

# Archaeology of Graves: a Contribution to Contemporary Archaeology in Poland

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Archaeology, usually associated with the distant past, is moving into new areas of research. Today it is also embracing recent history, including the investigation of burials of the fallen and murdered, victims of the twentieth century's turbulent history. Archaeological methods of research are now being employed for exhumations of the wartime and post-war dead.

KEY-WORDS: contemporary archaeology, grave, exhumation, archaeological exhumation works, archaeology of totalitarianism, archaeology of crime scenes, Poland

## INTRODUCTION

In 2018 Dr Claudia Theune, Professor at the University of Vienna, published at Leiden (the Netherlands) a book titled “A Shadow of War. Archaeological approaches to uncovering the darker sides of conflict from the 20th century”. The article here is written in reference to that book.

Contemporary archaeology is becoming increasingly involved in investigations of battle fields, cemeteries, scenes of war crimes and of the graves of victims of totalitarian regimes (Lech 1997–1998: 149–151; Trzeciński ed. 2013; Theune 2014; 2018; Ławrynowicz and Żelazko eds 2015; Zalewska 2016)<sup>1</sup>. Excavations and excavation methods supplement scientific knowledge, facilitate determining the cause of death, provide new material sources (Bem and Mazurek 2012; Sturdy-Colls 2015; Pawłoś 2016; Siemińska 2016; Wichowska 2016). Apart from the special excavations at the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp, carried out in 1967, the beginnings of contemporary archaeology of this type of “dark heritage” in Poland can be dated to the 1990s.

Archaeological exhumation works in Poland are being undertaken more and more frequently, with archaeology contributing its excavation methods – precise, methodical

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exploration and detailed documentation (Trzciński ed. 2013: 112–183; Sturdy-Colls 2015: 113–192; Zalewska 2016: 21–43). This type of research is sometimes included in a wider field known as the archaeology of totalitarianism. Apart from looking at traces of crimes against humanity committed in those times, it also focuses on elements of material culture associated with totalitarian systems (*cf.* Lech 1997–1998: Fig. 77; Theune 2014: 19–22, 61–65; 2018: 124–143). In this kind of work the accounts of eye-witnesses are often used to help determine the places where archaeological investigations should be carried out (Bem and Mazurek 2012: 12–13; Trzciński ed. 2013: 119–120; Ławrynowicz and Żelazko 2015; Sturdy-Colls 2015: 59; Theune 2018: 32–34).

As mentioned earlier, the first such research in Poland was done in 1967 by the Institute of History of Material Culture, Polish Academy of Sciences. Excavations were carried out at the Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp, near the ruins of the gas chamber and crematorium, twenty-two years after the camp's liberation. The discovered items included pieces of clothing and numerous personal items belonging to the prisoners: footwear, perfume and medicine bottles, brushes, pipes, buttons, watches, jewellery, keys and fragments of dishes (Hensel 1973: 171–172; Kajzer 1984: 10; Gurba 1996: 26; Lech 1997–1998: 130–131).

#### KATYN: FROM GERMAN AND SOVIET EXHUMATIONS TO POLISH ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATIONS

In April and May 1940, under in the so-called the Katyn (Katyń) massacre, NKVD soldiers shot over 21 000 Poles, army and police officers, detained in Soviet prisoner of war camps after the Soviet Union joined the Third Reich's war with Poland, from 17 September, 1939. The victims, held until then in Russia, in camps in Kozelsk (Kozielsk), Starobilsk (Starobielsk) and Ostashkov (Ostaszów), were killed with a shot to the back of the head. The murdered were buried in mass graves at Katyn, Kharkov (Charków), Mednoye (Miednoje) and Bykivnia (Bykownia); (Lech 1997–1998: 149–151; Kola 2009: 107–116; Siemińska 2012: 71–86; Piątek and Siemińska 2015: 21–26).

The mass graves in Katyn were first encountered by Polish railway workers in 1941. The Germans, occupying this part of the USSR, learned about them at the beginning of 1943. From 29 March to 30 June, 1943, they carried out exhumation work in Katyn (Fig. 1). They were headed by Dr Gerhard Buhtz (1896–1944), Professor at the University of Breslau (today Wrocław in Poland), a member of the SS (Buhtz 1943). Among exhumed bodies were those of Jan Bartys (1909–1941), Jan Fitzke (1909–1940) and Tadeusz Dobrogowski (1909–1940), three archaeologists, mobilized in 1939 (Blomborgowa 1992: 179–180; Łojek 1992: 151; Gurba 1996: 28; Lech 1997–1998: 56–57; Kisielewski 2008: 98–192; Wieczorkiewicz 2014: 349–354; Theune 2018: 118–120).



**Fig. 1.** Katyn, Smolensk Oblast. 1943. German exhumation works. Photograph shows a mass grave. After G. Buhtz (1943)

A team of Polish specialists returned to the study of mass graves in Katyn in September 1994, with the consent of the Russian authorities. Field work was carried out using archaeological methods. It is a good example of archaeological and exhumation work of great social significance, important both for Polish history of the 20th century and modern archaeology (Gurba 1996: 28; Lech 1997–1998: 150–151; Trzciński ed. 2013: 24). The initiator of the work carried out by Polish archaeologists from the 5th to the 25th of September 1994 was the Council for the Protection of Struggle and Martyrdom Sites (*Rada Ochrony Pamięci Walk i Męczeństwa*). The excavations were directed by Professor Marian Głosek from the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology of the Polish Academy of Sciences, Lodz Branch. The work involved using probe drillings. As a result, 83 boreholes were drilled to a maximum depth of 420 cm, revealing the presence of five burial pits. This information was verified by digging trial trenches in the area of the cemetery designated by the Polish Red Cross. The skeletons were mixed together and deposited mainly at depths of 100 to 230 cm. In many cases, the skulls were missing<sup>2</sup>, the bodies were placed in rows with their heads facing west.

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<sup>2</sup> The previous exhumations carried out by the Germans with the participation of the Polish Red Cross were not done with due accuracy, hence the mixing up of the skeletons and missing skulls.

Personal belongings, shell casings and bullets were discovered next to the victims (Głosek 1995: 115–123; ed. 2003: 15–148; Dutkiewicz 1996: 39–45; Persak 2010: 42–44).

The next stage of excavation work in the Katyn Forest covered the area of the Polish War Cemetery and took place from 6 June to 8 September, 1995. It was survey and exhumation work, beginning with initial reconnaissance of the site employing a hand-held geological drill. During the tests, 946 boreholes were drilled. On this basis, five trenches were marked out, locating the outlines of all the mass graves – “death pits”. Then, narrow trial trenches were dug, encompassing the grave trenches, while carrying out exhumations with the participation of anthropologists and forensic medics. In total, as a result of archaeological work in the years 1994–1995, over 360 murdered men were exhumed. Most of the skulls showed traces of gunshots in the back of the head (Głosek 1996; ed. 2003: 259–285; 2015; Kola 2001: 69–76; Persak 2010: 44–46; Góra and Kola 2015; Theune 2018: 118–120).

#### WARSAW AFTER WORLD WAR II

One instance of mass exhumations on an unprecedented in Europe scale was Warsaw in the first years after the World War II. After the uprising in the Warsaw Ghetto in April-May of 1943, which claimed about thirteen thousand victims, on the 1st of August 1944 the Warsaw Uprising broke out (1 August – 2 October, 1944). According to various estimates, about 150 to 200 thousand people died (Kirchmayer 1984: 462). People were buried wherever space could be found, in parks, courtyards, cellars, gateways, streets (Fig. 2). At times, a bottle was buried next to the corpse with information about the deceased: name, address and date of birth (Zaremba 2012: 93–95; Grzebałkowska 2015: 223–229; Szymańska 2015).



**Fig. 2.** Warsaw. August 1944. A cemetery from the Warsaw Uprising in a garden at 9 Mazowiecka St. From the collection of the Archive of the Warsaw Rising Museum. Photo: E. Lokajski

**Fig. 3.** Warsaw. April–May 1945. Records of post-war exhumations in Narutowicza Square next to the Church of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the parish of Saint James the Apostle. The photograph shows exhumed human remains with crosses and identification labels. From the collection of the Archive of the Warsaw Rising Museum. Photo: E. Haneman



Warsaw was liberated on 17 January, 1945 by the Red Army. Exhumations on a large scale began in March 1945 and ended three years later. The work was carried out by the Bureau of Information and Search of the Polish Red Cross, consisting mainly of women – often nurses and medical orderlies from the Warsaw Uprising. Employees of the Bureau inspected corpses and attempted to identify bodies based on inscriptions on crosses, personal items and documents discovered in the graves (Fig. 3). Unidentified and unclaimed corpses were initially moved to cemeteries organized temporarily in several places in Warsaw, then to the Powązki Military Cemetery and the Warsaw Insurgents Cemetery in Wola district (Borkowski 2009: 35–36; Grzebalkowska 2015: 229–235).

#### PALMIRY: GRAVES OF VICTIMS OF GERMAN CRIMES FROM 1939–1941

The exhumations carried out near Warsaw, in the village of Palmiry, in the Kampinos Forest, from 1945–1947, by the Polish Red Cross, in the presence of workers from the Central Commission for the Investigation of German Crimes in Poland, had a similar character. From 14 December, 1939 to 17 July, 1941, the Germans executed 1793 people, brought here from the Pawiak prison in Warsaw. Among them was the promising archaeologist Stefan Przeworski (1900–1940; 1939; see Lech 1997–1998: 55, 57). Information about places of execution and graves of victims was provided by forest services and local residents. As a result of the exhumations, 24 mass graves were located, containing almost 1800 bodies (Fig. 4). 576 victims were identified on the basis of documents found upon the bodies or by their families. A further 480 of the murdered were identified owing to witness statements and lists with names of those being taken away from the prison. The identity of the remaining victims was not determined. Altogether, 2115 people rested in Palmiry (Bartoszewski 1968: 40–85; 1969: 38–86; 1976: 103–104; Misiak 2006: 6–7; Wardzyńska 2009: 242–243; Sołtysik 2011: 157–158).



**Fig. 4.** Palmiry, Nowy Dwór district. 1946. Exhumation work at the scene of a war crime. A Polish Red Cross clerk is examining a body. After W. Bartoszewski (1968)

#### CRACOW: POSTWAR EXHUMATIONS OF VICTIMS OF THE GERMAN OCCUPATION

In the years 1939–1941, Fort 49 “Krzesławice” was the scene of mass executions of Poles carried out by the SS and the German police. The victims were political prisoners detained in Cracow prisons on Montelupich and Senacka Streets (the latter now houses the Archaeological Museum of Cracow). The prisoners were murdered by a shot to the back of the head over a previously prepared grave. The first exhumations of victims from the Krzesławice fort were carried out from 15 October – 6 December 1945 by the Central Commission for the Investigation of German Crimes in Poland; 29 graves were uncovered, located in the moats of the fort (23) and in the courtyard (6). The remains of 440 people were found, including 18 women (15–70 years of age). It was possible to identify 182 people. After the exhumations ended, the remains were laid in a common grave (Wroński 1981: 8–26; Wardzyńska 2009: 269).

In the years 2013–2015, Dr Krzysztof Tunia from the Centre for Archaeology of the Mountains and Uplands in Cracow, branch of the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology of the Polish Academy of Sciences (PAS), conducted archaeological-exhumation excavation in Cracow-Przegorzały (lot no. 154/1 on Bruzdowa Street). During the first years of the occupation, Polish citizens, Poles and Jews, were executed here. The bones of 125 people who had been shot were discovered<sup>3</sup>. The remains were exhumed, examined, laid in small, specially prepared wooden coffins and buried again where they had been found. The place of the crime was commemorated (Tunia ed. 2013; ed. 2014; ed. 2015a).

<sup>3</sup> The author would like to thank Dr Krzysztof Tunia for his unpublished information about the excavations at Cracow-Przegorzały.

## GRAVES OF SOLDIERS OF THE SOVIET ARMY FROM WORLD WAR II

After the end of World War II, the graves of Soviet soldiers who died in Poland in 1944–1945 were inventoried, and from 1948 exhumations were carried out. The bodies of the dead were moved to specially organized quarters in existing cemeteries.

Archaeological-exhumation work in the southern, Carpathian part, of the Małopolska voivodeship was carried out by Dr Krzysztof Tunia (PAS) with the consent of the Russians (Tunia ed. 2015b; Sadowski 2016: 288–304; Przybyła *et al.*, 2016: 322–340). The aim was to transfer graves still on private land, or in hard to reach places, and place them in a common grave in the cemetery in Nowy Sącz, in the quarter reserved for soldiers of the Soviet Army. The graves were explored in accordance with modern exhumation procedures (Fig. 5). Anthropological analyses were also carried out at the excavation site. Detailed documentation was performed at each stage of the work (Tunia ed. 2015b; ed. 2018; Przybyła *et al.*, 2016: 322–324).

In 2018 in Chrzanów, Małopolska voivodship, the most extensive exhumations in Poland were carried out at the military cemetery of Red Army soldiers. The remains of 1340 soldiers were exhumed and moved to the town cemetery in Chrzanów, where they were placed in a common grave. This work was also directed by Dr Krzysztof Tunia (ed. 2018).



**Fig. 5.** Nowy Sącz. 2015. Personal items uncovered with the remains of Soviet soldiers during excavations. Photo: B. Urbański. After A. Szczepanek and B. Urbański (2016)

## GRAVES OF GERMAN SOLDIERS FROM WORLD WAR II

The object of archaeological and exhumation work carried out by the “Pomost” Historical and Archaeological Research Atelier in Poland are the German graves of

soldiers who were killed in 1945. In 1990, cooperation was initiated between the Polish and German Red Cross, the Ministry of Land Management and Building and the German War Graves Commission. On 30 January, 1990, the Polish-German Commission for the Graves of German Soldiers was established. In 1994, the Commission established the “Memory” Foundation, which supervised exhumations. In 1997, the “Pomost” Association was established in Poznań, initially for the purpose of searching for German cemeteries in Poland. Since 1999, the Association together with the “Memory” Foundation has undertaken exhumation work in the western part of the country. Currently, research is being carried out in the area of the Kuyavian-Pomeranian, West Pomeranian, Lower Silesian and Opole voivodeships. In 2013, the Association was transformed into the “Pomost” Historical and Archaeological Research Atelier, which deals in conducting archaeological and exhumation work. The change consisted in the implementation of archaeological research methods for exhumation works in the field of searching for, exploration and documentation of graves. Discovered artefacts, after being recorded, are transferred to museums, but without identification items (Frąckowiak 2017: 109–118).

#### JEDWABNE – JEWS, VICTIMS OF THEIR POLISH NEIGHBOURS

For religious reasons, restrictions apply to archaeological excavations carried out at sites associated with the extermination of the Jewish population. According to *Halakhab*, Jewish law, from the moment when the body is laid in the grave, it cannot be disturbed and, consequently, the exhumation of corpses is forbidden. This is the so-called principle of the inviolability of the grave, according to which the resting remains await the coming of the Messiah (Theune 2018: 73).

That is why the exhumations and archaeological excavations at Jedwabne, Łomża district, undertaken in 2001 by Professor Andrzej Kola (from the Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń), were suspended. The objective of the excavations was to determine the number of Jews from Jedwabne burned to death by their Polish neighbours (10 July, 1941). The massacre was inspired by the German “Kommando Białystok” (*Einsatzkommando*) led by *SS-Hauptsturmführer* Wolfgang Birkner (1913–1945), active in the area at the time. It was also a savage revenge for cooperation with the Soviet administration and NKVD by some of the Jews during the Soviet occupation of eastern Poland between 17 September 1939 – 22 June 1941 (Gross 2001; Machcewicz and Persak eds 2002; Szarota 2002: 462–466, 499).

#### VICTIMS OF COMMUNISM

In recent years, important archaeological and exhumation works have been carried out by the Department of Search and Identification of the Institute of National

Remembrance, as part of a research project entitled “Searching for unknown burial sites of victims of communist terror 1944–1956”. The project was initiated on 10 November, 2011 by the Institute of National Remembrance, the Council for the Protection of Struggle and Martyrdom Sites and the Ministry of Justice. The project is directed by the historian Professor Krzysztof Szwagrzyk (2015). The main purpose of the research is to locate the graves of victims of communist repression in Poland, to explore them and then exhume the bodies in order to establish identity and give the victims a dignified burial (see also Paczkowski 2015). An interdisciplinary research team was set up and has carried out work in many places in Poland (Konczewski 2015; Latocha 2015; Szwagrzyk 2015; Żelazko 2015; Krüger 2016; Wichowska 2016: 14–17).

The most famous are the excavations carried out on the edge of the Powązki Military Cemetery in Warsaw. The site is known by its earlier name of “Łączka” (Little Meadow). Today, these are carefully ordered cemetery quarters marked as “Ł” and “Ł2”. In the years 1948–1955, in the period of Stalinist totalitarianism (see Lech 1997–1998: 84–85), this area was not used by the management of the cemetery. The prison authorities of that time buried here about three hundred victims of the “dictatorship of the proletariat”. Among them were soldiers of the anti-communist underground, opposition political activists, and falsely accused officers of the Polish Army who had either been sentenced to death and executed or died as a result of brutal interrogations (Szejnert 2012; Szwagrzyk 2015; Wichowska 2016).

The works on the “Łączka” site were carried out from 2012–2017 (Fig. 6). These were both geophysical investigations and excavations. To carry out the work, the memorial erected in October 1991 in honour of the murdered had to be dismantled, and the asphalt road and the pavement adjoining the “Ł” quarter removed (Lech 2017: 91, Fig. 2, 3). In 2017 over 195 recent graves were dug up, down to a depth of over 3 m. Next to them and underneath, several thousand loose bones were found. The result



**Fig. 6.** Warsaw. 2012. Powązki Military Cemetery, “Łączka”. Archaeological exhumation work. Archaeologist (left) and anthropologists are examining grave pits. Photo: P. Życieński. After K. Wichowska (2016)

of the excavations was the recovery of the remains of over 200 people. The victims had been buried collectively, mostly in clothes or uniforms (Polish and German) and in footwear. With some burials, personal items such as combs, toothbrushes, crosses and medallions were found (Szwagrzyk 2015: 338–341; Wichowska 2016: 22–35).

#### FINAL REMARKS

The exhumation works carried out during the World War II (Katyn) and in the first post-war years were aimed at documenting war crimes, honouring the fallen and murdered and organizing the space of a country gradually returning to a normal life. Such was the nature of the exhumation of graves of the War dead from September 1939, of the victims of the massacres in Palmiry, of those killed in the uprising in the Warsaw Ghetto (1943) and during the Warsaw Uprising (1944). At that time, the work was carried out by the Polish Red Cross.

Archaeological field studies in the years 1991 and 1994–1995 in Katyn, Kharkov and Mednoye were of great importance. Thanks to the methods of archaeological research used, mass graves were found, examined and some circumstances of the crime and creation of the graves could be determined. The work was carefully documented. Each archaeologist participating in the research prepared his own report on the activities carried out (Kola 2001; 2011; Głosek 2003: 5–13; Góra and Kola 2015). The work done was of a scientific nature. Stress was placed on revealing the circumstances of the death, the context of the grave or the artefacts found in it, rather than on the actual moving of the human remains, characteristic of previous exhumations.

Research directed by the Department of Search and Identification of the Institute of National Remembrance has a slightly different character. It still retains the features of an exhumation. The nature of this work is not strictly scientific, it is rather about using archaeological methods for the needs of criminal investigations (Trzcíński ed. 2013: 28). However, these studies also take on the characteristics of interdisciplinary scientific research. On the other hand, work carried out by the “Pomost” Atelier or the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology of the Polish Academy of Sciences (except for Cracow-Przegorzały – where the investigation is still continuing) is devoid of any judicial nature. It combines the humanitarian objective with the scientific aspect through the use of archaeological excavation methods. It is based on the archaeological exploration of grave pits and detailed photographic and descriptive documentation (Tunia ed. 2013; ed. 2014; ed. 2015a; ed. 2015b; ed. 2018; Przybyła *et al.*, 2016).

Many of the various research methods used in modern archaeology have found application in this archaeological and exhumation work. Can we talk about a new area within contemporary archaeology devoted to recognizing crime scenes and conducting

archaeological-exhumation studies of graves associated with the wars and ethnic conflicts of the 20th century? As yet the answer is still pending, but it seems possible.

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