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## **The Katyn Massacre and Polish–Soviet Relations, 1941–43**

On 5 March 1940 the Politburo, the leading committee of the Soviet Communist Party, officially ratified a decision taken by Stalin a few days earlier to execute about 15,000 Polish prisoners of war (PoWs). They had been captured in what became the Nazi–Soviet war of September 1939 against Poland which had been jointly agreed in the secret annexe to the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact of 23 August 1939, named after their foreign ministers. Around 4600 military officers were held in a camp called Kozelsk about 150 miles south-east of Smolensk, while another 3900 were detained at Starobelsk in the eastern Ukraine. A further 6400, mainly border and prison guards and police functionaries, were held at Ostashkov near Kalinin (now Tver). The Ministry of the Interior (NKVD) documents, which have become available since the fall of Soviet communism, confirm the truth, which was covered up by the USSR and its supporters until 1990, that all but 395 were executed in a carefully planned three-pronged operation by that security police agency, headed by Stalin's close henchman Minister of the Interior Lavrentii Beria and his deputy Vsievod Merkulov.

During April–May 1940 the Starobelsk PoWs were taken by train in almost daily convoys to be shot in the NKVD prison cellars in Kharkov and to be buried in a forest park close to the city. Those from Ostashkov were similarly transported to be shot in the NKVD prison cellars in Tver and buried in the greatest secrecy at Mednoe, a small village about 20 miles distant. Those transported from Kozelsk were, apparently, shot and buried in one fell swoop in the Katyn forest 12 miles from Smolensk. The Germans occupied this region following their June 1941 invasion of the USSR but Reich Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels chose his moment carefully to announce the discovery of the Katyn bodies only in April 1943. Varied Red Cross and Polish delegations as well as an International Medical Commission were then allowed to document the findings of German forensic–medical exhumations that the Poles had been shot in spring 1940 and that this was, therefore, obviously a Soviet crime. This truth was contested bitterly by the Soviets who, on reoccupying the Katyn region, produced the report of a commission called after Academician Nikolai Burdenko who chaired it in January 1944. This

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became the officially binding version for the Soviet bloc and its Western sympathizers, that the Poles had been captured and shot by the Germans during their advance in the autumn of 1941.<sup>1</sup>

The Katyn revelations were designed by the nazis to complicate, if not split, the alliance between the Western Powers and their junior Polish ally the London government-in-exile, from their major wartime Soviet ally. In this they were strenuously resisted by Britain and America who had an overriding interest in maintaining the Soviet military effort. The fighting on the Eastern Front eventually broke the nazi war machine, thus saving the lives of an enormous number of Western soldiers. After 1943 the Western Allies sacrificed not only the objective truth about Katyn but also their Polish wartime ally, although whether they did so consciously or otherwise is highly controversial. After Stalingrad in late 1942 Stalin not only began to impose his wishes regarding Poland's postwar frontiers but also did his utmost to destroy the London Poles, eventually replacing them entirely with an alternative communist leadership which took over and transformed Poland on his behalf at the end of the second world war. Communist control then froze knowledge about the 1940 massacre to that which had been revealed at Katyn in 1943 so that it colloquially came to symbolize the whole massacre. More informed speculation about the Starobelsk–Kharkov part of the massacre only emerged with the release of British documents under the Thirty Years' Rule in the early 1970s, while Ostashkov-Mednoe was wreathed in mystery until almost 1990.

The German invasion of the USSR in June 1941 ended the first phase of the second world war, that of nazi-Soviet collaboration. Between the summer of 1941 and April 1943 there was a period of direct diplomatic relations between the Polish government-in-exile in London and the Soviet Union. During that time, the struggle for the truth about the fate of almost 15,000 missing Polish PoWs captured by the USSR during its occupation of Eastern Poland in September 1939 became a crucial feature of the wider aspects of the Polish Question — the related issues of her postwar frontiers and the Soviet Occupied Territories of West Belarus and West Ukraine, and of the character and place of postwar Poland in Europe. The larger issues provided the backdrop of British–American efforts to mediate a Polish–Soviet understanding. Such hopes became increasingly unrealistic as Soviet military power and political prospects strengthened after the tide turned at Stalingrad in late 1942. The London Poles thus went from being a nuisance, endangering the Allied war effort in 1941–43, to an inconvenient historical loser. Their dumping troubled Western statesmen both morally and politically. The consequences affected the origins and course of the Cold War, while the establishment of the truth about what eventually transpired to be the spring 1940 massacre of Polish PoWs set particular problems for the British Foreign Office.

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1 For the classic examination of all these aspects which marked the limits of what could definitely be established before the appearance of the post-1990 Soviet documentation see J.K. Zawodny, *Death in the Forest. The story of the Katyn Forest Massacre* (London 1971).

The ultimate pretext for the above Allied failure, triggered by the German announcement of the discovery of the Katyn graves in April 1943, was the culmination of a whole series of fundamental Polish–Soviet disagreements. These concerned the control, size and provisioning of the Polish army formed in the USSR and the capacity of the London Poles to seek out, organize and bring relief to, both the deported civilian and the imprisoned military sections of their community. The Soviet totalitarian framework and Stalin's polonophobia resulted in the harassment and arrest of Polish officials and the large-scale Polish evacuation through Persia in 1943. This was accompanied by bitter Polish–Soviet disputes over the citizens and territory of West Belarus and West Ukraine occupied by the Red Army in 1939. Stalin's decision to lie about, and cover up, the fate of what we now know to be the 14,700 officers and policemen from the Kozelsk, Starobelsk and Ostashkov camps massacred by the NKVD in 1940 made it impossible for him to collaborate meaningfully with the London Poles. But his long-term aim of controlling postwar Poland excluded the sort of deal that was to be established with Benes' Czechoslovak government-in-exile with the much less compliant Poles. Stalin thus went ahead with his preferred policy of building up a Soviet-controlled Polish army in the USSR. This led later, when the Red Army entered Poland in 1944, to the arrest and disarmament of Home Army (AK) officers, and the forced integration of rankers into the Soviet-organized army formally led by Zygmunt Berling, a Starobelsk survivor who collaborated with the Soviets as the Red Army advanced into Poland. The general consensus, that the Red Army had over-stretched itself and was not militarily in a position to aid the 1944 Warsaw Uprising, is correct but misleading. Stalin clearly would not have supported an insurrection which was implicitly aimed against Soviet control even if he had been able to do so. Taking a wider view, however, the Western Allies can be faulted for their failure to support London Polish attempts to synchronize their 'Tempest' strategy with the Allied war effort from autumn 1943 onwards. The ultimate result was the complete, although probably inevitable, marginalization of the London Poles and their eventual abandonment by the Western Allies in 1945.

The documentary sources for the above story have long been available with the opening of Western archives in the early 1970s and the earlier publication of the Polish documents.<sup>2</sup> Only the fall of communism, however, has made it possible to have a dispassionate and informed debate about both the morality and effectiveness of the policy of Western concessions to the USSR during the second world war. Moreover, the changed ethical and human rights values after the end of the Cold War threw new light on the handling of various aspects of the truth and the manipulation of public opinion regarding such

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<sup>2</sup> For the latter see *Documents on Polish-Soviet Relations. Vol. 1, 1939–1943* (London 1961), hereafter *DPSR*. Stanislaw Kot, *Conversations with the Kremlin and Dispatches from Russia* (London 1963). I am familiar with their originals in the Sikorski Institute in London which overlap with the Hoover Institute's 'Eastern Archive' (Berkeley, California), now available on microfilm in the Archiwum Akt Nowych (Modern History Archives), hereafter AAN, in Warsaw.

wartime episodes as Katyn. It was not so much that the Soviet documents which became available during the 1990s fundamentally altered prevailing interpretations.<sup>3</sup> By documenting the hard realities they swept away the surrounding myth, speculation and propaganda and made it possible to have a reliably grounded discussion of the other factors. In addition, they produced a massive amount of specific detail on the organization and implementation of the Stalinist massacre of Polish PoWs by the NKVD.<sup>4</sup> I do not intend to cover the whole of Polish–Soviet relations for 1941–43 here, but to follow through the strand leading up to the Katyn revelations in order to indicate the historical and political background which formed the initial cast out of which the protracted subsequent struggle for the truth about the 1940 massacre developed. The maxim that historical truth is always the first victim of politics is amply borne out by Katyn. Its interpretation was later to be determined by the attribution of responsibilities for the Cold War during its varied phases just as much as by evidence indicating either Soviet or German guilt.

Polish–Soviet relations went through a number of phases between 1941 and 1943.<sup>5</sup> There was a direct and inverse correlation between initial Soviet weakness and Moscow's readiness to re-establish collaboration with the Poles, if only to mollify their new Western Allies. The prime minister of the London government-in-exile and commander-in-chief of the Polish Forces Abroad General Władysław Sikorski made a broadcast on 23 June 1941 welcoming the ending of the 'Nazi-Soviet combination' — the source of Poland's 'terrible disaster'.<sup>6</sup> Sikorski, and his Foreign Minister Auguste Zaleski, informed interlocutors, such as the British Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden, and the Soviet ambassador in London Ivan Maisky, of the London Polish view on contentious issues. The government-in-exile argued that the USSR should accept

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3 The key pre-1990 texts concerned with the crusade for establishing the truth about Katyn in addition to Zawodny remain: Henri de Montfort, *Le Massacre de Katyn* (Paris 1966); Louis FitzGibbon, *Unpitied and Unknown. Katyn — Bologoye — Dergachi* (London 1975). Allen Paul, *Katyn. Stalin's Massacre and the Seeds of Polish Resurrection* (Annapolis, MD 1991) is a transitional 'bottom-up' study. Gerd Kaiser, *Katyn. Das Staatsverbrechen — das Staatsgeheimnis* (Berlin 2002) reproduces the new material. The best documented contemporary Polish examination is Stanisław Jaczyński, *Zagłada oficerów wojska polskiego na wschodzie, wrzesień 1939 — maj 1940* (Warsaw 2000).

4 I have examined the subject in *Katyn and the Soviet Massacre of 1940. Truth, Justice and Memory* (London 2005) to which the reader is referred for the full discussion. As a result of extensive Polish–Russian archival co-operation in the early 1990s a great number of Russian documents were photocopied and transferred to the Central Military Archive in Warsaw. The key documents concerning the 1940 massacre have been published in *Katyn. Dokumenty Zbrodni* (Warsaw, 3 vols 1995–2001), hereafter *KDZ*.

5 The official version of the British role in Soviet–Polish relations in this period is covered with what I would call pudic reticence by Llewellyn Woodward, *British Foreign Policy in the Second World War*, vol. 2 (London 1971). In other words, he barely hints at the embarrassing dilemma facing the British in their refusal to question Stalin's cover-up of Katyn publicly or to oppose his policy on Poland's revised postwar frontiers and of forcing an alternative communist élite on its country in place of the London Poles at its end.

6 *DPSR*, vol. 1, no. 86.

that the annulment of the August 1939 Ribbentrop–Molotov Pact as well as of all subsequent anti-Polish German–Soviet agreements signified a return to the legal and actual status quo concerning Poland’s Riga Eastern Frontier and the Soviet Occupied Eastern Territories.<sup>7</sup> The Soviets rejected this, favouring ‘the independence of the Polish state within the limits of Polish nationality’.<sup>8</sup> Both sides maintained their respective standpoints in the ambiguous agreement of 21 July 1941 re-establishing diplomatic relations. The Soviet government recognized ‘the treaties concerning territorial changes in Poland which were concluded by the USSR since July 1939 as invalid’. It agreed to the establishment of a Polish army under Polish command in the USSR but ‘under the direction’ of Soviet military authorities.<sup>9</sup> Sikorski showed excessive goodwill by hailing the agreement as regulating ‘disputes which have mutually divided us for centuries’ and as heralding ‘a new era in Polish–Russian relations’.<sup>10</sup> The Presidium of the Supreme Soviet tersely amnestied ‘all Polish citizens deprived of their freedom on the territory of the USSR’ on 12 August.<sup>11</sup> The same day the VKP(b) (Communist Party) Politburo laid down the details of their release. Provisional identity documents were to be issued. Those who opted for Polish nationality would register with the Polish embassy and receive Polish passports and material support; the envisaged Polish army would be divided into units of 12,000 in Buzuluk, Saratov and Kamshyn.<sup>12</sup>

The Polish government-in-exile maintained principles of full sovereignty and operational control over its forces fighting under Allied and British Command in the Anglo-Polish Military Agreement of 5 August 1940.<sup>13</sup> It thought that it had protected the same principles in the Military Agreement of 14 August 1941 with the USSR.<sup>14</sup> The different story of the establishment of the Polish army in the USSR and the Polish–Soviet–British exchanges regarding their political relationship can be followed in detail elsewhere.<sup>15</sup> What is highlighted here are the growing complications caused by the issue of what was termed the ‘missing officers’. Natalia Lebedeva, the Russian historian whose archival investigations were important in forcing Gorbachev to accept Soviet responsibility for the 1940 massacre in 1990, argues that the refusal

7 Ibid., nos 89, 90, 91.

8 Maisky conversation with Sikorski and Zaleski, 11 July 1941, *DPSR*, vol. 1, no. 94.

9 *DPSR*, vol. 1, no. 105.

10 Ibid., no. 109.

11 Ibid., no. 110.

12 Wojciech Materski (ed.), *Z archiwów sowieckich*. Vol. I, *Polscy jeńcy wojenni w ZSRR, 1939–1941* (Warsaw 1992), 76–82.

13 *Foreign Relations of the United States* (Washington, DC 1956–63), hereafter *FRUS*, 1941, 1, 217–18.

14 *KDZ*, vol. 3, no. 198.

15 Anita Prazmowska, *Britain and Poland, 1939–1943. The Betrayed Ally* (Cambridge 1995); John Coutouvidis and Jaime Reynolds, *Poland, 1939–1947* (Leicester 1986); George Kacewicz, *Great Britain, the Soviet Union and the Polish Government in Exile (1939–1945)* (The Hague 1979); Jan Karski, *The Great Powers and Poland, 1919–1939* (Lanham, MD 1985); Edward Raczynski, *In Allied London* (London 1962).

of the Soviet authorities to give a satisfactory answer regarding the missing officers complicated Soviet–Polish relations and undermined trust in the Soviet leaders.<sup>16</sup> The London government accepted the official Soviet figures of over 9000 army officers and 181,200 soldiers detained in the USSR. It rejected the claim by the Soviet ambassador in London Ivan Maisky that only 20,000 Polish PoWs were held on Soviet territory by the summer of 1941. Stanisław Kot, the newly-appointed Polish ambassador to Moscow, was instructed to work for the rapid release of all Poles held in Soviet prisons and camps as well as to protect all Polish civilians throughout the USSR by establishing a network of consulates.<sup>17</sup>

The Polish Military Mission in the USSR, headed by Lieutenant-General Władysław Anders, soon became aware that few of the estimated 9400 or so officers could be traced. There was little information on the PoWs held in the Kozelsk, Starobelsk and Ostashkov camps after the spring of 1940. Anders's staff prodded the 395 survivors who had been transported to the Gryazovets camp and produced a list which eventually grew to 10,000 of those who had been detained at Kozelsk, Starobelsk and Ostashkov. Count (Major) Józef Czapski, who had survived Starobelsk because of his aristocratic connections, was given the job of co-ordinating these activities and of seeking out the missing officers. He made no progress with NKVD General Leonid F. Reikhman.<sup>18</sup>

The Soviet documents made available in the 1990s throw definitive light on how Stalin's establishment viewed the statistical parameters of the question. The note of 28 June 1941 of the Head of the NKVD Main Department for Prisoner of War Affairs (DPA), Petr Soprunenko, started off with an initial October 1939 figure of 130,242 PoWs from the former Polish army and internees in the Baltic States held in Soviet captivity. Of these, 42,400 were released to West Ukraine and West Belarus, 43,042 were exchanged with the Germans, 14,587 were liquidated, euphemistically 'handed over to the disposal of the NKVD in April–May 1940', and 2758 were arrested, sentenced, or had died or escaped, while a total of 27,455 still remained in NKVD camps.<sup>19</sup> Of the latter category 7692 were held in Siberian labour camps (Gulags), and 14,104 in a complex of camps around Lv'iv and smaller numbers in other camps.<sup>20</sup> The hurried and badly-organized evacuation of Polish PoWs from German-occupied areas during the summer 1941 invasion, however, resulted in the NKVD's shooting around 2000 of the Lv'iv evacuees rather than allowing them to escape or fall into German hands.<sup>21</sup> By the end of July 1941 the NKVD

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16 Natalia Lebediewa, '60 lat fałszowania i zatajania historii zbrodni Katyńskiej' in Marek Tarczyński (ed.), *Zbrodnia Katyńska po 60 latach* (Warsaw 2000), 105.

17 General Instructions for the Polish Ambassador in the USSR, 28 August 1941, *DPSR*, vol. 1, 158.

18 *Zbrodnia katyńska w świetle dokumentów* (London 12 edns 1948–89), 74–6; Józef Czapski, *Na nieludzkiej ziemi* (London 1969), 141–5.

19 *KDZ*, vol. 3, no. 381.

20 *Ibid.*, no. 175.

21 *Ibid.*, no. 194, 421–2.

had concentrated the bulk of Polish soldiers in two camps in which it still held 2 generals, 8 colonels, 25 lieutenant colonels, 47 majors, 154 captains and 205 lieutenants who had somehow survived the 1940 massacre.<sup>22</sup> By early September, 24,828 had been released into the ranks of the Polish army while 762 remained in the camps.<sup>23</sup>

Kot only received a confused and embarrassed reaction to the question: ‘What happened to 7500 officers?’, which he raised directly with deputy Foreign Minister Andrei Vyshinsky for the first time on 7 October 1941.<sup>24</sup> Vyshinsky was better prepared the second time on 14 October, when he cited the figures of 387,932 Polish citizens confined in the USSR, 71,481 in prisons (sentenced or under investigation), 291,137 deported (in four great waves during 1939–40) or held in special settlements, and 25,314 detained as PoWs. By 1 October 345,511 had been released leaving only 42,421 still detained.<sup>25</sup> Kot bluntly refused to accept the accuracy of these figures as most of the 9400 officers held in the USSR had not been accounted for. The Polish record states that ‘the discussion became loaded with irritation’.<sup>26</sup> The Soviet line firmed up subsequently, maintaining that all the Polish officers had been released; if by some oversight some individuals had not been freed, they soon would be.<sup>27</sup> Vyshinsky continued to stonewall during further exchanges, arguing that this ‘problem does not exist at all’ as it was only a matter of discovering the whereabouts of the officers.<sup>28</sup>

After these preliminary skirmishes Kot met Stalin for the first time in the Kremlin on 14 November. Their exchanges form an important staple of the Katyn literature.<sup>29</sup> Stalin expressed a magnanimous view of the historical conflict between Poland and Russia, claiming that he wanted bygones to be bygones. Regarding current controversies, he felt that the number of 30,000 men, set as a limit on the Polish army by their military agreement, was as much as the USSR could feed and supply, although a larger Polish contribution would be possible if the Western Allies supported it. The charade played out by him and Prime Minister Viachyslav Molotov when Kot asked for the release of all Polish soldiers according to the Supreme Soviet amnesty and pointed out that not a single officer had returned from Starobelsk is well known. Pressed directly by Kot on the obvious existence of detailed lists of the missing officers from the three camps — the Poles had learnt by now that each officer had been interrogated individually — Stalin phoned, or pretended to phone, the NKVD to ask them whether all the Poles had been released!<sup>30</sup> Stalin

22 Soprunenko notes of 30–31 July 1941, *KDZ*, vol. 3, nos 190, 191.

23 Soprunenko to Merkulov, 12 September 1941, *KDZ*, vol. 3, no. 202.

24 *DPSR*, vol. 1, 173–4. *KDZ*, vol. 3, no. 208.

25 For Beria’s more accurate figures of 1 October 1942, *KDZ*, vol. 3, no. 207.

26 Kot–Vyshinsky conversation, 14 October 1941, *DPSR*, vol. 1, no. 130.

27 Kot, *Conversations with the Kremlin*, op. cit., 105.

28 *KDZ*, vol. 3, no. 209.

29 *Ibid.*, no. 149; Kot, op. cit., 106–16.

30 The Soviet record, which otherwise corresponds fairly closely to the Polish one, contains no mention of this particular episode, *KDZ*, vol. 3, no. 212.

then diverted the conversation to the question of where, and when, the Poles wanted to fight the Germans.

Kot informed Sikorski and Zaleski, rather optimistically, that Stalin accepted the unconditional character of the amnesty and seemed irritated by the failure of his subordinates to keep him fully informed on the prisoner releases.<sup>31</sup> Significantly, nothing meaningful was said about the latter the following day when Kot and Molotov prepared the ground for Sikorski's visit to Moscow.<sup>32</sup> The Polish request to establish consulates was rejected in favour of temporary delegates to specific areas for agreed tasks. An exchange of diplomatic notes only confirmed the Soviet hard-line big lie that 'the amnesty of the Polish citizens has been fully executed' apart from criminals.<sup>33</sup> The Polish reply of 3 December denied that this was so, requested a list of those detained and protested against the Soviets' application of ethnic exemptions to the 1939 decree and their interpretation of Polish community relief as anti-Soviet activity.<sup>34</sup>

Despite Anglo-American hopes and Sikorski's best intentions, his visit to Moscow of 3–4 December failed to resolve Polish–Soviet difficulties and to establish a constructive basis for their relationship. At their Kremlin meeting on 3 December, in the presence of Molotov, General Anders and Kot, Stalin nodded at Sikorski's declaration that he was committed to establishing Polish–Soviet friendship but that this depended on the resolution of their current difficulties.<sup>35</sup> Knowing the truth about the 1940 massacre, he could hardly have felt comfortable at having to listen to Sikorski telling him to his face that his (Stalin's) declaration on the implementation of the amnesty was not being fulfilled. A large number of Poles were still held in labour camps and prisons. Stalin retorted in a famous exchange in the literature which maintained the lie that this was 'impossible' as 'all the Poles had been released'. Sikorski gave Stalin a way out by suggesting that lower-level authorities were not carrying out orders. Camp commanders had complete lists of prisoners released and detained. Sikorski handed over an incomplete list of 4000 detained Poles: 'Not one of them has returned.' Stalin replied, 'That is impossible, they have escaped.' In reply to Anders' question where they could have escaped to, Stalin came out with the oft-repeated classic line, 'Well, to Manchuria'. The laconic dictator, unused to being interrogated and corrected, diverted the conversation onto the firmer ground of the location and employment of the liberated Polish civilian population as well as the terms and conditions of their military collaboration. This included Sikorski's proposal that the Poles be allowed to regroup in Persia.<sup>36</sup>

Although the tone at the subsequent banquet was friendly enough, nothing

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31 Kot, *op. cit.*, 116.

32 *DPSR*, vol. 1, no. 151.

33 *Ibid.*, nos 150, 153.

34 *DPSR*, vol. 1, 230.

35 *DPSR*, vol. 1, no. 159; Kot, *op. cit.*, 140–55; *KDZ*, vol. 3, 499–509.

36 *FRUS*, 1942, vol. III, 100–4.



of substance was resolved in their Declaration of Friendship and Mutual Assistance signed on 4 December.<sup>37</sup> The two parties merely committed themselves to fighting the war to a favourable conclusion. All the contentious issues concerning postwar frontiers, the treatment of Poles within the USSR and the organization of the Polish forces were left unresolved. The hopelessly optimistic Sikorski left believing that the size of the Polish army would only be limited by the number of Poles fit for military service in the USSR and that the Poles would be freely allowed to organize it and their delegates to succour the civilian Poles.<sup>38</sup> He envisaged such a 150,000-strong force as strengthening the Polish–Soviet relationship within the Great Power alliance.<sup>39</sup> The basic premise of Sikorski’s policy that the Western Allies would support Poland’s postwar security and frontiers in exchange for her contribution to the war effort was, however, to prove mistaken.<sup>40</sup> Churchill’s promise that the Anglo-American allies ‘would not allow Poland to be harmed’ and that ‘a powerful and independent Polish state’ would be restored only seemed possible for a short while.<sup>41</sup> Such hopes were to be squashed by Stalin without overmuch Western opposition, but his ambiguous and skilful tactical manoeuvring encouraged Western self-delusions on that score for long after Stalingrad. His more co-operative immediate tack was also maintained following Sikorski’s Moscow visit. The Soviet State Defence Committee resolved on 25 December 1941 that the size of the Polish army in the USSR should be set at 96,000, grouped in six divisions.<sup>42</sup>

The folder handed over by the archivists of President Yeltsin’s newly democratic Russian Republic to the Director of the Polish Main Archives in November 1992 contained Soviet documents concerning the organization of the Polish army in the USSR during 1941–42.<sup>43</sup> Beria’s note of 30 October 1941 for Stalin revealed that the number of Polish military in the USSR was 40,961 (1985 officers, 11,919 sub-officers and 27,077 ordinary ranks), organized in two infantry divisions, a reserve regiment and an army staff of 508.<sup>44</sup> Beria, at that time, considered that its commanders, Generals Władysław Anders, Mieczysław Boruta-Spiechowicz and Michał Tokarzewski, as well as Colonels Leopold Okulicki, Zygmunt Berling and Janusz Gaładyk, were col-

37 *DPSR*, vol. 1, no. 161.

38 Sikorski to Churchill, 17 December 1941, *DPSR*, vol. 1.

39 For studies of Sikorski during the Polish People’s Republic (PRL) see Walentyna Korpalska, *Władysław Eugeniusz Sikorski. Biografia polityczna* (Wrocław 1981); Olgierd Terlecki, *Generał Sikorski* (Kraków, 2 vols, 1981–3); Roman Wapiński, *Generał Sikorski* (Warsaw 1978).

40 Sikorski’s report of 12 January 1942 to the Council of Ministers, *DPSR*, vol. 1, no. 171. For favourable studies of Sikorski’s pro-British and Federalist wartime aims by personal and ministerial associates, Marian Kukiel, *Generał Władysław Sikorski — żołnierz i mąż stanu Polski Walczącej* (London 1970); Karol Popiel, *Generał Sikorski w mojej pamięci* (London 1987).

41 Sikorski–Churchill conversation of 31 January 1942, *DPSR*, vol. 1, no. 179.

42 *KDZ*, vol. 3, no. 223; Wojciech Materski (ed.), *Armia Polska w ZSSR, 1941–1942* (Warsaw 1992), 41–5.

43 Materski (ed.), *Armia Polska w ZSSR*, op. cit.

44 *Ibid.*, 19–31; Materski (ed.), *Polscy jeńcy wojenni w ZSSR*, op. cit., 95.

laborating loyally. He accepted that, although they were very pro-British, they were attempting to dampen down the bitter anti-Soviet sentiments of camp survivors like General Jerzy Wołkowicki.<sup>45</sup>

The question arises whether there was a real possibility, during the period of maximum Soviet weakness between the German invasion in June 1941 and Stalingrad, for Polish–Soviet relations to be re-established on the genuine collaborative basis desired by Sikorski and the Western Allies. If there was, the Poles might have been treated in the same way as the Czechoslovaks, were it not for the dilemma which Stalin faced as a result of massacring the Polish officers in 1940. A dictator like Stalin could not afford to reveal his crimes, mistakes and lies publicly, and, even less, to allies. Stalin played for time and just survived in 1941. He profited, subsequently, in 1942–43, from the increasing leverage provided by the Red Army's contribution to the Allied war effort. He thus diminished the standing of the London Poles and their forces in the wartime alliance by making tactical concessions such as their partial evacuation through Persia. By the time Katyn was revealed by the Germans it was barely an annoying pinprick to Stalin. By forcing the Western Allies to accept his version he prepared the ground for gaining their commitment to fight the war through to Germany's unconditional surrender and allied occupation and to Great Power determination of the postwar settlement. The London Poles had been excluded from having any say over the Polish army in the USSR or over Stalin's political forces, which were to return to Poland and to establish communism in the Red Army's baggage train. Was any other outcome possible? Only if the 1940 massacre had not occurred, fuelling Stalin's need to establish and maintain the big lie on the issue. The situation would also have taken a different turn if military stalemate had continued on the Eastern Front, increasing the need for Polish manpower and giving the British greater leverage in Moscow. The most tantalizing question, however, is what would have happened if the Western Allies had tested Stalin by rendering Sikorski real, as against largely verbal, support.

Increasingly bitter Polish–Soviet recriminations about the missing officers continued throughout 1942 against the backdrop of wider events and issues and ongoing controversies over frontiers and territories. A Polish note of 28 January 1942 raised 'the sad fact' that over 8000 officers and all those from the Kozelsk, Starobelsk and Ostashkov camps had not been liberated and were, probably, still held in labour camps in Nova Zemlia, Yakutsk or on the Kolyma river.<sup>46</sup> It received the, by now, stock Soviet reply that all the officers had been released in accordance with the August 1941 amnesty.<sup>47</sup> Czapski also lobbied the American embassy in Moscow about the missing PoWs.<sup>48</sup>

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45 Materski (ed.), *Armia Polska w ZSSR*, op. cit., 37–9.

46 *DPSR*, vol. 1, no. 177; Raczynski note 49/Sow/42 of 28 January 1942, Hoover Institution, Eastern Archive, hereafter HIEA AAN.

47 *DPSR*, vol. 1, no. 192; Bogolomov note MC57 of 13 March 1942, HIEA AAN.

48 *FRUS*, 1942, vol. III, 104–5, 150–1, 155.

As of 1 March 1942, the Polish army was 60,000 strong (3090 officers of uncertain and varied provenance, 16,202 sub-officers and 40,708 rankers).<sup>49</sup> Beria reported to Stalin that there was a wide range of views within the officer corps ranging from loyal collaboration in the Sikorski group to extreme nationalist and authoritarian views which regarded the Soviet alliance in purely tactical terms. Anders had called on his commanders to stop gossiping ‘about all our grievances and experiences’ and to check what could be construed as anti-Soviet agitation. Anders raised the issue of the missing officers from the three camps in his conversation with Stalin on 18 March 1941 concerning the limitation of Polish rations and the subsequent evacuation to Persia which started in the spring of 1942.<sup>50</sup> Stalin suggested that they might have fallen into German hands.<sup>51</sup> He blamed the Allied shortfall in wheat deliveries for the cut in Polish rations. Stalin, therefore, agreed that the best outcome was the proposed Polish withdrawal and regrouping in Persia.<sup>52</sup> What was at stake was that Anders, influenced by his experience of the Lubianka prison during 1939–41, refused to commit the Poles to battle unless the Soviets provided firm guarantees regarding their supply and independence and allowed the London Poles to benefit politically from their military participation.<sup>53</sup> Stalin wished to limit their influence and had already decided to replace them with his own wholly controlled formation. All this scuppered Sikorski’s plans for good. His mouthpiece in Moscow ambassador Kot could only express the forlorn hope that ‘the maximum participation of the Polish army and the shared spilt blood in the struggle against the Germans on Soviet soil would bind both nations closely together and bring about the best possible result for future relations’.<sup>54</sup>

The departure of the main body of Polish soldiers for Persia, however, freed Stalin from any remaining allied constraints. It also allowed Anders, who was sceptical of the attempts by Sikorski and the British to achieve Polish–Soviet military collaboration and political understanding, to claim credit for having saved substantial numbers of his compatriots from ‘the Inhuman Land’. In the first evacuation to Persia, between late March and early April 1942, 42,254 Poles — 30,099 soldiers and 12,155 civilians — left the USSR.<sup>55</sup> In the second evacuation completed at the end of August 1942, 69,917 Poles left — 41,103 soldiers and 28,814 civilians.<sup>56</sup> The Soviet figures, therefore, claim that

49 Beria to Stalin, 14 March 1942, *KDZ*, vol. 3, no. 230.

50 Beria’s preparatory note for Stalin’s meeting with Anders accepted that the 44,000 rations would not cover even the 60,000 soldiers already enrolled in the Polish army in the USSR, Materski (ed.), *Armia Polska w ZSSR*, op. cit., 49–73.

51 *DPSR*, vol. 1, 307.

52 Molotov to ambassador in London, Bogomolov, 21 March 1942, *Armia Polska w ZSSR*, op. cit., 79–80.

53 Cf. *Polityka* (Warsaw), 1992, no. 40, 13.

54 Vyshinsky conversation with Kot, 24 March 1942, *Armia Polska w ZSSR*, op. cit., 85.

55 Beria to Stalin, 4 April 1942, *KDZ*, vol. 3, 542. Also in *Armia Polska w ZSSR*, op. cit., 91.

56 Cipher telegram by Soviet Consul in Pahlevi (Mikhail Koptelov), 5 September 1942, *KDZ*, vol. 3, no. 240. Also *Armia Polska w ZSSR*, op. cit., 107.

112,171 Poles left the USSR, of whom 71,202 were military and 40,969 civilians. The Soviets had originally opposed the withdrawal of Polish civilians under cover of the military evacuation but found it practical to turn a blind eye. They were also aware of the Polish splits between Sikorski's supporters and the strongly anti-Soviet General Kazimierz Sosnkowski, who had been a leading figure in the interwar regime dominated by Marshal Józef Piłsudski from 1926 till his death in 1935. An opponent of the withdrawal Colonel Okulicki expressed the fear that the Poles would end up as 'colonial troops' for the English, as indeed they did.<sup>57</sup>

Relations then deteriorated rapidly with increasing Soviet arrests and harassment of Polish community relief officials in the USSR. Direct investigation by the Poles within the USSR of the missing officers became impossible and was treated as espionage. The citizenship and frontier issues flared up repeatedly. By July, arrested embassy officials and delegates were accused officially of 'anti-Soviet activities and intelligence work'.<sup>58</sup> A Polish note of 27 August 1942 stated that 'the negative attitude of the Soviet Government to the further development of the Polish forces' was demonstrated by its failure to provide information about the missing 8000 Polish officers.<sup>59</sup>

Continuing Soviet arrests of embassy officials and of their 'men of trust' and the Soviet seizure of the Kuibyshev embassy archives led Sikorski to a pessimistic appraisal of Polish-Soviet relations towards the end of 1942 by defending the Polish government against the charge that it was to blame for the evacuation to Persia. He promised friendly co-existence with Soviet Russia and co-operation against the Germans but found it increasingly difficult to defend Poland's independence and his government's freedom of political decision.<sup>60</sup>

Kot had not been a career diplomat. Much was made at the time, and later, about his alleged indiscretions, especially by Sikorski's hardline opponents and supercilious British Foreign Office functionaries. Given the context of worsening Polish-Soviet conflicts, the brick wall faced by the Poles over the missing officers and the Allied priority of maintaining the Soviet war effort against Nazi Germany, his performance, as well as that of Sikorski's government-in-exile, can now be viewed with greater understanding.<sup>61</sup> When Kot left in July to become Minister of Information in London, his successor Tadeusz Romer faced an even more thankless task. The Soviets ratcheted up the pressure and the Poles' lack of political and military muscle became fully apparent.

Molotov, at his most pedantically legalistic, brought the full weight of Soviet power to bear upon Romer on 20 February 1943.<sup>62</sup> What Romer described as 'a historic moment' of crisis in Polish-Soviet relations was pre-

57 Beria to Stalin, 24 July 1942, *Armia Polska w ZSSR*, op. cit., 95.

58 Vyshinsky to chargé d'affaires Sokolnicki, 20 July 1942, *DPSR*, vol. 1, no. 251.

59 *DPSR*, vol. 1, 426.

60 *Ibid.*, no. 277.

61 Cf. Piotr Żaroń, *Kierunek wschodni w strategii wojskowo-politycznej gen. Władysława Sikorskiego, 1940-1943* (Warsaw 1988).

62 *DPSR*, vol. 1, no. 291.

precipitated by the Soviet note of 16 January 1943 asserting the Soviet claim to sovereignty over what the Poles regarded as the Occupied Eastern Territories. All inhabitants of West Belarus and West Ukraine (resident as of 1–2 November 1939) had been accorded Soviet citizenship by the Supreme Soviet decree of 29 November 1939, within the framework of the Soviet Citizenship Law of 19 August 1939.<sup>63</sup> ‘By way of exception’, the Soviets had been prepared to regard ethnic Poles resident there as Polish citizens. But their declaration of 1 December 1941 stated that this could ‘in no case serve as the basis of the analogous recognition as Polish citizens’ of the Ukrainian, Belarusan and Jewish nationalities, as ‘the question of a Polish–Soviet frontier is not yet settled and is liable to discussion in the future’.<sup>64</sup> Molotov blamed the crisis entirely on the Poles for failing to respond to Soviet goodwill regarding the exception.

Romer saw Stalin on the night of 26–27 February. Extensive discussion merely clarified conflicting viewpoints on the issues of citizenship, territory and propaganda.<sup>65</sup> The Soviet news agency TASS attacked the London Poles on 1 March for their imperialist refusal to accept Belarusan and Ukrainian rights to reunite with their constituent Soviet republics. The Poles responded with protests against the Soviet execution of two well-known Jewish Bund (interwar socialist trade union) activists Viktor Alter and Henryk Ehrlich, the arrest of Polish relief delegates and the Soviet refusal to allow Polish orphans to leave the USSR. They also lobbied the British and Americans on their rights and claims to the Eastern Territories. The Soviets, however, revealed their hand in March 1943 by transforming their group of pro-Moscow Poles resident in the USSR into the Union of Polish Patriots (ZPP), under the chairmanship of the writer Wanda Wasilewska. Stalin also began to organize the entirely Moscow-controlled Kościuszko division in the USSR.

Stalin had, therefore, by April 1943 excluded the London Poles from having any say over developments within the USSR, including the fate of the citizens of West Belarus and West Ukraine. He now used the government-in-exile’s reaction to the Katyn revelations as the pretext for breaking off diplomatic relations to marginalize it even further by forcing the British and Americans to take the Soviet side unconditionally against the London Poles.

This deterioration in Polish–Soviet relations during 1942 meant that the consequences of the discovery of the Katyn bodies should not have surprised Western élites. Public opinion, kept in the dark about the earlier problems, regarded Katyn as a thunderbolt out of a blue sky, particularly as the British censored Polish attempts to present their viewpoint. The form of the Germans’ announcement and their utilization of the discovery of the Katyn section of the 1940 massacre also complicated the historical truth enormously. Although the

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63 *Ibid.*, no. 285.

64 *Ibid.*, no. 157.

65 *Ibid.*, no. 295. Romer failed to gain any concessions in subsequent discussions with Molotov during March, *DPSR*, vol. 1, nos 299, 300.

German High Command had received reports of Polish bodies in the forest much earlier, the timing of the announcement seems to have been decided by Goebbels' judgment of the best moment for his proposed propaganda coup. On the morning of 13 April 1943, Radio Berlin announced that the German occupying authorities had discovered a Soviet execution site at Katyn in the Kozie Gory hills west of Smolensk. The Poles had been killed by revolver shots to the back of the neck and buried in their military uniforms, while the documentation left on them by the Soviets meant that their identification would be possible.<sup>66</sup> The Germans presumed that all 10,000 missing officers had been murdered there. Goebbels' subsequent propaganda use of the increased figure of 11–12,000 was, as we now know, mistaken, although self-serving. The Germans' aim was to divert attention from their planned liquidation of the Jewish Ghetto in Warsaw in the second half of April, although their primary objective was to split the Poles and the Western Allies from the Soviets.<sup>67</sup>

The discovery, and particularly its German auspices, confronted the government-in-exile with an impossible dilemma. Total capitulation to Stalin was ruled out, not only because it (the government-in-exile) contained strongly nationalist supporters of Poland's interwar Piłsudski regime. Sikorski's followers and the members of leftist peasant and socialist parties, as good Polish patriots, also could not swallow at face value the immediate Soviet cover story that the Germans were responsible, as they had captured and murdered the Polish PoWs in late summer 1941 after the Soviet withdrawal from the relevant part of the Smolensk region.<sup>68</sup> The Polish leaders were also aware of the understandable sensitivities of the Polish troops in the Middle East fighting for the British in North Africa, particularly those who had escaped from the USSR.

The Polish cabinet made a start at tackling the issue on 15 April by setting out what it regarded as the definite facts.<sup>69</sup> The Soviets had admitted capturing about 10,000 Polish officers. The Poles' excellent intelligence sources within the USSR confirmed that between 60 and 300 PoWs had been removed, almost every day, from the Kozelsk, Starobelsk and Ostashkov camps between 5 April and mid-May 1940. The ones from Kozelsk were transported towards Smolensk, while 400 were transported to the Gryazovets camp in Vologda district. Repeated Polish efforts during 1941–42 to elicit information from the Soviet authorities regarding the 15,000 Poles held in the three camps had all proved fruitless. The Polish government had, consequently, decided to request the International Red Cross, as the most competent international body, to send a delegation to Katyn to investigate the mass graves and to verify the facts. Their view was that the news was so shocking that 'only irrefutable facts

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66 *DPSR*, vol. 1, no. 305.

67 Cf. *Armia Krajowa w dokumentach, 1939–1945*, vol. II, *czerwiec 1941–kwiecień 1945* (London 1973), 500.

68 Soviet Information Bureau communiqué of 15 April 1940, *DPSR*, vol. 1, no. 306.

69 Minister of National Defence communiqué, *DPSR*, vol. 1, no. 307.

can outweigh the numerous and detailed German statements concerning the discovery of the bodies.<sup>70</sup>

The Polish government's denunciation of German crimes against the Polish nation and denial that the nazis had any moral right to speak on their behalf was to be shrugged off contemptuously by the Soviets.<sup>71</sup> The Poles had stressed that they were acting completely independently of the Germans. They were extremely unfortunate in that the Germans also asked the Red Cross to investigate at exactly the same time which allowed the Soviets to depict these wholly independent moves as being part of a co-ordinated conspiracy.<sup>72</sup> *Pravda* on 19 April 1943 attacked 'Hitler's Polish collaborators'. Stalin's reaction was rapid and ruthless as he could not afford to admit that one of his crimes had come to light. Churchill and Roosevelt accepted Stalin's resultant bluster that he was the aggrieved party. Whether they did so in good faith or for the good of their allied warfighting strategy can be debated. The result was that the Poles were blamed and traduced, both then and subsequently.<sup>73</sup>

Following the maxim that the best defence is always attack, Stalin savaged the London Poles. They had supported 'infamous fascist slander against the USSR' and colluded with the 'farical investigation' designed to cover up the nazis' own 'monstrous crime against the Polish officers'.<sup>74</sup> The ambiguous description of the breaking-off of relations as an 'interruption', however, fed forlorn British hopes for months that they might be resumed. Churchill supported Stalin's opposition to the Red Cross investigation and accepted his argument that it was bound to be fraudulent as it would take place under German control.<sup>75</sup> Eden prevailed upon Sikorski on 24 April to withdraw the request for the Red Cross investigation.<sup>76</sup> Churchill's appeal to Stalin, however, failed to prevent Molotov from breaking off relations officially on 25 April.<sup>77</sup> Molotov's note argued that the Poles had used 'the slanderous Hitlerite fake' as an attempt to gain territorial concessions at the expense of Soviet Belarus, Ukraine and Lithuania. The Foreign Office was made fully aware of the London Polish view that the Soviets had purposely exacerbated their mutual relations and rejected all Polish overtures brutally and high-handedly following the 1941 Polish–Soviet agreement. Katyn seems 'to have but changed the timetable for a rupture towards which the Kremlin had been

70 Minister Raczyński to Soviet ambassador in London, Bogomolov, 20 April 1943, *DPSR*, vol. 1, no. 309.

71 Polish government statement of 17 April 1943 concerning the discovery of the graves of the Polish officers near Smolensk, *DPSR*, vol. 1, no. 308.

72 Alexandra Kwiatkowska-Viatteau, *1940–1943, Katyn. L'Armée Polonaise assassinée* (Brussels 1982), 22–3.

73 *DPSR*, vol. 1, nos 314, 319.

74 Stalin telegram to Churchill, 21 April 1943, PRO FO371/34569 C484569/258/55; *DPSR*, vol. 1, no. 310.

75 Churchill to Stalin, 24 April 1943, *DPSR*, vol. 1, no. 312.

76 PRO FO371/34570 C4668/258/55.

77 Cf. *DPSR*, vol. 1, nos 313, 315, 316, 318.

heading for 16 months'.<sup>78</sup> But this was not the main factor in play. The liberal moralism of the British élites made it psychologically impossible, quite apart from their definition of the national interest, for them to accept, at least publicly, that their Soviet ally was a mass murderer. They, therefore, had to reject what would normally have been accepted as overwhelming evidence of proof of Soviet guilt for the Katyn massacre. They continued to do so for over four decades until the fall of communism, by undermining key aspects of the case against the Soviets in order to justify what the Foreign Office called the suspension of judgment line.<sup>79</sup>

The historical interpretation of this crucial episode in Polish–Soviet relations naturally varied subsequently, according to political circumstances.<sup>80</sup> From 1943 until the onset of the Cold War the London Poles were like Banquo's ghost haunting the uneasy conscience of the Allies until the realities of the postwar Soviet takeover of Eastern Europe became apparent. The immediate reaction to the Stalinist period of the Cold War was to swing excessively the other way, especially in America with McCarthyism and the year-long Congressional Committee investigation into Katyn in 1952.<sup>81</sup> Détente, however, favoured revisionist interpretations. The influential leftist American historian Gabriel Kolko, for example, submerged the truth about specific episodes, such as Katyn, in a wider doctrine of the historical inevitability of the postwar division of Europe and subsequent Cold War.<sup>82</sup> Kolko conceded Soviet guilt over Katyn as the Stalinists wanted to destroy the alternative Polish ruling class. He accepted that the Soviet–London Polish break over Katyn merely confirmed a longer-standing rupture reaching back to the Polish–Soviet War of 1920. But Kolko also blamed the London Poles for counting on firm Anglo-American support and thus failing to make whatever deal was possible with Stalin.<sup>83</sup> Kolko's conclusion that 'without Katyn nothing would have been different in Polish–Soviet relations' is fundamentally wrong, although it is little comfort that 'Katyn was the exception rather than the rule' in Soviet second world war practices.<sup>84</sup>

78 Raczyński to William Strang, 8 October 1943, HIEA AAN.

79 This aspect is covered in detail in chapters six and seven of my study. It came out into the open with the PRO's release in the early 1970s of the two major reports by Sir Owen O'Malley, ambassador to the London government-in-exile. This debate, including a subsequent controversy over the erection of a Katyn Memorial in London, was publicized at the time in a series of publications by Louis FitzGibbon, most notably, *Unpitied and Unknown*, op. cit.

80 As this article bristles with sensitive controversies, the reader is again directed to my book (London 2005) as well as to Anita Prazmowska, *Civil War in Poland, 1942–1948* (Basingstoke 2004). For information on the Polish personalities involved consult George Sanford, *Historical Dictionary of Poland* (Lanham, MD, rev. 2nd edn 2003).

81 For the latter see Robert Szymczak, *The Unquiet Dead. The Katyn Forest Massacre as an Issue in American Diplomacy and Politics* (Doctor of Arts Dissertation, Carnegie-Mellon University 1980. Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms International no 4012, 1985).

82 Gabriel Kolko, *The Politics of War. Allied Diplomacy and the World Crisis of 1943–1945* (London 1969), 99–104.

83 *Ibid.*, 104.

84 *Ibid.*, 106.



Criticism of the London Poles for not acquiescing meekly in their historical defeat, from Katyn through the 1944 Warsaw Uprising to Yalta, however, reads somewhat differently after the collapse of communism. It also raises basic questions about the handling by Western governments of the dilemma between truth and moral principles on the one hand and political expediency on the other. The case for the Curzon Line and Oder–Neisse frontiers has now been confirmed by history. But our preceding analysis of the hinge period of Polish–Soviet relations refutes Kolko’s claim that the significance of the Katyn affair needs to be downgraded. On the contrary, the truth about the whole 1940 massacre challenges both the morality and political wisdom of British–American policy regarding the second world war postwar settlement and passive acquiescence in the Sovietization of Eastern Europe.

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