



Physical Anthropology Section – 2010

H115 Epidemiology of Homicide in the Spanish Civil War

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After attending this presentation, attendees will understand how archaeological and forensic anthropological data can be used to reconstruct the manner in which extrajudicial executions occurred during the Spanish Civil War and how the execution modes varied by perpetrator group.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by showing how multidisciplinary cooperation among historians, archaeologists, forensic anthropologists, pathologists, and ballistic experts excavate seventy-year-old mass graves in Spain to reconstruct historic memory of the Spanish Civil War.

Forensic scientists involved in the exhumation, recovery, and analysis of victims of human rights atrocities are often tasked with

evaluating opposing testimonies concerning the number and identity of the victims as well as the nature of the event(s) surrounding the deaths. While investigators working on many sites within a single conflict may informally comment on a recognized pattern of execution and disposal, the *modus operandi* of perpetrators has received little formal attention. This is in large part because of the perceived heterogeneity of conflict behavior across space and time. However, patterns can arise within conflicts. The focus of this paper is to apply archaeological and physical anthropological data from a number of well-documented human rights investigations around the world, as well as Spanish historic information, to help define who was targeted for execution and define the manner of executions in recently excavated mass graves from the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) and subsequent period of Franco rule (1939 – 1975). The epidemiology of homicide focuses on who was targeted for execution and how the process by which executions were carried out varied over space and time and whether the perpetrators were military or civilian.

Despite the death of Franco in 1975, Civil Society in Spain is still struggling with when and how to reclaim historic memory of the Civil War and investigations of the atrocities committed by both sides are only recently underway. Most graves investigated to date are of the political left who were killed by the military as well as civilian Fascist groups. It is predicted that there will be distinct differences in the *modus operandi* between army and civilian perpetrators. Published and unpublished reports on documented clandestine execution methods from Iraq, Argentina, Guatemala, the former Yugoslavia, and several other conflict zones are compared to reports of controlled excavations of mass graves in Spain to establish the procedures to target, capture, and execute noncombatants during the Spanish Civil War and to document any regional or temporal variation.

The data collected for this study focus on the grave, any activities associated with the execution event at the site, and detailed information about the victims. The first dataset provides information concerning the actions of the perpetrators and includes: (1) geographic location of the graves; (2) the number of graves at the site (e.g., a single mass grave or multiple contiguous or nearly contiguous pits that may indicate use over a period of time); (3) dimensions of the grave(s); (4) evidence of primary or secondary interment; (5) evidence of postmortem disturbance of graves; (6) presence or absence of ballistic evidence in and around the grave (e.g., shell casings, bullets); (7) presence or absence of ballistic evidence near likely execution sites (e.g., cemetery walls); (8) type and number of firearms used; and, (9) position of individuals within the grave.

The second dataset focuses on the remains of the victims to examine who was targeted, whether it is likely they were combatants or unarmed civilians, the nature and frequency of peri-mortem trauma, and the positional relationship between the victim and perpetrator at the time of execution. Such data include: (1) number of individuals per grave; (2) demographic profile of victims; (3) date of execution; (4) number of individuals with peri-mortem gunshot, sharp or blunt force trauma; (5) number of individuals with multiple forms of peri-mortem trauma; (6) spatial relationship between perpetrator and victim (as determined by direction of gunshot fire and/or blunt force blows); (7) anatomical location(s) of peri-mortem trauma; and, (8) presence or absence of bindings (blindfolds, ligatures).

The results demonstrate that the mass graves investigated by our team, as well as most graves throughout Spain, involved little construction effort and that the majority of the victims were males who did not support the military revolt. Two or more types of bullets are recorded for most of the mass graves. The distribution of gunshot wounds on the skeletons are largely confined to the torso and entered the bodies from multiple directions. While some bullets entered the skull, the evidence is most consistent with death by firing squads as documented in Iraq. Importantly, the physical evidence of the graves and bodies is inconsistent with



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claims of battlefield deaths and support the local oral histories indicating unarmed men were rounded up and illegally executed by both military and civilian firing squads.

Forensic Anthropology, Human Rights, Spanish Civil War