Collective reburials of great terror victims in nowadays Russia: about mass death and identity erasure

Elisabeth ANSTETT
(CNRS, Aix Marseille Univ, EFS, ADES, Marseille, France)
elisabeth.anstett@univ-amu.fr
Great Terror / Great purges
facts and figures

- **When:** From 1936 to 1938 (August 1937 to November 1938 for the peak of violence).
- **How much:** Dispute over figures, between 700,000 and 1,200,000 dead for the whole period.
- **Where:** All over USSR, with zones of high and low intensity.
- **Why and who:** Motivations were political (loyalty toward the state), ethnic and national (enemies and traitors), then runaway reaction with virtually anybody targeted.
Soviet archives

Findings and blind spots

- Soviet NKVD archives published and studied since 1989 by Russian and foreign historians

- Research findings related to a hyper-bureaucratic documentation of the whole extrajudicial procedure:
  - arrest
  - custody
  - investigation (including examinations)
  - trial
  - execution (except places)

- Blind spots related to dead body management:
  - transport
  - burial
Limited number of victim’s remains discovered

- After research: in Ukrainian Dubno prison (2019), photo © EuroMaidan Press

- By chance: in Vladivostok surroundings (2010), photo ©
Collective and most often anonymous reburial

Photos © Memorial

Photo © E. Anste
The Voronej particular case: 30 years of annual mass grave opening, and human remains reburial.

Map © Voronejskij Memorial 2011

Photo © E. Anstett 2016
Mass graves hard to locate

Photo and doc, © Voronejskij Memorial 2011
Identification virtually impossible
Reburial = a tricky moment

Photo © V. Bitiutski 2009

Photo © T. Kizny 2017
Reburial as a political threat
Long lasting social effect of identity errasure