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Znaczenie dowodów materialnych i rola badań archeologicznych w procesie obalania kłamstwa katyńskiego (1943–2023)

Abstract: The main aim of the article is to show the importance of material remains and the contribution of Katyn archaeology in disseminating knowledge about the Katyn lie and the truth about the Katyn massacre between 1943 and 2023. The authors present: 1) the nature and conditions of the Katyn lie and the significance of material evidence in disproving it; 2) individual and public expectations and reactions to material remains and towards archaeological research; 3) the contribution to making the resting places and the material evidence from the death pits vibrant and causative for the victims' families, for the community of remembrance and the human community of suffering, and for the broad public of today and the future. The paper is based on data and analyses rooted in archaeology, history and cultural anthropology.

Key words: Katyn massacre, Katyn lie, Katyn remembrance, archaeology, history, cultural anthropology

Abstrakt: Głównym celem artykułu jest ukazanie znaczenia pozostałości materialnych oraz wkładu archeologii katyńskiej w upowszechnianie wiedzy o kłamstwie katyńskim i prawdy o zbrodni katyńskiej w latach 1943–2023. Autorzy przedstawiają: 1) charakter i uwarunkowania kłamstwa katyńskiego oraz znaczenie materialnych relikwów dla jego obalania; 2) indywidualne i społeczne oczekiwania oraz reakcje wobec pozostałości materialnych i badań archeologicznych; 3) działania podjęte, aby miejsca pochówku i materiał z dołów śmierci stały się żywymi i sprawczymi dla rodzin ofiar, dla wspólnoty pamięci i ludzkiej wspólnoty cierpienia, a także dla szerokiej publiczności współczesnej i przyszłej. Artykuł opiera się na danych i analizach archeologicznych, historycznych i antropologiczno-kulturowych.

Słowa kluczowe: zbrodnia katyńska, kłamstwo katyńskie, upamiętnienie, archeologia, historia, antropologia kulturowa

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I. Introduction. II. Historical background of the Katyn massacre and the beginning of the hypocrisy. III. The Katyn lie and exhumation works in 1943. IV. The intensification of the unmasking process and the end of the Katyn lie. V. Some insights into individual and public expectations for and reactions to archaeological research and its results. VI. Three decades of contribution and results from the archaeology. VII. Conclusions

I. Introduction

The Katyn massacre is one of the key events in the history of the Polish nation. Its uniqueness against the background of the turbulent history of the Poles is due both to the loss of a greater number of Polish army officers than that of those who died in combat against the Germans during the September Campaign of 1939, and to the efforts undertaken from the outset to construct and perpetuate the Katyn lie. This lie involved an intensive process of obliterating testimonies and material traces of the crime. That is one of the main reasons why archaeology became so important in refuting it. In this article we show the specificity and complexity of the Katyn lie in relation to the archaeology's contribution into its unveiling, by making the material evidence of the truth about the Katyn issue present and relentlessly vibrant.

The general aim of the article is to demonstrate, on the one hand, the horridness and durability of the Katyn lie, and on the other the importance, causality and timeless significance of material evidence. Our focus here is on the importance and role of materiality — made manifest — in the process of refuting the Katyn lie. We also introduce the observable attitudes, expectations and reactions of individuals and the public to the process of revealing the burial sites and making the material evidence from the death pits to be meaningful in the contemporaneity.

It is not our intention to show or 'insist' that the archaeology has contributed 'more' to the refutation of the Katyn lie than endeavours of other types, such as, for example, the analysis of documents from Russian archives and testimonies of witnesses and authorities, as well as anthropological or remote sensing data.¹ This would be just as wrong as trying to prove that the analyses of written, oral or visual data were 'more' causative than the discovery of the death pits and the examination of their layers and depositions, such as objects that provided us with personal details of the victims. Central to the issues discussed here — as in most processes of uncovering what the perpetrators sought to conceal, distort, erase and suppress from human and material memory — is the pursuit of a convergence of multiple data, evidence, methods, correlation and falsification strategies — rather than an attempt to adjudicate, *post factum*, which of these should be considered as more pertinent to the clarification process.

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We would like to express our sincere gratitude to all the individuals with whom we were able to speak about their experience of the archaeological process aimed at debunking the Katyn Lie, the dignified burial of the victims of the Katyn Massacre, and keeping the memory of this dramatic experience alive and important for our understanding of the recent past. The article was prepared by the members of the team conducting a research project entitled “Lexicon of Katyn Archaeology (1990–2015)” at the Faculty of Philosophy and History, University of Lodz. The project is implemented under the direction of Dr Olgierd Ławrynowicz in the framework of the National Heritage module of the National Programme for the Development of the Humanities of the Ministry of National Heritage, 2022–2027.

¹ Zawodny J.K. 1989; Mądro R. 1995; Godziemba-Maliszewski W. 1995.

Our approach, which we hope is coherent in its message, combines expertise and results provided by representatives of several disciplines (archaeology, history, ethnology, and cultural anthropology). It contains a characterisation of the creation of the Katyn lie, with a particular focus on its consequences at the material level and an analysis of the elements of the archaeological process relevant to the refutation of this lie between 1943 and 2023. Our chronological scope encompasses the period beginning in 1943, when material evidence of this crime first appeared, and ending in 2023, the eightieth anniversary of the discovery of the death pits and the thirtieth anniversary of the Katyn Museum in Warsaw. The museum documents and commemorates the Katyn massacre in a poignant and original way, presenting its material testimonies and evidence, as stated on its website: “It is the only exhibition of a military nature — on a global scale — being a kind of EVIDENCE OF A CRIME”.²

In our approach, two modules, historical and archaeological, are complemented by insights into opinions about the role and importance of archaeology in reviling views about the perpetrators, the course and the consequences of the 1940 crime, which have been triggered by ethnographers³. We invoke historical factual data, references to the archaeological process, and the voices of those whose research or family biographies are linked to the persistence and debunking of the Katyn lie. These are the voices of active participants in the archaeological works, descendants of the victims and custodians of the memory. We focus on testimonies about the importance of material evidence and the archaeological research process. Particular emphasis is placed on the personal and emotional aspects. The accounts of descendants and members of the Katyn Families relate to the reception of the archaeological research. They reveal what is recorded in personal experience, in family memory; they speak of the forms of remembrance practised and postulated. We have assumed that this is a way of reaching not only an individual’s knowledge and memory, but also the supra-individual resources that make up the particular community of discourse on the Katyn massacre and the Katyn lie.⁴

Due to the specificity of the material involved in our narrative, we situate the considerations in a theoretical assemblage of several domains, *i.e.*, the paradigms of modern conflicts archaeology, oral history,⁵ social history and pro-social archaeology/public archaeology.⁶ In doing so, we rely on the recognition of established facts as the historical frame of the story of what actually happened in the past world and of which material traces remain. This approach enables a dual reading — at the level of historical truth and narrative truth, in the perspective of communicative and cultural memory.⁷ We refer to sources that we ourselves brought to existence during our research. These are the utterances of the specialists involved in the exhumations and archaeological research, as well as the statements of the families of the victims of the Katyn massacre, mainly their children and grandchildren. Sometimes these categories overlap in our

² See: http://www.muzeumkatynskie.pl/pl/23227/historia_muzeum_katynskiego.html (accessed 12.12.2024). If not stated otherwise, the English translations for quotations in Polish were provided by the authors.

³ We use the guided free interview technique — an intensive interview technique characterized primarily by a subjectively limited field of interrogation, being a deep interrogation, probing with thematically focused and directed questions (Lofland J. et al. 2009, p. 41; Charmaz K. 2009, pp. 39–51). In such an interview, the questions asked of the interviewees are open-ended, expecting detailed and comprehensive descriptions, especially stories. Because of this, the interview itself can be called a narrative interview in a broad sense, without referring directly to Fritz Schütze’s narrowing concept (Schütze F. 2012; cf. Kaźmierska K. 2004). The material from the ethnographic research can be found in the archive of the project “Lexicon of Katyn Archaeology” and in the B. Kopeczyńska-Jaworska Ethnographic Archive of the Institute of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology of the University of Łódź.

⁴ Thompson P. 2000.

⁵ Rakowski T. 2015, p. 64.

⁶ Zalewska A.I. 2021a; Zalewska A.I. 2021b, further literature there.

⁷ Assmann J. 2008, pp. 66–67.

ethnographic research. For example, Professor Maria Blombergowa is both an archaeologist and the daughter of a victim. She is the only such person among the population we have interviewed. So far we have conducted 47 interviews with 65 individuals. Among them were 7 specialists (the archaeologists, anthropologist and prosecutor). The other interlocutors were relatives of the victims. The narratives of the professionals showed that their involvement in demystifying the crime, which was mostly unrelated to family trauma, bordered on personal imperative, empathy and post-memory. They were in close contact with the victims's families — their widows and their children. The emotional and intellectual closeness to the people who shared their experiences led the researchers to take on part of their identity, which obliged them to sympathise and to make amends.

II. Historical background of the Katyn massacre and the beginning of the hypocrisy

The Katyn massacre perpetrated by the USSR in April and May 1940 was unparalleled in many respects — its scale was unmatched by any other crime committed against prisoners of war during the Second World War. As a result of the first stage of the Soviet aggression against Poland on 17 September 1939, some 250,000 Polish prisoners of war were sent to a network of camps established by the NKVD chief, Lavrenty Beria. Among them were soldiers of the Polish Army (around 4,700 at Kozelsk⁸ and around 4,000 at Starobelsk) as well as police officers, prison guards and military police officers (at the largest camp at Ostashkov, there were over 6,300 individuals). The perpetration of this political murder was a process that spanned time and space. Analogous features characterized the efforts to erase the material and mental traces of this massacre. There is a very rich literature on the Katyn massacre and its victims.⁹ Therefore, we will only sketch the background of the crime in order to contextualise the narrative. We do this by quoting the words of one of the archaeologists who have been actively involved in the process of unravelling the Katyn lie since the 1990s. “The Red Army took into captivity several hundred thousand Polish citizens [...] who, while fighting the German invaders, found themselves in the eastern territories of the Republic of Poland. After repeated relocations, they were incarcerated in three camps: at Kozielsk in the Smoleńsk region, at Ostashkov near Kalinin (now Tver) and at Starobelsk in Ukraine. Then, by a decision of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks) on 5 March 1940, the Polish officers were executed. POWs from Kozelsk were buried in the Kosogory forest (commonly known as the Katyn Forest) near Smolensk; POWs from Starobielsk were shot in Kharkov and buried in Forest Quarter VI near that city. Prisoners of war from the Ostashkov camp were murdered in the basement of the NKVD building in Kalinin, then buried near the village of Mednoye”¹⁰ — as written by Maria Blombergowa, an archaeologist from the University of Lodz, the daughter of Rotmistrz Jan Mikołaj Kossakowski, the victim of the Katyn massacre.¹¹

From the very beginning of archaeologists' engagement in Katyn cases, researchers attached great importance to the necessity of applying archaeological methods in search for the truth about the Katyn massacre. Blombergowa was a member of the research team set up for the so called exhumation and search works in Katyn and Kharkov in the 1990s. She had a very special

⁸ Precisely, on 1 December 1939, there were 4727 prisoners; in the spring of 1940, there were 4609.

⁹ See, for example, the extensive bibliographies in: Zbrodnia. 2010; Katyń Massacre. 2020.

¹⁰ Blombergowa M.M. 2016, p. 43.

¹¹ The Rotmistrz's remains were identified as a result of the exhumation work in the spring of 1943, thanks to, among other things, the badge and booklet of the Virtuti Militari Cross (which he received for heroic combat in the Polish-Bolshevik War).

attitude to exploring the hidden mysteries of the course and mechanics of the crime itself, the subsequent hiding of bodies of the murdered, and the process of erasing the traces, so the perpetrators would go unpunished and the mass graves would not become a source of truth and the carriers of painful remembrance for descendants of the victims. Blombergowa's contribution to the demystification of the Katyn lie through archaeological research was rooted in personal experience. For her, the process of debunking that lie was a kind of 'intimate archaeology': "Being in the seventh and final grade in my hometown, in Wąwolnica, they were telling all sorts of things that it was the Germans [...]. And I said: Oh, I think you're mistaken. I know that it was the Russians who attacked us. [...] The young people had no idea what I was talking about, and the teachers tried to silence me so that I wouldn't talk. I didn't realise it was dangerous for me and the family. So they deported me to the other side to my family, beyond Minsk Mazowiecki. This Katyn followed me. I was always so resistant. [...] As I matured, I began to strive to find out what Katyn was."¹² Blombergowa delves further into the mysteries of the crimes and lies, emphasising that they still remain incompletely explained: "about 11,000 Polish POWs held in prisons in the western territories of Belarus and Ukraine were exterminated. Some prisoners of war from Ukrainian prisons were buried in Bykovnia near Kiev. We still have no information about other places where the Polish victims of the Katyn massacre were exterminated and buried".¹³

The fact that the truth has still not been fully uncovered is not surprising, given that the bestial process of political murder carried out by Soviet Russia and the Main Directorate of State Security of the People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs of the USSR, headed by Lavrenty Beria and Vsevolod Merkulov,¹⁴ was compounded by five decades of the drama of its falsification, during which there were also successive interactions with the resting places of the victims. Their aim was to completely erase the material memory of the sites associated with the Katyn massacre. Opposition to this was the motivation for the archaeologists, including M. Blombergowa, who tried to combine personal commitment with professionalism: "The forest was large, in view of the above, emotions could be discharged somewhere in a corner, when hands were already trembling. I couldn't be hysterical in front of the entire group. [...] And I didn't have the right to do that, I announced to myself. It doesn't. If I didn't like it, I would go into the woods, as if I needed something".¹⁵ Professor Andrzej Nadolski of the University of Lodz, son of Colonel Jerzy Nadolski, who was imprisoned in Starobelsk and murdered in Kharkov, also became involved in the research. Having decided that active participation in the research of this site would have been too overwhelming an experience for him for personal reasons, he suggested that further research be conducted by Marian Głosek, who pursued the objectives during the Mednoye excavations from 15 August to 30 August 1991.¹⁶ The latter aptly called the March 1940 decision "a criminal resolution on the murder of Polish officers and officials captured during the aggression against Poland".¹⁷

¹² Interview with Professor Maria Blombergowa, conducted on February 23, 2023. Project archive: interviews, ref. 13.

¹³ Blombergowa M.M. 2016, p. 43.

¹⁴ These men held the post of head of the GUGB — Lavrenty Beria from 29 September 1938 to 17 December 1938, followed by Vsevolod Merkulov from 17 December 1938 to 3 February 1941. It was the latter who was directly responsible for the smooth and effective execution of the so-called 'unloading' operation of prisoner of war camps and prisons in the spring of 1940.

¹⁵ Interview with Professor Maria Blombergowa, conducted on February 23, 2023. Project archive: interviews, ref. 13.

¹⁶ Blombergowa M.M. 2016, p. 50.

¹⁷ Głosek M. 2016, p. 102.

III. The Katyn lie and exhumation works in 1943

The first information about the discovery of a mass grave of Polish officers and non-commissioned officers murdered with a shot in the back of the head came from the German Press Agency Transocean on 11 April 1943. However, it was not until a communiqué broadcast over the radio in Berlin on 13 April 1943 that the Katyn massacre was really made public, along with a discussion about those responsible for the crime. It repeated the information that mass graves of Polish officers had been found in Katyn. The Germans blamed the Soviet NKVD for the

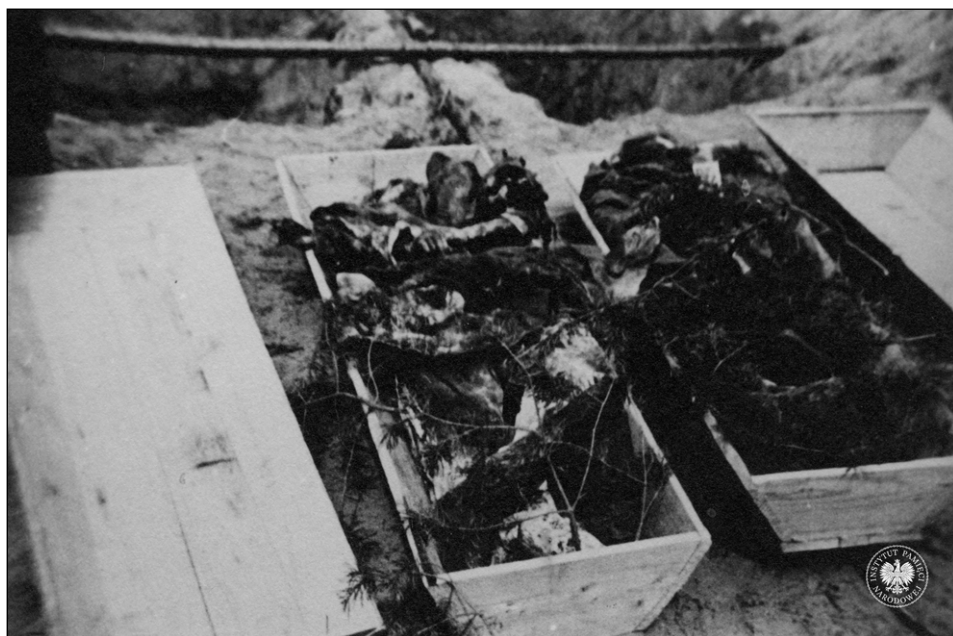


Fig. 1. The remains of two generals Mieczysław Smorawiński and Stanisław Bohaterewicz; the identification enabled by the 1943 exhumations in Katyn.

Source: AIPN Kraków, ref. no. IPN Kr 1/10098

crime. Two days later, the Soviets put forward their own theory on the Poles' death and published it in the newspaper *Pravda* and broadcast on Moscow radio. According to this theory, the prisoners in the camps had been working on road construction and, following the Third Reich's aggression against the USSR, the Germans had murdered them in the summer of 1941. As well as a major propaganda campaign, exhumations and on-site investigations were organised. As early as 9 April 1943, a meeting was held at the City Propaganda Department in Warsaw to announce the discovery near Smolensk. Two days later, the Germans sent a delegation of Poles to Katyn to show them the graves on site. Later that month, Polish doctors, representatives of the Polish Red Cross and "Caritas" visited the site.¹⁸ Their purpose was to confirm the veracity of the graves and the honesty of the work carried out there.¹⁹ The exhumations also enabled the personal identification of some of the victims and provided conclusive evidence to undermine the Katyn lie (Fig. 1).

¹⁸ Adamska J. 2021, pp. 257–339.

¹⁹ Adamska J. 2021.

As the German and Soviet sides were accusing each other of committing crimes in Katyn, on 17 April 1943, the Polish government sent an official note to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) asking it to send a delegation to Katyn to verify the received information. In the German-occupied Poland, opinion on the Katyn massacre was twofold. People associated with the Polish Underground State accepted the information about Soviet guilt as true and sympathised with the position of the Polish government in London. The Communists took a different view, seeing it as a provocation and a breach of Allied unity. However, the Germans did not give up trying to convince public opinion that they were not to be blamed for the crime.

In early June 1943, work at Katyn was stopped. When the Red Army occupied Smolensk on 25 September 1943, the document titled “Amtliches Material zum Massenmord von Katyn” (“Official Material on the Katyn Massacre”) was published in Berlin. It contained a list of 4,143 victims, including about a thousand unidentified individuals. Despite the propaganda nature of the publication, it was the first published collection of documents relating to the Katyn massacre. After the Soviets took over the area where the graves of the Polish officers were located, a Special Commission to Establish and Investigate the Circumstances of the Execution of Prisoners of War — Polish Officers — by the German Fascist Invaders in the Katyn Forest was set up. It included only citizens of the USSR. Even before examining the evidence, the commission *a priori* accepted the German guilt. The work of the commission, headed by Nikolai Nilovich Burdenko, ended with the publication of the report on 24 January 1944. In it, forensic experts concluded that the shooting had taken place between September and December 1941, on the basis of examinations of bodies that had supposedly been exhumed. The

Russians tried to spread such false information in a number of ways. One of them was to place a plaque in Katyn with the false information: “Here are buried the slaves of the Polish army officers who were murdered by the German-Fascist occupiers in the autumn of 1941” (Fig. 2). The total number of dead was put at 11,000, in line with German estimates. This meant that most of the missing POWs could be accounted for and the question of further searches was closed.

When the Second World War ended, the trial of the leaders of the Third Reich at the International Military Tribunal in Nuremberg could have provided an opportunity to identify the culprits. The indictment also included an accusation of the murder of Polish officers at Katyn. The case was brought by the Soviet side because a guilty verdict by the international tribunal



Fig. 2. A plaque with a false inscription about the Katyn crime erected by the Soviets (original photo kept in The Polish Army Veterans Association of America). Source: Archive of the Institute of National Remembrance, ref. no. IPN BU-12-1-11-11

would finally allow the Germans to be blamed and the Soviets to be exonerated. Between 1 and 3 July 1946, the judges examined the evidence and heard witnesses. Unfortunately, there were no Poles among them. Nor did the tribunal refer to material evidence held by Poles in exile. In the end, the International Military Tribunal at Nuremberg, in its verdict delivered on 30 September–1 October 1946, found the Germans not guilty of the Katyn massacre, but neither did it name the perpetrators.

IV. The intensification of the unmasking process and the end of the Katyn lie

In Poland, being under Soviet influence since 1945, the official version was that the Germans were responsible for the Katyn massacre. Despite this, there was no shortage of people who knew the truth and who preserved and passed on their memories. Members of pro-independence underground organisations drew on the symbolism of Katyn. People who told the truth about the guilt of the Soviets were sentenced to imprisonment for telling the truth. The issue of the Katyn massacre in Poland continued to be hushed up by the official media. Although there

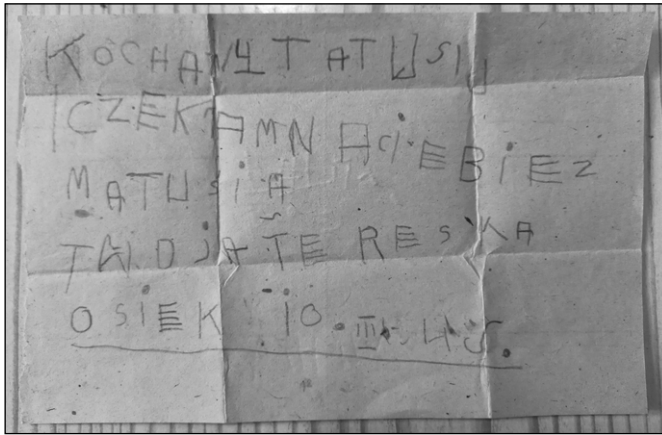


Fig. 3. A never-sent letter written by a child (Teresa Gwara, née Chołocińska) waiting for her father's return from the war (addressee: Tadeusz Maciej Chołociński, a victim of the Katyn massacre).

Source: private collection, courtesy of T. Gwara

were also those who openly opposed it.²⁰ The truth about the Katyn massacre, including the information about the NKVD's culpability for the crime, was being transmitted all the time, by the unofficial channels. The families of the murdered were the most active in seeking information about their loved ones — fathers, husbands, brothers. It was a protected memory, practised in private, and sometimes a hidden memory, the bearers of which became family heirlooms. An example of material evidence of such

situations can be found in the letter never sent by a little girl to her father, a victim of the Katyn massacre (Fig. 3). Urszula Gawor (President of the Opole Katyn Family) did not have time to get to know her father, Lieutenant Kazimierz Ściślewski; she was born a few months after his deportation. She recounts with emotion: “My mother, Kazimierz’s wife, kept his memory alive all the time. We waited a very long time for my father’s return. [...] It wasn’t before the first graves were discovered by the Germans, and then when the archaeological work was carried out that these terrible things were revealed. It was then that the first list of those who had been murdered was drawn up and illegally brought to Krakow, where it was made public; and information was secretly passed on to the families. They managed to identify who was there, what corpses and distinctions were there, but unfortunately my father wasn’t on that first list. So we continued to delude ourselves with the hope that he would come back, right? But unfortunately, he didn’t come back.”²¹

²⁰ Gańczak F. 2017.

²¹ Interview with Urszula Gawor, conducted on March 18, 2023. Project archive: interviews, ref. 15.

The turn of the 1970s and 1980s was a period of great interest in the Katyn issue. Reprints of books concerning the Katyn massacre and the fate of Poles in the USSR, published in the West or brought from there, appeared in the so-called second circulation, *i.e.*, the illegal book market.²² They were very popular among readers in Poland, because, thanks to them, it was possible to become acquainted with the fate of Poles in the USSR and the crime committed by the Soviets against Polish officers, bypassing the control of the communist state. Many Poles manifested their attitude to the Katyn tragedy by placing lighted candles in their windows on 13 April and financing memorial plaques in churches. On 31 July 1981, thanks to the efforts of the Katyn Committee, a monument to the murdered was erected at the Powazki Cemetery in Warsaw. The same night, however, it was vandalized by ‘unknown perpetrators’. The authorities would not tolerate such a demonstrative expression of opinion.

Despite the threat of repressions by the Security Service, the Katyn Institute began to operate in Poland on 4 April 1979, with its headquarters in Krakow and branches in Gdansk, Katowice, Lublin, Lodz, Poznan and Warsaw. Although the first groups had already organised themselves, and the first meeting of the initiators of the Institute took place in the spring of 1978, the official launch was announced a year later. From the very beginning the Institute published the “Katyn Bulletin”. In May 1989 the first Katyn Family in Poland was officially registered; and in September of the same year, the first congress of the Federation of Katyn Families in Poland was held.

On 13 April 1990 — now celebrated as the Day of Remembrance of the Victims of the Katyn Massacre — an official statement was issued in Moscow by the TASS agency. The communiqué confirmed the NKVD’s responsibility for the murder of Polish officers in the spring of 1940. Lavrenty Beria and Vsevolod Merkulov were personally accused. On the same day, the Polish side received the first batch of documents relating to that war crime. Much less publicity accompanied the handover of the second batch of documents on 22 June 1990. However, the key to uncovering the details of the crime was the materials handed over to Polish President Lech Wałęsa on 14 October 1992 by the Chief Archivist of the Russian Federation, Professor Rudolf Pichoja. This included the so-called Package No. I, which was fundamental to the case and contained, among other things, Beria’s request for the murder of 25,700 Polish prisoners of war, internees and detainees. And also an extract from the minutes of the meeting of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) of 5 March 1940, at which the request was accepted and the procedure for its implementation agreed. It was not until November 1992 that another batch of materials was brought from Moscow by a delegation from the Supreme Directorate of State Archives. The archives concerned the fate of Poles in the East in the years 1939–1951.

V. Some insights into individual and public expectations for and reactions to archaeological research and its results

It was not until the late 1980s and early 1990s that the Polish side intensified its efforts to initiate the Katyn investigation. In July 1990, the Polish press published reprints of documents in the Soviet press of the intention to conduct a search in Kharkov for the burial site and exhumation of the remains of the Starobielsk prisoners.²³ This only became possible in 1991, when the Supreme Military Prosecutor’s Office of the USSR in cooperation with Polish prosecutors, forensic specialists and archaeologists launched a criminal investigation. Further archaeological and exhumation works were organised by the Council for the Protection of Struggle and Martyrdom Sites (CPSMS — in Polish: Rada Ochrony Pamięci Walk i Męczeństwa ROPWiM) in 1994 and 1995. Polish

²² These were, for example, Jerzewski L. 1989; Madajczyk Cz. 1989; Zawodny J.K. 1989.

²³ Śnieżko S. 1992.

archaeologists, pathomorphologists and forensic scientists were involved. The research led to the final uncovering of the long-hidden truth about the fate of Polish police and military officers murdered by the NKVD. The work was carried out first in Kharkov (between 1991 and 1996), then in Katyn and Mednoye, and most recently in Bykivnia (in 2001 and 2006). Over time, all these sites came to be described collectively as the “Katyn Death Pits” or “Katyn Graves”.

The work conducted between 1994 and 1996 at the burial sites of the murdered were carried out with the agreement signed by Poland with the government of the Russian Federation and was coordinated by CPSMS, the government body at the time charged with the preservation of historical sites of wartime persecution of the Polish nation.

The course of the archaeological work carried out within the framework of Katyn archaeology has been discussed synthetically by Krzysztof Persak,²⁴ while the later results of the research in Bykivnia are contained in a publications by Andrzej Kola.²⁵ Here we will limit ourselves to present some arguments that underscore the role of archaeology in exposing the Katyn lie. In doing so, we would like to stress that uncovering the truth about that war crime was the complicated process of the collaborative efforts with the participation of archaeologists. They were not soloists or pioneers in this process. One of the key elements of the Katyn lie-debunking process was the attempt to find the places of executions and burials of remains of the prisoners of war held in the NKVD camps in Ostashkov and Starobielsk in late 1939 and early 1940.

At the beginning of the 1990s, the fate of more than 10,000 missing persons was still, to the significant extent, a mystery. While the dramatic fate of the murdered prisoners of war at Kozelsk had already been revealed to the public as a result of the exhumations carried out in Katyn, near Smolensk, in 1943, the Katyn lie continued to hide what had happened to those whom the Poles knew had been also deported at the beginning of April 1940. Already during the Second World War, attempts were made by Polish centres in the West to locate them. It turned out that the remains of those imprisoned in Starobielsk ended in Kharkov.²⁶

In 1991, Polish specialists carried out archaeological and exhumation work in Kharkov and Mednoye. As these sites, unlike Katyn, had not been discovered during the war, the main objective for the Polish side was to confirm that the victims of the Katyn massacre were indeed buried there. This became possible as a result of long and arduous negotiations conducted with the Soviet side by the General Prosecutor’s Office of the Republic of Poland with the Soviet side: “an agreement was reached to include representatives of the Polish Prosecutor’s Office and experts (including archaeologists, anthropologists, forensic medics, falerists and uniforms specialists) in the team carrying out the investigation and exhumation”.²⁷ Finally, at the end of July/beginning of August 1991, searches were carried out in Kharkov and in the town of Mednoye (near Tver) by the Polish group, led by the Deputy Prosecutor General of the Republic of Poland, Stefan Sniezko, at the sites indicated by the KGB offices in Tver and Kharkov. The bad intentions, and thus the insistence on the lack of knowledge by the Kharkov KGB about the exact location of the cemetery and the existing graves, became clear when the experts were shown the wrong clues, especially in the so-called VI forest park zone in the northern part of Kharkov, about 12 km from its centre.

Already in the first act of exposing the crime, archaeologists led by Nadolski found evidence that the process of obliterating of material traces of the crime and attempting to erase information about who was buried in the death pits was indeed bestial, deliberate and horribly consistent. Among other things, an object was discovered in which numerous items of property

²⁴ Persak K. 2010.

²⁵ Kola A. 2016; Kola A. 2023.

²⁶ Zbrodnia. 1982, p. 259.

²⁷ Kola A. 2023, p. 461.

taken from the murdered Polish prisoners of war — after they had been burned — were deposited. The remains of two murdered persons were documented at the bottom of this pit. In this phase of research, human remains were also found in three other pits. The remains were interpreted as both Polish and Russian, based on the accompanying objects, and were then ceremonially buried in common graves. The remains of the Poles were commemorated with a special marble plaque and a concrete borderline.²⁸

From the beginning of the archaeologists' involvement, they were accompanied by clear objectives that determined the methods of the archaeological research: "The action in Kharkov (and later in Miednoye) was in the nature of work aimed at locating and investigating mass skeletal graves, taking into account the associated material present in them. The analysis of the contents of the graves was intended to provide data allowing the identification of the buried persons" — commented Andrzej Kola of the University of Toruń.²⁹

As a result of the search with the participation of archaeologists, the principal objective was achieved, *i.e.*, the main burial sites were located. The demarcation of the burial pits was a painstaking process, in which archaeologists and their methods, developed in the course of research and adapted to the found conditions, played a very important role. Professor Marian Głosek also mentions the research solutions dictated by the peculiarities of the terrain and the subject: "This was absolutely pioneering research. I introduced the auger *en masse*. After all, who would use an auger in a cemetery? An auger is used when you don't know how deep the ditch is in a fortified settlement. But in a cemetery? I have introduced it, and that's how I determined the parameters of all the graves in Katyn. [...] Pioneering and leading the way, everyone follows. Just drilling, drilling, drilling, because these are huge spaces".³⁰ The research has also documented and collected evidence that allows for in-depth interpretations of the organisation and technique of the massacre. Data was collected to elaborate on the so-called Katyn method of shooting the victim in the back of the head as well as other methods of execution, including suffocation, torture, crushing skulls or shooting in a forehead.³¹

The political changes that took place in Europe and in the Soviet Union at the end of the twentieth century brought the hope that it would be possible to find more places — as yet unlocated — where the remains of the murdered victims of the Katyn massacre were hidden. The Poles sought to obtain a list of names of prisoners murdered in the territories now belonging to Ukraine and Belarus. Requests for support in this regard were initially addressed by the Polish authorities to Russia, but without any results. Therefore, direct contacts were undertaken with the Belarusian and Ukrainian law enforcement agencies. The result of these efforts was the handing over of the so-called Ukrainian Katyn List on 5 May 1994 by the deputy head of the Kyiv Security Service, Andrei Khomich. The list contained the names of 3435 Polish citizens who had been murdered in Kyiv, Kharkov and Kherson in 1940 as a result of a decision by the Russian Politburo. Undoubtedly, the possibility of conducting research not in Russia helped to debunk the Katyn lie more effectively.

As described by Kola³² — in this stage of the search for evidence of the Katyn massacre in Ukraine — the archaeological research and cartographic studies carried out in Kharkov in 1994 — in accordance with the agreement and in cooperation with the Ukrainian authorities — allowed for the methodical implementation of the research programme. They were undertaken

²⁸ Głosek M. 2016; Kola A. 2023, p. 463.

²⁹ Kola A. 1998, p. 50; Kola A. 2023, p. 302; Tucholski 1998, pp. 177–213.

³⁰ Interview with Professor Marian Głosek, conducted on July 13, 2022. Project archive: interviews, ref. 1.

³¹ Kola A. 2023, pp. 464–465.

³² Kola A. 2023, pp. 466–467.

by the CPSMS and led with regard to the location of all graves (Polish and local population), with their exhumation for anthropological and identification studies.

VI. Three decades of contribution and results from archaeology

The aims by which archaeologists were driven in relation to the material remains of the Katyn massacre were complex and specific to each site. One of them was the localisation and demarcation of range of the burial sites; another was to investigate the objects from personal and military equipment accompanying the remains. The work was carried out under different, often very challenging political and social circumstances. For example, in the territory of Russia over a total of eight months in 1995 and 1996, a team of archaeologists, the core of which was made up of academics and students from the Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń, worked under the direction of Kola.³³ The results of the exhumation research, using archaeological methods, made possible what the archaeologists had envisaged from the start: “We should locate all the pits where the bodies of Polish officers were buried, reach the remains and confirm that Poles were lying there”. After a decade of research, the Polish side received permission to build war cemeteries, which were consecrated in Katyn on 28 July 2000 and in Miednoye on 2 September 2000. Descendants of the victims of the Katyn massacre were able to experience what Blombergowa put in the following words: “Now that there is a Polish cemetery there, I know that my father is buried in consecrated ground. I can pray over his grave. For me it is a huge relief”.³⁴ Step by step, mainly through the analyses of the found objects, the archaeologists dispelled the doubts. The truth became fully tangible and the evidence became present in the public domain. The evidence and other material sources obtained during the excavations played an important role in the ongoing investigations, by supplementing or verifying previous assumptions both about the location of the graves and the circumstances of the murder, the treatment and the burial of the bodies (Fig. 4).

A very important aspect of the archaeological research described by the collective term of Katyn Archaeology was to make the evidence of the crime present in the public space. This was particularly important for the descendants of the murdered. Maria Matlachowska was in Kharkov when research work was still being carried out there. This is how she describes it: “There was a bench there, pelvises; two of the workers were still rinsing in this pelvis and putting the remains of the mementos excavated from these graves on the table. When I saw this, when I saw these tangible things, indeed. Only then I did believe that they were there; and somehow my throat tightened. That’s what you get when you finally see someone you’ve been waiting for a very long time; and that’s how I perceived it: that he is really here, that it’s not just on paper, there, just a few letters”.³⁵

Because of falsifying the truth about the crime, archaeology has also taken on the task of providing as much and as detailed data as possible to enable attempts to identify individual victims.³⁶ This was done mainly through documents, identity marks and objects found with the remains, which contained personal details or other clues, allowing them to be linked to specific victims.

The participants in the research were aware of the special responsibility, but also of the honour of being able to take part in these expeditions. Professor Anna Drażkowska, the specialist in charge of conservation of objects from the mass graves of Katyn massacre, recalls: “I was a very young employee; and the fact that I was offered the opportunity to work on such an exceptional case was something incredible for me. I felt as if someone had given me wings. [...] I know that

³³ Dąbrowska A. 2020.

³⁴ Dąbrowska A. 2020.

³⁵ Interview with Maria Matlachowska, conducted on March 18, 2023. Project archive: interviews, ref. 16

³⁶ Grupa M., Kaźmierczak R. 2001, p. 126.



Fig. 4. Archaeologists during archaeological research of the Katyn death pits. A photograph taken in 1994 by Dominik Ablamowicz, an archaeologist, who took part in the exhumation in the Katyn Forest. Source: private collection, courtesy of D. Ablamowicz

might sound highfalutin, but I felt it and it made me feel like a chosen one, because it was a very important story for us. And I felt I was someone who was co-creating, or had a chance to co-create, a new message about the Katyn massacre. The kind of story that will explain it”.³⁷

For many decades, the objects recovered from the death pits by archaeologists, treated as evidence in the case, as memoria, and by many even as relics, played the role of very important actants, whose message could not be silenced in the public and political space. Making them present, initially in informal exhibitions, caused practical problems during the phase of liberation from the burden of communism.

Currently, the memorabilia from the death pits are still playing their very important role in the complete and widespread refutation of the Katyn lie — as exposed to the public — at the Katyn Museum in Warsaw. The Museum was finally established on 29 June 1993 in the historic setting of Fort IX in Sadyba thanks to the enormous determination of the members of the Association of Katyn Families (Fig. 5). After more than two decades of operation under difficult conditions, the Katyn Museum — since 17 September 2015 in new, excellent exhibition and storage premises in the historically rich area of the Warsaw Citadel — is one of the most exceptional museums in Poland and beyond. It has received numerous prestigious international awards. From the perspective of thirty years of the Museum’s work, it must be said that this institution, which was initially created against the communist establishment, and which obstructed the will of those who did not agree with the Katyn lie, contributed significantly to the end of that lie.

³⁷ Interview with Professor Anna Drażkowska, conducted on June 23, 2023. Project archive: interviews, ref. 26.

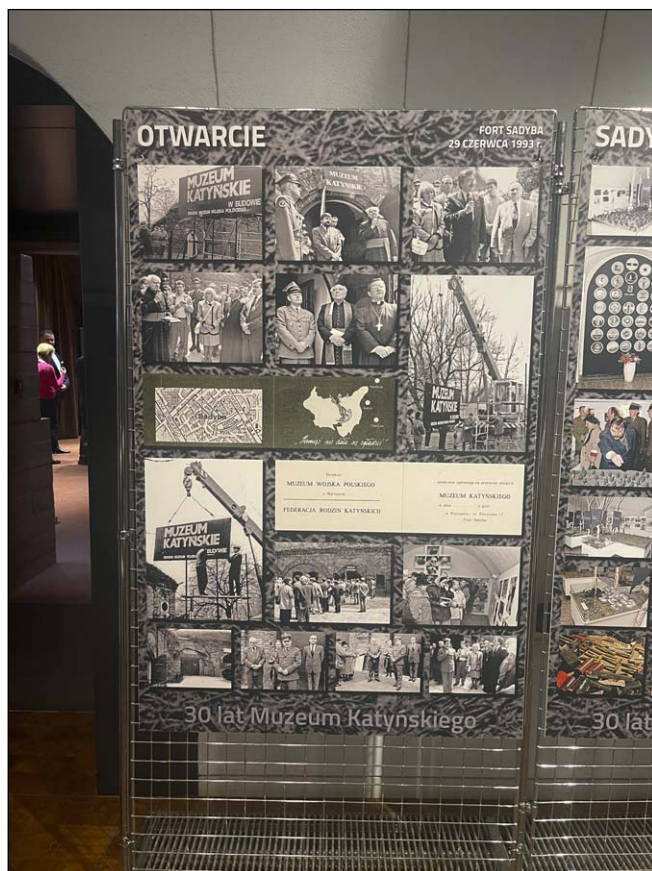


Fig. 5. The Katyn Museum, a part of the exhibition dedicated to the thirtieth anniversary of the Museum.

Source: private collection, photo by A. I. Zalewska

It is worth emphasising that the archaeological research process as the important element of the history of debunking of the Katyn lie is also reflected (since 2015) in the permanent exhibition of the Katyn Museum, where visitors can get acquainted, among other authentic exhibits, also with the elements of the archaeological documentation produced during fieldwork on the sites related to the Katyn massacre (Fig. 6).

Today, the museum brings together and exhibits the victims, the recent troubled past and the material evidence of the Katyn massacre. When approaching them, however, it is worth bearing in mind that just three decades ago — before the archaeological and forensic research began in the 1990s — the circumstances in which the objects from the death pits existed were different: “There, the cemetery hyenas were plainly digging and bringing out all sorts of things, post-German things, staples, but I also saw iron crosses on the market in Smolensk. I didn’t want to buy any, because it would be an affair that the expedition leader was taking German crosses from Smolensk to Poland. And we saw the pits there, after this wild looting. We saw shoes, buckles, belts lying around. So the locals know all about it” — recalls Głosek.³⁸

³⁸ Interview with Professor Marian Głosek, conducted on July 13, 2022. Project archive: interviews, ref. 1.



Fig. 6. The Katyn Museum, elements of the archaeological documentation from the fieldworks on the sites related to the Katyn massacre.

Source: private collection, photo by K. Ciesielski, courtesy of the author

Archaeologists are involved in the process of fighting for the truth about the Katyn massacre, delineating the extent of the death pits and providing data for the planning of commemorative places, searching for information to help determine the identities of the murdered. As a result, they make the Katyn memorabilia vibrant and causative for the families and relatives of the victims, for members of the community of memory and the human community of suffering, and for the wider public of today and the future.

VII. Conclusions

In the light of the information and arguments presented above, the significant role and importance of material evidence in the process of unravelling the Katyn lie seems undeniable. Such a diagnosis, in our opinion, also applies to the contribution of archaeology to this process. In this regard, however, it should be emphasised that the process in which archaeologists have been involved since the 1990s has been a collective one. It is not only archaeologists, but also witnesses and survivors, families of the victims, as well as forensic experts, researchers of many disciplines and specialities, including historians, archaeologists, anthropologists, remote sensing experts and many others, both past and present, who have contributed and contribute to uncovering of the truth of Katyn and to its dissemination with the engagement of material remains. We do not undertake to resolve which data and which group of specialists made the 'greatest' or the 'crucial' contribution and which, for example, slowed down or undermined that specific process of discovering, revealing and bringing the truth to light. Exploring the complexity, circumstances, multi-subjectivity and multi-temporal nature of the process of exposing of the Katyn lie (including the

contribution of archaeological research to this process) is a very complex challenge that deserves further research. In this article we have set ourselves much narrower objectives.

Firstly, we have outlined the specificity of the Katyn lie and revealed the connections between the process of its debunking and the activities that led to the uncovering of the material evidence in 1940s and later since the 1990s. The Katyn research — which in our opinion can be regarded as the forerunner of many other excavations that (since the 1990s) have constituted the archaeological disciplinary experience at the interface of the domain of medico-legal sub-disciplines³⁹ — has made a particular contribution to revealing the hidden and obscured truth. Among other things, it has provided precise data, which was valuable in the process of falsifying, interpreting and presenting of the material, oral, visual and written evidence. As a result, this research is an important reference point for the dynamic development of the archaeology of the recent past and, in particular, the archaeology of modern conflicts.

Secondly, we have presented selected insights into individual and public expectations, attitudes and reactions to the connections between the Katyn lie and the archaeological research and its results. In this context, it is worth emphasising that in the case of Katyn archaeology, the most faithful recipients of the research results from the 1990s to the present day have been, first and foremost, the descendants of the murdered, including the members of the Katyn Families. The archaeologists have always been able to count on their reactions, opinions, gratitude for their care and consistency in their actions. Let's illustrate this with a statement from Maria Rubas, the daughter-in-law of one of the victims: "I can't imagine not having something like this. After all these years, just like in Katyn, this is proof that such a crime took place and that they are buried there. It's invaluable, these exhumations, it's a huge amount of work".⁴⁰

The individuals and families had different hopes and expectations of the archaeological research, from very vague ("That maybe there will be something; that something will be found; that maybe there will be something that still connects.")⁴¹ to the very specific one — the archaeological research raised hopes that a cemetery could be built: "These people would rest in peace, that it would actually come to a burial. And that funeral, sixty years after the crime, was something incredible".⁴² Therefore, the archaeological research not only provided factual evidence of the crime at the level of historical truth and politics, but also at the personal level; thanks to the objects recovered from the death pits, the families of the victims were able to symbolically complete the rite of passage and mourning and bury their relatives.

Thirdly, in presenting the contribution of archaeology and the results of the archaeological process in making the Katyn resting places and things from the graves vibrant and causative, we have emphasized the importance of the material remains simultaneously on many levels, such as cognitive, evidential, and the 'surplus'. It is crucial that the items from the death pits documented by archaeologists are still being interpreted, protected, cared for and made public at the Katyn Museum. Also, the three-decade-long contribution of archaeology resulted in the situation that today most of the burial sites related to the Katyn massacre have the formal status of Polish war cemeteries and as such remain tangible witnesses to the dramatic crime committed by the Russians in 1940.

Material evidence of the Katyn massacre leave no doubt that political conditions had before and constantly have a great impact on them, and their persistence in time as witnesses of the difficult very recent past. This is made particularly clear by comparing the status of material evidence of the Katyn massacre in the territories of Ukraine and Belarus. While the resting places of the victims of the so-called "Ukrainian Katyn List" are (or rather, until recently, had been) commemo-

³⁹ Trzeciński M. 2021; Ekshumacje. 2023, further literature there.

⁴⁰ Interview with Maria Rubas, conducted on November 17, 2022. Project archive: interviews, ref. 9.

⁴¹ Interview with Anna Wesołowska, conducted on December 9, 2022. Project archive: interviews, ref. 11.

⁴² Interview with Izabella Sariusz-Skapska, conducted on August 2, 2022. Project archive: interviews, ref. 6.

rated with dignity, the situation of the murdered victims of the so-called “Belarusian Katyn List” is diametrically different. Unlike on the territory of Ukraine, where the authorities have been open to the search and commemorative process, as a result of which two Polish war cemeteries of the Katyn Victims function formally (in Kharkiv since 17 June 2000 and in Bykivnia since 21 September 2012), in the territory of Belarus the victims are still waiting to be commemorated. It is also dramatic that recently Polish war cemeteries and memorials — located in the zone of Russian operations and activities — are under threat due to the military aggression against Ukraine.

Summing up, on the basis of a critical analysis of the state of research and attitudes towards the phenomenon of Katyn archaeology, we argue that the results of the activities of archaeologists engaged in the archaeology of crime,⁴³ exhumation archaeology,⁴⁴ archaeology of totalitarianism⁴⁵ or archaeology of the troubled past⁴⁶ have had and continue to have significant social potential since their implementation. This extremely valuable contribution of archaeology to the process of revealing the truth about a unique element of human history (which the Katyn massacre and the fact of its hypocrisy remains), is and, we assume, should be treated as extremely important in both the current and future development of socially engaged interdisciplinary research into the problem of genocides, war crimes, historically significant lies and processes of evidence erasure, which always leave material traces and evidence behind.

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⁴³ Kola A. 2005.

⁴⁴ Blombergowa M.M. 2016.

⁴⁵ Archeologia. 2015.

⁴⁶ Materiality. 2017.

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