Medicolegal reconstruction of the Katyn forest massacre

Invited article

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Abstract

The genesis of the massacre of Polish officers, committed by the Soviets in the Katyn forest in 1940, is presented. Medicolegal documentation of the exhumation by the International Committee is contrary to the report by the Special Soviet Committee. The importance of the medicolegal findings concerning the time of the crime is stressed. The report by the Select Committee of the House of Representatives is also referred to.

Keywords: History; Forensic pathology; Reconstruction; Exhumation; Katyn forest massacre

1. Genesis of the crime

Three dates, 23 August, 1 and 17 September 1939, are the most important in the modern history of Poland. They signify the start of the fourth partition of our country.

During the night of 23/24 August 1939, Ribbentrop and Molotov signed a non-aggression pact, ratified by the Supreme Soviet of the Soviet Union on 30 August 1939. On 17 September 1939, with an unexpected, illegal attack by the Soviet army, the war started. The Polish Commander-in-Chief, Marshall Edward Rydz-Śmigly, issued the so-called 'General Instruction', an order not to fight the Red Army, preferring instead to negotiate, or to defend only in cases of attempted disarming. General Rommel, commander of the Warsaw defence, even ordered troops to treat
the Soviets as our allies. It brought about disastrous consequences for both our army and our country. It is important to understand that Polish officers were considered not to be prisoners-of-war, but counter-revolutionaries, caught armed on Soviet territory, according to the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact. What is more, the Soviet government had not signed the Geneva Convention Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War and so did not feel obliged to obey commonly accepted rules of behavior in time of war. According to Soviet documents, some 230,000–250,000 Polish soldiers were interned, including ~15,000 officers.

Firstly, imprisoned Polish officers and intellectuals were displaced among 138 transit camps, for subsequent relocation to permanent camps. The Soviets, not accepting the Geneva Convention of 1929, not only did not inform anyone, even the International Red Cross (IRC), but opposed all attempts to learn the facts. The existence of these camps was disclosed during Christmas 1939. Then the prisoners were allowed to correspond with their families. A great number of letters came to Poland, with information on the numbers and location of the imprisoned. Correspondence from Kozielsk, Starobielsk and Ostaszków came to an abrupt stop in April 1940.

### 2. Detection of the crime

On 22 June 1941 the Germans unexpectedly entered the Soviet Union. After taking territories around Smolensk, in March 1942 a building train 2005 (Bauzug-2005M) appeared on a railway track between Witebsk and Smolensk. It was used for repairs and rebuilding of railway tracks. The people employed on it by the German Todt Organization were Poles from Poznan and the surrounding area. They stayed for a month near Katyn, and were told by the local inhabitants about mass executions. Digging in the Katyn forest they found the corpses of Polish officers. Local officials and Wehrmacht soldiers soon learnt of the discovery, but did not pay much attention to it.

On 30 July 1941 a pact between the Soviet government and the Polish Government-in-Exile was signed in London. As a result, an amnesty for all Polish citizens was announced, including interned and imprisoned prisoners-of-war. A Polish-Soviet military treaty was signed on 14 August 1941. Attempts to find Polish officers interned in the USSR and call them up for service in the newly-formed Polish Army were unsuccessful; 45% of all the officers of the Army had been lost. No wonder the search was the subject of top-level talks between Polish and Soviet officials.

### 3. Documentation of the crime

Here is a fragment of the report by Professor Gerhard Buhtz, who was in charge of the medicolegal investigation by the German Committee: ‘On 1st March 1943 I received, for further utilization, a report from the secret field police (Feldgendarmen), dated 28th February 1943, about mass graves of Polish officers shot in the Katyn forest in 1940 by NKVD. Together with the secret field police, after trial exhumations, I became convinced that the evidence obtained from inhabitants of the surrounding villages was true. Frozen soil delayed the start of excavation and examination of the corpses. On 29th March 1943 exhumation started.’
Fig. 1. An autopsy by Professors Palmieri and Naville.
German radio in Berlin, on 13 April 1943, broadcast information of the discovery of graves in Kosogóry, ~16 km from Smolensk, thus: 'The committee found a ditch 29 m long and 16 m wide, in which there were 3000 corpses of Polish officers, in 12 layers. They were in full uniform, partly-bound, and all had shot wounds to the back of the head. Identification of the corpses will not prove difficult as they are mum-mified due to the properties of the soil, and the Soviets have left personal documents with the corpses. It is already known that one of the murdered was General Smorawiński from Lublin. The total number of murdered officers is estimated to be around 10 000, and is comparable with the number of Polish officers imprisoned by the Soviets...'

Three independent committees, International, Polish and German, after careful evaluation of all the evidence from the examination of the site of the mass graves, from examination of the graves before exploration, from analysis of the soil in individual tombs, from medicolegal examination of the corpses, (a total of 3900 documents were found with the corpses including personal notes, letters, camp certificates from Kozielsk, newspapers), from biological, dendrological and geological examinations and from witnesses' testimonies, came to similar conclusions. The report of the Special Soviet Committee was ~15 times shorter than the German one, and 29 times shorter than the report of the IRC Committee.

The Soviet Committee based its conclusions mainly on witnesses' testimonies. The Special Soviet Committee interviewed the witnesses from 26 September 1943 until 24 January 1944, while forensic pathologists spent only 1 week examining the corpses (16–23 January 1944). The Soviets' report, based on the testimonies of 100 witnesses, is not clear and in some matters is even contradictory. The main problem is how it was possible, during the eastern Winter (January) to carry out the exhumations, especially in places flooded with water. The difficulties encountered during exhumation are clearly shown in the excerpt from the report of Professor Buhtz (German Committee) cited above.

During medicolegal examination, especially in the case of corpses of younger prisoners, doctors encountered numerous quadrangular stab wounds. Dr Milo-slavich stated in Chicago (in front of the Select Committee) that these wounds were caused by bayonets of square-shaped cross-section, in those times used exclusively by the Red Army.

The total number of exhumed corpses, according to the German Committee, was 4143, and according to the Polish Committee of the IRC 4243. Around 200 corpses from a partly-emptied grave No. 8 should be added. The number of corpses found in the Katyń forest did not equal the figure spread by German propaganda. Knowing that the Poles were looking for some 15 000 people, the radio broadcast on 13 April 1943 mentioned the number of 10 000 murdered. Finally, following the fruitless search of the other graves in Katyń, and under pressure from the Polish Committee of the IRC, the real list of murdered was published.

The corpses of Polish officers found and examined in the Spring of 1943 were all equipped with metal tags with numbers, corresponding to their published personal data. In the case of 925 corpses exhumed by the Special Soviet Committee in 1944, for which these tags were not found, the main question is, were they from the same graves?
In the medicolegal part of the Soviet report precise information about the examination of corpses is missing. There is no list of the names of identified corpses. The discovered evidence was very scarce: just nine documents, allegedly found with the corpses, none of which gave any proof that the victims were alive after May 1940. The time of the crime is most interesting. The German, International and Polish Committees fix it between the end of March and the beginning of May 1940.

The Special Soviet Committee at first assumed, from the witnesses' testimonies, that the crime was committed between August and September 1941. Then, following remarks from international observers that the victims, who the Soviets said had been killed in Summer, were dressed in warm underwear, winter overcoats and scarves, the time of the crime was moved to September–December 1941.

The report of the Soviet Committee didn't mention the kind of ammunition used. According to the examinations by the three other committees, it was German-made ammunition, from Genschow and Co. This kind of ammunition had been sent to Baltic countries, and was available in the USSR to the NKVD. The bullets were of 7.65 mm calibre.

The perpetrators of the Katyn forest massacre, to cover the graves, planted young pines. Dendrological examination proved that the trees were 5 years old, and underdeveloped because of poor soil and shadow from surrounding, old pines. Cross-sections of the trees showed that they had been replanted 3 years prior to the examination. The fact that the same means to cover up traces (planting young firs and birches) had been used in the case of old graves of Russians shot and buried in the Katyn forest, eliminated all doubts as to the time and, consequently, who had committed the mass executions.

Items of evidence obtained during the examination, after preliminary on-the-spot examination, were taken for further investigation to the Chemistry Department of the Forensic Medicine Institute in Krakow. The head of the department was Dr. Jan Zygmunt Robel (a member of the Resistance). Nine numbered cases were brought, containing identity cards, savers' books, letters, visiting-cards and one case with diaries. A special card-file was initiated, filled with notes on all the facts from the lives of individual prisoners in the Kozielsk camp encountered in documents. The items of information often overlapped, and it enabled Dr Robel to recreate the reality of the camp. The dates encountered in diaries, correspondence and notes ended abruptly, without exception, between April and May 1940.

Very important evidence, concerning the Katyn forest massacre, is contained in the report of the Select Committee on the Katyn Forest Massacre (according to the Resolution No. 390-593-82 of the House of Representatives). Ray J. Madden was the chairman of the Committee. The Committee's investigation was divided into two stages: first, to find the nation responsible for the massacre; second, to find the American officials responsible for hiding the crime from the American nation.

On 2 July 1952 the Committee presented the House of Representatives with its preliminary report, in which the Soviet NKVD was accused of the crime. Relying on a great deal of evidence, the Committee came to the conclusion that there could be no possible doubt that the crime had been committed in the period up to Spring 1940. Poles were then the Soviets' prisoners, and the Katyn forest was Soviet territory. In the preliminary report the Committee advised bringing the Soviets to trial.
before the International Military Tribunal, to face charges of committing the crime and of violating basic rights accepted by civilized nations. The Charter of the United Nations contains resolutions relevant to the legal actions advised in the report [3]. For many years the Soviet authorities had refused to give any information on missing Polish officers, and deceived our government, which had been looking for these people. The replies to Polish demands in 1941–1942 were also very unclear.

In 1991 forensic pathologists from the Institute of Forensic Medicine in Kraków and Lublin participated in an investigation of the graves of Polish prisoners of war imprisoned during the War in another two camps on USSR territory, in Starobielsk and Ostaszków. The results of their work will soon be presented.

References

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