The Russo–Finnish War, November 1939–March 1940

The Soviet Union moved quickly to establish its sphere of influence in September and October 1939, as outlined in the secret protocol of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact. The USSR forced the three Baltic states—Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania—to sign mutual assistance pacts that granted the Soviets military, naval, and air bases in their countries. The Soviets pressured Finland to sign a similar pact, but the Finns refused and on November 29 were invaded by the Red Army. Otto Kuusinen, a Finnish Communist living in the Soviet Union, was made head of Finland’s puppet government. But the Red Army overestimated its abilities, particularly in the harsh winter conditions, and underestimated the determination of the Finns. The Finnish resistance persisted through the winter into 1940, generating international sympathy for its fight and leading to the USSR’s expulsion from the League of Nations.

Katyn

In April 1943, during its war against the Soviet Union, Nazi Germany announced the discovery of mass graves in the Katyn Forest in Russia, west of Smolensk. Despite accusations of the other by the Nazis and the Soviets, it has been proven beyond doubt that the Soviets murdered, in the Katyn Forest, at least 22,000 Polish prisoners of war, 15,000 military and police officers, and 7,000 members of the Polish intelligentsia. The mass shootings, which occurred between March and May 1940, were carried out by Stalin’s NKVD (Soviet secret police) with the approval of Stalin and other Politburo members. The findings of the Burdenko Commission, organized by the Soviets to implicate the Nazis, were easily refutable, yet the Western powers, unwilling to embarrass their wartime ally, chose not to address Katyn in the Nuremberg War Crime Trials.

In 1990, Mikhail Gorbachev admitted that the NKVD had executed the Poles, but since then Russia has sought to minimize the event as an isolated “military crime” for which the fifty-year term limit has expired. The memory of Katyn lives on, however, as a persistent flash point in Russo-Polish relations. The Kremlin fears that admitting full responsibility would diminish Russian national pride, which the memory of the Great Patriotic War is meant to evoke. Until such an admission is made, however, to the Poles it will appear that the “new” Russia has not fully come to terms with its Soviet past: collaboration with Nazi Germany during the first years of World War II and the crimes of the Stalin era.