Lies matter

Jane Rogoyska on telling the story of historical events through both fiction and non-fiction

If the Katyń Massacre is little known in the UK, it is perhaps too present in Polish society, a wound that remains painful even 80 years after the events. In April 1940, 22,000 Polish prisoners of war, mainly officers, were secretly murdered by Stalin's security police, the NKVD, on his direct orders.

The men (and one woman) had been captured as they retreated east from the German invasion of Poland in September 1939. For seven months, they were kept in interrogation camps. In April/May 1940 they were told they were being sent home. They were then shot, one by one, and buried in three mass graves.

In April 1943 the Nazis uncovered one of the burial sites in the Katyń Forest near Smolensk in Russia, setting off an almighty propaganda war. Joseph Goebbels blamed the 'bestial Bolsheviks' while Stalin indignantly asserted that the massacre was committed not by the NKVD but by the Nazis, and not in 1940 but 1941, when Smolensk was under Nazi control. For nearly fifty years the Soviets maintained the fiction that Katyń was a Nazi atrocity. The lie went unchallenged by Western governments fearful of upsetting a powerful wartime ally and Cold War adversary.

The systematic process by which the NKVD and its successor, the KGB, maintained an entire false narrative around Katyń is astonishing by any standards. They pursued witnesses, destroyed evidence, dug up bodies, planted documents, issued threats, committed further murders, erected monuments and published history books with fake dates. Behind the Iron Curtain the subject was taboo, and it was only in 1990 that Mikhail Gorbachev finally admitted Soviet guilt.

Finding the perspective

My initial intent in approaching this complex subject was to create a work of narrative non-fiction. But from the outset I encountered a problem that very swiftly set me on a different path. Most writing on the subject of Katyń has inevitably focused on the crime and its cover-up. The prisoners themselves are often treated as martyrs, victims without faces, faults or character. Yet those few survivors who wrote about their experience offer sharply observed portraits of their fellow inmates, descriptions of what they read, what they ate, how their friendships developed, how they argued among themselves. How could I possibly match the directness of a first-person narrative without falling into the trap of inauthenticity?

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The idea of writing fiction emerged almost inadvertently. At first, I did not even acknowledge to myself what I was doing as I experimented with different voices, different tenses, different points of view. But the question of authenticity persisted. I wanted the story to flow from one person's perspective, but when I tried on the clothes of memoirists such as Józef Czapski or Bronisław Młynarski they did not fit. Their voices were too distinct. A brief, unpublished account left by a young doctor who survived the massacre provided me with the stepping stone I needed. His experience became the foundation of my narrative, and I worked outwards from there.

Writers who base their work on factual material must define their own rules about which elements they consider untouchable. My rule was that I freely made up dialogue and personal events affecting my protagonist and his friends, but I did not mess with the wider story. If I took liberties with a character based on a real person I changed

his name. The novel grew, and as it grew it changed. I had started out asking myself the question: what would it feel like to survive a massacre that officially did not happen, to lose your friends yet never know their fate? Writing about my protagonist Kozłowski's life in London after the war I found myself, to my profound surprise, exploring themes that emerged from my own background as the child of a Polish refugee.

When the first draft of the novel went out to publishers it kept coming back with the same comment: nicely written, but the history is overwhelming the story. I had arranged the material chronologically, sticking close to the path carved by real events. My work of fiction, it transpired, was only half baked. With the encouragement of a generous editor I pulled apart everything I had so carefully constructed, cutting and rearranging the material until I had something entirely new. The publisher liked it. He published it. The end. Or so you would have thought.

Completing the story

There are losses and gains whichever form you choose to write in: if you write fiction based on real events you give yourself permission to create a story that obeys the rules you impose upon it; you can explore personal themes, invent events and characters, play with chronology. You can hope that in the process you are creating something that possesses an emotional or psychological truth that might endure in readers' minds and shed light on the historical events you have depicted. You can even use the words 'based on real events' or 'inspired by a true story' to lend your made-up narrative greater heft. A work of history, by contrast, is part of a larger network of works that test, investigate, question or prove a given topic. It is a solid thing, or would like to be, something that should add to the sum of knowledge on a particular subject.

In creating a novel written from a first-person perspective I had been forced to omit entire strands of the Katyń story because they were not part of my protagonist's experience. As I began thinking about new projects I kept finding notes reminding me of all the things I had left out. And I was troubled by the notion that, in writing a novel, I had forfeited the right to claim that the events depicted in my book had really occurred. When an opportunity arose to write a non-fiction book on Katyń, I jumped straight in. It should be easy, I thought. After all, I'd already done most of the research.

At this point, wiser writers may wish to pause for a moment and enjoy a hearty laugh.

Not having the habits of a historian, in making my initial notes I had failed to write down page references or even record which book I was reading. Moreover, I had cannibalised much of what I had read, changing sentences, shortening and smoothing them in a process of subconscious appropriation. This now meant a lot of time-consuming cross-checking, re-treading familiar paths. In accepting the commission I had undertaken to tell the Katyń 'story' in its entirety, bringing it right up to date. Determined to winkle out new material, I set out diligently to acquaint myself with all the latest thinking on the subject. I trawled through documents, visited archives, followed obscure leads.

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I remained fascinated by the subject, but at times I felt myself sinking under the burden I had placed upon myself.

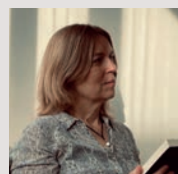
When I was working on the first book people would often ask me, 'Don't you find it depressing writing about a massacre?' I would answer, blithely, that I did not. Quite the opposite. I was, after all, engaged in an act of resurrection: I was writing about men's lives, not their deaths. How could that possibly weigh me down? Once I began the new book this feeling changed. The methods by which the NKVD murdered the prisoners and obscured their crime, the reality of the consequences endured by so many individuals who endeavoured to shed light on the truth, the grim details of the exhumations – I found all of it deeply troubling. Bitterly I reproached myself for failing to consider my own limitations, for following my curiosity without thinking about the consequences. Why had I embarked upon this crazy project?

Somebody (I forget who) once said that history tells you what happened and fiction tells you how it felt. I don't entirely agree.

Pursuing the truth

Katyń's importance as an example of state-sponsored deceit has resonances today; it matters when governments lie to their citizens. And when deceit infects every aspect of debate around a subject, writers surely have a responsibility to tread carefully in what they invent. When our public discourse is dominated by fake news and 'alternative facts' then it is up to us to reflect on the distinction between those details we make up to serve the emotional truth of our story and distortions of facts that might – however inadvertently – feed into the looking-glass world of conspiracy theories and historical denial. In writing the second book I think I wanted to place in the public domain a version of the Katyń story that says to the (English-language) reader: not only did these events really occur, they are important because of what they tell us about our society now, about truth, lies, fiction, facts.

In my struggle to find that elusive balance between history and fiction I split myself in two, becoming both novelist and historian. I wouldn't recommend it. But what kept me writing was a sense of having in some way to do justice to the moral courage of those who, finding themselves at the centre of this dark and tangled web, chose to speak out about what they had witnessed, not with hysteria, or for political purpose, but in pursuit of the truth. ●



Jane Rogoyska is the author of *Gerda Taro: Inventing Robert Capa* (Jonathan Cape, 2013), *Kozłowski* (Holland House, 2019), which was long-listed for the 2020 Desmond Elliot Prize, and *Surviving Katyń* (Oneworld, 2020), which won the 2022 Mark Lynton History Prize.

Photo: *Memorial wall in Katyń* © Artem / Adobe Stock