

DEFENDERS OF POLAND

1939, A Polish soldier during the summer maneuvers of the Polish Army using the Browning wz. 28



STALIN MURD MACH

Polish officers IN KATYN

Without courts, trials, and no sentences, in 1940, NKVD officers shot nearly 22,000 Polish officers and state officials on Stalin's order. For half a century, the truth about the Katyn massacre was hidden from the world's public opinion. Soviet propaganda said that Polish officers had been murdered by the Germans. This version was disseminated by the authorities of the People's Republic of Poland.

Only a few days after the Soviet aggression against Poland, around 250,000 Polish prisoners of war - soldiers, policemen, and civilians were captured by the Soviets. Poles ended up in internment camps established on the orders of the head of the NKVD and the People's Commissar for Internal Affairs, Lavrenty Beria.

Some of the prisoners - privates - were handed over to the Nazis, sent to work in gulags, or got released, while the officers were placed in camps in Kozelsk, Starobelsk, and Ostashkov. The latter included officers of the police, prison, and Border Defense Committee.

The selected elite

In February 1940, there were about 15,000 prisoners of war in the NKVD camps, including 8383 officers, 19 officers of the navy, 5,809 gendarmes and policemen, 78 officers of the prison administration, and counterintelligence. Among the imprisoned, there was also a large group of reserve officers called up to the army at the outbreak of the war. They represented the Polish elite - doctors, lawyers, academic lecturers, teachers, scientists, engineers, writers, political activists, officials, and landowners. There were also 21 clergymen in the camps.

The fact that Polish Army officers and policemen are in special camps was no secret. They had the right to correspond with their relatives. Despite censorship and various indoctrination measures, the content of the letters left no doubt as to where and in what character the Poles were. However, no one had any sense of the trage-

dy that was about to happen to them. Meanwhile, from the beginning of 1940, the Kremlin planned the liquidation of Polish prisoners of war.

„Unrepentant enemies”

At the beginning of March 1940, the head of the NKVD, Beria, sent a secret letter to Stalin, in which he suggested the liquidation of prisoners of war from the camps in Kozelsk, Starobelsk, and Ostashkov, as well as civilians imprisoned in the former Polish Borderlands. He justified it, inter alia, by the fact that all Poles „are unrepentant enemies of the Soviet power, with no signs of improvement,” and even in the camps they „try to continue their counter-revolutionary activities and conduct anti-Soviet agitation. Everyone is waiting only to be able to actively join the fight against the Soviet power.” He requested that their cases be examined under a special procedure, with the application of the highest penalty of prisoners - shooting. He added that the cases should be dealt „without summoning the detainees and without presenting charges, a decision to terminate the investigation and an indictment.” The prisoners were collectively found guilty of sabotage, espionage, and counter-revolution.

About 10,000 items found during exhumation works carried out in 1995 in Katyn, Miednoje and Kharkiv were handed over to the Katyn Museum



foto ADAMURBANER / PAP

Shot in the back of the head

Based on the decision of the dictator and his companions from the Politburo, mass death transports began in early April. It lasted until the end of May. On April 3, 1940, NKVD officers began the liquidation of the Kozelsk camp, and two days later the Starobelsk and Ostashkov camps. From Kozelsk, 4,404 prisoners were transported to Katyn. They were taken by train to the Gniezdowo station, and later by bus to the crime scene. Military coats were thrown over their heads over the mass graves and their hands were tied. They were killed at close range, usually with a single shot in the back of a German pistol (Walther 7.65 mm).



Katyn, Russia, 2010. Prime Minister of the Republic of Poland, Donald Tusk at the premises of the Polish War Cemetery during the celebration of the 70th anniversary of the Katyn massacre

The corpses were thrown into large, nameless pits. 3896 prisoners from Starobielsk were killed in the NKVD premises in Khar-