



Physical Anthropology Section - 2013

H55 Skeletal Trauma in the Tuskulnai Case: A Comparison of State-Sponsored Violence in the Former Soviet Union

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After attending this presentation, attendees will gain an understanding of how skeletal trauma varies between executioners in the Tuskulnai case and how state-sponsored violence in the former Soviet Union varied throughout the Stalin regime.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by providing relative frequencies of skeletal trauma in the Tuskulnai case, which can be used to locate People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD) violence within a global framework of state-sponsored violence. This project also demonstrates that state agents may not adhere to state guidelines as closely as historical data suggests.

Following the Second World War, the NKVD represented the Soviet security apparatus responsible for arresting and punishing "enemies of the state." From 1944 until 1947, the NKVD executed 767 prisoners in the Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic (L.S.S.R.) and buried their remains in mass graves at the Tuskulnai Estate. Guidelines for prisoner treatment and execution were established by Soviet authorities to be implemented at a local level by state agents, including in the L.S.S.R. In particular, the penal code of the Soviet Union mandated that the only legitimate means of performing executions was by fusillade, or firearms, to the back of the head. This study examined violence committed by state agents, investigating their actual adherence to state guidelines. Specifically, this project analyzes the sex, age, and frequency of skeletal trauma in a sample of prisoners in order to understand how patterns of violence differ between two primary execution squads in the Tuskulnai case. Execution squads include those led by NKVD agent Vasilij Dolgirev (operating from November 1944 until October 1946) and Boris Prikazchikov (operating from November 1946 until April 1947). Based on historical data, no difference in trauma patterns was expected between state agents who implemented violence. This project also attempts to shed light on how state-sponsored violence toward Soviet citizens changed during the 1930s and 1940s. Thus, skeletal trauma in the Tuskulnai case is compared to other instances of Soviet violence, including those at Vinnytsia (Ukraine), Katyn (Russia), and Rainiai (Lithuania). Data is collected with the intent to compare patterns of violence in the Soviet Union with other instances of state-sponsored violence during the twentieth century.

Preliminary analyses in the Tuskulnai case reveal that approximately 95% of prisoners are male, and consist mostly of young adults (45%) or middle adults (38%). Frequencies of skeletal trauma differ between the execution squads. The majority of prisoners executed by Dolgirev's squad exhibit gunshot wounds (91%), followed by blunt force trauma (16%), and undetermined trauma (42%). In contrast, prisoners executed by Prikazchikov's squad demonstrate a lower frequency of gunshot wounds (57%), but a higher frequency of sharp force trauma (1%), blunt force trauma (31%), square defects (31%), and undetermined trauma (60%). When the relative frequencies of trauma are combined for the Tuskulnai samples, preliminary analyses demonstrate that 80% of individuals exhibit gunshot wounds ranging from one to four shots, while blunt force (21%), square defects (11%), sharp force (1%), and undetermined traumata (47%) are also observed. The frequency of gunshot wounds in the Tuskulnai case is lower than that of Vinnytsia (100%) and Katyn (100%), but higher than that of Rainiai (14%).

Thus, while historical data characterize these execution squads as operating uniformly in accordance with state guidelines, skeletal data indicates that executioners may differ in their compliance with state guidelines. Furthermore, comparison of the Tuskulnai case with other instances of atrocity demonstrates the range of variability in state-sponsored violence in the Soviet Union.

State Violence, Executioners, Skeletal Trauma