

Kornelia Kajda*, Maksymilian Frąckowiak**

ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION OF THE MICROHISTORIES OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR. A CASE OF A SOVIET SOLDIER'S GRAVE IN WESTERN POLAND

ABSTRACT

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In this paper, we present the results of archaeological research into a Second World War military grave in western Poland, Lubuskie province. In the pages that follow, we argue that the archaeology of the recent past may contribute to negotiating and rewriting local memories, as well as to unveiling microhistories of global conflicts. Taking into account the story of one soldier – an actor and a victim of the Second World War, whose remains were found in the military grave in Bieniów village, we intend to present how archaeology works on oral histories and how it fills history with additional, previously lacking details.

Keywords: Second World War, archaeology of the recent past, conflict archaeology, exhumations, military grave

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* Instytut Archeologii, Uniwersytet im. Adama Mickiewicza w Poznaniu ul. Umultowska 89D, 61-614 Poznań; kornelia.kajda@gmail.com

** Pracownia Badań Historycznych i Archeologicznych „Pomost”, ul. Kłuszyńska 20/26, 60-136 Poznań; maksymilian.frackowiak@gmail.com

INTRODUCTION

In recent archaeological research, there is an increasing interest in studies of the twentieth century. Within archaeology, a new discipline called archaeology of the contemporary past (or archaeology of the recent past) has emerged (Buchli and Lucas 2001). Consequently, more and more studies have been devoted to issues relating to archaeological investigations of the contemporary era. As noted by researchers (see also Olivier 2001; Moshenska 2007; González-Ruibal 2012), archaeology of the contemporary past differs in its practice from archaeological analyses of more distant eras. One of the differences lies in the close relation between the archaeology of the contemporary past and cultural anthropology (Saunders 2004; González-Ruibal 2014; Zalewska 2012; 2016). Special links are noticeable especially between archaeology and memory studies as well as oral history. In such archaeological research, oral history, interviews and commemorative rituals are of great value and help in unearthing the histories of past events (compare Saunders 2004; 2005; Moshenska 2007; 2010; Schmidt 2013). The archaeology of the contemporary past is often based on living memory, and thus is practiced with special attention to witnesses' testimonies (Olivier 2011).

Another feature of the archaeology of the contemporary past is its ability to recreate microhistories. It has great potential to discern stories of the individuals upon which grand historical narratives are built (Olivier 2001; González-Ruibal 2012; Kajda and Frąckowiak 2017). According to Laurent Olivier (2001), attention to micro-scale studies is the primary difference between the archaeology of the contemporary past and other archaeological disciplines. As Alfredo González-Ruibal (2012, 472) states: "Archaeology rescues microhistories that are revealing of the nature of the war on both sides. Archaeology shows that the threads of history are always multiple and intertwined. This may not change grand historical narratives, but it can allow us to see and understand them differently". Such an approach transforms archaeology into a discipline that "downsizes history to a man's dimension" (Alexievich 2015, 23-24), and approaches the past from the perspective of ordinary people and their experiences in the world.

The aforementioned features of the archaeology of the contemporary past are due to the temporal proximity of the research to the events that are being studied. In such a way, the archaeology of the contemporary past may be interpreted as a form of creating and reclaiming individual memories (Zalewska 2012, 1178). As archaeologists engage with local memory, they have the opportunity to take part in the process of the renegotiation of memory (Moshenska 2010). Moreover, archaeological investigations may even influence the character of remembered events in a critical way (Greenberg 2009; Frąckowiak and Kajda 2015, 27).

In this paper we argue that the archaeology of the contemporary past may contribute to negotiating and rewriting local memories, as well as to unveiling microhistories of global conflicts. Taking into account the story of one soldier – an actor and a victim of the

Second World War, whose remains were found in a military grave in Bieniów village (Lubuskie Province, Poland), we intend to present how archaeology works on oral histories and how it fills history with additional, previously lacking details.

In the first part of the article, we present the scientific background of archaeological investigations of the contemporary past in Poland. The second section is devoted to the analysis of the events that occurred in Bieniów village during the Second World War. We briefly describe the battle of Bieniów as well as its impact on the German and Soviet forces. The next section presents the archaeological research conducted on the soldier's grave, which was reported by the local people in Bieniów, as well as an interpretation of the artefacts found in it.

ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE CONTEMPORARY PAST IN POLAND

Although archaeology of the contemporary past is still developing as a discipline in Poland, there have been various projects undertaken by Polish archaeologists aimed at scientific research of the contemporary era. Because the territories of today's Poland were the main arena for military actions during the Second World War, the archaeology of the contemporary past that is practiced in Poland focuses mostly on the events connected to this conflict, with special attention to the research of war graves (see also Kola 2000, 2011, 2016; Głosek 2004; Konczewski 2011, 2015, 2016; Kola and Góra 2015; Ławrynowicz 2015; Nowakowski 2015; Szwagrzyk 2015; 2016; Popkiewicz 2016). One of the most important and well-known examples of such studies is a search for victims of mass executions that occurred during the Katyń massacre (e.g. Głosek 2005), as well as present-day investigations of the graves of the so-called "Cursed Soldiers" (Szwagrzyk 2015; 2016).

Similar investigations are managed by the 'Pomost' Unit for Historical and Archaeological Research (Pracownia Badań Historycznych i Archeologicznych 'Pomost') from Poznań, which works for Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge e. V. from Germany. 'Pomost' searches for German victims of the Second World War (soldiers and civilians) buried in unmarked and forgotten graves in today's Poland. The company's aim is to find, identify and transfer soldiers' remains to German military cemeteries located within Polish territories (Frąckowiak and Kajda 2015). The article's case study presents one of the archaeological investigations conducted by 'Pomost' in the western part of Poland, namely, Bieniów village.

THE SECOND WORLD WAR ACTIONS IN BIENIÓW AND ITS AFTERMATHS

Bieniów is a small village in western Poland's Lubuskie Province. It lies on the territories that were adjoined to Poland after the Second World War and previously were inhabited by Germans. Although Bieniów (in German called Benau) was always a small village,

in February 1945 it was an arena of a week-long, strenuous battle between the Red Army coming from the east and the German Army, which was defending this region.

Despite its small size, Bieniów was an important road and rail hub, as well as a potentially strategic location for Red Army troops, making it a key point of military engagement. It was in Gorzupia, a village located 4 km east of Bieniów, that a unit of the Red Army's 6th Mechanised Corps broke through the German line at the Bóbr river and continued their westward attack (Friedl 2015, 48–49). The German defense was so poorly organized that they could not maintain their position, and the next day the column of Soviet tanks and infantry entered the village along the rail line. At that time, the citizens of Bieniów fled for fear of the Red Army soldiers (Friedl 2015, 71–72).

On February 14, 1945, the Germans began their counter-attack. The front line divided the village into two parts. The Germans held the western part (Bieniów Dolny) as well as the centre of the village. The eastern side (Bieniów Górny) was in the hands of the Soviet soldiers (Friedl 2015, 196–205). When the German counter-attack – with aerial support – began to gather strength, Soviet commander Dmitry Danilovich Lelyushenko called for backup from the Red Army units that operated nearby. The attacks came from the eastern, western and southern sides on 17 and 18 February, 1945. Red Army soldiers gradually captured house after house until they took control over the entire village. On February 19, 1945, German troops conducted a few unsuccessful counter-attacks, but the support of tanks, artillery and aircraft enabled the Soviets to control the region and to solidify their position along the Bóbr river (Friedl 2015, 205–243).

Combat lasted for a week in Bieniów. During that time, large parts of the village were destroyed. The German inhabitants that returned to the village after fighting ceased found their homes in ruins. Wilfried Läbisch, who lived in Bieniów as a child, describes the landscape in the following way: “Our village seemed to be dead. Burnt barns and houses were emitting smoke. The walls of the houses were riddled with bullets. There were only debris and ashes. It was as if a stone desert emerged from our once beautiful Bieniów. In one tank, stuck in the mud of the meadow, we found five soldiers of the tank's crew with their heads blown off, and lying near the wall of a building. The body of a soldier lay in our house's corridor; the next two deceased were at the pasture, near our neighbour's property. [...] For me, as a 13-year-old boy, it was the most horrific picture in my life” (Friedl 2015, 273).

In short order, however, these Germans were again forced to leave their homes. The political outcomes of the Second World War resulted in the total upheaval of the population of Bieniów. By virtue of the Yalta conference, Poland lost parts of its territories – the so-called “Kresy Wschodnie” (Eastern Borderlands) – to the Soviet Union. In return, Poland received the so-called “Ziemie Odzyskane” (Recovered Territories), previously a part of the territory of pre-war Germany and the former Free City of Danzig. As early as June 1945, these territories were resettled with the Polish people who had been forced to leave the eastern parts of Poland (N.B.: The expulsion of Poles from the Kresy regions was the

largest uprooting of a population in European history) (Hosking and Schopflin 1997, 153). Some of them departed from Rudki (the province of the city of Lviv) to the unknown territories of the so-called “Wild West” (Domaradzki 2015, 7-10). After a long journey, they reached Bieniów and came upon a landscape ruined by the war. On March 30, 1946, a transport of 250 new settlers arrived in Bieniów. One of them was Józef Zaleszczak, who described this moment as follows: “Even at the railway station, we could smell the stench of burning. From the road to the wood depot, damaged German and Russian tanks stood. In the village and in the farmlands, ammunition and arms could be found everywhere. Near what is currently the Schillers’ house, stood three cars packed with missiles. Each of us could have a gun without any effort” (Michalewska 2010, 132).

At the beginning of the exchange of settlers, many Polish people lived together with Germans in their houses. German people were forced to labor, cleaning and restoring damaged buildings. They were also forced to leave their homes and move to the new German territories. On September 28, 1948, the last resettlement of German people was conducted in the region (Szymczak 2008).

After the battle in 1945, various military remains and debris of buildings posed a threat to the people living in the village. Many farmers died accidentally while working in their fields due to explosions of unearthed mines hidden under the ground. Some, including children, were badly injured (Domaradzki 2015, 34). Although the area near Bieniów was subsequently cleared of mines by Soviet minesweepers, more hazardous artefacts have since been found near houses in Bieniów (Friedl 2015, 273-274). The last intervention of sappers took place in July, 2015, during which exhumations of soldiers were conducted at one of the fields, where researchers also found Soviet missiles and ammunition.

CONTEMPORARY MATERIAL REMAINS OF THE CONFLICT

In 2015, 70 years had passed since the battle of Bieniów. With the passing of time, material remains of the war have been disappearing. Most of the buildings and outhouses have been reconditioned or rebuilt. The buildings that suffered the most were demolished. One of the most interesting remnants of the war still discernible in the landscape is the fragmented body of a Soviet T-34 tank, which still resides embedded in one of the yards in Bieniów. After the war, the tank’s armour was gradually cut and exported as scrap. However, some parts of the underbody sank in the soggy ground, and even today it is visible in the terrain as a reminder of past events. These relics are not the only ones that may be noticed while wandering around the village and its surrounding forests and fields. For example, when observing the railway station one can encounter an inscription on the building’s façade from a Soviet ‘Bagaiev’ minesweeper, who cleared the territory of the mines. He noted in red paint that the area near the railway station had been cleared of mines (Fig. 1).

The material remains of the battle of Bieniów in 1945 also include anonymous war graves. Although exhumation works were conducted there between 1948–54 and 1957–58, and the bodies of fallen Red Army soldiers were transferred to the Soviet Military Cemetery in Żary (Affek-Bujalska 1999, 35), treasure hunters and local residents still incidentally discover previously unknown human remains from the Second World War.

A FORGOTTEN SOLDIER

One of the graves that remained undiscovered until the 21st century was found by the ‘Pomost’ researchers in 2015. The organization received information about the grave from one of the oldest inhabitants of Bieniów, who came to the village in 1946. The woman said that she remembered the grave in which a German soldier was buried, and that it was located at the back of her house. Just after the war, the grave was visible in the landscape thanks to a small mound on which a cross, made of birch wood, was standing. On top of the cross, a German helmet was hung, inside of which was a blood-stained photo of the deceased soldier. Only a few meters from the grave was an artillery stand where the woman saw various missiles and shells. She was caring for the grave along with the German inhabitants, who for some time after war still lived in the village (Fig. 2). After their resettling, they still came to visit the village and put flowers and candles in this place. This situation lasted until the turn of the 1950s and 60s, at which time the local authorities disapproved of the idea of commemorating the enemy. At their request, the people of Bieniów had to remove the mound over the grave, after which it was never reconstructed, and was subsequently mostly forgotten.

After 70 years, archaeologists came to this place to find the remains of the forgotten German soldier, identify him and transfer him to the official military cemetery. When the trench in the place marked by the old lady was opened, we encountered the remains of a human skeleton that was buried about 40 cm below ground level (Fig. 3). The body was buried in a layer of mixed earth and debris, which most probably came from the demolished buildings. The individual must have been lying on his back, sloping slightly to the right. The right hand was lying adjacent to the body, and the left hand was bent above the head. However, the most surprising fact was that under the head there were four cervical vertebrae missing (Fig. 4). They were placed loosely together near the right side of the skeleton’s chest. This could be explained by the possible detachment of the head as the result of a gunshot or explosion, which was then placed with the body during burial. The frontal bone of the skull was fractured, adding support to this hypothesis. Those who buried the deceased most likely also placed the vertebrae in question in the grave.

After further exploration, it turned out that the human remains were most probably those of a soldier (Fig. 5) – not, as assumed, a German soldier, but rather a Soviet one. Such affiliation was identified by the artefacts lying near the skeletal remains in the grave. In the vicinity of his left side were two Soviet submachine guns of the PPsh-41 type (Fig. 6),



Fig. 1. The Bagaiev's inscription, written in Russian, noting that the area had been cleared of mines.
Photograph: Maksymilian Frąckowiak



Fig. 2. The woman showing the possible location of the forgotten grave.
Photograph: Maksymilian Frąckowiak



Fig. 3. The archaeological exploration of the soldier's grave in Bieniów.
Photograph: Maksymilian Frąckowiak



Fig. 4. The skeleton's position with a close-up of the cervical vertebrae.
Photograph: Maksymilian Frąckowiak



Fig. 5. The skeletal remains of the Russian soldier and artefacts found in the grave.
Photograph: Maksymilian Frąckowiak



Fig. 6. The remains of the PPSH-41 submachine gun *in situ*. Photograph: Maksymilian Frąckowiak



Fig. 7. Artefacts found in the soldier's grave in Bieniów. 1 – Plastic button with the hammer and sickle symbol; 2 – Italian 5 Lira coin of Victor Emmanuel III (1900-1946); 3 – Soviet medal “For Courage”; 4 – Half of a comb; 5 – Pencil in a copper integument; 6 – Lighter. Prepared by Maksymilian Frąckowiak



Fig. 8. The American type shoes found in the soldier's grave.
Photograph: Maksymilian Frąckowiak



Fig. 9. The official burial of the Red Army soldiers exhumed in Lubuskie Province, Poland.
Photograph: Maksymilian Frąckowiak

and also near the body were several pieces of 7.62x25 mm calibre ammunition, an RG-42 type fragmentation grenade, a plastic button with the hammer and sickle symbol (Fig 7: 1), and an Italian 5 Lira coin of Victor Emmanuel III (1900-1946) (Fig. 7: 2). The coin was shot through and partially destroyed. A medal "For Courage" (Figure 7: 3) was also found near the body. This silver commendation was established in 1938, and between 1941-1945 it was awarded to almost 1.9 million Soviet soldiers. A soldier would have worn this commendation on the left side of his chest (Rio 2012, 13-14). The medal was most likely hidden in the left pocket of the unidentified soldier's trousers. Near it, we also found a razor, pocket-knife and a lighter (Fig. 7: 6). Additionally, half of a comb and a pencil in a copper integument were noted in the grave (Fig. 7: 4, 5). Shoes were still on the soldier's feet. They were probably a type of American shoes, which were given to the Red Army under the Lend Lease Agreement (Rio 2012, 79) (Fig. 8). During excavations, we also registered other artefacts connected to the battle of Bieniów. Near the grave lay another PPSH-41 submachine gun and a cartridge of a 76 mm Soviet heavy gun.

One of the main questions that we asked after the discovery was: why was the resting place of the Soviet soldier remembered by Bieniów's inhabitants as the grave of a German soldier? Here again we turned to the oral history and stories that were told to us about the place and the grave. As previously stated, somebody hung a German helmet atop of a cross on the grave. Most likely, this individual simply meant to mark this place as the grave of a soldier, and he or she did it with a helmet found in close proximity. Those who came to Bieniów, whether German inhabitants or new Polish settlers, were shocked by the extent of the destruction of the village, and by the amount of dead bodies lying in the streets. In such a situation, nobody had time to think about the affiliations of the soldiers and the items scattered about them. Another possible interpretation is that somebody may have switched or mistaken the original Russian helmet for a German one. The German helmet hanging on the wooden cross was then interpreted as an indication of the nationality of the deceased. This would have misled the local inhabitants as well as the communist authorities, who unconsciously demolished the grave of their hero. By the same token, the remains of the soldier were not exhumed after the war and were left in place for 70 years after his death.

Eventually, on July 5, 2016, the soldier's body (together with other previously exhumed bodies of Red Army soldiers) was reburied at the Soviet Military Cemetery in Żary, as required by the Lubuskie Province Governor (Fig. 9).

THE EPILOGUE

For archaeologists, the story of the unknown soldier did not end with his official burial. We wrote to the Russian Embassy in Poland to receive more information about the soldier found in Bieniów, using as a reference the silver medal "For Courage" with the series number 1704689 (Figure 7: 3). After a year of waiting, the Russian Ministry of Defence sent us

a letter with detailed information about the soldier – Nikolay Michailovich Piatkov. Private Piatkov was born in 1918 and lived in Omsk Oblast, Nazyvayevsky raion, Bolshepietschanoye village, and he had one brother, Alexander. During the war he served in the 1st Mechanised Infantry Battalion, which was part of the 17th Guards Mechanised Brigade fighting near Bieniów in February 1945 (Friedl 2015, 205-243). Piatkov was a radiotelegraph operator. He was injured four times during the war: on 12 December 1943, 19 March 1944, 27 August 1944, and finally during the battle of Bieniów on 15 February 1945. As previously mentioned, the Italian Lira coin found with Private Piatkov, apparently damaged by a bullet, could have been the evidence of this final injury. On December 20, 1944, he was awarded with the medal that we found during excavations. Additionally, the Russian archives indicate that Piatkov was also awarded the Order of the Red Star on March 5, 1945 – 20 days after his last reported injury.

The information that we received left us with many questions. If the soldier that we had found was Piatkov, then why was he awarded with a medal after the battle of Bieniów? And why in the archives is there no information about his death? Further investigation led us to various possible explanations for these questions. Firstly, a soldier could be awarded with the Order of the Red Star posthumously. It was a token of gratitude and consolation to the family of the fallen soldier. Additionally, although noting a soldier's death in the official record was important, it may occasionally have been overlooked due to some mistakes. Such was the case for Private Piatkov; the archives received the information about his injury but not about his subsequent death in Bieniów.

However, there may be another explanation – that the person who lay in the anonymous grave in Bieniów was not Piatkov at all. It might be a different soldier who found or was given Piatkov's medal "For Courage". The story of Piatkov could be resolved only through contact with his family. Here archaeology of the contemporary past again reveals its close relationship to anthropology. For the time being, however, our history of Piatkov ends with these unresolved issues.

CONCLUSIONS

This case study of an unknown soldier's grave from the small village of Bieniów in Poland presents the ways in which archaeology of the contemporary past may contribute to the unveiling of various microhistories of the Second World War. Detailed study of historical sources, documentation of the memories of local inhabitants, and archaeological excavation, with its specific approach toward material remains, all help to recreate local histories and to present their unique interpretation. In the case presented above, only careful investigation by archaeologists was able to give back to the soldier, who lay in the anonymous grave in Bieniów, his identity. Here it has been shown that archaeology, by focusing on microhistories and placing them in their broader context, has the power to reveal new horizons in the history of military conflicts and their actors.

The main conclusion of this article is that archaeology should also concentrate on small, momentary and local issues. In our opinion, such archaeology works for both contemporary and future generations. Writing a small-scale and short-term history with access to detailed information and the memories of living people is now possible. We, as archaeologists, should invest in such studies and take advantage of these unique and singular opportunities.

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