



## Physical Anthropology Section – 2003

### H17 Exhumations in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Unique Challenges in the Recovery From Cavern Sites

*Eva E. Klonowski, PhD\*, Nermin Sarajlic, PhD, and Piotr Drukier, MS, International Commission on Missing Persons, Alipasina 45a, Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina*

The purpose of this paper is to present an account of the challenges faced by forensic experts in recovery operations from deep caverns in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Three and half years of war in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the 1990s left about 250,000 dead and more than 30,000 missing, most of whom are presumed dead. The majority of missing persons are Muslims ("Bosniaks") who were killed during so-called "ethnic cleansing" operations during the spring and summer of 1992 and in July of 1995 after the fall of Srebrenica. Their bodies were buried in a seemingly endless number of clandestine mass graves, dumped into rivers, wells, septic tanks, and caverns, or simply left unburied in fields, meadows, and forests.

One of the most difficult kinds of exhumation sites is the underground cave (cavern). Bosnia and Herzegovina, with its mountainous configuration, has thousands of natural caves, caverns, crevices, and pits. During the conflict, many of them became convenient dumping grounds, soon filled with bodies from mass executions.

From the time when the Lanište cavern containing remains of 188 women, men, and children was discovered and exhumed in October 1996, the Bosniak State Commission for Tracing Missing Persons found 18 natural caverns from which remains of 585 individuals were recovered, while dozens of other caverns were carefully inspected for the presence of human remains. Eight caverns were discovered in southwest part of the country in Herzegovina, seven in the northwestern region of Bosnia known as the Krajina, and four in eastern Bosnia.

Recovery of remains from the caverns can be difficult and dangerous. Caverns can be deep (the deepest so far being 80 meters) and entrances can be as narrow as one meter. In addition to the dangers posed by natural threats (such as falling during ascent and descent), many caverns also contain a variety of explosive devices. To date, the remains recovered from caverns are generally skeletonized due to the length of time that has passed since bodies were dumped into them. However, in the Paklenik cavern that was exhumed in the summer of 2000 there were saponified remains of Bosniaks who were dropped in after reportedly being executed in the summer of 1992. In this case, deep layers of rocks and animal bones from a nearby slaughterhouse covering the bodies inhibited the natural process of decomposition.

With or without such concealment or site tampering, such as damage by grenade explosions after the bodies are dropped in, there are numerous technical and practical problems in the recovery of remains from cavern floors. Over time, as bodies decompose and bones disarticulate, skeletal elements separate and slide out of the clothing. Often those bones either commingle with bones of other individuals or they slide down to the bottom of the cavern. After the cavern floor becomes covered with bones, virtually no space is left for maneuvering by recovery team members, who are forced to work from suspended platforms or by hanging from ladders and ropes. Limited space also prevents the full complement of team members from effectively working simultaneously. Creative approaches are necessary to allow for proper mapping and excavation of the remains from cavern floors.

**Forensic Anthropology, Exhumations, Mass Graves**