

FILM

## KATYN

**Abhijit Ghosh-Dastidar**

In Andrej Wajda's "Katyn" (Poland, 2008, colour, 118 mins), the credits appear on dark rain clouds, as Soviet Union invades Poland in 1939. Refugees from both sides, scamper over a bridge on 17 Sep, 1939. The faces of terror are caught by hand held camera. Anna (Maja Ostaszewska), with her little daughter Nika, is searching for husband, who belonged to the 8th Crakow Ulhan Regiment. She declines a car lift from another lady. The soldier husband is never found. Nearby is a camp hospital, with wounded soldiers, undergoing surgery in open medical camps. A Roman Catholic priest performs last rites. A statue of Christ is covered by a coat. A loud speaker announces that the Bolsheviks have entered the town. Surrounded by Soviet tanks, the Polish soldiers surrender, and the Soviets take the Polish officers. Anna meets her husband, Andrzej (Artur Zmijewski) who is military pledge bound, and declines to move away with his wife.

The white and red Polish flags are torn, and only red flags fly. Andrzej is moved by train to Soviet Russia. His father Jan is a professor at the University. The local Nazi SS Officer advises that the university be closed for anti-German propaganda, and all professors are pushed and arrested by soldiers. In November 1939, Polish soldiers are prisoners in a camp barrack in Kosielski guarded by Russian Soviet soldiers. Loudspeakers in the occupation zone announce that resistance is pointless. Permission to return to Cracow is refused in December 1939. A captured Polish general encourages that these will never be a free Poland, without soldiers. The sighting of an evening star heralds Christmas, and songs are sung around Jesus Christ. At Cracow while letters from her husband are withheld from Anna, a Russian captain offers marriage to Anna. The wives of Polish officers are taken into custody. Elizabeth, the wife of another Polish officer, and her daughter, are taken away. Anna and her daughter, Nika are saved by the Russian captain, when the warrant of arrest arrives. Anna and Nika take shelter at Anna's mother's place. A letter arrives informing that Anna's father has died of a cardiac arrest in a detention camp at Sachsenhausen.

Polish soldiers at detention camps, are shifted in trucks. Anna and her mother are happy that in the roll call of names of the dead, husband Andrzej, is not mentioned. All Polish relatives are instructed to report to the German General's office, where the Katyn List of Dead would be read out. Diplomacy plays, and Soviet atrocities on Poles at Katyn are highlighted. There was mass murder of Poles in the Katyn forests, where 20,000 Poles were killed. One Polish wife is shown newsreel footage. The Nazi soldiers emphasize that they are protecting the continent. The Polish officers are murdered by the Soviets in the spring of 1940, and thrown into mass graves. Wives and daughters of bereaved families are directed by the German soldiers to read out prepared statements.

German flags are brought down in Cracow in 1945. Stasa, an old maid, returns to the house of the German general. She returns the General's sword. Her husband had collaborated with the Soviets. A Polish major Jerzy (Andrzej Chyral) returns from Russia to inform that Andrzej was last seen in 1940, and

he was dead wearing Jerzy's sweater. Soviet secret agent NKVP are on Polish university campuses, and research papers are packed. Each body from Katyn had undergone detailed autopsy. Every Polish body was shot with a bullet. The Germans treated the murders by the Russians, with utter cynicism. Newsreel footages depict the Katyn murders. The wife of a Russian general protests that it was lies at a public meeting. Stalin needed Polish officers to certify agreement with Germany. Jerzy feels that nobody will resurrect the dead anyway, and salutes the Soviet Officers. Digging up of the Katyn graves is suspended, and German atrocities in Katyn are broadcast. Horrible rumors abound, and nobody knows the truth. Radio broadcasts refer to blood at Katyn forests, and call for revenge. On a street in Cracow, Jerzy shoots himself on the head, with a pistol. Over 20,000 Polish intelligenzia, consisting of professionals like engineers and professors, dressed in uniform were shot by the Soviets in Katyn. A rosary from Anna's brother, who died in Katyn in 1943, is returned to Anna.

Depicting the almost simultaneous Soviet and German invasions of Poland in September 1939, and the Red Army's subsequent capture and shooting of about 20,000 educated and patriotic Polish officers in the Russian forests of Katyn, Wajda uses motifs of a Russian orthodox monastery converted to a prison, a bridge with refugees, an open air field hospital and mass graves. The rapid clips on the anecdotal stories and the brutalities of the murders allow the visuals to uncover historical truths. Pawel Edelman's photography never loses focus on the brutalities, with forward zooms and close-ups. Music, composed by Krzysztof Penderecki, echos the episodes and is a religious hymn for the massacred. Portrayals and the acting are breathtaking. The film was screened at the Kolkata Film Festival (Nov, 2008). □□□