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The examination and reporting of war crimes—an example from Finnish history

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Abstract We present a historical example of forensic investigation of civilian victims of an armed conflict. During the Civil War in Finland in 1918, 77 external examinations with photographic documentation and 10 forensic autopsies were carried out. However, incorrect conclusions concerning post-mortem changes made by non-medical persons led into erroneous interpretations of the events. Post-mortem changes were considered to be signs of torture and post-mortem mutilation. This example demonstrates how political purposes may falsify results of a forensic investigation.

Keywords Civil war · Exhumation · External examination · Forensic investigation · Post-mortem changes

Introduction

Recently, the investigations of victims of armed conflicts have increasingly involved forensic scientists [1–11]. According to a resolution of the United Nations Economic and Social Council, states are obliged to carry out impartial and exhaustive investigations of all allegations of massacres as well as other extrajudicial, summary, and arbitrary killings in order to determine the cause, manner, and time of death of the victims as well as to identify the bodies. The results of such investigations must be made public [12].

We present a historical example of the investigation of civilian victims of illegal executions during the Civil War in Finland in 1918. The investigation, performed shortly after the war, comprised exhumation, external examination, and photographic documentation of the corpses. Our example shows how little value forensic investigations may have: although this examination was ordered by competent authorities and the findings were documented, subsequent erroneous conclusions made by non-medical persons present at the examinations attracted more attention, and popular tales based on the impressions of non-medical persons have persisted for decades and appeared more viable than the official reports [13, 14].

The Finnish Civil War lasted a little more than 100 days, from January to May 1918. On January 27, Labour movement troops rose in rebellion against the legal government, and a battle between the Reds and the Whites continued until May 5, 1918. Figure 1 shows the frontline in early March 1918, which corresponds to the initial division of the country by the two parties.

The Civil War in Finland had various kinds of background elements. One of these was the collapse of the Russian Empire. For approximately 110 years, Finland had been part of the Russian Empire, but it became independent in December 1917, after the Bolshevik revolution in Russia. At that time, some Finnish socialists were willing to go along with their Russian comrades, and in Finland, this caused a worry of losing the new independence. Civil wars erupted also elsewhere around the periphery of the former Russian Empire, e.g. in Poland and the Baltic area.

Another element of the Civil War in Finland was the internal struggle for power. Finland had already elected a parliament, but the legal government had no army or police forces to secure the nation after the collapse of the Russian Empire. Both the Right and the Left had established their own troops in 1917 which then became the parties of the Civil War. These troops were called the White and the Red Guards, respectively.

Moreover, the conflict carried a social character related to an increase of the urban working population on one

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Fig. 1 The frontline of the Finnish Civil War in early March 1918. The Red troops had the south of the country, and the remaining was White territory

hand, and land ownership and rural working conditions on the other.

A total of approximately 36,600 people lost their lives in the Finnish Civil War [15]. Almost 10,000 of them were civilians executed or murdered outside of the combat, which is even more than the number of casualties in battlefields, as shown in Table 1. A typical element of the Civil War in Finland was that the number of victims in the aftermath was high. Approximately 13,500 persons lost their lives in prison camps after the battles, and, in addition, 600 persons died soon after their release from the camps because of diseases caught during the imprisonment. The numbers of the war victims are presented in Table 1.

The leaders on both sides of the war had forbidden the execution of civilians. Nevertheless, executions were carried out. There were approximately 7,400 victims of the so-called White Terror (civilians were killed because they were believed to be on the “Red” side), whereas the num-

Table 1 Numbers of victims of the Finnish Civil War according to the War Victims of Finland 1914–1922 Project Database [15]

Cause of death	Reds	Whites	Others	Total
Killed in action	5,199	3,414	790	9,403
Executed, shot, murdered	7,370	1,424	926	9,720
Died in prison camps	11,652	4	1,790	13,446
Died after being released	607	–	6	613
Missing	1,767	46	380	2,193
Other causes of death	443	291	531	1,265
Total	27,038	5,179	4,423	36,640

ber of victims of the so-called Red Terror was approximately 1,400. Moreover, 900 civilian victims are now classified as impartial, not having relationship to the parties of the conflict [15].

Materials

In Kouvola, southeast Finland, nearby the location of the Kymi (Kymmene) Paper Company, that time the largest in the world, at least 125 civilians, among them 2 women, were executed during the period between February and April 1918. This is almost 10% of all the civilians killed by the Red Terror. The victims in Kouvola had been highly placed in society, representing, for example, middle management and foremen of the Kymi Paper Company. Among the victims, there were also physicians, lawyers, and journalists, and their ages ranged between 25 and 70 years. Although the executions began at the end of January, most of the victims were killed in April. The bodies were buried in wet soil or thrown into the river Kymi.

According to the Finnish Meteorological Institute, that year, the average temperature in the area was 3.9°C in April and 7.3°C in May, but at night, the temperatures were below the freezing point. The melting of snow lasted until April 21. The amount of rain was usually small: in April, it rained 15 mm, and at the beginning of May, it did not rain at all, while the average amount of rain in the area is 30–40 mm.

Shortly after the war, in May 1918, the victims were exhumed or recovered from the river. The exhumations began on May 7, and the last body was exhumed on May 11. Hence, most of the bodies had been buried or they had been in the water for 2–4 weeks. After the exhumation, the bodies were brought to an external examination carried out mostly by four local physicians. The investigation was ordered by the local commander, and its aim was to identify the bodies and to determine the injuries and the causes of death. A total of 77 external examinations were carried out in the presence of a large audience, among which were relatives of the victims and curious people but also Red prisoners [14].

The reports on the external examinations are brief. There are some examples in the following. The numbering was used during the work process, and it does not indicate the quantity of the corpses investigated.

Fig. 2 One of the victims photographed during the external examination (Finnish National Archives)



Examples of exhumed bodies:

“No. 2. Unknown male. The skull and the upper part of the face crushed. (A close-range gunshot wound.)”

“No. 15. Middle-aged peasant man, a stab wound in the right side of the thorax.”

“No. 39. Identified as journalist T. from Hamina. A gunshot wound in the back of the head.”

“No. 42. Identified as W. T. from Hamina. A gunshot wound through the neck.”

Examples of bodies drawn from the water:

“No. 82. Unknown. A crushing wound in the back of the head and in the right shoulder. Drawn from the river Kymi.”

“No. 90. Identified as O. S. from Siikakoski. A gunshot wound under the left eye.”

According to the reports, 47 victims had only gunshot wounds. In five cases, blunt injuries or stab wounds were detected in addition to gunshot wounds; stab wounds only were reported in four cases. In 21 cases, the character of injuries recorded in the report remains unclear due to inaccurate terminology. One explanation may be that the reports were translated from Swedish into Finnish.

It is important to note that the medical reports do not indicate any signs of torture or mutilation on the bodies.

In addition to the external examinations, Dr. Ernst Ehrnrooth, professor of Forensic Medicine in Helsinki University, performed the autopsies on ten foremen of the

Fig. 3 Post-mortem changes seen on the body (Finnish National Archives)



Fig. 4 Putrefaction of the face of a victim (Finnish National Archives)



Kymi Paper Company. Also, these victims had been thrown into the river after being executed.

All but one of these ten victims had one or more gunshot wounds in the head or in the upper part of the body. One victim had died from a blunt injury to the head. Four victims had also stab wounds in the upper part of the body, inflicted most likely by a bayonet. Thoracic contusions, which were considered to be vital, were detected in one case [16].

The reports on the external examinations have not been published, but they have been filed with the Finnish War Archives [14]. In 1928, a description of the injuries recorded in the ten forensic autopsies was published in a history of the White Guards within the Kymi Paper Company [16].

Fig. 5 Peeling of the epidermis on the feet of a victim (Finnish National Archives)



The bodies brought to the external examination were also photographed before being returned to the relatives. Local White Guard members photographed 69 bodies in order to document the brutality of the Reds. The whereabouts of these photographs remained unknown until 1972, when the glass negatives were found and brought to the editor of a local newspaper. Since then, they have been on file with the Finnish National Archives [14].

The testimonies of relatives and other non-medical persons present at the external examination were published in newspapers. In 1926, a book describing the acts of the Red Terror came out [17], and in 1927, a book entitled *The Memory of the Heroes* named 1,800 victims and contained tales of the Red Terror [18]. Also, the history of the White Guards within the Kymi Company from 1928 [16] includes these testimonies. Furthermore, there are local traditional stories about the terror.

The testimonies describe signs of ante-mortem torture and post-mortem mutilation seen on the corpses. The methods of torture alleged to have been practiced include forcing to walk barefoot in the snow, scalding the face, hands, or feet with acid or with boiling water, piercing the eyes, cutting off the ears, burying alive, and castration [16–18].

Discussion

Obviously, there are discrepancies between the testimonies of relatives and other non-medical persons and the medical documents and photographs. In his study in 1966, Paavolainen [13] concluded that claims about torture in Kouvola were exaggerated or even erroneous. His conclusion was based merely on the medical reports because the photographs were not available at that time.

The reports of the local physicians are brief, but they contain relevant medical information. The reports do not

mention any findings indicating torture or mutilation. The photographs taken during the examination are not always of the best quality or very informative from the forensic point of view (Fig. 2); nevertheless, typical post-mortem changes can be recognized (Fig. 3). Our opinion is that hypostasis and varying states of putrefaction in various parts of the body were considered to be burns inflicted by scalding with acid or a result of other injuries. Moreover, the colour of the face was regarded as a sign of suffocation after being buried alive (Fig. 4).

In some photographs, signs of peeling of the epidermis on the skin of the feet and hands (so-called washerwoman's hands) can be observed (Fig. 5). These changes are visible in the cases drawn from the water and also in the exhumed bodies due to the wetness of the soil. The changes were regarded as a result of being forced to walk barefoot in the snow prior to the execution.

We believe that the tales of torture and mutilation may be considered to be misunderstandings or even propaganda. These civilians were illegally executed but hardly tortured.

It is perfectly understandable that persons who are unfamiliar with injuries or post-mortem changes may have false ideas and draw incorrect conclusions, which may lead to incorrect interpretations of events. However, even those who should know the correct answers may misjudge. A situation quite similar to this occurred, for example, during the armed conflict in Kosovo in 1999. The incident at Racak attracted wide international attention, and therefore, a team of Finnish forensic experts, representing the European Union, took part in the autopsies of the victims. Prior to the autopsies, there had been claims of post-mortem mutilation of bodies [19], but the autopsies showed gunshot wounds and post-mortem changes caused by animals [20].

An independent forensic investigation may sometimes prevent errors concerning medical findings if it can be performed and if the results can be published. It may therefore be necessary for forensic experts to also report negative findings and to point out the kinds of injuries which were not found [20–23]. However, forensic pathologists may be rather defenceless in a war of propaganda if their reports are neglected or even used for political purposes.

After the Finnish Civil War, the tales of the brutality of the Reds were useful in justifying revenge. From this point of view, the atrocities in Kouvola were particularly vehemently appealed to. A public demand was made that ten Red prisoners should be executed for each civilian killed by the Red Terror. Even prisoners who had not been involved in the terror were shot to death. When the Social Democratic members of the Parliament brought up the situation of the Red prisoners, one of the responses was that no mercy should be shown because of the atrocities in Kouvola. Popular beliefs based upon rumours and misunderstandings had therefore been encouraged, and the tales were published in newspapers and books.

Popular tales of torture and post-mortem mutilation, which were not based on real findings, were told and published in Finland in 1918, although a medical investigation of the victims was carried out and even documented by means of photographs. The tales appeared to be more viable than the documents of medical experts. The truth is not what people like to hear.

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