

Institute of National Remembrance

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The Katyn Massacre - Commemorations



Signs of Memory

The Katyn Massacre left an unhealed wound in the memory of both the families of the victims and the entire Polish nation. The shock and trauma of loved ones who had to face the loss of their fathers, husbands or brothers, was deepened by the awareness that they had also been deprived of the chance of a last goodbye, a prayer by their grave, or putting up a cross. There was a natural need to at least symbolically commemorate those who were murdered, to share the pain and to inform the world about this great loss. Holy Masses were ordered for the souls of the deceased, and obituaries were placed in the press - so that at least a transient trace would remain. During World War II it was, paradoxically, possible in the Polish territories occupied by the Third Reich - Katyn hourglasses were posted by such titles as "New Warsaw Courier", "Goniec Krakowski" or "Gazeta Lwowska".

The communist authorities, which had been installing themselves in Poland since mid-1944,

completely eliminated from all publications - with the help of the censorship apparatus - any references to the Katyn Massacre or those shot by decision of the Politburo of 5 March 1940. Therefore, the memory of lost loved ones could only be cherished within a close circle of trusted people. It was manifested by placing the names of those who died in the East on family tombstones. After the time of Stalinist terror, the inscriptions became more literal: "he died in the East ...", "killed in Katyn ...". The lack of knowledge about other places of execution meant that families usually identified lost relatives as those shot in Katyn. Cemeteries and churches were the first places of the material commemorations of the victims of communist crimes.

At the same time, the fight against the Katyn lie spread by the Soviets and Polish communists became one of the main goals of independence circles, legal Polish authorities in exile, and many leaders of post-war political emigration. Commemorations erected in Western European cities - as well as those across the Atlantic - were effective weapons. The problems faced by the initiators of erecting such monuments clearly proved that the communist regime saw them as a threat to their interests. Monuments in the West propagating the truth about the perpetrators of the murder, at the same time undermining the legitimacy of the communist authorities, provoked furious attacks by Soviet diplomatic services and those of the Polish People's Republic.

In Poland, the construction of official Katyn monuments became possible only after the political changes of 1989. The number of commemorations of the victims of NKVD crimes which have been erected since then can be safely counted in thousands, if, in addition to classic monuments, we also include smaller forms - plaques dedicated to particular groups, for example officers of specific formations, as well as oak trees planted to commemorate individual victims as part of the "Katyn ... Save them from Oblivion" program.

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