

KATYŃ

When the Soviet Union entered the Polish-German war, half of the Polish Republic found itself under its occupation. About 250.000 Polish soldiers, mostly reservists, became Soviet war prisoners. As a result of the Moscow-Berlin treaty most of the soldiers were handed over to the Germans. The officers of the Polish Army became interned by the Russians and sent to three prison-of-war camps: Kozelsk, Starobielsk and Ostashkov. Once in the camps, they were ineffectively agitated to cooperate with the Soviets. In the face of their refusal, they were declared 'hardened and uncompromising enemies of the Soviet authority, who held no promise for change of attitude in the future'. In such case Lavrenty Beria, the People's Commissar for Internal Affairs of the USSR, turned to Stalin with a note suggesting their extermination. The permission for the execution was signed by Stalin, Voroshilov, Molotov and Mikoyan. It was provided at the Soviet Politburo meeting on the 5 March 1940. The Board of NKVD, the Soviet secret police, received an order to 'uncrowd camps and prisons'. The Polish officers, according to the lists prepared by the Soviet Security, were transported to selected places and murdered there. A group of them were sent to Katyn, the NKVD recreation site. Between 3 April and 12 May 1940, 4410 officers, mostly from the Kozelsk camp, were transported there. In the nearby forest, with their hands bound with rope, they were shot down in the back of their heads and thus murdered. Their bodies were buried in eight mass graves on the spot. The graves were discovered by the Polish slave workers brought to that area by the Nazis. The exhumation works started in 1943. They lasted until mid-April, when the Germans informed the world opinion about the discovery of the graves of the Polish officers, accusing Stalin of committing that crime. Still in April, a committee of the International Red Cross and the Polish experts from the Nazi occupied territory were sent to that area. Due to the exhumation works, until the first days of June 1943, 4100 bodies were dug out from the graves. The works ceased to be continued due to the coming front. When the area became a part of the USSR territory, the Soviet own commission decided that the murder took place on 22 June 1941 and was performed by the Germans. The documents concerning that crime which had been gathered in the Soviet archives became mostly destroyed. The truth about Katyn stayed under cover until the end of the socialist system in Poland. It wasn't until April 1990 that the Russian information agency admitted that the Soviet Union was the perpetrator of the Katyn crime. On 14 October 1992 Boris Yeltsin, the Russian President, handed over to Polish President Lech Walesa copies of previously secret documents concerning Katyn. Due to the cooperation with Russians, the murdered officers were buried at the Polish War Cemetery, ceremonially opened in 2000. The Katyn forest is also a mass grave of the Russians who were murdered in the 30-ties. As the exhumation works have never been done there, it is not possible to make a precise list of the victims of the communist repressions.

by Stanislaw Jankowiak, PhD
History Institute of Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań