

Katyn: The Memory

SHANE LANGFORD, *West Texas A&M University*

ABSTRACT: *In the beginning of WWII as Poland was invaded first by the Germans, then the Soviets, the Polish officers were taken as POW's to three separate camps. In the course of the following months, the vast majority of the officers were executed by the Soviets. Immediately, responsibility for the crime was pinned on the Germans, and this was the stance that the Soviet Union/Russia took for the following decades. This paper will look at the attempts by multiple nations and individuals to uncover the truth concerning Katyn in order to preserve the rightful place of truth and memory in history.*

Deep in the Soviet Union in the spring of 1940, while the world was in the merciless throes of war, some 15,000 Polish prisoners of war were executed in the Katyn Forest near present-day Belarus. Unknown to the rest of the world, their mass graves were covered and all but forgotten. As the war raged and territorial occupation shifted, the graves were discovered and the missing prisoners were found. But the question of who was to blame was left unanswered for decades. The Soviets, fearful of the implications of their guilt, concealed evidence and withheld the truth, but the Poles and the Western world demanded an answer. The battle to uncover the truth about Katyn and save its memory from being erased in the darkness of the Soviet past began. For Stalin and his successors, the struggle was to conceal the memory in order to protect themselves. For the Polish, the struggle was the long-term effort to establish and secure the memory of the victims in the minds of people everywhere.

This international conflict between Poland and Russia went far beyond Katyn. A vast history of dispute, war, and occupation has plagued their relationship for centuries. The two countries were engaged in a seemingly endless conflict over territory for much of the 16th and 17th centuries. The Polish military occupied Moscow in 1610. But by the late 18th century, Poland had suffered a severe decrease in power. In 1772 the Polish Commonwealth was partitioned and soon lost much of its political authority. The Polish nation ceased to exist until the defeat of Germany in World War I. Poland celebrated its territorial claims of the Polish Commonwealth, but Russia planned to rule all of Poland so as to give it a foothold in central Europe. The resultant Polish-Soviet War ended with a Polish victory in 1921 that granted Poland its borders from the Commonwealth period. Poland had

again defeated the Russians and reestablished itself as a powerful European nation (Novosti, 2011).

Katyn

The relationship between the Poles and the Russians thus had an extraordinary amount of reserved aggression that had been culminating for centuries. And when Poland was perhaps at its weakest point as Germany invaded in 1939, the Soviets spared nothing in their attempt to crush finally their Polish enemy. As the Polish military rallied to meet the Germans with the same powerful force that defeated the Soviets in the Polish-Soviet War, the Poles were confident that this new war would end with a similar victory and would be a less than extensive conflict. In reality, what followed the German invasion was perhaps one of the darkest times in Polish history.

For two weeks the Poles defended their territory, but after multiple retreats, the eventual capture of Warsaw led to a resounding Nazi victory. As Polish soldiers fled the front lines hoping to return home to their families, they were met by Soviet forces advancing west from the Soviet Union. Hundreds of thousands of prisoners of war were captured, and over a million Polish civilians were subsequently deported across the vast expanse of Soviet Russia. Of the multitude of Polish POWs, roughly 15,000 officers were taken prisoner and eventually relocated in the Kozielsk, Starobielsk, or the Ostashkov POW camps (Slowes, 1992).

Among the officers was Captain Salomon Slowes, who recorded his time in Soviet captivity in his memoir *The Road to Katyn: A Soldier's Story*. After the capture of Warsaw, Slowes' escape from the advancing German line led him to board a train bound for Wilno where

he and his fellow officers would seek refuge. However, once aboard rather than heading west to Wilno, the train moved east into Russia. Slowes had been tricked into captivity. The train took them north of Moscow to the Griazoviets camp outside of Vologda where they met even more Polish officers in captivity. After weeks in the camp, the POWs were again transported, this time to the much larger camp of Kozielsk. There were 5,000 Polish officers of various ranks in Kozielsk where their conditions had vastly improved. The camp was well maintained, and the prisoners were allowed a relatively small level of freedom. After months in the camp and continual hints of repatriation; in April of 1940, a series of transports began, and the captives were led to believe this would result in their release. But when Slowes was summoned for transport, he was moved to yet another camp at Pavlishchev-Bor where he met prisoners from Starobielsk and Ostashkov; there were 394 officers from the three camps in all. Of the 15,000 officers held at the three camps, they were the only ones that survived. Every transport from Kozielsk, except the train carrying Slowes and his group of 191, led officers to the Katyn Forest where they were summarily executed by the NKVD. This was kept in absolute secrecy, and the forest was kept under a constant military guard (Slowes, 1992).

After the Germans invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941, the Soviets joined the Allies in fighting the Nazis, which led to repatriation agreements with the Polish government-in-exile in London. As a part of this settlement, the Soviets agreed to initiate a Polish Army on Soviet soil. In August of 1941, Polish General Władysław Anders was released from captivity in Moscow and appointed commander of the new Polish force. Slowes and the remaining prisoners were transported from Pavlishchev-Bor back to the Griazoviets camp outside Vologda where General Anders met his officer core. However, the number of officers proved to be vastly insufficient for the massive influx of Polish volunteers; roughly 15,000 officers were missing. Anders appointed Captain Czap-ski, who survived alongside Slowes at Kozielsk, to lead a diplomatic search for the missing officers (Slowes, 1992). His attempts at locating the POWs were futile, as each request led to strangely ambiguous responses from Soviet officials. They claimed that all the POWs that were in captivity had been released. In a meeting between Anders and Stalin in November 1941, Stalin claimed the men had escaped into Manchuria (Zawodny, 1962). The idea that 15,000 men could successfully escape from Soviet custody in three different POW camps and traverse thousands of miles of the earth's harshest terrains into

Manchuria seemed highly unlikely to Anders. Regardless, after this definite response came a diplomatic silence for over a year, despite further questioning and searches, Czapski and Anders had found nothing.

In April 1943, a long feared answer came. Radio Berlin announced that German field police had unearthed a mass grave in the Katyn Forest outside Smolensk, Belorussia. Germany established a committee, chaired by François Neville of the International Red Cross to investigate the site and uncover the mysterious massacre (Slowes, 1992). He found seven mass graves in the forest holding over 4,500 bodies of dead Polish officers. Each man had been bound and shot in the back of the head. Some men had been bayoneted as well, evidencing attempts at resistance. The investigation revealed that the last dates on newspapers and personal documents dated no later than April 1940, over a year before the Germans invaded. This meant that they were executed on Soviet occupied soil, and must have been executed by the Soviets. Germany was happy to announce this in order to create friction among the Allies during the war, but the Soviets soon responded with their rebuttal. They claimed that the Polish officers had been building roads on the wartime German-Soviet border and were overrun and captured by the German army upon their invasion of the Soviet Union. Thus, the Germans were the perpetrators. Supporting this argument was the resounding evidence that the bullets used in Katyn were German made (Zawodny, 1962). However, the Soviets were unable to produce documentation to support this theory.

At this time war was still raging, which preoccupied the Western Allies, and gave the Soviets plenty of time to act. The documents, clothing, and personal effects found on the bodies in the graves mysteriously disappeared. The same thing happened to secret Katyn documents around the world. Similarly, the Russian peasant named Krivozertsov who originally reported the graves to the German officials in the area was mysteriously found dead in his London apartment where he had relocated, attempting to ensure his safety. Numerous other key witnesses around the world somehow simply began to disappear (Slowes, 1992).

The Soviets decided to execute the vast majority of the officer core in order to ensure the weakness of any Polish resistance in the near future. However, they kept the 394 officers alive in case the political climate with the West changed, which it did. They were thus able at least to present some of the officers and cover up those left unaccounted for (Slowes, 1992). The men found in the graves in Katyn were the prisoners who were held along-

side Slowes at the Kozielsk camp. The roughly 10,000 remaining POWs from Starobielsk and Ostashkov were still unaccounted for, but the search was no longer as intense. The answer seemed to be obvious.

Cover Up and Exposure

Throughout history, decisions are made by governments or individuals that result in catastrophic consequences. Often times these are not the facts that we wish to be remembered by, nor are they the facts we want remembered. However, the subsequent attempt to cover up an event can result in the loss of the memory and the loss of the story of the individuals directly affected by the event. Naturally, the backlash is the collaborative effort to combat the concealment efforts made by the people themselves. This struggle is absolutely present when dealing with Katyn. Not only were family members of the victims searching for the truth about their missing relatives, they were seeking to ensure the establishment of their lost loved ones' correct place in history. The fact is that it is understandable for Stalin not to want the truth about Katyn to be discovered for the obvious reason of the immediate legal consequences that would have taken place. Furthermore, he did not want this event to be tied to his name in the pages of history. However, had Stalin actually succeeded in this cover up, it would have resulted in the denial of the memory and truth surrounding the individuals who fell victim to the NKVD. This struggle quickly spread further than Stalin could have possibly foreseen, and eventually resulted in his exposure.

When the Soviets joined the Allies in fighting Germany, Stalin was expected to lead his country in a manner that reflected the same accountability demonstrated by other Allied officials. This meant his compliance with laws established in the Geneva Convention, as well as peaceful cooperation with all Allied governments, including that of Poland. The fact that nearly the entire Polish officer core had been executed by his NKVD was obviously not information that he wished be made public. Thus the Soviet attempt to completely cover up their atrocious action began immediately after the massacre in Katyn took place.

Upon entering the camps of Kozielsk, Starobielsk, and Ostashkov, the POWs were allowed to contact their family members by mail. This continued for the duration of their stay. However, once the transports began from the three camps, all communication was cut (Slowes, 1992). For those men such as Slowes, who were lucky enough to make it to the Pavlishchev-Bor camp, they were then

allowed to resume communications. But, for most, April or May of 1940 was the last time anything was heard. Not only was communication cut, but the Soviets provided ambiguous responses to families attempting to reach the prisoners that somewhat let on that the men were simply out of reach.

The United States government launched a full-scale congressional investigation of the events surrounding Katyn. The House of Representatives Select Committee to Conduct an Investigation of the Facts, Evidence, and Circumstances of the Katyn Forest Massacre in 1951 and 1952 was located in Chicago. The committee held hearings regarding the testimonies of relatives and friends of the Katyn victims, as well as those of many surviving prisoners who were transferred to Pavlishchev-Bor. Irena Hajduk Metelica testified to the committee her memory of the events leading up to her father's death in Katyn. Metelica's mother had written and received letters from her husband who was a POW in Starobielsk. She received a letter in April 1940 indicating that he was in good health, and she responded in June 1940. That letter was soon returned back to her with a postscript written in Russian declaring, "You will not find him again" (*The Katyn Forest Massacre, 1952*, p. 338). This in itself demonstrated the Soviet determination to bury the truth. Their desire was for people simply to stop searching, because if there is no search, then nothing will be found. Yet this postscript invited the obvious question of "why?" There is no obvious reason behind this statement; it does not declare that the man is dead, nor does it say he is alive and is just missing. Ambiguity became a key tool of defense in the Soviet scheme.

Metelica and her remaining family had been deported from Poland into Russia, but when repatriation agreements were made, they were free to go. All the letters that she had received from her father, including the letter with the Russian postscript, were confiscated by the NKVD upon their exit from the Soviet Union (*The Katyn Forest Massacre, 1952*). This action further demonstrated the Soviet attempt to cover any paper trail that would lead to the connection being made between the missing POWs and the Soviet government.

Though the Soviet Union's effort to conceal the evidence of their actions and cover up this portion of the Polish past was extensive, the efforts of multiple Allied nations and the Germans proved to be equally extensive.

When the Germans discovered the mass graves in the Katyn Forest during their Soviet invasion, the discovery became a tool that was desperately needed. Losing the Soviet military as an asset was something Hitler was

prepared for, but the Red Army fighting alongside the rest of the Allies was not what he wanted to see. Thus, he needed something that would prevent cooperation between the Allies and the Soviets, something that would dissuade them from actually joining forces. For him, this was Katyn. If the Allies found out that the prospective new addition to the Alliance, (that already included the Polish government-in-exile) had actually exterminated nearly the entire officer core of the Polish Army, then presumably little cooperation would take place. Despite the ill intent behind the German reasoning for exposing the Soviet crime, they were in effect, combating the Soviet attempt to cover the truth by exposing it to the world.

Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels wanted to host an investigation of the site in the forest that would appear as objective as possible to the world, securing the legitimacy of the results that the search would reveal. This desire produced three diverse committees that would take part in the exhumation of the bodies, perform autopsies, and analyze evidence in order to determine when the act occurred, and by whose hand. The most diverse group was the International Commission consisting of professors, scientists, and medical doctors from twelve countries other than Germany. The other groups were the Polish Red Cross, and the German Special Medical-Judiciary Commission (Zawodny, 1962). These were the commissions that discovered that the victims were actually killed no later than the spring of 1940 and at the hands of the Soviets. This information, however, was doubted given that it was being announced by the German government, and it was difficult to believe anything produced by the Nazi propaganda machine. Nonetheless, it remains the case that the Germans did secure the truth about what happened in the forest.

The intentions and attitude of the US Congressional Hearing in Chicago in 1952 were consistently made clear throughout the proceedings where they demonstrated their patience and willingness to listen through extensive detail, to anyone and everyone who might possibly reveal any evidence that would lead to further information on the matter. This conversation between a surviving POW from Starobielsk and Congressman Ray Madden, the Chairmen of the committee, shows exactly that:

Mr. Mlynarski: I will ask you, if you please, to tell me or rather to indicate to me, how far shall I go into the details of my first period and my second period, and so on, because I am afraid that my story may be too lengthy if I go into great detail.

Chairman Madden: I will say, we are glad to have you here and we would like to have all testimony that will aid this committee in presenting evidence to the Congress regarding the Katyn massacre, and if your testimony takes 30 minutes or 10 hours, we will listen. We would like to hear all the facts. So our time is your time.

(The Katyn Forest Massacre, 1952, p. 341).

The United States took responsibility to obtain evidence and uncover any information that could shed light on the mysterious event despite their considerable diplomatic distance from the massacre. During this time, the Soviet Union was simply refusing to admit any responsibility whatsoever for the crime and blamed it entirely on the Germans. The Burdenko Commission was established in 1944 to provide countering intelligence that proved German guilt. However, the Western Allies refused evidence presented by the commission to be used in the Nuremberg Trials. Despite this, in the Soviet Union, the anti-German findings of the Burdenko Report became the standard for historical education and popular belief (Fox, 2010).

Attempts to uncover Soviet secrets surrounding the POWs were made prior to the discovery of the graves. Before it was known that the men were killed, as previously mentioned, Polish Captain Czapski and General Anders of the Polish Army in the Soviet Union had questioned high ranking officials, including Stalin, and came away with nothing. Not only were the Poles searching for their missing brothers, but even officers inside the Soviet Union were trying to do their part. "General G. S. Zhukov used his position, within the limits of propriety, to intercede on behalf of Poles. Some liberations of Poles still detained took place through his intervention" (Zawodny, 1962, p. 11). However, even a Soviet General was unable to uncover any information on the matter. It seems that Zhukov had been spared the truth, but had been warned not to go looking for these specific men because,

When approached by Polish Major-General Bohusz-Szyszko, Chief of the Polish Military Mission in Moscow, on behalf of two officers listed among the 15,000 missing, Zhukov told him bluntly, "Please do not ask me about these men, because in this particular case, I cannot help you."

(Zawodny, 1962, p. 11)

Though these attempts at finding the truth were widespread and collaborative, no further response would be granted from the Soviet Union other than that of the Burdenko Report. No matter how insurmountable the evi-

dence, the Soviets remained silent, and the information remained hidden.

Memory

Uncovering the truth concerning Katyn proved to be less than easy, given the state of global politics in the mid-1940s. Many assumed that the unanswered questions concerning the missing Poles would be addressed at the end of World War II. However, the Cold War froze communication as the Soviets retreated into diplomatic isolation. Increasingly, families of the Katyn victims and those who sought to uncover the truth found these questions to now be unanswerable.

During the Cold War, fears of global nuclear destruction dominated politics and the uncovering of Soviet War crimes was apparently of little importance. The United States Congressional Hearing in Chicago in 1952 was of little consequence since there was no way the Soviets would respect any findings. Stalin had completely wiped out any possibility in the minds of the Russian people that the Poles had been executed at the hands of the Soviets. He continued to blame this entirely on the Nazis. Stalin's death brought no further information and it seemed that the truth and the chance at uncovering it could have died with him. In 1992, however, Russian President Boris Yeltsin proved otherwise (Upman, 2011).

In an attempt to secure his political position of authority and demonstrate his ability to cooperate with the West, Yeltsin released previously classified political documents to researchers. Among these documents was a proposal dated March 5, 1940, written by NKVD chief Lavrenty Beria that called for the execution of the Polish officers. The proposal was approved with the signature of Stalin himself (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2010).

This information, along with much more that was found in the other declassified documents sparked massive national interest among the Russian public at uncovering what were called the "blank spots" (Upman, 2011, p. 94) in the Soviet past. Unfortunately, this lasted only a short time as the public and the government quickly grew tired of the negative facts that continued to surface. Many of the documents were reclassified and closed off to the public and researchers.

The Russians had moved out from under the Soviet Communist regime and into a new era. It was finally a chance to redefine their national identity. These documents seemed to prevent this as they tied such devastating events to the Russians. They did not want to be

associated with the atrocities of their former government and wanted to prevent any further negative information from being made public. Thus, perhaps unknowingly or even out of political habit, fearing the consequences that would result from the publishing of political secrets, the new Russian government reacted in a similar manner as the Soviets. They hid the information and refused to cooperate in discussions or external inquiries.

Finally, after years of avoidance and seclusion, the Russian government seemed to be making strides at dealing with the dark Communist past. In 2010 Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, alongside Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk, attended a commemoration service in the Katyn Forest. His presence marked the first formal acknowledgement from a high-ranking Russian official that the Soviets were, in fact, responsible for the mass murder that took place seventy years before (Voice of America, 2010).

Throughout the Cold War and the two decades following the collapse of the Soviet Union, relations between Russia and Poland remained exceedingly tense. Much of this was due to the Polish demand for acknowledgement of Katyn, and the Russians reciprocating with equal obstinacy. This face-off constituted a long-term political frustration, and drove the knife of Katyn even deeper into the hearts of Poles. Now it was not just that the Poles blamed the Russians, they hated their unwavering decision to ignore the obvious truth and confess to their crime. Thus, Putin's decision to attempt finally to bridge this gap, though it was a necessary step, it was just that—a step. It did not fix anything immediately, but it did help to satiate the seventy-year aggravation.

It seems that Putin knew this himself as well, which is important if the relationship was to mend. In his speech at the Commemoration, Putin stated, "No matter how difficult it is, we must move toward each other, remembering everything but understanding that we can't live only in the past" (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2010). This demonstrates his understanding that it is equally as difficult as it is necessary for two peoples to simply move on. The Russians' guilt for such an atrocity is obviously an obstacle, as is the victimhood of the Poles, but in the striving for unity, a peace can be found.

Tusk also spoke along this vein, of movement towards progress as two nations. "A word of truth can mobilize two peoples looking for the road to reconciliation. Are we capable of transforming a lie into reconciliation? We must believe we can," asserted the Polish Prime Minister (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2010). Tusk, also making mention of the existence of the Soviet lie,

provided his fellow Poles with the satisfaction that the Russians were now truly coming clean about their abuse of the Poles. The Poles always knew the Russians were lying, but now everyone, including the Russians, knew it. This sort of vindication, though perhaps hinging on selfishness, is inherently necessary for the victim to accept an apology and reach an understanding with the antagonist. Tusk was also asking the Poles to acknowledge that the fight was over. The gap had been bridged, and now what lies ahead remains only each side's attempt to cross it. This long-awaited political action very well could have been the watershed for Russian and Polish relations that had been tense long before Katyn, and perhaps still can be. However, it will not be without difficulty.

On April 10, 2010, just three days after Putin attended the commemoration service, a plane crashed near Smolensk carrying Polish President Lech Kaczyński and a great number of high-ranking Polish officials. The president was on his way to attend a separate service honoring Katyn. The cause of the crash was blamed on poor weather conditions, as there was a dense low-level fog that morning. Russian ground control had redirected the flight to Moscow, but Kaczyński was determined to be present at the service, and the pilot made repeated efforts to land despite the fog. On the fourth attempt, the plane hit the trees in the Katyn forest and exploded. All ninety-six people on board were killed. This accident remains a terrible tragedy, however, there is a large Polish popular suspicion that it, in fact, was no accident. Kaczyński had sustained a disjunctive relationship with Moscow, hence his refusal to attend the service alongside Putin (Harding, 2010). Poles maintain that his plane crash was more an act of Russian interference than a tragic accident.

As news reports flooded in, blogs and forums began filling up with thoughts and arguments of outraged Poles. Bloggers raised suspicions of Russian conspiracy in the crash in order to avoid commemorating Katyn and to punish the Poles for turning against the Soviets. The blogs and forums pointed out that the Polish officials were originally taking three separate planes to the service, but at the last minute all boarded one plane. This plane had been checked and serviced in Russia only five months before the accident. Also, upon arrival at the site, Russian military authorities confiscated the black box from the cockpit, and its contents were not revealed for weeks, giving the Russians plenty of time to make edits. Furthermore, witnesses claimed to have heard gunshots soon after the Russian military trucks approached the wreckage. These are suspected to be finishing off the survivors, and the fact that there were no autopsies done

only added to their suspicions (Critical T; righteousrick; feliks, 2010). Though most of these bloggers based many of their comments on rumors or exaggerated reports, it shows the popular unrest and disbelief of a Polish victim. These were the thoughts coming from the minds of a people who share a sad history filled with controversy and betrayal with Russia. The general consensus is that the plane crash is not at all an isolated event; rather it is one in a series of events for which Russia has been to blame. Though such conspiracy theories are reaching and stretch the facts, it is easy to find a measure of credibility when looking at how the relationship between the two countries has unfolded throughout history.

After much controversy, Russia led a full-scale investigation to determine the true cause of the plane crash. The team's findings proved only to be more of a source of discontent on the already controversial issue. Poles and Russians had been on a path that could lead to a measure of reconciliation and a more stable future of peaceful co-existence. However, with the release of the investigation's results, hopes of reconciliations could again be stifled.

The investigation revealed that the Polish pilots repeatedly ignored commands to land at multiple different locations due to the poor weather conditions. Moreover, the crew on the plane was less than qualified for a flight of such great importance, and inexperience proved to be a negative factor. Further still, General Andrzej Błasik, Commander of the Polish Air Force, was in the cockpit pressuring the pilots to make their landing as scheduled in Smolensk no matter what. As Air Force Commander this would not be out of the ordinary except that he had a blood alcohol content of 0.06%, compromising his judgment (Weir, 2011). These findings pinned full responsibility of the tragedy on the Poles, proving the innocence of the Russians. Upon hearing this information, Polish citizens were outraged, claiming that it continues to show a pattern of Russian refusal to admit their involvement in criminal activity and furthering a popular discrimination of Poles. Polish Prime Minister Tusk called the report "incomplete" and said, "If I am concerned by anything it is by the political context of Russia's investigation" (Weir, 2011). This, coming from the man who stood alongside Putin just the year before demonstrates a vast decrease in diplomatic trust and cooperation toward reconciliation.

The findings from the investigation only furthered the ideas of those conspiracy theorists. Not only was it the results that pushed them, the Russian attempt to transfer blame for a tragedy that resulted in the death of

numerous Polish officials sounds too much like Katyn itself to be ignored. Regardless of the fact that the crash took place en route to a Katyn commemoration service, in the minds of the Poles, Russia seems to be only repeating history. Recent attempts to find a common ground on which to leave past memories behind and move forward are darkly overshadowed by the Russians blaming the Poles for the crash; regardless of if the findings are true or not.

Daniel Hannan, writer for *The Telegraph* in England, covered the plane crash in an intriguing manner. He begins his article by briefly explaining what took place in Katyn, how the country's military, scholars and civic leaders were lost. Hannan continues on to the plane crash that killed Kaczyński and many of Poland's leading political and military figures. Before writing his article on the crash, he consulted with his Polish friends and concluded his article with the statement, "For the second time, their nation has lost its leaders at Katyn" (Hannan, 2010). This statement resounds far further than Hannan could perhaps foresee when writing this article. The memory of Katyn is forever at the forefront of the minds of the children of the murdered victims and those prisoners who were fortunate enough to survive. Losing the leaders of a country is a tragedy in itself, but to happen twice, in the same place, is much more than just tragedy.

While overall, efforts to establish truth and secure the memory of Katyn have been in the hands of the Polish, Russia has shown some attempts to accomplish the same goal. In 2007 on Good Friday, Russian state television aired Andrzej Wajda's recently released film *Katyn* during prime time hours (Sidorenko, 2010). This is an action that was truly unprecedented in its time. The act itself demonstrated a desire of Russians to educate its public about its darker Soviet past. By doing this, they provided the opportunity for open discussions of past atrocities and how they affect the present. Prior to this, because of the Burdenko Report, the vast majority of Russians still believed in Stalin's innocence and held Nazi Germany as the perpetrators.

The film was widely viewed and discussed. A Russian blogging site held a forum where people from Russia, Poland and the United States participated in discussions of the film. Overall, the Russian popular opinion was that the film was excellent and revealing. They appreciated its boldness and honesty while resisting the obviously easy opportunity to portray Russians in a terrible way. Conversations between Poles and Russians show an increased mutual interest in acknowledging the past, admitting the truth and moving closer together to establish the hope

of a peaceful and cooperative future. Though this is not the achievement of an international rehabilitation, it is yet another step in the right direction. This rehabilitation can be achieved, but only by means of this same mutual interest expressed by a seemingly ineffectual blog. Reconciliation lies in the hands of the public.

Such activity accomplishes two things: education and cooperation. If Russian citizens are made fully aware of the truth of Katyn, real strides can be made at recognizing the role of their country in both the atrocity and the recovery. Similarly, if Polish citizens are aware that Russia is doing its part in educating its people, it will tear down parts of the wall that has developed, which has hindered their relationship from peacefully progressing. However, simply showing the film in Russia is not enough by itself. The need of an opportunity for a response remains. Though it was three years after the film showing, a necessary response came with Putin and Tusk's commemoration service at Katyn. Again, this serves as a step towards recovery. Healing after a tragedy of such magnitude, followed by such a vast omission, will take time, but more efforts like these could lead to peaceful relations in the future.

Today there are many different ways in which people attempt to pay respect and reverence to the Katyn victims. Around the world, Katyn memorials have been unveiled. Statues, museums, plaques and cemeteries can be found from Detroit, Michigan to Wrocław, Poland; Johannesburg, South Africa and at the Katyn site itself near Smolensk. The existence of these monuments in such seemingly dislocated places demonstrates the world's commitment to always remember what happened at Katyn.

Another way people are coming together to commemorate Katyn is through Facebook. A "Katyn Memorial Wall" has been started and over a thousand people actively communicate about events taking place, movie premiers, services being held that have to do with commemorating Katyn. Also, family members of the victims are connecting and sharing their experiences and helping each other work through the hurts that history has left them with. The slogan for the site is "Never Forgotten, Never Forgiven Katyn 1940" (Facebook, 2011). The page information states, "This page is dedicated to the memory of those, who perished in Katyn, whose family lives were shattered by Katyn, who wish to learn about Katyn, who still believe in the ingrained innocence of the human nature, despite Katyn" (Facebook, 2011). It seems that their slogan and purpose is a way of saying that the atrocity will always remain as such, unforgettable and unforgivable. However, it does not mean that it is

something that cannot be moved past, while still maintaining the memory.

Although for over 70 years now Katyn has been a source of highest contention between Russia and Poland, even on the global political level, it seems that little by little, ground is being made in the long process of reconciliation. Russia and Poland have centuries of problems to work through in order to gain any real levels of trust or reliance, but it does not have to be impossible. As long as people are continuing to strive in their efforts to connect to each other, be it through the blogs over the *Katyn* film, or now through Facebook, as previously stated, reconciliation lies in the hands of the public. Governments have political and economic

purposes for making amends, but healing and restoration will come from those who have direct connection with Katyn.

With seemingly limitless effort, the Soviet Union attempted to conceal their actions for decades from the Western world. If it had not been for the greater persistence of those willing to fight for the truth, they may have succeeded. It is with this same persistence that people must continue if the memory is to remain alive and active.

SHANE LANGFORD *holds a BA in history.*

References

- Cienciala, A. M., Lebedeva, N. S., and Materski, Wojciech (2007). *Katyn: A crime without punishment*. Yale University Press.
- Critical T (2010, April 12). Polish president plane crash conspiracy theories start to emerge. NowPublic Crowd Powered Media. [Msg 3]. Message posted to <http://www.nowpublic.com/world/polish-president-plane-crash-conspiracy-theories-start-emerge-2603957.html>
- righteousrick (2010, April 12). Polish president plane crash conspiracy theories start to emerge. NowPublic Crowd Powered Media. [Msg 4]. Message posted to <http://www.nowpublic.com/world/polish-president-plane-crash-conspiracy-theories-start-emerge-2603957.html>
- feliks (2010, April 12). Polish president plane crash conspiracy theories start to emerge. NowPublic Crowd Powered Media. [Msg 5]. Message posted to <http://www.nowpublic.com/world/polish-president-plane-crash-conspiracy-theories-start-emerge-2603957.html>
- Facebook(November29,2011).KatynMemorialWall.Retrieved from <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Katyn-Memorial-Wall/113672055318875?sk=wall>
- Fox, J. P. (June 2010). Katyn: Tragedy upon tragedy. *History Today*, 60(6), p31-34. Accessed November 27, 2011. Retrieved from <http://web.ebscohost.com.databases.wtamu.edu:2048/ehost/detail?vid=6&hid=19&sid=50a427d0-12a1-4552-8cb7-33c7c04c3e5c%40sessionmgr13&bdata=JkF1dGhUeXBIPWlwLGNvb2tpZSx1cmwscWlkJnNpdGU9ZWwhvc3QtG12ZQ%3d%3d#db=a9h&AN=51447111>
- Hannan, D. (2010, April 10). President Kaczyński is killed in a plane crash: Poland's tragedies continue. *The Telegraph*. Retrieved from <http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/danielhannan/100033729/president-kaczynski-is-killed-in-a-plane-crash-polands-tragedies-continue/>
- Harding, L. (2010, April 10). Polish President Lech Kaczynski killed in plane crash. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/apr/10/poland-president-lech-kaczynski-killed>
- Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. (2010, July 4). At Katyn memorial, Putin calls for Poland, Russia to 'move toward each other.' Retrieved from http://www.rferl.org/content/Putin_Speaks_At_Joint_Commemoration_Of_SovietEra_Massacre/2005357.html
- Novosti, R. History of Russian-Polish relations. Retrieved from <http://en.rian.ru/analysis/20100902/160436483.html>
- Sidorenko, A. (2010, April 10). Russia: Bloggers discuss Andrzej Wajda's *Katyn* movie. *Global Voices*. Retrieved from <http://globalvoicesonline.org/2010/04/10/russia-bloggers-discuss-andrzej-wajdas-katyn-movie/>
- Slowes, S. W. (1992). *The road to Katyn: A soldier's story*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- The Katyn Forest Massacre: *Hearings before the Select Committee to conduct an investigation of the facts, evidence, and circumstances of the Katyn Forest massacre*, 82nd Cong. 338 (1952). Retrieved from <http://www.archive.org/details/katynforestmassa03unit>.
- Upman, M. (2011). The blank spots. *Foreign Policy*, (187), 94–95. Academic Search Complete. Retrieved from <http://web.ebscohost.com.databases.wtamu.edu:2048/ehost/detail?vid=8&hid=19&sid=50a427d0-12a1-4552-8cb7-33c7c04c3e5c%40sessionmgr13&bdata=JkF1dGhUeXBIPWlwLGNvb2tpZSx1cmwscWlkJnNpdGU9ZWwhvc3QtG12ZQ%3d%3d#db=a9h&AN=63016953>
- Voice of America. (2010, April 7). Putin attends Katyn memorial ceremony. Retrieved from <http://www.voanews.com/english/news/europe/Putin-Attends-Katyn-Memorial-90128357.html>
- Weir, F. (2011, January 13). Russia report on Lech Kaczynski plane crash irks Poland. *The Christian Science Monitor*. Retrieved from <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Europe/2011/0113/Russia-report-on-Lech-Kaczynski-plane-crash-irks-Poland>
- Zawodny, J. K. (1962). *Death in the forest: The story of the Katyn Forest massacre*. South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press.