

April 13, 2010

The Fog Over Katyn – Poland’s Struggle of Memory Against Forgetting

BY BRET STEPHENS

'The struggle of people against power,' Milan Kundera famously observed, "is the struggle of memory against forgetting." Is there any place that better captures that truth than the Katyn Forest, or any metaphor more apt for Katyn's place in our historical memory than fog?

It was, of course, a very mundane kind of fog that (along with some apparently reckless piloting) brought down the plane carrying Polish President Lech Kaczynski, his wife and an entourage of political notables as they attempted to land for Saturday's commemoration of the Katyn Forest massacre's 70th anniversary. Still, one can be forgiven for wondering whether the physical and metaphysical worlds didn't conspire in this latest cycle of Polish tragedy. Fog makes the world unseen; cutting through it is what Poland's long quest for freedom—itsself so often dashed to pieces—has always been about.

Today, the facts about Katyn are not in doubt. In the spring of 1940, 22,000 Polish prisoners of war—most of them army officers—but also thousands of leading members of the Polish intelligentsia—were systematically murdered by the Soviet secret police on direct orders from Joseph Stalin. Comrade Stalin, who was then carving up central Europe as an alley of Adolf Hitler, worried that some future Polish state might someday oppose him. "Under those circumstances," observes historian Gerhard Weinberg, "depriving [Poland] of a large proportion of its military and technical elite would make it weaker."

In one of history's richer ironies, the massacre was first discovered and publicized by the Nazis in 1943. That made it that much easier of the Soviets to dismiss the revelation as German propaganda to cover up a German crime, a line the U.S. and Britain were only too happy to adopt to propitiate their war-time ally. The behavior of the Roosevelt administration was particularly disgraceful: As Rutgers Professor Adam Scrupski has noted, the U.S. Office of War Information "implicitly threatened to remove licensure from the Polish language radio stations in Detroit and Buffalo if they did not cease broadcasting the details of executions."

Thus was the cause of a free Poland—the very reason the West had gone to war against Germany in the first place—sold out on the altar of realpolitik. It would not be the only sellout.

In 1968, Gabriel Kolko, now a professor emeritus at Toronto's York University, published "The Politics of War: The World and United States Foreign Policy, 1943-1945." The book—a landmark work of Cold War revisionism—affects to be agnostic on the question of culpability for the massacre. But Prof. Kolko did something else: He trivialized the massacre. Even assuming the Soviets bore responsibility, Katyn was "the exception" to Soviet conduct. "Its relative importance," he said, "must be downgraded very considerably." There is in that remark something very much like the view of France's neo-fascist Jean-Marie Le Pen that the Holocaust was "just a detail in the history of World War II."

Then again, Mr. Kolko's book at least acknowledges Katyn, which is more than can be said for Eric Hobsbawm's 1994 best-selling history of the 20th century, "The Age of Extremes," which the New York Times called "a bracing and magisterial work." In his 627-page catalogue of "extremes," the celebrated British historian and lifelong communist—who at 92 also remains the president of the University of London's Birbeck College—devotes exactly one paragraph to Stalin's several million victims. Katyn itself rates no mention, even though the book was published four years after the Soviets finally acknowledged their responsibility.

Katyn denialism doesn't end there. In Russia in recent years, there has been a renewed effort to raise a fresh round of doubts about Soviet guilt. To his credit, Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin has disavowed that line, and last week gave a conciliatory speech linking Russians and Poles as two peoples that "paid an exorbitantly high price...for the inhumanity of totalitarianism."

Still, Russia continues to seal its archives related to Katyn. And it is under Mr. Putin that the Russian government has been systematically scrubbing its history textbooks so as to present Soviet history in a better light. It brings to mind the old joke that, under socialism, "the past can never be predicted."

It goes without saying that Katyn is hardly the only piece of history lying under a fog. The Iranian government has made it its business to deny the Holocaust, partly out of true belief, and partly because Holocaust denial plays well throughout the Muslim world. And the governor of Virginia had a recent mental lapse in the matter of the peculiar institution the Confederacy was created to uphold. History may be irreversible, and yet it exists under a permanent state of siege from those whom it inconveniences. Defending it is the permanent burden of all free people, the essential task for which the Poles have again paid the terrible price.

Write to: bstephens@wsj.com