

Tadeusz Wolsza, *'To co widziałem przekracza swą grozą najśmielsze fantazje'. Wojenne i powojenne losy Polaków wizytujących Katyń w 1943 roku* ['The things I saw go beyond the most daring dreadful visions'. The wartime and post-war stories of Poles visiting Katyn in 1943], Warsaw, 2015, Instytut Historii PAN, Polskie Towarzystwo Historyczne, Wydawnictwo Neriton, 349 pp.

This book by Tadeusz Wolsza, an historian who has devoted much of his academic career to the study of the Katyn massacre, highlights those aspects of the crime that have thus far been dealt with at the margins of his monographs, the focus of which lay elsewhere, or in a variety of articles and contributions. As indicated by its title, it aims to give an account of the war and mainly post-war experiences of the members of Polish delegations — writers, scholars, photographers, journalists, doctors, the Polish Red Cross workers, factory labourers, officers held in German captivity, and the relatives of the victims of Soviet crimes — who, either as a result of the pressure from the Germans or in response to the opportunity they created, visited the exhumation site in the Katyn Forest in the spring of 1943. Forming organized groups, they were given a chance to see the scale of the crime, the examination work carried out by the anatomic pathologists to whom it was entrusted and a large-scale propaganda campaign launched by the Germans in connection with the massacre.¹

Wolsza's focus is thus on those who were subjected to interrogation by 'Lublin'² prosecutors and who suffered years of harassment in the post-war Poland because of a few hours spent, usually as a result of coercion, in the Katyn Forest in the spring of 1943. Having participated in some of the actions that formed part of the German propaganda campaign, they came to be considered an inconvenience or even a threat to the Soviet policy regarding different aspects of the Katyn massacre. Unlike the hearings held before Polish military courts in London, the goal of 'domestic prosecution' was not to establish the truth but to intimidate the people who had visited Katyn as members of the delegations targeted by the German propaganda, and to prevent them from talking/subdue them into silence about what they learned in the course of the exhumations carried out by Gerhard Butz's team and the International Medical Board and which was at odds with the spurious Soviet report prepared by the Burdenko Commission.

¹ Piotr Łysakowski, 'Prasa niemiecka o Katyniu. Jak niemiecka propaganda przedstawiała w 1943 r. sprawę mordu popełnionego na polskich oficerach', in *Katyn. Problemy i zagadki*, ed. Jerzy Janicki, Warsaw, 1990, pp. 88–114, *Zeszyty Katyńskie*, vol. 1; idem, 'Zbrodnia katyńska w kleszczach niemieckiej propagandy (prasa niemiecka o Katyniu)', in *Zbrodnia katyńska między prawdą a kłamstwem*, ed. Marek Tarczyński, Warsaw, 2008, pp. 18–49, *Zeszyty Katyńskie*, vol. 23; see also: Radosław Morawski, 'Katyn w niemieckiej propagandzie', *Pamięć.pl*, 2013, 12, pp. 10–13.

² 'Lublin Poland' — Poland in the years 1944–1945 ruled by the 'Lublin' government subservient to Moscow.

The work is certainly an original contribution to the historiography of the Katyń massacre, which, given the fact that the research into the topic in question has flourished since the partial opening of post-Soviet archives, must be strongly emphasized.³

Wolsza has again managed to prove that in spite of significant progress achieved in the field of Katyń studies, it is still possible to extend our knowledge of the issue. However, this possibility lies less in the reconstructing of the circumstances in which the decision of 5 March 1940 was taken, in the revealing of how it was executed, or in the recounting of the misrepresentation of the truth in the decades which followed, than in examining the social consequences of the crime, that is, the way in which it affected the lives of those who were in some way put in touch with the issue of the Katyń massacre and who thus became a hindrance to the Lublin rulers of Poland and especially to their Soviet superiors.

The two-part title (the pre-title is a quotation from the interview with Jan Emil Skiński) is a reference to the author's previous monograph devoted to the 'Polish' London's reaction to the disclosure of the mass graves of Polish prisoners of war in Katyń.⁴ Both works form a kind of diptych.

The work's structure is untypical, not to say highly controversial. It consists of fifteen studies of which only nine deal with the main topic (the wartime and post-war experiences of the Poles visiting Katyń). Apart from the traditional introduction (definition of purpose, information on the present state of research), the first lengthy chapter (an essay or a study), which gives a general account of the wartime and post-war experiences of the Poles visiting Katyń in 1943, also serves as an introduction to the topic. In my opinion it can be regarded as a successful attempt to introduce the reader to the chapters that discuss various aspects of the post-war fate of those whom the Germans had taken to the exhumation site in Katyń. But Wolsza decided to add two more studies that can also be considered additional introductions. One concerns the reaction of 'Polish' London to the discovery of the Katyń massacre and is a kind of a recapitulation of Wolsza's previous book.⁵ The other presents Polish communists' response to the crime in question. While the first is in my opinion out of place, the second, offering — just as the rest of the book — a chronological account that encompasses the period of up to mid-1950s, provides a useful background against which to discuss the fate of the people in question in post-war Poland.

Chapters on Reverend Tomasz Rusek and the editors of the collaborationist press (the press controlled by the occupant and used as a vehicle for the German propaganda) are outside the scope of the work's subject-matter,

³ See *Zbrodnia kатыńska. Bibliografia 1940–2010*, ed. Izabela Kowalska and Elżbieta Pawińska, Warsaw, 2010.

⁴ Tadeusz Wolsza, *'Katyń to już na zawsze katy i katowani'. W 'polskim Londynie' o sowieckiej zbrodni w Katyniu (1940–1945)*, Warsaw, 2008.

⁵ *Ibid.*

and so are two interconnected texts about Waław Pych's confabulations and the letters concerning the crime and sent in to the Polish Radio's broadcast called Fala 49 ('Wave, 49'), replaced after a few years by 'Fala 56' ('Wave, 56').

The whole is not a typical monograph offering a coherent account divided into chapters and discussing a specific problem. It is a collection of mini-monographs or, to be more precise, of articles each of which constitutes a distinct whole. All of these pieces of scholarship centre around the Katyń massacre, but in a way which they do so is often so removed from the work's titular subject that the whole is to be regarded as a collection of different sketches rather than a monograph. Absent from the book are conclusions and a bibliography, which typically appear in scholarly monographs. Their absence only throws into relief the heterogeneous character of the whole volume. The same can be said of the English abstracts which, attached to all the chapters, deepen the impression of dealing with a collection of loose sketches. Although the remark is not to be treated as a criticism but as a simple statement of fact, it is possible to imagine that the valuable factual material gathered by Wolsza could be arranged into a coherent monographic study, smaller in volume from the one under review by about 20 to 30 per cent. Such a study would of course be different both in terms of its structure and in terms of its narrative, and, given the heterogeneity of the source material and the limited comparability of the experiences of *dramatis personæ*, would suffer from obvious *lacunæ* in the presentation of the main topic.

Not only does Wolsza thoroughly reconstruct the lives of those who were directly confronted with the reality of the death pits in the Katyń Forest, but he also offers a critical review of the existing opinions about the topic. He supplements and corrects other scholars' findings, outlines the circumstances in which various accounts (interviews, memoirs) were brought into being and popular circulation (to a lesser extent scholarly circulation), explains hypothetical and real reasons for the distorting or even fabricating of some accounts and indicates the issues that cannot be unambiguously resolved given the existing body of primary sources. By way of illustration, one can mention here the fabricated interviews with Marian Wodziński and Franciszek Prochownik published in the collaborationist press, the circumstances of the creation of writer Ferdynand Goetel's black legend or the Zygmunt Ipohorski-Lenkiewicz affair which, as a vague one, has been interpreted in a variety of ways in scholarly literature. An artistic director at the officially operating theatre 'Jar', Ipohorski-Lenkiewicz was executed in 1944 following the death sentence passed by a Home Army Special Court.⁶

Individual studies are of high stylistic and scholarly quality. However, the way in which some minor issues (those forming the background against which key problems are discussed) are presented seems open to debate or at least requires some clarification.

⁶ See, for example, a unequivocally negative opinion about Ipohorski-Lenkiewicz expressed carelessly by Stanisław Marczak-Oborski (*Teatr czasu wojny i okupacji 1939-1945*, Warsaw, 1967, p. 58).

The interesting chapter dealing with the Polish and Soviet communists' position on the Katyń crime serves as an important point of reference for all the studies that attempt to show how the people who had witnessed the Katyń exhumations were treated in 'Lublin' and communist Poland. However, in my opinion it would gain in clarity if the Soviet communists were removed from its title. Taken as a whole, the latter group, regardless of how it is defined, took no position on the issue, which absorbed the attention of just a few members of the Soviet leadership. The report prepared by the Burdenko Commission was intended for outsiders, including the Poles but excluding Soviet citizens. It formed a directive to be followed by the Polish Workers' Party and its allies, all of whom were entirely subservient to Moscow. The Soviets' concern was with the Polish society on which the Katyń massacre left a significant mark, as opposed to the society of the Soviet Federation that remained totally indifferent to it.⁷ Social sentiments and the way people in Poland were going to react to the propaganda which, in dealing with the crime, resorted to primitive ways of distorting the truth was something to be reckoned with by the communists and later by the 'Lublin' authorities. These two positions were entirely different and, as such, can hardly be compared with each other. The remark refers of course only to this chapter's title. The text itself is clear and coherent.

One important aspect of the German propaganda campaign, which involved the arranging of visits by various delegations, composed not only of Poles, to the Katyń Forest in the spring of 1943, is omitted from Wolsza's account. He neglects to mention the fact that Wehrmacht soldiers were also brought to the exhumation site. The provision of a harrowing example of the way the Soviets treated enemy soldiers was to raise the fighting spirit of the front line units and to prevent German troops from surrendering themselves as prisoners of war — a phenomenon which, in 1942 and 1943 (the battle of Stalingrad), had begun to reach alarming proportions. The groups of Wehrmacht soldiers, mainly from the Army Group Mitte, who visited Katyń each numbered a few hundred, which clearly shows the scale of the action and the importance which the German command (propaganda officers) attached to it.⁸

The way of presenting the question of the delegation of foreign journalists' encounter with the Burdenko Commission can be regarded as an example of the defects from which the construction of the work suffers.⁹ The formula of self-contained sketches, as well as Wolsza's reluctance to make use of cross-references,

⁷ There was interest in mass crimes perpetrated by the Germans against the people of the Soviet Federation, particularly in Orel, Vinnitsa and Babi Yar, and widely publicized by Sovinform.

⁸ *Facts and Documents Concerning to Polish Prisoners of War Captured by the USSR During the 1939 Campaign*, Polish Government-in-Exile, London, 1946, pp. 313–315; Andrzej Przewoźnik and Joanna Adamska, *Katyń. Zbrodnia. Prawda. Pamięć*, Warsaw, 2010, pp. 259–60.

⁹ See, for example, the question of foreign journalists' escape to the Katyń Forest, pp. 95 and 127–28 (both the account and the sources on which it is based).

forces him to repeat the same information across the whole book. Fortunately, this repetitiveness does not weigh too heavily on the book's content.

In Wolsza's opinion, Ivan Krivozertsov, interviewed by Ferdynand Goetel, was 'an eyewitness of the NKVD's executions of Polish officers in Katyń' (p. 98).¹⁰ This statement is false. Krivozertsov simply learned from his sister Daria about the movement of prison cars between the Gnezdovo station and the Katyń forest. The cars were seen carrying Polish soldiers, civilians and even a few clergymen only in one direction. So he did not witness the execution and the knowledge he acquired was clearly second-hand.¹¹

Wolsza is not precise in his account of the way the issue of the Katyń massacre was dealt with during the Nuremberg trials. In his opinion the Soviets found the Nuremberg proceedings to be less problematic than a trial held in Poland 'because of the selective choice of witnesses and arguments' (p. 46).¹² Consequently, they wanted the crime to be investigated in Nuremberg, but to a limited extent, so as to make the Germans responsible for the crime with as little effort as possible. That was certainly the final goal the Soviets were pursuing, but the way they wanted to achieve it was different. In taking their decision regarding the inclusion of the crime in the indictment, the Soviet authorities relied on article 21 of the *Statute of the International Military Tribunal* which stated: 'The Tribunal will not require proof of facts which are common knowledge, but will take them for granted. It will also consider as valid proof official documents and reports of United Nations governments, including those drawn up by the Commissions established in the various allied countries to investigate war crimes, as well as the minutes of hearings and the decisions of military or other courts of any United Nations country'.¹³ The Soviet authorities considered the Burdenko Commission's Communiqué to be a document to which the article quoted above clearly applied. As such, it did not have to be subjected to evidentiary proceedings to be held before the Tribunal. The acceptance of this document as the basis of one count of the indictment, without submitting it to a thorough examination, would mean that the view of the German perpetration of the crime received international sanction, thus dispelling all the doubts that might arise in connection with the crime. This explains why the Soviets were outraged when the remaining members of the Military Tribunal refused to accept their position, concluding that the case of the Katyń

¹⁰ 'naocznym świadkiem sowieckich egzekucji popełnionych przez NKWD na polskich oficerach w Katyniu' (p. 98).

¹¹ Jacek Trznadel, 'Rosyjscy świadkowie Katynia (1943–1946–1991)', in *Zbrodnia katyńska. Droga do prawdy. Historia, archeologia, kryminalistyka, polityka, prawo*, ed. Marek Tarczyński, Warsaw, 1992, pp. 77–126 (p. 82), *Zeszyty Katyńskie*, vol. 2.

¹² 'wybiórczy dobór świadków oraz przywoływanych argumentów' (p. 46); [the Soviets sought], 'w bardzo ograniczonym zakresie', [aby] 'najmniejszym nakładem sił i środków przerzucić odpowiedzialność za mord katyński na stronę niemiecką' (p. 99).

¹³ *Against the Crime of Silence: Proceedings of the Russell International War Crimes Tribunal*, ed. John Duffett, New York, 1968, p. 148.

massacre was far from clear in respect of the collected evidence, as demonstrated in their opinion by, for example, the German 'white book'.¹⁴ Although the Burdenko Commission's Communiqué was certainly 'an official document', the Tribunal refused to regard it as resolving the whole issue. On 12 March 1946 the Tribunal's judges declared themselves in favour of Otto Stahmer's motion, Herman Göring's attorney, to hear, in the examination of the indictment regarding the Katyń massacre, three witnesses of the defence and three witnesses of the prosecution. The examination of the evidence which ensued proved a disaster to Moscow. However, the British and the Americans remained silent about it, suffering from something of a moral hangover because of the way they dealt with the issue in 1943–45, when they suppressed all the information about the real perpetrators in order to end the war in Europe and to defeat Japan with the aid of the Soviet Union.

Wolsza devotes a few words to the visit which 'Lublin' Poland's Minister of Justice, Henryk Świątkowski, and the state prosecutor Jerzy Sawicki paid to Moscow in order to exchange views about the trial of the 'participants of the Katyń provocation', that is, writers Jan Emil Skiwski and Ferdynand Goetel (p. 136). He simply follows Stefan Korboński in saying that they were told they 'had no right to touch the matter'.¹⁵ This statement is entirely false. During his conversation with Świątkowski and Sawicki, the Deputy Commissar of Foreign Affairs Andrei Vyshynskii not only did not attempt to prevent their engagement in the preparation of the trial but he also stated that the trial was going to be of a 'great importance' and promised to offer 'every assistance in this regard'. He asked them to present him with a plan for the organization of the trial and to 'indicate the matters with regard to which they would like to consult representatives of the Soviet judiciary'.¹⁶ He also promised to support the idea of sending Polish prosecutors to Sofia, Prague and Helsinki to interview members of the former International Medical Board, and still during their visit the list of the cities was supplemented with Brussels, The Hague and Bern. Eventually, the prosecutors were not dispatched abroad because of the changed circumstances — the Soviets' failure to charge the Germans with the Katyń massacre without carrying out normal legal proceedings. The trial of both authors was held *in absentia* as late as June 1949 in the District Court in Kraków.

In discussing the first Polish publications on the Katyń massacre, Wolsza dwells on the booklet *Katyń* published in 1943 under the fictitious name 'Andrzej Ciesielski' (p. 131). He proposes interesting hypotheses regarding the mys-

¹⁴ *Amtliches Material zum Massenmord von Katyn*, ed. by Deutsche Informationsstelle, Berlin, 1943.

¹⁵ [they] 'nie mają prawa nawet dotykania sprawy', Stefan Korboński, *W imieniu Rzeczypospolitej...*, Warsaw, 2009, p. 174.

¹⁶ 'wskazanie tych spraw, w których chcieliby skonsultować się z przedstawicielami sowieckich organów sądowo-śledczych', *Katyń. Dokumenty zbrodni*, vol. 4: *Echa Katyń. Kwiecień 1943-marzec 2005*, Warsaw, 2006, document 79, pp. 343–45.

terious issue of the authorship of the booklet, indicating alternatively either the Germans or the Polish Underground State. Without trying to resolve the matter, I am inclined to favour the first hypothesis. The title page features 'Gebethner and Wolf' as the booklet's publisher. However, I learned from Stanisław Gebethner that this claim had no foundation in fact. He remembered from his childhood the consternation with which his relatives reacted to the name of the family publishing house appearing on the booklet's cover. One should rather rule out the possibility of providing false information pointing directly to the publishing house involved in the clandestine activity and working closely with the Polish Underground State.

The Author adds no comment to the revelations of Borys Olshanskii (an escapee from the Red Army) concerning Nikolai Burdenko's statement, made soon before his death, that he was aware of the falsification of the Special Commission's report. These revelations are well-known, but many historians, including myself, treat them as implausible. Olshanskii — not a deserter but a worker of the Soviet occupational administration in Germany — defected/went to the West in 1947 as an intelligence officer and the information of the kind mentioned above was disseminated in order to lend him credence.

On a number of occasions Wolsza discusses the fate of the members of the International Medical Board for whom the Soviet agents organized a kind of a hunt. However, he neglects to point out that these Soviet efforts focused especially on a Hungarian doctor, Ferenc Orós, although not because of the fact that Orós had visited Katyń and Winnitsa (p. 70),¹⁷ but because he was the only member of the board who was quite unambiguous about dating the massacre to the spring of 1940. Orós relied on his own unique method of dating the death of the exhumed victims of the crime. The method was based on the examination of the progression of the osseous cranial changes (limestone salt deposits). However, other members of the board, sceptical about the possibility of dating the massacre under so specific and unknown conditions (the huge accumulation of bodies accompanied by untypical chemical processes, specific soil, huge annual temperature variations) were mistrustful of his approach. As a member of the board he was thus very important to the Soviets and if he had retracted his previous opinions, declaring he had acted under pressure from the Germans, it would have been of great propagandistic value to the Soviets.¹⁸

Taking the above into account, one can hardly agree with the opinion that 'all the members of the board stated, in accordance with the report, that the massacre took place in the spring of 1940'.¹⁹ The problem faced by the Germans, to

¹⁷ [He] 'miał on za sobą wizytę w Katyniu i Winnicy' (p. 70).

¹⁸ The Soviets' concern about Orós's opinion and a possibility of proving the reliability of his method is widely dealt with in a documentary by Grażyna Czermińska about MKL *Poświęćając życie prawdzie*. The documentary has recently been shown on the TVP History.

¹⁹ 'stwierdzili zgodnie z protokołem [...], że morderstwo zostało dokonane na wiosnę 1940 roku' (p. 75).

whose efforts the Medical Board owed its existence, was that its final report did not contain such a definitive statement²⁰ — the one which was used, and which was regarded as a compromise one, was that ‘the testimonies of witnesses, letters, notes and newspapers found with the bodies suggest that the executions took place in March and April of 1940’.²¹ However, such a statement is to some extent ambiguous and it is about this ambiguity that the board’s members argued, resolving the issue in a way which was not fully satisfactory to the Germans.

Wolsza relies on Jędrzej Tucholski’s lexicon for the verification of his data regarding the prisoners of war held in the special camp in Kozielsk.²² In view of the availability of later and more complete lexicons verifying information to be found in the publication prepared by Tucholski, which is not based on post-Soviet materials, such a reliance is open to debate.²³

As a whole the work is a well-written and mature piece of scholarship which gives no reason for significant critical remarks.²⁴ Footnotes are perfect. Not only do they indicate primary sources and secondary literature (of which, however, one cannot have a clear notion because of the lack of bibliography to which I have referred above), on which the Author’s account is based, but they also contain much factual information, adding significant details to the main text. However, sometimes Wolsza goes too far in his effort to avoid burdening his account with too many footnotes.²⁵

A few details can be corrected regarding the index of names. The journalist from the *Toronto Star* was called Jerome Davies and the person writing about Katyń in *Głos Wielkopolski* was Sławomir Kmiecik. It turned out to be relatively easy to identify Colonel Wiktor Pniewski and Colonel Kazimierz Wicherkiewicz. The ‘Captain Choiński’ who appears in Waclaw Pych’s confabulations is most probably Lieutenant Kazimierz Chomiński who stayed in the camp in Grazovets along

²⁰ *Katyń. Dokumenty zbrodni*, vol. 4, doc. 26, pp. 81–84. Similarly, the final report by the Technical Commission of the Polish Red Cross — *ibid.*, document 34, pp. 107–14.

²¹ ‘z zeznań świadków, listów, notatek, gazet itd. znalezionych przy zwłokach wynika, że egzekucje odbywały się w ciągu miesiąca marca i kwietnia 1940 r.’, see Przewoźnik and Adamska, *Katyń. Zbrodnia. Prawda. Pamięć*, pp. 292–93.

²² Jędrzej Tucholski, *Mord w Katyniu. Kozielsk. Ostaszków. Starobielsk. Lista ofiar*, Warsaw, 1991, pp. 63–64.

²³ See *Zabici w Katyniu*, ed. Aleksander Gurjanow and Anna Dzieńkiewicz, Warsaw and Moscow, 2013, p. 160, Indeks Represjonowanych, vol. 21.

²⁴ It is for example possible to indicate the synonymous use of the term ‘Poles’ and ‘Polish citizens’ (see, for example, p. 7). This is a bigger problem and concerns all Polish historiography.

²⁵ See, for example, on p. 49 the information that one of those who visited Katyń was a registered and long-term informer of the Ministry of Public Security is provided without a source reference; on p. 58 Wolsza mentions that in 1952 Dr Edward Grodzki was placed under the surveillance of the Ministry of Public Security without saying where this information comes from; on p. 68 he mentions that Jakub Berman approved of the opinion expressed by Jan Olbracht without giving the source of this knowledge.

with Colonel Wicherkiewicz. Whether the Captain Miscjak and Major Dzieszyna who appear in this account were real persons or not can be verified with the help of officer annuals and other lexicographic publications.²⁶

Although thriftily distributed across the work, the iconography (photographs, facsimiles of documents and newspapers, caricatures and posters) is well chosen and helps the process of reading.

As Wolsza himself indicates (p. 25) the work does not contain the full list of those who were in the Katyń Forest in the spring of 1943 and who for this reason suffered harassment in communist Poland. However, he does not add that the book, which is the result of a thorough examination of primary sources, like no other previous publication comes close to providing such a complete list and that it will be very difficult for other historians dealing with the subject to complement it. Moreover, to a significant extent Wolsza verifies previous findings and eliminates persons who were perceived as having visited Katyń but who for a variety of reasons actually had not reached the exhumation site.²⁷ So the goal which he set himself in the preface should be regarded as having been achieved.

The critical remarks made above, usually regarding minor issues, do not affect a very positive assessment of the work. Undoubtedly, it significantly supplements the literature on the Katyń massacre. Drawing on a well-chosen collection of primary sources, it raises issues that have so far been completely ignored or dealt with in a half-hearted manner and does so in almost a fully exhaustive way.

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²⁶ *Rocznik oficerski. Stan na dzień 23 marca 1939*, ed. Ryszard Rybka and Kamil Stepan, Kraków, 2006.

²⁷ Mainly from Lwów but also from Warsaw, Tarnobrzeg and Kraków, see pp. 26 ff.