

ideology. A national agricultural policy cannot afford to bow before any "universalist ideology."

Stephen B. Miles writes from Falls City, Nebraska.

HISTORY



Jeanne Berg

Conversation in Warsaw

by George Watson

Several Nazi concentration camps, as I explained in a recent *Chronicles* article called "Buchenwald's Second Life" (July 1989), were used by the Soviet occupying authorities in East Germany for some five years after the war, and for their original purpose.

That was once a secret, but we are now in a wholly new age. Some months after the article appeared the Berlin Wall came down, in November 1989; and some months after that, in March 1990, East Germans began to dig for bodies at at least one of the Soviet camp sites, Oranienburg near Berlin. The sudden liberation of Eastern and Central Europe means that a new era of archaeology has begun, and of the grimmest kind—much of it, in the most literal sense, digging up, and for much of which the quarry is human bones and human flesh.

No reliable figure has ever been put on Communist exterminations west of the Soviet borders after 1945. The first eight years, down to Stalin's death in 1953, were Stalinist, and in *The Great*

Terror (1968) Robert Conquest suggested an estimate of 25 to 30 million deaths within the Soviet Union in the age of Lenin and Stalin. Beyond the Soviet Union strictly conceived—in Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, the Baltic states, and East Germany—the human toll since 1945 is anyone's guess. Until quite recently, no Communist killing-field except Katyn has ever been dug up under the eyes of neutral witnesses. New details are, however, now coming to light, namely about Nazi-Soviet cooperation in mass-murder during their joint occupation of Poland in 1939-41.

A photo has recently been discovered in a Krakow library that tells a good deal. It is from a Nazi-sponsored German-language newspaper published there during the occupation, the *Krakauer Zeitung* of April 25, 1940, or about two weeks after the Katyn massacre of Polish officers by the Soviet NKVD. April 1940 was six months after Hitler and his Communist allies completed the dismemberment of Poland that began World War II. The photo is coolly headed "Discussion of German-Russian Refugee Exchange Control," and it shows two officers, one Soviet and one Nazi, with a young man between them, presumably an interpreter, seated at a table in Warsaw. The interpreter is speaking to the Russian, and the picture is subtitled: "As already announced, the Soviet Liaison Committee has begun work on the German-Soviet exchange of refugees in Warsaw: our photograph shows the leader of the Soviet committee, General Yegnarov, to the left, and on the right the representative of the German committee, Herr Schön." The article

that follows is a routine Nazi protest against foreign propaganda about the occupation of Poland: "German special courts are not blood courts: foreign atrocity propaganda refuted—only twelve death sentences out of 15,000 hearings." The purpose of the whole story is evidently to impress Poles with the fact that the two occupying powers are cooperating intimately and in detail, and that all resistance is now useless.

Its interest, however, is far-reaching. It was once supposed that the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of August 1939, which secretly awarded east Poland and the Baltic states to the Soviet Union, was limited to governmental and ambassadorial contacts, that it led to no more intimate collaboration than that, and that the Communist and Nazi régimes continued to treat each other down to Hitler's invasion of Russia in June 1941 with polite disdain. That myth should never have been believed. A former Polish prime minister, for example, Stanislaw Mikolajczyk, has shown in *The Pattern of Soviet Domination* (1948) that an agreement was made between Moscow and Berlin soon after the joint occupation of Poland to exchange prisoners. The situation was potentially embarrassing to both sides: Early in 1940 the Soviets complained to their allies that nearly 30,000 Ukrainians had been collected by the Nazis to be trained for the German armed forces, though Soviet citizens; and in exchange they offered some thousands of Polish officers whom they still held prisoner. The Nazis at first accepted, then rejected the proposal, mindful (perhaps) of their grand design of emptying Poland

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for themselves. They would return the Ukrainians, they replied, but did not want the Poles.

That may have been the moment when Stalin resolved to kill them. In April 1940, some five thousand Polish officers, hands bound behind their backs, were shot in the back of the neck at Katyn, in a wood near Smolensk, their bodies being piled deep in mass graves and buried there; another ten thousand Polish officers disappearing in the same week, presumably killed in some similar fashion by the NKVD at other sites inside the Soviet Union. It is likely that by then the Gestapo and the NKVD had been collaborating intimately for some months. A German diplomat in Moscow, Hans-Heinrich von Herwarth, has told in his memoir *Against Two Evils* (1981) how, when Ribbentrop arrived at Moscow's airport in August 1939, Gestapo and NKVD officers were seen to shake hands warmly and smile at each other. "But watch out," a German friend remarked to Herwarth. "This will be disastrous, especially when they start exchanging files." The 1940 Nazi photo may well show them doing just that, and it supports the view that there were direct discussions on prisoner-exchange early in 1940, when the Soviets handed over a large number of prisoners, including Jews, to their Nazi allies.

The identity of the two officers in the photograph of April 1940 may never certainly be established, and it is not even clear that the printed names are to be trusted. No Yegnarov is known among NKVD functionaries responsible for the Katyn mass-murder, though a certain Major S.Y. Yegorov has been listed and is known to have been promoted to major-general by the end of the war. Perhaps there is no connection; or perhaps the names of Yegnarov and Yegorov have been accidentally or deliberately confused. But one truth, at least, remains too probable to be easily dismissed: that the Soviets during those early months of joint occupation instructed their Nazi allies in techniques of repression and extermination.

That was known or guessed by Poles at the time. In his account of the Polish underground, *The Secret Army*, T. Bor-Komorowski has told how in March 1940, a few weeks before the conversation in Warsaw, an NKVD

mission had gone to Kracow to work out with the Gestapo the methods they might jointly adopt against Polish military organizations. The Nazis, he believed, greatly admired the NKVD for their superior efficiency in combating the underground, Russian techniques being "a hundred times more dangerous and efficient than the Gestapo's." That, after all, was to be expected. The Soviet terror-machine was over twenty years old by 1940, and it had the extensive experience of Stalin's 1930's purges to call on. The Nazis had little, and it is often forgotten how late, and how highly concentrated, Hitler's extermination program was, and how technically inexperienced the Nazis were in such matters at the outbreak of the war. In the spring of 1940 the Germans had no record of mass-killing, and the decision known as the Final Solution was not taken till as late as January 1942; they had no available model except that of their Communist allies. They had not yet collected vast numbers of people in specified places, that is to say, or herded them onto trains or into forest clearings where they could be killed by the thousand; and mass-grave killing, so far as is known, is something they had not yet attempted. The Soviets had done all that by 1940. They had even used gas. A memoir by a Soviet defector, Peter Grigorenko, has recently shown that the NKVD were using exhaust fumes in the 1930's in Omsk, in Siberia, to kill prisoners in windowless trucks, whereas the earliest Nazi use of gas appears to have been on incurables in September 1939. It was not until late in 1941, at Chelmno near Lodz and after the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union, that the Nazis employed this technique on Jews and dissidents.

That makes April 1940 look all the more significant as a date in human history. At Katyn, in that month, some five thousand Polish officers were shot in the back of the neck by the NKVD, hands tied behind them, to be buried ten to twelve feet deep in graves already prepared for the purpose in a wooded area long used by the NKVD. As a technique it is remarkably similar to what the Nazis later did in the Ukraine and elsewhere. In March 1944, for example, in the Fosse Ardeatine near Rome, Nazis shot 335 Italian hostages through the back of the neck.

It was a method already familiar in Stalin's purges of the 1930's, so there can be no reasonable doubt that it was known to the Soviets before it was known to the Nazis.

There is much historical work to be done, then, in the field of Nazi-Soviet collaboration, and it now seems likely that it will be done. What East Germans found at Oranienburg in March 1990 is only a tiny beginning. Central and Eastern Europe, even Soviet Asia, may now be entering a period of human excavation unheard of in human history, and one beside which even the revelations of the Nazi death-camps in 1945 may look small. In all that a single photograph, and a single article, in a Nazi newspaper in April 1940 is only one small crumb of evidence. Perhaps the two officers seated at a table in Warsaw are discussing, among other matters, Katyn, which happened only a week or two before. Since some of the Polish officers who died there had been handed over into Russian hands by the Nazis, and since all of them had been recently refused by the Nazis after a hesitant acceptance, the Nazis may well have been curious to know what had become of them.

It is natural, too, to suppose that the Nazi officer is seeking technical advice about genocide from his Soviet colleague. Massacre is always technically difficult if secrecy is to be maintained, if only because discreet corpse-disposal in the mass is a highly complicated business; and the text of the article shows how determined the Nazis were, early and late, to deny and disguise what they did. That determination remained; and the holocaust (as it has since come to be known) was always, at least in intention, a secret operation. In that case the bull-necked Nazi officer on the right in the photograph, supposedly called Schön, may be about to learn something momentous from his Communist colleague, whose hands are earnestly clasped before him and who looks about to speak.

George Watson, who is a Fellow of St. John's College, Cambridge, is the author of The Idea of Liberalism and The Certainty of Literature (St. Martin's Press). His British Literature since 1945 will be published in the fall.

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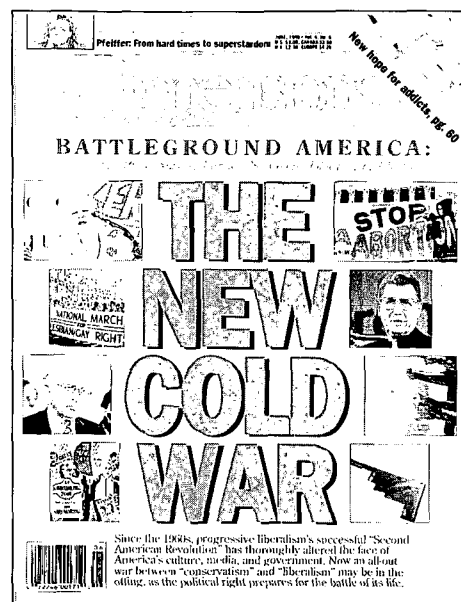
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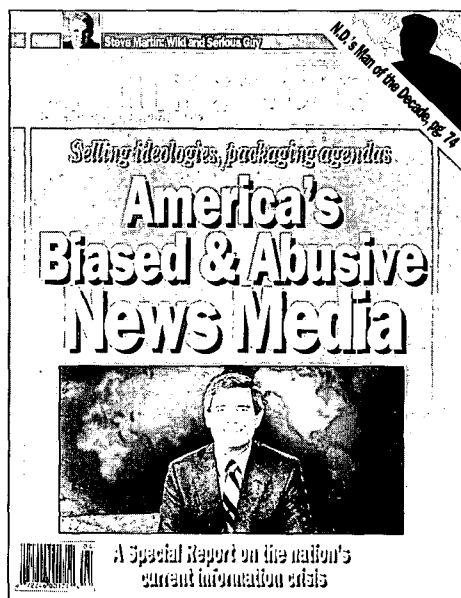


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