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**HISTORY, MEMORY, AND NATIONAL IDENTITY; THE
FORMATION OF THE RUSSIAN NATION AFTER THE KATYN
MASSACRE**

by
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**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS**

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What separates a memory from history? Both play an integral part in the formation of identities, that of the individual and the nation. An individual is informed by their own memories, experienced within a society, and forms perceptions based on historical events and what they learn within their community. The memories of individuals come together to form a collective base of knowledge, passed on from generation to generation to form the culture and traditions of the nation. These memories are based on history, and eventually become history themselves, and as such are subject to what is believed within collective understanding. An event that is misremembered or misrepresented within the historical record has the power to alter this collective knowledge and shift the perceptions of nations going forward. A major event, such as a massacre, has ramifications for collective perceptions of the parties involved. To alter the narrative of such an event (or cover up the truth) has the potential to alter the collective memory and the lessons gained from it.

In the spring of 1940 approximately 15,000 members of the Polish military and intelligentsia were reported missing from Soviet prisoner of war camps. Three years later, the German occupying forces in the Soviet Union uncovered the first of their remains in mass graves in the Katyn forest, sparking a global debate over who carried out this massacre. It would be years before an international investigation determined the Soviet Union's culpability, and decades before the Soviet Union would actually admit guilt. The years in between the discovery of the graves and the full understanding of what happened were full of international investigations, Soviet denials, and a shifting collective understanding of what happened and who was at fault.

This event demonstrates the power of historical narrative and shifting perceptions of collective memory in the formation of national identity. For decades the Soviet Union relied on

their perception as a hero of the Second World War to counter the evidence against them at Katyn. Using testimonies and eyewitnesses (who may or may not be credible) the Soviet Union pitted manufactured collective memory against real evidence. In ways that invoke the theories of scholars like Maurice Halbwachs and Pierre Nora, the Soviet Union relied on their false account of the massacre and collective forgetting through an altered historical record to salvage their national identity after committing the atrocity. The event is representative of the different roles history and memory play in shaping identity and a crafting legacy.

Using collective memory theory as a starting point, my thesis will explore the controversy surrounding the Katyn Massacre and its lasting implications for national identity in an age of global collective memory. From the first attempts to find 15,000 missing Poles to the current military action in Ukraine, Katyn prompted a pattern of Russian compartments and actions that has large-scale implications for both collective memory and historical writing about major events.

History and Memory

In 1925 the French philosopher Maurice Halbwachs wrote *On Collective Memory*. In this seminal work, Halbwachs discussed the meaning of memory and its potential to impact society, coining the term collective memory. Introducing new discussions of memory into historical contexts, Halbwachs argues that the events of the past are not as static as they may appear. The memories that inform how each person sees the world are colored by the context in which they are remembered; it is in this way that the present affects the past. Memories are remembered not in their accuracy but in their relevance to identity and emotion. It is through attempting to solve issues in the present that memories are relived and altered. Halbwachs claims that the reality of

the past events is never repeated, but that “the past is not preserved but is reconstructed on the basis of the present.”¹ An individual’s present brings new relevance to memory and changes the meaning. The atmosphere in which an event is remembered affects its relevance. The collective relevance of Katyn shifted as it is remembered during the war, in Soviet occupation, and after.

While these memories inform the identity of the individual, they are formed and contextualized within a society. Here we are introduced to Halbwachs’ theory of collective memory as shared knowledge within a social group, or a “people”. This knowledge encompasses shared experiences and memories that separate one group from another. This moves away from the memory of the individual to a larger scale understanding of history and traditions. Collective memory exists wherever people form groups, from the larger-scale memory of a nation or religion to the smaller groups of one’s family or town.²

These collective memories begin with the experiences of the individual.³ Because the individual forms their memories with others in society, “from the moment that a recollection reproduces a collective perception, it can itself only be collective; it would be impossible for the individual to represent to himself anew.”⁴ The individual experience happens alongside other individuals, creating a collective recollection. The perception attached to these experiences is then informed by the beliefs of society. The biases and opinions of the collective also inform the way an individual remembers, for “the mind reconstructs its memories under the pressures of society”.⁵ The individual’s perception of an event will be informed by what they are told within the collective. In relation to history, the modern lessons gained from events in the past will be

¹ Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 40.

² *Ibid*, 84,54.

³ *Ibid*, 34.

⁴ *Ibid*, 169.

⁵ *Ibid*, 51.

colored by how they are recorded and retold. A decades long cover up of a forest massacre will alter the way the event is remembered.

This theory of collective memory extends to the legacy of a group's culture. Halbwachs explains that "to the extent that the dead retreat into the past, this is not because the material measure of time that separates them from us lengthens; it is because nothing remains of the group in which they passed their lives"⁶. Once a group's members die out, so does their collective memory. The notion that a particular group's memory cannot outlive its members sets collective memory as distinct from a group's history which presumably would live on through recorded measures. The collective memory attached to this history is anchored to living people and does not have the same capacity to endure. Intentionally keeping information out of the historical record, an attempt to alter history, cannot keep it out of memory but leaves it vulnerable to the life of the group that remembers. In misrepresenting the events of Katyn, the Polish citizens who understood the truth of the event held that knowledge collectively while it was omitted from the historical record.

The difference between history and memory is explored extensively in writings on collective memory. Pierre Nora's *Realms of Memory*, written seventy years after Halbwachs, explains the disappearance of a tradition of memory within society. In society's effort to conserve and archive its experience for posterity, memory overpowers history. Further, "This uprooting of memory, its eradication by the conquering force of history, has had the effect of a revelation ... calling into question something once taken for granted: the close fit between history and memory."⁷ There exists a sort of cult of continuity, a desire to know where society comes from and what originated its traditions. This is the impulse to record and understand a

⁶ Ibid, 73.

⁷ Pierre Nora. *Realms of Memory: Conflicts and Divisions* (New York: Columbia University Press), 2.

complete and constant identity, one based on history that is not subject to changes in cultural knowledge. This desperation for recorded origins overpowers the collective memory already serving a similar function.

The excessive archiving and recording in the name of history undermines the existence of collective memory. Nora explains, “Memory is life, always embodied in living societies and as such in permanent evolution, subject to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting ... History, on the other hand, is the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer.”⁸ Here, history is a pale representation of memory, placing events recorded as history firmly in the past. Memory, on the other hand, has the ability to keep events and their lessons alive within society, evolving to serve society as it shifts and grows. That which is forgotten is not due to a lack of recording, but due to irrelevance within collective memory or an intentional shift in the narrative. To historicize a memory is to make a fluid concept static, and to remove it from modern experience.

Elaborating on the notion of strictly separate memories between different groups, the notion of historicizing and forgetting remains incredibly relevant. Through “great actions or creative endeavors” individuals enter into collective memory, assigning a sort of permanence that evokes classical heroes.⁹ Yet to assign immortality to a figure within collective memory implies that memory itself is immortal and grants “independence from the contingencies of human existence. Personal memory is ephemeral: it is subject to forgetting and ultimately to death.”¹⁰ Collective memory lives on, preserving the image of individuals, long past all who were alive to know them are gone. This is especially true for the Katyn Massacre, as the legacy

⁸ Ibid, 3.

⁹ Nicolas Russell, “Collective Memory Before and After Halbwachs,” *The French Review* 79, no. 4 (2006): 793. www.jstor.org/stable/25480359.

¹⁰ Ibid, 794.

of the event continues even after the victims have long since passed. Yet Halbwachs insists that collective memories live on only so long as members of their own group do as well. His emphasis on separate groups undermines the idea of an immortal figure, as groups themselves are not immortal. Nicolas Russell, a specialist in early modern theory, brings attention to this dichotomy, as “memory does have a certain independence from the vicissitudes of human existence, since much of it is preserved in books.”¹¹ The texts and archives that immortalize figures can outdate members of the group themselves and carry on their history, though the collective knowledge associated with it does not live on. It is for this reason that historization of an event is important, even if it removes some of the life. When no one is around to remember what happened, the historical record is all that can tell the story. If the Soviet Union’s historical record is all that survived of Katyn, there would be no true justice for the lives lost.

This difference between a shared collective memory within a group of people, and the possibility of immortalized figures extending beyond secular grouping, illustrates the difference of history and memory. This distinct grouping also ignores the possibility of a collective memory existing in two groups simultaneously, the shared knowledge of events and figures within separate peoples, able to live on if one group dies out. The groups discussed previously share no events within their collective memory, but this is not the case in contemporary society.

In a modern age, events and information that form collective memories can be shared on a global scale, far beyond the people who experienced the source. Current events are circulated around the globe by media far faster than they could be by word of mouth. Nora recognizes this point, explaining that “The nation is no longer the unifying framework that defines the collective consciousness.”¹² Indeed, engagement with history today also happens on a global scale. Angela

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Pierre Nora, *Realms of Memory: Conflicts and Divisions*, 1:6.

Landsberg's theory of prosthetic memory explains the entry of events into collective memory from educational sites. Prosthetic memory "emerges at the interface between a person and a historical narrative about the past, at an experiential site such as a movie theater or museum," breaking down the traditional bonds that form groups.¹³ Here, events can become a part of a global collective memory as individuals form a personal bond to an event or person they have no real relation to at an experiential site.

Even globally, no memory is entirely personal. An event occurring within one group is witnessed by others and enters into their collective memory. An identification with an experience may mean different things to different people, but the experience doesn't happen in isolation, and this memory cannot be exclusively owned.¹⁴ Access to information can be controlled, but the memory of an event carries on through the collective. In this way history can be altered but collective memory will reflect what the collective believes about an event. For Katyn, the controversy surrounding the event was experienced globally, allowing a collective opinion to form in nations not originally involved. This memory reflects reactions to the massacre and the attempts to cover it up, the general consensus not always in line with the historical record. Rather than acting as isolated events to separate people into groups, prosthetic memories bring people together. The historical events learned about at such experiential sites may hold different relevance to different groups of people, but knowledge about them can be shared globally.

Cultural sites act not only as locations of collective memory, but as physical reminder of national identity. Venerating people or events deemed culturally important, monuments, museums, or landmarks emphasize certain aspects of a nation. The state, the leaders of a nation,

¹³ Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: the Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 2.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 147.

becomes caretaker of these monuments, even if they do not originally belong to the state, allowing the state to shape and create a national image that fits in with their narrative.¹⁵ The linking of these sites to tourism maximizes the visibility of pre-ordained cultural aspects, celebrating what a nation is proud of while the darker events are not immortalized in the same way. There are several monuments to Katyn, though not all present the same narrative. In this way the different versions of the story are immortalized, preserving the controversy as well as the event itself. This represents the forgetful nature of collective memory mentioned earlier, as events have the capacity to live on, without a guarantee that they will remain accurately understood.

In short, collective memory incorporates the experiences of individuals into a common understanding. This collective knowledge forms wherever there are groups and can help create communities through independent collective memories. The individual forms their own memories within society, informed by the experiences of others and events that have come before. As such, the collective memory of these events is not a strictly recorded history, it is subject to change based on a group's perception. Where history is recorded to preserve a static version of an event, the collective memory continues to grow with the group. In the modern age, experiences are shared globally and enter into the collective memories of groups not involved in the initial event, spread through media and educational sites like a museum or monument. In this way groups perceive one another, and form identities based on these perceptions. The identities of nations rise out of collective perceptions on community interactions and shared knowledge on a local and global scale.

¹⁵ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, (New York, NY: Verso Books, 1983), 181.

The Nation

While Halbwachs was the first to use the term *collective memory* in this national context, the idea of shared memory within a group has existed for centuries.¹⁶ Early modern collective memory does differ in the idea of memories being dependent on the group that remembers, a central concept in Halbwachs' work.¹⁷ These concepts were dependent on the object of memory rather than who was doing the remembering. As such, no two groups can have access to the same event within their memories, as the individual collection of events is what separates groups of people. This is challenged by communities that overlap, with two separate groups each remembering the same event and ignoring the imagined boundaries that created by totally separate collective memories.

Despite the exclusion of overlapping communities in Halbwachs's theories, the idea of imagined boundaries forming community is a common thread of national identity. In his work on the ideas of nationhood, Benedict Anderson explains the origin of the imagined communities. Anderson explains, "It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion."¹⁸ People exist in the same community, sharing experiences and national identity without ever interacting. This is mirrored in the theory of collective memory, where two people share an experience as a part of their identity without ever meeting. Both communities, or collectives, are imagined, yet both form a strong identity for the individual and the nation.

¹⁶ Russell, "Collective Memory," 792.

¹⁷ Ibid, 793.

¹⁸ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 6.

While the nation is one imagined community, there are others that overlap (such as religion or ethnicity). These overlapping communities challenge the notion of separate collective memories, as the individual communities have a shared history yet retain their separate identities. A person can be both religious and patriotic, influenced by the collective memory of both communities. The shared knowledge within each community could allow the individual to be secure in their identity as a religious person and a patriot. In a modern digital age, there are few communities that don't overlap. It is possible to share information between communities that share no border or culture. In this way knowledge of events like Katyn can be shared on a global scale as a part of a global collective memory.

The existence of other communities is important in forming national identities. It is against other countries that a nation can set itself apart, particularly as a supposed superior entity. This can be seen in national practices of colonialism and racism, practices which established a national community by “generalizing a principle of innate, inherited superiority.”¹⁹ A nation can secure its identity as strong and superior by comparing itself to those around it, the different collective knowledge and practices setting groups apart.

While comparison of communities can be integral to the formation of national identity, the act of forgetting is also essential. When one community ends and another begins, the formation of a new collective (a new identity) involves the forgetting of what came before. The memories of the collective consist of the life of a community.²⁰ They contain what is known as important to that identity. What is forgotten collectively is not necessarily barred from entering into history, but it does not play the same role in shaping identity. As discussed previously, the way history is recorded and retold affects its relevance in collective memory, the more present

¹⁹ Ibid, 150.

²⁰ Pierre Nora, *Realms of Memory: Conflicts and Divisions*, 1:3.

source of knowledge in a community. The death of a community leads to the death of their collective memory, and this form of forgetting allows new communities to rise.

When forming the nation, a formerly separate group of individuals must forget what came before in order to come together. Renan even makes the argument that inaccurate history is beneficial at the start of nationhood, claiming that “Forgetting, I would even say historical error, is an essential factor in the creation of a nation and it is for this reason that the progress of historical studies often poses a threat to nationality.”²¹ Indeed, the usual traumas of forming new nations (war, invasion, etc.) must be forgotten to forge a united group. The inaccurate recording of these traumas, often to paint the new nation in a more favorable light, allow this young nation to create its own narrative, to reform the culture and customs of the group going forward. Anderson agrees with this point in his writings, explaining that “All profound changes in consciousness, by their very nature, bring with them characteristic amnesias. Out of such oblivions, in specific historical circumstances, spring narratives.”²² The narratives create memory, and memory creates the identity of the nation.

Even more than creating a new identity, this historical inaccuracy and forgetting can preserve an identity that already exists. For Katyn, the inaccurate representation of the event allowed the Soviet Union to maintain a heroic identity, one based on success in war and the image of a liberator. Preventing discussion of Katyn or the teaching of it in schools shows a desire to remove the event from collective knowledge, to create a collective amnesia, an attempt that did not work.

A national identity is formed within a community, shaped by imaginary boundaries and the collective experience of those within the nation. Overlapping groups can share collective

²¹ Ernest Renan, *What Is a Nation? And Other Political Writings*, 209.

²² Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 204.

memories, though they may have different resonance in different communities. The forgetting of what came before, and the less desirable aspects of a community, is imperative to the formation of national identity. This process can be helped along by historical error and misrepresentation, as was attempted with the Katyn massacre, while a collective memory will be affected by the way an event is presented and how history is recorded. The attempts to remove Katyn from collective memory brought further attention to the event and added an aspect of controversy to the massacre's legacy, the opposite effect to what Stalin and the Soviet Union intended.

Katyn

The Katyn Forest Massacre is one example of an event where the recorded history and collective memory do not align. At times when events are misrepresented through media and intentional deception, those who remember what actually took place pass on the knowledge collectively, allowing a collective understanding that spites the historical record. These intersections are defining moments for national identity, where the image a state presents to the world conflicts with how their actions are actually perceived. This is true for Katyn. For decades, the event was denied and misrepresented, but a persistent effort by those who doubted the state's narrative and desired the truth pushed it to the surface. The fight for the truth about Katyn is joined with the atrocity itself, both coloring the national image of the perpetrators. This process began before the graves were ever actually discovered, but when 15,000 Polish prisoners of war disappeared from the record and those who remembered them went looking.

The discovery of thousands of Polish military and civilians in Katyn was not entirely unexpected. In 1941, when the Soviet Union officially joined the Allied war effort, they restarted diplomatic relations with the Polish government in exile. For the first time since the Soviets had

invaded Poland at the start of the war in 1939, the two governments exchanged information and worked together to face the Nazi threat. One of the first orders of business for the Polish government was to establish the location of approximately 15,000 missing people, including approximately 8,350 officers in the Polish military.²³ Polish government officials began the process of formally requesting the release of those in Soviet prison camps and any information on where the missing people may be, but their questions received no answer. By October of 1943 more than 200 informal and formal inquiries were made by the Polish government (not to mention inquiries by other Allied forces), yielding no answers.²⁴ A personal meeting with Stalin began the narrative that the missing Poles, formerly held in Soviet Prison camps, had escaped, many likely captured by the German military. There is no evidence to support this claim, least of all no mention of 15,000 Polish prisoners making it to any foreign nation.²⁵

Answers finally came in 1943 when German Communication Regiment 537 reported findings of mass graves in the Katyn forest. Original reports estimated there to be over 10,000 people buried in the graves; the real number was approximately 4,443 officers and civilians buried in this location.²⁶ The graves immediately fueled German propaganda, a clear act of Soviet violence that they hoped would fracture the Allied party's cooperation. In a diary entry from April 9, 1943, Joseph Goebbels, the chief propagandist for the Nazi party, exclaimed, "Polish mass graves have been found near Smolensk. The Bolsheviks simply shot down and the shoveled into mass graves some 10,000 Polish prisoners, among them civilian captives, bishops, intellectuals, artists, et cetera ... I saw to it that the Polish mass graves be inspected by neutral

²³ J. K. Zawodny, *Death in the Forest: The Story of the Katyn Forest Massacre*, (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1962), 5.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 9, 35.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 10.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 20.

journalists from Berlin. I also had Polish intellectuals taken there. They are to see for themselves what is in store for them should their wish that the Germans be defeated by the Bolsheviks actually be fulfilled.”²⁷ An expected cynical view of a human atrocity, the mass graves in the Katyn forest had potential to serve as excellent propaganda against the Soviet Union, a direct opposition to the image of a savior Allied nation the Soviet Union was portraying at the time. The graves were an opportunity to call back to the Soviet Union’s own invasion of Poland and collaboration with the Nazi party, facts that were not often discussed internationally as the Allied parties worked together. Bringing the Soviet Union’s history into the collective memory became a primary goal of Nazi propaganda.

Yet, the Allies did not believe the German version of the story. As author Zawodny explains, “No one who lived under German occupation was apt to believe the German description of the discovery, nor would the Allies. At the time of discovery about half a million Poles were fighting against Germany. Their contribution to the war effort was well known among the free peoples. The Poles were appealing throughout the Allied camp for facts ... Public opinion pointed an accusing finger at the Germans.”²⁸ After the deceptive German motivation for the invasion of Poland, and the Second World War, it was reasonable to assume they would lie again.²⁹³⁰ Even years later, the persecution of Polish Jews and brutal street executions in German occupied territory left a forest massacre by the Germans well within the realm of credibility. The national identity of Nazi Germany as aggressors and liars could not compete with the collective positive image of the Soviet Union. The Allies would not allow themselves to be so easily split.

²⁷ Joseph Goebbels and Louis P. Lochner, *The Goebbels Diaries 1942-1943*, 318.

²⁸ J. K. Zawodny, *Death in the Forest: The Story of the Katyn Forest Massacre*, 16.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 5.

³⁰ *Nuremberg Trial Proceedings*. The German invasion of Poland began with the Gleiwitz incident, where German soldiers dressed in Polish uniforms attacked the Gleiwitz radio station to provide German justification for their impending invasion.

In response, the Nazi government encouraged the formation of an independent international commission to investigate the site of the mass graves, hoping to convince foreign powers that their conclusions were not influenced by Nazi propaganda motives. The International Commission, whose members came from 12 countries other than Germany, arrived in the Katyn forest on April 28, 1943, and began an investigation.³¹ They were joined by a commission from the Polish red cross to investigate the evidence on behalf of the Occupied Polish government. A third commission, a German Special Medical-Judiciary Commission comprised of German medical professionals, investigated the graves at the same time. Together, these commissions concluded that the men had been killed in the spring of 1941, when the Katyn forest had still been in Soviet possession. Spruce trees planted on top of the mass graves were younger than those surrounding and their growth bands suggested that they had been transplanted three years prior.³² They found that Soviet-made rope had been used to bind victims' hands and discovered evidence of wounds from four-cornered bayonets, the kind used by the Soviet army at that time.³³ The bullets used were German made, a fact noted by Goebbels as "unfortunate".³⁴ The bullets, made by the Genschow Company, would have been exported to both Poland and the Soviet Union in wide circulation before 1939, furthering evidence towards Soviet culpability. Once these reports were published, the historical record would place the blame of the massacre with the Soviet Union, despite collective misgivings towards Nazi evidence.

This was obviously disastrous to the national image of the Soviet Union. Unable to offer any counter evidence without access to the gravesite (the Soviet Government had blocked an

³¹ J. K. Zawodny, *Death in the Forest: The Story of the Katyn Forest Massacre*, 17.

³² *Ibid*, 24.

³³ *Ibid*, 20.

³⁴ Joseph Goebbels and Louis P. Lochner, *The Goebbels Diaries 1942-1943*, 354.

international Red Cross investigation and had not been invited to send any commission of their own), the Soviet Union was forced to counter the accusation with denial. Officials from the Soviet government approached the Polish government in exile asking for an official statement that Germans committed the Katyn Massacre, an attempt to sway collective opinion. In light of evidence from the international commissions, the Polish government in exile refused. In retaliation, and in a desperate play to maintain face, Stalin sent an identical letter to the leaders of the other Allied nations claiming that the Polish government had “descended to collusion with the Hitler Government [and] has, in practice, severed its relations of alliance with the U.S.S.R. and adopted a hostile attitude to the Soviet Union. For this reason, the Soviet Government has decided to interrupt relations with that Government.”³⁵ Shortly after Stalin and other officials introduced a pro-Soviet Polish government (the ‘Polish Patriots’) and severed their recently regained ties with the Polish government.³⁶ Other Allied leaders, eager to maintain the alliance at all costs, took action to support Stalin.³⁷ While the evidence may have proven Nazi propaganda correct in this instance, the need for cooperation outweighed any desire for other Allied leaders to spread the truth of the event.³⁸

In a telegram to the United States State Department the American Ambassador Admiral Standley nicely outlined Stalin’s long-term goals in terms of the Soviet Union. A paraphrase stated:

“We may, it seems to me, be faced with a reversal in European history. To protect itself from the influences of Bolshevism, Western Europe in 1918 attempted to set

³⁵ J. K. Zawodny, *Death in the Forest: The Story of the Katyn Forest Massacre*, 34–35.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 39.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 36, 41, 44.

³⁸ Claudia Weber, “The Export of Terror—on the Impact of the Stalinist Culture of Terror on Soviet Foreign Policy during and after World War II,” 293.

up a *cordon sanitaire*. The Kremlin, in order to protect itself from the influences of the west, might now envisage the formation of a belt of pro-Soviet states.’ The subsequent seizure of Eastern European Republics by Soviet-groomed men proved his acute observation, made two years before in advance, to be correct. Poland was the crucial buckle in this belt, and it was necessary to ‘produce’ a pro-Soviet Government if the buckle was to hold. Unfortunately for the Soviet Government, the communistic underground in Poland was extremally weak and the Poles, whether in exile or in occupied Poland, could not easily forget the Soviet-German co-operation in 1939, the seizure of Eastern Poland and the mass deportations. There was scarcely a possibility that a pro-Soviet government would emerge, particularly after the Katyn massacre. Stalin had to do it himself.”³⁹

While German war-time atrocities dominated Allied media in an effort to motivate their soldiers and civilians alike, the Soviet Union was not without its own motivations to remove high-status members of Polish society. The invasion of Poland by the Soviet Union, in fact, the entire collaboration of the Nazi and Soviet governments pre-1941, is a period often overlooked in recollections of World War II in favor of a heroic Allied narrative.⁴⁰ The fact is that Soviet military action and treatment of Poles before joining the Allied forces was not all that different from that of Nazi Germany, giving either nation a realistic possibility of murdering over 4,000 men in the Katyn Forest.⁴¹ Indeed the sudden disappearance of thousands of people is not out of line with previous Soviet Actions. During the Great Terror Stalin and the police executed thousands of political rivals, “Prominent persons from all fields disappeared without trace.”⁴² By

³⁹ J. K. Zawodny, *Death in the Forest: The Story of the Katyn Forest Massacre*, 39.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 65.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 80.

⁴² John Archibald Getty, *Origins of the Great Purges*, (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1994), 2.

the end of the 1930s, the Stalin regime built their power on mass executions, imprisonment, and deportations to the Gulag.⁴³ This is not to mention the brutal treatment of people living in Soviet Satellite states, like the Holodomor, the manufactured famine in Ukraine that led to thousands of deaths.⁴⁴ While the act of massacre was not out of line with Soviet policies, these darker aspects of the nation were not discussed. The Great Purge was framed as the uncovering of enemies of the Soviet State, their deaths an act of national defense.⁴⁵ Events like the Holodomor, and later Katyn itself, became gaps in national history.⁴⁶ The events carried on only through collective knowledge, unacknowledged in the historical record for the duration of the Soviet Union.

The Katyn massacre also demonstrated clear interest in destroying Polish capacity to reform society. The civilian casualties of Katyn included professors, doctors, artists, teachers, and scientists, roles author Zawodny described as “the brain and heart of Poland”⁴⁷. The massacre targeted the keepers of memory, those with the potential to influence the collective memory of Poland and carry on the nation’s culture and customs. In attempting to create a pro-Soviet state, Stalin targeted the Polish nation’s cultural, in addition to personal, legacy. The erasure of these people, and then the denial of their murder, is an event within the pattern of Soviet state rule. National Identities were broken down through mass execution and a firm control of the official narrative, and the truth of the events were kept from the historical narrative. It is through memory that they survived to be discussed in a post-Soviet world.

By September of 1943, the German military forces were on the retreat. As noted in Goebbels’ diary, the Soviet military retook the Katyn forest on the 29th of September, which was

⁴³ Claudia Weber, “The Export of Terror—on the Impact of the Stalinist Culture of Terror on Soviet Foreign Policy during and after World War II,” 285.

⁴⁴ Georgii Kas’ianov, “The Holodomor and the Building of a Nation,” 32.

⁴⁵ John Archibald Getty, *Origins of the Great Purges*, 1.

⁴⁶ Georgii Kas’ianov, “The Holodomor and the Building of a Nation,” 26.

⁴⁷ J. K. Zawodny, *Death in the Forest: The Story of the Katyn Forest Massacre*, 80.

“going to cause us [the Nazi party] quite a little trouble in the future. The Soviets are undoubtedly going to make it their business to discover as many mass graves as possible and then blame them on us.”⁴⁸ He was correct. The Soviet government immediately sent their own commission to investigate the grave site once more. This commission included no international representation. The version of the massacre concluded by the commission was that the 15,000 missing Poles had been Soviet prisoners in work camps until captured by the German military who ultimately killed the Poles in the Katyn forest. Their report leans heavily on the German-made bullets and includes no mention of the trees, ropes, or bayonet wounds, and concludes that the massacre actually happened in the fall of 1941 when the land was German-occupied.⁴⁹

A large part of the Soviet argument relies on eyewitness accounts from citizens in the area who claimed to have seen both escaped prisoners and Polish prisoners under German guard in 1941, long after the original account claimed they were killed. This is an ironic turn; the previous Red Cross and German Committee commissions relied on science and the artifacts left behind to determine the true nature of this event, whereas the Soviet commission relied on memory. Here was the potential for the Soviet Union to change public opinion about the event. The use of eyewitnesses and personal testimony rather than recorded facts made the report more alive and gave the Soviet Union potential to sway collective perception of the event in their favor, even if their report lacked real evidence. Some eyewitnesses later recanted their testimony, calling into question the validity of the memories within this argument.⁵⁰ These recanted memories influence the legacy of controversy surrounding the event, as generations later Russian citizens still want to believe in memory.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Joseph Goebbels and Louis P. Lochner, *The Goebbels Diaries 1942-1943*, 487.

⁴⁹ J. K. Zawodny, *Death in the Forest: The Story of the Katyn Forest Massacre*, 52.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 82.

⁵¹ Grover Furr, “The ‘Official’ Version of the Katyn Massacre Disproven?”

Time revealed further actions by the Soviet government to cover up any culpability in the massacre. Boxes of personal items taken from the remains (including identification cards, photographs, diaries, and letters, all used to date the massacre) were set to be transported. The Soviet Secret police attempted to steal the items in transport, destroying the items in a dramatic and drawn-out attempted heist.⁵² In the post-war Nuremberg trials, the Soviet Union was tasked with prosecuting crimes against humanity in Eastern Europe. To the surprise of other Allied powers who had worked at artfully ignoring Katyn, the Soviet Union officially tried the Nazi party for carrying out the massacre.⁵³ To discuss Katyn called direct attention to the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and the Soviet's own invasion of Poland. To bring this period of history up when the Nation was reaping a victor's benefits post-war threatened the foundation of a new chapter of Soviet, and later Russian, national identity.

That said, this was an opportunity for the Soviet Union to solidify Nazi guilt in the massacre once and for all. Documents suggest that Stalin and other Soviet leaders planned a show trial, similar to those used in the Great Terror in Moscow.⁵⁴ A stipulation in the Nuremberg Military Tribunal states that "The Tribunal shall not require proof of facts of common knowledge but shall take judicial notice thereof."⁵⁵ Here was the possibility of a guilty verdict based upon the carefully cultivated public opinion of the massacre, the common knowledge and collective understanding based on the Soviet Report's conclusions. The prosecution of the Katyn Massacre was ultimately unsuccessful. The accused refuted the accusation, and the Soviets could not

⁵² J. K. Zawodny, *Death in the Forest: The Story of the Katyn Forest Massacre*, 63.

⁵³ *Ibid*, 64–65.

⁵⁴ Claudia Weber, "The Export of Terror—on the Impact of the Stalinist Culture of Terror on Soviet Foreign Policy during and after World War II," 294. Show trials conducted during the Great Terror did not represent due legal process but were staged to convict those already believed to be guilty. A similar method was to be used at Katyn, further evidence being Stalin's appointing the same people who carried out the Great Terror trials to represent the USSR in Nuremberg.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 295.

muster enough evidence to remove all doubt in German guilt. The initial charges of the massacre are not included in the final judgement.

The other Allied powers did their best to ignore the issue of Katyn during the war, not wanting to splinter support for or function of the alliance. Post-war these leaders, particularly Churchill and Roosevelt, sought Soviet involvement in the United Nations. Looking into evidence that the Soviet Union had murdered thousands of Polish citizens would hamper this involvement, and they chose to ignore evidence against the Soviet Union once again.⁵⁶ It was not until 1951, after widespread national support and a cooling of U.S.-Soviet relations that the United States government established a Special Congressional Committee to seek answers for the 15,000 missing Poles. The investigation looked at previous evidence in a new Cold War, anti-Communist atmosphere and established the beginning of what is now considered the ‘official’ narrative of the Katyn massacre, concluding that the NKVD (Soviet secret police) carried out the massacre and that the Soviet government went to great lengths to conceal this fact.⁵⁷ It wasn’t until collective perception of the Soviet Union had grown less heroic in the eyes of United States citizens that they were able to fully examine what had happened in the forest.

In early 1952 the U.S. special Congressional Committee released its final report placing the blame of the Katyn Forest Massacre with Stalin and the Soviet Government. The thirteen-month investigation was incredibly thorough, including classified documents from the Roosevelt Administration and hundreds of witnesses, bringing memory into the argument against the Soviet Union.⁵⁸ While the evidence contained in this report was irrefutable, the U.S. government did nothing with the information. A large item in the press, the report was heard and then filed away

⁵⁶ J. K. Zawodny, *Death in the Forest: The Story of the Katyn Forest Massacre*, 190.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 187.

⁵⁸ Robert Szymczak, “THE VINDICATION OF MEMORY: THE KATYN CASE IN THE WEST, POLAND, AND RUSSIA, 1952-2008,” 419.

by the United Nations. No action to enact justice against the Soviet Union was considered.⁵⁹ Currently in the middle of negotiations to end the Korean war, the U.S. government had no intention of provoking the Soviet Union.

Nevertheless, even without promise of any government action against the Soviet Union, the report, and the rehashing of investigations into that chapter of history, clearly provoked the Soviet Union. The Kremlin began a propaganda campaign against the United States in early 1952, shortly after the publication of the report. Kremlin publications claimed that biological warfare and cruel treatment of Prisoners of War had been committed against Koreans by the United States military.⁶⁰ George F. Kennan, the American Ambassador to the Soviet Union in 1952, consistently reported hostile remarks from the Soviet Union during his time there. In a letter to his state department colleague, he claims that “The important question, therefore, seems to me to be less whether the Soviet Government conducted this massacre than why anyone should ever suppose it would be incapable of doing so.”⁶¹ The global sentiment, which had before been largely determined nationally, depending on the accepted version of Katyn broadcast by a nation’s government, began to shift towards a general consensus of Soviet Guilt.

Immediately following the release of the U.S. report, in addition to the propaganda campaign, the Soviet Union began transporting ‘witnesses by the carloads’ to Russian and Polish radio stations in order to attest that the incriminating contents of that report were a lie.⁶² They had witnesses reiterate the narrative supported by the 1944 Soviet report as the only viable explanation of the event, hoping to sway citizens with the memories (true or false) of their fellow country-men.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 420.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 420.

⁶¹ Ibid, 421.

⁶² Ibid, 420.

Even with Soviet denial and slanderous counter attacks, international outcry over the events at Katyn grew in the late 50s and early 60s. The publication of J. K. Zawodny's *Death in the Forest*, in 1962 presented evidence of Soviet culpability internationally. Renewed interest in investigation and prosecution of this massacre surfaced in Western nations. Memorial ceremonies and attempts to erect monuments began in nations across the world.⁶³ As sites of cultural knowledge production, the commitment to create a physical commemoration of Katyn, one that acknowledges Soviet guilt, represents the event's presence in collective consciousness. The drive to memorialize is a literal attempt to keep the memory of the event alive.

While this was going on, and while the Soviet's continued to deny their involvement in the massacre, more recently released documents suggests that the Kremlin was fully aware of the real story. In fact, the true number of people killed at Katyn exceeds even the estimates of those advocating for the official account. Szymczak explains:

“As we know now from the long-secret Soviet documents on Katyn, made available to Western researchers in the post-Communist era, Aleksandr Shelepin, the head of the KGB, the successor agency to Stalin's NKVD, reported to Nikita Khrushchev the full details on the Katyn murders in a secret memo dated March 3, 1959. The total of Poles executed was not roughly 15,000, as was believed for years, but 21,857. The victims, Shelepin reported, came not only from the three prison camps of Kozielsk, Starobielsk, and Ostashkov, but included an additional 7,305 in other camps in the western Ukraine and western Belorussi.”⁶⁴

Nearly 22,000 Polish citizens had been killed by the NKVD under Stalin's orders in the Katyn forest and nearby prison camps. In this report Shelepin also conferred that the Soviet attempt to

⁶³ Ibid, 428.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 423.

place the blame on Germany had successfully convinced foreign citizens of Soviet innocence. This was, in large part, not the case.

While the idea of German guilt was largely unpopular in international communities, it was the only explanation offered in Soviet-occupied Poland. Students and young people doubting the official record and seeking a more accurate account of information were forced to turn to alternative sources.⁶⁵ Even the official denial from the state did not stop memorials and attempts to raise awareness.⁶⁶ The history as presented by the Kremlin was rejected by the Polish community.

By 1971 sustained outrage both within Polish-American communities and in the general public (and the deterioration of U.S.-Soviet relations) led to a petition by the United States to the United Nation calling for action addressing Katyn.⁶⁷ This impetus, and a change of Soviet government, shifted the tide of Katyn denial. Mikhail Gorbachev became the General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1985. On March 9, 1989, the government of Poland under the Jaruzelski regime officially blamed the Soviet Union for the Katyn Massacre. It took a year for Gorbachev to officially respond, with an admission that the NKVD had, in fact, committed the atrocity.⁶⁸

Initially, the blame was placed purely with the NKVD leaders, Lavrenti Beria and Vsevolod Merkulov. The initial admission undermines the number killed in the forest and removes Stalin and the Soviet government from involvement in an attempt to save face. This was corrected by Gorbachev's successor, President of the Russian Federation Boris Yeltsin. In 1992

⁶⁵ Ibid, 432.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 434–35. In 1980, a 76-year-old Polish World War II Veteran burned himself to death publicly in order to protest the Massacre. Even under martial law, unofficial ceremonies continued to honor anniversaries of Katyn.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 432.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 437.

he “‘discovered’ the original 1940 execution order signed by Stalin and five other members of the Politburo. This was, of course, the ultimate "smoking gun" in the sordid Katyn affair. The Stalin order was reportedly found in Gorbachev's private Kremlin archive.”⁶⁹ Yeltsin also promised to persecute members of the NKVD who were involved and to make reparations to the victim’s families. This never took place.⁷⁰

This announcement was followed by a Russian reframing of events. The narrative of the 1939 Soviet invasion of Poland became one of liberation, continuing to uphold the heroic Soviet image during the Second World War. In a post-Soviet environment, the release of information on previous ‘blank spots’ in the historical record of Soviet states allowed the Russian federation to present themselves in opposition to their predecessors. Releasing incriminating documents (such as the “smoking gun” documents or evidence of intentional Soviet action in causing the Holodomor famine) became a pattern of de-Stalinization and the “battles for history” underwent by former Soviet States.⁷¹ Providing proof that such atrocities were committed by the Soviet Union allowed the new Russian Federation to contrast their government against their predecessors and leave the blame with the dissolved government.

In a symbolic gesture, Yeltsin arranged for a cemetery at the location of the Katyn graves. At a ceremony to lay the corner stone the president claimed that "totalitarian terror affected not only Polish citizens but, in the first place, the citizens of the former Soviet Union.”⁷² Now that the Soviet Union dissolved, the blame for their crimes and atrocities could be placed in the past. According to Yeltsin it was Stalin’s government that called for the massacre of nearly

⁶⁹ Ibid, 438.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Georgii Kas’ianov, “The Holodomor and the Building of a Nation,” 26.

⁷² Robert Szymczak, “THE VINDICATION OF MEMORY: THE KATYN CASE IN THE WEST, POLAND, AND RUSSIA, 1952-2008,” 438.

22,000 Poles; the direct successors, the Russian Federation, were also victims and should not have to share the blame. No symbolic apology was offered by Yeltsin, not at the gravesite or any time after. His successor, former KGB officer and current Russian President Vladimir Putin, visited Poland in 2002 and rejected the idea of an apology outright.⁷³ The new era of Russian national identity rejected the guilt for actions taken by their predecessors.

The Katyn Forest Massacre started as the mysterious disappearance of 15,000 Polish prisoners of war and ended in a Soviet Cover up and a further smear on their legacy. The Soviet Union's desire to maintain their 'good guy' status motivated decades of denial for their involvement in the massacre, despite all the evidence pointing to Soviet guilt. As a member of the Allied parties, the Soviet Union leveraged their connections with other Allied leaders to avoid spreading the truth of the event and keeping attention focused on the fight with Fascism. Placing the blame for the deaths of nearly 22,000 people with the nation already posed to be the villains of the Second World War allowed the Soviet Union to alter the collective understanding of their role in the war and in the world.

History, Memory, The Nation, and Katyn

As an event, the Katyn Massacre has a massive legacy in the global collective consciousness, and with lasting implications for the national identity of modern-day Russia. In terms of collective memory, it is clear that the events that took place in the Katyn forest and Kalinin and Kharkiv prison camps have influenced the lives of people not present at the massacre. The individual experiences of the approximately 22,000 victims are lost, but their lives are not forgotten. The individuals involved in this event either died in the forest or in the years

⁷³ Ibid, 439.

following and still Katyn has entered into history and occupied international discussions for decades following. The individuals die, collective experience lives on. The recorded history of the event, the blame of the Nazi military for decades, and the desire to view the Soviet Union positively after their victory in the Second World War contrasted with the collective understanding of those who knew the Soviet Union was guilty and worked for the truth to come to light. History and memory came into conflict, and the clash changed perceptions of national identity going forward.

The controversy surrounding the event, the uncertainty as to which party was responsible, colors the way this massacre is remembered. The loss of nearly 22,000 Polish lives is a tragedy in itself. The death of intelligentsia, those who held extensive knowledge of Polish history, is a blow to the nation no matter the perpetrator. This tragedy is further colored by drawn out debate and denials as to who committed this crime.

At the time of the event, the atmosphere within which the massacre was contextualized and collective memory was formed was that of German occupation. In an era where people disappeared overnight, never to be seen again, it was difficult to believe that the Nazi government would be telling the truth about their innocence in the Katyn murders.⁷⁴ The Nazi party's false motivation for their initial invasion of Poland and gross mistreatment of occupied nations did not lend the German nation any credibility during the war.⁷⁵ The revelations of Nazi atrocities that spread globally post-war only furthered their reputation as a nation fully capable of the forest massacre.⁷⁶ Examining the findings at Katyn within the collective memory at the time

⁷⁴ J. K. Zawodny, *Death in the Forest: The Story of the Katyn Forest Massacre*, 16.

⁷⁵ *Nuremberg Trial Proceedings*.

⁷⁶ Langerbein, *Hitler's Death Squads*, 15; J. K. Zawodny, *Death in the Forest: The Story of the Katyn Forest Massacre*, 16. In addition to the systematic mass execution of Jewish people and other groups labeled 'undesirable' by the Nazi Party, Einstazgruppen (SS) Death squads entered the Soviet Union with the intention of eliminating these 'undesirables' within Eastern Europe. While in the Soviet Union these Death Squads killed approximately 1.5

of the grave's discovery suggests an international distrust of Nazi claims and an unwillingness to blame the Soviet Union, a member of the Allied parties fight against Fascism. While the Soviet Union had committed similar atrocities against their own people and neighbors, these events were reframed for the broad Soviet audience whereas German atrocities against the Polish people were experienced first-hand.⁷⁷ The altered historical record combined with collective mistrust of Nazi Germany to encourage belief in Nazi guilt for the atrocity.

As the war progressed and years passed, the context of Katyn changed dramatically. Evidence from the International and the Polish Red Cross commissions pointed a clear and unwavering finger at Stalin and the Soviet Union. The Soviet government's actions regarding Katyn throughout the war (and the continued denial after) change the lens through which the atrocity is viewed. Rather than a tragic loss of Polish life, the massacre became a vicious act of Soviet aggression and misinformation.

By 1951, only a decade after the event, The United States Special Congressional Committee examined the evidence of Katyn in a completely different context from the initial investigators. The initial impulse to mistrust Germany was born out of Nazi actions, but also out of a desire to protect the Allied parties. The Soviet Union joined the Allied war effort in a time of desperate need, playing a massive part in conquering Fascism in Europe. The Soviet Union's international image as a hero and collaborator allowed other Allied leaders to turn a blind eye to the events in Katyn, silencing media and not asking questions.⁷⁸ A decade later, the actions of the Soviet Union in Eastern Europe altered this image. Without the protective aura of being one of

million people. These atrocities, combined with the rough daily treatment of Poles in occupied territory, made it more than believable that Nazi Germany committed the Katyn Massacre.

⁷⁷ John Archibald Getty, *Origins of the Great Purges*, 1.

⁷⁸ J. K. Zawodny, *Death in the Forest: The Story of the Katyn Forest Massacre*, 36.

the World War II ‘good guys’, the United States Congressional Committee was able and willing to place the blame of the Katyn massacre on the Soviet Union.

On a more individual scale, the every-day world citizen’s perception of the Katyn Massacre was informed by what was believed collectively. Hearing all of the unfolding controversy indirectly positioned average people to believe what everyone else believed. The falsehoods spread by the Soviet Union (and other Western leaders’ unwillingness to contradict them, at least initially) influenced the global perception of the Katyn Forest Massacre. The Soviet Union’s own reframing of their history, through intentional ‘blank spots’ in the record, meant that the nation’s own history of massacre and genocide was not as present in collective minds as their positive behavior in the fight against Fascism.

Indeed, the Soviet Union worked hard to remind citizens within the Union who the ‘bad guys’ of the war were. Agnieszka Lazarczyk, who grew up in Soviet-occupied Poland explains that “We were mostly conditioned to remember German responsibility for the war, but not so much the Russian side of it. It was only after the fall of communism that history could be taught freely.”⁷⁹ In Soviet states, the guilt of Nazi Germany was emphasized so that the Soviet Union could continue to present themselves as liberators. Lazarczyk explains that, in September, a different film about World War II (where it was very clear that Germany was the aggressor) was shown every day “so that there was no way you could forget what happened, who’s responsible, [or] who started the war.”⁸⁰ Stalin and the Soviet Union made clear attempts to prolong their post-war image, even within communities currently occupied against their will. They needed to

⁷⁹ Agnieszka Lazarczyk (Ph.D., Program Coordinator of the European Union Center), in discussion with the author, Claremont, California, April 26, 2022.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

keep the image of Nazi Germany alive and terrifying so the actions of the Soviet Union (at least the ones occupied people were allowed to discuss) would seem comparably better.

While the events of Katyn are considered historical now, the long-term process of uncovering the truth maintained the events of Katyn in global collective memory for decades. Following Nora's argument, the inability to fully archive this event, to understand the full scope in terms of evidence and experience, kept it within conscious memory. Through the series of investigations, from the International Commission to the Soviet investigation and, finally, the United States Congressional Committee, the narrative of the Katyn Massacre continued to shift in collective memory. New discoveries or attempts to hide the truth continued to alter public understanding of the event and the Soviet nation. Until the admission of guilt by the Soviet Union decades later, there could never be a fully fleshed-out history.

This continued experience of the same event was shared by many communities, around the world. While the primary desire to find the 15,000 missing Polish military and civilians was initially limited to mostly Polish interest, the uncovering of mass graves in the forest involved many different communities. The loss of these people was felt by the Polish nation, by the loved ones they left behind and the government that had spent years looking for them. Nazi officials played up the tragedy of the massacre for the German audience, emphasizing the large-scale loss of Polish life for the German national community as evidence of Soviet violence.⁸¹ The event was also communicated to the Soviets, and while the government blamed the Nazis, the loss was understood by its citizens. Knowledge of what had been found in the Katyn forest spread around the globe, new media carrying the experience to people who had never met a Polish person in their life but who could empathize with the tragedy of it all. The two opposing accusations of

⁸¹ Joseph Goebbels and Louis P. Lochner, *The Goebbels Diaries 1942-1943*, 318.

guilt were experienced differently during the war, with many members of the Allied nations believing the Soviet Union's account, and the members of Axis nations receiving evidence against the Soviet Union.⁸² As time passed and international tensions deepened, the global divide on Katyn shifted from Axis versus Allies to international understanding versus the Soviet account.

The physical reminders of the event provide evidence and a knowledge-sharing space to the massacre. The prosthetic memory received from a monument or historical site gives the individual visitor an attachment to both the place and event. The distinction is important, at least in light of Nora's view that "Memory fastens upon sites, whereas history fastens upon events."⁸³ The various landmarks for the people who died at Katyn reflect the dramatic changes in the event's legacy. Monuments in various cities allow a site to create new memories.

Alison Landsberg explains that "Monuments were intended to serve as guarantors of national memory; they both created the illusion of a stable, recognizable past and promised to serve as a bulwark against further social upheaval."⁸⁴ This is ironic in the face of the upheaval of landmarks at Katyn.

After the publication of Zawodny's *Death in the Forest* and the rise of information about Katyn in Britain, a monument project started and was well underway by 1975. A private enterprise, the British government had little control over the project. Despite this, incredible pressure from the Soviet Union caused the British government to move the monument to a cemetery further from the city than the initial location.⁸⁵ This series of events demonstrated the

⁸² The Allied leaders (primarily Churchill and Roosevelt) published a signed letter with Stalin officially blaming the Nazi party, the official stance during the war was Nazi guilt.

⁸³ Pierre Nora, *Realms of Memory: Conflicts and Divisions*, 1:18.

⁸⁴ Landsberg, Alison, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture*, 7.

⁸⁵ Robert Szymczak, "THE VINDICATION OF MEMORY: THE KATYN CASE IN THE WEST, POLAND, AND RUSSIA, 1952-2008," 429.

unwillingness of the British government to offend the Soviet Union. In 1976 the monument was unveiled in its new location, Gunnersbury. The official British government position is that they were not willing to place the blame on the Soviet Union and that they had no involvement in the memorial. Despite this several World War II veterans were involved in the memorial unveiling ceremony. The monument reads ‘The conscience of the world cries for the truth to be witnessed’.⁸⁶ The direct call to attention to the lack of transparency with the Soviet Union remains as a site of prosthetic memory. Those who visit have the ability to form memories not only of the event itself, but with the long process to uncover the truth.

The first Polish monument to honor the lives lost at Katyn (and elsewhere) was initiated in Warsaw in 1981, forty years after the atrocity. Still a few years before Gorbachev made the official announcement of Soviet guilt, the initial placard was meant only to read “Katyn, 1940”. As author Szymczak explains, “Even that was too explosive for the authorities. The police confiscated it and the regime replaced it with another memorial, which read – ‘To the Polish soldiers – victims of Hitlerite fascism – reposing in the soil of Katyn.’”⁸⁷ Monuments, meant to immortalize events and people for future generations to witness, here were used by the Soviet government to further deny the truth about Katyn. Even including the real year of the massacre was not allowed, as it pointed to Soviet guilt. The initial creation of monuments to Nazi guilt attempted to create a lasting comparison that would favor the Soviet national identity. To attribute the atrocity, in physical perpetuity, to the Nazi party allowed the Soviet Union’s triumph to be an act of vengeance for those lost. This serves to only further the heroic image of the nation.

⁸⁶ Ibid, 430.

⁸⁷ Ibid, 434.

The new monument doubles down on false blaming of Nazi Germany, representing a split in collective consciousness and the archived history. At this point it was globally understood that the Soviets had committed the atrocities at Katyn,⁸⁸ yet a monument to their loss, meant to stand the test of time and help create new collective memories for following generations, claimed a different guilty party. It was a desperate attempt to salvage the Soviet National image, and one that did not last. As Nora says, monuments are “the relics of another era, illusions of eternity.”⁸⁹ It would be less than a decade after this monument was placed that an official announcement from Gorbachev dismantled the narrative the plaque attempts to perpetuate.

A facet of collective memory that is clearly present in the legacy of Katyn is the comparison of communities. In an attempt to create a Soviet Poland, one that was a part of the Soviet Union and better served their interests, Stalin attempted to wipe out the collective memory of Poland. If Halbwachs is correct in assuming that the death of a group results in the death of their collective memories, the destruction of nearly 22,000 members of Poland’s elite and military classes would eliminate the receptacles of knowledge and those able to spread Polish collective memory.⁹⁰

Indeed, Russia did achieve a Soviet Poland. Until 1991 the Soviet Union controlled the nation and their narrative of the Katyn Massacre. The collective memory of Polish independence carried through, even when actions and narratives were controlled. According to Halbwachs “in our present society we occupy a definite position and are subject to the constraints that go with it, memory gives us the illusion of living in the midst of groups which do not imprison us, which

⁸⁸ Michael T. Kaufman, “POLAND ERECTS AMBIGUOUS MEMORIAL TO VICTIMS OF KATYN MASSACRE.”

⁸⁹ Pierre Nora, *Realms of Memory: Conflicts and Divisions*, 1:6.

⁹⁰ Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, 73.

impose themselves on us only so far and so long as we accept them.”⁹¹ The memory of Katyn, of the evidence of Soviet guilt that came out during the war and in other parts of the world after, filtered into occupied Poland. The collective memories of what came before allowed knowledge to pass despite real social constraints. Kept alive through media, rather than the historical record, the truth of Soviet atrocities was only explored by historians after the Union dissolved. This is true for historians within Poland, and for atrocities like Holodomor, where “Professional historians found themselves trying to “catch up” with writers, journalists, members of the technical intelligentsia, and public activists, who had taken the initiative.”⁹² Memories pushed past official Soviet restraints where history could not.

Agnieszka Lazarczyk grew up in Soviet-controlled Poland, however communism had fallen by the time she went to high school. Still, she did not learn about the massacre in a classroom. She explains, “It wasn’t in school where I learned about it. It was on T.V., through the public conversation in the media. Newspapers, media, and through family. But my family didn’t talk much about that, they didn’t have any personal experience with that. A lot of people did.”⁹³ A subject not covered in history classes; the collective knowledge spread after the fall of the Soviet Union ensured knowledge of Katyn spread to those not alive at the time it occurred.

It was the supposed superiority of the Russian nation that allowed for Polish incorporation into the Soviet Union in the first place.⁹⁴ Placing themselves as the liberators of Poland, Russia perpetuated the image that they were a superior force. In this way they set themselves apart and validated the Soviet state’s control of Poland.⁹⁵ The image built up of the

⁹¹ Ibid, 50.

⁹² Georgii Kas’ianov, “The Holodomor and the Building of a Nation,” 26.

⁹³ Agnieszka Lazarczyk (Ph.D., Program Coordinator of the European Union Center), in discussion with the author, Claremont, California, April 26, 2022.

⁹⁴ J. K. Zawodny, *Death in the Forest: The Story of the Katyn Forest Massacre*, 80.

⁹⁵ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 150.

heroic nation that was post-war Russia was not in line with a government that would authorize the killing of thousands of people in the middle of a forest. Halbwachs claims that “the most painful aspects of yesterday’s society are forgotten because constraints are felt only so long as they operate and because, by definition, a past constraint has ceased to be operative ... the mind reconstructs its memories under the pressure of society.”⁹⁶ In order to accept the information presented in Russian society, that the nation is good and right, then the truth of the events of Katyn must be forgotten. It is easier to blame a foreign nation, one that is universally accepted as morally wrong (Nazi Germany), than to accept facts that contradict a national image formed by collective understanding of Soviet heroism. Szymczak explains that “For the Russians, struggling to regain the status they enjoyed after the war as a legitimate super-power, these complaints and demands for a true accounting of history strike them as the unjustified carping of peoples who are not properly grateful for their liberation from brutal Nazi occupation by the valiant Red Army in 1944-45.”⁹⁷ The evidence from the Soviet report of 1944 is inaccurate, but it paints a more acceptable picture for the proposed Russian post-war national image. The historical error allows this image to form, and forgetting the truth, whether through active hiding of evidence or willful denial, creates a new legacy for the event.

The admission of guilt in 1990 alters this image. For those actively resisting Soviet occupation and misinformation, the image of a valiant Soviet Union had long since evaporated. For those within Russia, this was a shift in their historical understanding, their collective memory. The reframing of guilt by President Yeltsin allowed them to transfer their national image from one of a heroic Soviet Union to a strong but victimized Russia.⁹⁸ Claiming that

⁹⁶ Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, 51.

⁹⁷ Robert Szymczak, “THE VINDICATION OF MEMORY: THE KATYN CASE IN THE WEST, POLAND, AND RUSSIA, 1952-2008,” 442.

⁹⁸ *Ibid*, 438.

Russians too had been victims of Soviet mistreatment put them in line with the Poles killed in Katyn and removed national guilt. This is not entirely untrue, as the Soviet State did commit atrocities against its own members, however the Russian Federation did not completely distance themselves from their Soviet past. This new Russian identity attempted to retain the heroic values of the Soviet Union, as it was still the individuals in the army that put a stop to Hitlerite Fascism but did not absorb the guilt of the Soviet government. This partial distance was not fully successful.

Lazarczyk explains her own impression of Russia “There is distrust, there is lack of friendly feeling towards the nation. I don’t think it had to be that way, there was this period after Yeltsin, when the Soviet Union disintegrated, that I think there was some hope that we could all become normal countries, democratic countries, and we can have normal relations with Russia. Some of the Polish governments pursued that. They were not trying to be a foe or clash with them, but they were always cautions. They saw the country as a potential threat which I think the current day is proving right.”⁹⁹ The new independent Russia could not escape the collective perceptions attached to the Soviet Union.

Angela Landsberg states that “History’ has never had the privileged access to the ‘real’; like all knowledge, historical knowledge is and has always been mediated through narratives and interpretation.”¹⁰⁰ The real knowledge of the Katyn Forest Massacre took decades to uncover. Throughout that period ‘truth’ about the event depended on which government controlled the narrative. The desire to maintain their global standing and internal image of heroism led to a Soviet cover up and the denial of fact for half a century.

⁹⁹ Agnieszka Lazarczyk (Ph.D., Program Coordinator of the European Union Center), in discussion with the author, Claremont, California, April 26, 2022.

¹⁰⁰ Landsberg, Alison, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture*, 47–48.

Russian Identity After Katyn

The emotional impact of the Katyn massacre and the decades long cover-up extended far beyond Eastern Europe. In 1991, Jersey City, New Jersey erected a monument to the victims of the Massacre. Across the ocean from where the event took place and the victims lived, this monument represents the global effect of the massacre on collective memory. In a 2020 *Time* article, Keith Lowe explains the monument's significance:

“But, while the monument is ostensibly dedicated to the Katyn massacres, the word “Katyn” has itself become a symbol of every betrayal that the Poles were forced to suffer during the second half of the twentieth century. The soldier who is being bayoneted upon his plinth represents much more than the thousands of Polish officers killed at Katyn in 1940. He represents Poland itself, in all its tragic martyrdom.”¹⁰¹

The monument is not only for those who lost their lives in the forests, but also for their loved ones and those forced to flee their nation, 10,000 of whom ended up in Jersey City after 1945. Fifty years after the event itself, a nation not originally involved wanted to leave a physical marker of the experience, a site of prosthetic memory to shape the perception of modern Russia going forward.

While foreign nations remember the Katyn Massacre as a symbol of Soviet portrayal and Polish loss, the desire to maintain a Russian heroic national image carries on into contemporary Russia. In an article titled “The ‘Official’ Version of the Katyn Massacre Disproven?”, historian Grover Furr debates the accepted version of events in Katyn. In a 2013 article claiming that the

¹⁰¹ Keith Lowe, “A City Tried to Move a Monument. The Fight That Ensued Shows the Power of History.”

official version of events was shaped in an anti-communist, anti-Soviet atmosphere (not entirely untrue, as mentioned earlier), Furr presents a version where the Soviet Union carried out the murder of some of Polish victims, but the Nazi military committed the bulk of the massacre. This desire, even more than 70 years after the event, to preserve Soviet innocence (or, at least, lesser guilt) points to the power of a collective narrative in shaping the national image.

Furr claims that “the story of the Katyn Massacre [is] a fabrication intended to facilitate the destruction of the Soviet Union. During the following years this position has attracted much support among what we might call Left Russian nationalists, people supportive of the USSR during the Stalin period for its achievements at industrialization and defeating the Nazis.”¹⁰² There is a strong movement to deny the events of Katyn, to change both national and international collective memory of the event and rewrite the historical record. Furr claims that Katyn is “the most famous crime alleged against Stalin and the Soviet government”.¹⁰³

This 2013 article is only the latest in a trend of Russians denying the official account of the Katyn Massacre. Since the official announcement by the Russian government there have been those within Russia who doubt the evidence.¹⁰⁴ For larger, more mainstream publications, it took several years for dissenting views to be published. Szymczak explains that “The revival of the Stalinist propaganda about Katyn first appeared, the *Economist* reported, in September 2007 in *Rossiiskaya Gazeta*, a state-owned newspaper. Repeated by the mass-market *Komsomolskaya Pravda* the following month, it next turned up a month later on TV Sentr – a station operated by Putin's political allies, and then in an "up market" publication, *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*.”¹⁰⁵ The

¹⁰² Grover Furr, “The ‘Official’ Version of the Katyn Massacre Disproven?”

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Robert Szymczak, “THE VINDICATION OF MEMORY: THE KATYN CASE IN THE WEST, POLAND, AND RUSSIA, 1952-2008,” 441.

inclusion of an unofficial narrative, one not supported by the evidence, or any modern government, shows the impact of Katyn in Russian consciousness. It is easier to maintain a national image, one built around strength and heroism, if Katyn was committed by a different nation, one that history agrees was in the moral wrong like Nazi Germany.

Modern denial is not the only controversy that surrounds Katyn in contemporary society. On April 10, 2010, an airplane carrying the President of Poland, Lech Kaczynski, and many other high-ranking officials crashed in the nearby city of Smolensk.¹⁰⁶ A total of 96 people died including the president, his wife, the Polish army chief of staff, head of the national bank, deputy foreign minister, members of parliament, presidential aids, and the family members of Katyn victims. All had been on their way to a ceremony honoring the Katyn massacre's 70th anniversary.¹⁰⁷

The plane crashed after the pilot ignored warnings that conditions were not good at the Smolensk airport and went down attempting to land in the thick fog. There were clear signs that this event had been a terrible accident, but the prominence of people involved and such a close tie to an already controversial event led to conspiracy theories that the crash had been orchestrated by the Kremlin.¹⁰⁸ Agnieszka Lazarczyk remembers the event. She explains that “We know they were capable of horrible acts, so I think that created fertile ground for this conspiracy theory to grow. It became part of the political campaign of the current ruling party.” The distrust of Russia that bred from decades of deception and strict control of information made the Polish community willing to believe that they would commit another atrocity. The image of

¹⁰⁶ Luke Harding and Kate Connolly, “Poland in Shock as Plane Crash Kills President Lech Kaczynski.”

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Agnieszka Lazarczyk (Ph.D., Program Coordinator of the European Union Center), in discussion with the author, Claremont, California, April 26, 2022.

Russia that exists in Poland is linked to the events at Katyn and is therefore the opposite of a heroic nation.

Lazarczyk explains that the plane crash “made the event even more prominent in public consciousness in Poland. Now the two are kind of interlinked. You can’t think of one without the other. Here you have the murder of Polish elite, and then you have a plane crash that killed part of Polish elite as well. It was a tragic coincidence.” The new loss of life near Katyn keeps the initial event present in public memory. Spread through media, news of the plane crash also brought awareness of the Katyn massacre to new audiences.

While the Russian federation has positioned themselves as victims of the Soviet Union, and therefore not an inheritor to their crimes or guilt, they still repeat their mistakes. The modern-day conflict in Ukraine shares many similarities with the Soviet Union’s invasion of Poland and occupation of Eastern Europe.

Indeed, the crimes committed in Bucha, a suburb of Kyiv, mirror the events of Katyn, 80 years later. Satellite photos from between March 9th and 11th reveal bodies left on the streets of Bucha while the town was occupied by the Russian military.¹⁰⁹ When the territory was retaken by Ukrainian forces in early April (Russian forces withdrew March 30th), the bodies of civilians were found throughout the city. Many had their hands bound and showed gunshot wounds to the head, in nearly the same manner of execution as the Polish victims suffered in Katyn.¹¹⁰ The city’s mayor, Anatoliy Fedoruk reports that over 400 bodies have been found so far.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ Malachy Browne, David Botti, and Haley Willis, “Satellite Images Show Bodies Lay in Bucha for Weeks, despite Russian Claims.”

¹¹⁰ Jesus Jiménez, “More than 300 People Were Killed in Bucha, Zelensky Says.”

¹¹¹ “Ukraine War Latest News: Railway Strikes Targeted Arms Supply Routes - Russia,” BBC News (BBC, April 23, 2022), https://www.bbc.com/news/live/world-europe-61185469?ns_mchannel=social&ns_source=twitter&ns_campaign=bbc_live&ns_linkname=6263e42d77811a20d37c9562%26Bucha+counts+toll+of+Russian+occupation%262022-04-23T11%3A39%3A03.068Z&ns_fee=0&pinned_post_locator=urn%3Aasset%3A4d1cad5-17ab-4c6c-bc1a-b879aefab0d3&pinned_post_asset_id=6263e42d77811a20d37c9562&pinned_post_type=share.

A telegraph by the Russian Ministry of Defense claimed that these bodies were ‘just another provocation’ meant to discredit the Russian nation. The official Russian stance is that these bodies were placed after March 30th, when the Russian military officially withdrew from Bucha, and despite satellite evidence to the contrary.¹¹² Furthering parallels to Katyn, throughout the invasion of Ukraine the Russian government has alluded to ridding the country of Nazism. President Vladimir Putin had made the claim that Ukraine’s government is openly pro-Nazi, despite Ukrainian President Zelensky being Jewish and passing legislation to oppose anti-Semitism.¹¹³

The rhetoric is clearly an attempt to stir up the post war-national image of the Soviet Union once more, to revive support within Russia and in Western media for the invasion of Ukraine. If Russia is sending their military in to liberate Ukrainians from Neo-Nazi influences, they must still be heroic. This is similar to the dialogue that the initial Russian invasion of Poland in 1939 was to “liberate the Ukrainians and Belorussians in Poland's eastern borderlands from the repressive rule of Polish landlords.”¹¹⁴ Posing an invasion as liberation allows for the Russian nation to remain in the right, particularly if they again call on Nazism to juxtapose their good deed (liberation) with a widely accepted moral wrong (Nazism). The story of the bodies found in Bucha and the Russian denial of guilt despite all incriminating evidence so closely resembles the events of the Katyn Forest Massacre, as if history is repeating itself before our very eyes.

Agnieszka Lazorczyk was not surprised at how far Putin was willing to go. “There was a reset with Russia, they [western Europe and Russia] got friendlier, they had a lot of economic

¹¹² Malachy Browne, David Botti, and Haley Willis, “Satellite Images Show Bodies Lay in Bucha for Weeks, despite Russian Claims.”

¹¹³ Anton Troianovski, “Why Vladimir Putin Invokes Nazis to Justify His Invasion of Ukraine.”

¹¹⁴ Robert Szymczak, “THE VINDICATION OF MEMORY: THE KATYN CASE IN THE WEST, POLAND, AND RUSSIA, 1952-2008,” 432.

ties and all that. The Polish perspective was ‘these people are naïve. They don’t understand what they are capable of or what their true intentions are.’ I wish we were proven wrong. I would rather move on, and all be friends and get stronger together but unfortunately that’s not what happened. They now have to revisit what this country is really about, how we deal with them. But for Poland this is not surprising.”¹¹⁵ The atrocities committed by the Soviet Union never left the collective consciousness of nations under their control. Even with the Soviet Union gone, the same mistrust lies with Russia. Any hope for a friendly relationship did not prevail, and the actions taken by the current Russian government have proven collective fears accurate.

Conclusion

It is clear that the collective memory of the Katyn Forest Massacre shifted over time as information of the event was revealed. Evidence reexamined, testimonies recounted, and eventual confessions all contributed to the perception of a single event. To bring to mind Katyn in a modern context conjures a complex image of the Soviet Union and the atrocities they have committed. But this was not always the case. The Soviet Union had some success in repressing the facts and convincing foreign leaders to support their own side of the story.

Why does this matter? Stalin and the Soviet Union lied about committing an atrocity. In the context of war, and out of a desire to leave alliances uncomplicated, members of foreign nations believed them. The historical record was written with Nazi guilt, as can be seen in the gaps within Polish education and the physical plaque placed at the gravesite. In an age where communities interact on a global scale, committing an atrocity like Katyn has the power to alter national identity, and the Soviet Union temporarily avoided that mark on their record. The Katyn

¹¹⁵ Agnieszka Lazarczyk (Ph.D., Program Coordinator of the European Union Center), in discussion with the author, Claremont, California, April 26, 2022.

massacre is not the only atrocity committed by the Soviet Union, and not the only one to cause gaps in their historical record, but it is emblematic of a pattern within their nation and an excellent example of memory versus history.

Memories carried down through families were spread in Poland once the Soviet Union disbanded. These memories helped fill in the gaps, but only when the structure controlling history was dismantled. Had this structure remained in power the knowledge of what happened at Katyn would remain alive in memory but omitted from the archive. In this way, the truth of Katyn and an accurate image of the parties involved would survive only as long as those who remember them.

Katyn was corrected in the historical record, but the attempts to downplay the atrocities committed by the Soviet Union had some success. History classes still celebrate the Soviet's entrance into World War II as a member of the Allied parties. The large cultural legacy of Nazism as an ultimate 'bad guy' (while not unearned) overshadows other morally reprehensible behavior committed at the same time, by other parties. The lies of the Soviet Union were disproven yet the image they were created to protect does not completely vanish.

Katyn remains present in the modern collective consciousness, yet it springs to the front as Russia begins new Eastern European conflicts. The continued pattern of lying about atrocities and placing the blame elsewhere threatens the historical record, depending on the memories of people within a war zone to represent the reality of a situation. Without those memories, it is possible for the collective to forget relevant historical details. When the collective forgets, history repeats itself, and we learn all over again.

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