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FSB declassifies archival evidence on Nazi executions of Poles, Katyn case

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MOSCOW, April 11. /TASS/. The Smolensk Region's office of the Federal Security Service (FSB) has declassified archival documents exposing crimes committed by the Nazis in the Smolensk Region during the Great Patriotic War, including evidence concerning the execution of Poles and Nazi Germany's falsification of the Katyn case.

A TASS correspondent has seen copies of the documents, handed over to the State Archive of Contemporary History of the Smolensk Region under the project No Statute of Limitations.

The archive includes memos, intelligence data and special reports by the military counter-intelligence service Smersh (Death to Spies) dated 1944-1945. There are many accounts of interrogations of Poles who served with the Germans in the Smolensk Region, forensic expert of the Budapest City Royal Court, Imre Szecsody, a member of the commission for investigating the murder of Polish officers in the Katyn forest Boleslav Smektal and other key figures involved.

Polish-born Eduard Potkanski, who served in a Polish labor battalion formed by the Nazis in a camp at the Krasny Bor

station in the Smolensk Region, testified that in the summer of 1943 the Germans decided to take the battalion's members to the graves of Polish officers in the Katyn forest.

"According to the Germans, those graves contained up to 12,000 shot Polish officers. Up to 3,000 others were buried elsewhere, and these graves had not yet been exhumed yet," Potkanski recalled.

Near the graves, he said, there lay personal belongings, Polish money, personal letters and identification papers of the shot officers. "All these things and especially personal documents and money were in a condition they would not have retained, had they remained in the soil since 1939 (when, according to Nazi claims, NKVD officers shot Polish officers - TASS). The banknotes, for example, were in mint condition, as if they had not been in use," the Polish witness testified.

Prisoner of war Roman Kowalski, who also served in a labor battalion and saw the mass grave in the Katyn forest, added in his testimony that "one look at most of the bodies was enough to see that they were very recent victims."

"In the published lists of Polish officers shot at Katyn, many people in our labor battalion saw the names of their acquaintances who had been arrested even earlier by the Gestapo and sent to concentration camps in Germany," he said.

Both Poles stated that they knew at least seven cases of people shot by the Nazis in Smolensk for saying that the Soviet Union was not involved in the murder of Polish soldiers and officers.

Under SS supervision

Smektal told Smersh that before the war he had worked as a clerk for the field court of the 14th Polish Division and then

became an administrator of Russian workers at Germany's Focke-Wulf factory. In April 1943, he was appointed a delegate to a commission to investigate the mass murder of Polish soldiers and officers.

"One of the heads of the Poznan SD (security service of the SS - TASS), Sturmbannfuehrer Hoepner, held a special instructional briefing to warn each member that their trip to Katyn pursued propaganda purposes and that upon their return they should declare that they had personally seen 12,000 corpses of Polish officers. After their return the SD obliged the commission's members to make propaganda reports on the trip to Katyn at meetings with Polish workers. The SD pre-edited the contents of what was to be said at such meetings," the archival documents say.

Smektal recalled that in Katyn the Germans showed the commission two Russian citizens, describing them as "witnesses" of the murder of Polish officers. "It was clear to me as a former court officer from the behavior of these 'witnesses' that they had been coached by the SD in advance," Smektal said. He also noted that the corpses shown to the commission did not look the way they would have looked after staying in the ground for several years: "The clothes showed no signs of decay. The corpse of Polish military commander, Brigadier General Bronislaw Bohatyrewicz retained the lower part of the face with a mustache and beard."

The Katyn case owes its name to the Katyn forest near Smolensk, where mass graves of executed Polish prisoners of war were found in 1943 in German-occupied territory. The discovery of mass graves in the Katyn Forest in 1943 was first reported by Rudolf-Christoph Freiherr von Gersdorff, an Army Group Center intelligence staff officer.

According to a testimony by forensic expert Imre Szecsody, presented alongside other documents from the declassified archive, a commission consisting of doctors and forensic examiners from Germany, Hungary, Portugal, Switzerland and other Western countries traveled to Katyn at the same time to examine the bodies of Polish prisoners of war. The commission included members of pro-Nazi parties and organizations. For example, Hungarian professor Ferenc Orsos, who in 1941 advocated the prohibition of marriages between Hungarians and Jews or Gypsies and then collaborated with the team of SS Obersturmbannführer Otto Adolf Eichmann, the notorious "architect of the Holocaust."

The commission argued that the shootings were carried out by the Soviet police NKVD in the spring of 1940. The Soviet Union denied these charges. After the liberation of Smolensk by the Red Army, a special commission was established by Nikolay Burdenko (the surgeon-general of the Red Army in 1937-1946) which, after conducting its own investigation, concluded that the Polish military personnel had been shot in Katyn in the fall of 1941 by the German force of occupation. This conclusion had been the official view in the Soviet Union and Warsaw treaty member- countries until 1990, when the Soviet government recognized the NKVD's responsibility for the crime.

In 2010, the Russian State Duma expressed "deep sympathy to all victims of unjustified repression, their relatives and friends." It also stated that in the early 1990s, "the country made important steps towards establishing the truth about the Katyn tragedy." It was recognized that the mass extermination of Polish citizens on the territory of the Soviet Union during World War II was an act of arbitrariness of the totalitarian state, which also subjected hundreds of thousands of Soviet people to repression for

political and religious beliefs, and on social and other grounds.

In the fall of 2023, the Communist Party's State Duma member Nikolay Ivanov called on the State Duma for revoking this resolution as seriously damaging to Russia's interests and reputation. Duma Speaker Vyacheslav Volodin suggested forming a working group under Deputy Speaker Pyotr Tolstoy and including representatives of all parliamentary factions.