

# The Katyn Massacre

Key enquiry questions and learning from topic study.

- What happened in the Katyn massacre and who was responsible for the crimes?
- Why is the Katyn massacre important in memory of World War II, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe?

## Historical Background on the Katyn Massacre

The Katyn Massacre is not an event that can be considered part of the Holocaust, although a significant proportion of those murdered were Jewish. Nonetheless, it is a key event in memory of World War II in Eastern Europe, especially in Poland. Katyn became a symbol of the crimes committed by the Soviet Union during the Soviet occupation of Poland and of Poles as “double” victims of both Nazi and Soviet rule. The importance of Katyn as a site of Polish memory was strengthened following a tragedy in 2010. In April of that year, Vladimir Putin and then Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk jointly commemorated the massacre – the first time a Russian leader had joined such an event. Three days later, the plane carrying the Polish President Lech Kaczynski and several other senior officials crashed near the Katyn site, killing those on board. This event was the subject of political and media controversy with the Katyn massacre history as backdrop.

## What was the Katyn Massacre?

In August 1939, National Socialist Germany and the Soviet Union signed a Treaty of Nonaggression (the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact). In a “Secret Protocol”, they agreed to the partition of Eastern Europe between them. Following the pact, on 1 September 1939, Germany invaded Poland from the West and on the 17 September, the Soviet Union invaded the country from the East. The pact was terminated when Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941.

As a result of the Soviet occupation of the eastern territories, tens of thousands of Polish military personnel were imprisoned by the Soviet Union. On 5 March 1940, the Politburo of the Soviet Union ordered the execution of over 20,000 Polish soldiers. The aim was to deprive Poland of its intellectual elite and the Polish Army of their strongest commanders: the majority of those murdered were officers. The massacre also sent a clear message that resistance to the Soviet occupation of Poland would be punished harshly. The Katyn Forest in Smolensk was not the only place where the killings took place but has come to symbolise the massacre.

## Who was responsible for the executions?

After the invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941, the territory in which Katyn is located came under Nazi control. On 13 April 1943, the Germans announced they had discovered mass graves and that the bodies were those of the executed soldiers. The Nazis blamed the Soviets for the massacre. The Soviet response was that the soldiers had been engaged in construction work near the site and had been murdered by the invading German army in August 1941. Even at the time, there was reliable forensic evidence that the executions had been carried out in early 1940 when the area was still under Soviet control. Nonetheless, in the Soviet Union and communist Poland, the truth of the massacres was suppressed until the late 1980s and the collapse of communist rule in the region.

## Timeline of Events



Image © Charlotte Grace

## Some of the Polish - Jewish Officers Murdered at Katyn

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Baruch Steinberg, and his wife. Steinberg was a Jewish officer in the Polish army. From 1936 onwards, Steinberg was the Chief Rabbi of the Polish Armed Forces. He was imprisoned in Starobilsk, Kozelsk and Moscow, and finally murdered in Katyn in April 1940. He was 43.



Image in public domain. [Link to image.](#)

Mieczysław Birnbaum. During the 1919-21 Polish-Soviet War, Birnbaum was chosen to act as Józef Piłsudski's, the Polish Prime Minister's, emissary in negotiations with the Soviets. For his bravery, he was the Recipient of Virtuti Militari and Cross of Valour. He was arrested in 1939 by the NKVD and murdered in Katyn soon after. He was 51.

## Nuremburg Trial Testimony

Friedrich Ahrens, a German Army Colonel gave evidence at the Nuremburg Trial in 1946,

*During the winter of 1943, I think either January or February quite accidentally I saw a wolf in this wood and at first, I did not believe that it was a wolf; when I followed the tracks with an expert, we saw that there were traces of scratchings on the mound with the cross. I had investigations made as to what kind of bones these were. The doctors told me "human bones." Thereupon I informed the officer responsible for war graves in the area of this fact, because I believed that it was a soldier's grave, as there were a number of such graves in our immediate vicinity.*

The fact that Ahrens, a senior-ranking German soldier, was unaware of the event implied that the executions were carried out by the Soviets, rather than the Germans.

## Survivor Testimony, Major Eugenjusz Komorowski

The systematic execution of the Polish soldiers in the Katyn Forest left little chance of survival, yet Major Eugenjusz Komorowski lived to tell his tale. He published his autobiography, *Night Never Ending*, in 1974. In his book, Komorowski discusses his experience of imprisonment and torture by the Soviets following his capture by the Red Army in 1939. After months of captivity, Komorowski and his comrades were transported to the Katyn Forest, where they were systematically shot in the head by an NKVD officer, and then pushed into a pit to die on top of each other. However, the bullet intended for Komorowski missed his head and went straight through his arm. He fell unconscious and awoke hours later covered in the bodies of his fellow soldiers. Komorowski managed to remove himself from the ditch and survived World War II. He is believed to be the only survivor of the Katyn Massacre.





Polish Cemetery  
at the Katyn  
Memorial.

[Link to image.](#)

## Key Resources for Teacher Subject Knowledge Development

- Anna M. Cienciala, Natalia S. Lebedeva, Wojciech Materski (eds), *Katyn: A Crime without Punishment* (London: Yale University Press, 2007). With documents translated by Marian Schwartz with Anna M. Cienciala and Maia A. Kipp. This work explores the entire event, as well as its aftermath. It would be extremely useful for teachers reading around this subject. It is 624 pages long but divided into useful chapters to allow readers to focus on a specific topic of interest.
- Eugeniusz Andrei Komorowski, *Night Never Ending* (H. Regnery, 1974). This autobiography includes brutal testimony of the events of The Katyn Massacre. 284 pages.

## Existing Resources for the Classroom

- [English version of the Katyn Memorial website](#). The website includes an account of the history of the massacre and of the Memorial itself, as well as photographs and information about the Memorial's exhibitions.
- [Jewish Virtual Library, "The Katyn Massacre"](#). Offers important insight into the events of the Katyn Massacre. It is a short resource yet offers a good explanation of the importance of the Massacre.
- [Przemysław Batorski, Anniversary of the Katyn Massacre](#). Read about Polish Jewish Victims of the NKVD. Article discussing the Jewish victims of the Katyn Massacre. The NKVD was the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (the Secret Police, effectively)

- [Records Relating to the Katyn Forest Massacre at the National Archives.](#)  
This National Archives article gives a broad background on the events of the Katyn Massacre and offers photographic evidence that does not include graphic images, and which would work well within a classroom.
- [Seventeen Moments in Soviet History, Nuremberg Testimony on Katyn.](#)  
Entire transcript of the trial held at Nuremberg in 1946 discussing the events in the Katyn Forest. Students would need particular support working with this complex material.
- Photographic evidence of the Katyn Massacre is provided by [Yad Vashem](#) and the [Imperial War Museum](#). The Yad Vashem image is very graphic and teacher discretion should be used.

