



## Chapter One

# “Scurrilous Provocation”

## *The Katyn Massacre*<sup>1</sup>

### **Background:**

In a forty-day period starting April 3, 1940, special troops of the Soviet NKVD under the command of “commissar general” Lavrenty Beria systematically executed some twenty-two thousand Poles held in occupied territory and in western provinces of Belorussia and Ukraine. Of these, 4,421 were shot in the Katyn forest, a short distance from the city of Smolensk. The rest were from other camps with exotic names like Starobelskii or Ostashkovskii, but “Katyn” became the symbol of the 1940 Soviet massacre of Polish officers, held in Soviet POW camps.

As a typical NKVD operation, the killings were done in great secrecy. They required a month to carry out because necessary orders had to be distributed to the various camps, victims had to be processed by NKVD tribunals, executioners assembled, and prisoners transported to killing fields. Lacking the sophisticated mass killing machinery of the Nazis, victims were shot one by one before open trenches.

The official Soviet cover story was that there were indeed massacres of Poles in occupied Polish and Soviet territories, but they were carried out by Hitler’s SS about one year later. According to the Soviet version, the victims were captured Polish officers assembled into work brigades before their extermination by the Nazis.



Photograph of site of Katyn massacre, located in the vicinity of Smolensk.

As invading German forces occupied these execution sites, they conducted investigations in which they invited the Polish Red Cross to participate. A German commission interviewed eyewitnesses and exhumed bodies that bore the distinctive markings of NKVD executions. Seeing Katyn as a potential wedge between the Soviet Union and the Polish exile government, Nazi propaganda czar Joseph Goebbels released their findings, implicating Stalin's forces in these atrocities. Goebbels' convincing forensic and other evidence indeed caused a deep rift in Soviet-Polish relations, to the great concern of the Allied forces.

After the German retreat and Soviet reoccupation of its western provinces, the Soviet Union began its own investigation. The Burdenko Commission (named after its head, the president of the USSR Academy of Sciences) conveniently concluded that the Germans had massacred the Polish officers in 1941. The Burdenko Commission's findings became the official Soviet mantra and even found support in the Nuremberg trials, in which Nazi Germany was accused of ethnic cleansing of Poles.

The war ended with two competing versions of the mass burial grounds of Poles executed in occupied Polish territories and in the western parts of Ukraine and Belorussia: the German account released by Hitler's chief propagandist, the originator of the "big lie," versus the Soviet account issued by its chief scientist in the name of a heroic wartime ally. It was the Soviet account that was false.

The Soviet state and party archives chronicle a cover-up that began with Stalin's March 5, 1940, top-secret execution order and ended a half century later on January 22, 1991, with an official communication to the Polish ambassador, admitting that NKVD chief Lavrenty Beria was responsible for the killings. The Communist Party's secret files on the Katyn case include fifty-two pages of official documents. They begin with Beria's proposal to execute the Polish prisoners en masse and the Politburo's (Stalin's) written execution order. The Katyn file then turns to the increasingly shaky cover-up and pressure from Polish "friends" to come clean with the true story.

Throughout most of the fifty-year cover-up, the Katyn affair lay dormant. Soviet leaders from Nikita Khrushchev, to Leonid Brezhnev, to Mikhail Gorbachev—all of whom knew the true story—probably breathed sighs of relief during periods of quiet, hoping the matter

was dead and buried. Dormant periods were followed by periodic bursts of indignant propaganda as Western interest in Katyn was revived by television reports, the release of new books, or pressure from indignant Polish relatives. The Soviet official account eventually fell victim to Gorbachev's need to defend the "friendly" regime of General Jaruzelski from attacks by opposition parties. The Katyn "problem" finally drove a reluctant Gorbachev to a grudging and vague admission of guilt based, of course, on "newly discovered evidence."

There are no Soviet heroes in the Katyn files. The head of the USSR Academy of Sciences falsified scientific evidence. Khrushchev, the leader who disclosed Stalin's crimes, concealed the documents as a potential source of embarrassment. The reformer Gorbachev tried every possible maneuver to avoid telling the Poles the truth, and even then gave a "confession" that protected Stalin and the Politburo of the Communist Party.

## The Files: The Smoking Gun

In September of 1939, Germany invaded Poland from the west and the USSR invaded from the east in the wake of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. More than one hundred thousand Polish prisoners, mostly soldiers but also civilian officials, were captured and interned in occupied territory and in western provinces of Belorussia and Ukraine. Upon capture, they did not know their extreme danger. They hoped to be treated as normal POWs.

Two years earlier, Stalin began his "national operations" against ethnic Germans, Latvians, Koreans, Lithuanians, and other minorities working in strategic industries or located in border areas. Stalin feared that the multi-ethnic Soviet Union was a breeding ground for fifth-columnists, who would aid the enemy in case of war. Among his least favored ethnic minorities were Poles, the subject of Stalin's second national operations decree of August 9, 1937, which ordered the imprisonment or execution of members of underground Polish military organizations, political immigrants, and "anti-Soviet nationalistic elements."

For Stalin, the concentration of Polish officers and civilian officials in his own POW camps offered a tempting opportunity to wipe out another potential source of enemy support using the most reliable

method—execution. Moreover, he had a highly efficient ally in charge of his NKVD, who knew how to carry out such operations and to keep them quiet. Lavrenty Beria, the head of the NKVD since November of 1938, was already in charge of the national operations being conducted in the Soviet borderlands. He understood well what his boss wanted and was only too ready to come up with suitable proposals.

The Katyn smoking gun is not hard to find. The most important decisions of the Soviet Union were made formally by its highest ruling body, the Politburo, which in 1940 was a puppet of Stalin. A decision as important as the execution of thousands of Polish POWS would have had to emanate from the Politburo.

Politburo “meetings” (often there were no meetings; rather, members were asked to vote in writing or by telephone) dealt with “questions” posed by various agencies of government, such as the justice ministry, the industrial ministries, or Beria’s NKVD. Such “questions” were posted in the form of written proposals or draft decrees and were approved either in the Politburo meeting or by circulating the question to various Politburo members for their signatures. The Politburo’s (Stalin’s) execution order for Polish officers, therefore, had to be present among Politburo documents.

True to expectations, the Katyn file shows that, on March 5, 1940, Beria addressed a “question of the NKVD” to Stalin, informing him that 14,736 Polish “officers, officials, police officials, gendarmes, and prison officials” were being held in camps in occupied Polish territory and 18,632 similar persons were being held in camps in the western provinces of Ukraine and Belorussia. Beria’s “question” was to the point: “Taking as true the fact that all of them are hardened and unredeemable enemies of Soviet power, the NKVD recommends that their cases be examined in special order with the application of the highest measure of punishment—shooting.” The case reviews should be done “without summoning the arrested parties and without the posting of charges.” In effect, Beria’s “question” was for approval to summarily execute as many as 34,000 Polish prisoners of war. A note on Beria’s memo, handwritten by some faceless bureaucrat, listed his proposal as the “second question of the NKVD” on the Politburo’s agenda of the same day.

Clearly, Beria did not suddenly come up with this proposal on March 5, 1940, for a Politburo meeting later in the day. Stalin and

Beria met one-on-one regularly in Stalin's private office. This is where they would have agreed to the Katyn massacre. It was Stalin's practice to implicate his fellow Politburo members in such matters, despite their perfunctory participation. The other Politburo members knew the Katyn decision was already taken when they saw Stalin's bold signature scrawled at the top of Beria's "question." The signatures of three other Politburo members (Voroshilov, Molotov, and Mikoian) are also affixed to Beria's proposal. Presumably, they were in the building on that day to sign. Two other Politburo members (Kalinin and Kaganovich) were canvassed by telephone and their positive votes are recorded by someone's hand in the left margin of Beria's memo. The Politburo records show that the question was formally approved as "Question no. 144 of the NKVD" in protocol no. 18 of the Politburo session of March 5, 1940.

The excerpt from the Politburo minutes was directed to Beria, placing the responsibility on the first special department of the NKVD to carry out the executions. The document was labeled top secret, requiring recipients to return their copies within 24 hours. Copies were placed in the top secret "special files" of the Politburo, where they remained for Stalin's successors.

The executions began one month later. Beria was a meticulous planner, and his efficiency improved with each operation. Later in May of 1944, he was to boast to Stalin about one of his most successful operations, carried out in two days: "Today, May 20, the operation of deportation of Crimean Tartars was completed. Exiled and transported in echelons 180,014. Echelons sent to new places of settlement in Uzbek republic. There were no incidents in the course of the operation."<sup>2</sup> The Katyn operation was on a much smaller scale, but it needed care. Special tribunals had to be set up in the various camps; executioners had to be assembled, the victims had to be transported to the place of execution, clerks were needed to prepare the case files and to compile execution statistics. An adequate supply of vodka had to be brought in for those who did the actual shooting. Unlike the Nazis, the NKVD used its own officers as executioners, not ordinary soldiers who were likely to tell their friends and relatives. Above all, strict secrecy had to be maintained.

Beria's efficiency was evident in the Katyn operation. His special

NKVD forces processed and dispatched some 22,000 Polish prisoners between April 3 and May 19, 1940, for an average of over five hundred executions per day. Bodies were buried in covered ditches by special NKVD detachments until discovered by occupying German forces two years later.

## The Cover Story

The Katyn affair remained dormant throughout much of the postwar period, although never far below the surface in the “friendly” People’s Republic of Poland and in the Polish Diaspora. The top-secret Katyn file was reviewed by Soviet leaders, albeit infrequently. Records show that Nikita Khrushchev was briefed on its contents in 1959. Some top official checked the file out on March 9, 1965. Konstantin Chernenko and KGB head Yury Andropov reviewed the file in April of 1981 and two functionaries show it passing from one department to another on April 18, 1989, under Gorbachev.

Stalin’s immediate successor, Nikita Khrushchev, was given the March 5, 1940, execution order and was briefed by his minister of interior, A. Shelepin, in a handwritten memo dated March 20, 1959:

Accounting records and other materials are preserved by the Committee of State Security dating from 1940 on the execution of imprisoned and interned officers, gendarmes, police officials, land owners etc. persons of the former bourgeois Poland. In all, 21,857 of them were shot by orders of troikas of the NKVD. . . . The entire operation was based on the decree of the Central Committee of March 5, 1940.

Shelepin cynically concluded:

For Soviet organs, these cases do not represent operational interest, nor are they of historical value. They scarcely represent any real interest for our Polish friends. To the contrary, an accidental revelation could lead to unwelcome consequences for our government. Even more, we have an official version of the Katyn forest executions, confirmed by Soviet organs of power based on the 1944 Special Commission for the Investigation of the Executions of Interned Polish Officers by German-Fascist Occupation

Forces. Based upon the above facts, it would appear wise to destroy all these documents.

Shelepin's attached handwritten decree for the Politburo calling for the "liquidation of all materials carried out in accordance with the Central Committee Decree of March 5, 1940, with the exception of protocols of meetings of the troikas that condemned the prisoners to death" was not adopted, a decision that Khrushchev's successors surely considered a grave mistake. With a submissive Poland firmly entrenched in the Soviet bloc, Khrushchev figured that the March 5, 1940, decree was safe, deep in the vaults of the Politburo.

The next entry in the Katyn file (now referred to as the Katyn "tragedy") came twelve years later, as Khrushchev's successor, Leonid Brezhnev, and his foreign minister, Andrei Gromyko, and KGB head Yury Andropov grappled with the "Anti-Soviet campaign surrounding the Katyn matter." On April 12, 1971, Gromyko warned the Politburo that a book on Katyn and an upcoming BBC film were to blame the Soviet Union for the Katyn massacre. Gromyko's memo recommended informing "our Polish friends" about these unfortunate events.

The BBC film was considered a sufficient threat for the Politburo to move against the British government. Brezhnev's preemptive strike came in the form of secret Politburo instructions to the Soviet ambassador to the UK (with copies to the Soviet embassy in Poland), to protest the upcoming BBC film based on a "scurrilous" book on the "Katyn tragedy" in the following words:

The English side knows well that Hitler's forces have been proven responsible for this crime by an authoritative special commission, which carried out an investigation of this crime immediately after German occupation forces were driven out of the Smolensk region. In 1945-46, the Nuremberg tribunal pronounced German military criminals guilty of the policy of extermination of the Polish people and, in particular, of the shooting of Polish prisoners of war in the Katyn forest.

The English were also to be told in convoluted diplomatic language: "The taking of a position on this matter by the English govern-



ment would be in stark contradiction to efforts to improve relations with the Soviet Union.” The text of the ambassador’s protest was approved by the Politburo on September 8, 1972.

This blunt diplomatic warning to the British government to keep its hands off the Katyn affair bore little fruit; the Politburo was back to fighting anti-Soviet “slander” four years later.

The next Katyn record dates to the Politburo’s April 5, 1976, “Measures to combat Western propaganda about the so-called Katyn affair.” The Politburo ordered the preparation jointly with the Polish Communist Party of “some kind of official declaration from our side so as not to give the opposing side a chance to use these polemics for anti-Soviet purposes.” In addition, the KGB was ordered to use its “unofficial channels” to let ruling circles in Western countries know that “their use of anti-Soviet falsifications would be considered as a provocation intended toward worsening the international situation.” The Smolensk party committee, located a few miles from the Katyn site, was given instructions to maintain in good order a memorial to Polish officers. The Politburo decree also repeated the official Soviet version in a secret “short report about the Katyn affair” that Goebbels himself created an “international medical commission” of sympathetic satellite countries to conduct exhumations in 1943 and to produce a false book blaming the Soviets for the purpose of worsening USSR-Polish relations. The true version was that told by the Burdenko Commission: It was Nazi troops that carried out the massacre of Polish officers working in camps in the region.

Leonid Brezhnev died in November of 1982 and was replaced by KGB head Andropov, who was then replaced by Konstantin Chernenko upon his death sixteen months later. Chernenko’s rule ended with his death in March of 1985, and he was replaced by the young and “reform minded” Mikhail Gorbachev. Gorbachev embarked two years later on his course of perestroika that loosened Soviet control over its increasingly restive Eastern European satellites. Nowhere was the challenge to Soviet hegemony more acute than in Poland, whose independent labor movement was threatening the “friendly” regime of General Jaruzelski. Soviet stonewalling on Katyn was playing into the hands of the Polish anti-Soviet opposition.

The next official Katyn entry comes in May of 1988 as a different

Politburo, now headed by Gorbachev with Eduard Shevardnadze as his foreign minister, prepared for Gorbachev's visit of friendship to the embattled Jaruzelski. Although the bitter Poles would accept nothing less than a full Soviet admission and apology, the Politburo, in its May 5, 1988, meeting, is shown grasping at straws. To improve relations, the Politburo proposed to build a memorial to the victims of the massacre "destroyed by Hitlerites in Katyn." To make matters worse, the tin-eared Politburo also proposed a memorial to the five hundred Soviet POWs killed at Katyn by the "Hitlerites." The Politburo offered another cosmetic concession: a "simplified procedure" for Poles wishing to visit Katyn.

Gorbachev's visit took place July 11 to 14, 1988, and was followed by a Politburo meeting of September 1, 1988, to "realize the proposals put forward during the official friendship visit of General Secretary Gorbachev to Poland." The one proposal relating to Katyn was to "jointly with the Polish People's Republic declare a competition for the best proposal for a memorial to Polish officers buried in Katyn."

Katyn continued to plague Soviet-Polish relations. Gorbachev's Politburo continued its attempts to placate the Polish side, such as promoting the burial of a symbolic urn of ashes from Katyn in Warsaw.

The first crack in the official Soviet line is a memo from Gorbachev's trusted advisor, the head of the international department of the Central Committee, V. Falin, who sent the following frank assessment to Gorbachev on March 6, 1989:

We had in mind that a joint commission of Soviet and Polish scholars, created as a result of joint agreements at the highest level, could work out a consensus on Katyn.<sup>3</sup> After one and a half years, however, the Commission cannot even begin discussion because the Soviet scholars are not authorized to cast doubt on the official version. In the meantime the Polish side has introduced evidence about the unfounded argumentation used by the Soviet extraordinary commission of N. Burdenko in its 1944 report. . . . A year ago, the Soviet side was given a secret report about the participation of the Polish Red Cross in exhumation work in Katyn in April–May 1943 and the conclusion that the NKVD was responsible. Now without waiting for our response, the Polish side is publishing this report in their press.

Falin concluded on a pessimistic note:

In the whole, the problem will not go away. In case of a further worsening of the internal political situation in Poland, the Katyn issue may be used as an excuse for retribution against the Soviet Union.

A similarly bleak assessment “About the Katyn Issue” co-authored by Falin, Shevardnadze, and KGB deputy director Kriuchkov dated two weeks later (March 22, 1989) concluded:

In his press declaration, the Polish representative has legalized the official position of the Polish government that the liquidation of the Polish officers was the responsibility of the USSR. It is true that guilt was laid on Stalin’s NKVD and not on the Soviet government. The tactics of the Polish government are understandable. It is trying to reduce pressure which has been building because of the unfulfilled promise to clarify the Katyn affair. To a degree the pressure is also on us, because there has been no movement on this issue for two years by the joint commission of scholars. Our analysis of the situation shows that to further drag out this business will turn into a millstone around our necks not only for the past but also for current Soviet-Polish relations. . . . It seems we cannot avoid an explanation to the Polish government and Polish society about these tragic events of the past. Maybe it would be wise to say what really happened and who was concretely responsible and thus close the matter. To take such action in the final analysis would cause less damage than the current course of doing nothing.

As Soviet options shrank, the Politburo, on March 31, 1989, ordered the USSR Procurator, the KGB, and the international and ideological departments of the Central Committee to prepare proposals about the future “Soviet line” on the Katyn affair. The impending state visit of General Jaruzelski at the end of April to Moscow moved Soviet authorities into high gear. A draft decree dated April 22, 1989, called for a final report by August 1, 1989. The main archival administrations were to cooperate by supplying materials, and the state radio, and Pravda and Izvestia were to be ready to report the results of the investigation.

The next entry is a February 23, 1990, secret memo entitled “Further

Information on the Katyn Tragedy” prepared for Gorbachev by the USSR General Procurator (N. S. Trubin). The memo speaks volumes about the so-called ‘glasnost’ (openness) of the Gorbachev years.

The procurator’s memo informs Gorbachev about the work of Soviet historians charged with finding the true story of Katyn. The historians were given access to various “special” Soviet archives but were not given the March 5, 1940, “smoking gun” decree. Nevertheless, they uncovered sufficient evidence to prove Soviet culpability, such as memos from Beria to his deputy setting up the operation, daily prisoner transport records, embargoes on incoming and outgoing mail, and lists of “departing” prisoners that were not forwarded to the center (meaning they were dead). The procurator’s key conclusion:

Soviet archival documents confirm the fate of the interned Polish officers even in the absence of evidence of orders to shoot and bury them. On the basis of these documentary facts, Soviet historians are preparing materials for publication, and several of these will be published in June or July. Such publications place us in a new situation. Our argument that we cannot find archival materials that disclose the truth about Katyn would no longer be believable. The material uncovered by our historians, and they have uncovered only a part of our little secrets, in conjunction with the materials uncovered by the Polish side would scarcely allow us to hold to our earlier version.

The proposal to Gorbachev:

Communicate to Jaruzelski that as a result of a careful archival review, we have not found direct evidence of orders, directives etc., allowing us to establish the concrete time and guilty parties of the Katyn tragedy. However, in the main archives of the NKVD material has been uncovered that raises doubts about the Burdenko report of 1944. We can conclude that the execution of the Polish officers in the Katyn region was the work of the NKVD and personally Beria and [his deputy] Merkulov [no mention of Stalin!]. There remains the question in what form and when to inform Polish and Soviet societies. For this, we need the advice of the President of the Polish Republic bearing in mind the need to close this matter and at the same time avoid an upheaval of emotions.

Although the house of cards was collapsing, Gorbachev did not rush to admit the “truth” to the Polish side. A sidebar to Gorbachev’s presidential directive “About the Results of the Visit of the Polish Foreign Minister” of November 3, 1990, blandly states that the Soviet side will “accelerate research” on the fate of Polish officers held by the Soviets in 1939 “relating to events and facts from the history of Soviet-Polish relations that have damaged both sides.”

The long-awaited Soviet “confession” is mentioned in a memo prepared by the General Procurator (N. S. Trubin) in forty-five copies dated January 22, 1991, “About the course of the criminal investigation about the fate of fifteen thousand Polish POWs held in 1939–1940 in NKVD camps.” The faded memo is scarcely legible, but it tells that Beria’s Directive No. 5866/5 ordered the NKVD’s prisoner-of-war division and camp administrations to prepare cases for submission to NKVD tribunals (formed to pronounce death sentences). It also tells that, between April 3 and May 16, 1940, contingents of Polish POWs were dispatched by rail from the various camps where they were held by the NKVD. The report concludes: “Investigation of the matter continues. The USSR General Procurator, considering the importance of these new facts, is periodically informing the Polish side.” The memo mentions a meeting (date cannot be read) with the Polish ambassador to brief him on these findings.

### **Why Not Tell the Truth?**

When pressed to the limit, Gorbachev decided on a minimalist version of the truth. Although there was ample proof that Stalin’s Politburo had ordered the killings, the “confession” cited only an obscure operational order from Beria. In customary Soviet form, the confession also named a relatively low-level NKVD officer along with Beria as another scapegoat.

Why could not a “reformer” of Gorbachev’s ilk bring himself in 1991 (fifty years after the fact) to tell the Poles the full story? There are two answers: One is that the Soviets did not want to admit that the massacre was ordered by the Politburo, even though it was Stalin’s Politburo. The signatures on the death warrants were not only Stalin’s but other Soviet leaders who played prominent roles during the war

and early postwar period. Stalin's practice of implicating his fellow leaders paid off long after his death. Second, the 1944 cover-up (the Burdenko Commission) was also approved by the highest "organs of Soviet power," in which the Soviet leaders of the 1970s and 1980s were already playing leading roles. The executions were the work of Stalin and Beria; the cover-up and its continuation were the work of the second generation of Soviet leaders—the Brezhnevs, Andropovs, Kosygins, and even Gorbachevs—who came to power after Stalin's purges of the old Bolsheviks.