

Russia, Katyn and Bucha: How the Kremlin is Falsifying History

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Katyn is the name of a village as well as a mass grave near Smolensk in Western Russia. It was here that the Nazi German occupying forces executed over 4,000 Polish officers in the Fall of 1941, in one of the Second World War's most notorious war crimes. Recently, state-controlled Russian media been serving up this revisionist version of history, positing that the Soviet Union, contrary to previous belief, had nothing to do with the crime.

Here is the latest: on 12 April 2024, the Russian government's official news agency TASS proclaimed that earlier claims of Soviet responsibility for the "Katyn affair" can now be refuted. Referring to "declassified archival documents", TASS claimed that the accusation of Soviet guilt has been shown to be a product of Nazi propaganda. More than three decades after the fall of Communism in Europe, Russia has returned to the original Stalinist version of events. This shift has significant political implications.

The background of the Katyn crimes has, in fact, been established, examined and documented in detail. 'Katyn' is shorthand for several different yet related massacres. By an order of the Politburo issued 5 March 1940, the Soviet security police NKVD executed 21,857 citizens of Poland. 4,421 of the victims were from the Kozielsk prison camp (they were buried in the forest near Katyn), 3,820 from the Starobelsk camp (near Kharkiv), and 6,311 from the Ostashkov camp (near Tver). A further 7,305 were executed in Soviet prisons located in Belarus and Western Ukraine.

Kremlin leaders have never been comfortable with these circumstances. Like other killing fields from Treblinka to Nanjing, as noted by historian Tomas Sniegon, Katyn stands as a stark reminder of the worst crimes and abuses of the twentieth century. It also symbolizes the crimes of totalitarianism, as well as the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, which in August 1939 divided Europe into two halves. Russia's current president, Vladimir Putin, has consistently promoted a patriotic version of history intended to instil pride in the country's past—an aim complicated by the fact that Stalin and Hitler once cooperated in order to annihilate Poland as a nation.

It was first under Mikhail Gorbachev that a shift occurred in the discourse. Previous Soviet leaders had all denied responsibility for Katyn. Alexander Yakovlev—one of the Politburo's most reform-minded members—had as early as 1985 urged the General Secretary to deal with what he referred to euphemistically as a “white spot” in Soviet-Polish relations. Two years later, the Soviet Union and Poland appointed a joint commission to examine all available sources. Pressure to do so arose from several sources at once: Poland, Soviet civil society, and Western governments. The need to come to terms with the Soviet past was closely connected with democratic ambitions and the opening towards the West.

A Soviet-Polish reconciliation process was initiated in the Spring of 1990. Gorbachev handed over key documents concerning the Katyn massacres to Polish president Wojciech Jaruzelski. In retrospect, this was a unique occurrence. On 13 April 1990, TASS published an official acknowledgement of Soviet guilt. Over the course of a few years, more information was revealed about the extent of crimes against humanity under Stalin. The truth had been suppressed for half a century, but glasnost promised change, transparency, and the rule of law.

In recent years, however, the Kremlin has actively worked to turn commemoration of Katyn into a story of Russian patriotism. For example, in 2018 a museum was opened near Katyn which contains a permanent exhibit about four centuries of (supposed) Polish aggression against Russia. A sentiment of martyrdom is palpable. Putin has announced that it was the Polish government which provoked war with Hitler, and that Soviet annexations of territory were merely intended to “protect” the Russian and Ukrainian inhabitants of Eastern Poland, once the Polish state had ceased to exist. Ipso facto, no Soviet invasion, no Soviet culpability.

As reported previously by The Insider, Russian media has been engaged in Katyn revisionism for several years. However, TASS is the official organ of the Russian government. Its blaming of Germany for Katyn means that the country has crossed a political Rubicon, a form of revisionism typical of states with unchecked power. Russia's political leadership is clearly no longer content with corrective, silencing, and misleading versions of history. Now it is posited that Stalin's notorious order to execute the Polish prisoners was falsified during Boris Yeltsin's presidency, as a liberal conspiracy to satisfy the West's “russophobic” agenda.

A number of surreal “revelations” have been presented as evidence of this: that banknotes from the German occupation era were found in the graves, that only the Germans used gunshots to the neck (!), that the corpses were too well preserved, and that the bullet holes didn't match the kind of bullets used by the NKVD. All these claims, apparently, are based on documents from the Soviet counter-intelligence agency SMERSH, which supposedly conducted its own “investigation” of Katyn in 1945.

There is also an explicit connection to Russia's war against Ukraine. The “Kiev regime”, as one Russian historian stated in Russian state media, “has created a provocation in Bucha”, where the Russian military raped, tortured and murdered hundreds of residents in the Spring of 2022. He further claimed, counterfactually, that these crimes were committed by the Ukrainian “Nazi regime”. Ukraine, he argued, has “intentionally planted corpses, brought in journalists and launched a propaganda campaign—recalling in many ways what the Germans did in Katyn.”

A trajectory can be traced from Stalin to Putin, from Katyn to Bucha. In Russia's efforts to justify its war against Ukraine, lies about the present become dependent on lies about the

past. Crimes against humanity committed by the invaders are covered up with complete disregard for the consequences. There is no decency to be found. History merely serves as an instrument for present politics.



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