World War 2 and the Soviet People

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The Katyn Massacre and the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising in the Soviet-Nazi Propaganda War

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Although the countries occupied by the Germans were almost hermetically sealed, reports of the horrors nevertheless trickled out. The rest of the world tended at first to regard them as 'atrocities stories,' products of war propaganda. ... It was impossible to believe that outside of madhouses there might be human beings whose brains were capable of even planning the extermination of an entire people, let alone executing the plan.

Werner Keller, Diaspora: The Post-Biblical History of the Jews

The testimony of Colonel John Van Vliet was ringing in my ears: the Top Secret document prepared by Colonel Van Vliet at the Pentagon, concerning the report of his visit to the Katyn murder site which confirmed the Communist guilt, could not be found. My thoughts turned to Ivan Krivosertsov, the only Russian witness of the Katyn massacre, who was mysteriously hanged near London, England; his killers could not be identified either.

Thaddeus Wittlin, Time Stopped at 6:30: The Untold Story of the Katyn Massacre

This paper investigates a possible connection between the razing of Warsaw's Jewish ghetto by the Nazis in April 1943 and the execution of the Polish officer corps by the Soviets in the Katyn Forest sometime between March and May 1940. (Plates 36 and 37) Unlikely as it may at first seem, the available documentation indicates that these two grisly events were played off against each other by the Soviet and Nazi propaganda apparatuses, with a view to extracting from them additional benefits for their perpetrators.

Even though the NKVD files on Katyn remain closed to researchers, enough is known to piece together a sophisticated pattern of
deception regarding both Katyn and the Nazi activities in Warsaw. The evidence of this deception has been ignored mainly because the Warsaw ghetto uprising and the discovery of the Katyn murders have usually been considered in isolation from each other. There exists a vast literature about both Katyn and the Warsaw ghetto, but in almost all the sources I have consulted, the authors are so preoccupied with one of these subjects that they devote hardly any attention to the other.

Each of these events recalls a broader martyrology. The annihilation of the ghetto and the April 1943 uprising were part of the Holocaust, while the Katyn deaths account for 3 per cent of all Polish (mostly Catholic, but also Protestant and Jewish) deaths attributable to the Soviets. Yet in some ways, these two crimes were disproportionate. The Polish officers murdered by the Soviets at Katyn and elsewhere numbered about 14,000, and they were grown men and soldiers. At the time of the uprising, the Warsaw ghetto numbered about 34,000 inhabitants, women and children among them, enfeebled and desperate after three years’ incarceration in a walled-off district of Warsaw. They died in the ruins of houses, or were gassed or burned to death in bunkers, being the last large group of victims of the Holocaust. Only a part of the Polish Gentile population was murdered at Katyn and elsewhere, whereas the majority of the Jewish people of Europe died at the hands of the Nazis.

And yet, both events bear a ghastly resemblance. Both are historically unique. A holocaust of an entire people, conceived and planned in cold blood and executed over an extended period, was unheard of in the history of Europe. Many rank-and-file ghetto inhabitants, while realising that they were in danger, did not expect total annihilation. Many expected to survive by hiding in bunkers, as the accumulation of sandbags and dry food shows. And never before in military history have internees of officer rank been secretly executed in such large numbers. The Katyn Forest Massacre accounted for 50 per cent of the entire Polish officer corps. Even the word ‘executed’ is perhaps inappropriate, for it implies that the victims were notified ahead of time, whereas the Polish officers were never informed where they were going on that frosty spring morning in 1940. They were ordered to take their luggage with them and were led on foot in groups of thirty all the way to what turned out to be their graves. They probably realised what was about to happen only minutes before they received a shot in the back of the head from the Soviet NKVD men.

A further resemblance – the one I am chiefly concerned with in this paper – lies in the fact that the Nazis and the Soviets attempted to derive political advantage from these two unique events through propaganda. The Nazis appear to have timed their announcement of the discovery of Katyn to coincide with the planned annihilation of the Warsaw ghetto.

Why did they want to divert Allied and particularly Polish attention from the killing of no more than 1.5 per cent of the total Jewish victims of the Holocaust? Vast numbers of Jews had already been killed without an elaborate propaganda campaign. In Notes from the Warsaw Ghetto, Emmanuel Ringelblum offers an explanation. He emphasises that the Western governments knew of the existence of Warsaw’s Jewish population, and while they would, and indeed did, tolerate its diminution, its total annihilation at an inopportune moment might have spurred them into action. Thus, Ringelblum concludes, the Germans allowed 10 per cent of Warsaw’s Jews to remain alive in 1942 because they were afraid of an undesirable propaganda effect: ‘They don’t want to admit to the world that they have murdered all the Jews of Warsaw, so they leave a handful behind, to be liquidated when the hour strikes twelve.’

The Germans used their knowledge of the Katyn Forest Massacre to divert Polish attention from their own crimes in the ghetto. They hoped that the Katyn affair would so engross the Polish government-in-exile that the matter of the ghetto uprising would fade from view. A Nazi propaganda campaign about Katyn began shortly before the planned annihilation of the Warsaw ghetto. On 13 April 1943 the Germans announced in a radio broadcast that they had discovered mass graves of 10,000 Polish officers near Smolensk, and further information soon followed.

On the other hand, in its response to the Katyn disclosures the Soviet government tried to take full propaganda advantage of its knowledge of the forthcoming Warsaw ghetto Aktion (‘special operation’) and of the uprising which the Jewish Fighting Organisation (Żydowska Organizacja Bojowa) was preparing. It did so by accusing the Polish government of complicity in the German charge that the Katyn murders were committed by Jews, and by timing this accusation in such a way that it coincided with the annihilation of the ghetto. Mindful of the rule that offence is the best defence, the Soviet propaganda apparatus responded to Polish inquiries (initiated after the German disclosures) by declaring that at the core of the Sikorski government’s concern about Katyn lay anti-Semitism. Hitler’s Polish
Collaborators', shouted the front page headlines in Pravda and other Soviet newspapers on 19 and 20 April 1943. The timing was excellent. On April 19 the German forces surrounded the ghetto, following orders from SS-Brigadeführer Jürgen Stroop. On April 20 the Warsaw ghetto was attacked.

To make a case for the above scenario, we need first to answer two questions. First, what prompted the Soviets to try to discredit the Sikorski government? The answer is, self-interest. The Soviets needed to smear the Polish government-in-exile in order to divert the West's attention from the 1943 discovery of the Katyn graves and to facilitate legitimisation of a Soviet-sponsored group of communists as the future government of Poland.

Second, how did the Soviets know about the situation in Warsaw in 1943? The answer is that they derived their information from two sources. One was the Communist Party (renamed the Polish Workers' Party after the purge) in both the Gentile and Jewish sections of Warsaw. In 1941 on Stalin's order several communist leaders were dropped by parachute near Warsaw, having undergone training in a school run by the Comintern. Some members of the Party also belonged to the Jewish Fighting Organisation which led the armed struggle against the Germans. Gutman and Ainsztein agree that the communists had much stronger ties with the JFO than with the Polish Home Army (Armia Krajowa), even though all three were engaged in a fight against the common enemy. Given Communist Party discipline, it is inconceivable that intelligence messages about the situation in the ghetto were not regularly sent to Moscow.

The second source of information for the Soviets was the People's Army [Armia Ludowa] which consisted of Polish communists and fellow travellers and was Soviet-controlled. Members of the People's Army participated in an attempt to help the ghetto during the first twenty-four hours of fighting. Gutman reports (p. 380) that on April 20 a detachment of PA soldiers, including Franciszek Bartoszek and Niuta Tejtbelbaum, attacked a German artillery crew at the ghetto wall. The PA commander obviously knew of the uprising ahead of time; again, it is unlikely that he did not radio this information to the Soviets.

Historians agree that during the weeks preceding the fighting, information was flowing fast to and from the ghetto, brought in and out by what to a present-day observer appear to be incredibly courageous men and women, both Jews and Gentiles. Gutman (p. 367) states that on Sunday, 18 April 1943 the Germans massed troops in Warsaw, and this piece of news was immediately passed on to the ghetto resistance from the Gentile side, and the Jewish Fighting Organisation was put on the alert. Given the centralised and disciplined nature of communist organisations, a failure to inform the Soviets about German preparations appears improbable. Thus there is little doubt that the Soviet campaign to discredit the Sikorski government was crafted with the help of substantial knowledge about the situation in Warsaw's Jewish quarter.

The Germans showed themselves to be just as skilful as the Soviets in using intelligence information available to them. They had discovered the Katyn graves long before 13 April 1943 (when the first official announcement was issued), but withheld this information, hoping to derive propaganda benefits from it at a later date. In October 1942 some Russians in the Smolensk region told the Polish railway workers employed on German trains that there were mass graves of Poles in the Katyn Forest. The Poles discovered a trench filled with decomposed bodies, disinterred several bodies and then buried them again in separate graves, erecting a wooden cross over each mound.

German intelligence already knew about these events in November 1942, long before the Polish government-in-exile, but chose to remain silent. However, in January 1943 the German-run Russian language newspaper, Novy put (New Way), published in the occupied territories of the Soviet Union, editorialised about the worries of the Sikorski government over the disappearance of the Polish officer corps interned by the Russians after the Soviet invasion of Poland in September 1939. It said that in 1941, when General Władysław Anders was organising a Polish Army from among Gulag survivors, he could not locate the officer corps. The article in Novy put was a propagandistic come-on because by that time the German military already knew of the Katyn graves.

A response was not slow in coming. Having read the article, one Ivan Krivosertsov, a peasant from the village of Grushchenka, went to the Geheime Feldpolizei in the village of Gnezdovaya and announced that he knew where the Polish officers were buried. He talked to a German translator named Ludwig Voss. According to Krivosertsov's later testimony, on February 18 he and his step-brother Ivan, accompanied by two other peasants, Ivan Andreyev and Grigory Vasilikov, were ordered to the Katyn Forest by the German police. Another peasant, Parfeon Kiselyov, was called in to help find the graves and open them up. Several weeks later, the Germans ordered a full opening of the eight mass graves. In February 1943 the command-
Only one-third of the Polish officer corps were murdered at Katyn while the rest met their deaths elsewhere in circumstances at Kyauy to make a more powerful impression on the Western Allies. The primary German goal of the Soviet-Western alliance seems to have been the weakening of the Soviet forces by military reversals in the various fronts where they were beginning to lose ground. However, as mentioned before, the Germans knew that a total annihilation of the Soviet forces would be a priority; the Final Solution, as it was planned, should be completed at the various fronts where the Germans were beginning to lose ground. However, as mentioned before, the Germans knew that a total annihilation of the Soviet forces would be a priority; the Final Solution, as it was planned, should be completed at the various fronts where the Germans were beginning to lose ground. However, as mentioned before, the Germans knew that a total annihilation of the Soviet forces would be a priority; the Final Solution, as it was planned, should be completed at the various fronts where the Germans were beginning to lose ground.
that a resistance force was being organized in the ghetto and that they
could expect armed opposition to any forthcoming Aktion.’

As mentioned before, in March 1943 the Soviets knew that the next
round of deportations from the ghetto would soon begin and that it
probably would trigger armed resistance. By March 1943 the Soviets
also knew that the Germans had begun to publicise the Katyn
massacre and that more publicity would inevitably follow. In response
the Soviets engaged in a propaganda war of their own by taking
advantage of the forthcoming annihilation of the ghetto in much the
same way in which the Germans were trying to use Katyn: to divert
world attention from their own behaviour.

At this point the Polish government-in-exile had two choices: either
to ignore the German disclosures about Katyn or to press forward
with an investigation, even though it involved asking the Germans for
access to the Katyn Forest. The first choice was hardly possible
because by that time the disappearance of the officer corps had
become an emotional issue for Polish communities worldwide. Public
opinion in Poland had long assumed that the Soviets engineered the
Katyn executions and people were eager to follow up on the evidence.
However, the second choice was inhuman, in addition to being
politically impossible at that time, since Poland was at war with
Germany. Hence the Sikorski government decided to pursue Polish
interests as best it could. To by-pass the Germans, it contacted the
International Red Cross in Switzerland and requested an investigation.
Within hours the German government did the same.

The Soviets responded swiftly yet, at first, awkwardly. On 15 April
1943 Radio Moscow announced:

Goebbels’ slanderers are spreading despicable fabrications alleging
that in spring 1940 the Soviet authorities ordered the shooting of
Polish officers. . . . The Hitlerite liars mention the village of
Gnezdova. But, like the scum they are, they do not mention the
fact that near that village, archeologists have discovered the
‘Gnezdova cemetery.’

This statement was repeated on April 17 in Soviet War News. The
mention of an ancient cemetery must have been an ad hoc invention. It
was abandoned in later statements, and it indicated that the persons in
charge of the Moscow broadcast and the Soviet War News com-
muiqué were not privy to the information about Katyn which the higher
levels of Soviet intelligence possessed and used in their later response.

Events unfolded fast. Particularly significant were the two days,
April 18 and 19, which witnessed the dramatic coincidence of the
massive crime about to be committed in Warsaw and the start of an
investigation of another massive crime already committed in the Katyn
Forest.

On April 18 a representative of the Soviet Embassy in Bern appealed
to the International Red Cross in Geneva to postpone the dispatch of
the investigative committee until 20 May 1943, while a representative
of the Soviet Embassy in London appealed to the Polish Information
Minister Kot to publicly declare that the Katyn massacre had been
engineered by the Germans. Kot refused, but the International Red
Cross complied with the Soviet request.

On April 19 the International Red Cross notified the Poles that it
would dispatch an investigative committee to Katyn only if such an
action were requested by all the parties, including the USSR. The
Russians were obviously not interested in having an international team
investigate a territory they did not control, and so the IRC team did
d not go. Instead, another international group was dispatched. It was
composed of medical and forensic specialists from eleven European
countries, including Switzerland but excluding Germany. Except for
Switzerland, those countries were all occupied by the Germans. Even
though the international reputation of individual members of the
committee was not in doubt, the mere fact that they lived in occupied
territory undermined their collective credibility, especially among those
already predisposed to favour the Soviets. The committee issued a
report describing the methods of subduing the Katyn victims and
quoting their number, which turned out to be slightly over four
thousand. The report was issued in early May 1943, or at the time when the annihilation of the ghetto was
nearing its final phase (the ghetto uprising lasted until May 16).

On April 19, or the first day of the German Aktion in the ghetto,
Pravda published a front-page editorial (reprinted in Komsomolskaya
pravda and in other regional Party newspapers on April 20) accusing
the Sikorski government of complicity with Hitler and quoting the
names (allegedly provided by the Germans and seconded by the
Sikorski government) of those responsible for the Katyn massacre.
In English-speaking countries these allegations were given publicity
through the British Communist Party paper, The Daily Worker.

The Pravda editorial is a model of Soviet propaganda, written in its
own inimitable style. It says in part:
Stalin and that, due to their insensitivity to the Holocaust, the Poles deserved what they got anyway. The Nazis and the Soviets both won propaganda wars aimed at discrediting the Polish people.

World War 2 was a total war. Both the Germans and the Russians waged it in that fashion. What counted in that war was ideological and national self-interest. It was unfortunate for Poland that her interests in World War 2 did not coincide with those of any other major participant. The Allies wanted the Germans defeated at any price, and that included an alliance with Stalin. The Germans were interested in the enlargement of Lebensraum for the German people, and Poland, situated to the northeast of Germany, was an attractive territory to conquer, depopulate and resettle. The Soviets were serious enemies of Poland, much more so than, say, of Czechoslovakia. The reasons had to do with the centuries-long conflicts between Poland and Russia; the position of Poland among the Catholic countries of Europe, while Russia was the leading representative of Eastern Orthodoxy; and Poland’s geostategic location. Last but not least, the destruction of ‘gentry Poland’ helped the Russians to assert their hegemony over the weaker Slavic nations of Belorussia and Ukraine, and it opened up the possibility of exporting the communist revolution to western Europe.

The Jews, if Jewish interests can be said to have been represented at all in World War 2, had no reason to approve of the Polish goal of defeating both the Nazis and the Soviets. The Jews of the West had good reasons to feel sympathy for the Soviet Union, which sheltered Jewish refugees from Nazism. And it was in the interest of the Nazis to use any means they could to cover up their crimes. All these diverse interests left Poland virtually friendless both during the war and afterwards. When the war was over, Soviet behaviour toward Poland was glossed over in Western memory and beautified beyond recognition in official Polish historiography.

The Soviet Union never opened the archives related to the Katyn Forest Massacre, let alone apologised for it.26 Even under glassnost the Soviet authorities still maintained the Stalinist version of events that had happened fifty years ago. On 25 May 1988 Pravda published a short note announcing that artists have renovated the monument erected in the vicinity of Smolensk to commemorate those Polish officers shot by the fascists near the village of Katyn. The caption on the monument reads: ‘To the Polish officers executed by the fascists in 1941.’27

Western media coverage of this outrageous statement seems to have paved the way for a softening of the Soviet position. Not long afterwards low-level negotiations began between Polish investigators and KGB officers, and private visitors from Poland were allowed to travel to the Katyn gravesites. In 1989 a Polish film crew headed by Marcel Loziński went to the Katyn Forest to interview local peasants and film the grave-sites. On 23 March 1990 the first press showing of the Katyn documentary book took place in Warsaw. Since that time Polish investigators have been permitted to inspect the remains of the bodies buried at Katyn, although always under the watchful eyes of KGB personnel.

Only now, when the war generation has virtually died away and the Soviet grip on Eastern Europe has loosened, can events of the past be investigated in an objective fashion. After the August 1991 coup failed, two other killing fields were opened to Polish observers. The first is near the city of Kharkov (Kharkiv) in Ukraine, where 4403 Polish officers were shot; and the second is near the city of Kalinin (renamed Tver), where 6295 Polish officers were murdered in the basement of the NKVD headquarters building (averaging 250 per night). Accounts of these investigations have appeared in the Polish and British press.28 The successor to the Soviet Military Prosecutor’s office in Moscow possesses documents proving that two of the executioners are still alive. These two men, Vladimir S. Tokarev and Peter Soprunenko, have been interviewed by Polish and Russian authorities.

These developments, however, fall short of full disclosure and cooperation with representatives of the Polish government, who have yet to be granted access to archival information on the massacre of over ten thousand Polish officers who were imprisoned at Ostaszków and Starobielsk. The names of those who actually planned these murders and approved them along the chain of command have not been revealed. Putting the blame on low-level executioners on the one hand, and on Stalin and Beria on the other, obviously does not solve the mystery, nor does it suggest a genuine feeling of regret for the terrible atrocities that were committed against the Polish people.

It remains to be seen whether President Yeltsin’s Russia will be able and willing to dismantle the Potemkin villages built in the past and accept its share of the historical responsibility for policies originating in Moscow during and after the Hitler-Stalin Pact of August 1939. The German Bundesrepublik has set a worthy precedent with its formal acceptance of the historical link between Nazi aggression against Poland and the destruction of Jewish life in Eastern Europe.
homes, raping women and girls and then killing them with bayonets. Hundreds of victims of fascist terror were then brought to a certain locality where the inhabitants of Lvov were forced to go to contemplate the alleged ‘victims of Bolshevik terror’.

Pravda confidently drew parallels between the slaughters in Lvov and Katyn. The fact that Stalin’s propagandists invoked another grisly Soviet deed to cover up Katyn testifies to their supreme ability to bluff and to use what Solzhenitsyn has called ‘the big lie’. A massacre did indeed take place in Lvov, but in quite different circumstances from those described by the Communist Party newspaper. The slaughter of some 12,000 Brygidki Prison inmates took place before the Soviet withdrawal from Lvov in June 1941. The Brygidki prisoners were apparently machine-gunned in a hurry, and the Nazis, ever eager to demonstrate that they had competitors in inhumanity, allowed ample visits and picture-taking by the distraught families of the slaughtered. The mention of the Lvov episode testifies to Soviet self-assurance at that time. Stalin apparently believed that the West would swallow whole any Soviet version of what took place in Poland.

In his meticulously researched book, Revolution from Abroad: The Soviet Conquest of Poland’s Western Ukraine and Western Belorussia, Jan T. Gross describes what really happened at Lvov:

Soon after the first German bombs fell on Lvov on Sunday, June 22, the NKVD began to collect prisoners from different cells in the Brygidki prison, take them to the cellars, and shoot them. The sound of shooting could clearly be heard in the cells. Executions continued for about twenty-four hours. . . . Early on Tuesday morning the guards returned, shooting at and killing scores among the crowd assembled in the courtyard. They drove prisoners back into their cells, ordered everybody to lie face down on the floor, shot a few recalcitrant prisoners in their cells, and, having thus restored order, continued with the executions.

 Shootings went on for the whole week, through the morning of Saturday, June 28. . . . When the cellars were filled with bodies, a trench was dug in the courtyard and prisoners were executed there. . . . When the NKVD men finally fled from Brygidki prison, they had killed all but some 600–700 of their approximately 13,000 inmates.[24]

On 26 April 1943, with the Warsaw ghetto still resisting, Stalin announced the severing of relations with the Sikorski government.

On the same day, Pravda editorialised that the Polish government’s ‘treacherous behaviour’ made it imperative for the Soviets to break off relations. The timing was perfect: the alleged ‘Hitler’s collaborators’ in the Sikorski government looked particularly odious while the Jews were being killed in Warsaw. No one among the Allies cared to pursue the issue of the Katyn massacre in these circumstances.

What the Soviet Note announcing the severing of relations with Poland did not say was that a Polish government of Stalin’s choice was already waiting in the wings. In March 1943 a handful of Polish communists banded together in the USSR on Stalin’s orders, calling themselves ‘the Union of Polish Patriots’. The denunciation of the Sikorski government took place while this Union, headed by a Red Army colonel Vanda Vasilevskaya, was already poised for action. On 22 July 1944 this group, now renamed the National Liberation Committee, would issue the so-called Lublin Manifesto and then declare itself to be the new government of Poland.

On 28 April 1943 Pravda issued yet another editorial (reproduced verbatim the following day, as was the custom, in Komsomolskaya pravda and other Party organs across the country) entitled ‘Against Hitler’s Polish Accomplices.’ Pravda repeated the earlier allegations about Katyn, but without any mention of the names it had listed on April 19. Instead, it reasserted the Soviet Union’s right to control western Belorussia and western Ukraine. The Soviet Union had in fact annexed these areas in 1939 as part of Stalin’s Pact with Hitler, but now Pravda invoked Slavic solidarity and deplored the damage done to Polish culture by the Nazis. While the Polish nation was ‘groaning under the Hitlerite yoke’, the Polish government-in-exile and its press supported the Hitlerite lies and helped to spread them abroad. ‘The Polish Prime Minister Kozlowski, Foreign Secretary Jozef Beck and others, have been well known as German agents,’ claimed Pravda. The Germans and Poles had united in spreading slanderous views of the Soviet Union. The Polish government had among its members ‘pro-fascist’ and ‘imperialistic’ elements. In contrast, the Soviet Union was leading ‘a heroic fight, without equal in history, against the worst enemies of humanity – the fascist German conquerors.’

One notes a shift of focus in this editorial compared to the earlier one. Now that the goal of discontinuing relations with the Polish government-in-exile had been achieved, the time was ripe for reasserting Soviet control over western Belorussia and western Ukraine. Thus Pravda attacks the Sikorski government for its refusal to accept Soviet annexation of Ukraine, Belorussia and Lithuania, rather than for anti-
Semitism or for the inquiries about Katyn. It was claimed that the ‘Polish imperialists’ had orchestrated a ‘hostile campaign’ against the Soviet Union, and had used Nazi slanderers to force the Soviet Union to surrender ‘Soviet Ukraine, Belorussia and Lithuania’. . . . ’ Pravda continues: ‘The Memorandum of the Soviet government, published on April 26, expresses its decisive resolve to repel the German provocateurs and their helpers in their attacks on the sovereign rights of the Soviet state and its nations.’

This editorial shows that in 1943 the Soviets were defiantly unrepentant for what has sometimes been described as Stalin’s terrible blunder, or an action which the Soviets truly regretted. It indicates that even at a time when they needed Polish support, the Soviets were cold-blooded about the Katyn affair. With a view to inflaming world opinion against the Poles at the moment of the final Jewish tragedy on Polish soil, the Soviets kept launching anti-Polish propaganda.

At this point Sikorski was faced with the unsolved Katyn mystery, the razing of the Jewish quarter in Warsaw, and the Soviet attempt to isolate his government and eventually replace it by one consisting of Soviet puppets. As Prime Minister he considered it his foremost task to prevent the Soviet takeover of Poland, and to this end he exerted most of his energies, devoting virtually no time to the ghetto uprising. He hoped that, after ascertaining that the Katyn crime had been committed by the Soviets, the Allies would be more wary of Stalin’s Russia and more sympathetic to the cause of Polish independence. But when the International Red Cross refused to get involved in the Katyn investigation, Sikorski found himself in a Catch-22 situation. He was caught between two totalitarian powers, both of which seemed bent on the destruction of Poland, though for different reasons and by different means. The Germans simply used force. The Soviets, having engaged in the use of force in 1939 to 1941 following the secret protocols of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, now used diplomacy. They knew that in April 1943 the accusations they advanced against Sikorski would devastate his credibility as a head of state. The Poles, as a defeated and powerless nation (and one with a history of anti-Semitism) were an easy prey at that time, as the Soviet propagandists well knew.

In April 1943 the interests of the Sikorski government lay in giving the Katyn affair as much publicity as possible. This could have been achieved only through the mediation of another enemy, the Germans. The Poles wanted to press on with the investigation but the Allies held them back, and the Russians did their best to make the investigation impossible. Unlike the Americans, the Poles distrusted Stalin no less than Hitler, and their attitude seemed annoying and incomprehensible to the Allies at that time. The Sikorski government did not understand that under the circumstances the Allies were bound to be impervious to an argument coming from a government-in-exile, behind which stood only an army totally dependent on the West for communications and supplies.

What is more, in 1943 it was not in the Allies’ interest – except for the Poles – to uncover the truth about Katyn and to break off friendly relations with Stalin’s Russia. The Allies, understandably, placed a high value on Russian co-operation in the struggle against Hitler. At that time the Soviet Union was also a place of refuge for tens of thousands of Polish and other East European Jews for whom the choice between the Soviets and the Nazis was clear. Only the Poles insisted that Soviet war conduct be scrutinised in an unfriendly fashion.

The British ambassador to the Sikorski government-in-exile, Owen O’Malley, sums up the Katyn dilemma in the following way:

In handling the publicity side of the Katyn affair we have been constrained by the urgent need for cordial relations with the Soviet government . . . We have been obliged to appear to distort the normal and healthy operation of intellectual and moral judgements; we have been obliged to give undue prominence to the tactlessness or impulsiveness of Poles, to restrain the Poles from putting their case clearly before the public, to discourage any attempt by the public and the press to probe the ugly story to the bottom. In general we have been obliged to deflect attention from possibilities which in the ordinary affairs of life would cry to high heaven for elucidation, and to withhold the full measure of solicitude which, in other circumstances, would be shown to acquaintances situated as a large number of Poles now are. We have in fact perforce used the good name of England like the murderers used the little conifers to cover up a massacre.

Thus it can be said that both the Germans and the Russians were successful in their propaganda campaigns. The Germans managed to divert Polish attention from the ghetto uprising, and the Russians succeeded in persuading the Western governments that the Katyn Forest Massacre was not a sufficient cause to curtail friendship with
Stalin and that, due to their insensitivity to the Holocaust, the Poles deserved what they got anyway. The Nazis and the Soviets both won propaganda wars aimed at discrediting the Polish people.

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Western media coverage of this outrageous statement seems to have paved the way for a softening of the Soviet position. Not long afterwards low-level negotiations began between Polish investigators and KGB officers, and private visitors from Poland were allowed to travel to the Katyn gravesites. In 1989 a Polish film crew headed by Marcel Łoziński went to the Katyn Forest to interview local peasants and film the grave-sites. On 23 March 1990 the first press showing of the Katyn documentary book took place in Warsaw. Since that time Polish investigators have been permitted to inspect the remains of the bodies buried at Katyn, although always under the watchful eyes of KGB personnel.

Only now, when the war generation has virtually died away and the Soviet grip on Eastern Europe has loosened, can events of the past be investigated in an objective fashion. After the August 1991 coup failed, two other killing fields were opened to Polish observers. The first is near the city of Kharkov (Kharkiv) in Ukraine, where 4403 Polish officers were shot; and the second is near the city of Kalinin (renamed Tver), where 6295 Polish officers were murdered in the basement of the NKVD headquarters building (averaging 250 per night). Accounts of these investigations have appeared in the Polish and British press.28 The successor to the Soviet Military Prosecutor's office in Moscow possesses documents proving that two of the executioners are still alive. These two men, Vladimir S. Tokarev and Peter Soprunenko, have been interviewed by Polish and Russian authorities.

These developments, however, fall short of full disclosure and cooperation with representatives of the Polish government, who have yet to be granted access to archival information on the massacre of over ten thousand Polish officers who were imprisoned at Ostaszkow and Starobielsk. The names of those who actually planned these murders and approved them along the chain of command have not been revealed. Putting the blame on low-level executioners on the one hand, and on Stalin and Beria on the other, obviously does not solve the mystery, nor does it suggest a genuine feeling of regret for the terrible atrocities that were committed against the Polish people.

It remains to be seen whether President Yeltsin's Russia will be able and willing to dismantle the Potemkin villages built in the past and accept its share of the historical responsibility for policies originating in Moscow during and after the Hitler-Stalin Pact of August 1939. The German Bundesrepublik has set a worthy precedent with its formal acceptance of the historical link between Nazi aggression against Poland and the destruction of Jewish life in Eastern Europe.
Soviet and Nazi War Propaganda

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Notes


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7. In Notes from the Warsaw Ghetto Ringelblum says: "Divide and rule" [the German strategy]...poisons relations between Jews and Poles and makes any help from [that] Polish quarter impossible' (p. 327). Gutman, op.cit., speaks of 'the Germans' tendency to point to the ghetto as the central base of the Communists in Warsaw' (p. 401).


17. Ringelblum, op.cit., p. 357.

18. Kwiatkowska-Viitlau, op.cit., p. 11.

19. Soviet War News, No. 541 (17 April 1943), in the Hoover Institution Archives (Mikołajczyk Archive, Box 15).


21. In his book on Katyn, Janusz Zawodny provides a "vertical" list of 43 names of persons presumed responsible for Katyn, from the generals in Moscow to the ascertainable participants. The list has not been confirmed by archival research. Except for Lev Rybak, no name provided by Pravda appears on Zawodny's list. However, there are on that list names which resemble the Pravda names but are spelled differently. Instead of Avraam Borisovich, the name First Lieutenant A. Borisovets appears on Zawod-
ny's list; instead of Pavel Brodnitsky, P. Borodynsky; and instead of Khaim Finberg, Ch. Finsberg.

In V. Pozdnjakov's 'Katyn' (The Hoover Institution's Nikolaevsky Archive, # 227, Box 2) there are other unconfirmed names. See also the manuscript 'Ya byl v Katyni', in the Nikolaevsky Archive, Series 236, # 409–25.

22. Editors' note: by mentioning both GPU and NKVD Pravda was evidently trying to demonstrate that it had made a thorough check of all available records.

23. As it happened, Sikorski died in a plane crash on 4 July 1943 near Gibraltar.

Editors' note: Sikorski was a particularly suspect figure in the Soviet Union because of his role in defeating the Bolshevik forces which attempted to invade Poland in 1920. Poles have long suspected that Sikorski was murdered by the NKVD. The very same Alger Hiss was responsible for security in the Gibraltar region on behalf of the Americans. He might well have alerted Moscow to Sikorski's flight plans.


Editors' note: the Allies added to their offence by permitting the Russians to charge the Germans with the Katyn Forest Massacre at the Nuremberg Trials, although this charge was not mentioned in the final verdict. I.I. Nikitchenko, one of the Soviet judges at Nuremberg, had previously served as a judge at Stalin's show trials in the 1930s.


To distract attention from the real Katyn Forest Massacre, the Russians also took a village with a similar name (Katin) and turned it into an official shrine to victims of Nazi atrocities. The spirit of Potemkin lived on under Marxism-Leninism.


Map 5 Soviet industry and allied aid 1941–5