

Forensic Archaeology in the Russian Federation

Asya Engovatova

The collaborative work between archaeologists and forensic experts seems to be heading in an interesting direction. Unfortunately, however, collaboration with forensic experts in Russia only began in the last ten years.

During the Soviet period in Russia, archaeology usually covered the period up to the 16th or 17th centuries. Layers from the 18th century and later were normally left unexamined by archaeologists. This was due to theoretical ideas according to which the cultural layers after the 17th century were not of interest to archaeologists – since there was almost nothing new left to say, by comparison with written sources. Over the period from the 18th to the early 20th centuries, the number of written records was so substantial and complete that it seemed archaeology had little left to add – and therefore further archaeological research seemed to be less important.

However, from the early 2000s onwards, these concepts began to change. The view was now taken that examining the cultural layers and sites of the 18th to 20th centuries had value. The results of such archaeological work led to new additional information. A number of significant events were

connected with this radical change in the viewpoint of the archaeological and scientific community.

The most visible example was the absence of archaeological work (and archaeological research) during the work of criminologists on the graves of the final generation of the Romanov royal family – Emperor Nicholas II and his family (Fig. 1). There are probably many people here today who don't know the terrible details of the shooting of the royal family, which took place in Ekaterinburg in 1918, when the last of the Emperors was killed. Not only the direct family were murdered, but also their domestic staff and their doctor. The bodies of the assassinated were hidden at a secret location. For 70 years the remains of the bodies and their location were unknown. Any idea of searching for them was impossible due to the restrictions imposed by communist ideology. This meant that only after the collapse of the Soviet system, in 1991, one could seriously start searching for the burial location and excavating it.

One of the official coroners began excavations at the probable site, together with criminologists. However, the excavation was conducted very unprofessionally, and a large sec-



Fig. 1: The royal family in Tyumen (West Siberia) in 1917

tion of the burial site was destroyed in the process. Only the major bones and skulls were recovered. From an archaeological viewpoint, this was practically vandalism. Many artefacts were unfortunately destroyed. The remains which were recovered (mainly the skulls) were examined by the coroner and the criminologists, to compare them with photographs of the royal family taken when they were alive. However, the lack of proper contextual material from the burials (which would provide the true archaeological background for the finds) made the results of these unprofessional excavations inconclusive. Unfortunately, the Russian Orthodox Church did not examine or confirm the authenticity of the remains (Fig. 2). To this day, the authentication of these remains is a matter of dispute, and their status still remains in question.

This negative result shows the need for archaeologists to be involved in all studies and excavations, in order to achieve the best results. This is why in 2013, Russian federal



Fig. 2: The Russian Orthodox Church did not examine or confirm the authenticity of the remains. Instead, they decided to run their own authentication commission.



Fig. 3: Examining mass graves dating from the Napoleonic Wars in Kaliningrad (former Königsberg)

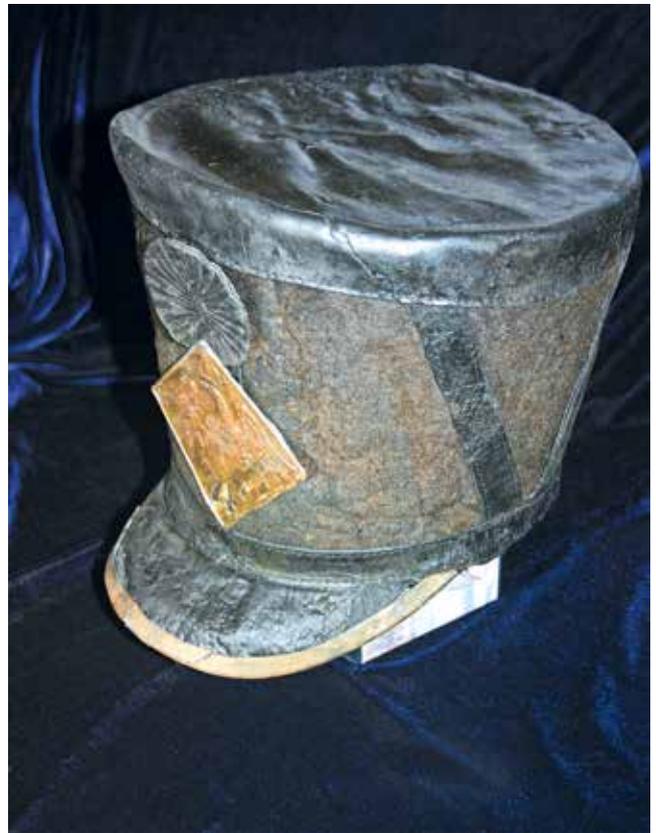


Fig. 4: Shako military headwear of the Fourth Regiment of Line of the Kingdom of Westphalia, from a mass grave of soldiers and officers of the Great French Army, in present-day Kaliningrad

law was changed to incorporate significant additions. Today archaeologists work on all sites that are over 100 years old. The choice of this one-hundred-year limitation was made on the basis that it marks the likely end of oral history – when information from great-grandparents to great-grandchildren can no longer be handed down.

All archaeological finds dating not only from the 18th and 19th centuries, but also those from the first decades of the 20th century now belong to the mandatory competence of

professional archaeologists. We have to study not only locations which featured in the Napoleonic, Caucasian, Crimean and other wars, but also – for example – burials from the First World War and sites connected with the Russian Revolution and the Russian Civil War which immediately followed it, during the early decades of the 20th century (Figs. 3 and 4).

Russian archaeologists are also very experienced in using the techniques of forensic science when investigating



Fig. 5: Reburial of the remains of Soviet soldiers who perished during the Second World War



Fig. 6: The burial vault of General Yermolov, with signs of looting (photogrammetric model)

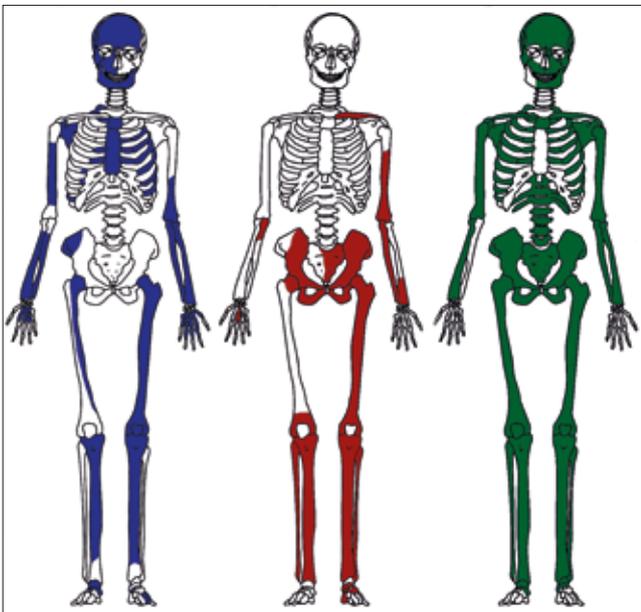


Fig. 7: Preservation of the remains from the family burial vault of General Yermolov



Fig. 8: Remains of a general's epaulette from the burial of General Yermolov

important historic sites of the 19th and early 20th centuries. Information about such sites was frequently lost or distorted during the Soviet period, or the sites themselves were severely damaged.

Despite this, forensic archaeology has not yet become established in Russia as a separate branch of science. Current-

ly, it is only in the initial stages of its development. Russian archaeologists and forensic scientists are separate professional spheres. The involvement of forensic scientists and coroners in archaeological work most frequently happens on the personal initiative of particular experts, and there is no established legal precedent for such collaboration. How-

ever, a number of interesting studies have been made over the recent decades. Their results provide both positive and negative statements on the involvement of forensic scientists in current archaeological expeditions in Russia.

In the early 21st century Russia was able to take an important step in the development of legislation regarding rescue archaeology when the European Convention on the Protection of the Archaeological Heritage ('the Valetta Convention') was ratified. It had been put forward in the city of Valetta in 1992, and remained under discussion until 2011. The academic community acknowledged the importance of ratifying this document, since it covered a great many existing threats to archaeological sites and monuments. Based on European experience, recommendations were made for the preservation of archaeological heritage and for the bases of rescue archaeology.

The ability of archaeologists to make accurate assessments for such sites is of great value for modern archaeology. The results of investigations undertaken at sites from the end of the 19th and the early 20th centuries have already shown how much additional information this can provide and that this could not have been obtained from written evidence alone.

This means that archaeology is in a position to add a completely new viewpoint to historic events. Currently there is an ongoing and hotly-debated discussion in Russia about how far archaeologists should be involved in work connected with sites from the Second World War (1939–1945). At present, the search for military graves and their reburial is carried out exclusively by the Army Commission, with no involvement of archaeologists at all. On paper, the dates of the Second World War are not covered by the existing archaeological legislation. Furthermore, the Army Commission receives dedicated and significant funds for these reburials (Fig. 5). For archaeologists, all context material is of great significance for the purposes of identification and reconstruction. At present, the information uncovered by the so-called 'special search teams' who research Second World War burials is ignored. This increases the risk of serious mistakes being made during such work, if archaeologists are not involved. It should also be added that the methodology used in searching for these burials and identifying them in the European zone of Russia is very archaic.

The results obtained by archaeologists at a number of significant sites give a vivid impression of what could be revealed if archaeologists were always involved in such investigations. One of the most striking examples of collaborative work between archaeologists and criminologists has been the investigation of the family grave of one of Russia's most famous military leaders of the 19th century, General Yermolov. The general was one of the most notable figures during Russia's war with Napoleon – he served at the Battle of Borodino and at the taking of Paris. In the 19th century, a portrait of General Yermolov could be found in every tavern in the Russian Empire. He remained just as active after the Napoleonic wars, during the military campaign in the Caucasus. He founded the famous city of Grozny, as a military garrison of the Russian army. Even today, the name of General Yermolov is hated by Chechen people. This is one reason why the scientific work in connection with his



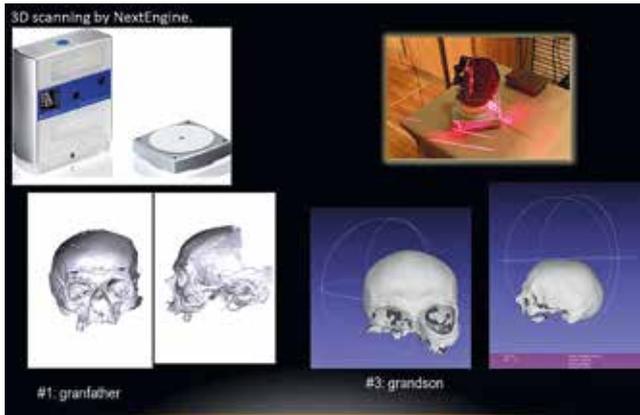
Fig. 9: Anthropological expertise conducted on the human remains from the Yermolov family burial vault.



Figs. 10 and 11: Anthropological expertise conducted on the human remains from the Yermolov family burial vault

tomb, carried out by forensic scientists and archaeologists, received such prominent political attention. Yermolov's grave was discussed and in political circles.

The collaborative work of archaeologists and forensic scientists was considered to be a success. The myth that his grave had been robbed and his skeleton stolen by Chechen activists in the 1990s was disproven – as was another story, namely that Chechens had thrown out all of the grave's contents, and instead had placed the remains of famous



Figs. 12–15: Currently, when anthropological expertise is conducted in Russia, the latest identification methods are used during inspection of the remains (photogrammetry)

Chechens there. During the excavations, archaeologists were able to verify the objective truth. In fact, different people had broken into the family grave at different times since the late 1930s when the church was closed. Archaeologists found ample evidence of repeated break-ins at the crypt, in the form of household items left behind by robbers. A total of four periods of such break-ins were recorded – at the end of the 1930s, during World War Two, in the 1980s, and in the early 1990s, as evidenced by candy wrappers (Fig. 6).

All three burials in the vault – Yermolov himself, his father, and his son – had been turned over. Apparently, the robbers were searching for treasures – the skeleton and some clothes had partly been pulled out of the coffins. However, the remains of the bodies were not stolen. Archaeologists and forensic scientists managed to collect the scattered bones belonging to the three men (Fig. 7). Their state of preservation made it possible to correlate them to the three historic individuals. Fragments of uniforms considerably helped the archaeologists in this process. Items of uniform, such as period-specific buttons and epaulettes, were fully consistent with the members of the Yermolov family (Fig. 8). The anthropological characteristics of the skulls – despite their poor condition – correspond to the proportions we see in their lifetime portraits. There is a family similarity to be seen between the skeletons (Figs. 9–11). DNA testing made on the remains gave a confirmed answer about their family

relationship. Thus, it was only the comprehensive work of archaeologists together with forensic scientists and anthropologists which made it possible to understand the confused situation in the family grave of General Yermolov. A scientific basis was established for disproving all the myths about the theft of the coffin from the grave.

Over the four most recent fieldwork seasons, archaeologists have begun to make more frequent explorations of late-period (19th and 20th centuries) burials, although these remain isolated investigations. Of all the excavation permits issued in 2017, a total of over 3000, only five or six were connected with the period of the turn from the 19th to the 20th century.

We have only now begun to work with forensic scientists on the 20th century period. Yet the main task currently is to change the legislation regarding archaeology. This should include enabling archaeologists to receive Open List permissions to work at sites up to and including the period of the Second World War (Figs. 12–17).

Probably the first stage should be directed towards the most complex projects of that period. There are two issues involved, the first being that there are not very many field archaeologists in Russia, probably no more than 4000. But the second issue, which is just as important, is that the Second World War period is not enthusiastically seen by the community as a whole as a research period for archaeologists.



Fig. 16: Forensic scientist S.A. Nikitin creating a portrait on the basis of a skull.

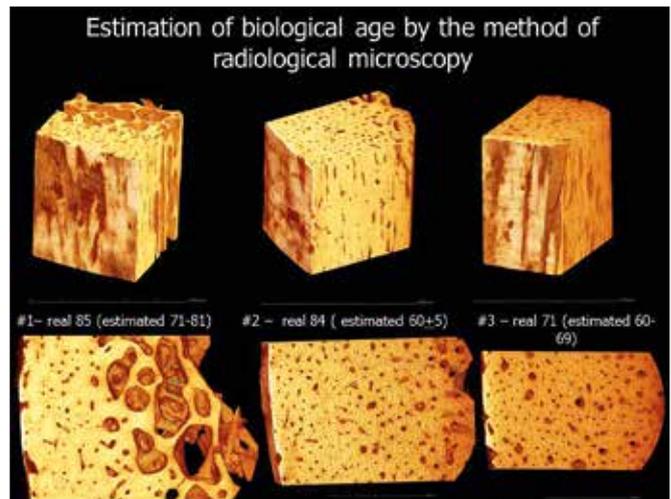


Fig. 17: Estimation of biological age by the method of radiological microscopy