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Tall Leather Boots From the Death Pits of Polish Officers – Victims of the Soviet Regime During World War II

Obuwie wojskowe z wysoką cholewą pochodzące z dołów śmierci oficerów polskich – ofiar reżimu radzieckiego w okresie II wojny światowej

Abstract: Footwear has long been a vital component of human attire, particularly for ancient warriors, knights, and soldiers over the centuries. Along with the development of technology and warfare, footwear has also been transformed many times in numerous ways. The primary objective behind those changes was to create better foot protection against vari-

ous traumas and ensure greater comfort while walking. However, even the most durable boots eventually succumbed to wear and tear due to excessive use or mechanical damage, whether during times of war or peace. The boots unearthed from the death pits of Polish officers, executed by the Soviet NKVD in 1940, serve as examples of this reality.

Keywords: Katyn, Kharkiv, Mednoye, Ostashkov, Kozelsk, Starobilsk, Bykivnia, military boots, Second Polish Republic, death pits

Introduction

Since ancient times, footwear has been an essential part of human attire, including for warriors, knights, and later, soldiers. As technology advanced and the art of war evolved, footwear underwent numerous changes. The primary objective behind these changes was to better protect the feet from injury and to provide comfort when walking. However, even the sturdiest shoes deteriorated due to excessive wear or mechanical damage, whether in times of peace or war. A striking example of this is the footwear found in the death pits of Polish officers bestially murdered by the Soviet NKVD in 1940.

September 1939 – the fourth partition of Poland

The onset of World War II in the territory of Poland can be divided into two phases, both marked by the country's partition. The first was the German invasion on September 1, followed by the Soviet invasion of Poland's eastern territories on September 17. Both our neighbours played an equal role in the tragedy that befell Poland and its citizens. While German crimes have been described in many publications, with many war criminals still unpunished, the crimes and massacres committed in Poland's eastern territories remained largely unspoken of for over half a century.

The mass execution of Polish officers, taken as prisoners of war after September 17, was only one part of Stalin's broader plan to exterminate Poland's intellectual and leadership class and subjugate the nation. The fact that selected prisoners were sentenced to death is confirmed by Soviet efforts to hunt down and execute them in all prison camps until the end of the Soviet occupation (including officers, representatives of state administration, and educated professionals such as foresters, lawyers, doctors, teachers, and other members of the intelligentsia) (Grüner-Żarnoch 2001: 13–14).

The conspiracy of silence surrounding that painful subject officially ended on April 13, 1990, when the Soviet Union, through a statement issued by the TASS news agency, admitted Soviet responsibility (specifically the NKVD) for the massacre of Polish officers imprisoned in Kozelsk, Ostashkov, and Starobils in 1939 and 1940 (Fig. 1). This marked the beginning of numerous efforts, especially by Poland, to explain the Katyn Massacre.

In the 1990s, Polish archaeologists began searching for the “supposed” mass graves of victims of NKVD repression (Kola 2005: 17). Among these were the Katyn death pits, first revealed by the Germans in the spring of 1943. The full extent of the atrocity, the systematic and deliberate execution of Polish officers, whose only crime was being educated Poles, was partially uncovered during exhumations in the 1990s in Kharkiv, Mednoye, and Kyiv (Fig. 1).

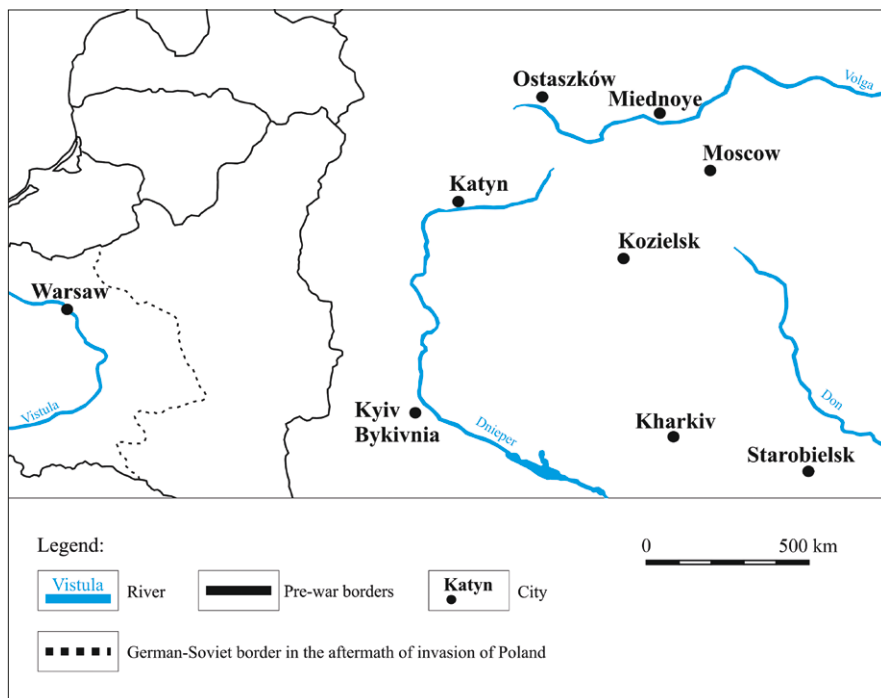


Fig. 1. Map showing location of the mass execution of Polish military officers. Prepared by J. Michalik.

Leather boots of Polish officers as silent witnesses of crime

During the excavations of the death pits, archaeologists uncovered various personal belongings, religious items, and jewellery. Many of the remains were still clothed in fragments of civilian garments, uniforms, and military buttons. Each artifact was treated as a historical object, sent for conservation¹, and eventually preserved in a museum (Grupa, Kaźmierczak 2001; Kola 2005; Kowalski 2016: 267). In some cases, the leather military boots of the murdered officers were the only surviving elements of their attire.

Leather objects are often preserved complete or in fragments in archaeological sites, including graves. Their preservation is usually aided by higher soil humidity and anaerobic conditions, which slow the growth of bacteria and fungi on artefacts of organic materials like leather, wood, and textiles – objects with complex

¹ Not each artefact; for example, some items from the 1994 research in the Katyn Forest were transferred directly to the museum without conservation treatment, which was carried out in subsequent years.

material structures (Drażkowska, Grupa 1998a: 127–128; 1998b: 117; Drażkowska et al. 2011; Grupa 2014: 125–135).

The artefacts recovered during exhumations at Katyn, Kharkiv, Mednoye, and Kyiv were transported to the Toruń Laboratory for conservation between 1995 and 1996, and again after 2003. These items were treated with the same meticulous care as objects hundred years old (Drażkowska, Grupa 1996: 78–90; Drażkowska 2001: 146–153; 2010: 97–101; Grupa 1996: 75–78; 1998: 75–82; Grupa et al. 2015a: 248–254; Grupa, Kaźmierczak 2001). Researchers could closely study the construction of the boots and describe their history – signs of wear and repair (Drażkowska, Grupa 1996: 78–80; Kola 2005).

Military footwear in the Second Polish Republic

Military footwear is a crucial part of soldier's equipment, and during Second Polish Republic, it was the responsibility of military authorities to ensure that soldiers² were provided with appropriate footwear. At that time, the Polish Army operated under a decentralised supply system, where units bought all necessary articles using specially allocated funds. Although some internal regulations restricted certain formations, the final products had to meet mandatory standards. Footwear production methods, including the use of civilian shoemakers, and the specific types of boots adopted by the Polish Army in the 1930s, were outlined in detail by the "Warunki techniczne materiałów wojskowych" (Technical Conditions of Military Materials) (Sypułkowski 1931a)³. The regulations not only specified the design of various footwear types but also detailed the components

2 Military footwear production in Poland until 1935 was managed by The State Military Equipment Factory (Państwowe Zakłady Umundurowania), along with shoemaker workshop centres in Żelechowo, Gąbin, Maków, and others, as well as several mechanical factories in Warsaw. Starting with the 1935/1936 financial year, the entire footwear production was centralised at Zakłady PZU, supported by the workshops in Żelechowo, which were expected to deliver 20,000 pairs of cavalry boots. The annual footwear demand for enlisted soldiers was estimated at 159,000 pairs of standard ankle boots, 50,000 pairs of cavalry boots, and 14,000 pairs of sapper boots, with a total value of 4,923,000 Polish zloty. A portion of this supply, 40,000 pairs annually, was imported from Estonia up until 1939, despite the objections of the Military Commissariat, which aimed to limit the cheap export of Polish leather and prioritise domestic production. Military footwear factories successfully utilised modern technologies, such as Poznań's introduction in July 1936 of new ankle boots featuring a novel system for screwing soles, a first for Poland (Wielecki 1995: 149).

3 Basic guidelines were established in "Warunki techniczne materiałów wojskowych", e.g. M 1/31 "Zasady wyrobu obuwia wojskowego" (Principles of Military Footwear Production) from June 10, 1931, M. 2/31 "Zasady odbioru i nadzoru nad wyrobem obuwia" (Principles for the Acceptance and Supervision of Footwear Production) from June 10, 1931 (Sypułkowski 1931b).

used, such as horseshoes, protective nails, and clamp rivets. The Polish Army employed several types of boots⁴, with leather boots being the most common. Additionally, cavalry boots (patterns 25 and 31) and sapper shoes⁵ were standard issue (Sypułkowski 1931c), with the latter being an essential part of a soldier's gear depending on the military formation⁶.

Other regulations governed the boots worn by officers. The specific model was outlined in *Dziennik Rozkazów MSWojsk*, No. 8, dated May 30, 1936, item 98 (long boots and shoes). Officers serving in the regular military service ordered their boots individually from the best local shoemakers, a practice especially common among cavalry officers. Such custom-made boots were often a source of pride and deviated from the standard type defined in regulations. Reserve officers mobilised shortly before the outbreak of war received boots similar to those issued to regular soldiers.

Naturally, footwear was subject to wear and tear. During peacetime, each formation had internal cobbler workshops, often staffed by civilian craftsmen, to repair boots. However, during the intense military actions and combat in September 1939, boots were damaged more frequently, and the capacity for proper repairs was limited, resulting in only temporary fixes.

Footwear from exhumations

Military footwear related directly to World War II events excavated during planned or rescue archaeological explorations can be categorised into two groups.

The first group consists of objects that can be easily identified, such as boots or their fragments, found during exhumations of war graves, which contained the bodies of soldiers killed in combat or who died from their injuries. These items generally show no signs of repair.

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- 4 Common leather boots, trekking boots, skiing boots, cavalry boots, chrome ankle boots, football boots, barracks boots, athletics shoes, deck canvas shoes, deck leather shoes, sapper ankle boots, felt boots, "bear" type felt-leather ankle boots, leather shoes, felt shoes, and clogs.
 - 5 "Warunki techniczne materiałów wojskowych": M. 4/31 "Trzewiki juchtowe" (Yuft Shoes) from June 10, 1931, M. 13/31 "Buty kawaleryjskie" (Cavalry Boots), M. 14/31 "Buty saper-skie" (Sapper Boots) from May 11, 1931.
 - 6 Having good boots is crucial for a soldier, as long hours of marching in uncomfortable footwear could have been a torture. In 1939, Polish infantry were issued short ankle boots with thick soles. They were sturdy and durable, but heavy and very stiff, often requiring months to properly break in and mould to the wearer's foot. Officer boots were also impractical in field conditions. Soldiers preferred sapper ankle boots used by Signal Corps, although these were known to cause discomfort and heel injuries. The most sought-after footwear by soldiers, including infantry, were the common cavalry boots made of cattle hide (Wielecki 1995: 52–54).

The second group includes boots worn by prisoners of war. While staying in camps, soldiers typically continued using the same boots they had worn during combat. The harsh camp conditions caused these boots to deteriorate, forcing their owners to make makeshift repairs in an attempt to prolong their usability, as they had no access to replacements⁷.

Władysław Cichy, one of the few survivors from the Kozelsk camp, recounts several facts in his memoirs. A twenty-eight-old study graduate and lieutenant in the Polish Army, he was deeply struck by the patriotic spirit, high morale, and impeccable appearance of the imprisoned officers, which stood in stark contrast to the dishevelled image of the Soviet guards. He recalls that the Polish officers wore well-tailored uniforms and took great care of their boots, made from soft, black-dyed cattle hide, which were frequently polished and, likely, repaired. This elegant footwear became a coveted item among NKVD guards, who tried to exchange significant sums of money or vodka for the officers' boots but were refused (Paul 2006: 99–100).

The internal organisation of the camp included various branches managed by fellow prisoners, such as the cultural-educational committee, which promoted *wearing officer badges sewn on with white thread and maintaining a neat and tidy appearance* (Grüner-Żarnoch 2001: 216). This also referred to footwear.

In the memoirs of Reserve Lieutenant Bronisław Młynarski⁸ from the Starobilsk camp, there are several notes concerning boots:

The prisoners of war had significant issues with their boots, which deteriorated rapidly, especially given the perpetual mud covering the campground, which often reached ankle-deep. The Soviet guards wore rubber boots over their regular shoes. After many requests, 800 pairs of boots were delivered to the camp in mid-December – enough for every fifth officer. We collectively assessed the condition of the boots and distributed them to those with the most worn-out footwear. However, 200 pairs were immediately smuggled out of the camp in sacks. The last soldiers

7 During the exhumation in September 1996, a wallet belonging to Lieutenant Alojzy Babiński was discovered, sewn under the lining of his uniform jacket. Among the items in the wallet was a pocket calendar from 1939. Babiński had kept daily notes, beginning on the day of mobilisation and continuing through his transfer on April 6, 1940, from the Starobilsk camp to Kharkiv. His entries are brief – usually two sentences – documenting each day of imprisonment in Starobilsk, giving the temperature, which frequently ranged between minus 35 and 40°C (throughout his stay there, the temperatures were very low). These notes also give information how difficult it was to obtain leather to repair the soles of his boots (Grupa 2001: 156–157).

8 The lieutenant was imprisoned in Starobilsk from September 30, 1939, until May 12, 1940. The German Embassy requested his transfer, and through camps in Pavlishtshev Bor and Grazovietz, he eventually joined General Anders' Army. After the war, he settled in California (Grüner-Żarnoch 2001: 130).

got only scraps, such as two left boots or the wrong size. One complete pair was women's rubber boots with extended tops and heels. They could not be worn on officers' boots – but being stuffed with newspaper and using footwraps tied with shoelaces – one could wear them with dry, albeit cold, feet. They also served as slippers for two years. On the first night, a Soviet guard offered to buy them for 150 roubles (they cost 14) (Grüner-Żarnoch 2001: 146).

Donald B. Steward, an American prisoner of war, also mentioned the footwear of Polish officers. While interned in a German prison camp, the Germans selected him as the Allied representative and witness during the Katyn exhumations in 1943. He was convinced that the crime was committed by the Soviets, not the Germans, based on his observations and comparisons of the well-maintained boots and uniforms, which starkly contrasted with the footwear of prisoners who had been in camps for several years (Dąbrowska 2018).

When examining the footwear of prisoners of war, it is important to exercise caution in drawing conclusions because not all boots found in the graves can be classified as military footwear, a point noted by Lieutenant B. Młynarski.

Footwear from exhumations in Kharkiv and Kyiv

The exhumation work in Kharkiv was carried out as part of the General Prosecutor's Office of the Republic of Poland's investigation, with the consent of the Russian government, in 1991 and 1994–1996 (Kola 2005; Frątczak et al. 2019: 274). Throughout the research seasons, death pits were discovered, containing the remains of Russians, Ukrainians, and Polish officers executed in 1940. A similar situation was reported in Bykivnia, where exhumations took place from 2001 to 2012 (Kola, Góra 2015: 235).

The death pits containing human remains and fragments of uniforms were labelled as Polish graves. In many cases, researchers also found layers of burnt clothing and other objects inside suitcases. Bodies of murdered officers were thrown into pits along with their belongings, which were then set on fire⁹. The Soviet authorities' order was clear: not even the tiniest trace of the Polish officers was to remain. Any warden who failed to comply faced the same fate as the Polish prisoners. Other graves, known as Russian graves, and the death pits dated back to the Soviet Great Purge of 1937–1938 (Kola 2001: 126) and contained naked skeletons. The murdered persons might have been wearing linen or cotton undergarments, which

9 Report by Małgorzata Grupa on the Kharkiv exhumation works. The burnt suitcases did not contain large fragments of clothing or items that could assist in identifying the officers, however, every element was meticulously examined. That way the only known priest's cassock from the Katyn Massacre was discovered.

typically decompose quickly, within 5–10 years (Grupa et al. 2015b: 43; Nowosad et al. 2018: 76). Moreover, it was impossible that they were buried with boots or shoes, as the severe shortage of uniforms and clothes in the Soviet Union led wardens to steal such items, including footwear, from the victims. The research team was not surprised to find footwear in the graves of Polish officers in Kharkiv, which confirmed the general identity of the victims.

In Bykivnia, the handling of the officers' personal belongings differed, making relic identification more difficult. In Kharkiv, the bodies were covered with layers of suitcases and other items, while in Bykivnia, the belongings were placed in a separate pit. As a result, 259 pieces of military and civilian footwear, along with other objects of Polish origin from the 1930s, were excavated (Fig. 2) (Kola 2015: 229–230, 245). This shift in the treatment of victims' footwear and other possessions was noticeable during the exhumations. In Kharkiv, bones from the feet and shank were found inside every high boot, or only foot bones in lower shoes, whereas in Kyiv the situation varied. In some graves, footwear was discovered with bone remains, but in other cases, it was placed in separate pits without any contents. It remains impossible to determine when the boots were taken from the victims, as the exact execution process in Kyiv is unknown (whether they were brought alive to Bykivnia and executed there, or killed in NKVD cellars in Kyiv). The varied methods of execution make it difficult to fully interpret the circumstances of the massacre of Polish officers through the recovered footwear.



Fig. 2. Bykivnia; Polish military footwear from one of the death pits. Photograph by A. Kuczynski, from: Siemińska 2021.



Fig. 3. Objects found in the Kharkiv death pits: **a.** Wooden cigarette case; **b.** Wooden chess game. Photograph by P. Bielecki, from: Kola 2005; figs. 50, 117.

We gain some insight into the condition of footwear in the Starobielsk camp through deciphered notes from the calendar of Lieutenant A. Babiński. On November 12, he reported that his friend Stanisław Pietrzyk had offered him a piece of leather to repair his boots. In another entry, he mentioned that his boots would be fixed in a week, though they were not mended until November 29. From these notes, we can infer that the boots were given to someone skilled in repairs and that the author probably had another pair to wear in the meantime. Subsequent entries do not mention further issues with the boots.

The camp conditions forced some prisoners to acquire new skills, such as cobbling, which became essential for survival – first due to the muddy environment, and later due to the -40°C frosts. Survivor accounts reveal that in Starobielsk, the carpenter's

workshop produced small, everyday items such as ladles, washboards, axe handles, vats, barrows, shelves, hangers, and clogs. These were crafted using knives made from large nails and glass, which substituted for planes (Grüner-Żarnoch 2001: 144). Given the production of clogs for the demanding conditions, it is plausible they also made wooden pegs for boot repairs. Small wooden elements were crafted from fruit trees growing in an orchard behind the Orthodox church and monastery in Starobilsk (own research by M. Grupa). These included wooden cigarette cases (Fig. 3:A), cigarette holders, chess pieces (Fig. 3:B), checkers pieces, and other games like domino and Ludo, along with various other objects. The situation in other special camps (Kozelsk, Ostashkov) was likely similar, as excavations in Katyn and Mednoye uncovered comparable sets made by Polish officers (Głosek 2015: 210).

In the camp's reality, wooden pegs were easier to obtain than leather. It is difficult to determine whether prisoners, who stayed in the camp for up to seven months (with transports to the execution sites beginning in early April 1940), had any chance to repair their boots even once. Many likely did not, as indicated by several examples.

The right high boot excavated in Bykivnia exhibited significant leather loss in the metatarsal area and under the toes (Fig. 4). The sole measured 28 cm in length, 10.5 cm in width, with a minimal width of 6.7 cm. The semicircular heel was 8.3 cm long and up to 8 cm wide. It was constructed from seven layers of leather about 3.2 cm high. The heel was finished with an iron horseshoe (Fig. 5). The front portion of the sole, covering the toes and metatarsus, consisted of two layers in the external part (14 cm long), the layer that contacted the ground. Visible rubbing could be seen on the top part of the leather sole. All parts were fastened using metal (iron) nails. The leg height was 35.5 cm.

An interesting structural and functional feature was the presence of linen straps sewn into the sides of the inner uppers, forming loops. These loops facilitated gripping the boot and pulling it onto the leg. Although the straps themselves were not preserved, rectangular stitch marks from this element remained (Smoliński 2002b: 4)¹⁰.

The surface of the top and leg of the boot showed signs of wear, and the twine that held the segments together had decomposed. Only small patches of blackening remained on the leather¹¹.

10 Aleksander Smoliński studied the construction of military footwear, identifying the use of at least two types of tall military boots. The first mentioned above is the WZ 31 type, sewn on both sides of the boot – with external and internal seams, and the classic models from Kharkiv and Kyiv, sewn at the back of the upper and protected by rear reinforcement strips (Smoliński 2001a; 2001b; 2002a; 2022a; 2022b).

11 Authors' own research.



Fig. 4. Military shoe from the exhumation of the death pits at Bykivnia.
Photograph by J. Michalik.



Fig. 5. Heel and horseshoe of a military boot from the death pits at Bykivnia.
Photograph by J. Michalik.



Fig. 6. Military shoe sole from the exhumation of the death pits from Kharkiv.
Photograph by J. Michalik.



Fig. 7. Military shoe from the exhumation of the death pits at Kharkiv.
Photograph by J. Michalik.

The other high boot, found during the Kharkiv exhumation, had a sole marked by negative impressions left by nuts that secured the sole's leather layers with screws. This may suggest the boot was produced in Poznań in 1935. The screws were concentrated from the toe area to the middle of the metatarsus (Fig. 6). The absence of a heel made it impossible to assess the presence of screws there,

but the negative imprint indicated a heel size of 8.5 cm long and up to 8 cm wide. The sole was 29.3 cm long, and an additional external leather layer covered the toes and metatarsus, measuring 15 cm in length. The maximum sole width was 11 cm, with a minimum width of 7 cm, and the heel counter was 5 cm high. The preserved height of the boot was 30.5 cm. Boot elements were segmented due to the decomposition of the twine, and its surface showed signs of leather blackening and greasing.

The third officer's boot, also from Kharkiv, had a heel made up of seven folded leather layers, with a total height of 2.7 cm (the top layer was worn out and detached from the iron horseshoe). The heel measured 8.1 cm in length and had a maximum width of 7.8 cm. The sole was 28.5 cm long, and, according to the authors' own research, an additional external layer covering the toes and half of the metatarsus measured 14.5 cm. The sole's maximum width was 11 cm, with a minimum width of 6.1 cm. The leg and heel height was 37 cm. The leather grain showed significant wear, cracks, and deformation (Fig. 7), though these damages may have been caused by the heavy pressure of human remains in the death pits. The upper of the boot bore the imprint of a rectangular object with two circles.

Explorations of the death pits also uncovered numerous ankle boots, typically worn by infantry. These were made of blackened leather, lace-up, with nailed soles and heels with iron horseshoes. The level of their damage was comparable to that of the long boots.



Fig. 8. Wooden “roll-call” clog from the exhumation of the death pits at Kharkiv. Photograph by P. Bielecki.

A unique find were the wooden “roll-call clogs”, designed to protect footwear, particularly from holes in the soles and other damage. These clogs consisted of flat wooden platforms (1–1.5 cm high) with two wooden supports nailed underneath to elevate the entire structure (Fig. 8). Two leather straps, obtained from uniform belts or high boot legs, were attached to both sides of the sole. The construction was reminiscent of medieval pattens (Turska 1987: 145, 147), which also protected delicate footwear from muddy roads and gutters. Regardless of the historical period – Middle Ages or the 20th century – these clogs served the same purpose (Persak 2010: 38), protecting leather shoes from harsh environmental conditions and insulating feet from the frozen ground.

Conclusions generally, it can be stated that only some damaged footwear was repaired, with examples of soles mended by adding rubber layers. Some rubber fragments even bore trademarks, such as “SANOK”. Footwear damage across all camps was similar – worn-out soles and leather heels, while legs remained in the best condition. However, due to a shortage of leather material, the legs of the boots were often cut off and used for repairs (typically around the ankles) (Kola 2005: 120–121, 127, 142, 187–188, 217, 231; Persak 2010: 38). When this modification was intentional, the cut edges were finished with care. In contrast, some boots were cut roughly, suggesting hasty actions by NKVD functionaries, likely carried out in secret before the bodies were thrown into the pits.

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Streszczenie

Początek II wojny światowej na terenie Polski związany był z dwoma etapami rozbioru kraju: atakiem Niemiec 1 września i inwazją Związku Sowieckiego 17 września. Decyzja Stalina o masowej egzekucji wziętych do niewoli oficerów miała na celu zniszczenie warstw przywódczych i inteligencji. Do końca okupacji sowieckiej oficerowie, przedstawiciele administracji państwowej, a także wykształceni szeregowi żołnierze, byli typowani w obozach jenieckich i mordowani. Przez wiele lat temat ludobójstwa polskich oficerów przez Związek Radziecki był przemilczany. Dopiero w latach dziewięćdziesiątych XX w. władze radzieckie wyraziły zgodę na ekshumacje masowych grobów ofiar represji NKWD przez polskich archeologów. W trakcie ekshumacji „dołów śmierci” pozyskano liczne przedmioty osobiste, dewocjonalia i odzież ofiar, w tym obuwie wojskowe, które czasami stanowiło jedyny zachowany element ubioru.

To właśnie przedmioty osobiste ofiar z katyńskich grobów, a także stan zachowania ich obuwia, w tym przetarcia skóry, chałupnicze naprawy i modyfikacje, były dowodem na to, że polskich oficerów, po długim oczekiwaniu w obozie jenieckim, zamordowano, a ich ciała wrzucono do dołów śmierci. Prace ekshumacyjne prowadzone w latach dziewięćdziesiątych XX w. rzuciły nowe światło na fakt ludobójstwa przeprowadzanego przez Związek Radziecki na polskich oficerach. Mimo wszystko, nadal jest to niewielki krok w kierunku odkrycia prawdy o zbrodni katyńskiej, gdyż po wielu latach w Rosji wciąż dochodzi do fałszowania historii, a istotne dokumenty pozostają utajnione.

Słowa kluczowe: Katyń, Charków, Miednoje, Ostaszków, Starobielsk, Bykownia, obuwie wojskowe, II Rzeczpospolita, doły śmierci

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