

TWO MASS GRAVE SITES OF WAR PRISONERS: ENIGMAS OF “GREY ZONE” ARCHAEOLOGY AND ANTHROPOLOGY

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Background: During 2020, remains of 1927 individuals from two mass grave sites were exhumed. Archival and archaeological data indicated these were remains of Red Army prisoners of war (POW) who died in Nazi camps.

Objective: The study objective was to examine the remains on site before their scheduled reburial that same year.

Results: Analysis revealed differences: in Zokniai site, only 30.9% of individuals had POW ID tags, and 3.4% had Red Army ID capsules; 61.2% possessed some artifacts, mainly equipment and personal items. Age range was from 15 to 50+ years, the remains contained a number of former traumas and diseases, and at least 19.5 percent of skulls had gunshot wounds (shots into the occipital area). In Armalenai site, 69.7% of individuals had POW ID tags, and only 0.3% Red Army ID capsules. Only 33% possessed some items, mainly buttons. Age range mostly 18–30 years, fewer traces of traumas and diseases, no gunshot lesions. At both sites, scapular traumas with healing signs were documented; causality remains unclear.

Conclusions: Summing up the available data, it is concluded that POW inhumed in Zokniai were transferred for a short period in the first months of the war: no stationary camp (location unknown); a low number of POW ID tags; more personal items; possible time: second half of 1941 – beginning of 1942. It was noted that individuals were often of older age, had more early pathologies (officers?); gunshot lesions – cause of death in part of those POWs. The Armalenai, on the contrary, had a stationary camp with preserved location; more than half of POWs had ID tags, but few equipment and personal items and no obvious cause of death, though the regular number of bodies per pit suggests that it may have been exhaustion and infectious diseases (e.g. typhus); probable burial period: autumn 1942 – spring 1943.

Keywords: Forensic anthropology; Mass graves; WW2.