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THE EXECUTIONERS OF KATYN

AN UNPUNISHED CRIME

A film written by Olivia Gomolinski & Cédric Tourbe
A coproduction by ARTE France & La Générale de Production

“He felt no hatred towards those condemned men as they turned their bare necks towards him. But he still felt some pity. He knew they were enemies of the revolution. But he served the revolution conscientiously and diligently, as he would have served any respectable commander-in-chief. He wasn’t shooting them, he was just doing his job.”

Vladimir Zazoubrine, *Le Tchékiste*, [1923], Paris, Christian Bourgois éditeur, 1990, p. 45.

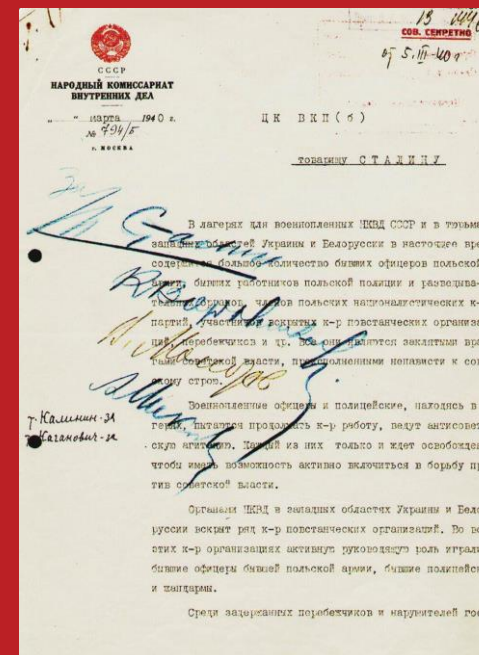
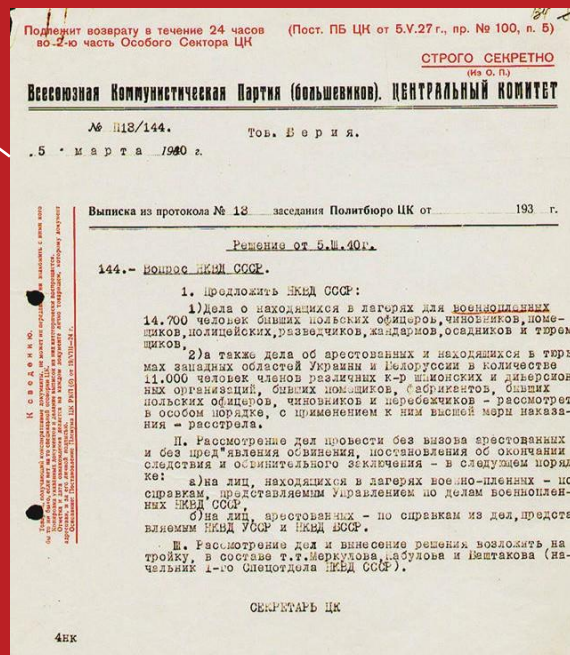
Presentation



Soviet investigators in front of mass graves in Katyn in the Autumn of 1943

In April 2020, **80 years will have passed since the killings of 22,000 Polish war prisoners by the NKVD**, the Soviet political police. Originally attributed to the Nazis, the Katyn tragedy remained a secret for fifty years. It was only on the eve of the collapse of the Soviet Union that Mikhail Gorbachev was forced to recognise Stalin's responsibility in the perpetration of these crimes. His successor, Boris Elstine, disclosed the archives and unearthed some of the evidence that has been so long awaited.

A note by Beria to Stalin proposing the execution of the polish officers, dated March 5, 1940, signed by Stalin, Vorochilov, Molotov and Mokoyan.



The first version of the Politburo's decision to execute 22,000 imprisoned polish soldiers dated March 5, 1940.



The evidence included the names of the victims and revealed the decision-making processes which engaged the responsibility of **high-level Soviet officials**. First, Stalin, who had ratified Beria's proposal on March 5, 1940. Beria was the feared commander-in-chief of the NKVD who ordered the execution of the 22,000 Polish officers who had been imprisoned in the camps of Starobielsk, Kozielsk and Ostachkov.

Yet these archives that had been left in the shadows contained some **dark secrets on the executioners**. Who were these men? How had they been recruited? What happened to them after these crimes were committed?

Secretly preserved in the NKVD's local archives, the revelations of these documents are striking: they cast a light on the entire chain of command, from Beria's proposal to physically eliminate the prisoners to the final execution order. They reveal the lists of people to execute that were drafted day after day in Moscow. And for the first time, files on these NKVD men are revealed with their names, faces, their history and destiny, as the archives document what happened to them after Katyn.

The Katyn executioners are Tchekists, hardened by the Great Terror (750 000 executions between 1937 and 1938). They are professionals recruited for their ability to kill in cold blood. Their experience is quite different from the ordinary men from the Einsatzgruppen who follow a rudimentary training. In the USSR, things turned out quite differently.

This film tells the story of the Katyn massacre for the first time, **from the perspective of the victims and of the executioners**. It shows how these crimes are symptomatic of a system which relied on specific police methods and a **culture of secrecy and concealment**.

Facts



Polish soldiers and officers imprisoned and deported to camps by the Red Army during the Soviet invasion of Poland.

On September 17, 1939, in accordance with the German-Soviet Pact, the Red Army invaded the eastern half of Poland while the Wehrmacht kept control of the western territory. Immediately and without any declaration of war by the Soviet Union on Poland, the NKVD organised the **deportation of 400,000 Poles**. 22,000 of them, mostly officers and intellectuals, were gathered into three different camps.

Despite intense propaganda efforts and attempts to politically influence education, the **Sovietization enterprise failed**. What to do with an elite that is strongly attached to its social status in the new working-class society that had become the USSR? The Soviets chose to eliminate what might become a future threat.

On March 5, 1940, **Beria proposed to Stalin that he should get rid of the Polish prisoners**. Stalin approved and scribbled his signature on an ultra-secret document drafted by the NKVD commander-in-chief. The **Politburo**¹ in turn adopted the resolution. Within six weeks, the operation was carried out simultaneously in all three camps.

The execution method consisted in checking one last time the identity of each prisoner, tying them up and bringing them to a small confined room without windows, to shoot them in the back of the neck **with a Walter pistol**, a German-made model, before transporting the bodies in a truck to the pit.

In August 1941, a few weeks after the invasion of the Soviet territory, the Nazis, discovered a mass grave in Katyn. As they were making their way forward and were preoccupied with their own massacres of Jews and civilians – they decided to close the pit.

But in the spring of 1943, after the bitter defeat of Stalingrad, and as the Wehrmacht was losing ground, the **Nazis decided to use this affair to their political advantage and to discredit their adversary**. They created an “international“ commission² to investigate the matter. It concluded that the NKVD was responsible for the massacre. They used the Katyn crimes to fuel an intense anti-Semitic propaganda campaign, reactivating the **myth of “Judeo-Bolshevism”³**.

¹ Molotov, Vorochilov, Mikoyan

² Exclusively composed of countries that were Germany’s allies or under German occupation

³ The political perpetuation of traditional anti-judaism turned into racial anti-semitism, very widespread among population in central and eastern Europe



Nikolai Bourdenko was the surgeon in charge of leading the Soviet counter-inquiry commission (autumn-winter 1943).

Six months later, the Soviets, took back control over their territory and created a Commission to investigate the "alleged" Nazi manipulation. It was led by a renowned surgeon, **Nikolai Bourdenko**, who concluded that the executions were perpetrated between August and December 1941 by the **Nazi police**, with the bullets as evidence. Churchill and Roosevelt accepted these conclusions: the Alliance prevailed over the quest for truth.

In the aftermath of the war, the Soviets tried to demonstrate that the Nazis were responsible for these crimes. During the Nuremberg Trials, they tried to include the Katyn crime in the charges pressed against them. But their efforts were vain. The **Soviet regime remained absolutely silent** on the matter. In 1959, the KGB chief, Alexander Chelepine, proposed to Khrushchev that he should destroy the compromising documents altogether.

In the West, the Katyn affair crystallised oppositions. During the Korean War, the Republican, Ray Madden, led an investigation on behalf of Congress which concluded that the NKVD was responsible, recommending that the Soviets be brought before an international court of justice. In the United Kingdom, a commemorative plaque marking the date of 1940 was called out as a provocation.

The Soviets, on the other hand, led a counter-propaganda campaign to divert attention from the death of the Polish officers, condemning anti-communist propaganda.

In the 1970s, people began to talk. In Poland, the Workers' Defense Committee dared to raise the subject, defying censorship.



Tcheckist group in 1940

How could they recognise their crimes without harming the Communist Party and the relations between the USSR and Poland? Mikhail Gorbachev was aware of the existence of those ultra-secret archives that were kept in sealed boxes in the Politburo. Only he, the head of the KGB and the director of the General Department of the Central Committee had the right to open them. He had always refused to reveal them but they were nonetheless passed on in December 1991 to his successor, Boris Yeltsin.

In October 1992, the documents were given to Lech Walesa on the World Day for Victims in Katyn.

For the 70th anniversary of the massacre, Polish Prime Ministers Donald Tusk and Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin met in Katyn. During the ceremony, Vladimir **Putin** did not ask for forgiveness but stated: **"We do not have the power to change the past"**.

But he added that the culprits "were the heads of the security services at the time, the NKVD, including Beria, and part of the political leadership. As for those who executed the orders, do you think I know them?"

The most hidden and unspeakable secrets that remains concern the executioners of the Katyn massacre.

Today, we are about to unveil them.

Author's note

Olivia Gomolinski



Photos of Polish officers that were killed in the Katyn massacre

This film raises an unprecedented aspect of the Katyn massacre. It is the result of the **recent discovery of documents that had been buried in the secret archives** of the FSB , thanks to the investigative work led by the Russian historian Nikita Petrov. For almost thirty years, Nikita Petrov has been working for the Memorial association. This Russian NGO, founded under the Perestroika by the dissident Andrei Sakharov, was initially created to help the political prisoners and victims of the Soviet regime. It aims to **defend human rights and to unveil the truth about Soviet crimes and violence.**

These classified Soviet-era film archives include footage that was shot by the authorities during the commission's inquiry led by the renowned surgeon, Nikolai Bourdenko. They echo the film that was shot six months earlier by the Nazis. Stakes were high at the time in terms of propaganda. The battle of images, and their crudeness, are a testimony of the violence of the war. They also reveal very **sophisticated propaganda techniques and the NKVD's culture of repression and concealment.**

These two dimensions structure the history of Katyn's crimes. Nothing was left to chance. The massacre was planned, organised and implemented methodically and "efficiently" with a certain dose of perversity. Subsequently, huge efforts were made to deny these crimes and maintain the Soviet's version of the Katyn massacre, **keeping the NKVD operation secret, to the detriment of its victims and of historic truth.**

KATYNN

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