
Andrzej Przewoźnik, Jolanta Adamska, *Katyń. Zbrodnia-prawda-pamięć* [‘Katyn: The crime, the truth, and remembrance’], Warszawa, 2010; 672 pp.

“There are more and less interesting books; there are books people are in need of, and ones the world would easily do without. But there are books which simply had to be published; ones without which the memory and history of nations remains incomplete, inaccuracies and distortions remaining unexplained” (p. 5): these words by Jerzy Buzek, former Prime Minister of the Republic of Poland, open one of the most important recently released publications.

2010 was the year of the seventieth anniversary of the annihilation by the Soviet NKVD (*Narodniy Komissariat Vnutrennikh Del* – the People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs) of more than 25,000 prisoners-of-war and other prisoners regarded as enemies of the USSR. All of them were taken captives in September 1939, resulting from the Red Army’s unexpected attack on the eastern territory of the Second Republic, which occurred as a consequence of the secret clauses attached to the (overt) Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact, entered into between the Nazi Germany and Joseph Stalin.

More than 14 thousand people, mainly Polish Army officers, gendarmes and officials or clerks, were eliminated in spring 1940 by means a decision of the USSR’s Political Bureau of 5th March 1940. those people were at first kept in three special camps, that is, in: Kozielsk 1 – over 4,000; Starobelsk – over 3,500; Ostashkov – over 6,000. Almost all of them were eventually killed – in Katyn, Kharkov (buried at Pyatikhatky) and Tver (buried in Mednoe). The total number of the camps’ survivors was less than 400.

The book in question consists of fourteen chapters, the first two discussing the situation of the Second Republic of Poland in the twenty years between the two World Wars and, subsequently, during the defence war of September 1939, waged against the Nazi Germany and, more importantly, the Soviet Russia simultaneously. The following chapter is strictly devoted to the ‘initial’ history of the Katyn Crime, and is titled ‘The formation and the tasks of NKVD’s special camps’. As the authors remarkably observe, “historians are not fully concordant with regard to the status of the Polish soldiers taken captive by the USSR” (p. 51). Extremely interesting prove the observations made and outlined by the detained/interned; for instance, Lieuten-

ant Bronisław Młynarski, a surviving Starobelsk POW, remarked: “what we can see has been yielded by the hatred inculcated in them [i.e. NKVD guards; M.K.’s note] artificially by the authorities from the dawn of their years, turned into the leading thread of their thoughts and imagination” (p. 50).

Of interest is also the following chapter – ‘Polish POWs in the Soviet captivity’, showing those imprisoned not as soldiers, officials, etc. but as ordinary people: loving husbands, good fathers, sons and friends. One of them, Captain Antoni Wróblewski, murdered in Katyn, is worth quoting here: “Christmas Eve today – the wafer has been made by the buddies. The table is laid with a sheet – the Christmas tree is so tiny, dressed up with gingerbreads and cigarettes [...]; sobbing, I am sending my wishes to Stefa and Hanka, and to all my dear, praying warmly” (p. 100).

The following section deals with the murder of the Polish citizens committed in spring 1940. Most of the related facts are well-known, and those of expertise in this field will not find anything sensational there; still several facts stand out. First, the authors express their astonishment because of the drafting of the document dated 5th March 1940. Justifying this with “Stalin’s well-known cautiousness” (p. 119), they ask why so many traces have been left of the crime committed (pp. 118, 119). Can it be regarded, as they would suggest, as an argument testifying to a non-authentic status of the legal deed in question? Another such intriguing occurrence is a supposed presence of German officers at the execution sites: “The concurrence of the Katyn murder period (April–May 1940) and the ‘AB-Aktion’ carried out by the Germans in the Generalgouvernement area between 30th March and July 1940 has been pointed out” (p. 120). The authors refrain from unambiguously stating that the Germans actually participated in those incidents – whilst not completely rejecting the concept. What they do is they quote a message provided by Lt. Loebecke, commandant of the German camp in Arnswalde, to Lt. Adam Sawczyński, with respect to the Polish officers: “they [i.e. the Soviets] are murdering you there”. These are just some of the intriguing aspects; what it shows is that there are still certain ‘blank spots’ in the Katyn question and keeping the relevant documents unreleased from the Russian archives renders it unfeasible to gain a complete knowledge on the crime’s circumstances.

A remarkable contribution to our knowledge on the Katyn homicide is made by the chapter on deportations of the victims’ families. The authors have correctly associated the shootings of Polish citizens with mass-scale removals of those who waited for their relatives, arrested in September 1939 by the Soviet services, to return. Accounts of the Polish officers’ children prove most valuable. “In the night of 13th/14th April [1940], at 2 [a.m.], they [i.e. the Soviets] came over to take us. [...] All [of those detained were] intelligentsia. There were thirty-two of us packed into the wagon. It was horribly tight in there. Filthy cattle cars, the stench was awful. [...] The winter was horrid. Frosts coming up to 60°, in spite of which we were driven out to

the forests, to do the labour” (p. 171). The existing literature has rarely dealt with this particular aspect of the Katyn Crime; it was an inseparable element of those occurrences, though.

The authors further on show the progress of the search for the lost officers, describe the incidents of 1943 related to the disclosure (or, discovery) of the Katyn graves by the Germans and the policy applied by the latter in order to break the Allies’ unity (chapter 7). Chapter 8 discusses the exhumations carried out at the Katyn site in 1943. As emphasised by the authors, “this topic is apparently well known, and seemingly banal. [...] As a matter of fact, it is one of the least-elaborated chapters of the Katyn Crime.” (p.241) One finds there pieces of information unobtainable from other like publications. Special focus is deserved by the penetrating and extremely minute data on individuals forming the subsequent exhumation crews: German, Polish, and, also, Soviet. Let us just make a general remark that this section is extremely important, particularly for specialists in the field.

No less interesting appear the other aspects of the Katyn Crime. Chapter 9, titled ‘The Polish-Red-Cross cemetery. The outcome of the exhumation. Letters and objects’, is similar, by assumption, to the preceding one. Of importance for a political significance of Katyn is the tenth episode – ‘The aftermath of Katyn and of the allied powers’ decisions affecting Poland’. What sort of a policy that was, the authors define by quoting British scholar George Sanford: “After 1943, at the price of maintaining good relations with Stalin, the Western Allies renounced the objective truth on Katyn and sacrificed Poland, their loyal wartime ally.” (p. 320)

The following chapter describes the Soviets’ attempts at blurring and falsifying the traces of their crime. A commission established upon Soviet initiative was meant to prove that the Germans were responsible. The very name of this body, ‘Special Commission for Determination and Investigation of the Circumstances of the Shooting by the German Fascist Invaders of Polish Officers, Prisoners-of-War, at the Katyn Forest (near Smolensk)’, firmly stated who the murderer was to be. A whole chain of actions taken by the Soviets to camouflage this crime can be observed here.

The considerations on the following pages concern ‘the fight for the truth’ about Katyn. “As it however appeared, Poland did have its allies and friends, ready to seek the truth, indignant at the conduct of their own countries’ governments” (p. 388). Those included e.g. the British ambassador Owen O’Malley; Col. Henry Szymański, U.S. liaison officer to the Polish Army in the Middle East. Their reports were received by competent persons but were then purposefully encrypted, so as not to irritate the Soviet ally. Other such individuals to whom seeking for the truth was dearest included Lt.-Col. Van Vlieta, J.P. Carter, G.H. Earle. Here, again, one comes across a few not-quite-well-known facts that have been amassed over the fifty-or-so years. The most important statement concludes this episode: “the lies were not maintainable any more”. (p. 444)

The penultimate chapter opens with the following statement: “As of 7th April 1990, the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union approved the TASS Agency message regarding the deaths of the Polish officers kept at the Kozelsk, Starobelsk, and Ostashkov [camps].” (p. 449) A mechanism was started ever since to subsequently disclose the occurrences of the years 1939–40. An interesting evolution could be seen with Gen. Wojciech Jaruzelski, who, on laying a wrath at the symbolic grave in Katyn, wrote in the commemorative book: “They fought for Poland to be free, and were killed without a guilt committed. [...] To the Polish officers, victims of the cruel Stalinist crime.” (p. 451)

A chapter titled ‘The Katyn affair past the year 2000’ concludes the book. It describes individual actions still taking place in respect of, especially, clarification of certain still unclear aspects, like e.g. those pertaining to the so-called Belarusian Katyn List, or Ukrainian Katyn List. It namely remains unclear where the 11,000 Polish citizens are buried of those contributing, apart from the aforesaid in-excess-of-14,000, to the total of 25,000 earmarked for shooting – the number implied by the document of 5th March 1940. The chapter also presents the as-at-present outcomes of the exhumations carried out in Kuropaty, Belarus and Bykovnya, Ukraine – the highly plausible sites of the corpses’ burial. Those sites are not the only ones, though. A very interesting section deals with an attempt at ‘justifying’ the murder by Russian politicians. “The Russian press started publishing articles finding that, in the first place, the Poles had their Soviet POWs murdered in the war of 1920, so the Russians retaliated twenty years later.” (p. 572) It befits to agree with the authors believing that “the wall of silence, understatement, insinuations, and lies regarding the Katyn Crime” (p. 583) will finally be knocked down.

The study ends with an Epilogue and a series of annexes, whereof the first two are the most important. One is a ‘List of prisoners-of-war deported with the first transport from the Kozelsk camp to Katyn on 3rd April 1940 (pp. 607-610); the other is ‘Appendix to the Report of the P.C.K. [= Polish Red Cross] Technical Committee] regarding the activities pursued in Katyn’ (pp. 611-627). The final section includes a bibliography, along with a name index. A considerable number of illustrations exquisitely complement the book.

Placing the footnotes at the end of each chapter appears to be not the best possible option, technically. There was nothing to hinder doing it the traditional way, i.e. having the footnotes placed below the text body. Since some of the chapters are extensive, such arrangement might disturb the reader’s analysis of specific facts and incidents.

The bibliography too leaves a lot to be desired. There is no differentiation made between the sources and the studies, and the list is, on the whole, selective as it does not cover all the items appearing in the book’s text.

To sum up, this book is an important link in the still-ongoing discussion on the Katyn Crime. Since this publication fortunately bears no visible hallmarks of political intervention, one can find it unbiased and reliable; it certainly fills yet another gap with respect to the occurrences of spring 1940.