

KATYŃ

Study Guide



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❖ Introduction ❖

On September 17, 1939, the Soviet Union began an unprovoked invasion of Poland, adding another battlefield to the country already facing a western invasion from Germany. With armies advancing on both sides, Polish forces were overwhelmed. The story of Nazi-occupied Poland is one well known, as the country became the epicenter for the terrors of the Holocaust and housed the most infamous of the Nazi death camps: Auschwitz-Birkenau.

Yet, while Nazi atrocities against the Polish during the Second World War are so well known, those committed by the Soviets have remained hidden, due in large part to a misinformation campaign initiated by the communist state.

As the Soviets invaded Poland, they rounded up a large number of military officers, chaplains, refugees, professors, physicians, and other members of the intelligentsia, detaining them as prisoners of war. According to the 1929 Geneva Conventions, the Soviet Union was required to treat these prisoners humanely. Instead, in spring of 1940, General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Joseph Stalin, condemned 21,857 Polish prisoners of war to death by firing squad. The victims were then buried en masse in unmarked graves in the Katyń forest.

In an attempt to avoid international condemnation for their mass murder of Polish citizens, the Soviet Union began a propaganda campaign, planting false evidence to frame the Katyń massacre on the Nazi regime. Throughout the Second World War, the American and English governments accepted the communist lie that Germany was responsible for the deaths at Katyń, even as investigators and the Polish people insisted on Soviet culpability.

For decades, the communist regime maintained the lie that they were not responsible for the deaths at the Katyń forest, and they brutally suppressed any who tried to publically recognize this atrocity. However, in the United States and England, many books were published laying bare the facts of the Katyń massacre, eventually leading the two governments to release previously confidential documents on the event and putting international pressure on the Soviet Union to admit their crimes.

Mikhail Gorbachev became leader of the Soviet Union in the midst of this pressure to recognize the truth behind the Katyń massacre. Though he initially attempted to place blame on the head of Stalin's chief of police, in 1992—a full 52 years after the atrocity was committed—Gorbachev released the original 1940 execution order signed by senior Soviet leadership including Stalin himself.

Though the characters in the film *Katyń* are fictional, this depiction of the massacre exposes the truth behind the mass murder committed by the Soviets at Katyń forest, the intentional cover-up of their crimes, and how important recognizing the truth is to the Polish people.

“It is a hard task to formulate rules which will control action of sovereign states. Yet few rules of war have been established and constant effort should be made to sustain, strengthen, and extend them. At least defenseless prisoners-of-war should not be murdered. Here lies the lesson of the Katyń affair.”

— J.K. Zawodny, *(Death in the Forest)*



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❖ Memorable Quotes ❖

Andrzej: Anna. Listen to me. You're the wife of a Polish officer. This conversation is pointless.

Anna: I've traveled across half of Poland to you!

Andrzej: I'm bound by my military pledge.

Anna: You swore to me, before God. Till death do us apart, you've forgotten?

Andrzej: I swore to them, too.

General: Defeat is also part of a soldier's duty, and captivity, but also a return home to resume fighting. You don't lay down your arms before an enemy, but before yourself. So it's only up to you if you'll remain soldiers or losers.

Anna: Hope? I've been living with hope for five years so don't you tell me about it.

Jerzy: How many names of your former students could you have found here?

Professor: Dozens, sir.

Piotr's Sister-in-Law: You choose the dead, which is morbid.

Piotr's Wife: No. I choose the murdered, not the murderers.

❖ Thoughts for Discussion ❖

1. Andrzej Wajda, the director of *Katyń*, is the son of a victim of the Katyń massacre. He was 13 years old at the time of the murders, and his father's remains were never found.

How does knowing the director's connection to the subject matter effect our understanding of how the families of the victims are treated in this film?

2. In the film, while giving a Christmas speech in the POW camp, the Polish General tells the imprisoned painters, professors and lawyers, "You must endure, because there won't be a free Poland without you." During his own experience in Poland under Soviet subjugation, Karol Wojtyła (future Saint Pope John Paul II) participated in an underground theatre troupe, demonstrating that he too felt that men and women who promote culture are important to freedom.

Why is culture so essential to freedom? What is culture's role in creating a country? How does a country's culture offer hope under oppression?

3. Jerzy, one of the Polish officers who was captured but not sent to Katyń to be murdered, later joins the Soviet Army. He argues that he does so to protect his life, but one of the widows of a Katyń soldier accuses him of being "the same as they are."

Is Jerzy the same as the Soviets for working with them, even though he knows they committed the Katyń massacre? Is the argument presented by Jerzy legitimate? What would you do in his place?

4. The rosary makes three appearances in the film: in the POW camp, in the church after Mass, and at the site of the massacre.

What does this tell us about the rosary, its power and its meaning? What does it demonstrate about the faith of the Polish people? How does the symbolism of this prayer change in the different scenes? Why?

5. The subject of this film is the Katyń massacre and its subsequent cover-up, and yet we are given multiple scenes relating to the atrocities committed by the Nazis in the Holocaust.

Why do you think the director included these scenes, especially since the Soviets tried to paint the Katyń massacre as another Nazi atrocity, like the Holocaust? Do these scenes strengthen or confuse the message that the Soviets were responsible for the massacre?

6. The film includes real footage of the Katyń gravesites, as well as propaganda films of both the Soviets and the Germans.

How does this footage effect our understanding of the Katyń massacre as a historical event? Were you to see the films absent any other background, would you believe the story they are propagandizing? If so, what does this teach us about approaching media in a way that uncovers truth and lies?

7. Norman Davies, a historian who has studied the Katyń massacre, said, “The truth about Katyń was not publicly acknowledged by the British government, [the American government, or] the Soviet government until 1990 when Gorbachev formally admitted to the crime. Katyń is a terrible affair not just because of being a mass murder but for the cover up that lasted half a century.”

Why do you think western nations were complicit in the cover-up? How might distract for one evil, the Nazis, have blinded the United States and England from the evils of the Soviets? How can we ensure such blindness does not happen again?

8. Norman Davies also said that the communist Soviets attempted to “turn the Catholic Church in Poland into a subservient organ of the state rather than to destroy it completely.”

How do we see the Catholic Church combating this attempt in the film? In our own time, how can we ensure that the Catholic Church is kept from being used as a political pawn? How can we better highlight the sacramental nature of the Church to combat attempts to use her for political means?

9. French poet Charles Péguy wrote of hope: “It is faith that is easy and not believing that would be impossible. It is charity that is easy and not loving that would be impossible. But it is hoping that is difficult.”

How does *Katyń* demonstrate that hoping is difficult? What do we learn about the nature of hope? What do we learn about how to handle unfulfilled hopes?

10. The film ends with Polish POWs praying the Our Father before being murdered by the Soviet army. The movie ends with a line of this prayer, “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.”

Why end the movie with this line? What does forgiveness for the massacre, the cover-up, and the murder of those who spoke the truth look like? Do you think you would be able to forgive such a horrible action? Why or why not?