

## A9 Communist Human Rights Violations in Poland (1944–1956): A Forensic Anthropological Perspective

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**Learning Overview:** After attending this presentation, attendees will have a better understanding of the importance of pursuing justice through scientific evidence with no cultural, political, or social bias.

**Impact on the Forensic Science Community:** This presentation will impact the forensic science community by presenting evidence from two sites that contained the remains of executed Polish citizens during the Communist era.

The establishment of the most probable cause of death on skeletal remains is one of the crucial features determined by forensic anthropologists in the examination process of human remains. Numerous studies from recent years found that forensic examination of skeletal material from the past can reveal essential pieces of information about the history of conflicts and also help to identify the victims.

In recent years, the Institute of National Remembrance carried out some excavation work concerning the victims of the communist regime in Poland. After World War II, Poland and other Eastern Europe countries were under the influence of the Soviet Union. Many citizens were arrested and sentenced to death, including members of underground organizations who fought against the Soviets, the pro-Soviet government, and the secret police.

This study analyzed the results of two excavations conducted in Warsaw and Wrocław. The excavations were a part of the Institute of National Remembrance project named “The search for unknown burial places of victims of communist terror in Poland in the years 1944–56.” A medical and anthropological examination followed the exhumation of the former prisoners’ skeletons.

In Powązki Cemetery in Warsaw, the examination established the presence of gunshot wounds on the bone in 78 out of 194 cases.<sup>1</sup> In Osobowicki Cemetery in Wrocław, Szleszkowski et al. observed the gunshot wounds in 39 out of 223 skeletons.<sup>2</sup> A chi-square test of independence revealed a statistically significant association between the presence of gunshot wounds and the cemetery from where the remains were recovered,  $\chi^2(1) = 26.525$ ,  $p < 0.005$ . All of the statistical analyses were performed in the IBM® Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Statistics 26.0 software.

The fall of communism in Poland in 1989 created an opportunity to study crimes from the past using forensic archaeology and anthropology based on scientific evidence without any bias or pressure. In addition, the forensic examination of the skeletons revealed that the firing squad killed the prisoners sentenced to death in a different way than the one described by communist authorities.<sup>3</sup>

The goal of this research is to identify the differences in the manner of execution between Warsaw and Wrocław. Furthermore, this study demonstrates how forensic anthropological examination can reveal various types of gunshot trauma on skeletons exhumed more than 70 years after death.

This present research brings to light the communist crimes in Poland after World War II and emphasizes how the application of forensic science can restore the truth about crimes in a historical context. This is especially relevant in the present day, where there is an increased polarization of political ideologies.

### Reference(s):

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2. Szleszkowski, Ł., Thannhäuser, A., Szwagrzyk, K., Konczewski, P., Kawecki, J., and Świątek, B. Exhumation research concerning the victims of political repressions in 1945–1956 in Poland: A new direction in forensic medicine. *Forensic science international*. 2014 235, 103-e1.
3. Szleszkowski, Ł., Thannhäuser, A., Kawecki, J., Szwagrzyk, K., and Świątek, B. Reconstruction of methods of execution of the death penalty by shooting in the years 1949–1954 based on exhumation research of “prison fields” in Osobowicki Cemetery in Wrocław. Part II—Analysis of gunshot injuries and an attempt at reconstructing the course of execution. *Archiwum medycyny sądowej i kryminologii*. 2012; 62(2): 87-97.

### Forensic Anthropology, Gunshot Wounds, Communism Victims