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Necroviolence in the archaeological evidence. Mass crimes in the Szpęgawski Forest, Poland and the materiality of Aktion 1005

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ABSTRACT

The first few months of Second World War were marked by numerous mass crimes against humanity committed by Third Reich civil servants on citizens of the Second Polish Republic – local intelligentsia, people with mental disorders, and the Jewish minority. The bodies were then disposed of by hiding them in mass graves. In the second half of 1944, the Nazis returned to the scenes of the crimes to delete the traces of mass executions – as part of a special operation (Aktion 1005) and cover up all evidence of their crimes. This article analyzes the process undertaken by the Nazis to destroy graves as part of Aktion 1005 through the concept of necroviolence on human corpses – defined by Jason De León, as, ‘the intentional infliction of violence on human corpses’. The following case study presents evidence excavated during archaeological research conducted in the Szpęgawski Forest in Gdańsk Pomerania, Poland.

KEYWORDS

Crime; necroviolence; mass grave; Second World War; Aktion 1005; Poland; Germany

Introduction

Material traces of crime (and punishment) have been discovered and documented by archaeologists for decades (e.g. Martin and Harrod 2014). The recently discernible dynamic development of forensic archaeology is a telling exemplification of the crucial role archaeology plays in collecting and researching evidence of various crimes – no matter how old or how recent it is (e.g. Ferrándiz and Robben 2015). This also applies to Polish archaeology – the discovery and documentation of material traces of Nazi crimes during Second World War and (post-) war communist crimes, is an important field of research (e.g. Kobiałka 2022, 2023; Konczewski 2020; Ławrynowicz and Żelazko 2015).

The act of symbolic or physical violence does not only apply to living people – it includes various acts that torturers, executioners, criminals, and others commit against the corpses of their victims. At first glance, this phenomenon seems to be well documented in literature on the subject – from the Nazi’s ‘death factories’ (extermination camps of Second World War) to the current migration crisis and armed conflicts (De León 2015). Indeed, the mass graves from Second World War can be seen as a paradigmatic example of both physical and symbolic violence – unmarked death pits in which tens, hundreds, thousands, and sometimes even tens of thousands of people lost their lives and from where their bodies were later exhumed and burned to cover up the most crucial evidence of the crimes (e.g. Kobiałka 2023).

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Following the commentary of Alexandra Staniewska and Ewa Domańska (2023, 39–40), the issue of mass graves can be analysed through the concept of necroviolence introduced by Jason De León (2015). While studying the problem of undocumented migration across the US-Mexico border, De León drew attention to the relationships that are generated by the bodies of migrants who died in various circumstances while trying to reach the US. As he notes:

[...] different engagements with dead bodies are forms of what I term necroviolence: violence performed and produced through the specific treatment of corpses that is perceived to be offensive, sacrilegious, or inhumane by the perpetrator, the victim (and her or his cultural group), or both. Unlike Mbembe's necropolitics, which centers on the capacity to 'kill or let live' associated with modernity and the exercise of sovereignty, necroviolence is specifically about corporeal mistreatment and its generative capacity for violence. [...] Much can be learned about ideologies of conflict and social inequality by interrogating necroviolence across time, space, and fields of study. (De León 2015, 69–70)

The concept of necroviolence can be also seen as a relevant framework to make sense of the events that took place in the fall of 1939, in Gdańsk Pomerania, and the associated evidence that has survived to the present day. It is important to bear in mind that necroviolence is not limited to physical violence: murdering people and hiding of the victim's bodies. The concept is much broader – as Staniewska and Domańska (2023, 40; my translation) note, it includes the sphere of symbolism, funeral rites, and the families of the victims: 'The absence of the body and the impossibility of its burial puts the families in the difficult position of "eternal mourning" and thus we can say that in such cases we are dealing with long-term, slow, necroviolence'.

Mass crimes and necroviolence should not be understood as events on a timeline. They are usually dynamic processes with various fluctuations or phases. It is the processual dimension of necroviolence that I discuss, related to mass crimes committed in Szpęgawski Forest during the early period of Second World War and the covering up of their traces in the following years (Berendt et al. 2016; Hoffmann 2013). This execution site was one of the largest of 1939 in Gdańsk Pomerania. In the fall of 1944, the Nazis returned and destroyed evidence of the mass graves by exhuming and burning the corpses of the victims (Kobińska, Ceran, et al. 2024; Kubicki 2019; Milewski 1989).

In the following parts of this article, I will present a much broader historical context related to the mass crimes committed against the local intelligentsia, people with mental disorders, and representatives of the Jewish community, which also took place in the fall of 1939 in Gdańsk Pomerania. They are today collectively labelled as the 'Pomeranian Crime of 1939' (Ceran 2024) – which has been the subject of a multidisciplinary and international research project (e.g. Kobińska and González-Ruibal 2024; Kobińska, Ceran, et al. 2024; Kobińska, Fabiańska, et al. 2024b). Next, I discuss and illustrate what can be defined as the materiality of necroviolence. Murdering innocent people and hiding their bodies was basically about getting rid of the evidence of the crime – its materiality (corpses). The same applies to the cover-up of the crime by the burning of thousands of corpses as part of Aktion 1005 – where a 'second death' was inflicted upon the victims – by burning the corpses, it seemed impossible for decades to assess the scale of the mass crime and identify victims by name. Finally, the archaeological research carried out in the Szpęgawski Forest in 2023, revealed the very materiality of necroviolence as a process, which, despite the vigorous efforts by the perpetrators to erase it, has remained to this day. Archaeological research shows the raw, brutal, material, and undeniable evidence of crimes.

The Pomeranian Crime of 1939 between historical and archaeological research

Nazi crimes committed during Second World War, between the years 1939–1945, in Gdańsk Pomerania were the subject of in-depth research by subsequent generations of Polish historians (e.g. Ceran 2024; Jastrzębski 1974; Jastrzębski and Sziling 1979; Steyer 1967). They were also the subject of official investigations conducted by the District Commission for the Prosecution of German (Fascist) Crimes in Gdańsk, among others (Figure 1). In connection with the implementation of the 'Archaeology of the Pomeranian Crime of 1939' project, the broader context of events related to the political situation in Gdańsk Pomerania before 1 September 1939, the organization and course of mass crimes in the first months of Second World War, their scale and nature have already been discussed in several English-language publications (e.g. Kobiałka 2022; Kobiałka, Ceran, et al.

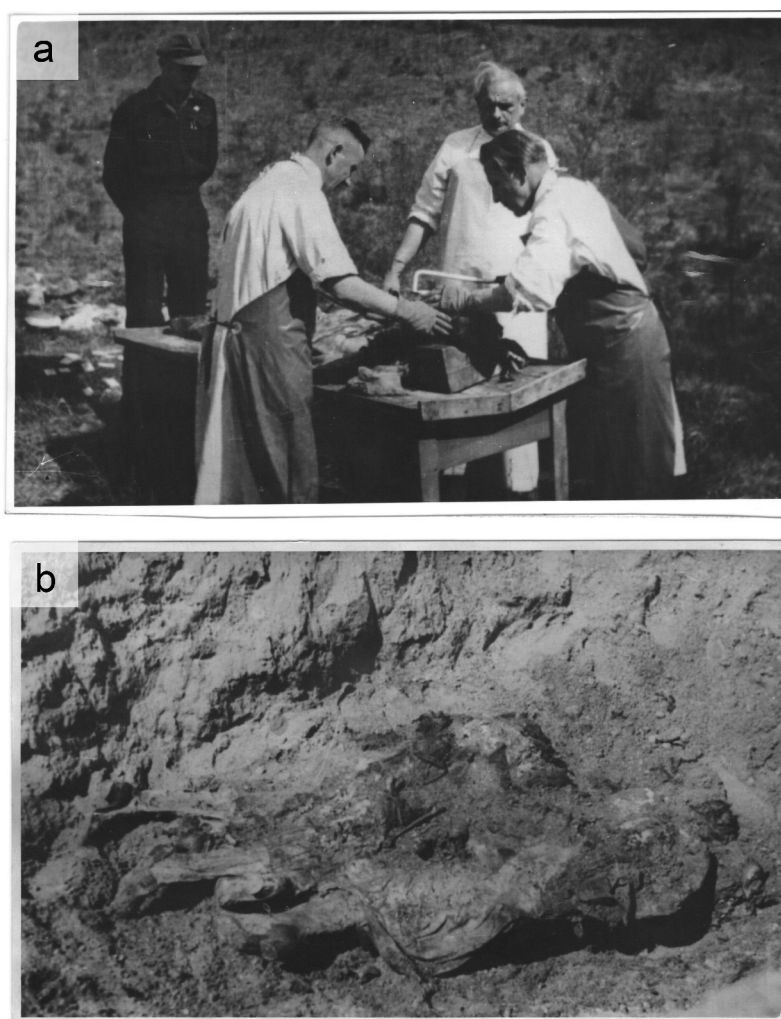


Figure 1. Photographic documentation of post-war exhumation works carried out in the Szpęgawski Forest. (a) Members of a team of experts working on one of the human corpses recovered from a mass grave; (b) State of preservation of unburned human corpses of two people found in one of the mass graves – state of preservation in situ (collections of the Public Library in Starogard Gdański, Poland).

2024). Nevertheless, the most important historical facts require at least a brief discussion for the purposes of this article.

Gdańsk had a strategic and symbolic dimension for the Nazi occupiers. They considered the land to have been originally German territory – which they lost to Poland after First World War. This they considered to be one of the greatest injustices levied against Germany in the 1919 Treaty of Versailles, following the war. The ‘Pomeranian Corridor’, as it was called by Nazi ideologues, was in fact one of the pretexts for invading Poland on 1 September 1939. Germany’s Wehrmacht troops were immediately followed by special operational groups of the Security Police and Security Services (Einsatzgruppen, SD, and other delegated SS groups) (Rhodes 2002).

One of their first and most important tasks was to see to the immediate elimination of specifically selected Poles, who were considered to be enemies of the broadly-understood, ‘Germanness’ (Król 1996). This was mostly done by the Nazis on the basis of pre-war-prepared lists of names mainly including Poles involved in the reconstruction of the Second Polish Republic – teachers, clergymen, local politicians, people associated with various types of patriotic associations, policemen, railway workers and former Greater Poland insurgents, among others.

The Nazis assumed that the extermination of the local elites would be an essential element of effective governance by the Germans, of the newly occupied Gdańsk – West Prussia region, which on 26 October 1939, was incorporated into the Third Reich as a Reich District. By all accounts, it was an ethnic cleansing that would completely transform the region into a purely German district. In a public speech in October of 1939, Albert Forster, the German governor, made a promise to Adolf Hitler to complete this ethnic transformation within five years. Due to the groups of people targeted for extermination, which were considered to largely be the intelligentsia, this action was given the code name, ‘Operation Intelligence’, (Intelligenzaktion) (Wardzyńska 2009).

Many studies on the mass executions during the first months of Second World War in Gdańsk Pomerania, emphasize the fact that the exterminations also included people who did not even belong to the intelligentsia – in the broad sense of the term. Literature on the subject uses the term ‘neighborhood crime’, to emphasize the fact that in many cases, the executioners knew their victims because they lived in the same town or village, or worked in the same factory prior to Germany invading Poland. The German minority in some regions of Gdańsk Pomerania, constituted approximately 40% of the citizens – this was the case, for example, in the context of some villages and towns in the border district of Sępólno Krajeńskie (Mazanowska 2017).

A deep knowledge of local, social relations was used by members of the SS, Sipo, and other organizations of the Third Reich to round up Poles for execution. ‘Neighorly’ disputes were very often used as a pretext to take over a brewery, a carpentry shop, a manor house, a distillery, or land owned by Polish neighbours. No court hearings were ever held – the opinion of a total of three Germans was all the evidence that was needed to prove that a certain Pole was ‘hostile’ to the Germans – and that would be enough cause to arrest and imprison the victim at a collection point – which could be a prison, detention centre, factory or even a stable.

Following brutal, lengthy interrogations by the Nazis, people usually were not released to return home, but instead, were kept incarcerated until marched directly to their deaths and interred in mass graves (e.g. Kobiałka, Ceran, et al. 2024; Kubicki 2019). An element of the Third Reich’s policy towards the inhabitants of Gdańsk Pomerania was ‘anti-Polonism’, which was blown out of proportion by Goebbels’s anti-Polish propaganda. The 1939 events known as ‘Bloody Sunday in Bydgoszcz’ (September 3–4) and the ‘March on Łowicz’, (September 9–10), where several-hundred saboteurs and local Germans lost their lives as a result of war chaos, were also used as a pretext for a vendetta against the Gdańsk Pomeranian Poles. In the following days of the war, the number of Germans

allegedly murdered by Poles in Bydgoszcz and on the way to Łowicz was to reach several-thousand victims (Ceran 2024). Revenge against the Polish nation provided the impetus and reason for local Germans to join the ranks of the 'Selbstschutz Westpreussen' (Ceran 2014; Mazanowska and Ceran 2016).

The main executioners of the mass crimes in Pomerania in the fall of 1939 were young, German civilians and citizens of pre-war Gdańsk Pomerania (a consequence of the formation of the Second Polish Republic after First World War). In fact, according to Polish-post-war witnesses, most of the crimes took place in October and November, 1939, when the residents of Gdańsk Pomerania returned to their homes. However, mass executions continued to take place through January and even extended into April, 1940 – such as the murders in the Piaśnica Forest (Bojarska 2009). Each time, it was directly connected to the elimination of people with mental disorders from Pomeranian psychiatric institutions and others brought to the region for this purpose. The 'elimination of a life not worth living' was a parallel element of the mass crimes. Moreover, most of the bodies of people with mental disorders ended up in the same mass graves as those of the previously murdered representatives of the local elite. These events are known in the literature as Aktion T-4 (Evans 2004).

The final group of people whose bodies landed in mass death pits in the fall of 1939 in Gdańsk Pomerania were representatives of the Jewish community. It should be emphasized that they made up about two percent of the pre-war population of Gdańsk Pomerania. Today, it is estimated that in the fall of 1939, the Nazis murdered about 600 Jews, half of whose bodies were found and identified during post-war exhumations, carried out at the various locations of the mass executions.

Several factors have rendered it impossible to determine the exact extent of the crime. This is due to the fact that the Germans covered up most traces of the crime. The executions were usually carried out in remote places with all relevant documentation summarily destroyed by the Nazis in November, 1939. Almost 30 of the largest sites of mass crimes from 1939 were destroyed during the second half of 1944. At that time, a special exhumation commando (Sonderkommando) was responsible for locating the mass graves from 1939, exhuming the bodies and then burning them, which was intended to make it impossible to identify the victims as well as determine the exact scale of the crime (Berendt et al. 2016).

According to Polish historians, there are currently, approximately 400 known locations where, in the fall of 1939, in Gdańsk Pomerania, the Nazis organized the murder of innocent citizens of the Second Polish Republic. At some locations, it is estimated that there were from just a few, to up to a dozen people who lost their lives. In contrast, however, there is also a larger number of locations where victims numbered in the several hundreds. Death Valley in Chojnice is such a site (Kobińska 2022). Two of the largest mass-crime sites from the fall of 1939 are considered to be Mniszek-Grupa and the Piaśnica Forest, where the number of victims could have reached between 12.000–14.000. It is currently estimated that at least 30.000–35.000 people were murdered during the first months of Second World War in Gdańsk Pomerania (Kozłowski 1992; Bojarska 2009). This number of victims is twice as high as the total number of victims from a similar period of time who were murdered in all other territories of the Second Polish Republic occupied by the Third Reich.

The largest execution sites were destroyed by the Sonderkommando as part of Aktion 1005. However, material evidence was left behind. The executioners did not have the technical capabilities or time to completely erase evidence of their criminal actions. Considering the scope and nature of the crimes, their geographical and time boundaries, and key participation of the German minority in their organization, some Polish historians concluded that use of the term, 'Pomeranian Crime of 1939' is more accurate than the generic terms 'Intelligenzaktion' and 'T-4' that were used by the Nazi executioners (Ceran 2024).

During the post-war period, numerous exhumations were carried out but burned graves were not the subject of further fieldwork. As a result of the (false) conviction, that the burning of corpses would be an effective way of destroying evidence of crimes. Contemporary archaeology can use modern technologies that were not available in the past to those investigating the mass crimes of the Second World War. One example of this is the archaeological work carried out in 2023 in the Szpęgawski Forest ([Figure 2](#)).

The research methodology in the Szpęgawski Forest followed a three stage-process: 1) desk-based research, 2) non-invasive archaeological prospection and 3) test excavations (Kobiałka, Ceran, et al. [2024](#); Sturdy Colls [2015](#)) ([Figure 3](#)). The first element included archival research on the most important documents collected by Polish institutions for criminal prosecution after the Second World War ([Archive 1–4](#)), aerial photographs, and the study of secondary literature (e.g. Kubicki [2019](#); Milewski [1989](#)).

As part of the second stage, archival aerial photos were examined and LiDAR data for the research area were analysed. A ground-penetrating radar survey was part of the methodology as well. Metal detector surveys were systematically carried out in order to find unmarked execution sites and potential mass graves. Finally, testing cores were carried out and 15 test trenches were dug in selected areas, over a total area of 5.65 acres. It is important to highlight the scale of the *crime landscape*, because known mass graves are scattered within an area of 10 × 7 km of the local forest.

The longest test trench (no. 4) was 31.31 m long and 1.2 m wide. The shortest one (no. 12) was 12.7 m long and 1.2 m wide. Due to the location of the trenches, they can be divided into three main groups. The first one was aimed at verifying the places pinpointed by LiDAR data (trenches no. 1–7, 11–13), the second one focused on confirming non-invasive surveys (no. 14–15) and the third one was intended to check oral information provided by a former forester (no. 8–10). Additionally, during fieldwork, two excavations were also carried out for verification. The first sondage, measuring 3.5 in width and 6.5 in length, was to verify a grave (number 31) that has been the objective of commemoration. During the work, however, it turned out that the above-mentioned grave was not a real burial, as no human bones or burial pit could be recorded. The second trench was intended to explore another commemorated grave (number 18), which is the subject of this article. This was never exhumed by the Polish authorities in the post-war period.

The goal of the project was twofold: 1) to find unknown and unmarked places related to the crimes in the Szpęgawski Forest and their cover-up in the fall of 1944, and 2) to verify whether contemporary gravestones in the Szpęgawski Forest are in fact mass graves. Soil samples and plant macroremains were recovered in order to reconstruct the cover up the evidence of crime. The samples were also examined for the identification of human fats and flammable substances used to destroy the corpses in the fall of 1944 (Fabiańska [2023](#); Hildebrandt-Radke [2023](#); Rennwanz [2023](#)). Burnt and unburnt bones found during excavation were also examined anthropologically and forensically (Wysocka [2023](#)).

Necroviolence in the Szpęgawski Forest – the materiality of Aktion 1005

The crimes committed in the Szpęgawski Forest were the subject of an official post-war investigation conducted by the prosecutor's office as part of the activities of the District Commission for the Prosecution of German Crimes. The case files contain valuable material providing insight into the process of arrests, the concentration of people to be shot and about the executions themselves ([Archive 1](#)). The executions took place far from residential buildings: a forest near Starogard (Szpęgawski Forest) was one of the chosen places for executions. The scale of the killings of the

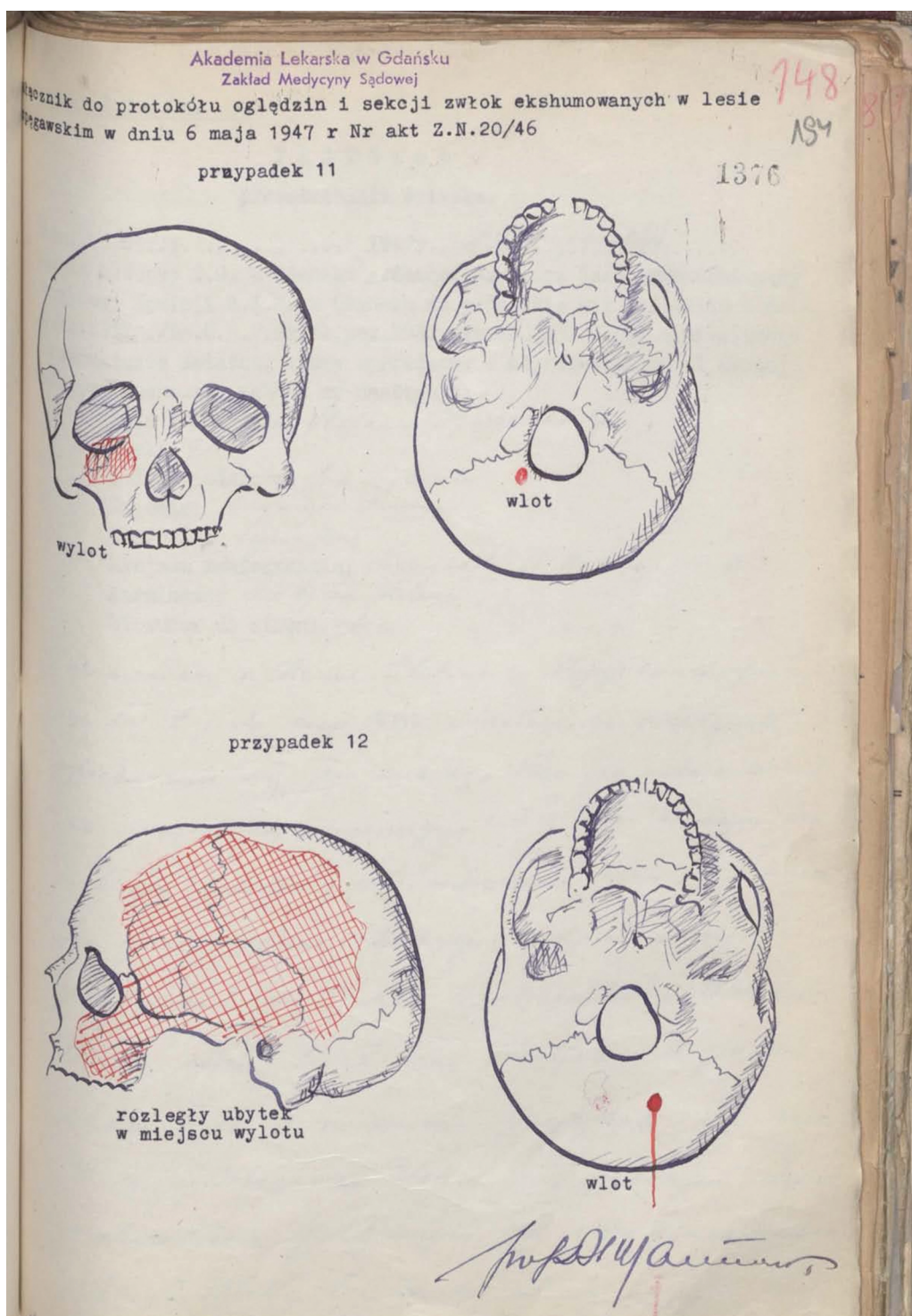


Figure 2. Example of drawing documentation of two skulls excavated in 1947 from one of the mass graves in the Szpęgawski Forest. Damage caused by gunshots is marked in red (collections of the Institute of National Remembrance, Poland).

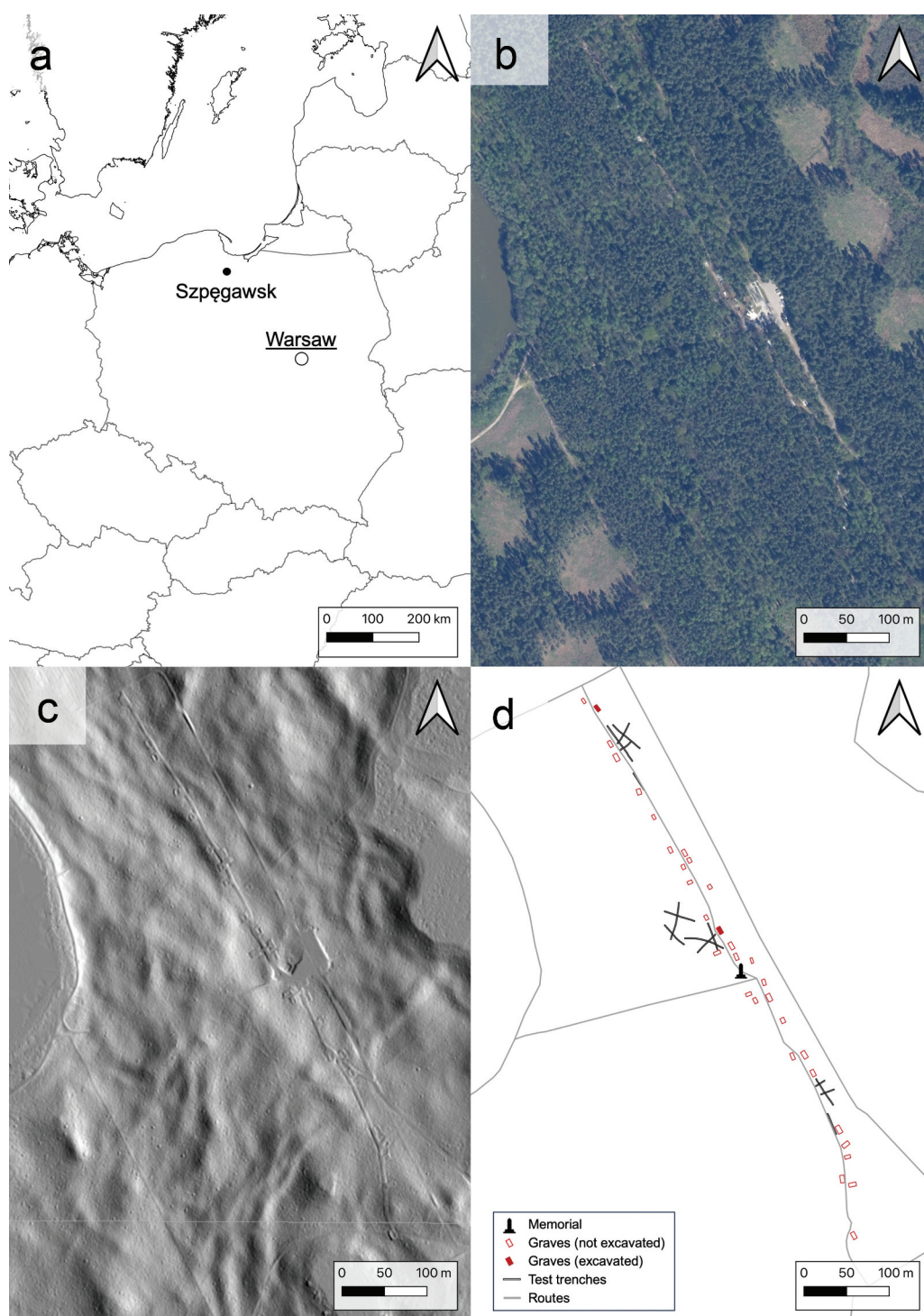


Figure 3. Remote sensing data of Szpęgawski Forest. (a) Location of Szpęgawsk close to which mass killings were organized during Second World War on the map of Poland and Europe; (b) contemporary orthophoto map showing the mass killing site and local landscape); (c) LiDAR visualization showing the local landscape with currently marked mass graves in the Szpęgawski Forest, (d) currently marked graves in the Szpęgawski Forest with the marked location of test excavations and excavated graves no. 18 and 31 (source: Head Office of Geodesy and Cartography, Poland) (prepared by K. Karski and M. Czarnik).

local elite and people with mental disorders, and the duration (it took place over several months) meant that many people were aware of the crimes and could testify of the disappearance of their loved ones. We know that fewer than 30 Poles were employed in digging the graves, and they were not shot after finishing their work. Furthermore, several victims miraculously managed to escape from the death pits, while some transports with prisoners were turned back at the last moment before the shootings.

After the war, people testified that graves were burned from the end of October to the end of December 1944. Finally, a copy of the documentation of the Psychiatric Hospital in Kocborowo escaped destruction and informs of the murder of 1.689 interns, who we know by name and surname. There are even photos of children from the hospital murdered in the Szpęgawski Forest. Some of the pre-war Polish staff were forced to continue their work under the supervision of the Nazis. Their testimonies were later used in the investigation of individual persons responsible for the crimes committed (Kubicki 2019).

The image of the violence experienced by the victims before the executions in the Szpęgawski Forest is still shocking today. It is known from archival materials that just prior to their deaths, the victims were interrogated and beaten. There is a well-known story where one of the arrested Catholic priests had a swastika carved in his forehead with a knife. Another had his eyes popped out, and another's intestines burst as a result of being severely beaten. Prisoners were forced to eat their own excrement. Some of the women detained in the Gdańsk Tower in Starogard were raped and then murdered by the Nazis. The memories of Julian Hein, for example, who managed to escape execution while his son did not, illustrate the *modus operandi* well (Figure 4):

On 23 November 1939, together with others, I was loaded onto a truck and taken to the Szpęgawski Forest [...]. After five minutes we had to undress and then we had to walk, holding hands, to the grave, which was about 70 meters away from the car, and there they were shot next to the grave. My son was among the other five, and as he was leaving and saying goodbye to me, one of the executioners hit me on the head with his gun so that I immediately fell and lost consciousness for some time. [...] at that moment I hit him in the jaw with all my strength so that he fell [...]. [...] taking advantage of this moment, I ran away into the nearest forest [...]. (Archive 2, 22; my translation)

Equally drastic are the numerous accounts of the patients from the Psychiatric Hospital in Kocborowo who were dragged out of their hospital beds into a nearby forest and murdered. No patient could escape, including young children hospital patients who were poisoned and killed with injections of luminal. Urszula Chrakowska, a member of the staff, testified after the war that one of the patients had to wash shovels and axes stained with human blood and hair each time the SS trucks returned to the hospital from the execution place. She also saw the trucks departing with interns and returning empty after one or two hours (Archive 3, 101).

Among the Poles who testified after the war were also Edmund Osysko, Jan Kłopocki and Andrzej Szumiński, who claimed that from the end of October to the end of December 1944 in the Szpęgawski Forest human remains from the killings of 1939 were burned (Archive 4). The forest area was secured and the activities were supervised by SS men who spoke Ukrainian. The glow of the bonfire's flames was visible, as well as the smoke hanging heavily between the trees in the forest. After the destruction of the graves in Szpęgawski Forest, the pits had sunk up to 50 cm, and traces of bonfires where the bodies had been burned were visible, along with metal barrels containing, as later analyses showed, turpentine.

My point here is a simple one – the activities of Aktion 1005 were nothing, but a paradigmatic example of necroviolence – not only were several thousand innocent people murdered in the

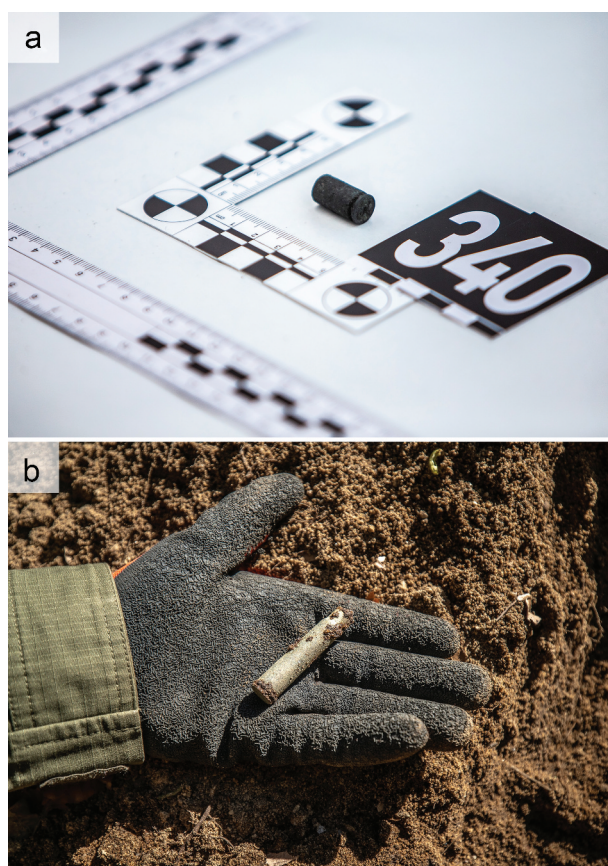


Figure 4. Material evidence of the crime recovered from a mass grave in the Szpęgawski Forest. (a) 9×19 mm Parabellum casing; (b) 7.92×57 mm Mauser rifle casing (photo by D. Frymark).

surrounding forest and their bodies disposed of in mass graves, but one could say that in 1944, a ‘second death’ was inflicted on the victims by the exhumation and burning of the corpses to erase the traces of the crime. This method was effective, but not perfect by any means – as the archaeological research carried out in the Szpęgawski Forest, in 2023, has proven.

Following the war, Polish commissions examined the mass graves. However, these works were riddled with imperfections and inaccuracies. Moreover, reports from the field inspections show that the burned human remains were not treated as evidence ([Archive 4](#)). It seems that after the first traces of burning were found, the exhumation work in a given grave was discontinued. In fact, it is not known today how many graves were exhumed after the war, whether all the places marked today are in fact mass graves, and whether there are unknown and unmarked graves in the forest. In short, there seems to be more questions than answers regarding the exhumations and the material evidence of the crime (Kobiałka, Ceran, et al. [2024](#)).

One of the test trenches in 2023 was opened in the place of the marked grave no. 18. In fact, small fragments of burned bones and charcoal were already noticed on the surface. The mass grave was destroyed in 1944 ([Figure 5](#)). Unburned human remains in partial anatomical order were registered only at the bottom of the burial pit from 1939. In that case, two gold wedding rings were found there, still on the fingers of two victims.



Figure 5. Unburned human remains found in a mass grave in the Szpęgawski Forest. (a) General view of the state of preservation of human remains; (b) fragments of the skull of one of the victims found at the bottom of the burial pit with a visible gun-hole (photo by D. Frymark).

It is important to note here that bodies, probably numbering in the several hundreds, given the dimensions of the pit (10.5 m long, 4 m wide, 2 m deep), were recovered and burned. Nevertheless, the burned layer was not uniform – dark layers consisting of burned human remains, charcoal, and thousands of small artefacts, among others, were interspersed with brown sand. Importantly, only half of the grave could be examined (quarters B and D) in 2023 (Figure 6). Nevertheless, it allowed for the discovery of almost 1.400 kg of burned human remains (Kobiałka, Ceran, et al. 2024; Wysocka 2023). The total weight suggests that these were not just the burned remains of people who were originally hidden in mass grave no. 18. The minimum number of victims was determined to be 87 based on the right part of the petrous temporal bone. Examination of damaged material allowed the identification of some other bones belonging to both men and women. Osteological material also included the bones of children approximately between the ages of three and seven years old – they were also patients from the psychiatric hospital in Kocborowo or other centres, who were eventually transported to Szpęgawski Forest for extermination (Kubicki 2019).

The excavated burned bones were mostly black and brown – white and cream ones were relatively rare (Figure 7). This is indicative of the low temperature at which the bodies were burned – outdoors, where the main fuel was wood from the surrounding forests (Rennwanz

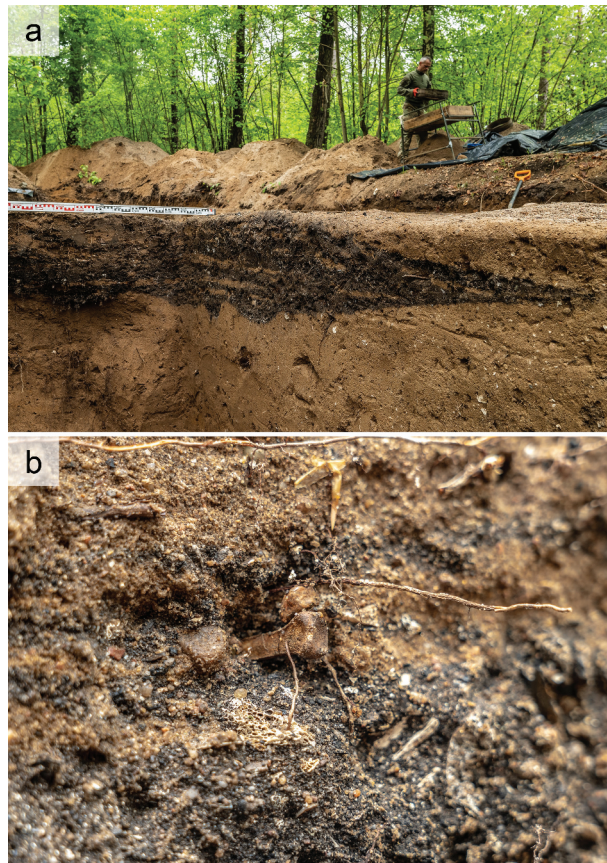


Figure 6. Necroviolence in the archaeological evidence. (a) A layer of burning which is the material evidence of the destruction of a mass grave and the burning of human corpses; (b) close-up of the structure of the burning layer (photo by D. Frymark).

2023). The fragmentation of the bones indicates that they must have been further crushed. The burned layer contained thousands of small objects and their fragments. Basically, there were no valuable items in the layer. Not only were the victims robbed before the executions, but it seems that the ashes were also sifted in order to rob the victims of anything of value that had remained after the killings.

Necroviolence in the Szpęgawski Forest is materialized in various ways. Shell casings and bullets from pistols and rifles used to murder the victims are one example (see Figure 4). Small objects recovered at the site belonging to the victims, such as cufflinks, coins, various types of civilian buttons and Polish military buttons from the period of the Second Polish Republic, were found as well. Importantly, necroviolence combines the spiritual and the material (Domańska 2023). It is a materialization of what can be called the *metaphysics of mass graves* (see more in Kobiałka 2023). The most evocative and affective illustrations of this are examples of various types of crosses and medallions – undoubtedly some of the most intimate artefacts that the victims carried with them on a daily basis before and during their arrest and executions (Figure 8). Here, however, the burning of the corpses in the bonfire in 1944 transformed everything – including the bodies of the victims, the wood that was used as fuel and what the victims had



Figure 7. Necroviolence in the archaeological evidence. (a) A fragment of burned human bone found during sifting of the filling of the burial pit; (b) field analysis of burned human remains recovered from the mass grave (photo by D. Frymark).

with them at the time of their death as well as their ‘second death’ which was Aktion 1005. In many cases small fragments of the burned remains of various victims blended to the artefacts as an effect of the high temperatures.

If something must serve as confirmation of various types of archaeological theories about entanglement, mixing and the ontological relationship between the human and the non-human, materiality and eternity (belief in God, for instance) – it can be found in the evidence gathered from Szpęgawski Forest. For example, the analysis of charcoal found in the burned layer confirmed that a variety of wood species were used during Aktion 1005 (Rennwanz 2023). However, chemical analysis of the charcoal showed the presence of animal fat within them – the result of burning human corpses (Fabiańska 2023; Kobiałka, Fabiańska, et al. 2024).

Necroviolence was also archaeologically and scientifically detectable in the soil itself of the mass grave – the burned layer consisted of soil, human ashes, burned bones, wood, charcoal, artefacts, and so forth. The soil had a different colour, structure, and chemical composition when compared to local, undisturbed soil (Hildebrandt-Radke 2023). Necroviolence can affect people, things, soil and local landscapes, as well as transform all of them – creating new configurations of the human and the non-human (González-Ruibal 2019).

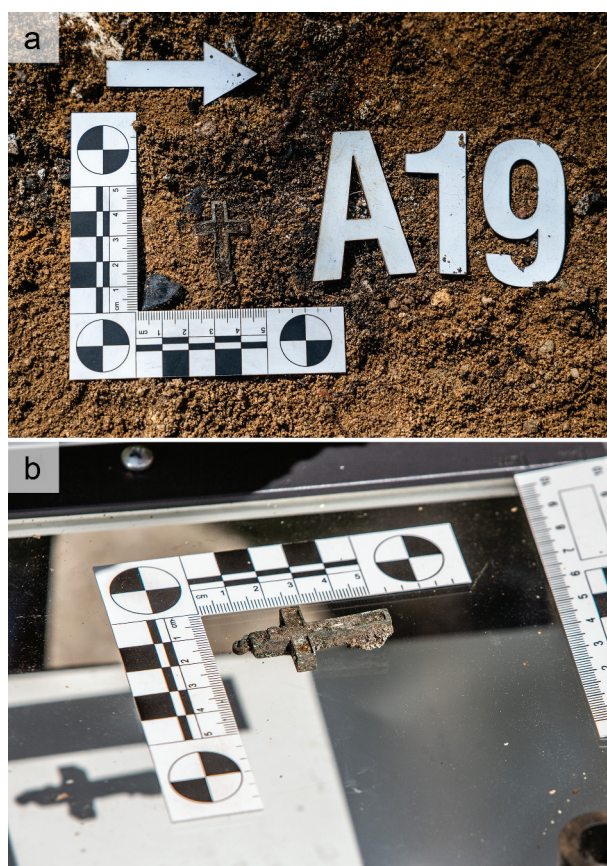


Figure 8. *Metaphysical dimension of the crime.* (a) A cross of one of the victims found in situ in the burning layer among burned human bones; (b) a cross of one of the victims with burned fragments of human bones adjacent to it (photo by D. Frymark).

Significant research into archival materials (which consists of several-thousand pages of documents about crimes in the Szpęgawski Forest ([Archive 1–4](#)), fail to reflect the absolute horror which is the murder of thousands of innocent people in the fall of 1939 and then subjecting their bodies to a ‘second death’ by exhuming their corpses and burning them at the end of 1944. It is the experience of the very raw, banal, small, rusty, broken, and burned materiality of necroviolence that one has the chance to feel during the monotonous daily sifting of successive heaps of earth from the filling of grave no. 18 that conveys what words and historical sources cannot.

Even the smallest piece of human bone found in the Szpęgawski Forest during the archaeological research was a fragment of what was once a living, breathing human being – a person with a given name, surname, parents, or children of their own. Most of the remains did not even weigh one gram and yet, the application of archaeological methods, tools (and broader reflection) ended up in discovering a total of almost 1.4 tons of burned human bones. In other words, 1.4 tons is 1.400 kg which is 1.400.000 grams of remains of human beings. This data is indeed verification of the scale of the crime, its cover-up and the evidence that was preserved over time until the present. It is a proven fact that the exhumation and burning of the corpses in 1944 did not result in erasing the crimes nor subjecting them to oblivion.

It is in this inhuman condition that the irreducible dimension of humanity can be found. This is why archaeological research is so important to conduct on the graves of murder victims whose bodies were hidden in 1939 and then burned in 1944 in order to completely erase the traces of the crime. However, the materiality of crime can never be completely destroyed. Things and people do not just disappear into thin air. This is a simple, but crucial thesis in forensic archaeology (Dziuban 2017; González-Ruibal 2023; Mazz 2017).

Conclusion

De León's definition and concept of necroviolence can be seen as an inspiring framework to analyse mass crimes and the attempts to cover them up. In this text, I have emphasized the materiality of necroviolence – that is, the tangible evidence of the destruction of human remains related to a specific crime: the mass killings committed in the Szpęgawski Forest (Poland), during the Second World War. The task of documenting such destruction was not undertaken by the Polish commissions that conducted exhumations in the post-war period. At that time, the destruction of the graves and the burning of the victim's bodies were considered acts that made any investigative and scientific findings impossible.

Contemporary (forensic) archaeology, using various research methods, and a specific understanding of the materiality of crimes, is able to document the multiple forms of evidence related to the crimes and their obliteration under Aktion 1005, which was, in fact, a form of necroviolence. The history of Aktion 1005 is relatively well known, yet its material evidence was almost completely unknown and archaeologically undocumented – until now. Indeed, ashes are not simply nothingness, they have their own materiality and ontological status. The same applies to the process of destroying evidence of crime itself – both in the Szpęgawski Forest and in other historical and geographical contexts (e.g. Dziuban 2017; Jugo and Wastell 2015; Mazz 2017). Even burnt corpses, destroyed artefacts and exhumed ('empty') graves constitute the basis for the reconstruction of the organization's *modus operandi*, the course of the crime and the erasure of its traces.

Finally, the materiality of the crime in the Szpęgawski Forest confronts the researcher with the liminality of what is human and non-human – are metal crosses with the image of the crucified Jesus and burnt human remains attached to them still 'evidence in the case'? The same applies to 'ecofacts' such as the wood charcoal from the bonfire extracted from grave no. 18 – how much 'human' and how much 'wood' is in the charcoal that contains the human fat of the victims (Kobiałka, Fabiańska, et al. 2024)?

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