

Vello Lõugas

THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF TERROR

Archaeological excavations of mass-murder sites in the Soviet Union

Abstract

Described in this article are examples of a most unusual area of Soviet archaeology. Normally concerned with the remote prehistoric past, archaeologists in the Soviet Union have in recent years been locating and investigating the mass graves of tens of thousands of people – the products of some 70 years of Soviet rule. The most active work at present is going on in the Baltic states and in Byelorussia. Excavations carried out at the mass burial sites of Pravienske, Libagi, Kuropato, Burashevo and other locations are discussed in more detail. The authorities had assumed that these sites of massacres had by now been forgotten and could be ignored, but their plans have failed.

Vello Lõugas, Estonian Academy of Sciences, Institute of History, Rütli 4, Tallinn 200101, Estonia.

Archaeologists have on many occasions provided professional assistance in locating and exhuming recent and modern graves. During the past few years, Soviet archaeologists have become involved with a completely different kind of excavation work, which troubles and grieves the soul: the discovery and investigation of the graves of people who have disappeared during the 70 years of Soviet rule. These have included several mass graves. By now, the whole world is familiar with such factories of death as Bykhovna near Kiev, where approximately two million people were murdered (Fig. 1:1), and Kuropato near Minsk, where the number of victims is believed to have been around 200,000 (Fig. 1:2). These places have become well known, but the total number of Soviet death camps and mass graves is in the tens of thousands. The resting places of 20 to 30 million people are still being sought by relatives and kin.

In a Canadian publication from 1953, Robert Conquest drew international attention to the Bykhovna death camp near Kiev, but this discovery was yet too early for anyone to investigate the matter in the Soviet Union. The Soviet authorities began to disguise the site in 1988, and the first detailed data concerning it appeared in the press in 1989 (Moscow News, 13/1989, p. 16). On the initiative of the bosses of the Communist Party of the Ukraine, a huge monument

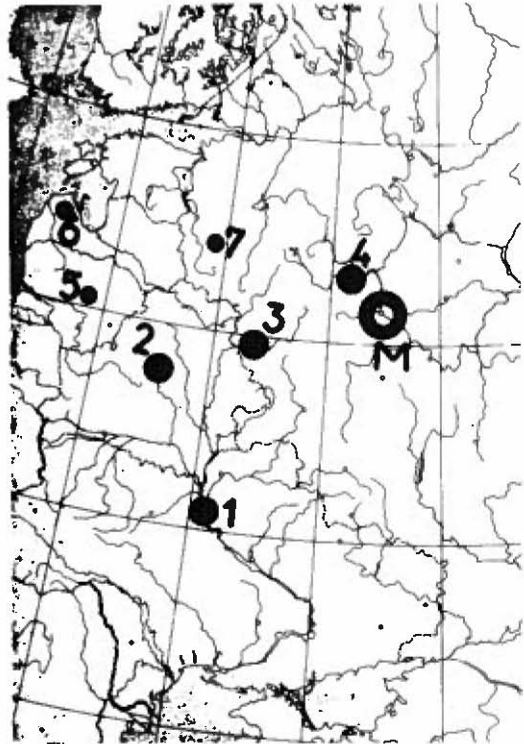


Fig. 1. Sites mentioned in the text.
1 – Bykhovna, 2 – Kuropato, 3 – Katyn, 4 – Burashevo, 5 – Ruseiniai, 6 – Libagi, 7 – Novoržev. M = Moscow.



Fig. 2. Bykhovna. Forensic expert Nikolai Kovalenko.

was erected at the site. The inscription on the monument places the blame on the Fascists, but gives the number of victims with amazing precision!

On 5 April, 1989, "Liternaturnaya Gazeta", at the time a progressive-minded Moscow paper, referred in an article to Bykhovna, thus forcing the authorities to begin excavations. The first data was published already on 26 April by Sergei Kisselyov, the paper's correspondent in Kiev. He had to admit that the remains were confusing because of reburials in 1944, 1971 and 1978. In an article in the Estonian paper "Noorte Hääl" (9 May, 1989), Viktor Tribug, a journalist of the Kiev newspaper "Komsomolskoje Znamy", described the excavations at Bykhovna and the difficulties caused by the local authorities. Published in this article are photos by Oleg Markovich, which give an idea of the excavation methods. Shown in one picture is Nikolai Kovalenko, a forensic expert, engaged in his work (Fig. 2), and another photo shows technical devices used by the archaeologist Vladimir Dorofeyev (Fig. 3) in the excavation.

Archaeologists in Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia have also been active in locating the sites of massacres. On 26 June, 1941, soldiers of the Red Army murdered over 400 people in Pravienskės, Lithuania. An investigation has now been launched by the prosecuting magistrate in Kaunas. In late 1989, the newspaper "Gimtasis Kraštas" reported the discovery of five skeletons.

The mass graves often reveal many telling features, for instance the exact number of people killed or the specific methods of violence used. An example is a mass grave in Lithuania, at present under excavation, where a number of people, murdered on the 4th of November, 1946 now lie buried. The victims were from the Ruseiniai village at Josvainių apylinkėse in the Kėdainiai district (Fig. 1:5). On the day of the massacre, 18 persons had gathered at the farmhouse of Matas Mažeika. Kazys Šaras from the village of Barsukynės had come to the farm to collect his pay for building a cowshed. On his way he picked up Jurgis Jankauskas. From Ruseiniai came Kazys Kerza with his girlfriend, Verute Mažeikaite, followed by a Mr Stuogis together with his wife, who lived with the Pranevičius. Ferdinandas Dzikas happened to be passing by and also dropped in. Also living on the farm was 18-year-old Genovaitė Jasaitytė who had been driven away from her home in the village of Paliepių. There were 18 persons in the cottage, including the seven members of the Mažeikas family. There were no firearms in the house. Only two persons survived the massacre. Not much is known of the fate of Matas Mažeika, the owner of the cottage, although he is said to be living somewhere in Latvia. According to Ferdinandas Dzikas, the other survivor, the house was suddenly hit by bullets, the lights went off, flares were shot into the sky, and shouts in Russian were heard. In the ensuing confusion, he managed to crawl out of the build-

ing. Before reaching a ditch, he was hit in the leg by a bullet. He tied the wound with his belt. While running away, he heard several more shots, which probably meant that the wounded were being finished off. Dzikas now lives in the Vilkaviškis district, and he claims that the bullet is still in his leg.

This attack was a "minor error" by the KGB. Most of the victims were very poor people; Mažeika himself owned only eight hectares of land. The bodies of the women were burnt on the spot, the cottage was burnt down, and the men's bodies were taken to Kėdainiai. One wounded woman is said to have rushed out of the burning house, but was quickly thrown back in. Matas Mažeika managed to run to a friend's house and tell him where to find the bodies of the others. Natalia Šarienė recalls how she had heard shooting that evening and had seen the glow of fire. She had felt a foreboding of evil. Later, in the market place at Kėdainiai she recognized her husband's body by his face and clothing. But she also noticed that his wide finger-ring of gold was missing. There were seven men lying on the ground, and she could also recognize Mažeika Albinukas, his neighbour Jurgis Jankauskas. Marijona Gaurilčikienė recalls how Mažeika had come to her late that night and told about what had happened, remarking that "my brother Kazys is no more". "I recognized his dead body at once. He lay there beside the others, without shoes and missing a finger on which he had worn a wide American gold ring, a present from his father. I could not help bursting into tears upon seeing my beloved brother. I did not want them to know who he was, so I ran away." What happened to the bodies? They did not lie in the market place for long. Hearing that seven "bandits" had been shot, people came to have a look and recognized their own friends, peaceful farmers of the locality. A local Russian, a war invalid, protested that they were not "bandits" but good people. Then the bodies disappeared. Their place of burial is not yet known. Some suggest that they were laid in gravel pits on Skongulio street, while others maintain that they were buried further away on the banks of the Nevežis River." (Ignas Meškauskas, *Gimtasis kraštas* 1990, No. 8, p. 5, "Ruseinių tragedija. 1946.")

In 1989 the prosecuting magistrate of the Talsi district and the Latvian Popular Front organized the excavation of a massacre site in Libagi, Kurland, dating back to the 1940s (Fig. 1:6). Guntis Zemītis, head of the Department of Archaeology of the Museum of Latvian History, and



Fig. 3. Bykhovna. Peeling off the surface layer of the mass graves with a bulldozer.

three other archaeologists of the museum participated in the investigation. A grave containing 14 bodies was opened. A number of personal objects (pocket-knives, mirrors, combs, watches etc.) were found together with the bodies. These objects indicate that the event occurred after 1942. It is not yet known whether these people were the victims of Fascists or Stalinists.

In 1989, veterans of the 24th Territorial Corps of the Red Army, based on the former Latvian Army which was liquidated by the Stalinists in 1940, organized excavations of the burial ground of their fellow soldiers near the town of Novoržev in the region of Pskov (Fig. 1:7). The excavations were supervised by the Latvian Institute of History and the Museum of Latvian History. At Novoržev, all traces of the burials had been destroyed, apparently as the result of reburial in the 1950s.

The Kuropato massacre site near Minsk (Fig. 1:2) was already known to a number of people several years ago, but any closer investigation was impossible during the Brezhnev era. Most of the available information was provided by local people, who had been eyewitnesses to the

events in their childhood, or had heard from their parents about the mass murders which took place in the forest of Kuropato. It was feared that the authorities would destroy the site by digging a quarry or by constructing multi-storey buildings there, and it was only in 1988 that investigations could begin at Kuropato. The heart and soul of the project was Z. Paznyak, an archaeologist from Minsk.*

Sergei Fyodorovich Ladutska from Minsk recalls how the machinery of death operated "at full capacity" in 1938: "I remember once passing the KGB building in the winter of 1938. It was freezing, but the open cellar windows gushed forth steam like a locomotive – there were so many people crammed together." Between 1937 and 1941 overcrowded trucks drove from here almost every day towards the mass graves. What was their destination? Already in the early 1970s a number of liberal-minded researchers began to interview the villagers of Zyalyonói Lug, north of Minsk. In 1987–1988 more data was obtained by tracing the former inhabitants of a village that had been torn down. One of the massacre sites turned out to be only a few kilometres to the north of this village in a forest between the present Minsk ring road and the road to Zaslav. Executions took place in the forest already in 1937. An area of 10–15 hectares was cut off from the forest. In the second half of 1937 it was surrounded by a three-metre-high wooden fence with barbed wire on top. Behind the fence, fully armed men with bloodhounds patrolled the perimeter. The shootings took place three times a day: in the morning, at two p.m. and later in the evening. The victims were brought to the site in trucks. The bodies were thrown into a pit and covered with a layer of sand. The process was repeated until the pit was filled. The "factory" operated in full gear even on the weekends.

The local villagers recall how the trucks drove back and forth incessantly, and the road through the forest became smooth as if laid with bitumen. The pits, measuring 2 x 4 metres, were filled and hidden under freshly planted young pines, which have now grown into a fifty-year-old forest.

Some of the villagers, especially children who had the courage to crawl in under the fence, said the pits were prepared in the mornings. People were gagged to stop them from crying out, but

* 1990, Z. Paznyak was nominated as candidate for the Supreme Soviet of Byelorussia, competing with five Communist Party members. He was one of the five delegates to be elected in the round of voting on 4 March, 1990.

there were more victims than gags, and their screams could be heard by the villagers. Either to save ammunition or to demonstrate their professional skills, the executioners discharged their Nagant revolvers from the side of the row of victims in order to kill two with one shot. This was verified by the excavation results.

The murders continued until the outbreak of war. When the Germans occupied the area, men from the village took down the fence to use it for timber. They saw the upturned and disturbed soil with grass growing in the sand, but they saw something else as well. There were thousands of thin-stemmed red mushrooms growing on the huge mass graves, as if soaked with human blood. These turned out to be a species of garlic mushroom growing in grubbed and disturbed soil.

The shots were not always lethal, and many who fell into the pits survived. If they found themselves under the top layer of sand, some of the wounded could crawl out of the grave. Many were caught and sent back with a new shot, while some managed to escape. The wounded who fell deeper into the pit, of course, perished. The older villagers pointed out hills in the forest where the shootings took place. The mass graves form distinct rectangular depressions approximately half a metre deep. The sinking of the ground was due to the decomposition of the corpses. Archaeological excavations at the site confirmed reports that after the war the skeletons had been unearthed by soldiers and taken away, perhaps to cover up for the crimes. There is also a rumour in Minsk that the local porcelain factory tried to improve its ware by adding powdered bone, for which purpose human skeletons were collected. No one has yet been able to prove this claim, but people familiar with the period believe that it may well be true.

The mass graves were first opened in half-section to determine their profile. The skeletons were in layers with sand between them. There were hundreds of grave pits in the area. Various smaller objects (cups etc.) have been found, and leather objects (shoes, wallets etc.) were especially well preserved. Several objects found in the mass graves from 1940–1941 have Baltic labels. The excavations at Kuropato are being continued.

Since 1988 the Estonian people have closely followed the search for the remains of Konstantin Päts (Fig. 4 & 5), former President of the Republic of Estonia, who disappeared under the Stalinist regime. His place of death was not known. After being deported to Russia in 1940,

he was brought back to Estonia for a short period in December 1954, but before long was sent back at the request of the local authorities. In October 1988, retired KGB officers reported that Päts's last probable place of confinement was a psychoneurological hospital at Burashevo in the Kalinin (Tver) region (Fig. 1:4). They also confirmed his date of death as the 18th of January, 1956. This information was checked and substantiated, and further material was gathered from the hospital staff at Burashevo.

Interviews of the president's last doctor, Gusseva, nurses and other staff revealed that no one had any precise recollection concerning the bodies of patients, who were buried in unmarked graves in the nearby forest. There was even no precise information on the resting places of more prominent patients, such as "a former president", "a Red Army colonel" etc. The burial site selected for excavation was a logical choice considering the historical background and conditions of the period. While earlier cemetery areas near the hospital contained hundreds, possibly thousands, of unmarked graves, the selected area was unfinished and contained only approximately a hundred graves. We must also consider the time when President Päts died. In the late winter and spring of 1956, Nikita Khrushchev made public his first exposures and



Fig. 4. President Konstantin Päts.



Fig. 5. The last photograph of Konstantin Päts, taken in 1941 at the prison of Ufa.



Fig. 6. Burashevo. All details are meticulously recorded as in standard excavation procedure.

condemnations of the Stalinist regime. Khrushchev himself appeared to have tired of the whole system by this time. This was such a shock to the KGB-run hospital at Burashevo that the dead were now buried in another cemetery. The grave of Konstantin Päts was at the edge of an unfinished section of this cemetery. Although it was feared that the president's body might have been removed and destroyed without the knowledge of the hospital staff, this was not seen as probable. At the time, the authorities in Moscow had already freed former Baltic leaders, and there is no reason to believe that Päts had been taken to some unknown place just before his death or immediately following it. The former president of the Estonian Republic was greatly respected by the Estonian people in the 1950s. He was therefore dangerous only to the local Communist Party bosses, who tried, at any cost, to keep the president, dead or alive, as far away

as possible. The forest of Burashevo was thus a suitable site in all respects.

The archaeological expedition for locating the grave of the president was organized by the Estonian Heritage Society and was headed by the author. The first excavations in May 1989 lasted only 3–4 days. The state security authorities of the Kalinin region requested that work be stopped. According to them, the excavations had caused great alarm in the district with regard to their real purpose. A year later, the atmosphere had changed considerably, and work could be carried out between the 19th and the 22nd of June, 1990. Before long, a skeleton was found, which bore the serial number 46 and showed no indications why it could not have been the remains of President Päts.

The burial site was located behind the hospital at the foot of a hill where sparse forest grew in the 1950s. The graves of the patients have no



Fig. 7. Burashevo. Burial no. 46 in a grave 1.2 metres deep with remains of clothing and footwear. Konstantin Päts, President of the Estonian Republic. 22 June, 1990.

names. The number of burial mounds, graves and skeletons do not coincide, for in many cases there were several bodies (2–5) in a single grave, and under some of the mounds there are no graves at all. Autopsies were usually carried out on patients who died at the hospital. The autopsy records were written competently and with great precision. This was probably because of scientific research conducted at the hospital and the Medical Institute of Kalinin at the time. Despite this, autopsies had been performed on only 70 % of the 46 skeletons.

The expedition included three eminent Lithuanian scientists, specialists in the anthropological identification of skeletons. These were Vytautas Urbanavičius, a leading researcher at the Institute of History of the Lithuanian Academy of Sciences and a restorer of skulls; Professor Gintautas Česnys of the University of Vilnius and Rimantas Jankauskas, an anthropol-

ogist of the same university. Along with the sex and approximate age of the skeletons, they also determined other characteristic features. An unexpected finding was the relatively young age of most of the dead (25–45 years). There were more women than men (♂ 40–50 % of adults) and only 2–3 male skeletons of advanced age, one of them being skeleton no. 46. The dead were mostly buried without coffins, and in some cases were thrown upon each other. Some were put into box-like coffins of thin boards. Only two graves contained proper coffins. The majority of the corpses had no remains of clothing, as there was nothing that could be "wasted" on the dead. Only very few graves contained remains of jackets, trousers or footwear. Doctor Gusseva recalled that the hospital staff had found items of clothing for the president. Skeleton no. 46 had remains of clothing, which indicates that this body was especially important (Figs. 6 & 7).



Fig. 8. The reburial of President Konstantin Päts. The cortège in front of the Kadriorg Palace, the former presidential residence. Tallinn, October 1990. Photo P. Pillak.

Further study of the skeleton was carried out at a laboratory in Tallinn, Estonia on 10 September, 1990. The three Lithuanian scientists carried out standard anthropological measurements and X-ray studies. Their final opinion was that the measurements, comparisons of the skull with photographs of the president and the X-ray results cannot outrule the fact that this skeleton belonged to the last president of the Estonian Republic. The remains of President Päts were buried with full honours in Tallinn on the 21st of October, 1990 (Fig. 8).

But many cemeteries of the factories of death still remain to be examined, with their hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, of victims.

Along the banks of many rivers in Northern Russia and Siberia are the graves of millions of people who died in vast numbers in the huge log-

ging camps established in these regions. Visiting the villages along the Petchora River in the Komi region in 1985, the author was shown by the Komis numerous hills, where children have uncovered skulls while sliding down the slopes. Will these graves ever be examined, or is it even necessary?

Every East European archaeologist is familiar with the Early Iron Age "kosti" of Glyadenevo in Bashkiria, 25 km from the city of Ufa. It is a mountain of bones, containing the remains of thousands of animals. This site is a well-known point of departure and comparison for the study of similar sites and antiquities of smaller scale. Perhaps a chronological starting point for future archaeologists will be the "East European and Siberian layer of bones" from the second quarter of the 20th century.