crime had been committed by the NKVD.³ Nevertheless, until spring 1990 every Soviet government stood by the Burdenko Commission report (January 26, 1944) as the only true verdict on Katyn.

However, in 1989–90, in the era of Mikhail S. Gorbachev's glasnost, three Russian historians, Natalia S. Lebedeva, Valentina S. Parsadanova, and Iurii N. Zoria (the son of Nikolai Zoria, Soviet Assistant Prosecutor at Nuremberg who died there in mysterious circumstances in May 1946) obtained access to hitherto secret archives and found collections of documents which clearly pointed at the NKVD. A newspaper interview with Lebedeva in March 1990, the forthcoming publication of the three historians' articles in June 1990, combined with pressure by the public opinion and the government of Poland, prodded Gorbachev's Politburo to admit Soviet guilt. Thus, on April 13, 1990, the Soviet News Agency TASS issued a communiqué stating that the crime had been committed by the NKVD and placing responsibility on its then head, Lavrenty P. Beria and his deputy, Vsevolod N. Merkulov. The Soviet government expressed its deep regret for what it called one of the most heinous of Stalinist crimes. On the same day, at the Polish embassy in Moscow, President Gorbachev handed Polish President Wojciech Jaruzelski two thick files containing NKVD POW group "departure lists" from the camps, that is, the prisoners' departures to their deaths. Now it was clear that in the period April-May 1940 the Kozelsk POWs (officers and civilians) were sent to Gnezdovo (Katyn), those from Ostashkov (mostly rank-and-file police) to Kalinin (Tver), and those from Starobelsk (officers and civilians) to Kharkov. The total number of victims from the three camps as verified on the basis of Polish and Russian sources in the 1990s stands at 14,413, though it is known that others were shot and buried in places still unknown today. About four hundred were spared.⁴

Two and a half years later, on October 14, 1992, President Boris N. Yeltsin allowed the publication of the "smoking gun" document. This was Beria's resolution, which the

³On the Polish Army in USSR and the discovery of the Katyn graves see *Katynskii sindrom*, chap. 2. See also J. K. Zawodny, *Death in the Forest: The Story of the Katyn Forest Massacre* (Notre Dame, IN, 1962), and reprints in chaps. 1 and 2.

⁴TASS communiqué, *Izvestiia*, April 13, 1990; *Katynskii sindrom* (photo of Gorbachev handing NKVD files to Jaruzelski, between pp. 160–61). For verified figures for victims from the three camps see Maria Skrzyńska-Pławińska, ed., *Indeks Represjonowanych*, 3 vols. 1–3 (Katyn, Kharkov, Tver) (Warsaw, 1995–97).

Politburo voted to accept on March 5, 1940. Beria described the Polish POWs as “counterrevolutionaries” and unregenerate enemies of the Soviet system; therefore, they should be shot. Beria gave a total of 14,736 POWs in the three camps and listed the prisoners by rank. (This number probably included some prisoners from other camps.) He also added 11,700 prisoners held in the prisons of western Ukraine and western Belarus. (Those shot there are now estimated at 7,300.) This document, along with a collection of other, hitherto secret documents, was also handed that day to President Lech Walesa of Poland. It is clear that though Yeltsin personally condemned the crime, he used the document as a weapon against his political enemies in Russia.⁵ It was also in 1992 that thousands of documents were made accessible in the Russian archives to Russian and Polish historians, resulting in the publication of the first book based on these materials by Natalia S. Lebedeva.⁶ She is also the coeditor with Polish historian Wojciech Materski of the Polish and Russian documentary volumes on Katyn published in 1995–2001.⁷

Parsadanova and Iazhborovskaia were involved in the Katyn question before Lebedeva. They were members of the Soviet part of the Joint Commission of Polish and Soviet Party Historians established in May 1985 to examine and fill in the “blank spots” in the history of Soviet-Polish Relations. The commission got nowhere because its Soviet members lacked new documents to defend the Burdenko Commission report, when the latter was attacked and discredited by the Polish party historians.⁸ Iazhborovskaia, Parsadanova, and Iurii Zoria were also members of the Commission of Experts of the Main Military Prosecutor’s Office of the USSR, later the Russian Federation. Therefore, the authors could make extensive use of the documents gathered by the Soviet/Russian Katyn investigation which opened in August 1990. Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, Iablokov was the prosecutor in charge of the Katyn investigation in August 1990–June 1994. His accounts of his interrogations of such “witnesses” as Aleksandr N. Shelepin, head of the KGB from 1958 to 1961, and Dmitrii S. Tokarev, head of the NKVD administration for the Kalinin region in 1940, make for fascinating reading. Shelepin admitted that in March 1959 he wrote a note to Nikita S. Khrushchev proposing that the POW files be destroyed, while preserving the sentencing records. (It seems that Khrushchev ordered that both be destroyed.) Tokarev gave a detailed description of how the Ostashkov prisoners were led one by one into a special room in the cellar of the NKVD prison in Kalinin (Tver), asked to confirm their personal data, and then shot in the back of the head. He said that about two hundred prisoners were shot per night by executioners sent from Moscow, after which the bodies were trucked to the nearby village of Mednoe and secretly buried there. It is known that the same method was used in killing the Starobelsk prisoners in the NKVD prison in Kharkov, after which the bodies were trucked to burial pits in the

⁵See Celestine Bohlen, “Russian Files Show Stalin Ordered Massacre of 20,000 Poles 1940,” *New York Times*, October 14, 1992, A–1, A–5 (Gorbachev on A–6).

⁶Natalia [S]. Lebedeva, *Katyn: Prestuplenie protiv chelovechestva* (Moscow, 1994). For the Polish edition see *Katyn: Zbrodnia Przeciwno Ludzkości*, and *Suplement* (Warsaw, 1998).

⁷*Katyn: Dokumenty Zbrodni*, 3 vols. (Warsaw, 1995–2001); *Katyn: Dokumenty*, 2 vols., (Moscow, 1997, 2001). An English-language volume of selected documents, edited by the author of this review, is to be published by Yale University Press in 2006.

⁸*Katynskii sindrom*, chap. 4.

nearby park.⁹ However, no first-hand accounts of the murder of the Kozelsk prisoners at Katyn have come to light as of today.

The Commission of Experts wrote a detailed legal-historical examination of the Katyn crime, dated August 2, 1993. They concluded that it was a crime of genocide, a war crime, and a crime against humanity as per Article 6 of the Charter of the International Military Tribunal at Nuremberg. They demanded the condemnation of the decision-makers, implementers, falsifiers of evidence, and those who participated in the cover-up until 1990. Since Russian criminal law did not include the crimes as defined above, they demanded—as did Iablokov in his summing-up of June 1994—that the highest Russian authority (the Duma), include them in Russian criminal law.¹⁰ This demand was rejected by the Russian Military Prosecutor's Office, and Criminal Case No. 159 (Katyn) was handed to another prosecutor. The crimes mentioned above were, in fact, included in the new Russian Criminal Code of 1997, but they applied only as from this code's entry into force. After years of delay, the Russian Prosecutor's Office closed the investigation unofficially in September 2004 and officially in March 2005. The Prosecutor General concluded that there was no evidence of genocide; the victims were condemned under the Soviet criminal code of the day so the crime came under the statute of limitations; and none of those involved could be prosecuted because they were no longer living. Meanwhile, the Polish Institute of National Memory opened an investigation in November 2004, but the Russian Prosecutor's Office classified as secret all but 67 of the 183 volumes of its investigation and said it would not allow verified copies to be made from the accessible volumes.¹¹

The Katyn families, as well as majority Polish opinion, condemned the Russian verdict. They continue to claim that the massacres of spring 1940 constitute genocide and demand an official Russian apology and compensation. Minority Polish opinion—to which this reviewer subscribes—holds that while the crime fits the definition of ethnic/national genocide as per the Genocide Convention of 1948, the Polish POWs from the three camps, as well as those held in prisons, were shot not as Poles but as “counterrevolutionaries” and “enemies of the Soviet system,” like some two million Soviet citizens. Most Russians, for their part, show little interest in this and other Stalinist crimes. Of those who are interested, a small minority stands by the Burdenko Commission report, claiming that the published documents disproving it are falsified. Some Russian historians claim there was a “Polish Katyn” during the Polish-Soviet War of 1919–20, when the Poles allegedly murdered thousands of Soviet POWs. Polish historians, however, point to the lack of documents for intentional murder; they claim that Soviet POW deaths

⁹Iablokov's account of his interrogations of Tokarev and Shelepin are in *Katynskii sindrom*, 355 ff. See also Inessa Jaźborowska, Anatolij Jabłokow, and Jurij Zoria, *Katyni: Zbrodnia Chroniona Tajemnicą Państwową* (Warsaw, 1998), 264–74, 317–22. For the protocols of the Soprunenko, Tokarev, and Syromiatnikov [a Kharkov eyewitness] interrogations in Polish translation see *Katyni: Dokumenty Zbrodni* 2:423–500.

¹⁰For the experts' conclusion see *Katynskii sindrom*, 446–94; and *Zbrodnia Chroniona*, 358–422. For the history of the Katyn inquiry see *Katynskii sindrom*, chap. 5; and *Zbrodnia Chroniona*, chap. 5.

¹¹Statement by Aleksandr Savenkov, Russian Military Prosecutor General, March 11, 2005, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, March 11, 2005; BBC News report, March 11, 2005. On access to 67 volumes for the Institute of National Memory prosecutors see *Gazeta Wyborcza*, April 4, 2005.

in Poland were due to malnutrition and disease. They also point out that about half of the Poles taken prisoner by the Red Army in 1919–20 failed to return from Soviet Russia.¹²

Katynskii sindrom is an excellent study of Katyn's role in Russian-Polish relations to the end of the year 2000, when Russian and Polish cemeteries were opened side by side at Katyn, Kharkov, and Mednoe. (The Russian cemeteries contain the graves of victims of Stalinist terror, 1936–38, though some, as at Katyn, may go back to the Civil War.) The authors unmask the falsifications of the Burdenko Commission report of January 1944, detail the fiasco of the Soviet attempt to prove German guilt at Nuremberg, and the cover-up. Finally, they give a detailed account of the Soviet/Russian Katyn investigation, so their book is a vital source of information on this subject. There are copious endnotes referring to the investigation's collected material, most of which are now classified as secret. The illustrations provide interesting and valuable photographs covering the whole period. Unfortunately, through no fault of the authors, there is no bibliography or index.

¹²For support of the Burdenko Commission report and the charge of document falsification see Iuri Mukhin, *Antirossiiskaia podlost': Nauchno-istoricheskii analiz* (Moscow, 2003). For the claim that Poles murdered thousands of Soviet POWs after their victories over the Red Army in August–September 1930 see Irina Mukhtina, *Polsko-sovetskaia voina, 1919–1920* (Moscow, 1994); for the Polish denial see Aleksander Achmatow, "Strzałków to Nie Katyń, Tuchola – Nie Miednoje. Kwestia Jeńców Sowieckich Wojny 1919–1920 w Polsce," *Studia z Dziejów Rosji i Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej* 30 (1995): 110–12. Strzałków and Tuchola were the main POW camps holding Soviet prisoners in Poland; Mednoe is the burial site of the Polish Ostashkov prisoners, shot in Kalinin/Tver.