

The 58th Berlinale—Part 2

Katyn—The political agenda of Polish filmmaker Andrzej Wajda

Stefan Steinberg
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Katyn is the new film by postwar Poland's most prominent film director, the 81-year-old Andrzej Wajda, and deals with the fate of an estimated 22,000 Polish officers and intellectuals—including Wajda's own father—who were slaughtered by Soviet troops at the start of 1940. *Katyn* is the name of the town near Smolensk in Russia where the executions took place. Wajda's film is the first cinematic attempt to deal with this highly controversial historical event.

Six months prior to the massacre at Katyn the Soviet Union had signed its infamous Molotov-Ribbentrop pact with Nazi Germany on August 23, 1939. Stalin regarded the pact as a guarantee that the Nazis would mainly concentrate their plans for war on the West and refrain from attacking the Soviet Union. For Hitler the pact represented a green light to drive ahead with his war preparations, which always included plans for German expansion into Eastern Europe (*Lebensraum*)—and the Soviet Union.

On September 1, 1939, German troops proceeded to overrun Poland from the west—the fatal step which led to the outbreak of the Second World War. Eager to weaken a traditional rival of Tsarist Russia, Stalin decided to exploit the Nazi initiative by sending Soviet troops 17 days later to invade Poland from the east.

In the course of their advance the Soviet troops took hundreds of thousands of Polish soldiers, officers and civilians captive and transported many of them back to the Soviet Union. At the personal request of the head of the Russian secret police (NKVD), Lavrenti Beria, Stalin agreed to the execution of over 20,000 Polish prisoners. The slaughter of the Polish captives by pistol shots to the head in Katyn in 1940 delivered a major blow to the command structure of the Polish army and wiped out many young intellectuals who could have provided a base of opposition to Stalin's policies. Stalin had already wiped out the entire leadership of the Polish Communist Party, which had taken refuge in the Soviet Union in the 1930s.

From his base in Poland Hitler was then able to proceed with his plans (Operation Barbarossa) to invade the Soviet Union in 1941. Stalin's pact with Hitler was crucial in allowing the latter to advance his military plans. Millions of Soviet citizens and soldiers were to pay with their lives for Stalin's betrayal in 1939.

For decades any discussion of the slaughter carried out in Katyn was taboo in postwar Stalinist Poland, while in the Soviet Union itself blame for the atrocity was laid on German troops following

the breach of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact by Hitler.

Only in 1989 did Mikhail Gorbachev, General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, admit the NKVD's responsibility for the crime. In 1992 an envoy from Russian President Boris Yeltsin handed over Katyn documents to Polish president Lech Walesa. Even today, Russian authorities refuse to carry out any investigation into the events at Katyn.

For many years Wajda sought a suitable script as the basis for a cinematic recreation of the Katyn events and he has only been able to complete the project in the twilight of his career. In Berlin Wajda disingenuously told newspapers that he did not regard his new film to be political, but the launch and reception of the film in Poland and Germany tell another story.

The premiere of *Katyn* in Poland last autumn was a major political event. The Polish president, Lech Kaczynski, and the prime minister, his twin brother Jaroslaw Kaczynski, attended, alongside high-ranking officials of the Catholic Church. A candlelit vigil was also held at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Warsaw, where the names of the Polish officers murdered at Katyn were read out. The first name on the list was read out by President Kaczynski. Students and army recruits were then ordered to see the film and the Kaczynski brothers sought to exploit the latter during their ultra-nationalist campaign in the Polish parliamentary elections.

In line with their evocation of Polish patriotism, the Kaczynskis even proposed a special commemorative meeting with the aim of rehabilitating Jakub Wajda, the father of Andrzej Wajda. The Kaczynskis obviously regarded the film as their own personal property—after all, according to Wajda's production notes, the film was made under the honorary patronage of Lech Kaczynski. Wajda subsequently addressed a letter to the president objecting to the overtly political exploitation of his film during the election campaign, but the genie was out of the bottle.

The political nature of the film was underlined at its European premiere in Berlin, which was attended by no less a person than the right-wing German chancellor, Angela Merkel.

For decades Andrzej Wajda has been Poland's leading important filmmaker. In over thirty films, which span much of the post-war period, Wajda has chronicled Polish resistance against Nazism (notably *Canal*, 1957) and also the struggle against Stalinism. In the course of his filmmaking (*Man of Iron*, 1981) he established

close links with the Solidarity (*Solidarnosc*) movement and his political trajectory closely follows that of the movement itself, i.e., following the collapse of Stalinism in Eastern Europe in the period 1989-90, Wajda emerged as a leading protagonist of Polish nationalism and anti-communism.

Wajda entered politics during this period to serve as a senator for Solidarity between 1989 and 1991, in the period when Solidarity leader Walesa assumed the post of president. From 1992 to 1994 Wajda was chairman of the nation's Cultural Council. He played an active role in politics, in other words, during the crucial period when capitalist market relations were being introduced, with disastrous consequences for broad layers of the population. Wajda has repeatedly declared in interviews that he observes a crisis of identity in modern-day Poland and that he sees his role as assisting in the revival of a national consciousness.

At the Berlin Film Festival Wajda emphasised central aspects of his political outlook. He told an audience of young film students at the festival: "I want Polish people to be a nation, not a group of random people." And in an interview in the *Berliner Zeitung* Wajda responded to the question of his interviewer, "How could such a thing [Katyn] happen?," by declaring: "It was possible because Stalin and Lenin earlier, had murdered millions of Soviet citizens—Ukrainians, White Russians, Russians, whose mass graves still remain unopened until today."

The bracketing of Lenin with Stalin's crimes in the 1930s and the attempt to associate the leader of the Russian Revolution with the crimes of the Stalinist bureaucracy—whose principal aim ultimately became the liquidation of all the genuine revolutionaries who fought alongside Lenin—is a stock-in-trade of contemporary anti-communism, shared by the current and former leaders of the Solidarity movement, as well as its conservative opponents such as the Kaczynski brothers.

Wajda would prefer to distance himself from the crude patriotism whipped up by the Kaczynski brothers, but his own variety of nationalism has its own inevitable logic which, in the final analysis, plays into the hands of the twins. This logic is revealed on a number of occasions in his new film, which provides a showcase for Wajda's attempt to revive Polish nationalism.

At the start of *Katyn* we witness groups of Polish civilians crossing a bridge in opposite directions. It is 1939 and one group escaping German troops runs head-on into a second group fleeing Soviet soldiers from the other side of the river. The Poles, we are meant to understand, confront the double danger of invasion and oppression from Germany on the one side and the Soviet Union on the other.

The film then switches to a group of Polish officers who have been taken prisoner by Soviet troops and await transportation. We witness the discussion between two Polish officers who speculate upon their fate. Lieutenant Jerzy turns to his friend, cavalry captain Andrej, and expresses his fears for the worst—after all, the Soviet Union has not signed the Geneva conventions governing the treatment of prisoners of war.

A camera sweep of the grounds where the Polish troops are held captive centres on the compassionate figure of a Polish Catholic priest who is giving the last rites to a number of Polish soldiers who have fallen during fighting with Soviet troops. The scene then

switches quickly to a group of Russian troops mutilating a Polish flag to transform it into a Soviet banner.

These few scenes contain all the themes of contemporary Polish nationalism—the perpetual danger of Poland being overrun from Germany in the west and the Soviet Union or Russia from the east; the role played in Polish society by the Catholic Church, heroically intervening on behalf of the "Christ amongst nations"; and the quasi-democratic qualms of an elite Polish cavalry officer in 1939, whose first thought, according to Wajda, is that his enemy does not adhere to the Geneva conventions.

Wajda denies his film is anti-Russian, although all of the Soviet figures portrayed in the film—with one notable exception—are thugs and brutes. Only one Russian officer who offers to marry the wife of the cavalry captain to save her from Soviet persecution seems to provide an exception to the rule.

Despite his protestations, Wajda's film provides ammunition for those in Poland who seek to revive the Russian bogeyman as a means of diverting popular opposition into the reactionary channel of nationalism and chauvinism. Certainly the attendance of the German chancellor of the premiere of *Katyn* in Berlin was regarded as a sop to the Polish government and a snub to Moscow.

The tragic nature of Polish-Russian relations was also central to Wajda's 1999 film, *Pan Tadeusz*, based on an epic poem by Poland's national poet, Adam Mickiewicz. Wajda's film deals with the efforts by the film's hero Tadeusz to mobilise the Polish peasantry against the Russian occupation of Lithuania. The film ends with Poles dancing their traditional polonaise to celebrate a decisive military victory over the Russians.

Wajda is intent on reviving a national tradition—as the reviewer for the *New York Times* put it, "*Katyn* is deliberately intended to inspire patriotism in the most positive sense of the word." However, both the global integration of world capitalism and the venality of the Polish bourgeoisie render independent Polish national development impossible. Nothing could be more indicative of the reactionary dead-end of Polish nationalism today than the fact that in its efforts to evade German influence from the west and Russian influence from the east the Polish ruling elite has increasingly looked for support from the White House in Washington.

During the postwar period many of Andrej Wajda's films provided genuine insights into the workings of both Stalinist and Nazi totalitarianism. His films dealt with the possibility and necessity of opposition to oppressive regimes. As such his work offered a genuine starting point for a revival of culture and film in Poland. Now, however, the development of culture in Poland and elsewhere can only take place in hostile opposition to the film director's espousal of nationalism and uncritical embrace of free market economic values.



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