

# **God's Eye: Aerial Photography and the Katyn Forest Massacre**

## ***Intelligence in Recent Public Literature***

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**Reviewed by Benjamin B. Fischer**

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A number of police departments in the United States have created 'cold-case squads' to investigate unsolved crimes that are years or even decades old. To 'clear' old cases, detectives often use new methods such as DNA analysis and other modern forensic techniques to analyze data that was collected but not comprehensible when the crimes were committed. Professor Fox's intriguing book is about an historical 'cold case' that took more than 50 years to clear.

The crime in question was the cold-blooded murder of some 4,500 Polish officers and soldiers whose bodies were discovered in April 1943 in the Katyn Forest, located 12 miles west of the Russian city of Smolensk. The hero of Fox's book is a self-taught photo-interpreter of professional caliber named Waclaw Godziemba-Maliszewski. The data collected at the time of the crime were aerial reconnaissance photographs taken by the German *Luftwaffe*, which were seized, classified, and stored in the "evidence room" of the US National Archives until they were declassified in 1979. The methods used to finally solve the crime were modern photo interpretation

and photogrammetry.

German occupation forces stumbled onto mass graves at Katyn in April 1943. Nazi propaganda minister Josef Goebbels charged the Soviets with mass murder, hoping to exploit the grisly discovery to shatter the Anglo-American-Soviet wartime alliance. The Germans exhumed many of the corpses and brought in an international team of forensic experts and other observers to substantiate the Soviet atrocity. The plan backfired. All of the forensic experts were from Nazi-occupied countries, with the exception of one pathologist from neutral Switzerland. Stalin blamed the Germans for the massacres, and London and Washington accepted his version of the story as the truth. As time went on, most historians in the West concluded that the Soviets were to blame, since what little evidence there was suggested that the Poles were killed while in Soviet, not German, captivity. Nevertheless, doubts persisted for decades.

*God's Eye* is part history and part biography. The historical part tells the story of Katyn and other killing fields where more than 20,000 Polish officers, soldiers, border guards, police, and other officials, as well as ordinary citizens, were executed during World War II. The narrative stretches from 1940 to the present, tracking successive investigations that uncovered the truth bit by bit. The biographical part of Fox's book focuses on Maliszewski's indefatigable efforts to identify execution and burial sites, establish Soviet culpability, and pressure Warsaw and Moscow to complete a full official investigation.

Maliszewski, who was born in Scotland in 1948, developed an interest in Katyn early in life when he learned that a relative had been among the victims. Interest turned into obsession, however, when he discovered that the solution to the crime might lie in aerial reconnaissance photographs that the Germans themselves had taken of Smolensk and the surrounding area. While doing research at the US National Archives, Maliszewski came across an intriguing article from the CIA's in-house journal, *Studies in Intelligence*. The author, a respected CIA photo interpreter, had used the German film footage to analyze the physical characteristics of Katyn, identify burial sites, and draw inferences regarding German versus Soviet culpability.<sup>1</sup> Maliszewski had a hunch that additional study of the Luftwaffe imagery would yield further insights.



Caught in the act: A 1944 Luftwaffe photograph captured a >Soviet bulldozer excavating mass graves in the Katyn Forest in preparation for moving the corpses to another site.

From 1941 to 1944, the *Luftwaffe* flew 17 sorties in the Smolensk area, some of which included the Katyn Forest. There, recorded on film, were “snapshots” of the area taken before, during, and after the German occupation. In one series of photographs taken in April 1944, discovered by Poirer and reexamined by Maliszewski, the German cameras caught the Soviets removing bodies from mass graves and bulldozing the ground to cover up evidence of the crime. Maliszewski later found more burial sites using US intelligence satellite imagery and up-to-date maps based on satellite imagery that were provided through the good offices of Dr.

Zbigniew Brzezinski, former national security adviser to President Carter, who was sympathetic to the project.

Fox points out that Maliszewski's research and his struggle to bring his findings to the attention of Polish officials and scholars were crucial to persuading the Polish government to reexamine the World War II tragedies. As a result, Katyn erupted as an issue in Polish-Soviet relations in 1990. In October of that year, Mikhail Gorbachev, under pressure from Warsaw and from his own advisers, revealed part, but not all, of the truth about Katyn. He pinned the blame on Stalin's chief henchman, Lavrenty Beria, and Soviet military intelligence. It took two more years, the collapse of Soviet power, and a bitter rivalry between Gorbachev and his successor, Boris Yeltsin, for the whole truth to emerge. In 1992, Yeltsin released records from the Communist Party's "special archive" that revealed that Stalin and five other members of the Politburo had approved the killings on Beria's recommendation.<sup>2</sup>

Readers may not be surprised by Soviet and later Russian stonewalling, but they may be shocked to learn that prominent figures in post-communist Poland also impeded Maliszewski's efforts to locate the final resting places of the murdered Poles and force a full and complete disclosure of the truth. Promises were made but not kept, funding for further investigation was offered but never materialized. Some Polish researchers expropriated Maliszewski's findings and published them without attribution. When he finally succeeded in publishing his painstaking research in a prestigious Warsaw University scientific journal, the editor censored some of the more damning details.

In *God's Eye*, Fox gives due credit to other historians who helped to establish the truth about Katyn. One was Professor Janusz Zawodny, the doyen of Katyn historians, whose 1962 book, *Death in the Forest*, was the first major exposé of the Polish tragedy. Another was Dr. Simon Schochet, a Polish-Jewish historian whose research revealed that several hundred of the Katyn victims were Jewish. Establishing the presence of Jewish victims illuminates the complexity of the Katyn story. Goebbels reportedly hesitated at first to expose the massacre when he learned that a number of the victims were Polish Jews. And some historians have attempted to portray Katyn as a "Jewish crime" perpetrated by "Jewish-Bolsheviks" against ethnic Poles.

Despite all the "hard" evidence that is now available, the Katyn tragedy continues to reverberate in Russia and Poland and in Russo-Polish

relations. In 2000, the Polish government, with Russian and Ukrainian cooperation, dedicated military cemeteries and memorials at Katyn, as well as at Mednoye and Kharkiv, two other sites where Soviet executions occurred. The chairman of the Russian Duma recently said that this had “closed a chapter of a shared past that was a source of conflicts and served as a pretext for many to evoke tension in our relations.”<sup>3</sup>

Maybe so. But Russia has yet to formally apologize, and the Duma has refused to give the case legal standing so that the families of the victims can claim compensation. The head of the Association of Katyn Families recently charged that Warsaw itself is dragging its feet on demanding a complete investigation of the murders and punishment of the perpetrators who are still alive. Katyn, it seems, is a wound that will take more than one generation to heal.

*God's Eye: Aerial Photography and the Katyn Forest Massacre* provides an eminently readable, detailed information base against which to gauge the continuing tensions between Russia and Poland over the Katyn atrocities.

### **Footnotes:**

<sup>1</sup> See Robert G. Poirer, “The Katyn Enigma: New Evidence in a 40-year-old Riddle,” *Studies in Intelligence*, vol. 25, Spring 1981, pp. 53-63.

<sup>2</sup> Russia’s revelations do not account for all of the probable Polish deaths at Soviet hands; the actual number will never be known. A 5 March 1940 Politburo memorandum signed by Stalin and five other leaders recommended executing 14,700 Polish officers, soldiers, civil servants, landowners, and others being held in Soviet camps and 11,000 more being held in captivity in Soviet-occupied eastern Poland. A KGB report dated 3 March 1959 stated that “21,857 Polish officers, gendarmes, police, settlers, and others” had been killed on official orders in 1940. See Dimitri Volkogonov, *Autopsy for Empire: The Seven Leaders Who Built the Soviet Regime* (New York, NY: The Free Press, 1998), pp. 148, 220. The latter number does not include some 90,000 Polish officers and soldiers captured in 1939 who have never been accounted for or the estimated 1.5 to 2 million Poles deported to Soviet Central Asia and Siberia, many of whom died in transit or after arriving in the USSR.

<sup>3</sup> Yinnadiy Syclycznyov, Interview, ‘There are no barriers between us.’

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