PS for 4/26/90

Time for Confession About Katyn Forest

It took exactly 50 years for the Soviets to confess the truth about Stalin's most brutal and cunning crime. On April 13, they apologized for the massacre of 15,000 Polish officers at Katyn Forest.

During late 1939 and early 1940, when Stalin attacked Poland from the rear while the Poles were trying to defend their country from the Nazis, the Soviets took 250,000 Polish troops as prisoners and deported them, like cattle, to 100 prisoner-of-war camps in Russia. Under Stalin's order, 15,400 of these prisoners, the flower of Polish military and intellectual leadership, were specifically selected out and sent to three POW camps run by the NKVD (predecessor of the KGB).

After compiling a life-dossier on each officer and his family, the NKVD's notorious boss Beria inflicted them with five terrible months of Communist indoctrination and interrogation. It is a monument to Polish patriotism that Beria obtained only 20 of the 15,400 as even candidates to become quislings.

Beria then received the order from Stalin to "liquidate" all the Polish officers quickly and secretly. Between April 3 and May 12, 1940, the officers were packed in long trains, sent to an isolated railroad station, then loaded 30 or more to a van, and driven 550 miles west by south of Moscow to an isolated forest called Katyn.

The Poles were led to the brink of great pits, 30 by 50 yards in area and 18 feet deep, and each on shot through the back of his head with one inexpensive bullet by Beria's pistol executioners. Frequently, the officer's hands were tied behind his back with a peculiar knot which tightened into the flesh if an attempt was made to get free.

Into just one of these graves, the Soviet executioners packed the bodies of two generals, 12 colonels, 50 lieutenant colonels, 165 majors, 440 captains, 542 first lieutenants, and 146 military doctors. The Russians stacked the bodies like cordwood, five to seven deep, covered them with five feet of earth, planted pine and spruce saplings on top, and expected their crime to remain forever buried.

The Russians might have gotten by with the perfect murder except that the Nazi army, invading Russia, discovered mass grave three years later, on April 13 1943. The German high command immediately summoned international witnesses,

including forensic and criminal medicine experts from Switzerland, Scandinavia, Holland, Belgium, Italy, and the Balkans.

The witnesses examined the first 982 bodies, of whom 70 percent were identifiable. All agreed that the victims were Polish officers, killed by assassination, buried three years before and long prior to the German occupation of the area. The Soviets responded by accusing the Nazis of the atrocity and vetoing an investigation by the International Red Cross.

It's easy to see why Stalking would want to hide his savagery from the world. But why would any Americans want to hide it? Now that the Soviets have confessed, we need to explore how and why the Franklin Roosevelt Administration hid this scandal from our citizens.

Among the non-Germans brought to the site of the murders as eye-witnesses to the exhumation of the bodies was an American army officer then held as a prisoner-of-war: Major John H. Van Vliet, Jr. When he was liberated on May 5, 1945, he reported thee information, along with photographic evidence, to his commanding officer, who found the story so credible that he had him flown from Europe to Washington “with all haste.”

On May 22, 1945, he reported to Major General Clayton Bissell, Deputy Chief of Staff for Military Intelligence, handing him his signed eyewitness account complete with photographs. Bissell then gave a written order to Van Vliet directing him to “neither mention nor discuss this without the specific approval in writing from the War Department.”

Americans first learned about the Katyn Forest Massacre in 1949 when a Vienna-born journalist, Julius Epstein, became interested in the case and began to write about it. Congressman George A. Dondero (R-MI) wrote a formal letter to the Pentagon demanding a copy of the Van Vliet report and photographs. The Pentagon first claimed the report was “classified,” then that they report and photographs had been “lost.”

In September 1950, under continuing Congressional pressure, the Pentagon ordered Van Vliet to dictate another report from memory, again ordered him into silence, and then sent him to Korea out of reach of a Congressional subpoena. His second report confirmed the evidence that indicted the Russians. A House Congressional investigation under Congressman Ray J. Madden (D-IN) discovered

another American eyewitness to the exhumations, Ly. Colonel Donald Stewart, who independently corroborated Van Vliet.

It is important, even after 50 years, for the Soviets to confess their murders. It's also important for Americans to realize how the Roosevelt and Truman Administrations suppressed the truth about Soviet crime so that the myth could be propagated that Joseph Stalin was "good old Joe… a decent fellow."