



Physical Anthropology Section – 2010

H81 Spatial Patterning of Clandestine Graves in the Investigation of Large Scale Human Rights Violations: The Example of the Spanish Civil War Rearguard Repression

Derek Congram, MSc*, 706-1850 Comox Street, Vancouver, BC V6G 1R3, CANADA

After attending this session attendees will understand the importance of studying spatial patterns in the location of clandestine graves in contexts of armed conflict. Attendees will learn about the primary factors that influence offender choice of burial site for victims of wide scale killings in repressive contexts. This method will help investigators conduct more effective searches for victims of forced disappearance.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by discussing effective methods in the search for clandestine graves in the investigation of Human Rights violations and forced disappearances.

The creation of clandestine graves may be influenced by many factors but few are very influential and these few commonly reoccur across different cultural contexts. This means that grave locations can be reasonably well predicted in certain contexts as part of the search for missing persons, victims of human rights violations.

In the context of the Spanish Civil War (1936-1942), over 100,000 civilians were detained, executed and buried in anonymous, clandestine graves by rebel soldiers and militia members in the rearguard of the war and postwar repression. The lack of formal criminal investigations in this context, and the recent movement (2000-present) to find and exhume victims allows researchers to study various aspects of the crimes, including spatial patterns related to clandestine graves. Similar patterns have been observed by the author in quite different cultural and temporal contexts (e.g., Bosnia, Iraq) suggesting that there are broad factors influencing offender decisions (e.g., logistics, least effort principle, restriction of resources during periods of armed conflict). As anthropologists and archaeologists are commonly called upon to assist with the location and excavation of clandestine graves (both domestically and internationally), it is important to evaluate the context in which the crimes are taking place and the factors that may influence the decisions of those committing the killings.

This study of spatial patterns will assist forensic anthropologists and archaeologists in their efforts to locate clandestine graves in similar contexts of internal armed conflict resulting in the forced disappearance of civilians. Preliminary analysis of results demonstrates that graves are typically located between 1 and 10 km of the location from which the victim was detained. Graves are almost never more than 50 metres from a road, with main roads being the principal route used (rather than secondary and minor roads). The physical locations of gravesites are typically in areas not visible from the point of origin, urban areas or even close surroundings (e.g., olive groves, low-lying basins). Commonly, pre-existing features are used, such as wells, mines and ravines. All of these features speak principally of the importance of cost in resources when having to dispose of victims. It appears that although the offenders are acting as the local authority and with consent from the governing military – and so acting with impunity – there is still a clandestine element in their behavior resulting in them committing killings and creating burials in places not easily seen but also those which are not costly in terms of time and energy. Despite the social disorder in armed conflict and the justification of killings in rhetoric employed by the military and civil authorities, there continues to be a degree of deliberate secretiveness when authorities choose where to dispose of the bodies of their civilian victims. There is also a fair degree of consistency in behavior across broad geographic areas governed by different individuals. A greater understanding of the factors that influence killer behavior will result in more effective searches for graves by forensic anthropologists and archaeologists involved in the investigation of crimes against humanity, genocide, forced disappearance and similar human rights violations.

Clandestine Grave Prospection, Spatial Analysis, Forced Disappearance Investigation