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Forest brothers - the search and identification of the participants of anti-soviet resistance

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Abstract:
This article focuses on the history and main activities in the search and identification of Lithuanian partisans, commonly known as the "Forest brothers". After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the search for partisans was chaotic and unprofessional, leading to extensive exhumations without professional provision, and reburial without further identification of the remains. Only after regaining independence, the Lithuanian government supported official surveys and even re-exhumations of the partisans. These new investigations were led by esteemed historians, archaeologists, and anthropologists, and provided results that conflicted with former activities. The overall outcome could be summarized as a division between an "official history" asserted by the Soviet Union, and results coming from a collaboration between forensic archaeology and forensic anthropology specialists. The thorough results and overall conclusions led to two main accomplishments: the identification of partisans, including some prominent figures of this movement, and the manner of death, through the evidence of undocumented torture.

Keywords:
Forensic anthropology, bioarchaeology, partisans, inhumations, Soviet Union, Lithuania

INTRODUCTION

For some countries, including the Baltic states, the end of World War II did not mark the end of terror. The Red Army occupied the independent Baltic states in 1940–1941 and, after a period of German occupation in 1941–1944, again in 1944–1945. The new political regime carried out massive repressions and deportations in occupied territories [1]. As the Stalinist repression intensified, residents of Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia used the heavily forested countryside as a base for an armed anti-Soviet resistance [1], [2]. The participants of this resistance (partisans) were often called the *Forest brothers*. Among the three countries, the movement was best organized in Lithuania, where partisans had a well-functioning military and political structure. Armed resistance in Lithuania lasted until 1965 when the last fighting partisan, Antanas Kraujelis (codename *Siaubūnas* or *Horror*), was surrounded and killed himself. As the Lithuanian partisan war was relatively undocumented by the Soviet Union, because all partisans were formally charged as common criminals, some historians consider it the *Forgotten war* [3]. This forgotten war claimed many deaths: over 20.000 partisans were killed, with no less than 280.000 of their supporters or political prisoners arrested, imprisoned, sent to forced labor camps, or exiled to Siberia [1]. Collisions with the Red Army or KGB units left hundreds of unmarked inhumations across Lithuania.

From 1988 until late 1991, an unprecedented number of spontaneous and unprofessional exhumations and swift reburials took place [3]. The undocumented exhumations were mostly conducted by partisans' family members. The remains of the dead were removed with the help of enthusiasts with no methodological approach, thus remains were usually commingled and later buried in collective graves. Though family members exhumed presumed executed relatives, remains at the time were not yet positively identified (Fig. 1). The exact number of such exhumations is unknown. It is estimated that from 1988 to 1997 the Lithuanian Union of Political Prisoners and Deportees alone was in charge of reburying the remains of 1964 partisans [3]. In 1991, this issue captured the attention of the government. In 1992 Lithuania issued an official document encouraging teams consisting of archaeologists, anthropologists, and forensic specialists to participate in the search and identification of human remains. The document indicated that exhumations should be conducted following the basic methodological principles of archaeological research. However, not much had changed in practice, and unqualified exhumations persisted.

Though some archaeologists declared that the possibility to identify the recovered remains was lost, and the evidence of crimes that could be used for prosecution by international courts was destroyed [3], this is not completely true. The last decade is marked by discoveries in the Lithuanian partisan war field: partisan bunkers, or disposal sites of partisan remains [4], [5], [6], [7], [8], [9], etc., were uncovered, highlighting the importance of methodological research, standard procedures, and cooperation between specialists in their respective fields. Collaborative research cases allowed historians, archaeologists, and anthropologists to identify some victims, to demonstrate not only the manner of death of the partisans, but also to trace the mechanism of the KGB operational system. Meticulous forensic archaeological and anthropological investigations in Tuskulėnai, Rietavas, and some other sites were followed by the successful identification of the victims. These important investigations also contributed to unlocking the secrecy of undocumented disposal of remains, and the unprecedented style of execution between different executioners [10], [11]. All this gained experience served as a model for subsequent investigations. These crucial analyses were an impulse for a professional search and identification of victims of the Soviet regime.

Nowadays, the main coordination center for Lithuanian partisan war victims is The Genocide and Resistance Research Centre of Lithuania (henceforth, the Center), which is the state-funded entity that engages in the study of genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes in Lithuania. Once the Center obtains information on the location of a possible single or mass

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inhumation, where participants of the resistance movement were buried, they initiate the collection of archival data on the victims. These data include victim biographies, their units, and if the death occurred during an operation (possibly a higher number of victims) or capture (one-two individuals, most possibly signs of torture, and execution) [12], [13]. Once all information is gathered archaeological excavation takes place, followed, if necessary, by the presence of an anthropologist at the site. Once the fieldwork is finished the remains are taken to the Faculty of Medicine, Vilnius University, for further analysis. If special investigations are required (X-rays, craniofacial superimposition, DNA analysis, etc.) collaboration with the State Forensic Medicine Service or Vilnius University Hospital is granted. This paper shortly introduces the case of the Orphans' cemetery that received special societal interest in Lithuania, as it led to the identification of the remains of Adolfas Ramanauskas (1918–1957), executed in the late 1950s. The presented case also clearly illustrates a successful collaboration between different professionals and disciplines.

THE ORPHANS' CEMETERY SITE AND A PARTICULAR CASE

The Orphans' cemetery in Vilnius is near the historical Antakalnis cemetery. In the 19th century, it was used to bury soldiers from a nearby monastery hospital and poor city residents. Therefore, it became known as the cemetery of orphans, hence the name Orphans' Cemetery (in Lithuanian, *Našlaičių kapinės*). Over time the site became a hidden place in the depths of the forest. The cemetery again appeared on the map after the Center's specialist and historian Darius Indrišionis noticed some coincidences while studying special archives of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MGB): from 1956 till 1969 there was a series of overlaps when the death penalty for the criminals in Lukiškės prison and the political prisoners in KGB prison had been administered on the same day (in total, 13 cases) [14]. These prisons were approximately 1 km away from each other. The archival documents indicated that all criminals were taken to "the cemetery of the orphans" (in Russian, *bezrodnoje*), while the political prisoners' inhumation site was undisclosed. A hypothesis about a single burial place was raised: if executions were conducted on the same day there was a possibility that all remains might have been buried together in the same place [14]. Inspection of old plans, remaining burial marks, and Orphans' cemetery book records revealed discrepancies suggesting the presence of previously unknown inhumations.

In 2017–2019 archaeological excavations commenced in the discussed area and the remains of 72 individuals in total were exhumed from 52 graves/pits (more details on the archaeological excavations and maps in [15]). Twenty-four individuals were interred in coffins, with their arms crossed on the pelvic area, and the legs stretched; some evidence of autopsy was present, thus indicating a regular burial and death from other causes (Fig. 2). After examination *in situ*, such graves were covered and tomb-marking



Fig. 1. Picture taken at a local museum in Lithuania, demonstrating the exhumation of a partisan (according to locals, the remains belonged to Stasys Senda). The year is unknown. Information and photo were provided by Vykintas Vaitkevičius.

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Fig. 2. Old male with a performed autopsy (pit No. 32). Photo by Justina Kozakaitė.



Fig. 3. Adult male with personal belongings, i.e. shoes and socks (pit No. 50). Photo by Justina Kozakaitė.

restored. In some pits, hospital waste was discovered [15]. However, 28 pits contained skeletonized remains of more than one individual, including traces of projectile injuries. The position of these bodies indicated that they were dumped disorderly without coffins, suggesting rapid and disrespectful disposal of the corpses (Fig. 3).

The anthropological analysis of the remains followed standard protocols for sex and age estimation. Sex estimation was performed based on the morphological features of the skull and pelvic bones; meanwhile, age-at-death estimation was based on pubic symphysis, auricular surface, and costochondral junction evaluation [16]. Cranial suture closure or dental wear were also employed if no other skeletal elements were available [16]. The anthropological analysis indicated that all 48 individuals with evidence of gunshot wounds were males, with their age-at-death ranging from 20 to 60 years (Fig. 4). Perimortem data of the discussed cases were cross-matched with individual data from files of both criminal and KGB prison executed individuals. Meanwhile, a routine forensic identification procedure was performed, seeking to identify the deceased as much as possible, thus narrowing down the search range for any "targeted" person. As a result, from 48 executed and exhumed individuals, 8 were positively identified by applying DNA (7 political, and 1 criminal prisoner).

All cases of perimortem injuries (sharp, blunt, or gunshot wounds) were carefully documented with thorough descriptions. In case of ballistic injuries, the site of entry and exit (if possible), including the direction, was noted. The distribution of bullet entry sites varied with the left occipital (16 cases) or left parietal (15 cases) dominating (Fig. 5). This would support the knowledge of the historical characterization of the Soviet security apparatus as an "efficient bureaucracy", where "the only legitimate means of execution was by fusillade or gunshot to the back of the head" [10]. Though Tuskulėnai and the Orphans' cemetery sites bear resemblance in the disposal of the bodies of executed individuals, the overall execution mechanism differs. Most notably, Tuskulėnai individuals demonstrated blunt force trauma to the head or more than two gunshot lesions on the skull [10]. These elements (i.e., blunt force trauma or multiple gunshots) were absent in the case of the Orphans' cemetery.

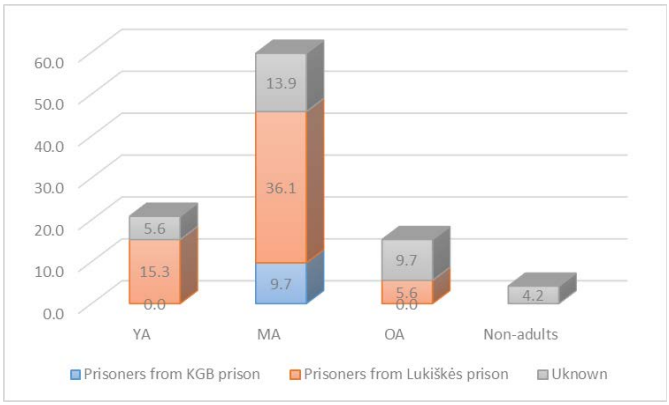


Fig. 4. Age distribution (percentages) between prisoners from the KGB and Lukiškės jails. YA – young adult (18-29 years); MA - middle adult (30-49); OA – old adult (>50); non-adults – in the Orphan's cemetery, non-adults of 0-1 years old were also identified.

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Fig. 5. Typical entrance of a gunshot wound (size: 10x12 mm) with radiating fractures on the left parietal (individual from pit No. 33). Photo by Justina Kozakaitė.

At least three individuals showed no evidence of gunshot wounds on the skull vault. The injuries consistent with gunshot wound lesions were located either on the right or left side of the mandible (2 cases), or mastoid process on the right side (1 case). The latter individual additionally had perimortem fractures on the atlas separating the posterior arch from the rest of the cervical (Fig. 5), and some missing fragments. These three cases could be traced down to the KGB prison: the identification of the discussed individuals could be attributed to political imprisonment, thus raising some questions on the execution style and the cause of this unfamiliar procedure.

On June 1, 2018, pit No. 27 was discovered, with the remains of 20, 60, and 40 years old males interred. The third individual hidden beneath the former two, later confirmed by forensic anthropological and DNA analysis, was identified as Adolfas Ramanauskas. Born to a Lithuanian family in New Britain, Connecticut, United States, Ramanauskas returned to Lithuania in 1921 with his family. With the occupation of Lithuania, he soon joined the armed anti-Soviet resistance in 1945, choosing the codename "Hawk" (in Lithuanian, *Vanagas*). In 1949 he was promoted to First Deputy Chairman of the Presidium of the Council of the Movement of the Struggle for Lithuanian Freedom, and carried out the functions of the Chief Commander of the armed forces. In 1956 a specially formed KGB operational group captured Adolfas Ramanauskas. The leader of the resistance movement was executed on November 29, 1957.

Detailed information was collected on his general health conditions or injuries experienced during the resistance, and injuries sustained during his initial arrest and brutal interrogation. The report of a commission formed at the KGB prison around October 15, 1956, the arrest day of Adolfas Ramanauskas, noted the following: "The right eye is covered with a hematoma, there are six stab wounds, judging by their diameter made by a thin wire or nail going deep into the eyeball. Multiple hematomas in the stomach, a cut wound on a finger of the right hand. The genitalia reveal the following: a large tear wound on the right side of the scrotum and a wound on the left side" (Medical report, Vilnius, October 15, 1956). Conclusion: "self-injury". On the remains, five healed penetrating wounds were identified on the right orbital roof, hence providing the hard evidence of brutal torture months before, at the beginning of the interrogation. Moreover, a new active bone formation was noted on the frontal part of the skull (Fig. 7). Based on historical sources, after the death penalty was announced, the victim was free from interrogations and from being submitted to further use of force [17]. These findings raised some questions concerning the period of three months before the execution. Could this suggest a period of undocumented violence?

FUTURE CHALLENGES

This case is a special one because the remains of the main leader of the resistance movement, the Chief Commander of the armed forces, Adolfas Ramanauskas, were identified. It is also pointing to the necessity to have proper qualifications and experience before starting this kind of work. As the case received extraordinary publicity, the Center was addressed with numerous requests to perform further identifications, including formerly "closed" cases. After the discovery of Adolfas Ramanauskas, the children of another prominent figure of the resistance movement, Juozas Vitkus,



Fig. 6. Middle adult male with a gunshot wound located on the mastoid process of the right temporal bone. Additionally, C1 revealed a perimortem fracture of the posterior arch. Photo by Justina Kozakaitė.

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Fig. 7. Active new bone formation on the frontal bone. Photo by Justina Kozakaitė.

codename *Kazimieraitis*, contacted the Center with the inquiry of finding the remains of their father. He was killed in action against the NKVD units in 1946. Though his remains were never found, the uncredited information indicated *that Kazimieraitis* was buried in Leipalingis. In 1991 the remains of 32 partisans were discovered and exhumed in a way typical for that time in an area of the former KGB headquarters, in the town of Leipalingis. After a superficial anthropological analysis *in situ* (age, sex, perimortem lesions), the remains were properly buried in the local cemetery. In 2020 all the remains were re-exhumed from Leipalingis cemetery and brought to the Faculty of Medicine for further analysis. While this investigation is ongoing, 14 individuals have already been identified.

Attention to these cases raised the need for a specialized institution for the search and identification of unidentified burial sites of the partisans or even re-exhumation of buried unidentified individuals. This demand could be viewed from several perspectives. First and foremost, identification of the victims enables researchers to inform relatives and give a proper burial to the dead. Secondly, the State has an interest in identifying the remains of people considered as an official underground army. Thirdly, following the historical narrative that was created for the former Soviet countries could drastically change. While official Soviet documents indicate how the system was run, archaeological and anthropological discoveries disclose new evidence. Lastly, Article 15 of the Geneva Convention of 12 August 1949 accentuates that "At all times, and particularly after an engagement, Parties to the conflict shall, without delay, take all possible measures to search for and collect the wounded and sick, to protect them against pillage and ill-treatment, to ensure their adequate care, and to search for the dead and prevent their being despoiled."

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