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‘LEXICON OF KATYN ARCHAEOLOGY (1990–2015)’. AN ATTEMPT AT CONSILIENCE, A MODEL OF INTEGRATIVE PERSPECTIVE

Abstract

This article discusses the main assumptions and methodological procedures used in the ‘Lexicon of Katyn Archaeology (1990–2015)’ project. The authors highlight the research and social significance of archaeological research into the Katyn Massacre. They discuss and explain the need for an integrative methodological perspective (archaeology, history, ethnography – cultural anthropology) that allows for the reconstruction and recognition of the significance of archaeological research, as well as the massacre itself, in aspects that sometimes escape historical studies, archaeological reports, and analytical scholarly texts – in biographical, personal, and emotional contexts.

Received: 04.11.2025 Revised: 26.11.2025 Accepted: 06.12.2025

Citation: Krupa-Ławrynowicz A., Ławrynowicz O. 2025. ‘Lexicon of Katyn Archaeology (1990–2015)’. *An Attempt at Consilience, a Model of Integrative Perspective*. “Fasciculi Archaeologiae Historicae” 38, 109–115, DOI 10.23858/FAH38/2025.007

KEYWORDS

- Katyn Massacre
- archaeology
- ethnography
- ethnoarchaeology of the contemporary past
- history
- methodology
- integrative perspective


INTRODUCTION – THE PROJECT FRAMEWORK

The interdisciplinary research initiative, ‘Lexicon of Katyn Archaeology (1990–2015)’, commenced in 2022. Its fundamental objective is to collect, archive, and disseminate information concerning the evidence of the 1940 Katyn Massacre that was investigated between 1990 and 2015, much of which previously existed in a fragmented and unsystematic manner. The project also entails documenting and compiling a lexicon covering research methodologies, public perception of the findings, and a re-evaluation of non-archaeological exhumation work preceding 1990 (such as the 1943 German-led inquiry and the 1944 Soviet investigation). Furthermore, the scope includes

the detention facilities for Polish prisoners of war from September 1939 up until their execution in the spring and summer of 1940, alongside the identification of potential, yet unexplored, burial grounds requiring future archaeological surveys.

A summary of selected findings will be published in both Polish and English. The development of the Lexicon will also result in a freely accessible text and multimedia e-repository available in Polish, English, and Russian. This platform will host the Lexicon entries, augmented by interactive 3D visualisations of archaeological artefacts (primarily from the Katyn Museum in Warsaw) and various audio-visual materials.

The e-repository will incorporate current knowledge on presentation methods, including the visualisation of information, and the needs and preferences of diverse audiences, including the younger generation, seniors, and international users from Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine.

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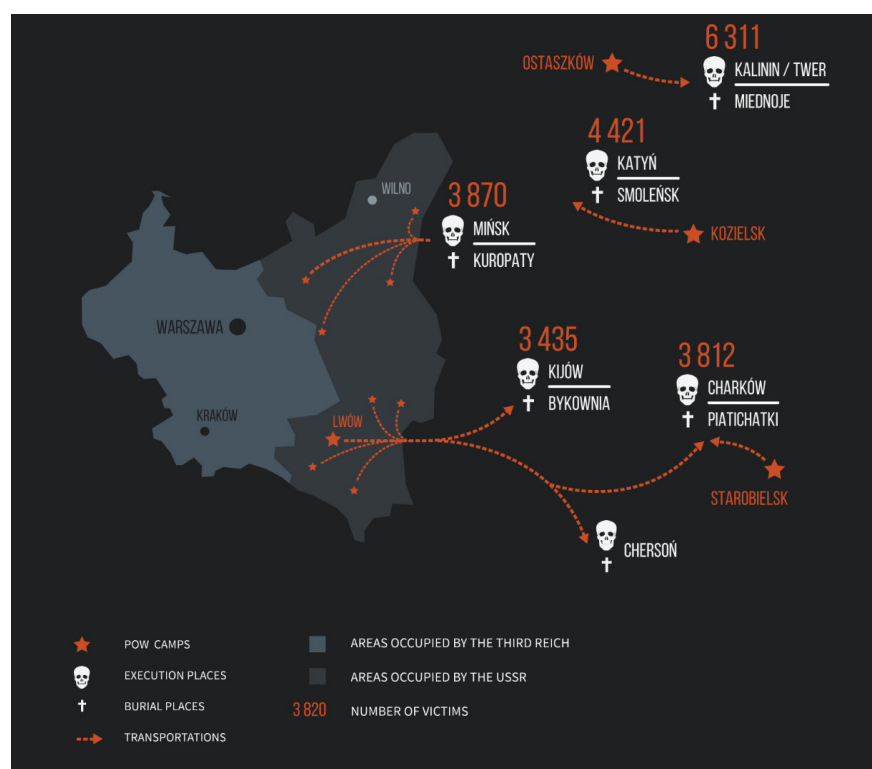
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Fig. 1. Map of the Katyn Massacre.

Source: Institute of National Remembrance; by Authors based on *Zbrodnia Katyńska* 2014.



THE KATYN MASSACRE – ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH

The 1940 Katyn Massacre represents a pivotal event in Polish history. It was a direct outcome of the German-Soviet invasion of Poland in September 1939, forming part of a genocidal strategy designed to liquidate the Polish intellectual and leadership class, thereby dismantling Polish statehood and the centuries-old multi-ethnic identity of the occupied territories. The atrocity claimed the lives of approximately 22,000 individuals: Polish Army officers and regular soldiers, police and border guards, civil service and judicial officials, and members of the professional and cultural elite, including clergy, aristocracy, scientists, and artists.¹

The crime was exposed two years after Germany attacked the Soviet Union – in the spring of 1943 in the Katyn Forest near Smolensk in western Russia. The Germans established an international commission of forensic doctors, with members of the Polish Red Cross also participating in the research (*Amtliches Material zum Massenmord von Katyn* 1943). By then, the Soviet Union had joined the anti-German alliance with the United States, Great Britain, and the governments-in-exile of German-occupied European countries, including France and Poland. Hitler sought to exploit the massacre in his propaganda in order to sow division among the Allies.

Despite its propaganda aims to disrupt the Allied coalition, the inquiry successfully identified numerous victims and led to the establishment of the Polish Red Cross Cemetery – the first memorial to this Soviet crime at Katyn. Stalin refused to admit Soviet responsibility, blamed the Germans, and severed diplomatic relations with the Polish government-in-exile. Following the Red Army's expulsion of the Wehrmacht from Smolensk, the Soviet authorities established an investigative commission which, in 1944, purported to have 'proven' that the Katyn Massacre had been carried out by Nazi Germany. This marked the first step towards installing communist rule in post-war Poland. That is why the Katyn Lie, i.e. the denial that the crime against Polish officers in Katyn was committed by the Soviets and that Stalin was Hitler's ally at the beginning of World War II, became the 'founding lie of communist People's Poland'. This interpretation was binding on all official discourse in post-war Poland and other Eastern Bloc countries.² This lie consisted of an intensive process of obliterating evidence, testimonies, and material traces of this crime. The last aspect is the reason why, in an important and inalienable relation to the Katyn issue, archaeology remains.³

It wasn't until the political reforms of the late 1980s that the Soviet Union finally acknowledged the Katyn Massacre was perpetrated by NKVD

¹ Kalbarczyk 2010; Przewoźnik and Adamska 2010.

² Ławrynowicz et al. 2024.

³ Zalewska et al. 2025.

officers, granting Polish researchers access to Katyn and associated locations (Fig. 1). This group included archaeologists, such as Andrzej Nadolski and Maria Blombergowa, whose own parents were victims of the atrocity. Their participation elevated the intended exhumation work into formal archaeological investigations. Nadolski’s student, Marian Głosek (from Łódź), was involved from the outset, later joined by Andrzej Kola (from Toruń).

These researchers employed techniques typically used for locating burial sites from mediaeval and modern battles. It was also notable that Nadolski, born in 1920, had served as a soldier in the Home Army (*Armia Krajowa*), the primary Polish resistance movement during World War II.⁴ The objective of the work at Katyn, Mednoye, Kharkiv, and Bykivnia was to identify and demarcate the graves of Polish victims, enabling the creation of war cemeteries on these sites. This effort was particularly important because the victims of other communist crimes dating back to the 1917 revolution were also interred at these locations.⁵ The archaeological effort at Katyn, primarily conducted by Marian Głosek in 1994–1995, resulted in the re-identification of the 1943 Polish Red Cross Cemetery within a military cemetery established after the 1944 Soviet commission’s work. This area contained six mass graves holding the remains of over 4,000 Polish officers, along with the separate graves of two generals: Bronisław Bohaterewicz and Mieczysław Smorawiński. A further eight burial pits were discovered, containing the bodies of victims transported from the Kozelsk POW camp and executed by the NKVD in 1940.⁶ At Mednoye, Głosek (1991) and Bronisław Młodziejowski (1995) located 27 burial pits, four of which were exhumed, yielding the remains of around 300 individuals from the Ostashkov camp. In Kharkiv, investigations led by Nadolski (1991) and Kola (1995–1996) revealed 15 graves containing the remains of approximately 4,300 prisoners from the Starobelsk camp.⁷

Between 2002 and 2012, across several research seasons, Kola continued to uncover and examine 69 burial pits, which collectively held the remains of roughly 2,000 people previously detained in NKVD prisons in western Ukraine.⁸ Pursuant to agreements with Russian and Ukrainian authorities, the human remains at all these locations were left in situ, with only mementoes of the victims returned to Poland. These items

are currently exhibited at the Katyn Museum in Warsaw. The extensive scope of research at these sites contributed notably to the growth of Polish archaeology focused on recent periods, now termed the ‘archaeology of the contemporary past’.

‘Katyn archaeology’ has served not only to supply evidence for major international and political investigations. The items recovered from the death pits have been officially recognised as physical evidence, yet for the victims’ families, they hold the significance of relics on a personal, micro-level. In this context, archaeological research goes far beyond merely concluding excavations and undertaking laboratory artefact analysis. ‘Katyn archaeology’ operates as a public science, serving the public interest and pursuing goals that extend beyond purely academic objectives.⁹

It was not until the political changes of the late 1980s that the Soviet Union acknowledged the NKVD’s responsibility, finally granting Polish researchers access to Katyn and related sites. Among the first researchers were archaeologists whose own parents were victims, such as Andrzej Nadolski and Maria Blombergowa. Their involvement elevated the planned exhumation work to formal archaeological investigations. Researchers such as Marian Głosek and Andrzej Kola applied methodologies typically used for locating graves from historical battlefields. The aim was to locate and delineate the mass graves, leading to the creation of war cemeteries. The extensive fieldwork, such as Głosek’s work at Katyn (1994–1995), Kola’s at Kharkiv (1995–1996), and the multiple seasons at Bykivnia (2002–2012), significantly contributed to the development of Polish ‘archaeology of the contemporary past’.

The items recovered from the grave sites have become forensic evidence on the international stage. Yet, for the victims’ families, these objects hold the profound significance of sacred relics at the personal level. Archaeological research in this field transcends traditional excavation and laboratory analysis; ‘Katyn archaeology’ functions as a public-facing science with aims that are both scientific and commemorative.

‘LEXICON OF KATYN ARCHAEOLOGY (1990–2015)’ – CONSILIENCE AND INTEGRATION

We concluded that answers to our research questions and goals could not be found within a single discipline. It was necessary to use tools and methods offered by disciplines. The Lexicon is, as we hope, coherent in its message – a polyphony

⁴ Głosek 2013.

⁵ Głosek 2015; Kola and Góra 2015, 219, 227.

⁶ Głosek 2004.

⁷ Kola 2011.

⁸ Kola and Góra 2015.

⁹ Ławrynowicz et al. 2024.

of representatives of several disciplines: archaeology, history, ethnology, and cultural anthropology. The procedure used is also a specific application of ethnoarchaeology of the contemporary past.¹⁰ It is worth pointing out the idea of consilience, understood as a multidimensional epistemological perspective, a model of searching for mutual dependencies and connections between phenomena studied by specialists from various scientific disciplines.¹¹

Drawing insights from other academic fields is a common practice among historians, anthropologists (including ethnographers and ethnologists) and archaeologists. Nearly four decades ago, Giovanni Gozzer observed that no branch of the humanities is entirely independent or isolated, nor is it shielded by unique subject matter or research methods.¹² The points of contact between disciplines often revolve around shared concepts and themes. Mieke Bal refers to these as ‘wandering notions’.¹³ Her research approach addresses the issue of placing too much emphasis on rigid boundaries between fields, even in interdisciplinary work, which she argues are neither self-evident nor particularly helpful. According to Bal, it is important to study phenomena that exist in the spaces between established disciplines, as these cannot be assigned to just one field, or may belong to several fields simultaneously.¹⁴

Notions that became central or even activating for the research carried out in the *Lexicon* include, above all, the Katyn Massacre, Katyn archaeology, memory, and commemoration. Within these conceptual frameworks, all contributors to the project developed categories and research topics (*lexicon* entries) that integrate the perspectives of archaeologists, anthropologists, and historians. The framework for the ‘*Lexicon*’ is provided by the term ‘archaeology’ in its title, which refers to the recent past. It should be noted that the first archaeological investigations in the East were carried out only five decades after the crime. Today,

from the perspective of another three decades, Katyn archaeology is understood as fieldwork situated within the broader paradigms of the archaeology of the contemporary past.¹⁵ In Polish literature, the archaeology of the contemporary past is regarded as the chronologically youngest branch of historical archaeology¹⁶ – that is, one whose sources include existing records such as documents, letters, memoirs, films, photographs, and sound recordings. The authors of this article hold that the chronological scope of the archaeology of the contemporary past is defined by the memory and post-memory of interviewees, explored through ethnographic interviews and oral history. In the *Lexicon*, the strategy and subject matter of ethnographic interviews concerning the discovery of material traces of the Katyn Massacre – as a phenomenon remembered or post-remembered by the interviewees – are developed in collaboration with archaeologists, who assist in formulating the interview guidelines. This research procedure falls within the concept of contemporary ethnoarchaeology.¹⁷ The creation of certain *Lexicon* entries does not require archaeologists to seek the support of historians or ethnographers. This applies, for example, to issues such as fieldwork methods and the selection and conservation of artefacts excavated from burial pits. Similarly, the *Lexicon* will include entries closely related to cultural anthropology (e.g. memory and private forms of commemoration, Katyn religiosity) and to history (e.g. descriptions of the course of the crime, its distortion, and subsequent exposure).

The process of the archaeological investigation into the Katyn Massacre and its societal impact can be precisely reconstructed through ethnographic interviews conducted as part of the ongoing research project. Consistent with the project’s premises and methodological protocols, the initiative includes ethnographic interviews with researchers and participants involved in the fieldwork in the East, as well as with descendants of the victims or those who inherited their memory.

The *Lexicon* entries will underscore the importance of oral accounts and written records, including memoirs, diaries, letters, anecdotal stories (‘passed from mouth to mouth’), field notes, and other documentation. When applied to archaeology and history, ethnography not only expands the range of considered sources but also redefines the questions asked about the past. Memory, as the chief repository of the past, transforms the study of factual

¹⁰ Ławrynowicz and Krupa-Ławrynowicz 2019; Ławrynowicz and Krupa-Ławrynowicz 2024.

¹¹ This term was ‘modernised’ in the 1990s by the American scholar Edward O. Wilson, founder of sociobiology, who used it to describe humanity’s age-old dream of the unity of nature, order in the world, and the unification of knowledge from all fields – from the exact sciences, through the social and economic sciences, to the humanities and even the fine arts (*artes*). Wilson calls this dream the ‘Ionian infatuation’, because it appeared already with Thales, returning periodically in the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, and contemporary science (the idea of unification was familiar to Albert Einstein; Claude Lévi-Strauss also alluded to it); Wilson 2002; Kita 2012.

¹² Gozzer 1982.

¹³ Bal 2012.

¹⁴ Bal 2012; Tabaszewska 2013.

¹⁵ Buchli and Lucas 2001; González-Ruibal 2014; Zalewska 2016; Zalewska 2024.

¹⁶ Kajzer 1996; Kajzer 2013.

¹⁷ Ławrynowicz and Krupa-Ławrynowicz 2024.

events into the examination of their social reception within the circulation of cultural values.

Ethnographic research yields new data – in this study, primarily the narratives of researchers and specialists (archaeologists, anthropologists, and lawyers) who were involved in locating and investigating the clandestine burial sites of totalitarian crimes in Katyn, Mednoye, Kharkiv, and Bykivnia at the turn of the 21st century. These recollections are invaluable, as the conventions of scholarly texts and official reports typically prohibit the expression of emotions, personal experiences, or private attitudes towards the subject of research. In stark contrast, ethnographic material is rich in intimate accounts and personal reflections that researchers and experts normally refrain from sharing. Consequently, ethnography validates ordinary human experiences within the research process.

In this particular study, it exposes the emotional underpinnings of research strategies, the subjective motivations of participants, their moral obligations, moments of fragility, and other factors that contribute to a comprehensive understanding of ‘Katyn archaeology’. It also illuminates the history of archaeology as a discipline, showcasing the significance of fieldwork as both a research exercise and a personal experience, and revealing the evolution of new methodological strategies in response to novel – and often unanticipated – needs and challenges. This research describes the creation of knowledge and the development of the field. The Katyn investigations initiated the formation of a new sub-discipline, as there was no pre-existing model of the archaeology of the contemporary past dedicated to recent history, nor was there sufficient institutional support from the academic community.¹⁸

Simultaneously, ethnography facilitates an understanding of the viewpoint of those who regard the archaeological research in the East as a means to commemorate the victims of the Katyn Massacre. These individuals are the children, relatives, and in-laws of the deceased, often knowing the victims solely through photographs, ‘private relics’, or family stories passed down through generations. Guidelines for interviewing victims’ descendants and members of the Federation of Katyn Families cover areas such as family biographies (including memories of the murdered and ways of preserving and transmitting that memory, particularly when challenging the pro-Soviet ‘Katyn Lie’), objects/mementoes of the murdered, forms of remembrance (cemeteries, monuments, museums, and ‘Katyn pilgrimages’), and the reception of the archaeological

work at the crime scenes. The accounts of the descendants and members of the Katyn Families offer insights into these issues and articulate both current and desired forms of commemoration.

A critical element of ethnographic work is the gathering and documentation of knowledge, generating various types of material for future study and broader generalisation. This objective is also pursued by cultural anthropologists in the Lexicon project. However, the primary focus of ethnography and cultural anthropology, even when dealing with traces of World War II, is not the discovery or verification of historical facts – the construction of knowledge about the past, which remains the domain of history and archaeology.

The ethnographer, when asking about the past, instead focuses on their interlocutor as a ‘user’ of the past. Engleking¹⁹ refers to a person “who functions within the reality shaped by social memory, seeking to satisfy his need for continuity and rootedness”, as a “socio-cultural subject who learns and acts within a system of collective symbolic categories produced in the historical process”. The categories used to operationalise the material collected by ethnographers become various forms and strategies of “reaching for the past”. They address such questions as: What and how is remembered? Who possesses this memory? What constitutes institutionalised mnemonics? How are past events made present, and for what purpose?

This meeting of sometimes different cognitive needs, workshops and not always identical approaches to various types of cultural sources and messages is part of the increasingly stronger tendency to establish cooperation and dialogue between various scientific disciplines. However, this isn’t about following a methodological trend. We are driven by the belief that describing cultural and social reality and attempting to understand history can only be achieved by taking into account multiple perspectives, that is, many different research points of view.

Our collaborative endeavours exemplify the methodological framework described by Paula Saukko as the ‘integrative perspective’. Within this paradigm, the objective is to encourage rigorous, empirical reflection on social reality, recognising that reality itself is composed of various interconnected elements. Consequently, scholarly enquiry is understood as a process that contributes to constructing this intricate social mosaic. From this perspective, research is conceived as the systematic assembly of components such as analytical techniques,

¹⁸ Lawrynowicz et al. 2024.

¹⁹ Engleking 2018, 144.

investigatory tools, and interpretive approaches into a coherent, unified whole.²⁰ Carolin Korsmeyer offers a comparable metaphor, likening this process to assembling a jigsaw puzzle comprised of pieces from various disciplines. The main goal is to expand the boundaries of knowledge, invigorate established viewpoints, and incorporate innovative ideas from other fields. Even when certain elements do not integrate seamlessly into the new configuration, the synthesis process remains valuable, as it fosters the emergence of novel connections and insights.²¹

‘LEXICON OF KATYN ARCHAEOLOGY (1990–2015)’ – STRUCTURE AND IMPLEMENTATION

The idea of the ‘Lexicon of Katyn Archaeology’ follows a long-standing Polish encyclopaedic and lexicographic tradition, initiated in 1781 by Ignacy Krasicki’s “Zbiór potrzebniejszych wiadomości porządkiem alfabety ułożonych” (A Collection of Necessary Information Arranged in Alphabetical Order). Unlike an encyclopaedia, which seeks to encompass ‘all human knowledge’ within a single work, a lexicon focuses on key terms related to a clearly and precisely defined subject area. The Lexicon described here is intended as a comprehensive compendium of knowledge about the Katyn Massacre and its victims. Rather, it is a resource concentrating on specific, narrowly defined problems and issues related to four main thematic areas:

1. Archaeological and exhumation,
2. Research methods,
3. People, places,
4. Things.

The section on research procedures will focus primarily on archaeological, conservation, and forensic archaeological methods. It will also address the organisational aspects of research – namely, the everyday realities of fieldwork – and include discussions of the public and scholarly reception of Katyn archaeology.

The section devoted to people will present characteristics of the victims, including biographical

and memoir elements. It will also feature biographies of researchers involved in archaeological investigations of the Katyn Massacre, as well as descriptions of selected institutions and organisations engaged in commemorating the victims. The concept of memory will be explored in entries concerning the Katyn Lie, and in those devoted to the families and descendants of the victims.

The section on places will cover, among others, archaeological research sites (their characteristics and state of research), the camps at Kozelsk, Ostashkov, and Starobelsk, as well as the Katyn cemeteries and the Katyn Museum.

The dimension of *materiality* will be presented primarily through thematic discussions of artefacts – camp art, everyday objects (such as clothing, writing materials, and items of consumption), family mementoes and relics, and the identification of victims based on grave artefacts.

We assume that the open form of the lexicon – more so than that of a dictionary – permits internal eclecticism and the blending of genres. While the Lexicon follows an alphabetical arrangement, it also allows for polyphony: research reports, exegeses, researcher profiles, personal documents, and photographs will coexist and complement one another at various levels, forming a coherent and multidimensional whole.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The research project ‘Lexicon of Katyn Archaeology (1990-2015)’ is being conducted as part of the “National Heritage” module of the National Programme for the Development of the Humanities by the Polish Ministry of Science and Higher Education in the years 2022-2027 at the Faculty of Philosophy and History of the University of Łódź (project no. 11H 20 02 48 88).

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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²⁰ Saukko 2014, 502.

²¹ Korsmeyer 2006.

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