

February 23, 1944
U.S. Embassy Moscow Despatch No. 207,
'Investigation by Soviet Authorities of the Massacre
of Polish Soldiers in the Katyn Forest, near
Smolensk'

Citation:

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Summary:

Averell Harriman sends the accounts of his daughter and the Third Secretary of the Embassy who accompanied foreign correspondents to Smolensk to witness the Soviet Katyn investigations.

Original Language:

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EMBASSY OF THE
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

Moscow, February 23, 1944

No. 207

Subject: Investigation by Soviet authorities of the
Massacre of Polish Soldiers in the Katyn
Forest, near Smolensk.

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DEPARTMENT OF
STATE
1944 MAR 24 PM 2:10

Secret

DIVISION OF
EUROPEAN AFFAIRS
MAR 23 1944
DEPARTMENT OF STATE

The Secretary of State,
Washington, D. C.

FREE
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Sir:

740.00116 RU/1273

I have the honor to refer to my secret telegram
no. 247 of January 25, 7 p.m., concerning the activities
of the Special Commission to Establish and Investigate
the Circumstances of The Shooting by The German Fascist
Invaders of Captive Polish Officers in The Katyn Woods.
On January 21-23, 1944 the foreign correspondents in
Moscow made a trip to Smolensk to witness the proceed-
ings of the Commission. The correspondents were accom-
panied by my daughter, Kathleen, and Mr. John F. Melby,
Third Secretary of the Embassy. I am enclosing copies
of their memoranda containing their observations on
this trip. I am also enclosing a copy of the January
29, 1944 Moscow News which contains an abridged version
of the formal report of the Commission.

1-2/

3/

DEPARTMENT OF STATE
DIVISION OF
COMMUNICATIONS
AND RECORDS
APR 2 1944
JFM/hnw

Respectfully yours,

L. H. Harriman

File No. 711.6

✓ Enclosures:
1-2-3/ as stated. *Okw*

Original and Hectograph to the Department.

Hecto sent to DCA

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Final File

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740.00116 EUROPEAN WAR 1939/1364

PS/FK

Moscow, February 23, 1944

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W. A. Harriss

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DIVISION OF
EUROPEAN AFFAIRS
APR 2 1944
COMMUNICATIONS
AND RECORDS
JRM/hmw

File No. 711.6

Enclosures:
1-2-3 as stated.

Original and Hecograph to the Department.

Hecograph sent to DDA

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MAR 24 1944 KFC	

140.00116 EUROPEAN WAR 1939-1945

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Enclosure No. 1 to Despatch
No. 207 dated February 23, 1944
from American Embassy, Moscow.

Trip to Smolensk and the Katyn
Forest, January 21-23, 1944.

We left Moscow, in company with seventeen newspaper men and including Czech, Polish and Spanish newsmen, at 4:00 p.m., January 21, for Smolensk on a special train which had been put at the disposal of the party. We were the first foreigners to visit Smolensk since its occupation by the Russians on September 25, 1943. We did not arrive in Smolensk until 10:00 a.m. the following morning, 220 kilometers from Moscow, presumably because military traffic had the right of way on the railroad. Since most of the trip was made by dark there was small opportunity to observe along the way. During the daylight hours little rolling stock was seen on the sidings and almost no military supplies along the single-track line. We saw only one troop train of a dozen boxcars, dirty and with straw covering the floor. The troops appeared to be work battalions rather than line troops. Outside Smolensk there were some seventy-five boxcars and three locomotives which had been turned off the track and burned. The closer we came to Smolensk the more evidence there was of destroyed buildings and blown-up bridges. Almost none of the buildings had been replaced and generally only enough bridges to supply one or two lines of traffic in the railroad yards. The railroad yards in Smolensk itself were a complete shambles, only enough having been rebuilt to keep operations going.

We were met in Smolensk by the Secretary of the Special Commission to Establish and Investigate the Circumstances of the Shooting by the German Fascist Invaders of Captive Polish Officers in the Katyn Woods. He took us first on a short tour of the city to witness the damage. The first thing noticeable was that every bridge over the Dnieper had been destroyed, the only crossing point for road and motor traffic being one temporary wooden structure. The railroad does not cross the river at this point. In the city it is difficult to find a structure which has not been damaged. Most of the destruction seems to have been caused by demolition, and there was little evidence of fire. The city once contained 7,900 buildings. There now remain 300, of which only 64 are stone structures, the rest being one-story wooden houses. The remaining population lives in the cellars of the wrecked buildings. The Lenin Library is a total loss, and the books were either burned or removed by the Germans. According to official figures, the population of Smolensk is now about 30,000 as compared with a pre-war figure of 185,000. In and around Smolensk the Germans are alleged to have massacred 135,000 Russians.

After the tour of the city we were taken out to the Katyn Forest, some fifteen kilometers west of Smolensk on the Vitebsk highway. We were met there by a battery of

movie cameras

movie cameras and the surgeon who is in charge of the exhumations of Polish bodies and the post-mortems. He told us that 700 bodies have already been exhumed from seven graves and that there are perhaps a total of twelve to fifteen thousand. This is pure estimate. The six graves on which the most work has been done are approximately twenty-five feet square and vary in depth from three to ten feet. In two of them the bodies are laid out in rows; in the others they are simply piled in. As each body is exhumed it is taken to a tent for examination, approximately 120 bodies being examined daily by eleven crews. After examination the bodies are laid in rows in a field which we inspected. Despite the freezing temperature, there was no doubt they had been dead a long time.

Every one of the bodies seen wore a Polish Army uniform, a preponderance being uniforms of enlisted men. Each one had a warm topcoat or heavy underwear. All pockets had been ripped open prior to exhumation by the Russians, but a wide selection of documents and miscellaneous items are being found which were missed in the previous searching by the Germans. All items found are taken to Smolensk for examination and classification. Every skull we saw contained a bullet hole at the base of the skull and a second one just above the forehead. The holes were made by bullets varying from 7.6 m.m. to 9.5 m.m. On the skulls where skin or hair is left powder burns are in evidence. The brain, flesh, and organs of each body are also examined. The doctor in charge said that the state of decomposition proves the men cannot have been dead much more than two years. A number of the bodies had small, rectangular, metal clips attached to the lapel of their overcoats, bearing only numbers. The highest number seen was 2032. These were on the bodies said to have been exhumed by the Germans in 1943.

We were later taken to see the dacha which was used as headquarters by the German occupation forces in the forest. It had previously been an NKVD rest home. It lies about a quarter of a mile from the graves and beyond the road, over-looking the river. It was completely destroyed by the Germans when they withdrew.

During the afternoon the Commission held a press conference at which one member, V. P. Potemkin, read a previously prepared statement. Its principal points were as follows: The Commission for the Investigation of Atrocities in Smolensk arrived in the city shortly after its capture from the Germans on September 25, 1943. Experts started to work on the Katyn Forest murders on January 16, 1944. After the occupation by Russia in 1939 of the Eastern part of Poland several camps of Polish prisoners of war were established to the West of Smolensk. These prisoners were used on road construction work, officers included. In July, 1941, the Germans suddenly broke through the line at Smolensk and enveloped the city. It had been planned to evacuate the Poles to the West and a requisition was put in for a train to do so. This request was refused because of the shortage of trains to move even the civilian population of Smolensk. In any event, the Germans were already shelling the railroad.

After the

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After the occupation the German 537th Construction Battalion moved into Katyn and put a wire fence around it. Three Russian girls were put to work cleaning the dacha which was used as headquarters. They were constantly under sentry guard. In August, 1941, according to the testimony of one of them, Andreeva, they frequently heard trucks coming into the forest. The officers quartered in the dacha would then go out. Shortly after the girls heard single shots at regular intervals. The trucks would leave and the officers would return, noisy and excited. One time one of the girls noticed blood on an officer's tunic. Another time one of the girls saw two Polish soldiers outside the window. They were led into the forest by Germans. Shortly thereafter she heard shots. Still another time one of the girls while walking down the road saw a group of men approaching. She hid in the bushes and saw they were a group of Poles who were led into the forest. Later she heard shots. All during August and September, 1941, Poles were rounded up from the countryside. After the end of September, 1941, no one saw any more Poles.

The above statements are further corroborated, according to the Commission, by other testimony. The traitor B. G. Menshagin, a lawyer, was in close communication as occupation mayor of the town, with the German commander in Smolensk, and was assisted by B. V. Bazilevski, formerly director of the Smolensk Observatory. In August Menshagin told Bazilevski that orders had been received "to liquidate Polish prisoners." He added that the Russian prisoners would die of "natural causes." Some time later he said the orders had been carried out. He is reported to have given the same information to other persons. When Menshagin was later evacuated with the Germans he left behind him his notebook. His handwriting has been verified. An entry of August 15, 1941, states that orders had been issued for all detailed Poles to be turned over to the German authorities. Subsequent entries state that execution orders had been carried out.

With reference to the motive for these executions, Bazilevski testified he had been told by Hirschfeld of the SD that it is "an historical fact the Poles are an inferior race and hence it is a good act to kill them." He added that all Polish intellectuals had been killed.

Father Alexander Oglobin, of the parish of Katyn, testified according to Potemkin, that his parishioners had talked in 1941 of the events in the forest. During 1942 there was no talk. Then it started again in the early part of 1943 at a time when the Germans were exhibiting great nervousness and greater harshness of treatment toward the Russians. The first public notice was in the spring of that year when the local German paper printed a story that the NKVD had murdered Polish officers in Katyn during March and April of 1940. This same story was reprinted in three other papers at the same time and was designed to improve the position of

the Germans.

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the Germans. The Germans then began searching for witnesses to substantiate their statements, using torture to obtain what they wanted. When the Germans evacuated they tried to take with them or destroy all witnesses they had used. To strengthen their case further they opened some of the graves, using 500 Russian prisoners from concentration camp No. 126 for labor. Once the job was done the Russians were in turn killed, except for one who managed to escape in the melee. He was sheltered by an old peasant woman, Moskovskaya, to whom he told the above story before he was recaptured and executed himself. During the exhumation the Germans removed all documents from the bodies, especially those dated later than April, 1940. They did, however, overlook some, including one unmailed postcard dated June 20, 1941. Before closing up the graves the Germans brought to Katyn the bodies of other Poles from other graves and camps in order to concentrate in one spot all the alleged atrocities by the Russians. And finally, in March 1943, the Germans organized compulsory excursions of the local citizenry to the graves before they were again closed.

Potemkin then stated the conclusions of the Commission:

1. During August and September, 1941, the Germans killed in the Katyn Forest all Poles in the vicinity of Smolensk.
2. Feeling their position insecure in 1943 they attempted to blame the incident on the Russians.
3. To implement this position the Germans opened the graves, searched the bodies, sought witnesses for their case, and added bodies from elsewhere to those in Katyn.

In answer to a question, it was stated that prior to August, 1941, there were three camps of Polish prisoners: Camp No. 1 was thirty-five kilometers West of Smolensk on the Minsk highway, containing 2,932 Poles who were sent to Siberia finally; Camp No. 2, twenty-five kilometers West of Smolensk on the Vitebsk highway; and Camp No. 3, thirty-five kilometers West of Smolensk.

We were then taken to inspect the collection of miscellaneous items taken from the pockets of the Polish soldiers. This collection consisted of letters, books, newspapers, personal items, money. We were also shown eleven twenty United States dollar gold pieces, one fifty dollar note, and numerous dollar bills. A major portion of the dated evidence, such as letters and newspapers, was prior to or during March and April, 1940 and included a copy of Izvestiya of April 11, 1940. There were however letters bearing Moscow postmarks as late as June, 1941.

During the evening the Commission held a session devoted to questioning the witnesses whose testimony had earlier been summarized by Potemkin. It soon became apparent that the session was staged for the benefit of the correspondents and that the witnesses were merely

repeating

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repeating stories they had already given the Commission. The show was staged under hot and blinding klieg lights and motion picture cameras. In all, five witnesses were produced who added nothing to what had been said at the press conference. Attempts by the correspondents to question the witnesses were discouraged, and finally permitted reluctantly only through the members of the Commission. All witnesses were shunted out of the room as rapidly as possible upon finishing their statement. There was also an argument about translation of the testimony, this finally being agreed to.

The first witness told how he had been forced to turn evidence for the Germans in 1943; the second, Alexeyeva, told of her work in the dacha; the third, Bazilevsky, recounted his association as assistant burgomaster; the fourth, Zukhov, an expert in "criminal medicine," told of his "excursion" to the forest in the spring of 1943 and his belief that the bodies could not have been three years old; the fifth, Ivanov, the local station master who had been unable to supply a requisition of forty cars to move the Poles in 1941, told of conditions during the German break-through and of being forced to give evidence for the Germans in 1943.

All the statements were glibly given, as though by rote. Under questioning the witnesses became hesitant and stumbled, until they were dismissed by the Commission. Bazilevsky was ludicrous when one correspondent asked him why he was now so excited by the murder of 10,000 Poles when he also knew that 135,000 Russians had been killed in the same area, and he answered that the Poles were prisoners of war and it was an outrageous violation of international law for them to be massacred.

The atmosphere at the session grew progressively tense as the correspondents asked one pointed and usually rude question after another. At midnight it was announced abruptly that our train would leave in one hour. Just before the meeting broke up Alexei Tolstoy, a member of the Commission, who had apparently sensed that matters were not going well and who has had the most foreign contacts of anyone on the Commission, produced answers to several questions which had earlier been passed over. The members of the Commission were hasty and formal with us in their farewells, and the earlier atmosphere of at least semi-cordiality had disappeared.

The Polish correspondent who accompanied us, and who slept noisily through most of the press conference, a captain in the Polish Army and the editor of Wolna Polska under Wanda Wasilewska, told me that the present investigation has no interest for the Poles in Russia since it is obvious that the Germans committed the crimes and that therefore it is pure "political provocation" on the part of the Russians. Certainly the members of the Commission were not at all pleased when leading questions were asked. On the return trip the Foreign Office officials who accompanied us were almost unduly anxious on the return trip to be assured that we were convinced. It is apparent that the evidence in the Russian case is incomplete in

several

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several respects, that it is badly put together, and that the show was put on for the benefit of the correspondents without opportunity for independent investigation or verification. On balance, however, and despite loopholes the Russian case is convincing.

JFM/hnw

On January 23, 1944 members of the foreign press were taken to Smolensk to get first hand the evidence compiled by the Commission on the Katyn incident.

The party was shown the graves in the Katyn Forest and witnessed post mortems of the corpses. As no member was in a position to evaluate the scientific evidence given, it had to be accepted at its face value.

The testimonial evidence provided by the Commission and witnesses was minute in detail and by American standards petty. We were expected to accept the statements of the high ranking Soviet officials as true, because they said it was true.

Despite this it is my opinion that the Poles were murdered by the Germans. The most convincing evidence to uphold this was the methodical manner in which the job was done, something the Commission thought not sufficiently important to stress. They were more interested in the medical evidence as conclusive proof and the minute circumstantial evidence surrounding the crime.

Following is a description of what we saw and most particularly the manner in which the story was presented.

1. Inspection of Katyn Forest graves.

The Katyn Forest turned out to be a small unspectacular little wood, sparsely filled with young trees, the bigger ones having been apparently chopped down by the Germans. The soil was orange and very sandy.

To date the Commission has found seven graves in all -- six in the general area called Goat Hill, about the size of an acre, and one more several hundred yards away. They are still looking for more graves and expect to find from twelve to fifteen thousand bodies in all.

The senior member of the Medical Committee, Burdenko, took us around each and every grave -- asked that we scrutinize each detail. He willingly answered every question put to him of medical bearing and was most helpful.

On the basis of a meticulous post mortem of seven hundred corpses we were given the following information.

1. The corpses were Poles -- the majority enlisted men with no rank badges, but some officers. Where, as the privates ranged from twenty-five to thirty, the officers were considerably older, -- forty-five to fifty years.

2. The majority of the corpses were dressed in top coats, had long underwear. Those wearing just tunics had sweaters.

3. The pockets of the uniforms had been ripped and their documents taken out -- except for a few that apparently had been missed.

4. On the

4. On the basis of a thorough autopsy, the doctor stated that the bodies had been in the ground about two years -- certainly not four. We were told that although sandy soil in a dry climate tends to mummify bodies, the soil in Katyn is damp hence had no preservative qualities.

5. Two graves had the bodies laid out meticulously in rows three deep, the top row being about three meters from the surface. Each one of these corpses had a metal tag - (put on by the Germans when they themselves dug up the bodies in the spring of 1943). The other graves had either six or eight layers of bodies thrown in helter-skelter -- the pockets of these soldiers had been ripped.

6. Each corpse bore the markings of a single wound made either by a 7.65 m.m. bullet or a 9.00 m.m. bullet that entered the head at the base of the skull and came out at the top of the forehead. We saw enough skulls to see that the wounds were all identical, except that a very few had received two bullet wounds instead of just one. To date no body wounds have been found. In fact the corpses were all proclaimed to be in "good physical condition". The minority of the corpses had their hands tied. We were told that the bullets had been fired at close range from an "automatic weapon".

7. Evidence that the bodies were little more than two years old was on the basis of the following information. Some skulls still had hair, at any rate epidermis; the internal organs, though considerably flattened and shrunken, were only partly decayed; the liver and spleen green. There was still firm red colored meat on the thighs.

The autopsies were conducted in heated tents by teams each headed by a qualified doctor with several assistants, including a secretary who took page long notes on each case.

2. Evidence given by Atrocity Commission.

We had two meetings with the members of the "Special Commission to Establish and Investigate the Circumstances of the Shooting by the German Fascist Invaders of Captive Polish Officers in the Katyn Wood." The first, during the afternoon, lasted three hours. We were read prepared statements and allowed to ask questions. Besides a detailed story of the sequence of events, we were told the substance of data collected from witnesses, much of which was repeated verbatim by the witnesses later on that night. Alexey Tolstoy, a member of the Commission, was of greatest assistance. Some questions we asked required information not on hand. He had it for us by night. In the main during this session our questions were answered willingly.

Our second meeting was conducted in the same room. This time there were Klieg lights and movies and photos were taken throughout the proceedings. The Committee sat along a long table covered by red baize at one end of the room, the press were strung along a similar table down one side. Witnesses sat directly opposite the Committee and were brought in one at a time. Aside from the photographers and one stenographer, there was no one else present.

At first

At first the Committee refused to interrupt the testimonies for translation, but when the members of the press objected they agreed with some lack of grace. During the testimony the committee chatted and whispered between themselves and most didn't appear to listen. We were told we could question any witness, through the Committee, but the questions appeared to annoy them though not apparently due to their substance. Only one question was called "irrelevant" and not answered -- the present job of one of the witnesses. Tolstoy later gave it to us.

The witnesses themselves were very well rehearsed, and they appeared subdued rather than nervous, their pieces having been learned by heart. Only the girl had an air of self-assurance.

When the last witness had been heard general questions were asked, some of import to the Katyn Incident, others not. Shortly, however, the representatives of the Foreign Office Press Department got up and said we'd better break up as our train was due to leave shortly. I got the distinct impression that the Committee was relieved. They had been told to put on a show for us -- the show was over -- and they did not want to be bothered any further. The meeting broke up without any informal chatting.

3. Members of Commission.

(1) N. N. Burdenko, Member of U.S.S.R. Academy of Sciences.

(2) Alexei Tolstoy

(3) Metropolitan Nikolai of Kiev, Galovski and the Ukraine Republic.

(4) Lieutenant General A. S. Gunderov, Chairman of the Pan-Slav Commission.

(5) S. A. Kolesnikov, Chairman of U.S.S.R. Red Cross and Red Crescent.

(6) V. P. Potemkin, Commissar of Education of the R.S.F.S.R.

(7) Colonel General E. I. Smirnov, Chief of Central Medical Service Administration of the Red Army.

(8) R. E. Melnikov, Chairman of Smolensk Regional Executive Committee.

The above-mentioned arrived at Smolensk "a few days" after the Germans evacuated Smolensk on September 25, 1943 to look into various German atrocities committed in the Smolensk region. The Committee did not start to investigate the Katyn graves until January 16, 1944. The reason given was that they had other atrocities to investigate first. We were given no information about these other atrocities, except the statement that 135,000 Russians and Jews had been killed in the Smolensk area. Presumably

it is

it is significant that Russians didn't think the Katyn graves were worth bothering about until after Polish-Soviet relations again became a big issue.

On January 16 the Commission's scientific experts opened up the Katyn graves, exhumed bodies and started meticulous post mortems on each body. Simultaneously, other members of the Commission questioned witnesses of the crime and compiled the evidence of the witnesses, and documented all papers found on corpses.

As a result of the work and exhumation of 700 bodies out of an estimated total of 12,000 the Commission reached the following conclusions:

1. Between August and September 1941 the Germans killed Polish prisoners of war on Goat Hill (one area of the Katyn Forest);
2. Later in the Spring of 1943, feeling their position unstable, the Germans hastily covered up evidence of their crime;
3. For this purpose the Germans:
 - (a) Re-opened graves on Goat Hill.
 - (b) Tortured witnesses into giving evidence that the Russians murdered the Poles.
 - (c) Dug up other bodies of Poles murdered elsewhere and brought them to the Katyn Forest and buried them there.

4. The Commission's Story.

(1) Position of Polish Prisoners of War Prior to German Invasion.

After the Russo-Polish campaign 2,932 Polish soldiers, mostly officers, were evacuated to Siberia. The rest were put in three camps: one thirty-five kilometers West of Smolensk on the Moscow-Minsk highway, a second, twenty-five kilometers west of Smolensk on the Smolensk-Vitebsk highway, and a third, forty-five kilometers West of Smolensk in the Krasnenskoye area. (This information was supplied at our asking by Tolstoy).

The Polish prisoners of war were brought to the above camps back in 1939. They were employed by the Soviets for work on the roads and when the Russo-German war began, the Polish prisoners remained in the West Smolensk province and continued their work digging and building roads.

With a sudden tank thrust, the Germans suddenly broke through to Smolensk on July 15-16. The question immediately arose how should the Polish prisoners be evacuated. The Commission told us, and their testimony was later upheld by a witness, Ivanov, the station master of Gnezdov railway (village outside Smolensk) that in mid-July 1941 Ivanov received a phone call from the Administrator of the Polish prisoners of war camps asking that he provide empty railway cars in which to evacuate the Polish prisoners. He had none, but tried to get some from the Smolensk station. The Commission told us that railway cars could not be provided from Smolensk because that section of the railway running between Smolensk and Gnezdov was already

under

under artillery fire. Furthermore, the Soviet Government "had to reconcile itself to the fact that even the local inhabitants could not be evacuated. So, due to artillery fire along the railway and lack of box cars, the Polish prisoners of war, along with the native population, had to remain in this district."

After the arrival of the Germans, the Poles remained in their prison camps. A number of witnesses testified (we did not hear any) that the Poles continued to do road repair work for the Germans. When autumn came, all ditches were cleared and the mud taken away. (Here it was made clear to us that there wasn't any more useful work for the Poles to do).

We were then told that although many witnesses confirmed that for a short time the Polish prisoners remained in the Smolensk region, no witness had yet been found who saw any Pole after September 1941.

(2) How Atrocity was Committed.

The Katyn Forest is situated fifteen kilometers outside of Smolensk and during peacetime was the favorite Sunday picknicking ground for the Smolensk population. One section of Katyn Forest is known as Goat Hill. Here the NKVD had a datcha which they used for a rest home. The Smolensk population were allowed to walk freely through the NKVD property, but when the Germans arrived the whole Katyn Forest area was surrounded by barbed wire; sentries were stationed at all road entrances and signs posted saying to the effect that any trespasser would be shot at sight. The NKVD datcha was taken over by the Germans and used as headquarters for the 537th "Construction Battalion".

This headquarters employed three girls from the neighboring village of Borok. All three have given evidence on what happened and we heard one of the girls testify.

Thirty German officers and non-commissioned officers lived in the datcha. They got up late in the morning, ate well, etc. The servants did not live in, but were escorted to and from the main road by guards and were not allowed to clean the bedrooms except when a guard was present.

We heard one girl testify (Anna Mihailovna Alexeyeva) that towards the end of August 1941 she and the other girls noted that often opened and closed cars and trucks could be heard turning off the highway at the Goat Hill entrance. When this happened invariably the Germans in the datcha would go out into the woods. About ten minutes later single shots, fired at regular intervals, would be heard. When the shots ceased the officers, accompanied by German non-commissioned officers and enlisted men driving empty trucks, would return to the datcha. Always on these days the bath house water was heated. The men went directly to the baths and returned to be served a "particularly tasty meal" plus double the usual hard liquor ration. The girl said on these days the soldiers seemed noisier than usual and talked more. Once Alexeyeva was asked to wash off fresh blood from one of the non-commissioned officers' sleeves.

We were

We were told that "the girls guessed without difficulty that the Germans living in the datcha were engaged in killing." The Commission asked witness Alexeyeva how she guessed it was Poles, not Russians, who were being killed. She answered readily that one day she was ordered to return home early even though her work was not yet finished. She was escorted to the main Smolensk-Vitebsk road as usual. En route to her village she noticed some German sentries and Polish prisoners walking along the highway. She recognized the Poles by their characteristic cap. The group turned off at the Goat Hill entrance. Alexeyeva hid in the bushes and waited and soon heard the familiar shots, one after another.

Another day, one girl heard noises near the datcha and looked out and saw two Poles hovering around under guard. She was ordered back into the kitchen, but her "feminine curiosity" got the best of her. She went back to the window and saw the Poles being led away into the woods. Soon after two single shots were heard.

Alexeyeva said that walking down the side road to the highway each day she frequently noticed German soldiers digging sand heaps. These grew as time went on. Once she asked her sentry what was going on. The reply was "we are digging dugouts". The Commission was asked to ask Alexeyeva if she ever noticed any odd smell around Goat Hill and she said "no".

During this whole period the Germans were combing the countryside for Poles -- tracking them down. We were told that numerous inhabitants have confirmed these searches. In particular, the Metropolitan told us about the statement of one Father Oblobin, priest at Kuprino, a village in the neighborhood of Katyn Forest. Prior to the German invasion he had been priest at the village of Katyn, but the Germans tore down his house and he moved to Kuprino. The Metropolitan told us that Oblobin was able to give particularly valuable information due to his contact with his parishioners. Oblobin had told him that during August 1941, there was much talk among the parishioners about the Poles. Many people reported seeing groups of twenty to thirty being taken into the Katyn Forest. During 1942 Polish prisoners of war were not mentioned; but in the Spring of 1943, Poles again became a current subject of talk.

Aside from information obtained from the girls working in the datcha and the peasants living nearby, the Commission told us that they had received further evidence of the Germans' actions from the assistant burgomaster, Boris Bazilevsky.

We heard Bazilevsky testify. Prior to the German invasion he had been professor of astronomy in Smolensk. He had been asked by the traitor burgomaster, Menshagin, to serve as his assistant. He protested on grounds that he knew nothing about civil affairs, but on being threatened with death if he refused, he took the job and held it from July 1941 until October 1942 hoping thereby "to be able to help the plight of the local population in some ways."

Once he

Once he approached Burgomaster Menshagin with the request to help get a local school teacher out of concentration camp, also to try to improve general conditions in camps as epidemics were starting and there was fear that soon the entire population might become infected. Menshagin reluctantly agreed. A few days later, mid-September 1941, he informed Bazilevsky that von Schwetz, head of the German Gestapo in Smolensk, had turned down his request on the grounds that he, von Schwetz, had received word from Berlin demanding that harsher treatment be given in the Smolensk concentration camps. Bazilevsky asked Menshagin if he figured that was possible -- to make things any tougher than they already were -- to which Menshagin replied "yes". Then confidentially he whispered in Bazilevsky's ear that things were going to be made tougher for the Russian prisoners so that they would die a natural death due to exposure, disease, etc., but that the Polish prisoners were going to be liquidated... liquidated in the most precise and literal meaning of the word... Some days after this meeting in the beginning of October 1941 Menshagin told Bazilevsky that the directive about the Poles had been carried out, that they had been shot in the neighborhood of Smolensk.

Bazilevsky relayed this information to his close friend, Professor Yefimov. Yefimov, we were told, upholds Bazilevsky's story. As Menshagin left Smolensk with the Germans his testimony was not available.

Aside from this verbal testimony the Commission told us they had some written evidence in the form of Menshagin's personal note book. (We were shown a photostatic copy of the crucial pages of this notebook). A committee of experts had confirmed that these notes were in Menshagin's own handwriting.

An insert dated August 15, 1941 said "all escaped Polish prisoners of war should be detained and turned over to the German headquarters." A few pages further on was an annotation to remember to ask the chief of the Russian police "if there are any rumors circulating among the population about the shooting of the Polish prisoners of war." The Commission stressed to us the significance of this note, that the Germans must have been worried about talk among the villagers of the atrocity, which apparently they wanted to keep secret.

The Commission told us that they had wanted to get information on the motive of the crime. Here again Bazilevsky proved useful. He told us about a "very candid" conversation between himself and the Gestapo chief in which the latter had told him that "the Poles are harmful people and inferior, therefore, the Polish population can serve usefully only as manure and so create space for the widening of the Leibenstaum of the Germans". The Gestapo chief went on to tell him that no intellectual class had been left in Poland itself.

We were later told that other reasons for the German mass killing of the Poles was due to the tendency of Poles to go over to the Red Army and their refusal to fight for the Germans, something the Germans had hoped they would do.

From

From September 1941 on until the Spring of 1943 all discussion of Polish prisoners stopped.

The Metropolitan quoted Father Oblobin (priest of nearby village) as saying that beginning in 1943 there was a marked nervousness amongst the Germans and an increase in their harshness. He pointed out that this general change of atmosphere for the worse coincided with the end of the battle of Stalingrad. Oblobin believed that the Germans spread rumors of the Russian mass killing of Poles so as to try and strengthen their position among the local population.

In the spring of 1943 the Germans published stories in the three quisling local papers telling of the murder of Poles at Katyn during March and April 1940, by the NKVD. The Commission told us that they had interviewed the stenographer who had typed the articles.

Next the Germans searched out witnesses to confirm their story. We saw three men who had been questioned and beaten by the Gestapo, one of whom was the Gnezdov station master, the two others peasants. All three were tortured into signing documents, the contents of which they did not understand.

Failing to get any direct information from the local population, the Germans next issued a poster (we saw a photostat of it) written in grammatically incorrect Russian saying the following: "Who can give testimony on the mass murder of the Bolsheviks against Polish officers and members of the clergy? Who saw the Polish prisoners of war in Goat Hill adjoining the Katyn highway? Who observed Poles going from Gnezdov to Goat Hill? Who saw or heard shots fired? Who knows members of the population who can testify? Every bit of information will be rewarded. Send information to German Police Headquarters in Smolensk and Gnezdov." The poster was dated May 3, 1943 and signed by an officer of the German police. The Commission told us that the Germans, failing to get the needed information, then began the work of setting up the proper "stage scenery" on Goat Hill. First, they set about the gruesome work of digging up Polish corpses. From concentration camp No. 126 they imported 500 Red Army prisoners of war to do the work, and when the work was completed the Soviet prisoners of war were marched away to be shot. One managed to escape and sought shelter in the house of citizen Moskovskaya. Though the Gestapo later found him, she had full details of the story which the Commission gave us.

It goes as follows. Not only did the Germans dig up the Polish bodies in the Katyn Forest, but by night they imported in big tarpaulin covered German trucks bodies of Poles that they had massacred elsewhere at the Kozelsky Camp (in the South Smolensk Province) and from the Starobelsky Camp (in the Ukraine between 200 to 250 kilometers from Smolensk). We were told that a number of witnesses confirmed the story of trucks coming into the Goat Hill, their load identified by the unmistakable stench.

As they were

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As they were dug up, the Germans tagged each corpse with a metal number, slit open the pockets and removed all papers they could find that bore dates later than March and April 1940 and looted the pockets of any money and valuables. They imported a corpse specialist called "Butz" from Berlin to make an investigation and to prove scientifically that the bodies found were buried in the Spring of 1940.

The German authorities organized compulsory excursions to Goat Hill, so that the local Smolensk population could see for themselves. Among the visitors was Zubkov, a Soviet doctor, whom we saw. Zubkov testified that, as a pathological anatomist, he could rightly say that at that time none of the bodies could possibly be more than a year and a half old. The Commission stressed Zubkov's statement to us that to his knowledge the Germans conducted no autopsies, that the German specialist Butz was not interested in conducting a scientific investigation -- loot from the pockets of the dead was what he was after, and dated documents that would compromise the German story. It took Butz three Butz three months to accomplish his task.

(3) Documents found on the Polish Corpses.

The final act of the Germans was to route out and either kill or deport any person who might have information proving the whole Polish incident was a fake. They caught all but a few of the men they had beaten into signing false evidence and the three girls who had been servants at the Goat Hill datcha.

Despite the thoroughness of the pocket ripping by the Germans, out of the seven hundred corpses the Commission have so far investigated, 146 items have been found. The earliest date was found on a postcard -- March 1940 -- and the latest -- an unmailed postcard dated June 20, 1941. We were shown all these documents and trinkets and the most important and significant ones were translated for us. They included letters from Warsaw and Moscow dated in the winter of 1940, receipts for valuables dated in the Spring of 1941 and numerous newspaper clippings dated from early 1940 through early 1941. In particular we were shown documents with communist leanings. The Commission inferred that the Polish prisoners of war had pro-Soviet rather than pro-German leanings.

KLH/hnw
