

The Katyn Order

Douglas W. Jacobson

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In 1940 the Soviet army executed 20,000 Polish army officers and civilians, a command issued from the highest authority, the eponymous Katyn Order of Jacobson's second historical thriller. As the German army withdraws from Poland in 1944, finding and destroying all evidence of the massacre becomes essential for the Russians to retain control over the war-ravaged country. Jacobson chronicles the efforts of assassin Adam "The Wolf" Nowak and a band of Polish partisans known as the Armia Krajowa, or AK, who survive the German invasion only to face even greater risk under Russian rule. Finding the surviving document that will prove Stalin's direct influence on the Katyn Forest slaughter is their only chance for survival, one made even slimmer by the ruthless campaign to expunge all evidence of Russian responsibility.

This journey takes Nowak through the bombed-out buildings and sewers of Warsaw to the streets of London, and into the remote forests of the Trata Mountains as he races to keep one step ahead of the NKVD. Polish by birth, American by upbringing, and allied with the British government, Nowak moves fluidly between many of the war's most dynamic fronts. But his mission soon becomes personal as he finds his role as ruthless assassin challenged by his feelings for the brave and beautiful Natalia Kowalski, a dedicated member of the AK who fights to protect her fellow partisans, the only family she has left. The last known location of the Katyn Order has personal significance for Nowak, too: it was entrusted to his uncle, Ludwik Banach, a man long believed lost to the Sachsenhausen concentration camp, whose death is revealed to be anything but certain.

In *The Katyn Order* Jacobson presents a fast-paced thriller rich with historical details of wartime Poland and the tangles of shifting political allegiances. At times the book suffers from the faults of its genre: the dialogue is heavy on exposition; many characters lack depth (British officers call each other "chap" and "old sport;" all Russian officers are vodka-bottle waving brutes); and the prose can be amateurishly instructive. But the camaraderie of the AK members and burgeoning love between two members helps to soften the rough edges. And NKVD Major Tarnov, the ruthless antagonist, is as menacing a presence as one is likely to encounter. The result is a taut, nuanced thriller illuminating one of the many dynamic dramas of World War II.

MICHAEL BEEMAN (May / June 2011)

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