

Katyn killings poison Putin's Polish mission

From Giles Whittell
in Katyn, Western Russia

THE officers were each killed with a single shot to the back of the head, "their bodies laid out in mass graves 2,500 at a time in regular rows overlapping each other in roof-tile fashion". This was how German army radio messages, intercepted by the British, described one of the worst single atrocities of the Second World War when it was discovered near Katyn in 1943.

It is here, deep in the birch forests of western Russia, that President Putin has launched an effort to bury once and for all the ghosts of Stalin's secret police. In an unexpected phone call last week he invited Poland to join Russia in investigating new graves thought to contain the bodies of high-ranking Polish army officers shot by the dreaded NKVD on Stalin's orders 60 years ago lest they foment an anti-Soviet uprising.

More than 4,000 officers, the cream of Polish society, were killed in Katyn alone. For half a century the Soviet Union blamed the massacre on the Nazis while thousands more officers remain unaccounted for, lost in an historical black hole that still sours Russia's relations with Poland. It does little credit to Britain either: Whitehall has only grudgingly admitted helping to cover up the truth of the Katyn affair for decades.

The forest floor near the road from Smolensk to Katyn is spongy underfoot thanks to the retreating snow — but also, some believe, because of still-buried human remains. In a clearing south of the road welders are working against the clock on a memorial complex to be opened later this year to the 4,421 known to have died here. There is an iron plaque for each of them

and "death holes" are marked out where they were buried, but according to Polish activists the bodies of at least 4,000 more who disappeared that spring have never been found, and bones were recently discovered half a mile away.

Throughout the Soviet era foreign visitors were encouraged to come to Katyn. What they saw was a monument to victims of German fascism. The new memorial is a massive rewriting of false history, but it still tells only part of the story. According to a letter apparently written in 1959 by the then head of the KGB to Nikita Khrushchev, the Soviet President, another 10,000 Polish of-



ficers were shot in 1940 at two other western Soviet sites. One, northwest of Moscow, was never occupied by German troops, meaning the massacre could not be blamed on them and had to be covered up entirely.

The victims — prisoners of war seized when Stalin invaded eastern Poland in 1939 — were the elite: "professors, judges, engineers, artists — defenders of our country". Jerzy Buzek, the Polish Prime Minister, said in a speech to mark the Katyn massacre's 60th anniversary last week. The murders were intended to "kill Poland", he claimed.

What is known is that letters from up to 22,000 Polish offic-

ers stopped reaching their families in 1940. In the commonly-accepted version of events, Stalin, terrified of insurrection, ordered their liquidation and left the details to his trusted NKVD chief, Lavrenti Beria. He in turn ordered that the officers be dressed in winter uniforms to confuse anyone who found their bodies, and that only German rifles and ammunition be used.

Many died singing Catholic hymns and patriotic anthems. Ballistics experts have since confirmed that German bullets made the holes in every skull recovered.

Ten years ago Mikhail Gorbachev acknowledged the Soviet Union's responsibility for the massacre, but some Russians still refuse to accept it. "This will be the biggest falsification of the century," said Georgi Nikolaev, a Smolensk guide and Katyn history buff, surveying the new memorial site with a scowl. "The more grandiose the monument, the bigger the falsification."

Questions do remain about Katyn, but they have less to do with who was to blame than with where the remaining bodies lie and why Britain kept silent about them for so long. The need to avoid antagonising Russia was clear during the war but less so afterwards. "Britain has never apologised," said Simon Zaremba, a veteran of the London-based Polish Home Army. "It hurt very much at the time." Mr Putin is finding less forgiveness in Poland, where he is anxious to soothe old grudges and boost business with an important trading partner. His invitation to help lay the Katyn affair to rest has been welcomed, but experts believe the real answers may still lie in sealed Moscow vaults, not in the forest.

Giles Whittell, page 22

From Professor I. N. R. Davies, FBA

Sir, Whilst welcoming your report (April 22) on the Katyn massacres, I think it should be made clear that the case is no longer surrounded by a mysterious "historical black hole". The official estimate of Allied (Polish) officers murdered in 1940 on Stalin's orders now stands at 25,000. In consequence of President Gorbachev's admission of Soviet guilt, two further killing grounds have been discovered, and the number of missing victims is now relatively small. The names and addresses of several surviving NKVD agents, who prepared and perpetrated the murders, have also been identified.

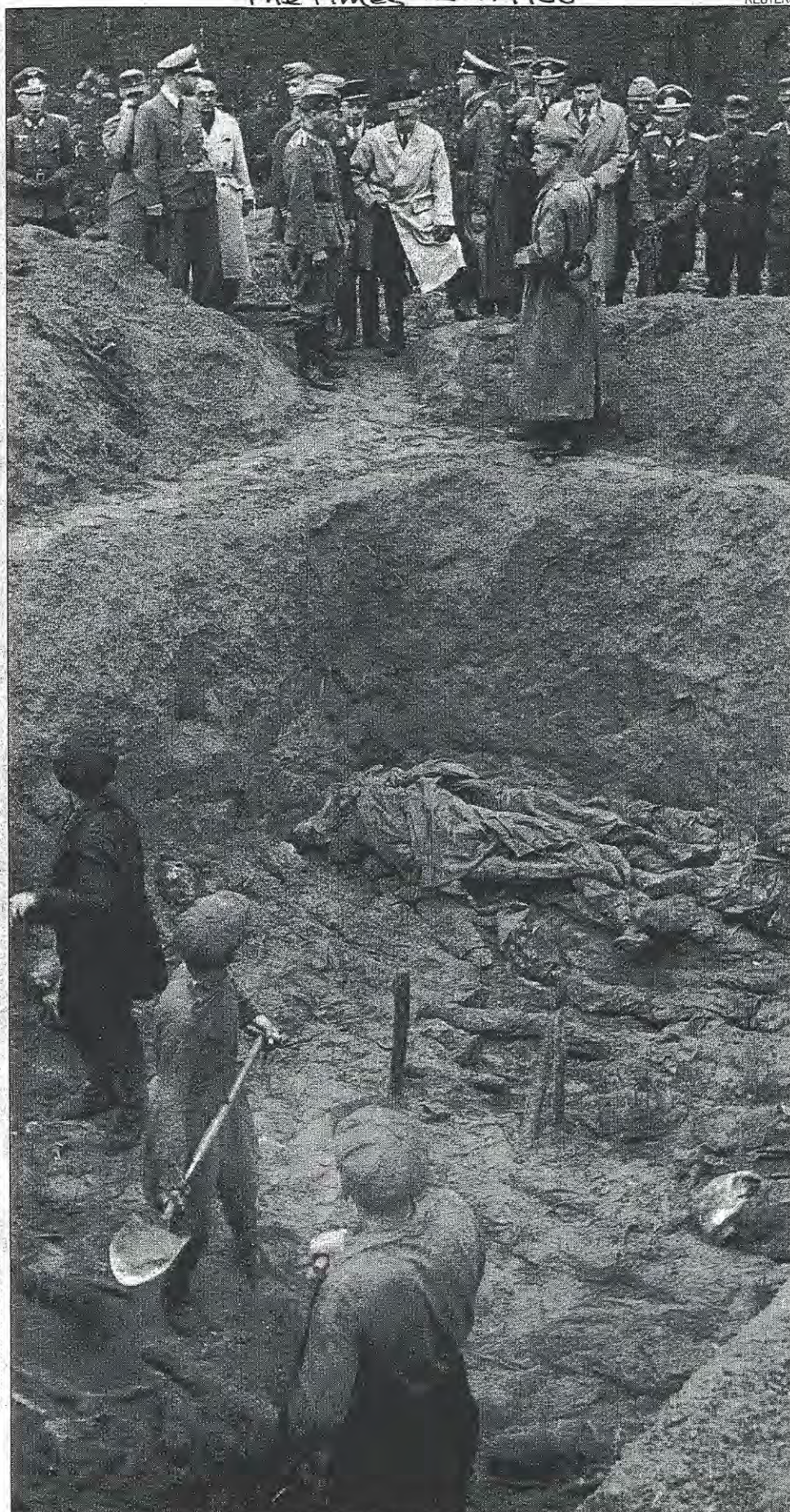
No evidence has ever surfaced to suggest that Stalin ordered the deaths of the prisoners, who were reserve officers rather than active soldiers, on the grounds that they were trying to foment "an anti-Soviet uprising". Stalin, like Hitler, routinely murdered whole classes of people, not for what they did or planned to do, but simply for who they were — including a considerable number of Jews. (Indeed, the SS was conducting a parallel campaign of killing the educated Polish elite in the German-occupied zone at the very same time.)

British commentators ought to be more open about the deep British interest in these horrendous matters. It is not enough simply to say that Whitehall helped "to cover up the truth". Not only were the Katyn massacres a mere drop in the ocean of Stalin's atrocities but they occurred in the same year that the comrades of the murdered men were sacrificing their lives in the Polish squadrons of the RAF, defending London during the Battle of Britain. Throughout the war, the Poles were our close allies, for whose independence we had declared war. We owe them a debt of honour.

It is a grave scandal that the British War Crimes Act (1991) expressly excludes all crimes not committed "by Germans or on German-occupied territory". As a result, the mass murders of allies, who had placed all their armed forces under British or French command, are *not* regarded as an offence under British law. Whilst we rightly condemn and prosecute former Nazis, we pretend that genocidal acts committed against our allies by other criminal regimes are somehow of no concern.

Lastly, though the largest overall categories of Stalin's victims were Ukrainians and Russians, it is doubtful whether President Putin will do the decent thing and prosecute former NKVD agents still living comfortably in Moscow. If by any chance he does take action, it would not be amiss to advise the mass murderers among Mr Putin's former colleagues that the best place to seek asylum would be the one country where their misdeeds have been legally exempted from prosecution — namely the United Kingdom.

Yours sincerely,
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April 22.



German officers watch as a mass grave is unearthed in Katyn in 1943, revealing the bodies of Polish reserve officers massacred by the Soviet NKVD three years earlier