

Documents show Stalin signed Katyn death warrants

Russia has published previously top secret documents which prove that Josef Stalin personally approved one of the Second World War's gravest massacres in which nearly 22,000 Polish officers were murdered.



A picture taken on April 1, 1943 shows men digging out bodies of Polish officers from a mass grave in Katyn Photo: AFP

Andrew Osborn in Moscow

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Although the documents have been available to a handful of researchers since 1992, it is the first time that the general public has been given access to the files which concern the 1940 Katyn massacre.

The sight of Stalin's signature on what amounts to a collective death warrant quells decades of debate on the massacre and gives the lie to claims by die-hard Stalinists that their idol did not personally sanction the killings.

The disclosure is also a blow to Stalin's grandson Yevgeny Dzhugashvili who has tried to sue media who have said that Stalin personally signed the death warrants of innocent people.

The files catalogue the chilling decision-making process that culminated in Stalin and his henchmen approving the execution of 21,587 unarmed Polish army reservists in 1940. The massacre, perpetrated by the Soviet NKVD secret police, was carried out in three different locations but took its name from just one of the three killing fields - the Katyn Forest in western Russia.

One of the documents made public is a note from Lavrenty Beria, the head of the NKVD, to Stalin about the fate of the Poles. The Poles included military officers, priests, writers, professors and aristocrats. In the note, Beria proposes that the NKVD "quickly examine the use of the highest means of punishment – death by shooting." Stalin's signature and a red stamp reading "Top Secret" are on the first page of the document, which is dated March 1940. Another document, a secret internal Soviet Communist party memo from 1965, refers to "what was formerly Bourgeois Poland" and warns against any public disclosure, arguing that the documents have no historical value.

The decision to make the documents public, taken by President Dmitry Medvedev, is being seen as a friendly albeit symbolic gesture towards Poland which has been pushing for full disclosure for decades. It comes just weeks after Polish President Lech Kaczynski and 95 others died in a plane crash on their way to a memorial service at Katyn. Although Polish historians welcomed the release of the files, they said that more needed to be done.

Russia has stubbornly refused to fully open its archive on the subject or to prosecute or even reveal the names of surviving secret policemen who took part in the killings.

President Medvedev said Russia was trying to be as open as it could. "Let everyone know what was done, who made the decisions, who ordered the elimination of the Polish officers," he said. "Everything is written there.

With all the signatures." He also promised fresh disclosures. "There is some material that has not yet been handed over to our Polish partners. I have given the order to make that happen," he added.

The Soviets lied about the Katyn massacre for five decades, claiming that the Nazis and not the NKVD had perpetrated the atrocity. It was only in 1990 that Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev publicly admitted that the NKVD had done the killing, expressing "profound regret" at what had happened.

The files were posted on the web site of the Russian state archive service on Wednesday morning, which swiftly ground to a halt after more than 700,000 people rushed to take a look.



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