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Katyń and Post-World War II Polish National Identity

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“*Katyń* and Post-World War II Polish National Identity,” by John Behnke

Instructor’s Note

John writes a research paper in which he identifies and evaluates how the Polish tendency toward individualism influences characters in their resistance to Soviet oppression in Polish director Andrzej Wajda’s film, *Katyń*. Note how John effectively links his sources to examples from the film. Note also how John identifies and addresses arguments that conflict with his own. How might a writer’s cultural presuppositions unfairly influence his or her conclusions when dealing with a foreign culture? How might one’s own cultural biases be identified and diminished? Why does Hollywood create so few films about Soviet atrocities?

Writer’s Biography

John Behnke is a sophomore Biology major from South Carolina who intends to attend medical school upon earning his undergraduate degree. He has always enjoyed writing both creative poetry and prose. His hobbies include rock climbing and swimming, along with reading and drawing.

Katyń and Post-World War II Polish National Identity

The past is dynamic in the social mind: it alters and transforms to “preserve a society’s identity” according to the group’s current character (Koczanowicz). Any reconstruction of the past demonstrates this tendency. Director Wajda’s reconstruction of the *Katyń* massacre does not differentiate. In the spring of 1941, the Soviets shot 22,000 Polish officers, intellectuals, and artists through the back of the head and buried them in mass graves beneath the boughs *Katyń*. The war crime remained secret until the end of World War II, at which time the Soviets occupied Poland and founded the Polish People’s Republic, a socialistic and

totalitarian governing system controlled by Stalin. When Poland emerged from the era, they sat divided, lost in the transition between the old and the new. Their identity was particularly affected by the conflicting cultural orientations that change forced upon them: they lay lost somewhere between the old, Soviet collectivist system and the new individualist identity to which the Solidarity Movement gave birth. Wajda's film *Katyn* asserts an individualist Polish orientation by accurately exhibiting characters that display strong, traditional Polish independence in their reactions to the totalitarian Soviet regime.

Many factors go into Poland's current cultural orientation. The nation holds a unique cultural position firstly due to its geographic position. Feldman states,

The difference in thinking between people in Asian and Western cultures is a reflection of a broader difference in the way the world is perceived. Asian societies generally have a collectivistic orientation, a worldview that promotes the notion of interdependence. [...] In contrast, people in Western cultures are more likely to hold an individualist orientation that emphasizes personal identity and the uniqueness of the individual. (Feldman, 528)

As a western society on the cusp of the East, the Poles comprise of a distinctive mix of eastern and western values: they have "long viewed themselves as a Western nation transmitting Western ideas and values to their Eastern neighbors" (Forbes et al. 4). This contributes to Poland's identity as both an individualist and collectivist society. They gain their individualism from their Western roots, and their collectivism from their proximity to the Orient (Forbes et al. 4).

In addition to Poland's geographic positioning, the nation's recent ascension from forty years of collectivist Soviet domain constitutes another factor in its cultural orientation (Forbes et al. 4). The post-World War II Poland was different in many respects from its predecessor. Behrends states, "Post-war Poland was significantly smaller,

geographically further west, and ethnically more homogeneous” (Behrends). He later says, “For the first time in her history, Poland had the structure of a nation-state. [...] Still, the new Poland was less independent than its predecessor” (Behrends). This lack of independence constitutes the most drastic difference between the post-war and pre-war Poland. The People’s Republic of Poland forced collectivism on a largely individualist nation for nearly forty-four years. So, when the system finally fell, it left the nation in a cultural identity crisis: on the one side lay the foreign collectivist orientation and the ease of non-action, and on the other lay the traditional individualist orientation and the drive for true identity and differentiation.

The discomfort of change and ease of non-action hinder in any attempt at revolution. It takes time and effort to spark a transformation, and even when it is sparked, there is no guarantee that it will catch flame. The People’s Republic fell slowly to the Solidarity Movement, and even when it did collapse, its ideology did not fully disappear with the government; it took effort to break away from collectivism. The nation had spent over forty years living in a totalitarian culture; this means that there were children who knew nothing else, and adults who had spent the majority of their lives under its hold. This makes it difficult to enact change.

The desire for true identity and the drive of a nation to differentiate from its oppressors is a similarly strong combatant. Objects naturally arc: after swinging too far to one end of a spectrum, the innate tendency is for an object to swing to the opposite end. So, after being kept under the collectivist, totalitarian system for over forty years, it is Poland’s natural desire to swing in the opposite direction and embrace the contrast. This holds especially true because of the abuse that the Poles faced during the World War II and post-World War II eras. The Poles lost a large portion of their population and diversity during the Great War (Behrends), and those who were left bore the wounds of Hemingway’s Lost Generation. Hence, the Poles hold a widespread desire to escape the stigma of the People’s

Republic. Furthermore, they desired their own identity, their own orientation—not that of the conquering nation.

Katyń takes up the cause of traditional individualism: it attempts to assert Poland's original, individualist orientation by displaying strong, independent characters. For example, Anna demonstrates strong resistance to the Soviet rule. The film is primarily concerned with Anna and her husband Andrzej. Early in the film, Andrzej is taken to a Soviet work camp; some time later, he becomes a casualty of *Katyń*. However, his wife Anna does not know about this until the end of the war, forcing her to live with the fear that her husband is dead. Yet, she handles the fear, and takes it in stride, holding onto hope in spite of all the circumstances. Even when Anna's own mother tries to tell her that her husband is dead, she remains true to her personal conviction that he lives. Anna also demonstrates strength when she refuses to marry a Soviet officer to save herself and her daughter. With her life on the line, she remains faithful and brave, preferring to die rather than act against her principle. This is the picture of Polish resistance Wajda provides the viewers of *Katyń*. During the Soviet occupation and the era of the People's Republic, not every Pole actively resisted totalitarianism. But, according to Wajda, passive submission does not mean total support: Anna does not fly in the face of the Soviets, but that does not mean that she ascribes to their ideals. In reality, as she continues to live her life as if it were normal, she demonstrates a form of opposition. This is especially evident as she retains her sense of self despite the Soviet's collectivist campaign: she starts a photography business, raises her daughter, and lives as she did before the Republic. In essence, Anna harbors traditional Polish individualism through the Soviet winter so that it might live to see the spring.

Anna's husband Andrzej shows similar strength. At the beginning of *Katyń*, Andrzej is given the chance to escape from the Soviet's hands; but he refuses the opportunity. Instead, he tells his wife that his duty is to serve his country and his men (*Katyń*). So he willingly boards the train to the Soviet work camp. Like his wife, Andrzej demonstrates a type of passive rebellion by retaining his

individualism: it was not the Soviets who made him board the train, but his own conscious decision to fulfill his duty. Wajda uses Andrzej primarily to question the extent of Soviet power during their occupation of Poland after the Great War. The purpose of totalitarianism is to control not only actions of the people, but the thoughts as well—hence, the abundance of propaganda in totalitarian states. However, by making an autonomous decision, Andrzej did not allow the Soviets to do this. Wajda also uses Andrzej to paint a picture of the Polish people as a strong, faithful nation that honors service and self-sacrifice.

Agnieszka acts as another example of Polish resistance to the Soviet cause. The Soviets killed her brother in the *Katyń* massacre. To honor him after the war, Agnieszka orders a headstone to place in the local church. But, she flies in the face of the Soviets when she lists his death date as spring of 1941—a date that would place the blame of *Katyń* on the Soviets' shoulders. When Agnieszka tries to erect the memorial in the local church, the priest tells her she could not put it up because of the date, and urges her to abandon the attempt; she refuses and departs for a cemetery. Along the way, Agnieszka's sister confronts her, imploring her to forget about the memorial and save herself, to "side with the living instead of the dead" (*Katyń*). Again, Agnieszka declines. She places the memorial in the graveyard, and is taken into custody by the Soviet police. She is then given an opportunity to recant, and endorse the Soviet date. She declines and is led away. Agnieszka constitutes the perfect example of Polish individualism, strength, and bravery. When she is confronted by the priest, she declines to listen; when confronted by her own sister, she does the same; and when her life is possibly on the line in a Soviet interrogation, she refuses to relent. She will not conform or bow her principles to the will of others. She chooses not so much the "dead over the living," (*Katyń*) as her sister accused her of doing, but her personal values over her life: she is the ultimate individualist.

Lieutenant Jerzy strongly contrasts the other characters: while Anna, Andrzej, and Agnieszka resist the Soviets on the basis of sheer principle, Jerzy supports the

Soviets despite his knowledge of the facts, demonstrating what Wajda sees as the weakness that comes with socialism, totalitarianism, and the unquestionable obedience to authorities. After surviving World War II in a Soviet work camp, Jerzy chooses to support the Soviet's claim to innocence by joining the Polish People's Army, which buttressed the Russian cause. He also affirms their claim that the Katyń massacre occurred in 1942, even though he witnessed the event in 1941. However, Jerzy cannot live with his lie. After the General's widow confronts Jerzy, he goes to a bar and becomes intoxicated. He begins to ramble, and is escorted from the bar: when he reaches the street, he pulls out a pistol and shoots himself in the head. Jerzy watched the Soviets lead his friends away: he knew the truth about the massacre and was in the best possible position to resist the Soviets. But he does not do it. Instead, he joins their ranks and urges others to do the same. Then, whenever he is made accountable for his actions, he kills himself. Interestingly, though, Jerzy's suicide suggests that he changed in orientation at the end of his life. Lester states, "Because external pressures, such as totalitarianism in the government, give citizens a clear external source to blame for their unhappiness, this situation should make them assaultive rather than depressed and homicidal rather than suicidal" (Lester). However, Jerzy does not lash out at others: anger at the Soviet's crime does not cause his suicide, otherwise he would have tended to be more homicidal than suicidal. Instead individual guilt causes him to take his life. At the end, he realizes the truth that his actions and decisions are his own and independent from the rest of society. His change in orientation leads to his suicide, as he is too weak to accept responsibility for his personal actions.

Wajda's picture of Polish resistance is obvious, but it only matters if it affects its audiences; many argue that it does. At the hands of a master, film has virtually limitless power, as it holds the ability to impose a visual version of an actual event on an audience—and Director Wajda is a master. In his film, the audiences see the slaughter at Katyń and the damage it caused, and they feel empathy for the victims and their families. Then, when the audiences witness the strength the Poles show throughout the ordeal, they are

inspired, which is his Wajda's goal. He wants his nation to reassert its individuality, so he uses his gift and shows characters that lead by example.

Still, others question whether or not Wajda's judgments are correct—if he is not painting a picture of Polish courage and individuality that is too rosy. After all, several characters in *Katyń* possess abnormal daring in the face of danger: Anna would rather risk her life and the life of her child than marry a Soviet officer; Andrzej walks confidently to his death when he had the option of life; Agnieszka goes to prison rather than say the Germans were responsible for *Katyń*. In the entire film, only one character gives in to the Soviets, and he ends up dying by the action of his own weak hands. This, obviously, is not a perfect cross section of the Polish people during the post-World War II era, but the movie can get away with it because of its realism. The entire film is brimming with bleak, yet accurate, realism. The movie opens with a scene that gives the audience an accurate feeling of panic as the Poles flee both east and west. They carry half-packed trunks and odds and ends from their now-abandoned homes, and call out the names of loved ones into the chaos. The end of the movie is even more brutally realistic. Wajda shows a dozen officers being led to an open pit, and shot through the back of the head by a Soviet pistol. Yet the film does not broach on sentimentality. The characters carry out their actions stoically and with a sense of definite purpose that makes the film entirely believable.

Wajda's film asserts an individualist Polish orientation by accurately exhibiting characters that display strong, traditional Polish independence in their reactions to the totalitarian Soviet regime. Poland lies on the borders of both collectivist and individualist cultures, and only recently ascended from an oppressive foreign-founded government. This renders the nation divided, as the new tries to unseat the old and unbalance ensues. *Katyń* attempts to remedy this unbalance by depicting Polish characters that lead by example with strength and individualism. Wajda is largely successful in his attempt thanks to his skill, the skill of his actors, and the innate power of film; still, some question whether or not *Katyń* is nothing more than anti-Soviet

propaganda, and whether or not its depictions of characters are not overly romantic. However, the movie is entirely realistic: it does not broach on sentimentality, and therefore retains its integrity. In conclusion, *Katyń* helps assert Poland's traditional orientation by displaying individualism and strength in an inspiring way.

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