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Katyn Forest Massacre Sparks Interest in Expanding Polish Studies on Campus

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By Nora Breznai

On March 5, 1940, Joseph Stalin, the former Soviet Union Leader, ordered thousands of Polish engineers, public servants, doctors and lawyers to be killed and buried. In 1943, the graves were discovered by the German soldiers who blamed the Russians, but in the fog of the war the Soviets and other countries blamed the Nazi Army for the massacre. Many years after the war, the Soviets continued to deny their responsibility for the crime. In the 1990s, when the Soviet archives were opened to historians, the Russian government acknowledged that Stalin had given the kill order.



The killings tookplace in the Katyn Forests, a wooded area near the villages of Katyn and Gnezdovo in Russia. It was later determined around 25,700 Polish citizens were killed in the Katyn Forest. For decades, little to no action has been taken for the killing order that wiped out many Poles. Some lawyers, who work in the area of crimes against humanity, want the Katyn Forest Massacre to be known as an act of genocide.

On Feb. 3, a panel discussion sponsored by CLASS was held on the Katyn Forest Massacre at CSU. The panelist included Maria Szonert Binienda and Alexander Guryanov. Binienda is an attorney, the president of the Libra Institute and the author of *World War II through Polish Eyes*. Guryanov is the Polish Program Coordinator of the Russian Memorial Society, who came all the way from Moscow.

Binienda explained the scope of Katyn Forest and how the motive meets the standard required to be classified as genocide. She went into further detail of understanding the Katyn Forest, as it was not only just about the 25,700 killed, but the deportation of the victims and their families. Binienda added, "The whole plan and system involved was to destroying Polish nationality."

"I'm not a historian or lawyer but engaged in study of political repression of Polish," Guryanov said, who is working on human rights issues. For the last five years, the Memorial Society has been trying to get the names of the Katyn victims. Guryanov said there are two open appeals and the Memorial Society remains unfulfilled.

Milena Sterio, assistant professor at Cleveland-Marshall and the moderator of the panel, said that in international law going ahead since 2002 there is no statute of limitations and case can be brought before an international court. She thinks law students should be educated on international law.

Sterio said, "Areas of law such as international criminal law cannot be properly understood or studied without a historical context, knowledge and background about what led to a particular development in international criminal law." She added, "Thus, I think it's crucial that our students be educated in world history and this was a wonderful opportunity for students to learn about Katyn."

Binienda said if Katyn is considered genocide, it will give the Polish nation the safety and protection to know that it won't happen again. Sterio said for the victims' families, justice could translate into Russia accepting complete responsibility for the Katyn Forest killings. Legally speaking, the meaning of justice is different. She added, "It may mean the creation of a truth commission or an international tribunal to prosecute those responsible. Still there is nothing concrete and Russians are general with statements and volumes of documents are not being released.

Binienda, who organized the event, contacted Gregory Sadlek, the dean of the College of Liberal Art and Social Sciences, due to his interest in Polish Studies to see if CSU would be a sponsor for the symposium at Case Western Reserve Law School in return for a session at CSU. Sadlek opened the event, saying this is an effort to expand Polish studies on campus. "[We] want to engage with the Polish and American community here and with the Warsaw exchange program with students and faculty," said Sadlek.

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Last year, CLASS offered a Polish language course with mild success; however, due to low enrollment this year the section could not be offered. Sadlek said they will try again next year to offer courses in the area of Polish Studies and they have signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the University of Warsaw because they are committed to continue developing a relationship for future student and faculty exchange programs.

Currently, CLASS has educational partnerships with other countries including India, Korea, France, Costa Rica, Slovenia and Turkey. Sadlek said, "Because of Cleveland's large Eastern European ethnic community and CSU's mission to connect with its city, we believe that CSU should offer education in the histories and cultures of various Eastern European countries. Because the local Polish community is important, the study of Polish history and culture is important to us." Sadlek works closely with the local chapter of the Kosciuszko Foundation.

In early February, with the foundation partnership, CLASS hosted Rita Cosby, a supporter of Polish history and culture and a recent best-selling author on her father's Polish wartime experiences. In the future, if endowments are raised, they hope to host regular visiting lecturers from Poland to teach Eastern European culture and history.