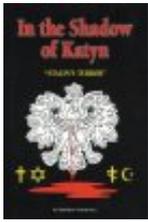

In the Shadow of Katyń: "Stalin's Terror" by Stanisław Swianiewicz (2002), 266 pages.



There are several fine books in Polish, which for various reasons have to wait to be translated into English, as did this one. It was first published 25 years ago and now arrives from Canada, thanks to the late author's son and his friends. In essence, it is a tragic war story. As the German Army rapidly overpowered Polish units in the fall of 1939, thousands of soldiers were captured. Most were allowed to go home, but officers were interned in so-called Oflags for the duration of the war. Despite the atrocities of Hitler's regime, the rules governing prisoners of war (POWs) were observed by the German Wehrmacht. These were originally established by the International Red Cross in 1863 and firmly ratified by civilized countries in Geneva in 1926. However, the fate was tragic for the multitudes that were ruthlessly disarmed by the Soviet Army, which unexpectedly crossed the eastern borders of Poland on September 17. No war existed between these two countries; on the contrary, a non-aggression pact was in place, and no battle took place.

The author relates how 17,000 officers were promptly imprisoned at three large camps: at Kozielsk near Katyń, at Kalinin near Mednoye, and at Starobelsk near Kharkov. Swianiewicz was in Kozielsk among them. In civilian life, he was a newspaper columnist, primarily an economist. No one knew then that on March 15, 1940, Lavrenti Beria sent an urgent memorandum to Stalin which stated that all these „hardened and uncompromising enemies” of the Soviet authority must be declared guilty and executed. The Russian original of this document is reproduced in the book. Without any feeling of shame, the civilian occupations of the POWs are listed, amongst them civil servants, priests, teachers, farmers, and 6,100 „escapees”, and these people did not have any military rank. The signatures of Voroshilov, Molotov, and Mikoyin also appear in this appalling document.

In late April 1940, the author was shipped along with many of his colleagues from the Kozielsk Camp to a new, unknown destination. In the middle of the night, the Soviet officers called him by name and separated him from the rest in the train transport. Soon thereafter, small buses with whitewashed windows began to ferry the prisoners; they shuttled back and forth for some time. With this movement completed, Swianiewicz's train continued in the eastern direction, still under tight control. The book relates subsequent events in detail, but we already realize that by sheer accident Swianiewicz became an indirect witness to the outright murder of his compatriots as the rail station was Katyń. In 1943 Katyń graves were discovered by chance while the German engineering firm Todt was engaged in some routine work at the front line. This made international news and caused the break of relations between the Moscow government and the Polish government in exile. Yet, the Nuremberg Trials did not list these murders as Nazi crimes. Ultimately, in 1990 the Soviet news agency admitted that Russia committed the Katyń massacre. One year later the sites at Mednoye and Kharkov were also discovered.

Swianiewicz's gripping book contains several very interesting chapters related to political life in Poland before 1939. His interest in the economy of Nazi Germany was known to the Soviets through some publications, which resulted in the removal of his name from the execution list at the last moment, as the captors became interested in his research. It did not spare him from prison but saved his life, and the author traveled via the Near East to ultimate freedom in the West. The narrative demonstrates his keen understanding of history, and the lucid style makes this book easy to read.

George E. Suboczewski