



## Gunshot wounds (resulting from execution) of exhumed victims of the communist regime in Poland



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### ABSTRACT

This study presents the results of the analysis of the remains of 23 executed male individuals aged between 21 and 63 years, recovered from Osobowicki Cemetery in Wrocław (Poland), field 83B, in 2012. In 1948 and 1949, prisoners sentenced to death by firing squad – most of them associated with the post-war anti-communist underground independence movement in Poland – were buried there. The aim of the study was to analyse fatal wounds and the method of execution, and to compare the results to data from archival documents. The results were also compared with studies concerning executions during a later period, i.e. 1949–1954. The research on the method of execution during this period of history carried out during the exhumations in Osobowicki Cemetery was the first conducted on such a scale in Poland. Forensic analysis revealed a wide variety of gunshot wounds inflicted during executions, revealing both gunshots to the head, especially single shots to the back of the head, and cases corresponding to the use of a firing squad, probably equipped with machine guns. The results of the research indicate that capital punishment by shooting was carried out in ways both similar to those specified in the regulations and completely different.

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### 1. Introduction (historical context)

The end of World War II for the countries of Central and Eastern Europe marked the beginning of the next tragic period in their histories. Encroaching on their territories, units of the Red Army, the NKVD and SMERSH counterintelligence smothered all traces of opposition to the new Soviet-controlled authority. In the first years after the war, countries such as Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and Ukraine became the theatre for another bloody struggle for national independence [1–4]. Many armed and conspiratorial organisations operated during this period in Poland, continuing their underground activities from the time of the Nazi occupation and forming an anti-Communist underground (Resistance Movement without War and Sabotage 'Freedom and Independence', National Armed Forces, National Military Union, Conspiratorial Polish Army) [1]. Units associated with the security apparatus and the military, subordinate to the government of that time (Security Office, Internal Security Corps and the NKVD), effectively detected and eliminated these organisations [1]. The last of these forces were defeated in the years 1952 and 1953 and the last soldier in hiding was killed in October 1963 [1]. Their members were

sent before military courts and frequently were sentenced to death. In later years, they became known as Accursed Soldiers. It is estimated that in the years 1944–1956, the period of the greatest terror in Poland, approximately 4000 individuals perished. After the death penalty was carried out, usually by shooting, the majority of them were buried in unknown, undisclosed locations managed by the military or the Security Office, often in mass graves. Initiation of archival research became possible only after Poland's political transformation in 1989. Currently, the Institute of National Remembrance is establishing the locations of burials of victims of political repression from the 40s and 50s, carrying out the exhumation and identification of victims and forensic, anthropological and genetic examinations of the remains [5].

### 2. Materials and methods

In the first half of 2012, on behalf of the Institute of National Remembrance and the Council for the Protection of the Memory and Martyrdom of Independence Fighters, an exhumation was conducted in field 83B of Osobowicki Cemetery in Wrocław, Poland, where, in the period from 14 September 1948 to 12 September 1949, 89 prison inmates (including two children), were buried, among them 28 prisoners executed by shooting [6]. A total of 76

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sets of human remains, located in separate, unmarked burial pits, were excavated and examined. This work was a continuation of the exhumations carried out at this cemetery at the end of 2011, using the same methodology in both archaeological operations at the cemetery and the forensic and anthropological inspection of the remains [7]. The work was therefore carried out using the excavation method used at archaeological sites. The remains were taken up individually and given consecutive numbers. At each stage of the work, complete photographic documentation was performed. In each case a full forensic and anthropological examination of the remains was conducted in a field laboratory. In the course of these examinations, the remains were placed in anatomical order and checked for completeness; a full description was made of morphological characteristics, features resulting from burial in a natural environment, and signs of injuries, wounds and disease-induced changes [7]. The sex of each set of remains was identified using features of the pelvis, skull and other parts of the skeleton [8]. Ages were estimated, particularly on the basis of changes in the pubic symphysis [9], along with the use of other known methods [8]. Antemortem statures were derived from the length of long bones, using the tables of Trotter and Gleser [10]. In the course of the work, preliminary personal identification was carried out based on an analysis of data from cemetery records, archival material and the results of forensic research, as in the work done in 2011 [7]. In each case, bone material was secured for genetic identification testing. Traumatic changes involving bone were evaluated following reconstruction of damaged bone elements (especially skulls). These changes were described in the forensic protocol. In each case of gunshot wounds,

freehand sketches were made and photographic documentation performed. Assessment of the nature of gunshot wounds involving bone was based on the standard procedure used in forensic medicine [11,12]. Isolated damage which, due to taphonomic changes, could not be unequivocally classified as perimortem trauma was not taken into account in the analysis.

### 3. Results

In 23 of 76 cases, the presence of gunshot wounds was demonstrated. Two sets of remains were not taken from the grave pits due to the presence of tombstones. In three cases, the state of the remains (pronounced taphonomic changes, absence of a skull or the presence in the grave pit of previously exhumed remains only) prevented the confirmation of gunshot wounds. During exhumation work, very badly corroded single pistol bullets were found in two grave pits. Analysis of the location and nature of the gunshot wounds enabled the distinction of the following types of gunshot wound groups:

- (1) Type I – isolated gunshot head wounds (Table 1) – 11 of 23 cases
  - subtype Ia – isolated single gunshot wound in the back of the head, i.e. occipital or posterior parietal regions – 8 of 23 cases
- (2) Type II – gunshot wounds in the head with associated single gunshot wounds in other body regions: chest and left arm (Table 2) – 5 of 23 cases

**Table 1**  
Gunshot damage, Types I and Ia.

Skeleton no.	Gunshot wounds in the skull	
	Entrance wound	Exit damage
35	Shard of occipital bone and of left frontal bone	Left facial and left occipital
44	Shard of occipital bone	Right suborbital region
50	Shard of occipital bone	Shard of frontal and facial bone
51	Lower part of a shard of right occipital bone	Facial
54	Right parieto-occipital region	Shard of right frontal bone
55	Right parieto-occipital region	Shard of right frontal bone
56	Fragment of left occipital bone	Shard of left frontal bone
58	Glabellar region	Rear part of the parietal region
67	Shard of right occipital bone	Left side of the jaw; the canal running through the core of the occipital bone and maxillary sinus
69	Right occipito-mastoid region	Shard of left frontal bone
74	In the left temporal region, two defects characteristic of a tandem shot; in a shard of occipital bone at the same height, a tangential gunshot to the head (gutter defect 3°) with the entrance portion on the left	Bones of the right side of the skull

**Table 2**  
Gunshot wounds, Types II and V.

Skeleton no.	Gunshot wounds of the skull		Gunshot wounds of the subcranial skeleton
	Entrance hole	Exit hole	
17	Left temporo-frontal region	Right temporal area	Of T9 vertebra with external bevelling
21	(3×) Two in a shard of left frontal bone, one in the left fronto-temporal region	Not found	Shaft of the left humerus
48	Right temporo-parietal-occipital region	Bones of the left cranial vault	Two adjacent vertebrae in the T1-T4 area with external bevelling
64	(3×) Left fronto-parietal region; left parieto-sphenoid region; and (likely) lower left mandibular region	Area of the parietal tuber and right occipital region	T4 vertebra, right side, with external bevelling, and necks of four ribs on the right side
68	Glabellar region	Occipital region	Single rib, left side
31	(4×) Glabellar region; shard of right frontal bone; right fronto-parietal-temporal region; occipital region	Right parietal region and lower part of the occipital bone	Tangential gunshot to the left scapular spine with external bevelling; T9 vertebra and heads of nine ribs, left side

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