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Besprechungen

Andrzej Kola, *Archeologia Zbrodni. Oficerowie polscy na cmentarzu ofiar NKWD w Charkowie* (The archaeology of the crime. Polish officers in the cemetery of NKVD victims in Charkov), Toruń, 2005, Uniwersytet Mikołaja Kopernika and Rada Ochrony Pamięci Walk i Męczeństwa; 448 pages, 240 figures, 3 tables, Paperback, ISBN 83-231-1899-X.

ALEXANDRU DRAGOMAN

Andrzej Kola's book is a good example for an "archaeology of the 'terrible 20th century', to use Laurent Olivier' phrase (2002: 138). The volume refers to a traumatic, long debated event in the history of World War II, namely the fate of the Polish officers captured in 1939 by the Soviets, following the agreement between Stalin and Hitler (known as the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact) regarding the occupation and division of Poland.

The reconstruction of the events starting from the reports of some prisoners, but especially from the Soviet archive documents, made available by the early '90s, is presented in the first chapter of the book. On the 17th of September 1939 the Soviet army invaded eastern Poland and captured as war prisoners 250,000 soldiers and officers. Three of the founded prisoner camps were specially designed for the officers: Starobielsk / Starobilsk / Starobelsk (Voroshilovgrad / Vorošilovgrad district), Kozielsk / Kozelsk (Smolensk district) and Ostaszkov / Ostaškov (Kalinin district). In March 1940, due to the suggestion of Lavrentij Berija (people's commissar for internal affairs), the members of the Politbureau of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union – Iosif Stalin, Kliment Vorošilov, Vjačeslav Molotov and Anastas Mikojan – decide that the prisoners interned in the three camps (but not only) should be executed. From April to May 1940, the Polish officers were deported to the places of execution. From that moment on, the correspondence between the prisoners and their families broke off; the concerned families' appeals to the Soviet authorities are met with the answer that the internment camps were dismantled and the fate of the prisoners remains unknown. Meanwhile, the NKVD destroyed both the confiscated personal documents (letters, postcards, telegrams, photographs, negatives), and the official documents of the camps (prisoner records, alphabetical lists, person indices, the diary with the correspondence received) in order to wipe out any trace of the victims. The first information on the fate of the prisoners appeared in 1943, when the Germans discovered the mass graves at Katyń/Katyn. In spite of the attempt by the Soviet authorities to blame the Germans for the massacre, upon the invitation on the behalf of the latter, the exhumations conducted by an international commission led to the conclusion that the victims had been brought from the Kozielsk camp and executed by the NKVD in the spring of 1940. By the early '90s, as access to the Soviet archives was no longer denied, the place of the execution of the prisoners from the other two camps became a certainty: those interned at Starobielsk had been sent to Charkov/Charkiv, and those interned at Ostaszkov to Miednoje/Mednoe.

The first archaeological excavations meant to check these places began in the summer of 1991 (Chapter 2). In both cases, they identified graves of the victims of Stalinist cleansings from the 1938-1941 time span, including mass grave with Polish officers. In the presumed NKVD cemetery at Charkov, following some of the 49 drillings conducted two mass graves were fully spotted (the remains of 161 people were exhumed from them), as well as at least two neighbouring mass graves (the remains of other six people were exhumed). The artefacts found proved beyond any doubt that those buried there were Polish prisoners from the camp of Starobielsk. At the same time, other two mass graves with Soviet civilians were spotted. Once identified, the Polish took official steps towards conducting a full research into the

cemeteries at Katyń, Charkov and Miednoje, as they were keen on getting full information on (1) the victims' places of burial, and (2) the circumstances of the massacre; however, the priorities were commemorating those killed and burying them in a proper manner. Following these endeavours, in 1994 the Polish government signed two agreements: one with the government of the Russian Federation and another with that of the Ukraine. Consequently, between 1994 and 1995 the Polish archaeologists conducted excavations at Katyń and Miednoje, and between 1994 and 1996 at Charkov – the latter being the subject of Kola's book. Part of the investigations at Charkov included a map of the region that had to be researched, then thousands of drillings were conducted in order to spot the graves, followed by sondages, and during the second campaign the exhumations began. In all 75 mass graves were identified, 15 of which contained remains of the Polish officers.

The results of the exhumations (Chapter 3) showed that in the 15 mass graves 4302 people were buried, two of which were women, and the rest men. The figure exceeds by 500 people the number of war prisoners interned in the camp at Starobielsk and sent to Charkov, which means that also military brought from other camps were executed there. The mass graves were identified as belonging to the Poles on the basis of the thousands of the uncovered artefacts: the pieces of military equipment (coats, uniforms, belts, caps, four-cornered caps with eagle emblem, officer and field military boots, flasks, canteens), decorations, épaulettes, identification plates, personal belongings (toilet utensils, object of religious cult, watches, Polish banknotes and coins, cigarette-cases and holders, games sets), personal documents (notes in calendars). The identity of some of the victims could be found out due to the mess kettles engraved with the names or initials of their owners. Equally important are the notes in the diaries as they contain the names of other comrades. The dating was performed on the basis of the cigarette boxes and cigarette holders inscribed with "Starobielsk", often along with "1939-1940" or "date-month-1940" – the moment of the departure from Starobielsk, as well as on the basis of the Soviet newspapers found on some of the victims, the dates of the issues ceasing with April 1940. According to the skulls analyses, most victims were shot in the head from behind. A part of the officers were executed in the cemetery itself, as proven by the fact that in some of the mass graves many cartridges of various types were found, especially for Soviet made weapons. Some of the bodies had their hands tied at the back. More often than not, the bodies of those shot were laid in layers. Based on the entire information acquired, including the archived one, a reconstruction of the order in which the bodies were dropped in some of the graves was performed: the bodies of the first victims were brought by car and dropped into the mass grave 17/1994 and probably simultaneously into the mass graves 7/1994 and 28/1995, while the victims of the last deportations in May 1940 were dropped into the mass grave 30/1995.

Besides the 15 mass graves of the Polish officers, the archaeological excavations identified also 60 mass graves with remains of the victims from the local population, mostly civilians. These include 2241 people, of which at least 26 are women. The first victims could have comprised also Poles, as shown by the presence in a grave of a spoon inscribed in the Polish language – "Sanatorium in Izdebna". The artefacts include especially fragments of Soviet made rubber boots, fragments of cups bearing inscriptions in Russian language, and, rarely, toilet objects. Objects used by the murderers were also found: mass grave 4/1994 contained an iron hook for dragging the bodies and a spade used to dig the pits. It is worth mentioning the almost total lack of textile fragments in comparison with the graves of the Polish militaries. Almost all the mass graves contained many revolvers cartridges, pistols or machine gun of various types, which shows that the victims were executed in the cemetery itself, a fact confirmed by one of the mass graves in which evidence was found that they were shot directly in the pit: Nagan bullets were excavated in the bed rock. The civilians were executed in the same manner as the Polish officers – in the head from behind – proving a methodical uniform system of killing the victims, practised by the NKVD.

According to the anthropological analysis, among the killed Polish officers there are not only young people (20-30 years old) or middle-aged (35-45 years old), but also many older people (over 55 years old), often with signs of pathological diseases. As regards the civilian victims, most are adults (35-45 years old) or those who had reached the upper limit of maturity (45-55 years old).

Except for the mass graves, in the cemetery at Charkov the archaeological excavations also identified the wooden enclosing of the former NKVD cemetery, "The Black Road" along which the bodies used to be brought (in the case of those executed somewhere else) or those who would be shot (in the case of those executed in the cemetery), as well as the remains of a wooden building, in which an iron bed was preserved, used by the NKVD guards who watched the cemetery on a permanent basis. The role of the road and building has been determined on the basis of the report of an eye witness to the massacre, a guard of the NKVD prison in Charkov and very likely a participant in the executions.

Chapter 4 refers to the interventions that affected the cemetery after the events of the spring of 1940, while in chapter 5 the archaeological excavations at Charkov are discussed in the context of other places where victims of the Stalinist regime are buried. Following the excavations (Epilogue), on the 17th of June 2000, the new cemetery dedicated to the murdered Polish and built on the place of the former NKVD cemetery was inaugurated in the presence of the representatives of the Polish and Ukrainian states, representatives of the Churches and of the victims' families.

The work contains a bulky documentation. The presentation of each of the stages of the research is accompanied by plans and photographs. For example, in the case of the mass graves belonging to the Polish officers, next to a detailed description, plans and profiles of the pits are illustrated (however, in a few situations it was not possible), colour photographs of excavation details and colour photographs of the artefacts found in them.

Undoubtedly, the archaeological excavations at Charkov by Kola's team completed the image offered by the archive documentation not only by the fact that they brought information on the place where the victims were buried, the circumstances of the executions, and the identities of some of the dead or the presence of other victims besides the Polish militaries. The excavations developed another image, that of the materiality of suffering, an image hard to develop in historical texts. The families of the officers shot at Charkov have finally learned the whole nightmare story of those who disappeared and were able to bury their dead properly. However, the most important thing consists in the fact that Kola's work allows the reader to empathize with the victims. The objects uncovered, such as the cigarette cases, cigarette holders, chess or domino pieces, the small crosses or icons, letters, postcards, journals, brings one closer to the people interned in the camp at Starobielsk, to their life there, as well as to the life left behind, at their homes. When they left the camp they carried the objects with them, as they did not suspect that they would never need them any more, that no letter would ever reach home, that they go directly to death. I think that the objects' power of evocation is also proven by the fact that over 6,000 artefacts in a good state of preservation were sent to Poland, conserved and then donated to the Katyń Museum in Warsaw. The bodies with their hands tied at the back or the cartridges found in the pits evoke the horror of the last moments before death much more movingly than any other abstract historical text. What felt the Polish militaries and Soviet civilians while waiting for their turn to be shot? What felt the Soviet civilians as they saw the grave pit already dug? What felt the victims' families waiting for a sign from their loved ones, when no letter ever came again? For how long can someone keep hope alive? The authors of the massacre should not be forgotten either. How can one, in a landscape of crime and death, rest quietly on the bed in the wooden building and/or carry a weapon, pull the trigger tens, or, why not, hundreds of times in order to put an end to the lives of other people? How can one dig with a spade a pit where he would bury the bodies of those killed by his NKVD comrades or even by himself, drag the bodies into the pit with an iron hook, and how can all that seem something "normal", a "task", just a

“job”? How can one simply return to the family after “work”, as if nothing ever happened? It seems that in the name of an ideology it might be very easy. The book does not answer these questions, but it is important that it provides the opportunity for them to be formulated. From that point of view, citing one of Olivier’s phrases again (2002: 138), Kola’s work is also an “archaeology of ideology”, of the sets of ideas that turn people into murderers.

Last but not least, I mention that the archaeological excavations at Charkov are not a singular example, as similar endeavours have been initiated also in other countries in eastern Europe, like Lithuania (e.g. Jankauskas *et al.* 2005), Latvia (e.g. Zemītis 2005), or Romania (e.g. Petrov 2007; Petrov and Budeancă 2007), in order to discover the places where the victims of communist repression were buried and the circumstances in which they died.

At the end of these lines, I recommend to the reader not only Kola’s book, but also the movie *Katyń*, directed by Andrzej Wajda and premiered on 17th of September 2007, the anniversary of the Soviet invasion of Poland in 1939: the movie focuses not on the massacre itself, but on the drama of the victims’ families who are loyally waiting, hoping that their beloved ones are still alive and that someday they will return home.

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