

Volhynia Massacre

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Leon Popek, Exhumations in Volhynia in 1992–2015

I participated in search and exhumation in Volhynia, Ukraine, which was organised by the Council for the Protection of Struggle and Martyrdom Sites since 1992. Exhumations were preceded by laborious search for the last living witnesses, collecting their accounts, memories, photographs and browse records not only in Polish archives, but also regional archives in Lutsk, Rivne, and Zhytomyr. Such information was verified with the help of the friendly Ukrainian locals where often there was no trace of a village that had been inhabited by Poles and was burnt in 1943. Despite the effort, the joint Polish and Ukrainian archaeological team often failed to find remains of Poles who had been murdered by the UPA. There were various reasons for this: in most cases, it was difficult to find the right place due to the absence of any surviving buildings of the settlement or any other point of reference, irrigation work carried out after the war, sometimes a forest planted on the site of the former village, construction of new settlements and roads, and lack of witnesses. The local Ukrainian residents were often migrants from other parts of Ukraine, Russia or Poland – they were settled there after 1945.

The first exhumations took place in 1992 in Ostrówki and Wola Ostrowiecka in the Luboml Poviats in Volhynia. The remains were dug out from two mass burials (we can barely speak of proper burial in this case) of at least 323 persons – Poles murdered by OUN-UPA members on 30th August 1943. Their funeral ceremony, in which Polish and Ukrainian officials took part, was conducted on 30th August 1992 at the former Roman Catholic parish cemetery in Ostrówki.

In late July and early August 2011, Polish and Ukrainian archaeologists supported by numerous volunteers from the Voluntary Labour Corps, former residents and their families, exhumed remains of at least 317 Poles murdered by OUN-UPA on 30th August 1943 and buried in five mass graves in Ostrówki and Wola Ostrowiecka. The funeral ceremony took place on 30th August 2011, again at the Ostrówki cemetery.

In September 2013, on the 70th anniversary of the genocide of Poles in Volhynia, the remains of 81 Poles murdered by the UPA on 30th August 1943 in Gaj (Kovel District, Volhynia) were exhumed. On 19th October 2013, the funeral ceremony involving representatives of Polish and Ukrainian authorities and Roman Catholic Clergy took place at the Sokil parish graveyard.

The Polish-Ukrainian research team carried out further archaeological work in Ostrówka and Wola Ostrowiecka in May and August 2015. A single mass grave containing remains of 33 people (22 men, 5 women, and 6 children) was found in Ostrówki, and a grave of a woman was found in Wola Ostrowiecka. The funeral ceremony took part on 30th August 2015 – on the 72nd anniversary of the massacre.

Dr Leon Popek

The photographs were taken e.g. in Ostrówki, Wola Ostrowiecka, and during the exhumation in Gaj, Kovel District. They were taken by Leon Popek.









Photo gallery

