

Tomas Sniegon

FROM STATE TERROR TO INTERNATIONAL CONFLICT

A place of memory: Katyn as a foreign policy tool of Putin's Russia

ABSTRACT

This text discusses the transformations of the Katyn memorial site near Smolensk in western Russia, where, in 1940, the mass murder of more than 4,000 Polish military officers who were prisoners of war occurred. After the Soviet Union's admission of guilt in 1990, it seemed for two decades that Katyn could also serve as a place for mutual reconciliation between post-communist Poland and post-Soviet Russia. However, in the period of increasing tension between Russia and Poland after 2010, the monument in Katyn became an object of Russian–Polish confrontation. The author concludes that the Katyn memorial complex today illustrates the tendency to patriotize and detraumatize Soviet crimes, whereby the positive events of the Soviet era – especially the victory over Germany in World War II – are 'Russified' and newly politically traumatized in parallel with the trivialization and marginalization of murder and crimes against human rights. The new form of memory in Katyn reflects an increasingly firmly dictated line from above that combines Russian nationalism, Orthodox faith, and a sentimental view of the period of Communist rule.

KEYWORDS:

Katyn, Stalinism, Soviet Terror, Soviet History, World War II, Russian historical culture, Polish history

TOMAS SNIEGON

Historian and associate professor in European Studies at Lund University in Sweden. In his research, he studies the modern history of Central and Eastern Europe, with an emphasis on the history of communism, the Cold War, and research on historical memory and historical cultures in Russia and the former Soviet Union, Poland, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia.

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9911-7118>

The Katyn mass burial site is located near Smolensk in western Russia, yet it is mainly associated with Poland. In the spring of 1940, the brutal mass murder of more than four thousand captured Polish officers took place here. Around the world, the name Katyn has since become a symbol of Soviet cruelty and Stalin's brazen power ambitions, joining globally significant sites of traumatic memory such as Auschwitz-Birkenau or Treblinka in Poland, the Solovetsky Islands or Volgograd (formerly Stalingrad) in Russia, Nanking in China, the Killing Fields in Cambodia, the 9/11 Ground Zero site in New York in the US, or the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

But a few years ago, the leaders of the current Russian regime decided to turn Katyn – for the first time since 1940 – into a primarily Russian place of memory and adapt it to their conception of Russia's emerging 'patriotic' historical culture. The aim of this decision was to take full control of the historical interpretation of the events that marked the formation of Katyn as a memorial site, and to relativise and increasingly deny Soviet responsibility for the mass murder of 1940 once again, as was the case before 1990. This is mainly so that Russia can 'punish' contemporary Poland for its growing anti-Russian stance over the past decade and for its confrontational attitude towards the Soviet Red Army memorials on its territory.¹

Russian 'patriotic' historical culture is understood here as the process through which Russia under President Vladimir Putin is constructing a historical culture that is intended to promote love of the homeland and cohesion between the country's people and the ruling political elite through a strictly controlled and top-down interpretation of Russian and Soviet history. At the same time, however, this kind of patriotism also means a rejection of the 'anti-patriotic' tendency of a section of contemporary Russian society that is sympathetic to Western liberalism and is demanding deep self-reflection and a critical reassessment of the Soviet past.² This 'guided patriotism' is based on a strict hierarchy with the widest possible reach to the local level and to the regions throughout the Russian Federation. The teaching of patriotism, aimed primarily at the younger generations, is carried out under the auspices of the Ministries of Culture, Education and Science, and Defence, as well as some other institutions. The aim is to achieve a high "patriotic awareness" of the population, including their "readiness to fulfil their civic duty and constitutional obligations in defence of the interests of the Motherland".³

¹ See for example: Dominika Czarnecka, *"Monuments in gratitude" to the Red Army in Communist and post-Communist Poland* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2021).

² Viktor Šapovalov, 'Rossijskij patriotizm i Rossijskij antipatriotizm', *Obščestvennye nauki i sovremennost'*, 1 (2008), 124–32.

³ Pravitel'stvo Rossijskoj Federacii, 'Postanovlenie № 1493 ot 30 dekabnja 2015 g. O gosudarstvennoj programme "Patriotičeskoe vospitanie graždan Rossijskoj Federacii na 2016–2020 gody"', 30 December 2015 <<http://static.government.ru/media/files/8qqYUwwzHUxzVkJHjsKAErrx2dE4qows.pdf>> [accessed 4 June 2022].

Katyn as a memorial site of the mass murder of 1940 has been analysed, for example, in the collective study *Remembering Katyn* from 2012.⁴ However, the analyses presented in that book cover developments only up to 2010. This text therefore focuses on those aspects that have received little or no analysis so far.⁵ This is especially true of the development of the Russian–Polish Katyn memorial site after the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, after the changes in Poland after 2015 (when Polish politics became dominated by the nationally conservative and Catholic-oriented Law and Justice party, which also set patriotic goals in its interpretation of Polish history), and after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.⁶

Since 1945, Soviet communist and now Russian ‘Putin’ historical culture has conceived of the memory of the Second World War as ‘patriotic’, more precisely as the memory of the “Great Patriotic War”.⁷ In this context, the period 1939–1945 has been reduced to 1941–1945 because, in the Soviet conception, the Great Patriotic War began with the invasion of the USSR by Nazi Germany on 22 June 1941 and ended with the Allied – but for the USSR above all Soviet – victory on 9 May 1945. The first period of the war prior to the invasion of the USSR is deliberately excluded from the ‘patriotic’ concept as coverage of the entire war from the 1st of September 1939 would also have drawn unwanted attention to the pragmatic alliance between Stalin’s Soviet Union and Hitler’s Germany, which, while sharing a common anti-Western course, enabled the Soviets to annex large parts of Poland and then to launch the aggressive Winter War against Finland and annex the Baltic republics of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, as well as parts of Romania. Moreover, the exclusive focus on the Great Patriotic War ensured for the USSR the status of the greatest and *de facto* unique victim, while other victims such as the USA or China, which after 1945 also became great powers in the subsequent Cold War and competed fully or partially with the USSR, were denied similar status. The narrower the focus in both Soviet and Russian historical culture on the censored image of Soviet suffering and heroism, the easier it was to refer to the ‘patriotic continuity’ that underpinned both successive Soviet

⁴ Alexander Etkind, and others, *Remembering Katyn* (Cambridge: Polity, 2012).

⁵ This text is a substantially expanded version of the author’s much shorter texts on the recent transformations of the Katyn memorial site, published in popular science form in English and Czech. See: Tomas Sniegón, ‘A Transformation of the Memorial Site in Katyn’, *Ponars Euroasia*, 14 June 2019 <<https://www.ponarseurasia.org/a-transformation-of-the-memorial-site-in-katyn/>> [accessed 22 June 2022]; Tomáš Sniegón, ‘Místo paměti Katyň: Od masové vraždy přes pokus o smíření k nové konfrontaci’, *Paměť a dějiny*, 2 (2022), 3–12.

⁶ See, for example, Krzysztof Jaskułowski, and Piotr Majewski, ‘Populist in form, nationalist in content? Law and Justice, nationalism and memory politics’, *European Politics and Society*, 31 March 2022 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/23745118.2022.2058752>>.

⁷ The concept of the Great Patriotic War was introduced immediately after the German attack on the USSR. The term first appeared in the main communist newspaper *Pravda* on 23 June 1941. Soviet leader Iosif V. Stalin, however, did not start using the term until May 1945; before that, he had mainly used the terms “Patriotic War”, “Liberation War” or “Great Liberation War” in his speeches. See Iosif Stalin, *O Velikoj Otečestvennoj vojne Sovetskogo Sojuza* (Penza, 1942).

and Russian national identities. Moreover, the ‘Russification’ of Soviet heroism after the collapse of the USSR in 1991 has increasingly attempted to take away the wartime merits of other former Soviet republics, especially Ukraine. Any attempts to challenge the official Russian version are then dismissed and attacked by Russian propaganda as ‘revisionist’ and, more recently, ‘fascist’ or ‘Nazi’, without the authors of such labels bothering to present clear definitions and evidence of what they mean in particular.

KATYN AS NAZISM MEETS STALINIST COMMUNISM

From this point of view, the Katyn memorial site is very specific. Its limited area of 22 hectares inextricably links the crimes of Soviet communism with those of German Nazism and speaks with equal clarity about the two greatest political catastrophes ever to take place on Russian territory: the Second World War and the Stalinist terror that came to be known collectively as the Gulag.

The tragic history of Katyn began even before 1940, especially during the so-called Great Terror in the Soviet Union in 1937–1938, when an as yet not fully specified number of Soviet citizens were murdered there.⁸ The reason that both mass murders – of Soviet and Polish citizens – took place here was that this wooded area near Katyn belonged to the Soviet NKVD political police, which was also responsible for both horrific crimes.⁹ The first secret burial of Soviet citizens – victims of the regime of the time – even took place here as early as the late 1920s, when a cottage used for recreation by the head of the regional Soviet political police was located in this forest area.¹⁰ The nature of the site then changed from a ‘resting’ place to a place for ‘state needs’ in the mid-1930s, and access to the entire forest area was completely closed.¹¹

The tendency to ‘Russify’ this place of memory by emphasizing Soviet victims at the expense of Polish victims thus inevitably attracts unwelcome increased attention to the crimes of Soviet communism and its terror against its own people. The main actors in the construction of Russian patriotic historical culture, however, seek to minimize this inconvenient reference to Stalin’s ‘anti-patriotic’ repression by employing

⁸ For more on this process, see the *Book of Memory of Polish Prisoners of War – Prisoners of the NKVD Kozel Camp, shot on the basis of the Politburo decision of 5 March 1940*, published by the Russian human rights organisation Memorial. *Ubity v Katyni: Kniga Pamjati pol'skich voennoplennych – uznikov Kozel'skogo lagerja NKVD, rasstreljannyh po reseniju Politbjuro CK VKP(b) ot 5 marta 1940 goda*, ed. by Aleksandr Gur'janov, and others (Moskva: Memorial – Zven'ja, 2015). The book is available in electronic form at: https://www.memo.ru/media/uploads/2022/01/21/killed_in_katyn.pdf.

⁹ N. Gurskaja, and E. Koneva, ‘Iz istorii Katynskogo lesa’, *Vestnik Katynskogo Memoriala*, 10 (2010), 56–57.

¹⁰ *Vestnik Katynskogo Memoriala*, 7 (2007), 110.

¹¹ Gurskaja, and Koneva, ‘Iz istorii Katynskogo lesa’, pp. 56–57.

a strategy I have previously described as the “patriotization of Gulag memory”, which limits both reminders and interpretations of the meaning of the Gulag to the extent that they do not stand in the way of the dominant promotion of Soviet heroism and victory.¹² This strategy is delineated in a document, adopted by the Russian government in August 2015, entitled *Concept of State Policy on Preserving the Memory of Political Repressions*, which states that the memory of the victims of political repression must be jointly cared for by the Russian state and Russian society in coordination with religious and other social organizations, in order to promote the “patriotic education” of young people of Russia.¹³ Post-Soviet Russia then for the first time linked Russian patriotism with the memory of the Stalinist terror, which was in its essence completely ‘unpatriotic’, as one part of Soviet society murdered another part of the same society, with ethnic Russians among both the victims and the perpetrators. This, of course, also applied to the murders that took place in Katyn during the Great Terror of the late 1930s.¹⁴

HALF A CENTURY OF LIES AND DENIAL

In the spring of 1940, the NKVD murdered more than four thousand Polish officers in the forests near the Soviet town of Smolensk.¹⁵ This was not long after the Soviet Union, under a secret agreement with Germany (the so-called Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact), had occupied eastern Poland and taken many prisoners, both soldiers and civilians, to its concentration camps. Not all of them, however, suffered the same tragic fate.

The mass murder was carried out on the basis of a decision of the highest leadership of the USSR, the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist Party, on 5 March 1940, which approved a proposal by the People’s Commissar of the Interior, Lavrentiy Beria.¹⁶ At Katyn, everything was planned and executed so that the mass murder would remain secret. Such behaviour was not entirely typical and did not

¹² Tomas Sniegón, ‘Dying in the Soviet Gulag for the Future Glory of Mother Russia? Making “Patriotic” Sense of the Gulag in Present-Day Russia’, in *Cultural and Political Imaginaries in Putin’s Russia*, ed. by Barbara Tornquist-Plewa, and Niklas Bernsand (Leiden: Brill, 2019). See also Tomáš Sniegón, ‘Umírání v sovětském Gulagu pro budoucí slávu matky Rusi? „Vlastenecký“ výklad Gulagu v současném Rusku’, *Paměť a dějiny*, 3 (2018), 3–13.

¹³ Pravitel’stvo Rossijskoj Federacii, ‘Konceptcija gosudarstvennoj politiki po uvekovečeniju pamjati žertv političeskich repressij’, 18 August 2015 <<http://www.president-sovet.ru/documents/read/393/#doc-1>> [accessed 4 May 2020].

¹⁴ Nikita Petrov, *Nagraždeny za rasstrel. 1940* (Moskva: Meždunarodnyj fond “Demokratija”, 2016), pp. 177–87.

¹⁵ The exact number of people murdered varies in the statistics over time, but not diametrically. For more on the census of the number of victims, see N. Gurskaja, and E. Koneva, ‘Towards the question of the number of Polish prisoners of war buried in Katyn at the Polish War Cemetery’, *Vestnik Katynskogo Memoriala*, 11 (2011), 59–69.

¹⁶ Rudolf’f Pichoja, and Aleksandr Gejštor, eds, *Katyn’. Plenniki neob’javlennoj vojny* (Moskva: Meždunarodnyj fond ‘Demokratija’, 1999), pp. 384–92.

affect all occupied territories equally. Although Soviet forces regularly committed atrocities in the occupied territories, mass executions of thousands of people at once were still exceptional.¹⁷

After Hitler broke his pact with Stalin and German troops entered the USSR in the early summer of 1941, mass graves of Polish victims were discovered near the Russian villages of Kozi Gory (Goat Mountains) and Katyn. These troops brought some Poles with them, and it was they who would be the first to know about the execution site of the Polish officers, probably in March 1942. Then, while digging in the Katyn forest, they discovered bodies in Polish uniforms.¹⁸

Nazi propaganda did not immediately begin to report on these Stalinist murders; it did so only belatedly in the spring of 1943, when it needed to cover up its own similar atrocities committed on Soviet territory. First, mass graves of Polish officers were identified in February 1943, and interrogations of the local population took place at the end of the same month. Thus, German interest in Katyn grew at the same time that the German army suffered defeat at Stalingrad in early February 1943, and when German radio in Berlin reported that the site of the murder of as many as 10,000 Polish officers had been discovered near Smolensk on 13 April 1943.¹⁹

Originally, the Germans did not refer to Katyn in their documents as the site of the crime, but to Kozi Hory. However, Goebbels' propaganda changed the name when the name Katyn better served its purpose. In Russian, it is derived from the word *katit'* (to roll), but it also resembles the Polish word *kat*, meaning a person carrying out executions. This amplified the effect of the German findings and the accusations of Soviet Stalinism.²⁰

As early as 15 April 1943, just two days after the German radio report, the Soviet Union began a disinformation campaign blaming Germany for the Smolensk massacre. The murders were supposed to have occurred not in 1940 but in 1941, when the Smolensk area was under full German control.²¹

After Soviet denials and the outbreak of disputes over who killed the victims in Polish uniforms, the Germans sent an international expert commission (composed of experts under their control) to Katyn in April

¹⁷ Mark Kramer, 'What Was Distinctive about Katyn: The Massacres in Context', *Case Western Reserve Journal of International Law*, 44.3 (2012), 569–76. This article is available in electronic form at: <https://scholarlycommons.law.case.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1124&context=jil>.

¹⁸ Andrzej Przewoźnik, and Joanna Adamska, *Katyni. Zbrodnia, prawda, pamięć* (Warszawa: Świat Książki, 2010), pp. 199–200. See also the Russian version of the interpretation: Gurskaja, and Koneva, 'Iz istorii Katynskogo lesa', pp. 56–57.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* See also: *Katyn'. Mart 1940 g. – sentjabr' 2000 g.: Rasstrel. Sud'by živych. Echo Katyni. Dokumenty*, ed. by Natalija Lebedeva (Moskva: Ves' Mir, 2001), p. 447.

²⁰ Oksana Kornilova, 'Katyn: dolgaja žizn' nacistского termina', *Izvestija Smolenskogo Gosudarstvennogo Universiteta*, 1 (2018), 229–41.

²¹ *Katyn'. Mart 1940 g. – sentjabr' 2000 g.*, p. 448.

1943 to confirm the mass execution of Poles by the Soviet Union. At the end of that year, however, the Soviet Union recaptured the territory in question and immediately sent a commission of its own to the site. In its conclusions in January 1944, the commission denied the previous information about Stalin's crime and stated that the murder of the Poles had taken place not in 1940 but at the end of 1941, after the Smolensk area had been occupied by Germany. The Soviet conclusion was clear: the perpetrators were not Stalin's but Hitler's military units.

However, it was also significant that, in addition to the two commissions mentioned above, a technical commission of the Polish Red Cross (PCK), headed by the then-Secretary General of this organisation, Kazimierz Skarżyński, had already studied the remains of the victims in Katyn in the spring of 1943. Thus, the Polish resistance movement, and with it the Poles in exile, could learn about the fate of the Polish victims from sources other than German and, later, Soviet ones.²²

At that time, outside the Soviet Union, Katyn was becoming one of the main symbols of Stalin's wartime terror. At the same time, however, the most vociferous interpretation of the crime at Katyn went from being directed by Goebbels' propaganda to being directed by Soviet propaganda for a long time. At the mass grave in the Katyn forest, despite the fact that access to the site was completely closed for a long time, a small memorial was erected, and an inscription was installed in both Russian and Polish: "Here are buried the prisoners of war, Polish officers, atrociously tortured by the German-Fascist occupiers in the spring of 1941". The Polish quotation did not include the term 'prisoners of war' but spoke of 'enslaved officers'.²³

The Soviets even went so far as to try to force their own murders onto the list of charges against the top leaders of Nazi Germany in the run-up to the Nuremberg Trials. The Soviet lie was thus to be elevated to the official truth accepted by all the victorious Allies. The Soviet side, using prosecutors at Nuremberg with experience of the great Stalinist political trials of the 1930s, proceeded with great confidence in pushing for the mass murder at Katyn to be put on the tribunal's agenda, convinced of the success of such a strategy.²⁴ However, not only the Nazi documents but also a number of other testimonies and facts had by then already begun to refute the Soviet version and, in contrast, to suggest that the Stalin

²² See for example: Tadeusz Wolsza, *Encounter with Katyn: The Wartime and Postwar Story of Poles Who Saw the Katyn Site in 1943* (Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 2018).

²³ "Here are buried prisoners of war Polish officers, brutally executed by the German-Fascist occupiers in 1941". See: Gurskaja, and Koneva, 'Iz istorii Katynskogo lesa', p. 63. Translation of the quote by the author. In the Polish original the citation read as follows: "Ś.P. Tu są pogrzebani niewolnicy oficerowie Wojska Polskiego w strasznych męczarniach zamordowani przez niemiecko-faszystowskich okupantów jesienią 1941 roku".

²⁴ See Francine Hirsch, *Soviet Judgment at Nuremberg. A New History of the International Military Tribunal after World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), pp. 8–9.

regime was responsible for this crime. This evidence included, for example, the testimonies of Poles who had managed to survive Soviet captivity before Polish military courts cooperating with authorities in exile in the UK during the Second World War.²⁵ The Nuremberg experiment thus failed for the Soviet Union.²⁶

However, the main evidence, as well as complete control of access to the crime scene in the Katyn forests, remained in the hands of the USSR. Poland also remained under Stalinist control, therefore questioning of the Soviet version of the Katyn crime could only occur outside the USSR's sphere of influence, especially in Polish emigre circles in the West. One of the first historiographical studies, for example, appeared in London in 1948 in Polish as *Zbrodnia katyńska w świetle dokumentów* (*The Katyn Crime in the Light of Documents*), edited by Józef Mackiewicz but published anonymously.²⁷ This publication had a rather complicated history – as did the author, who himself visited Katyn in 1943 as part of one of the international delegations initiated by Germany, but with the consent of the Polish Resistance. The final form of the book contained a foreword by General Władysław Anders, who was also imprisoned in the USSR during the war and later released, and who was put in charge of the Polish troops fighting alongside the Red Army in 1941–1942. Later, the so-called Anders Army came under British command and its commander subsequently fell back into disfavour with both Polish and Soviet communists.²⁸

In 1951, Mackiewicz published his version of *The Katyn Wood Murders* in English, and in 1965, the 1948 publication was translated into English and appeared as *The Katyn Crime in the Light of Documents*.²⁹ In the United States, the American Committee for the Investigation of the Katyn Massacre was formed in 1949, and two years later the US Congress created a special commission on the Katyn case. After World War II, the Soviets transferred the 'Katyn problem' to the Cold War agenda, which the Soviet leadership took advantage of, dismissing accusations of guilt as mere 'Western propaganda'. Side by side with the Soviet Union, the Polish Communist leadership, which also shared the official version of the Katyn mass murder as a German crime, condemned the American initiatives.

The term 'Katyn' gradually came to encompass the crimes committed by order of Stalin's leadership against Polish officers not only at Smolensk,

²⁵ See, for example, Jerzy Platajs, *Zbrodnia katyńska. Zeznania świadków przed polskimi sądami wojskowymi (1943–1946)* (Gdańsk: Muzeum II Wojny Światowej, 2016).

²⁶ Natalija Lebedeva, *SSSR i Njurnbergskij Process. Dokumenty* (Moskwa: Meždunarodnyj fond "Demokratija", 2012), pp. 54–57.

²⁷ Władysław Anders, *Zbrodnia katyńska w świetle dokumentów* (London: Gryf, 1948). For more on this publication, see Etkind, and others, *Remembering Katyn*, pp. 17–18.

²⁸ See: Jacek Trznadel, 'Kto jest autorem "Zbrodni katyńskiej w świetle dokumentów"', *Zeszyty Katyńskie*, 1 (1990), 207–11. See also: Jacek Trznadel, 'Józef Mackiewicz o Katyniu', *Zeszyty Katyńskie*, 8 (1997), 47–51.

²⁹ Józef Mackiewicz, *The Katyn Wood Murders* (London: Holis & Carter, 1951).

but also in several other places in the Soviet Union – in Russia, Belarus and Ukraine – and in the occupied territories of Eastern Poland. In the massacre, which is also widely referred to as the ‘Katyn massacre’, 4,415 prisoners from the Kozelsk camp were murdered (these victims are buried in the Katyn Forest near Smolensk), 6,295 inmates from the Ostashkov camp were shot in Kalinin/Tver and buried in the forest near the village of Mednoye, and 3,820 inmates from the camp in Starobelsk were shot in the NKVD building in Kharkov and buried on the outskirts of the same city. In addition to the victims from these three camps, thousands of victims were imprisoned and murdered in prisons in the annexed territory of eastern Poland or taken to the USSR and murdered there. In all, the name ‘Katyn’ refers to the mass murder of nearly 22,000 Polish victims.³⁰

Even the partial liberalization of the Soviet regime and condemnation of Stalin’s repression in the Soviet Union after Stalin’s death did not bring change. The new ruler, Nikita Khrushchev, criticized Stalin, but mainly for the murders of Soviet communists. Destalinization affected the USSR’s foreign policy towards its satellites only marginally; instead of admitting Soviet guilt for Katyn, Poland received a threat of military intervention from Moscow in 1956 (similar to the invasion of Hungary in the same year) if it tried to break free from the Kremlin’s grip. In 1959, then KGB chairman Alexander Shelepin sent a top-secret letter to Khrushchev in which he unequivocally confirmed Soviet guilt for the mass murders, including Katyn. He pointed out, for example, that the archives of his service contained documents on the executions of 21,857 captured Polish citizens as early as 1940 (not 1941). He also suggested that all these documents should be destroyed.³¹

However, the pressure for Soviet admission of the truth about Katyn did not disappear under Khrushchev or his successor Leonid Brezhnev. In the mid-1970s, memorials to Polish victims of this Soviet crime were erected in Stockholm (1975) and London (1976), but the Soviet authorities only continued to repeat the lie that the deaths of these Polish prisoners of war were a German crime, not a Soviet one. Those who cried out for the truth, according to Moscow, were spreading the same propaganda as Goebbels once did. Soviet leaders countered Western initiatives by passing a resolution on the means of combating Western propaganda on the so-called Katyn case at a meeting of the Politburo of the CPSU Central

³⁰ For more, see the *Ubiti v Kalinine, zachorony v Mednom. Kniga pamjati pol'skich voennoplennych - uznikov Ostaškovskogo lagerja NKVD SSSR, rasstreljannyh po rešeniju Politbjuro CK VKP(b) ot 5 marta 1940 goda*, ed. by Aleksandr Gur'janov, and others, 2 vols (Moskva: Obščestvo “Memorial”, 2019).

³¹ Aleksandr Šelepina, ‘Zapiska predsedatelja KGB pri SM SSSR A.N. Šelepina ot 3 marta 1959 g. № 632-Š s predloženiem likvidirovat’ vse dela po operaciji, provedennoj organami NKVD v sootvetstvii s postanovleniem CK VKP(b) ot 5 marta 1940 g.’, Rossijskij Gosudarstvennyj Archiv Social’no-Političeskoj Istorii, f. 17, op. 166, d. 621, l. 138

Committee on 5 April 1976.³² The 1946 memorial at Katyn was removed and a new one – completely devoid of religious symbolism – was created in its place (a cross was part of the former memorial).³³ Part of the Soviet propaganda was the fact that instead of Katyn another place with a similar sounding name, Khatyn, located near Minsk, Belarus, was emphasized. This was a small Belarusian settlement that had been destroyed by the German Nazis during the Second World War. Thousands of other similar settlements in the USSR suffered a similarly sad fate during the war, but the 150 or so victims of Khatyn have been brought to the fore since the late 1960s by the erection of the National War Memorial of the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic (a total of 2,230,000 people were murdered in Belarus during the war).³⁴ It was unveiled in 1969 and visited by US President Richard Nixon in July 1974.

From the communist period, it is also worth mentioning that the Soviet regime began to ‘Sovietize’ the site of the Katyn memorial during the era of Leonid Brezhnev. In 1983, on the initiative of the Smolensk City Soviet, a tribute began to be paid to the memory of more than 500 Soviet prisoners of war who were also allegedly murdered by the Germans in Katyn. This allegedly happened in May 1943, but this claim was not supported by any concrete documentation or archaeological research and exhumations. Regardless, a stone commemorating Soviet prisoners of war can still be found on the grounds of the Katyn memorial today.³⁵

A decisive shift in the question of Soviet guilt for the mass murders of Polish officers in Katyn and elsewhere took place only under Mikhail Gorbachev. The Soviet Union and Poland agreed in 1987 to jointly examine the sources, and for the first time there was a proposal in the Soviet Politburo, the highest organ of the Communist Party, that the Soviet Union accept its guilt. Gorbachev himself, however, did not immediately take such a step. In the end, definitive change was brought about only by pressure from outside – above all, of course, from Poland – and from within Soviet society, in which the need to come to terms with the dark history of Stalinism was growing stronger as democratization continued, and whose regime needed self-reflection and democratization to strengthen its own legitimacy.³⁶ The Soviet Union finally officially admitted its guilt for the murders of Polish prisoners in April 1990, when Gorbachev handed over to Polish Communist President Wojciech Jaruzelski in Moscow on

³² *Katyn'. Mart 1940 g. – sentjabr' 2000 g.*, p. 571.

³³ Gurskaja, and Koneva, 'Iz istorii Katynskogo lesa', p. 63.

³⁴ For more, see Per Anders Rudling, 'The Khatyn Massacre in Belorussia: A Historical Controversy Revisited', *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, 26 (2012), 29–58.

³⁵ Gurskaja, and Koneva, 'Iz istorii Katynskogo lesa', p. 63.

³⁶ See Inessa Jazborowska, 'Russian Historical Writing about the Crime of Katyn', *Polish Review*, 53.2 (2008), 139–57 (here: 141–42).

13 April the lists of Polish prisoners transported from Kozelsk to Smolensk and from Ostashkov to Kalinin (Tver) in the spring of 1940, the record of prisoners deported from the NKVD camp in Starobelsk, and some other documents.

In a Russian local scholarly journal published by the Katyn Memorial, information has become available that Jaruzelski secretly visited Katyn as early as 2 September 1988. Although he was the leader of a regime that fought ideologically against Polish Catholicism and promoted atheism, during this alleged visit a cross was re-erected at the Katyn memorial site.³⁷ In the same year, public access was granted.

However, Jaruzelski did not become president until a year later, on 19 July 1989. In 1988, he was officially the first secretary of the ruling Polish United Workers Party. This visit is not mentioned in other sources. Katyn was visited on 1 September 1988 by representatives of the Polish Embassy to the USSR in Moscow, and on 2 September a wooden cross was actually erected in Katyn as a result of the efforts of, above all, the Polish Primate, Cardinal Jozef Glemp.³⁸ At the same time, 1988 was also the year of commemoration in the USSR of the thousandth anniversary of the introduction of Christianity in Russia.

Gorbachev at the time – like no other Soviet communist leader before him – was trying to come to terms with the problematic Soviet past. Exactly half a century of Soviet lies and denial had thus come to an end.

VICTIMS OF WAR OR STALINISM?

On 13 April 1990, the TASS news agency published an admission of Soviet guilt. At the end of the same year, the Chief Military Prosecutor's Office of the USSR and the Chief Military Prosecutor's Office of Poland signed a mutual agreement on the joint investigation of the mass murders in Mednoye, Kharkov and Katyn. At that time, however, any mention of Soviet mass terror having occurred there before the murders of Polish officers and before World War II was still lacking in connection with Katyn.

The first official mention of the victims of the Stalinist purges of the late 1930s did not appear in the USSR until 1991. The authorities in Smolensk decided in a resolution to survey the terrain in order to locate and protect the graves of the victims of Stalinist repression.³⁹ Indeed, the graves of Stalinist victims had been discovered alongside Polish victims in both

³⁷ Gurskaja, and Koneva, 'Iz istorii Katynskogo lesa', p. 64.

³⁸ See: Milena Kindziuk, 'Historia postawienia krzyża w Katyniu w 1988 roku', *Warszawskie Studia Teologiczne*, 31 (2008), 58–73.

³⁹ Nikolaj Il'kevič, 'Iz istorii Memoriala "Katyni"', *Vestnik Katynskogo Memoriala*, 8 (2008), 121.

Kharkov and Mednoye, and although they had not yet been discovered in Katyn at that time, the protection zone for further exploration was a full 100 hectares in size.⁴⁰ According to later figures, given in 1998 by the Russian Federal Security Service (the successor to the Soviet KGB) following an investigation in the archives, a total of 2,997 Russian victims of Stalin's repressions are believed to have been buried in the Katyn complex.⁴¹ However, the remains of all of them are far from being found and identified.

Russian President Boris Yeltsin paid tribute to the Polish victims of Soviet state terror by laying a wreath at the Katyn Cross in Warsaw's Powazki military cemetery during his visit to Poland in 1993. Three years after the collapse of the USSR, in 1994, Poland and the Russian Federation concluded a treaty on the mutual care of the burial sites of soldiers and victims of persecution/repression and the places of memory associated with these victims.⁴² The concept of *burial sites* was easy to understand, but the precise meaning of the concepts of *repression* and *memory sites* was much less clear. This issue gained importance after Polish President Lech Kaczyński and his wife died in a plane crash on the way to Katyn on 10 April 2010, when their plane was landing in Smolensk. A total of 96 people lost their lives in this tragedy, including many high-ranking Polish government, military and political officials. They were all on their way to a commemorative event dedicated to the 70th anniversary of the mass murder of Polish soldiers in Katyn.

The memory of the mass murder in Katyn has become one of the most important historical pillars in the construction of a new Polish national identity in post-communist Poland.⁴³ The process of building a dignified memorial in Katyn began in 1995, when the then-President of Poland, Lech Wałęsa, personally attended the laying of the foundation stone for the construction of a new, dignified complex in Katyn. The stone was consecrated by Pope John Paul II himself, who, like Wałęsa, was Polish.

In a 1996 decision on the issue, the Russian government described the Katyn project as a place of memory that would honour "Soviet and Polish citizens who were victims of totalitarian repression".⁴⁴ Polish cit-

⁴⁰ G. Andreenkova, 'K voprosu o memorializacii ostankov sovetskikh grazhdan – zertv repressij na territorii Memoriala "Katyń"', *Vestnik Katynskogo Memoriala*, 9 (2009), 24.

⁴¹ Il'kevič, 'Iz istorii Memoriala "Katyń"', pp. 127–31.

⁴² Pravitel'stvo Rossijskoj Federacii, 'Soglašenje meždu Pravitel'stvom Rossijskoj Federacii i Pravitel'stvom Respubliki Pol'sa o zachoronienijach i mestach pamjati zertv vojn i repressij', 22 February 1994 <<https://docs.cntd.ru/document/420349827>> [accessed 5 April 2022]. In the Polish version: Rząd Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej, 'Umowa między Rządem Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej a Rządem Federacji Rosyjskiej o grobach i miejscach pamięci ofiar wojen i represji, sporządzona w Krakowie dnia 22 lutego 1994 r.', 22 February 1994 <<https://isap.sejm.gov.pl/isap.nsf/download.xsp/WDU19941120543/O/D19940543.pdf>> [accessed 5 April 2022].

⁴³ See, for example: Maria Kobielska, *Polska kultura pamięci w XXI wieku: dominanty: zbrodnia katyńska, powstanie warszawskie i stan wojenny* (Warszawa: Instytut Badań Literackich PAN, 2016).

⁴⁴ Pravitel'stvo Rossijskoj Federacii, 'Postanovlenie №1247 O sozdanii memorial'nych kompleksov v mestach zachoronienij sovetskikh i pol'skich grazhdan – zertv totalitarnych repressij v Katyni (Smolenskaja oblast') i Mednom (Tverskaja oblast')', 19 October 1996 <<https://docs.cntd.ru/document/9031087>> [accessed 5 April 2022].

izens murdered in Polish military uniforms were thus designated not as victims of the Second World War or prisoners of war, but as victims of Stalinist terror.

In this respect, it must be stressed that the USSR did not treat Poles as prisoners of war at the time of their murder. The Soviet Union did not officially declare war on Poland in September 1939; instead, it wrapped its annexation of eastern Poland in phrases such as “liberating the Ukrainian and Belarusian minorities” in that territory.⁴⁵ However, as early as 19 September 1939, Order No. 0308 of the People’s Commissar of the Interior, Lavrentiy Beria, created the Administration for Prisoners of War of the People’s Commissariat of Internal Affairs of the USSR, which also dealt with the soldiers of the Polish army detained in the camps in Starobelsk, Ostashkov and Kozelsk. The Soviet Union then used the designation of Poles as prisoners of war itself at a time when it wanted to attribute the crime to Nazi Germany.⁴⁶

However, it is not clear from the 1996 Russian government document whether or not Russia considered including the concept of prisoners of war for Poles after the collapse of the USSR. However, all former Polish prisoners of war held in the camps in Kozelsk, Starobelsk and Ostashkov were also included in the Russian rehabilitation process for innocent victims of Stalin’s repression in the early 1990s, which was not yet complete.⁴⁷

Russia’s decision meant that Katyn became the first ever international Gulag memorial on Russian territory. No other site of memory of Stalin’s repressions has been used so prominently at the international political level by the Russian side as Katyn.

In the 1990s, the Polish authorities have decided to give the site of the mass murder in Katyn the status of a Polish military cemetery. However, this also meant that the memorial site, where Polish soldiers were murdered by the Soviet NKVD on the basis of a decision taken by the highest levels of the USSR, acquired in principle the same status as the memorial site of more than 600,000 Soviet soldiers killed on Polish territory by the Germans in 1944 and 1945 during the liberation of Poland from German occupation. The same liberation meant that Poland was immediately transferred from German to Soviet rule and, under Moscow’s leadership, turned into a communist dictatorship until 1989.

⁴⁵ Sovet narodnykh komissarov SSSR, ‘Nota Pravitel’stva SSSR, vručennaja pol’skomu poslu v Moskve utrom 17 sentjabrja 1939 g.’, *Pravda*, 18 September 1939.

⁴⁶ The NKVD Prisoner of War Department. See: *Katyn’. Plenniki neob’javlennoj vojny*, p. 79.

⁴⁷ Polish scholar Wojciech Materski pointed out that the full rehabilitation of all Polish victims was never completed. See: Wojciech Materski, ‘Problem rehabilitacji ofiar zbrodni katyńskiej w stosunkach polsko-rosyjskich’, *Nowa Polityka Wschodnia*, 1 (2012), 39–53. The Russian human rights organisation Memorial has also addressed the problems of rehabilitating Polish victims. See: *Meždunarodnyj Memorial, ‘Pol’skaja issledovatel’skaja programma’, Meždunarodnyj Memorial*, [n.d.] <<https://www.memo.ru/ru-ru/history-of-repressions-and-protest/victims/poland/>> [accessed 5 April 2022].

The opening ceremony of the Katyn Memorial Complex took place on 28 July 2000 in the presence of Jerzy Buzek, Prime Minister of Poland, and Viktor Khristenko, Deputy Prime Minister of the Russian Federation. After passing through a common entrance corridor, the 18.5-hectare area of the complex is divided into two parts: on the right, the Polish military cemetery; on the left, the part dedicated to the memory of Soviet victims of Stalin's repressions.

In Russia, the following decade – marked by the first and second periods of Vladimir Putin's presidency (2000–2008) and the first half of his successor Dmitry Medvedev's government (2008–2010) – did not suggest that the gradual search for ways of mutual Russian–Polish rapprochement on the memory of the Katyn tragedy would change in any fundamental way, and the tension surrounding the “Katyn case” did not disappear.

In 2007, the feature film *Katyn* by the prominent Polish director Andrzej Wajda attracted great international attention, among other things because Wajda himself was the son of one of the Polish officers murdered in the USSR in 1940. While his father, Jakub Wajda, may not have died and been buried in Katyn himself, the curiosity surrounding the film was magnified by the combination of Wajda's personal fate, his internationally acclaimed directorial skill, his first ever attempt at such a large-scale artistic representation of one of the most traumatic moments in modern Polish history, and his ambition to make the work as authentically credible as possible.⁴⁸

The political dimension was indisputable: in Poland, the premiere was watched by the President, the Prime Minister, representatives of the Catholic Church, family survivors of the murdered, and representatives of *Memorial*, a Russian human rights organization that cares for the memory of the victims of Stalinist repression.⁴⁹ The film first appeared on Russian television in April 2010 and was even broadcast on Russia's main television channel, Channel One, in prime time on 11 April 2010.

On the other hand, however, the Supreme Military Prosecutor's Office of the Russian Federation concluded a lengthy investigation in 2005, which had been proceeding intermittently since 1991, with a controversial explanation that suggested new manoeuvring and did not satisfy the Poles. It also refused to label the mass murder of Polish officers as genocide. Only

⁴⁸ Andrzej Wajda's father, Jakub Wajda, was murdered in the NKVD headquarters in Kharkiv as a prisoner of the Starobelsk camp. The site called Piatykhvatky, where a small memorial plaque is placed and where Jakub Wajda's remains are buried, was first visited by his son in 2008 during the Ukrainian premiere of his film. *Remembering Katyn*, pp. 55, 77.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

some of the files collected by the prosecutor's office were handed over to Poland, with the remaining material reportedly classified as secret.⁵⁰

The political process of symbolically accepting Soviet responsibility culminated on the Russian side in November 2010, when the Russian parliament, the State Duma, adopted a declaration condemning Stalin's murder of Polish military officers and civilians and seeing this step as an impetus for the new development of Russian–Polish relations. The document reads:

“Our peoples have paid a huge price for the crimes of totalitarianism [...] The members of the State Duma, on behalf of the Russian people, extend their hand to the Polish people and express their hope that a new stage of development of relations between our countries on the basis of democratic values is beginning. Achieving such a result will be the best memorial to the victims of the Katyn tragedy, who have already been exhaustively rehabilitated by history itself, to the Red Army soldiers who perished in Poland, to the Soviet soldiers who gave their lives for the liberation of Poland from Hitler's Nazism.”⁵¹

FROM ATTEMPTS AT RECONCILIATION TO A NEW CONFRONTATION

The above facts are necessary to understand the developments that have taken place around the Katyn memorial site over the last decade. These developments are, on the one hand, in the spirit of the continuing Soviet – and, to some extent, post-Soviet Russian – reluctance to include the crimes of the USSR against the Polish and Soviet populations in the official historical interpretation of the Second World War and the entire communist system; on the other hand, this reluctance reflects the current state of Russian–Polish relations. The tragedy of 2010, the death of Lech Kaczyński and his delegation at Smolensk, and the ongoing efforts of the regime led by Russian President Vladimir Putin to make ‘patriotism’ the main official ideology – and thereby legitimise Russia's current policy towards Ukraine since the annexation of Crimea in 2014 – have caused new tensions in the relations between these two countries.

Since 2010, Poland's conservative right has repeatedly accused Russia of conspiring against the late President Lech Kaczyński, of being

⁵⁰ ‘Sejm Pol'si potreboval ot Rossii priznat' fakt genocida poljakov’, *Lenta.Ru*, 22 March 2005 <<https://lenta.ru/news/2005/03/22/poland/>> [accessed 14 June 2022].

⁵¹ Gosudarstvennaja дума Federal'nogo sobranija Rossijskoj Federacii, ‘Gosduma prinjala zajavlenie “O Katynskoj tragedii i ee žertvach”’, Gosudarstvennaja Duma, 26 November 2010 <<http://duma.gov.ru/news/5093/>> [accessed 5 May 2022].

responsible for his death, and of conducting an inadequate and problematic investigation into the air disaster, which has been dubbed 'Katyn Two' in Poland. Such an insinuation of the relationship between the original Katyn mass murder and the plane crash aimed to emphasize the similarities (the loss of Polish elites) at the expense of the fundamental differences: in the first case, the cold-blooded planned killing of innocents; in the second case, the plane crash, which, however, may also have been influenced by Polish mistakes in the attempt to land at Smolensk even in adverse conditions. The emphasis on the similarities then only strengthened a number of conspiracy theories that emerged in connection with the 'second Katyn'.

In addition, after the Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (Law and Justice) party came to power in 2015, a new law was adopted in the country on the need to remove the remaining symbols of the communist system and its ideology. Under it, monuments and memorials from the communist era, including those commemorating the Red Army's presence in Poland, can be removed.⁵²

Russia, on the other hand, was reinforcing its own nationalism and the 'Russification' of the Katyn memorial. Instead of promoting Russian-Polish reconciliation, which – despite all the partial problems – continued in the 1990s and even in the first two periods of Putin's presidency and the first years of the presidency of Putin's successor, Dmitry Medvedev, the rivalry of radical nationalist tendencies prevailed, which affected Katyn in a significant way.

In 2018, a large memorial dedicated to the victims of the so-called Great Terror of 1937–1938 was built in the Russian part of the site next to the Polish war cemetery. Thanks to this, the thousands of victims of the pre-war Stalinist mass murder from the Smolensk region finally received a suitable memorial site. After being deliberately neglected or even completely 'forgotten' during the existence of the Soviet regime and partly after its fall, the murdered were given back their names, which were inscribed on several dozen panels at the memorial. Compared to similar memorials, the Katyn monument is quite impressive. However, its role did not remain limited to empathy with the victims of Stalin's times.

The role of this memorial is also to weaken the dominance of Polish memory in Katyn. The emphasis on the more than 8,000 Soviet victims compared to the approximately 4,400 Polish victims, which is also reflected in the large inscriptions at the entrance to the memorial complex, turns Katyn mathematically into a place of Soviet – and in a sense even Russian – rather than Polish suffering. The inscriptions proclaim that all of

⁵² Jörg Hackmann, 'Defending the "Good Name" of the Polish Nation. Politics of History as a Battlefield in Poland, 2015–18', *Journal of Genocide Research*, 20 (2018), 587–606.

the more than 8,000 Soviet victims were buried in Katyn, which is not true. In fact, this figure corresponds to the entire area and, moreover, relates to the entire period of 'repression' from 1917 to 1953, i.e., the reigns of both Lenin and Stalin, which, incidentally, could certainly justify the erection of a large memorial in Smolensk.⁵³ According to the data documented so far, fewer Soviet – and especially Russian – citizens were buried in Katyn than Poles.⁵⁴

The tendency of Russification was strengthened by the construction of an Orthodox church right at the entrance to the site. Its foundation stone was laid on 7 April 2010 by the then-Prime Ministers of Russia and Poland, Vladimir Putin and Donald Tusk. This was exactly three days before the aforementioned Smolensk air tragedy. The church was originally planned as a project on the road to reconciliation, as evidenced, for example, by the fact that it also housed a prominent Polish icon of the Madonna of Częstochowa. However, the church's position became ambivalent the moment the Russian Orthodox Church declared Katyn "the site of the Russian Golgotha", which not only emphasized the Russian ethnic dimension within the victims of Stalinism, but also particularly privileged the memory of those victims who belonged to this church over the victims of others. Therefore, the church in Katyn also joined the line of 'patriotization' of the memory of Stalin's terror.

RUSSIA AS THE SELF-PROCLAIMED MAIN VICTIM

The new 'Russian offensive' in Katyn has so far culminated in the opening of a new museum in April 2018. It was conceived under the strong influence of the Russian Military Historical Society (RVIO), an organization founded by Vladimir Putin in 2012 and led by former culture minister and current Putin adviser Vladimir Medinsky.⁵⁵ The same society also built a memorial to the victims of the Great Terror in Katyn, but in terms of content the museum and the memorial are in no way connected.

⁵³ N. Semenova, 'Repressii v Smolenske v cifrach i faktach', *Vestnik Katynskogo Memoriala*, 13 (2013), (p. 37). This study gives a total of 8,243 Soviet casualties in the entire area. Another later study, however, reaches a new conclusion and increases the number of Soviet victims of the communist terror in the area to more than 10,000 in 1937–1938 alone, but even this does not claim that all these victims should be buried directly in Katyn. See Kirill Aleksandrov, 'Smolenskaja oblast', *Vestnik Katynskogo Memoriala*, 16 (2016), 25–33.

⁵⁴ According to the aforementioned data of the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) from August 1998, a total of 7,860 people were shot in Smolensk during the "gratuitous repression", of which 2,997 "Russian citizens" are buried directly in the Goat Mountains/Katyn Forest. See: Il'kevič, 'Iz istorii Memoriala "Katyn"', pp. 127–28. The difference between the designation of victims as Russian (in the FSB document) and Soviet (at the entrance to the Katyn memorial complex) is not explained, but there is no conclusive data that victims of Stalinist repression from republics of the former USSR other than Russia were buried in Katyn in the numbers indicated on the Katyn entrance wall.

⁵⁵ Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Medinsky served as head of the Russian negotiating team, confirming his prominent position in the Russian power structure.

The narrative of the museum exhibition does not focus on the individual suffering of the victims of the Soviet terror, sympathy for them, or condemnation of the immediate and highest-ranking, and therefore decisive, perpetrators. Instead, the focus is on Russian suffering in the long process of Russian (Soviet)–Polish relations and the attempt to convince the visitor of the only correct – Russian patriotic – truth.

The exhibition is entitled “Russia and Poland. Twentieth Century. Pages of History”.⁵⁶ However, it begins with the early seventeenth century and emphasizes the aggressive behaviour of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth towards its Russian neighbour. The attack led to the Poles dominating and controlling Moscow between 1610 and 1612. In Russian history, this event was given the name *smutnoye vremja*. What follows is an account of another unilaterally interpreted ‘Polish invasion of Russia’, this time shortly after the end of World War I.

The occupation of Polish territory by the Russian Empire in 1795–1918, on the other hand, is pushed into the background, as is the 1939–1941 pact between the USSR and Germany. Although this so-called Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact – which led to the division of Poland between Germany and the Soviet Union and was followed on the Soviet side by the attack on Finland, the seizure of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, and parts of Romania – played a significant role in the outbreak of the Second World War, the exhibition in Katyn, instead of traumatic images, presents only photographs of Poles who supposedly greeted the arrival of the Red Army in September 1939 with enthusiasm. The annexation of eastern Poland is explained in a similar vein to that of the central communist daily *Pravda* in 1939: because the Polish state *de facto* ceased to exist after the German attack on 1 September 1939, there was supposedly no one to protect the Ukrainian and Belarusian minorities there, so the Red Army took over. The annexation of eastern Poland is thus explained as a consequence of the ‘German-Polish’ war, and not as a consequence of the division of Europe between Hitler’s and Stalin’s empires.

All aspects of Russian–Polish history corresponding to the ‘patriotic line’ of the current Russian state are considered natural and positive, while the conflict themes, when mentioned, are considered by the creators of the exhibition as a kind of tendentious attempt by evil forces to disrupt the ‘natural’ friendship between the Polish and Russian people. From this point of view, the exhibition’s narrative is reminiscent of former Soviet propaganda, which emphasized the progressive role of the majority ‘people’ and denounced the minority category of ‘enemies of the people’ as those

⁵⁶ For official information on the Katyn Museum website, see: Memorial’nyj kompleks “Katyn”, ‘Exhibitions’, Memorial’nyj kompleks “Katyn”, [n.d.] <<http://memorial-katyn.ru/en/exhibitions.html>> [accessed 4 June 2022].

who did not understand the course of history and were therefore historically destined for extinction.

The mass murder in Katyn is seen in a broader disturbing context as an act of Russian-Soviet 'historical justice' that balances earlier unjust Polish actions against the Russian and Soviet state, rather than as an example of unacceptable brutality on the part of the communist dictatorship. A relatively large subsequent section of the exhibition is then devoted to what has been characterized as successful post-war cooperation between the Soviet Union and Poland. The Soviet liberation of Poland from Nazi occupation plays a central role in the museum, while the imposition of the Stalinist communist system on Poland is not highlighted.

The historical exhibition is rounded off with a section highlighting the differences between how contemporary Russia and Poland take care of their military monuments. While images show Vladimir Putin and the Russian patriarch paying tribute to the Polish victims during their visit to Katyn, Poland is presented as an ungrateful country that destroys Soviet military memorials and completely ignores the fact that without Soviet help it would hardly exist today.

All texts on the panels and the explanations on the multimedia presentations are written only in Russian, making it clear who they are exclusively for. Those who do not know Russian will, of course, understand their exact meaning only partially or not at all, and therefore will not be able to criticize the Russian 'patriotic' interpretation of the mass murder in Katyn in 1940. In fact, intentions of this kind are also evident on the museum's website, which reports on the exhibition. Both the English and Russian versions are based on half-truths and highly distorted facts, but, even so, the English version is somewhat less confrontational than the Russian version. For example, while the English version of the information site refers to the annexation of western Ukraine and western Belarus in the autumn of 1939 (without clearly specifying that this was a Soviet annexation, which took place in collaboration with Hitler's Germany shortly after the invasion of Poland), the Russian version emphasizes that after the Polish government fled the country in September 1939, the Soviet Union thus "could not remain neutral" in the situation, leaving the Ukrainian and Belarusian inhabitants of Poland undefended.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ For comparison: the Russian version is at: Memorial'nyj kompleks "Katyn", 'Istorija', Memorial'nyj kompleks "Katyn", [n.d.] <<http://memorial-katyn.ru/ru/history.html>> [accessed 4 June 2022]. English version: Memorial'nyj kompleks "Katyn", 'History', Memorial'nyj kompleks "Katyn", [n.d.] <<http://memorial-katyn.ru/en/history.html>> [accessed 4 June 2022].

ADMIRATION FOR RUSSIA INSTEAD OF SYMPATHY FOR THE VICTIMS

In summary, it can be stated that the current form of the Katyn memorial site has broken the previous tendencies that could be observed since the 1990s. After half a century of lies and denials from the Soviet side concerning the two mass murders carried out in the Katyn area – one on the victims of the Great Terror and the other on Polish prisoners of war – there was then finally a gradual process of admission of guilt from the Russian side and an improvement in relations between post-Soviet Russia and Poland. While far from being seamless, it was in any case a step forward.

However, the recent anti-liberal turn has turned the more favourable atmosphere between the two states into another confrontational phase, marked by new attempts to use the 1940 Katyn massacre as a weapon in international relations. Perhaps the most striking examples are the incidents of March and April 2022, when a group of politicians at the local and national Russian level even demanded the complete removal of the Polish military cemetery from Katyn in retaliation for Poland's attitude following Russia's invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022.⁵⁸ Given that this text is being written at a time when Russia's war against Ukraine is still ongoing, it cannot be ruled out that the Katyn incident of spring 2022 will have an even more radical sequel.

The current form of this site of memory, especially the new museum, shows that Russia still lacks a consistent policy of remembrance towards crimes committed during the Soviet era, and especially under Iosif Stalin. In addition, it is still unable to reconsider the Soviet Union's foreign policy, especially that of the first two years of the Second World War. It does not use the traumatic periods of its recent era with an emphasis that they cannot be repeated, as is the case, for example, with the memory of the Holocaust in democratic societies.

The Katyn memorial complex today illustrates the tendency to *patrioticize* and *detraumatize* Soviet crimes, whereby the positive events of the Soviet era, especially the victory over Germany in World War II, are "Russified" and newly politically traumatized in parallel with the trivialization and marginalization of murder and crimes against human rights. The new form of memory in Katyn reflects an increasingly firmly dictated line from above that combines Russian nationalism, Orthodox faith, and a sentimental view of the period of Communist rule.

It uses the memory of Stalin's terror only to the extent that the central power sees fit.

⁵⁸ Aleksandr Asadčij, 'Pol'skij memorial v Katyni predložili likvidirovat', *Kommersant*, 3 March 2022 <<https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/5240252>> [accessed 5 May 2022].

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Aleksandrov, Kirill, 'Smolenskaja oblast', *Vestnik Katynskogo Memoriala*, 16 (2016), 25–33
- Anders, Władysław, *Zbrodnia katyńska w świetle dokumentów* (London: Gryf, 1948)
- Andreenkova, G., 'K voprosu o memorializacii ostankov sovetskich graždan – žertv repressij na territorii Memoriala "Katyn"', *Vestnik Katynskogo Memoriala*, 9 (2009)
- Asadčij, Aleksandr, 'Pol'skij memorial v Katyni predložili likvidirovat', *Kommersant*, 3 March 2022 <<https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/5240252>> [accessed 5 May 2022]
- Czarnecka, Dominika, *"Monuments in gratitude" to the Red Army in Communist and post-Communist Poland* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2021)
- Etkind, Alexander, and others, *Remembering Katyn* (Cambridge: Polity, 2012)
- Gosudarstvennaja дума Federal'nogo sobranija Rossijskoj Federacii, 'Gosдума prinjala zajavlenie "O Katynskoj tragedii i ee žertvach"', *Gosudarstvennaja Duma*, 26 November 2010 <<http://duma.gov.ru/news/5093/>> [accessed 5 May 2022]
- Gurskaja, N., and E. Koneva, 'Iz istorii Katynskogo lesa', *Vestnik Katynskogo Memoriala*, 10 (2010), 56–57
- Gurskaja, N., and E. Koneva, 'Towards the question of the number of Polish prisoners of war buried in Katyn at the Polish War Cemetery', *Vestnik Katynskogo Memoriala*, 11 (2011), 59–69
- Hackmann, Jörg, 'Defending the "Good Name" of the Polish Nation. Politics of History as a Battlefield in Poland, 2015–18', *Journal of Genocide Research*, 20 (2018), 587–606
- Hirsch, Francine, *Soviet Judgment at Nuremberg. A New History of the International Military Tribunal after World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020)
- Il'kevič, Nikolaj, 'Iz istorii Memoriala "Katyn"', *Vestnik Katynskogo Memoriala*, 8 (2008)
- Jaskułowski, Krzysztof, and Piotr Majewski, 'Populist in form, nationalist in content? Law and Justice, nationalism and memory politics', *European Politics and Society*, 31 March 2022 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/23745118.2022.2058752>>
- Jażborowska, Inessa, 'Russian Historical Writing about the Crime of Katyn', *Polish Review*, 53.2 (2008), 139–57
- Katyn'. *Mart 1940 g. – sentjabr' 2000 g.: Rasstrel. Sud'by živych. Ècho Katyni. Dokumenty*, ed. by Natalija Lebedeva (Moskva: Ves' Mir, 2001)
- Kindziuk, Milena, 'Historia postawienia krzyża w Katyniu w 1988 roku', *Warszawskie Studia Teologiczne*, 31 (2008), 58–73
- Kobielska, Maria, *Polska kultura pamięci w XXI wieku: dominanty : zbrodnia katyńska, powstanie warszawskie i stan wojenny*, (Warszawa: Instytut Badań Literackich PAN, 2016)
- Kornilova, Oksana, 'Katyn: dolgaja žizn' nacistkogo termina', *Izvestija Smolenskogo Gosudarstvennogo Universiteta*, 1 (2018), 229–41

- Kramer, Mark, 'What Was Distinctive about Katyn: The Massacres in Context', *Case Western Reserve Journal of International Law*, 44.3 (2012), 569–76
- Lebedeva, Natalija, *SSSR i Njurnbergszkij Process. Dokumenty* (Moskva: Meždunarodnyj fond "Demokratija", 2012)
- Mackiewicz, Józef, *The Katyn Wood Murders* (London: Holis & Carter, 1951)
- Materski, Wojciech, 'Problem rehabilitacji ofiar zbrodni katyńskiej w stosunkach polsko-rosyjskich', *Nowa Polityka Wschodnia*, 1 (2012), 39–53
- Memorial'nyj kompleks "Katyn'", 'Exhibitions', Memorial'nyj kompleks "Katyn'", [n.d.] <<http://memorial-katyn.ru/en/exhibitions.html>> [accessed 4 June 2022]
- Memorial'nyj kompleks "Katyn'", 'History', Memorial'nyj kompleks "Katyn'", [n.d.] <<http://memorial-katyn.ru/en/history.html>> [accessed 4 June 2022]
- Memorial'nyj kompleks "Katyn'", 'Istorija', Memorial'nyj kompleks "Katyn'", [n.d.] <<http://memorial-katyn.ru/ru/history.html>> [accessed 4 June 2022]
- Meždunarodnyj Memorial, 'Pol'skaja issledovatel'skaja programma', *Meždunarodnyj Memorial*, [n.d.] <<https://www.memo.ru/ru-ru/history-of-repressions-and-protest/victims/poland/>> [accessed 5 April 2022]
- Petrov, Nikita, *Nagraždeny za rasstrel. 1940* (Moskva: Meždunarodnyj fond "Demokratija", 2016)
- Pichoja, Rudolf, and Aleksandr Gejštor, eds, *Katyn'. Plenniki neob"javlennoj vojny* (Moskva: Meždunarodnyj fond "Demokratija", 1999)
- Platajs, Jerzy, *Zbrodnia katyńska. Zeznania świadków przed polskimi sądami wojskowymi (1943–1946)* (Gdańsk: Muzeum II Wojny Światowej, 2016)
- Pravitel'stvo Rossijskoj Federacii, 'Konceptija gosudarstvennoj politiki po uvekovečeniju pamjati žertv političeskich repressij', 18 August 2015 <<http://www.president-sovet.ru/documents/read/393/#doc-1>> [accessed 4 May 2020]
- Pravitel'stvo Rossijskoj Federacii, 'Postanovlenie №1247 O sozdanii memorial'nych kompleksov v mestach zachoronienij sovetskich i pol'skich graždan – žertv totalitarnych repressij v Katyni (Smolenskaja oblast') i Mednom (Tverskaja oblast')', 19 October 1996 <<https://docs.cntd.ru/document/9031087>> [accessed 5 April 2022]
- Pravitel'stvo Rossijskoj Federacii, 'Postanovlenie №1493 ot 30 dekabnja 2015 g. O gosudarstvennoj programme "Patriotičeskoe vospitanie graždan Rossijskoj Federacii na 2016 - 2020 gody"', 30 December 2015 <<http://static.government.ru/media/files/8qqYUwwzHUxzVkJH1jsKAErrx2dE4qows.pdf>> [accessed 4 June 2022]
- Pravitel'stvo Rossijskoj Federacii, 'Soglašenje meždju Pravitel'stvom Rossijskoj Federacii i Pravitel'stvom Respubliki Pol'sha o zachoronienijach i mestach pamjati žertv vojn i repressij', 22 February 1994 <<https://docs.cntd.ru/document/420349827>> [accessed 5 April 2022]
- Przewoźnik, Andrzej, and Joanna Adamska, *Katyn'. Zbrodnia, prawda, pamięć* (Warszawa: Świat Książki, 2010)

- Rudling, Per Anders, 'The Khatyn Massacre in Belorussia: A Historical Controversy Revisited', *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, 26 (2012), 29–58
- Rząd Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej, 'Umowa między Rządem Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej a Rządem Federacji Rosyjskiej o grobach i miejscach pamięci ofiar wojen i represji, sporządzona w Krakowie dnia 22 lutego 1994 r.', 22 February 1994 <<https://isap.sejm.gov.pl/isap.nsf/download.xsp/WDU19941120543/O/D19940543.pdf>> [accessed 5 April 2022]
- Šapovalov, Viktor, 'Rossijskij patriotizm i Rossijskij antipatriotizm', *Obščestvennye nauki i sovremennost'*, 1 (2008), 124–32
- 'Sejm Pol'si potreboval ot Rossii priznat' fakt genocida poljakov', *Lenta.Ru*, 22 March 2005 <<https://lenta.ru/news/2005/03/22/poland/>> [accessed 14 June 2022]
- Šelepina, Aleksandr, 'Zapiska predsedatelja KGB pri SM SSSR A.N. Šelepina ot 3 marta 1959 g. №632-Š s predloženiem likvidirovat' vse dela po operacii, provedennoj organami NKVD v sootvetstvii s postanovleniem CK VKP(b) ot 5 marta 1940 g.', *Rossijskij gosudarstvennyj archiv social'no-političeskoj istorii*, f. 17, op. 166, d. 621, l. 138
- Semenova, N., 'Repressii v Smolenske v cifrach i faktach', *Vestnik Katynskogo Memoriala*, 13 (2013)
- Sniegon, Tomas, 'A Transformation of the Memorial Site in Katyn', *Ponars Euroasia*, 14 June 2019 <<https://www.ponarseurasia.org/a-transformation-of-the-memorial-site-in-katyn/>> [accessed 22 June 2022]
- Sniegon, Tomas, 'Dying in the Soviet Gulag for the Future Glory of Mother Russia? Making "Patriotic" Sense of the Gulag in Present Day Russia', in *Cultural and Political Imaginaries in Putin's Russia*, ed. by Barbara Tornquist-Plewa, and Niklas Bernsand (Leiden: Brill, 2019)
- Sniegoň, Tomáš, 'Místo paměti Katyň: Od masové vraždy přes pokus o smíření k nové konfrontaci', *Paměť a dějiny*, 2 (2022), 3–12
- Sniegoň, Tomáš, 'Umírání v sovětském Gulagu pro budoucí slávu matky Rusi? „Vlastenecký“ výklad Gulagu v současném Rusku', *Paměť a dějiny*, 3 (2018), 3–13
- Sovet narodnych komissarov SSSR, 'Nota Pravitel'stva SSSR, vručennaja pol'skomu poslu v Moskve utrom 17 sentjabrja 1939 g.', *Pravda*, 18 September 1939
- Stalin, Iosif, *O Velikoj Otečestvennoj vojne Sovetskogo Sojuza* (Penza, 1942)
- Trznadel, Jacek, 'Józef Mackiewicz o Katyniu', *Zeszyty Katyńskie*, 8 (1997), 47–51
- Trznadel, Jacek, 'Kto jest autorem "Zbrodni katyńskiej w świetle dokumentów"', *Zeszyty Katyńskie*, 1 (1990), 207–11
- Ubity v Kalinine, zachoroneny v Mednom. *Kniga pamjati pol'skich voennoplennych – uznikov Ostašovskogo lagerja NKVD SSSR, rasstreljannyh po rešeniju Politbjuro CK VKP(b) ot 5 marta 1940 goda*, ed. by Aleksandr Gur'janov, and others, 2 vols (Moskva: Obščestvo "Memorial", 2019)

Ubity v Katyni: Kniga Pamjati pol'skich voennoplennykh – uznikov Kozel'skogo lagerja NKVD, rasstreljannykh po rešeniju Politbjuro CK VKP(b) ot 5 marta 1940 goda, ed. by Aleksandr Gur'janov, and others (Moskva: Memorial – Zven'ja, 2015)

Vestnik Katynskogo Memoriala, 7 (2007), 110

Wolsza, Tadeusz, *Encounter with Katyn: The Wartime and Postwar Story of Poles Who Saw the Katyn Site in 1943* (Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 2018)