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Hall of mirrors

A Soviet crime long hidden, and its legacy

By Uilleam Blacker



On exhibition at the Katyn memorial museum, Smolensk region, Russia | © Viktor Drachev/TASS via Getty Images



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SURVIVING KATYŃ

Stalin's Polish massacre and the search for truth
400pp. Oneworld. £20.
Jane Rogoyska

In Poland, the word “Katyn” has two powerful associations. The first is with a crime; the second is with a lie about that crime. The crime in question is the mass shooting of almost 22,000 Polish service personnel at sites across the Soviet Union, including the Katyn forest in western Russia, by the NKVD in 1940. The murders were carried out in a matter of weeks. The lie - the Soviet claim that the killings had in fact been carried out by the Germans in 1941 - lasted half a century and was maintained through a combination of diplomatic pressure, fake investigations, deceitful monuments, destroyed documents, intimidation and murder. While Russia reluctantly admitted the truth in the early 1990s, aspects of the crime remain unclear and the facts are increasingly subject to revision under Vladimir Putin’s reactionary memory politics.



In 1939, few Poles had illusions about Stalin's ruthlessness. Yet even after the shock of the Soviet invasion and the internment of the Polish soldiers, nobody thought the mass murder of captured foreign nationals possible. The officers represented the elite of Polish society, so the massacres may have been an attempt to make the nation easier to conquer; another theory is that the killings were revenge for Stalin's humiliating defeat as a Red Army commander in the Polish-Soviet war of 1918-21. No documents exist to give the answer. The Soviets even seem to have regretted the decision, since it deprived them of a useful resource in the fight against the Germans in 1941. The first hints at the truth came in the form of rumours among the few officers who remained in Soviet captivity that Beria had referred to an unspecified "big mistake" in relation to the captured Poles.

When the Germans discovered the mass graves at Katyn in 1941, they thought they had struck propaganda gold: the news would surely split the Allies. Instead, after the Soviets retook the territory in 1943, a propaganda war ensued: what Jane Rogoyska calls "a never-ending hall of mirrors in which historical truths are warped, distorted and - if we are not careful - permanently disfigured". The Soviet investigation produced flimsy evidence of Nazi guilt, but Stalin made the most of its "findings". British documents show a kind of embarrassed desire to find at least scraps of plausibility in its ally's version of events, even as they acknowledge the horrific truth. The Soviet account prevailed, and in the late 1970s the British government was still bowing to diplomatic pressure when it refused London Poles permission to commemorate their dead with a prominent memorial.

Yet the Katyn cover-up began with the crime itself, which was perpetrated in such a way that almost all witnesses were eliminated. Those considered "survivors" - that is, the Polish officers who were not sent for execution - never saw any killing. Local witnesses were few and the perpetrators vanished, consumed by the system they had served. It is fitting, then, that Rogoyska focuses on what we do know about - the immediate lead-up to the crime and the search for truth in its aftermath.

The officers' experience of internment is reconstructed in meticulous detail. The soldiers were kept in the dark about developments in the war, and the fates of their families, and it took a psychological toll. Reactions ranged from stoicism and resistance to breakdown and capitulation. The internees were patriots, and even the few who were co-opted into collaboration with the NKVD saw themselves as acting in Poland's interests. Rogoyska's study of men under extreme pressure draws out the nuances of these dilemmas, presenting us

with ordinary people confronting their own doubts and fears. Most compelling is her portrait of Józef Czapski, the cosmopolitan artist who survived the camps and was charged by the Polish government with locating his comrades. Czapski's remarkable patience and bravery in his dealings with the NKVD, and his insistence on retaining his humanity in what he called an "inhuman land", are moving and tragic.

The long struggle for the truth about Katyn, and the impossibility of closure, have left a deep mark on Polish society: they are "a wound that remains disturbingly fresh". Jane Rogoyska rightly points out the relevance of this story about the suppression of memory to "a modern world where truth seems an expendable and ever-more-malleable commodity". One need only travel a short distance from one of the NKVD killing sites to understand this relevance. The forest of Piatykhatty in eastern Ukraine, where a sombre memorial to the officers now stands, is a few hours' drive from the frontline of the Russian-Ukrainian war. This war has been going on for seven years but, with the help of disinformation techniques recognizable from the NKVD's playbook, Russia denies involvement. The hall of mirrors is long, and we are still far from escaping it.

Uilleam Blacker is an Associate Professor in Comparative East European Culture at University College London. He is co-author of *Remembering Katyn, 2012*

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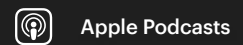
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