

# Institute of National Remembrance

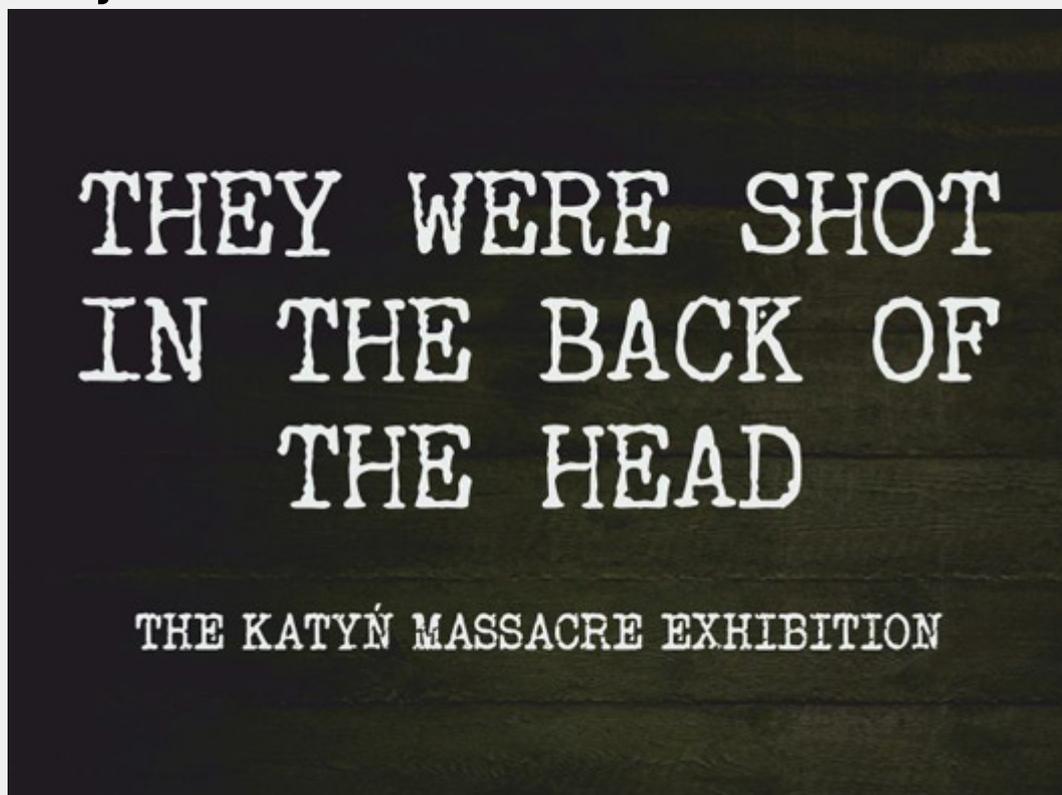
<https://ipn.gov.pl/en/news/900,They-were-shot-in-the-back-of-the-head-The-Katyn-Massacre-exhibition.html>

18.04.2024, 05:58

02.02.2017

---

„They were shot in the back of the head” - The Katyń Massacre exhibition





# THE UNIFORM GROUPS

MEMBERS OF MANY MILITARY AND CIVIL  
UNIFORM GROUPS AND FORMATIONS  
WERE MURDERED IN KATYN MASSACRE

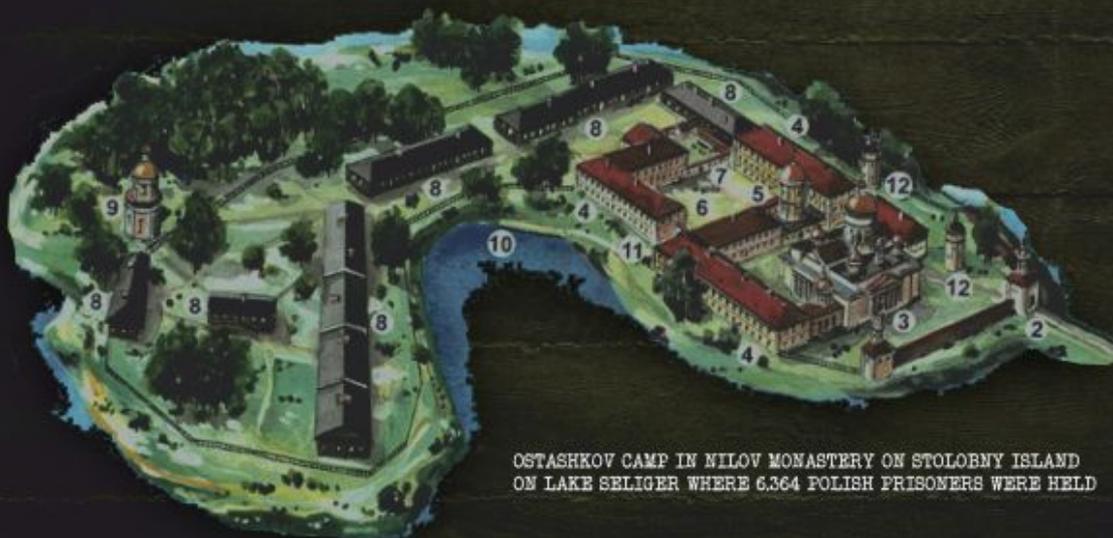


- |                            |                     |
|----------------------------|---------------------|
| 1. BORDER PROTECTION CORPS | 6. CAVALRY          |
| 2. BORDER GUARD            | 7. STATE POLICE     |
| 3. INFANTRY                | 8. PRISON GUARD     |
| 4. ARTILLERY               | 9. NAVY             |
| 5. AIRFORCE                | 10. MILITARY POLICE |

# PRISONS AND THREE SPECIAL CAMPS

The number of captured Poles exceeded the capacity of Soviet special camps. As early as 1939, Soviet authorities decided that soldiers of other ranks are to be released or sent to lagers and labour camps. Almost 40,000 prisoners returned to German-occupied territories in a prisoner exchange program. Others were released when claimed by the Lithuanian government. Still, more than 8,200 Polish Army officers remained in special camps in Kozelsk (Russian SSR) and Starobilsk (Ukrainian SSR). This group included one woman, 2/Lt Pilot (P/O) Janina Lewandowska. Polish policemen, Border Guards, and personnel of the Prison Service, Military Provost and the Border Protection Corps were placed in a special camp in Ostashkov (Kalininskaya Oblast'). All camps were located in former Russian Orthodox monasteries adapted to hold prisoners. But the buildings were not prepared for the number of prisoners they had to receive. In the first weeks of their imprisonment, the inmates had to build their own cots and outhouses, help organise the prison hospital and mess. The Ostashkov camp was the largest, with almost 6400 inmates - personnel of uniformed services, regardless of rank. Ostashkov was also the camp with the worst living conditions. It was located in a monastery on an island on Lake Seliger. Prisoners of this camp were forced to work at the logging of the surrounding forests and building an embankment to connect the island to mainland.

Soon after the eastern territories of Poland were captured and annexed into the Belarussian and Ukrainian SSRs, the NKVD began arresting representatives of Polish intelligentsia - teachers, university professors, doctors, priests, lawyers, judges, public administration officers, mayors, community leaders, landowners and factory owners. More than ten thousand thus selected prisoners were sent to former Polish criminal prisons in Grodno, Bialystok, Brest, Lvov, Stanislawów, Tarnopol and other cities of former Eastern Poland. A number of them were hastily accused of spying and membership in "counter-revolutionary organisations" and executed or deported to lagers. More than 7000 civilians were held in prisons without trial until the spring of 1940.



OSTASHKOV CAMP IN MILOV MONASTERY ON STOLOBNOY ISLAND ON LAKE SELIGER WHERE 6.364 POLISH PRISONERS WERE HELD



DRAWINGS OF KOZIELSK CAMP BY STANISLAW WESTWALEWICZ - KATYN MASSACRE SURVIVOR

# THE EXECUTIONS

On March 5, 1940, the People's Commissar for Internal Affairs Lavrentiy Beria proposed a motion to the Politburo of the All-union Communist Party for the execution of several thousand Polish public service officers. They were condemned to death as "inveterate enemies of the Soviet rule, filled with hatred for the Soviet system." The Politburo decided in favor and the document was signed by Joseph Stalin, Lazar Kaganovich, Mikhail Kalinin, Anastas Mikoyan, Vyacheslav Molotov and Kliment Voroshilov. The most secret decision of the highest authorities of the Soviet party and state concerned the "elimination" of 14,700 prisoners of war held in special camps and 11,000 civilian prisoners held in the prisons of so-called "Western Ukraine" and "Western Belarus".

"The cases ... are to be investigated under special procedures protocol; they are to receive capital punishment - execution by firing squad. The prisoners are not to be summoned for investigation, nor presented with charges, the decision to close the investigation or the bill of indictment".

Executions began in April and went on until mid-May. Officers held in Kozelsk were transported to the forest of Katyn and executed over open death pits or in the cellars of a neighbouring villa occupied by the NKVD. Inmates of the Starobilsck camp were moved to Kharkiv and murdered in the cellars of the NKVD offices, their bodies buried in death pits in Piatykhatty; POWs from Ostashkov were taken to Kalinin (today's Tver) and buried in mass graves in Mednoye. Most prisoners held in the prisons of Western Ukraine were transported to Kiev and there murdered in the execution rooms of the NKVD. Their bodies were deposited in the forest of Bykivnia near Kiev. There were also other places of execution. Several prisoners were killed in Kherson on the Black Sea and in Kharkiv. The names of about 3870 victims murdered in Belarus remain unknown to this day. Though there are reasons to presume they were murdered in Minsk and most likely buried in Kuropaty, the Belarussian government has been unwilling to allow complete research and exhumation work to be conducted in that area.



# DEPORTATIONS

Deportations into the Soviet interior were one of the main forms of Soviet persecution against the Polish people. On 5 December 1939, the Council of People's Commissars of the USSR passed a resolution on the deportation of relatives of Polish military settlers, foresters and railway personnel. They were all labeled as *spetspereselentsy - osadniki y lesniki* ["special immigrants - settlers and foresters"]. The first deportation began on 10 February 1940. The 140,000 to 230,000 deportees were sent to northern and eastern districts of the Soviet Union. They were placed in special high-security camps with increased work discipline. Deprived of their identification documents, they became property of the NKVD which ruled over them according to its own interests. Many froze to death during the onerous wintertime journey; others fell victim to excessive labour at logging in the deplorable conditions Soviet lagers. It is estimated that nearly one out of every twenty deportees died in the first months after their displacement.

On 2 March 1940, the Soviet authorities made a decision to carry out a second deportation from the eastern territories of the Polish Republic - this time to Kazakh and Uzbek SSRs. Three days later, this decision was followed by the resolution which led to the Katyń Massacres. The correspondence of the dates when sentences were passed on the defenders of Poland and their relatives suggests an attempt to cover the traces of the genocide intended by the Soviet authorities. The deportations were carried out in mid-April and included mostly relatives of the prisoners, between 61,000 and 320,000 civilians. Sentenced to 10 years in exile, the deportees were billeted with the local population and given passports valid only in the assigned area.



The third deportation took place in June and July 1940. The 80,000 to 240,000 civilians included primarily refugees from western and central regions of the II Polish Republic, who had fled from the German onslaught in the first days of the September campaign to the eastern territories of Poland. After the fall of the defense war, they did not return to their homes and refused to accept Soviet passports. This time reprisals affected mostly (an estimated 80% of the transport) Polish citizens of Jewish descent. They were relocated into various areas of Siberia and the northern territories of European Russia.

The fourth and last deportation began on 22 May 1941. The purpose was to "cleanse" the western territories of the Soviet state from the so-called "unreliable element". Transports involved mostly representatives of the intelligentsia, but also families of railway personnel, skilled workers and craftsmen. The number of deportees is estimated between 40,000 and 230,000. The unexpected outbreak of the German-Soviet war saved many from deportation.

All deportations were conducted in a similar manner: NKVD operational groups appeared at the doors at night or at the break of dawn. Families were given between 15 and 45 minutes to collect their most important belongings. After that, the deportees were transported to assembly points or directly to train stations where they were loaded onto cattle cars. The long journey was passed in cramped cars, in poor sanitary conditions, where disease spread easily and took a heavy toll on the exiles.

# EXHUMATIONS OF 1943

On 11 April 1943, the German news agency Transocean announced the "discovery of a mass grave containing the bodies of 3000 Polish officers." The news came as a shock to the victims' families who had been waiting since the spring of 1940 to hear from their loved ones held in POW camps. The German authorities had been aware of the events that had taken place in Katyn since 1941, but did not at first make any efforts to clarify the issue. When the tables turned and their military situation changed, however, they decided to reveal the Soviet crime to the world in order to set the allies against each other and present their war with the Soviet Union as a sacrificial battle against the barbaric East. German authorities carried out large-scale survey and exhumation of the area, opening most of the death pits and studying the bodies found within. They allowed three commissions to participate in the work. The first was a German Wehrmacht commission led by Professor Gerhard Buhtz.



POLISH RED CROSS COMMISSION MEMBERS AT THE DEATH PITS



BRITISH AND AMERICAN OFFICERS WITNESSING THE EXHUMATIONS

The second was the International Medical Commission of pathologists from allied states and the III Reich's satellite states, as well as one member from a neutral state, Dr. François Naville from Switzerland. The work of the International Commission, which included also the Finnish physician Dr. Arno Saxén, was carried out under the guidance of a Hungarian pathologist, Dr. Ferenc Orsó. The third commission was the Technical Commission of the Polish Red Cross, comprised solely of Poles. The Germans insisted on the presence of the Polish Red Cross commission, which in their view would warrant credibility to their discovery. All the medical experts who studied the death pits of Katyn agreed beyond the shadow of a doubt that the massacre must have been committed by the Soviets in the spring of 1940. In an attempt to publicize their discovery of mass graves containing the bodies of officers, the Germans brought reporters from all over Europe to the Katyn forest. They also brought in British and American prisoners of war who were to watch the exhumation and confirm Soviet culpability. In June 1943, the work was suspended due to high temperatures and difficult conditions. The research was to be reopened in autumn, but that plan failed when the Red Army marched into the area in September of that year.



POLISH PRIEST STANISŁAW JASIŃSKI AT THE DEATH PITS



GERMAN PROPAGANDA - NEWSPAPER WITH INFORMATION ABOUT DISCOVERY OF KATYN GRAVES



REMAINS OF POLISH OFFICER



GERMAN PROPAGANDA POSTER „KATYŃ - WARNING FOR EUROPE!”

# THE UNKNOWN VICTIMS OF THE KATYN MASSACRE

Not all victims of the Katyn Massacres have been commemorated and given a proper burial. The names of 3870 prisoners held in Western Belarussia, killed most probably in Minsk and buried in the forest of Kuropaty, remain unknown to this day. The search for the so-called "Belarussian Katyn List" - a list of names of prisoners handed over to the NKVD in the spring of 1940 - began more than 20 years ago. In its investigation into the Katyn murders, Polish Institute of National Remembrance has repeatedly asked the Belarussian authorities to carry out exhumation work in Kuropaty and to send documentation of the study to Poland. In 2003, Belarussian authorities notified the Institute that a study carried out in Kuropaty had not yielded any information as to the ethnicity or citizenship of the exhumed remains. No documents were sent to confirm the veracity of that statement.

Meanwhile, a search for the Belarussian List was attempted in Moscow. By Vladimir Putin's personal instructions, Russian archive services searched the central and district archives. After a few days, however, the search was closed as unsuccessful. At the end of 2010, President Alexander Lukashenko announced his intention to request a report from the Security Agency regarding Poles murdered by the NKVD in the territory of Belarussia. The gesture, which raised some hopes in Poland, unfortunately later proved to have been a political manoeuvre rather than a real offer of help. On 23 December 2011, Lukashenko denied that any executions of Poles had ever taken place in Belarussia. In the following year, the claim was repeated by representatives of the Belarussian Ministry of Justice who also denied the existence of any document resembling the "Belarussian Katyn List".

Complete exhumation of the death pits in the forest of Kuropaty would certainly help clarify the issue and provide a closure much awaited by the children and grandchildren of victims who are currently considered missing, but were most likely murdered in the spring of 1940. The victims' families long to learn of the fate of their loved ones. The Katyn Massacres still keep the secret of the fate of 3870 victims.



WOODEN CROSSES AND ICON IN THE FOREST OF KUROPATY

The Katyń Massacre - The massacre perpetrated by the NKVD in the spring of 1940 on about 22,000 Polish POWs and prisoners captured after 17 September 1939 left a heavy mark on the pages of Polish history. By Lavrentiy Beria's decision of March 5, 1940, all prisoners held in the prison camps of Kozelsk, Starobyelsk and Ostashkov, and prisons of western Ukraine and Belarus, were labeled "enemies of the Soviet state". Executions began in April and went on until mid-May. Officers held in Kozelsk were transported to the forest of Katyń and executed over open pits or in the neighbouring villa occupied by the NKVD. Inmates of the Starobyelsk camp were moved to Kharkov and murdered in the cellar of NKVD offices, their bodies buried in death pits in Piatykhatky forest; POWs from Ostashkov were killed in Kalinin (today's Tver) and buried in mass graves in Mednoye. Bodies of victims from the so-called "Ukrainian list" were deposited in the forest of Bykivnia. The names of about 3870 victims murdered based on the "Belarussian list" remain unknown to this day. Though there are reasons to presume they were buried in Kuropaty, the Belarussian government has been unwilling to allow research and exhumation work to be conducted in that area.

The issue of the Katyń massacres is not limited to the year they were perpetrated, but extends to its implications and actions undertaken after 1940, such as reprisals against the prisoners' families, deportations, a whole spectrum of persecutions, as well as propaganda and decades of silence regarding Soviet genocide on the part of the international community. The mass executions were only the beginning of the harsh fate of Poles under Soviet occupation. It took 50 years before the truth of the Katyń issue could be released and brought

under the roof of the Katyń Museum.

By this exhibition we would like to present what Katyń is - a symbol of a genocide perpetrated on the Polish nation under Soviet occupation, of falsifications, of the conspiracy of silence and of the final victory of truth. It is a symbol of the destruction of the Polish intellectual elite, citizens of the Second Polish Republic of diverse ethnicities and faiths, a symbol of a tragedy on a human, national and state level alike.

The exhibition presented in the Museum of Occupations in Tallinn will be next available to visitors from November in the Museum of KGB cells in Tartu and in the Museum of War in Ryga, Latvia from the beginning of February 2017.

Exhibition commissioners: Magdalena Sasal, Sebastian Karwat

Content consultation: Ewa Kowalska PhD

Katyń Museum – branch of the Polish Army Museum

---

## Opcje strony

- [Print this page](#)

- [Generate PDF of this page](#)

- [Notify about this page](#)

- Share this article

[Share on Facebook](#)

[Share on Twitter](#)