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The ghosts of Katyn

by Michael Weiss

My first thought upon hearing of last weekend's tragedy in the misty canopy of Smolensk was a professionally selfish one. "Would Ann Applebaum be filing her *Slate* column on Monday?" Applebaum's husband, Radoslaw Sikorski, is the Polish foreign minister and apparently one of the few members of his government not on board the Soviet-era aircraft that crashed in the trees near the memorial site for another Polish tragedy. Apart from being one of Stalin's worst crimes, the Katyn Massacre was also one of his most capricious. In 1940, when Moscow was still aligned with Berlin under the terms of a "friendship" pact, agents of the NKVD took about 20,000 Polish officers into the Katyn Forest and executed them. The Politburo later blamed the atrocity on the Nazis, and this myth persisted right up through the Nuremberg trials until the early 1990's when Mikhail Gorbachev assigned his country the responsibility for the mass murder and his successor Boris Yelsin released the state archives confirming it.

This year, for reasons that Applebaum speculated over a week ago, Vladimir Putin agreed to attend the 40-year commemoration of the Katyn massacre, the event that led to Poland's instantaneous loss of a government and the occasion for Russia's second show of sympathy in the same week. Putin has hitherto been a revisionist and apologist when it comes to the totalitarian history of his country, and so the seeming about-face -- he actually used the word "totalitarian" to condemn Stalin's slaughter -- was marked. Did it reflect Putin's growing indifference to the past in light of mounting economic and national security obstacles Russia faces in the present? Or was it a calculated ploy to try and wrest oil and gas deals from Poland, using the delicate tool of national memory and memorialization as his tool with this former satellite as opposed to his usual kit of pipeline warfare and despotic intimidation?

As it happens, an unwidowed Applebaum did file her piece on Monday, noting that the aftermath of a national calamity brought out the best in Polish democracy and signaled a restart of Russian-Polish relations.

Although there is not much to be grateful for this week, I am thankful, at least, that the families of the dedicated public servants who died on that plane will not have to wait 70 years to learn what really happened. This terrible disaster, in that strange and bloody forest, contains eerie echoes of the past. But it is not destined to become yet another "blank spot" in this region's dark history.

The point is well taken, although one fears slightly that the untimely demise of President Kaczynski and his entourage has distracted from the internationally relevant purpose of their travels and thus wound the clock back, as it were, on a full accounting with history.

In studying Katyn one learns a great deal about the pathological mind of Stalin and the Soviet art of transforming guilt into political victory. The plan to commit mass murder was hatched, according to Russian investigations made the early 1990's, in the winter of 1940 at conference between the Gestapo and NKVD held in Zakopane in what was then German-occupied Poland. The joint Soviet-Nazi objective was to defeat resurgent Polish nationalism as a threat to either power's carve-up of Eastern Europe. So ebulliently was the massacre plotted that photos from the conference, released, too, in the last days of Communism, show Gestapo and NKVD agents sledding together in the snow in between sessions.

Fast forward three years. Stalin was attempting a rapprochement with the Polish leadership-in-exile in London since, at that point in World War II, well after friendship had devolved into enmity, the USSR's fortunes were flagging and the Red Army needed all the help it could get. Stalin held three meetings with Polish officials. The first was with the Polish ambassador Professor Kot; then with Kot, the Polish Premier General Sikorski (who would later die in a mysterious plane crash himself widely blamed on Moscow among Poles) and General Anders; and then with Anders alone. According to Robert Conquest's *Stalin: Breaker of Nations*, talk at first was general until the Generalissimus oddly began inquiring of his own victims. He asked Kot what had happened to the beautiful Polish Communist Vera Kosztrewa and when told that she'd been shot in the Soviet purges, his response was: "What a pity."

There were hardly any Polish Communists left after the mass liquidations that occurred between 1937 and 1938. However, the status of the missing 20,000 was a persistent concern of the Polish command despite--or perhaps because--of Molotov and Vyshinsky's insistence that they'd eventually be found. (Even in the fog of war, 20,000 officers of a neighboring nation are not so easily misplaced.) Stalin likely laughed when recounting to his inner circle how he suggested that these men had possibly escaped to Manchuria, or lay in camps whose chiefs had not yet had the Poles' manumission orders communicated, or failed to uphold those orders if they in fact came through. Sikorski took these assurances at face value, telling his cabinet: "We shall find them...

Gentlemen, you don't maintain that the Soviet government has simply murdered them? Absurd! Nonsense!"

In 1943, the Germans uncovered the mass graves. An International Medical Commission dated the deaths in 1940, a view confirmed by the Polish underground as well as by Western POWs who surveyed the hecatombs. Stalin's response was that the Germans had murdered these men after the Nazi invasion of Poland, an accusation that the Allies, fearing an already tenuous relationship with Russia, let stand.

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