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Nazi Germany's Gestapo officers accompanied Katyn commission

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MOSCOW, April 13. /TASS/. Officers of the Nazi Germany's state secret police (Gestapo) accompanied the members of an international commission to investigate the mass killing of Polish soldiers and officers in the Katyn forest, as follows from testimonies by a laboratory technician, the German Army's Senior Ensign Ludwig Schneider, contained in the declassified FSB archive materials, seen by TASS.

The documents declassified by the Federal Security Service (FSB) office in the Smolensk Region were handed over to the State Archive of Contemporary History of the Smolensk Region under the project No Statute of Limitations. The archive contains reference notes, memos, intelligence and special reports of the military counter-intelligence service Smersh (Death to Spies) dated 1944-1945.

"SS Obersturmfuehrer Hilbers and a lieutenant from the city commandant's office, whose last name I did not know, showed up at the laboratory. Both of them talked for a long time with [the subsequently appointed chief of the group of experts, Prof. Gerhard] Butz at his office behind closed doors. <...> Hilbers was a member of the Gestapo's central Ost department. In fact, he became the head of our laboratory's work on the 'Katyn case'

and it was easy to notice that Professor Butz obeyed him unconditionally in everything," Schneider, who worked in that commission, testified.

He stated that it was Hilbers who first told Butz and his men that in the Katyn forest a large number of bodies had been found. Allegedly, the Bolsheviks had shot Polish officers there, and "the upcoming investigation is very important for Germany, and for that reason, as Hilbers said, the laboratory staff must be very attentive, instantly and clearly follow all orders without asking questions and do not make any experiments on their own, as the slightest inaccuracy or error can cause irreparable harm."

After the arrival of the international group of selected experts, they, according to Schneider's recollections, met at a banquet, where Hilbers, wearing civilian clothes was present himself. Gestapo officers accompanied the commission on all their trips to the Katyn forest. " During the autopsy of the corpses a large number of German officers and officials were present, and they were giving 'explanations' to the commission's members, repeating all the time that they had in their hands irrefutable evidence that the Poles had been shot by the Russians. In all, a little over 200 corpses were examined by the commission," as follows from the declassified testimony.

Katyn case

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.