Disclosing the Traumas of History:
The Case of First Estonian President

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Abstract: In Estonia, occupied by the Soviet Union in 1940, thousands of people disappeared without traces, and the former heads of state of the Republic of Estonia were no exception. Only in late 1980s, during the Gorbachev perestroika, when secret archives were made public, the tragic fate of those people was revealed. In order to disclose the traumas of history archaeologists have often been of help. It was so in the case of Estonian President Konstantin Päts who died on January 18, 1956 in the mental asylum in Burashevo, Russia. The Estonian Heritage Society, established in 1987 on the initiative of civil society, organized in 1989 and 1990 two archaeological expeditions to Burashevo aiming to find the remains of President Päts. There was neither a tombstone nor a cemetery plan that would have identified his grave. Only the 46th skeleton dug out happened to be the one we had been looking for. The thorough expertise in Estonia that followed the initial one on spot confirmed that these were really the remains of President Päts. Thousands of Estonians participated in the reburial ceremony with full honors in October 1990 in Tallinn. Besides clarifying historical facts, the search for the remains of the President and their reburial in homeland was one of the events that consolidated Estonian people for the restoration of Estonia’s independence. Unfortunately the case of President Päts is the only exception of the heads of state who were arrested by Soviet authorities. The graves of others, like those of the thousands of Estonians in Russia, are still unknown. Research into the last tragic year of President Päts has excited the interest of the people of Burashevo not only in his person but piqued also their concern for Estonia.

Keywords: victims of Soviet regime, archeology of terror, exhumation

The archaeology of terror

Traditionally, archaeology is seen as a branch of historical research that relies on material sources and studies the early periods of human society with no or scanty written records to give us a comprehensive picture. The case of the recent history of the 20th century could be different – written and printed matters, films, photos, sound records etc. should be abundant. Unfortunately, this is not so because the terror regimes of the recent past have tried to eliminate every trace of their crimes against humanity. In order to reveal the nature of terror regimes one has to use archaeology and exhume the mute witnesses lying in the ground – the victims of the regime. The archaeology of terror is an extreme branch of historical research that has much in common with forensic medicine. Archaeological research of terror and the knowledge one can obtain from it is not of positive value emotionally, but the knowledge as opposed to unawareness is definitely of value. The study of mass crimes and their public appraisal is of preventive importance in safeguarding that these would not be repeated in the future (for more see in PILLAK 2008 & PILLAK 2016).
The tragic destiny of Estonian heads of state

In 1918–1940, before the Soviet occupation, the Republic of Estonia had had eleven heads of state. One of them, August Rei, escaped in 1940 and died in Sweden. He was reburied with his wife from Stockholm to Tallinn Forest Cemetery in 2006. Another, Otto Strandman, committed suicide in 1941 after he had been commissioned to go to an investigation to the NKVD (i.e. the People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs, in Russian Народный комиссариат (Наркомат) внутренних дел, abbreviated as НКВД, that functioned under this name in 1934–1946 and was the precursor of the KGB), and was buried to Tallinn City Cemetery in February 1941. The remaining nine heads of state were arrested and their further destiny was long unknown. The NKVD/KGB archives, opened partially in the end of 1980s, revealed that four of them were executed by the Soviet authorities and five died in Soviet imprisonment in 1941–1942. Their graves are still unknown (PILLAK 2015a). The only exception is the best-known Estonian politician and the first Estonian President Konstantin Päts.

President Konstantin Päts

Konstantin Päts is one of the few Estonians who has been included in the Encyclopaedia Britannica (1963). He was born on February 23, 1874 in Tahkuranna, Estonia, as a son of house-builder and landowner. In 1898 he graduated the Faculty of Law of Tartu University and started his career as a lawyer in Tallinn. He founded his newspaper “Teataja” (The Gazette) and was elected the deputy mayor of Tallinn. In 1905 he took part in the revolutionary movement and was condemned to death in the Russian Empire. Päts managed to escape to Switzerland, but on his return he served his time in prison in St. Petersburg in 1910–1911. As World War I broke out, he was enlisted in the tsarist army, and in 1917 he was one of the organizers of the Estonian national forces. During the October Revolution, when the Bolsheviks took control of Estonia, Päts was arrested for a short period. He was a key figure in paving way for Estonia’s independence, and the prime minister of the first government of the Republic of Estonia. When German forces had occupied Estonia in 1918, Päts was imprisoned again from June to November. On his release he organized resistance to the advancing Red Army and was the leading politician who led the Estonian War of Independence to its victorious end in 1920. As an active politician Päts was a number of times the head of state of Estonia. In 1934 he declared state of emergency, and established authoritarian regime. In 1938 Päts was elected the first President of the Republic of Estonia (Fig.1). On July 23, 1940, when Estonia had been occupied by the Soviet Union, Päts was released from office, and on July 30 he and his family were deported to Ufa, Russia. In June 1941 he was arrested and detained subsequently in different prisons and mental asylums until his death in 1956.
President Konstantin Päts in Burashevo
In the Soviet historiography Konstantin Päts was always portrayed in a very negative light as a “bourgeois nationalist”, “public enemy”, “pro-fascist” etc. In the 21st volume of the Big Soviet Encyclopedia (1975) one can read his bio-sketch that states as his date of death January 18, 1956, and the place as the Kalinin (now
Tver) oblast. In Estonia, annexed to the Soviet Union, no more information about the destiny of President after his deportation was available. It was in 1988 only when the collaborators of the KGB in the Estonian SSR, updating their practices in accordance with perestroika and glasnost, made public facts of the last years of President Päts and of his death. It came out that after his deportation in 1940 and the successive years in prison, his last house of detention was the mental hospital in Burashevo near Kalinin (Fig. 2) where he also died.

![Fig. 2 – Burashevo is a village south of Kalinin, now Tver](image)

Several medical experts who have studied now his case history have found no reason to treat or keep President Päts in a psychiatric hospital (SOOMERE 1988, NOOR 1994). He had, however, serious health problems, as his weight was about 50 kilos. His post-mortem identified coronary and bloodstream insufficiency, sclerosis, remnants of myocardial infarction, and nephrolithiasis, the latter stated as the cause of his death. Luckily, his physician Dr. Yevgenia Gusseva (05.01.1905–08.08.1994), a Soviet major in the medical service who had taken part in World War II, was still alive, and although she herself had not been present at the burial of President Päts, she knew the place used at that time. The burial place of the deceased patients of the hospital was a small wood about a kilometer from the hospital.

**Pre-expedition to Burashevo**

In November 1988 archaeologist Vello Lõugas, accompanied by photographer Rein Kärner and Matti Päts, the grandson of the President, drove to Burashevo. The latter was born in 1933, and in 1940 he had been deported to Russia and sent, after the arrest of his parents in 1941, to an orphanage. His younger brother
Henn died there in 1944 of malnutrition; their father Viktor Päts died in 1952 in the Butyrka prison, Moscow. But in 1946 their mother was released from her 5 year imprisonment, and she returned with her son Matti to Estonia. Now Dr. Gusseva showed him the approximate burial spot of his grandfather as she remembered it (Fig. 3).

The graves were mostly unmarked, and there was no plan for the burial place. From the archives of the hospital it was possible to learn that in 1956 there had been 80 burials all in all, and in January, President Päts and three other persons were buried.

In February 1989 Matti Päts handed in a formal application to the board of the Estonian Heritage Society asking for assistance in finding the grave of Konstantin Päts in order to rebury his remains in his homeland. The leader of the expedition organized by the Society was the well-known Estonian archaeologist Vello Lõugas (06.04.1937–21.05.1998) who composed the team of the expedition including historians, archaeologists, and archivists (LÕUGAS 1991). As there were no anthropologists of sufficient expertise in Estonia, Lõugas contacted his Lithuanian colleagues who agreed to participate in the project. These were Dr. Gintas Česnys, a biologist, Dr. Vytautas Urbanavičius, a historian, Dr. Rimantas Jankauskas, a physician.
First expedition to Burashevo in 1989

The expedition departed for Burashevo on May 14, 1989 (Fig. 4). Although the tide was turning in the Soviet Union, the system was still fairly steady. In order not to attract undue attention, the participants were officially on their summer vacation. Everyone was optimistic and expected to complete the mission within maximum a week because the burial place had been identified by Dr. Gusseva.

We reached Burashevo by the midday of May 15 and marked the place to dig as it had been shown (Fig. 5). But then there came two elderly ladies from neighbourhood who had worked in the hospital as nurses, and having heard what we were looking for, they confidently directed us to a different direction. We marked also their suggestion on the landscape and began with our work. By the next morning we had opened three first graves, and had to admit that these all belonged to younger persons. Now we went back to the place that Dr. Gusseva had indicated, but found nothing from the spot she had suggested. Probably the landscape had changed much with decades – her orientation had relied on the position of paths and trees (Fig. 6).
Fig. 5 – When we reached Burashevo on May 15, 1989 we marked down the place shown by Dr. Gusseva a year earlier and started excavations (Copyright: Peep Pillak)

Fig. 6 – The landscape had changed during decades (Copyright: Peep Pillak)
Local people took great interest in our activities – to the extent that we had to circle ourselves with a safety barrier to keep them off the area we were examining. Many of them said that they remembered Mr President well (that was nonsense of course, because the existence of an Estonian President in the mental hospital in Burashevo had been a top secret), and could show us his grave. Having already excavated places we had been sent to with great confidence, we were sceptical by now. Our initial optimism was gradually turning into doubts about our ability to succeed.

In the days to follow, our hope was inversely proportional to the cubic meters we were excavating: it seemed impossible to find the grave from among the ones potentially available by the method of trial and error (Fig. 7). Soon we learned that the agency – KGB – keeping its alert eye on everything had lost its patience: although we had a permit for the excavations, we were now told that our presence had caused too much disturbance in the neighbourhood. On May 18, when a militiaman was sent to keep watch at our site, we had to stop our work. Next day we backfilled the graves we had cut and drove back to Estonia.

Second expedition to Burashevo

In summer 1990, we had our second expedition to Burashevo. Meantime we had analyzed our results and obtained more information. As the memory of the failure of our previous attempt was still vivid, many participants refused to experience it anew, and it was difficult to find others to replace them. Nonetheless, we left Estonia early morning on June 18, and by the noon of the next day we were there. We had accepted the
fact that our chance to spot the right grave was in the hands of destiny. But the probability was increasing with every grave we opened, and with every spadeful of soil we dug up. The locals, seeing the amount of earth we had moved manually, offered us their help in the form of a tractor or an excavator. We were grateful to them for their kind offer but continued to work with spades, shovels, and brushes. The time allotted for the expedition was running out, and this time no one had hindered us. In the first year we had excavated only 10 skeletons, this time it was more than 30 already (the number of graves is another matter for there were sometimes more than one in a grave). On only three occasions the anthropologists-experts had needed more time to think and investigate (Fig. 8).

Fig. 8 – On only three occasions the anthropologists-experts needed more time to think and investigate. From the left Dr. Vytautas Urbanavičius, Dr. Gintas Česnys, Dr. Vello Lõugas (Copyright: Peep Pillak)

The last day of the expedition had come. Our spirits were low – we were to return again without results. We had also realized that there would be no third expedition. We discussed among ourselves whether we should take a few handfuls of earth with us or find a small oak-tree to replant it in Estonia in commemoration of the President. Before taking our leave, we decided to try our luck with two other graves. Soon we saw the remains of a coffin, a skeleton that had been dissected, fragments of a textile, and tennis shoes (Fig. 9).
Fig. 9 – Skeleton No 46. At the forefront Dr. Vello Lõugas (Copyright: Peep Pillak)
Most of the bodies in the opened graves had been buried naked and without a coffin. But Dr. Gusseva had told us that Mr President had been buried in a human way – clothed and in a coffin (Fig. 10).

Fig. 10 – President Päts had been buried in a human way – clothed and in a coffin (Copyright: Peep Pillak)
Everybody gathered round the grave leaving their work in other places. The Lithuanians had a long discussion in Lithuanian and consulted Vello Lõugas to whom the language was also available. By the time skeleton No 46 had been entirely opened, Dr. Gintautas Ėsnis announced that this was probably that of President Päts (Fig. 11).

![Figure 11 - Dr. Gintautas Ėsnis: “It’s very, very, very similar to President Päts” (Copyright: Peep Pillak)](image)

A more thorough examination on the spot confirmed it. We packed the remains of the Estonian President carefully and could begin our journey back home (see more about the expeditions PILLAK 2007).

**Back in homeland, thorough expertise**

We reached Estonia on June 23 that in Estonia is not only Midsummer Eve but also the Victory Day that recalls one of the decisive battles in the Estonian War of Independence. On our return there was published a short press release announcing that probably the remains of the first president of the Republic of Estonia had been found and brought to his homeland. Then there followed a thorough expertise. It had to be trustworthy indeed because a few years before there had been a scandalous case of reburial of Georg Lurich and Aleksander Aberg, the two Estonian world-famous wrestlers and weightlifters of the early 20th century. They had died of typhus in Armavir, Russia, in 1920 and their probable remains had been taken to Estonia in 1987. The expertise opinion of these remains, conducted in Estonia, had declared them authentic. But there was also another, conducted in Moscow on request of those Estonian sport historians who doubted in the enthusiasm of an amateur archaeologist who had used an excavator for his undocumented work. The latter revealed that the remains were a mixture of the bones of two men and a woman, and cannot be those of Lurich and Aberg (VOOLAID 2007).
The tragicomical case had been a good lesson about the consequences of a dilettante enthusiasm that serves public interests in times of national awakening, and replaces reality. However, without enthusiasts the remains of the President of Estonia would have stayed in Burashevo, because the enlightening case of Lurich and Aberg was the reason why many a recognised archeologist of Estonia refused to participate in the expedition. As the two Burashevo expeditions had been documented, photographed and filmed in accordance with the rules of archaeological excavations, the procedure had to be also archived professionally, and the results were to be made public so that investigation into it could be continued in case of any competent doubt. While caring about the academic standards of the expertise, the political and social circumstances could not have been ignored either. In Estonia, struggling to regain its independence, it was out of question to go to Moscow to ask for an expert opinion about the remains of Estonian President who and had suffered and died in Russia. At the same time, there were no professional contacts with international experts at that time because all academic relations behind the Iron Curtain had been regulated in and by Moscow and were available only for the scholars most loyal to the Soviet regime. The latter had no public trust whatsoever. The collaboration with Western experts would have meant expenditure in foreign currency that was complicated under the circumstances of the falling Soviet rouble. In 1990 Estonia was still occupied by the Soviet Union, its border was controlled by the Soviet border-guards and customs officers, and KGB controlled everyone crossing the border. Taking into account everything said, these were the three Lithuanian academics who had to take responsibility of the expertise: Professor Gintautas Čėsnys, biomedical PhD, Dean of the Department of Anatomy, Histology and Anthropology of Vilnius Univeristy, Vytautas Urbanavičius, PhD in history, senior researcher of the Institute of History of the Lithuanian Academy of Sciences, and Rimantas Jankauskas, biomedical PhD, senior lecturer in the Department of Anatomy, Histology and Anthropology of Vilnius Univeristy. Estonian and Lithuanian scholars of various fields collaborated with them, and to coordinate the work there was established an Expert Committe at the Estonian Heritage Society chaired by Jaan Tamm, PhD in history, the deputy chairman of the society. The Committe began with its work on September 10. The Act on the Morphological Identification of the Burashevo Burial No 46 (ACT 1990) was compiled on September 20 in Lithuanian by the above-mentioned three Lithuanian scholars, and translated into Estonian by Vello Lõugas, the head of the Burashevo expedition. It is a document of 17 typewritten pages with two tables and 23 photos. The complex archaeological and anthropological research reveals that most of the findings identify the remains buried in Burashevo under the designation No 46 as related to the person of Konstantin Päts, the President of the Republic of Estonia. This was testified by

1. the structure of and contribution in the grave: coffin, clothes, footwear;
2. the gender, age, and height, and the anthropological pecularities of the cranium of the deceased;
3. the skeleton and its deformations;
4. the comparison of the cranium with the photos of the person in life.

A summary of the Act was sent to the central media corporations of Estonia that published them (EESTI 1990). The full version of the Act was (and is) available in the Estonian Heritage Society (for more see
ARJAKAS 1990). In case further doubts about the identity of the remains should develop, there is always the option of DNA tests. These were considered also in 1990 but estimated as redundant because the competence of the experts was not doubted and a DNA research project would have been if not impossible then at least highly complicated.

After a thorough expertise, the remains of President Konstantin Päts were reburied with full honours on October 21, 1990 in Metsakalmistu (Forest Cemetery), Tallinn (Fig. 12).

The reburial of the remains of President Päts from Russia to his homeland was possible only within a very limited time frame: a year or two earlier the bare idea of finding the grave of the “public enemy” and his ceremonial reburial would have been a criminal offense in the Soviet Union. In 1988 we were lucky to have Dr. Gusseva still there who could walk, leaning on her stick, and show us the approximate place of burial. In August 1991 Estonia became an independent state, and an excavation on the territory of another state, the Russian Federation, would have been much more problematic if not impossible. And under the present political situation it would be unimaginable again with the Russian authorities who still refuse to return to Estonia the collar of the Estonian President and keep it in the Kremlin Armoury instead (for more see PILLAK...
2001 & 2009). In 1990 President Päts was the symbol of independence for Estonians; by now historians have evaluated his activities from a highly critical perspective too, because from the year 1934 he had governed authoritatively, and as a president, he was responsible for the takeover of Estonia by the Soviets (see for example: ILMJÄRV 2004 & Riigikogu 2015).

**President Päts – a link between Burashevo and Estonia**

Hereby it is of importance to observe that in the local museum attached to the secondary school in Burashevo there is now a permanent exhibition about the life of Konstantin Päts (Fig 13).

![Fig. 13 – Exhibition about the life of Konstantin Päts in Burashevo Secondary School (Copyright: Peep Pillak)](image)

The local school has established contacts with schools in Estonia and for some years pupils have exchanged their visits. While in Estonia, the children from Burashevo always visit the grave of President Päts in Metsakalmistu and lit their candles there. Moreover, on the initiative of the local government, the former grave of the Estonian President in Burashevo has been designated by a wooden cross, and on February 28, 2015 a memorial stone was opened with the portrait of President Konstantin Päts on it and a text in Russian and Estonian: “Here was the grave of Konstantin Päts (23.02.1874–18.01.1956), the President of the Republic of Estonia, reburied to Metsakalmistu, Tallinn” (Fig. 14).
At the opening ceremony in Burashevo there participated local inhabitants but also people of Estonian decent living now in Tver and its surroundings, representatives of the Estonian Embassy in Moscow, and a delegation from Estonia including schoolchildren. At the ceremony, the Estonian Heritage Society distributed a Russian-language brochure “Konstantin Päts and Burashevo” (PILLAK 2015b).

This is a good example of how a dramatic past can be a uniting factor between people at present. But to reach that we must first disclose the traumas of history, and in the given case, it was possible only with the help of archaeology.
Fig. 15 – Tombstone to President Konstantin Päts in Forest Cemetery, Tallinn (Copyright: Peep Pillak)
References


EESTI (1990) = Eesti Vabariigi president Konstantin Päts maetakse sünnimaa mulda. Õhtuleht 11th October; Päevaleht, 13th October.


