"FIFTY YEARS OF "FAKE NEWS;" THE COVER-UP OF THE KATYN MASSACRE IN WWII

THIS ARTICLE HAS THREE PARTS

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View of the exhumed bodies of Polish officers murdered in the Katyn Forest Massacre by Soviet secret police (NKVD), Katyn Forest, Russia, 1943. In the background, bodies are autopsied. The massacre, which occurred in 1940, was discovered by German soldiers in 1943, and covered-up by Soviet forces shortly after--<mark>it was not acknowledged by the Russian government for nearly 50 years</mark>.

APRIL 10, 2020
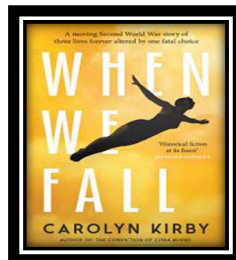
When We Fall by Carolyn Kirby is published as an e-book on 10 April and in paperback on 7 May 2020.

Carolyn Kirby

Thursday, 10 April 2020, marked the commemoration of a war crime 80 years ago in which the Soviet Union massacred thousands of Poles in locations including the Katyn Forest, near Smolensk, close to Russia's present western border.

<mark>*The atrocity was covered up for 50 years, and it took the fall of the USSR for evidence to begin to come to light, Carolyn Kirby tells Historia.*</mark>

At the heart of my new novel, When We Fall, lies one of the most notorious crimes of the Second World War; the murder of more than 22,000 Polish prisoners of war near Katyn in the USSR. When We Fall imagines the fate of Janina Lewandowska, a pilot in the Polish air force who was the only female victim of this slaughter.

The story also tells of a desperate quest for justice based on a real attempt to preserve evidence of the atrocity at the end of the war. But despite in-depth investigations at the time, Katyn is a crime for which no-one has ever been punished. And the 50-year cover-up of the killings, a cover-up in which the British and US governments were active participants, make it the 20th century's most outrageous example of fake news.

Poland was the first casualty of the second world war, but contrary to the outdated clichés about the campaign of September 1939, Polish military forces put up a fierce fight. The Polish Republic was a new country, but it had a huge army with modern tank battalions and a sizeable air force.

After the German invasion from the west on 1 September, the Poles fought numerous pitched battles leaving high casualties on both sides. This was a stark contrast to the Wehrmacht's easy conquest of France nine months later. But when the USSR invaded from the east on 17 September, Poland was quickly overwhelmed.

Hundreds of thousands of Polish combatants were taken prisoner. Amongst those captured by the Red Army, the officers were separated out and mostly sent to three prison camps in western Russia. The officers were imprisoned over the winter in conditions that were harsh but comparable to German prisoner of war camps. The prisoners' diaries and letters suggest that the Soviets were adhering, more or less, to the Geneva Convention

So, when the spring thaw arrived and movements out of the camps began, the remaining prisoners were full of hope. Surely, their lucky comrades were being returned to their homeland. In fact, what awaited them was a single bullet to the back of the head and burial in a mass grave in the forests of Katyn.

The prisoners' fate had been sealed in March 1940 when Lavrentiy Beria,(picture below) the head of NKVD (the Soviet secret police) recommended to his boss, Joseph Stalin, that 25,700 of the Polish officers held in captivity should be executed as 'nationalists and counter-revolutionaries. For reasons that are not entirely clear Stalin gave his assent.

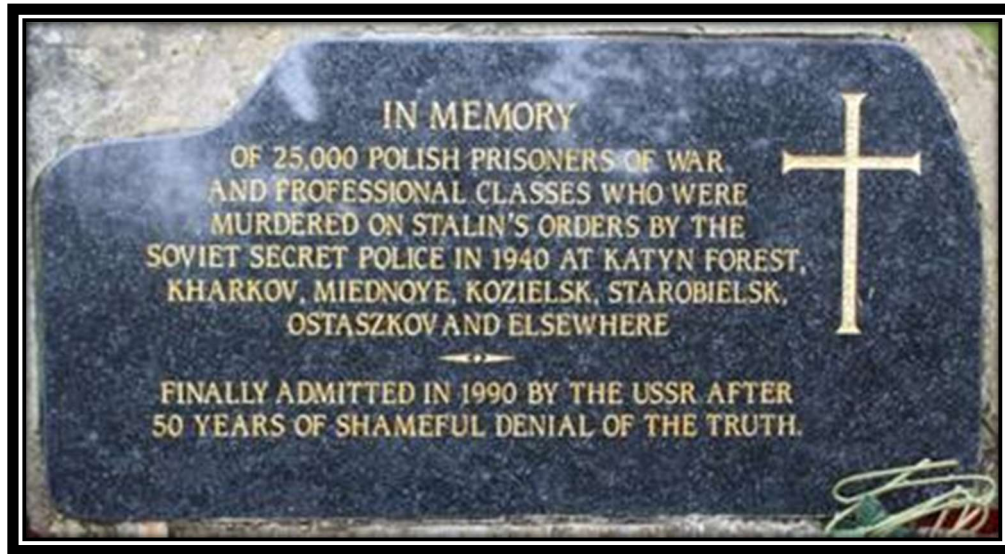*Man who recommended executions to Stalin*

Photo from 1943 exhumation of mass grave of Polish officers killed by <u>NKVD</u> in Katyn Forest.

The killings were perhaps an extension of the Soviet state's '<u>Great Purge'</u> of the 1930s, political murders which often targeted citizens of Polish heritage. Stalin had never forgiven Poland for defeating his own forces in 1920 during the Polish-Soviet war.

In 1940, many of Polish officers were reservists who had been the core of the country's professional middle class. *The Katyn massacres wiped out around 40 per cent of Poland's doctors, as well as lawyers, engineers, teachers, and journalists.* And it could be argued, given Poland's post-war history, that if this genocide was part of Stalin's strategy to cripple Poland's independence, it was highly effective.

In May 1940 though, Stalin halted the killing spree; possibly because he suspected that he had made a big mistake. Hitler was about to invade France, and when that goal was accomplished, Stalin perhaps sensed that his erstwhile ally would turn his eyes to a bigger prize in the east. Then, once Germany invaded the Soviet Union, Stalin would need the help of the western Allies who might regard the slaughter of the Poles as an obstacle to alliance. Britain had declared war on Germany because of a commitment to protect Poland. *It was time, therefore, for the Soviets' long Katyn cover-up to begin.*

Sure enough, when Germany invaded Russia in July 1941 and the USSR suddenly became Britain's ally, questions were asked about the 'missing' Polish officers. General Anders, the head of Polish forces under Allied command, *pressed Churchill to make the prisoners' return a condition of alliance.* But Stalin gave Churchill a vague excuse about sending some Polish prisoners to the east and then losing track of them 'in Manchuria.' In the summer of 1941, that excuse was good enough. For the Allied leaders, the importance of a pact with the mighty USSR overrode every other consideration.

IN MEMORY
OF 25,000 POLISH PRISONERS OF WAR
AND PROFESSIONAL CLASSES WHO WERE
MURDERED ON STALIN'S ORDERS BY THE
SOVIET SECRET POLICE IN 1940 AT KATYN FOREST,
KHARKOV, MIEDNOYE, KOZIELSK, STAROBIELSK,
OSTASZKOV AND ELSEWHERE

FINALLY ADMITTED IN 1990 BY THE USSR AFTER
50 YEARS OF SHAMEFUL DENIAL OF THE TRUTH.

So, in 1943, when German forces occupying Smolensk discovered thousands of decaying corpses wearing Polish uniforms, the news was dismissed by the Allies as a hoax. The British government said the Nazis must be to blame. And although the German authorities did their best to convince the world otherwise, with a multi-national Red Cross commission and then allied prisoners of war visiting the exhumations at Katyn and a team of forensic scientists carefully preserving the dated evidence found on the bodies, the world would not believe them.

Even evidence about Katyn from other sources was dismissed. In 1944, Ron Jeffrey, an escaped prisoner of war who joined the Polish resistance before making his way back to Britain*, provided documents from the Polish underground movement detailing Soviet responsibility for the Katyn killings*. Jeffery later believed that his evidence was binned because it landed on the Foreign Office desk of the Soviet secret agent Kim Philby.

Then, at the chaotic end of the war in Poland, Dr Werner Beck, a German scientist who had been working on preserving documents from the Katyn graves, decided to protect some of this evidence from the coming Red Army onslaught. In a mission similar to that attempted by one of my characters in *When We Fall*, Dr Beck loaded crates of the Katyn victims' diaries, letters, notebooks and passports onto a truck and made a daring solo dash from Kraków towards the American forces in Czechoslovakia. *But the truck could not get through and to avoid falling into Soviet hands, its precious cargo was incinerated.*

Dr Beck survived, though, and in 1952 gave evidence to a US congressional investigation of the massacres at Katyn.

The final report agreed with him that culpability for the killings lay firmly with the Soviet Union, not Nazi Germany. But by then it was too late. The world was gripped by another conflict, the Cold War, and no-one in the west wanted to bring nuclear annihilation closer by ramping up tensions with the Soviet Union over a bygone wartime controversy.

Even in the 1970s, the subject was politically inflammatory. The building of a Katyn memorial in Gunnersbury cemetery in London was delayed for years by an argument over the inscription, 'Katyn 1940', *because at such a date only the USSR could have been behind the atrocity.* In Poland, the very mention of 'Katyn' was taboo. Families who had lost a loved one in the massacre had to keep it secret. Jobs, university places or friendships would all be jeopardized if a personal connection to this toxic subject became known.

The Katyn memorial at Gunnersbury Cemetery

Finally, after 50 years of 'fake news,' the collapse of the Soviet Union allowed the truth about Katyn to emerge. In 1990, President Gorbachev first admitted Soviet responsibility for the deaths of Polish officers held in captivity in 1940, and in a symbol of final reconciliation on 7th April 2010, Prime Ministers Putin of Russia, and Tusk of Poland, together laid wreaths in the forest at Katyn.

And then, three days later, on its way to a commemoration at Katyn, the plane carrying Poland's top dignitaries, including *President Kaczyński, crashed into the fog-bound forest killing all 96 people on board.* The repercussions of this modern twist in the Katyn tragedy and the conspiracy theories it generated still rebound through Polish political and cultural life.

The 2010 plane crash frames the prologue of *When We Fall*, a story of three young people bound together by a fatal choice made during the horror of the killings at Katyn. From the desperate quest for justice that ensues, only one of the three will survive to witness the long aftermath of the atrocity.

The novel was published on 7 May, 2020, to coincide with the 75th anniversary of VE Day as well as this year's anniversaries marking 80 years since the massacres and 10 since the Polish air disaster that finally, *and dramatically, brought the long-hidden truth about Katyn to the world's full attention.*

POLISH HISTORY (1940)

Encyclopedia Britannica's editors oversee subject areas in which they have extensive knowledge, whether from years of experience gained by working on that content or via study for an advanced degree....

If interested……. a video concerning information about Operation Katyn is available by *copying and pasting the below link into your browser.*

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f2djnWw751s

After Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union concluded their Nonaggression Pact of 1939 and Germany invaded Poland from the west, Soviet forces occupied the eastern half of Poland. As a consequence of this occupation, tens of thousands of Polish military personnel fell into Soviet hands and were interned in prison camps inside the Soviet Union. But after the Germans invaded the Soviet Union (June 1941), the Polish government-in-exile (located in London) and the Soviet government agreed to cooperate against Germany, and a Polish army on Soviet territory was to be formed. The Polish general Władysław Anders began organizing this army, but when he requested that 15,000 Polish prisoners of war whom the Soviets had once held at camps near Smolensk be transferred to his command, *the Soviet government informed him in December 1941 that most of those prisoners had escaped to Manchuria and could not be located.*

The fate of the missing prisoners remained a mystery. Then on April 13, 1943, the Germans announced that they had discovered mass graves of Polish officers in the Katyn forest near Smolensk, in western Russian S.F.S.R. A total of 4,443 corpses were recovered that had apparently been shot from behind and then piled in stacks and buried. Investigators identified the corpses as the Polish officers who had been interned at a Soviet prison camp near Smolensk and accused the Soviet authorities of having executed the prisoners in May 1940. *In response to these charges, the Soviet government claimed that the Poles had been engaged in construction work west of Smolensk in 1941 and the invading German army had killed them after overrunning that area in August 1941.* But both German and Red Cross investigations of

the Katyn corpses then produced firm physical evidence that the massacre took place in early 1940, at a time when the area was still under Soviet control.

The Polish government-in-exile in London requested that the International Committee of the Red Cross examine the graves and also asked the Soviet government to provide official reports on the fates of the remaining missing prisoners. The Soviet government refused these demands, and on April 25, 1943, the Soviets broke diplomatic relations with the Polish government in London.

The Soviets then set about establishing a Polish government-in-exile composed of Polish communists.

The Katyn Massacre left a deep scar in Polish-Soviet relations during the remainder of the war and afterward. For Poles, Katyn became a symbol of the many victims of Stalinism.

Although a 1952 U.S. congressional *inquiry concluded that the Soviet Union had been responsible for the massacre, Soviet leaders insisted for decades that the Polish officers found at Katyn had been killed by the invading Germans in 1941.*

This explanation was accepted without protest by successive Polish communist governments until the late 1980s, when the Soviet Union allowed a noncommunist coalition government to come to power in Poland. *In March 1989 this government officially shifted the blame for the Katyn Massacre from the Germans to the Soviet secret police, the NKVD. In 1992 the Russian government released documents proving that the Soviet Politburo and the NKVD had been responsible for the massacre and cover-up and revealing that there may have been more than 20,000 victims. In 2000 a memorial was opened at the site of the killings in Katyn.*

On April 7, 2010, Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin joined Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk at a ceremony commemorating the massacre, *marking the first time that a Russian leader had taken part in such a commemoration*. Three days later, on April 10, a plane carrying Polish Pres. Lech Kaczynski to another commemoration ceremony crashed near Smolensk and the Katyn site, killing Kaczynski, his wife, the head of the national security bureau, the president of the national bank, the army chief of staff, and a number of other Polish government officials.
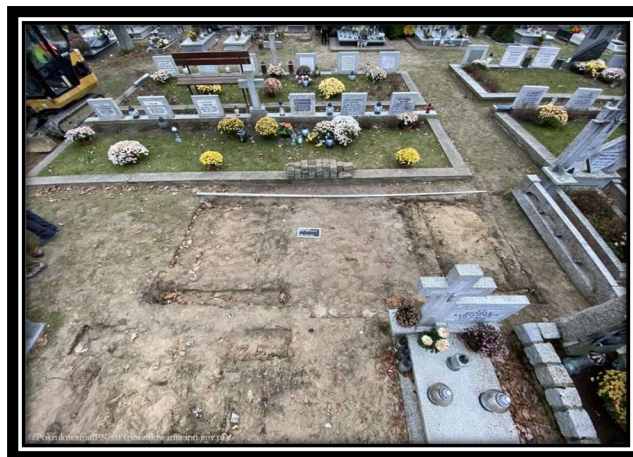
This article was most recently revised and updated by Jeff Wallenfeldt, Manager, Geography and History.

PART THREE

RESEARCHERS UNCOVER REMAINS OF POLISH NUNS MURDERED BY THE SOVIETS DURING WWII

As the Red Army pushed the Nazis out of Poland in 1945, soldiers engaged in brutal acts of repression against civilians. Researchers in Poland have discovered the remains of three Catholic nuns killed by Soviet troops toward the end of World War II.

Smithsonian
MAGAZINE

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As Sebastian Kettley reports for the *Express*, a team from the Polish Institute of National Remembrance (IPN), which investigates crimes committed in the country by Nazi and communist forces, uncovered the women's skeletons in Orneta, a village in northern Poland, last December.

The dig marked the culmination of a months-long search for the bodies of seven nuns from the order of St. Catherine of Alexandria. Murdered in 1945, during the Russian Red Army's "liberation" of Poland and subsequent seizure of power, the sisters were among the hundreds of thousands of Polish civilians targeted by the Soviets during and after World War II.

Per the IPN, *archaeologists had previously found the bones of* Sister Charytyna (Jadwiga Fahl) and three nuns who'd served as nurses at St. Mary's Hospital—Sisters Generosa (Maria Bolz), Krzysztofora (Marta Klomfass) and Liberia (Maria Domnik)—in Gdańsk and Olsztyn, respectively.

The team drew on archival records to locate the final three nuns' resting place: a 215-square-foot graveyard in Orneta, writes Mindy Weisberger for *Live Science.* According to a statement, the exhumed skeletons' age and sex, in conjunction with necklaces, crosses and religious garments buried nearby, gave the researchers probable cause to identify them as Sisters Rolanda (Maria Abraham), Gunhilda (Dorota Steffen) and Bona (Anna Pestka).

Many of the nuns suffered brutal deaths: Krzysztofora, for instance, *sustained 16 bayonet wounds and had both her eyes and tongue gouged out,* according to an October 2020 IPN statement.

Generosa, meanwhile, succumbed to her injuries after ten days of torture, as Kettley pointed out in a 2020 *Express* article.

One of the nun's skeletons (IPN)

Seventy-six years after World War II drew to a close, Russia's treatment of Poland during and after the conflict remains a significant source of tension between the two nations. On September 17, 1939, just 16 days after Nazi Germany began the war by invading western Poland, Josef Stalin's Red Army invaded eastern Poland, promptly annexing the territory in what Deutsche-Welle's Magdalena Gwozdz-Pallokat describes as the Soviets grabbing "their share of the spoils when Poland was as good as defeated."

In the brief period between Stalin's annexation and the Nazis' capture of eastern Poland in the summer of 1941, the Soviets engaged in brutal acts of repression, including the 1940 Katyn massacre of nearly 22,000 Polish citizens. As the Red Army regained control of the region in late 1944 and early 1945, violence against Poles—particularly clergy, military, educators and others viewed as threats to communist rule—resumed: "Far from being a 'liberator,'" wrote Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki in a 2020 op-ed for *Politico*, *"the Soviet Union was a facilitator of Nazi Germany and a perpetrator of crimes of its own."*

As Jonathan Luxmoore reported for the National Catholic, in 2019, Soviet soldiers killed more than 100 sisters from the St. Catherine order alone during the 1945 reinvasion of Poland. Religious orders, Luxmoore added, "were seen as secretive organizations threatening the officially atheist Communist Party's absolute power, so they became key targets for repression."

The seven nuns at the center of the recent excavations likely died in February 1945, when Soviet troops arrived at the hospitals in Gdańsk-Wrzeszcz, Olsztyn and Orneta, according to *Live Science*. As the nuns attempted to protect their patients, the soldiers brutally retaliated.

Now, researchers are trying to learn more about these women's lives. Per the October 2020 statement, pathologists at the Forensic Medicine Institute in Gdańsk are analyzing the skeletons to confirm their identities; religious officials in Poland are also seeking beatification for the murdered St. Catherine sisters.

As the Red Army pushed the Nazis out of Poland in 1945, soldiers engaged in brutal acts of repression against civilians.
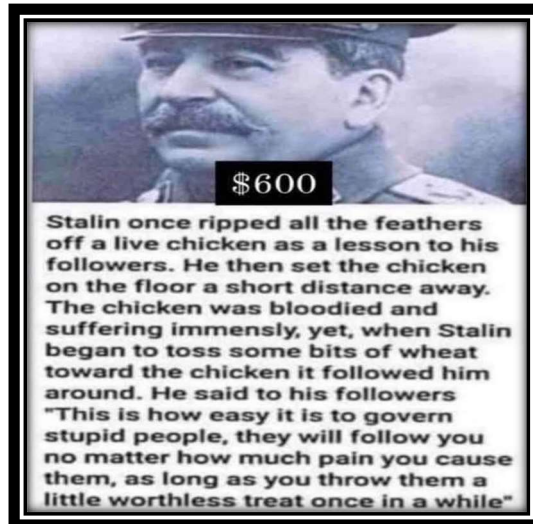
DOCUMENTARY "KATYN 1973"

This film "Katyn, 1973" (National Archives Identifier 1936842) is located in the *records of the Central Intelligence Agency* (Record Group 263) in the series titled "Moving Images Relating to Intelligence and International Relations, 1947-1984." It explores the history of the Katyn Forest Massacre of World War II.

Monument in Katowice, Poland, memorializing "Katyn, Kharkiv, Mednoye and other places of killing in the former USSR in 1940"

The Katyn Memorial in Warsaw, Poland

$600

Stalin once ripped all the feathers off a live chicken as a lesson to his followers. He then set the chicken on the floor a short distance away. The chicken was bloodied and suffering immensly, yet, when Stalin began to toss some bits of wheat toward the chicken it followed him around. He said to his followers "This is how easy it is to govern stupid people, they will follow you no matter how much pain you cause them, as long as you throw them a little worthless treat once in a while"

Sources state that this man was responsible for 20 million deaths during his time in power.

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HAS BEEN TAKEN FROM WHAT APPEARS TO BE AUTHENTIC WEBSITES
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