

Uncovering war crimes: Hidden graves of the Falstad forest

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Abstract

This paper presents and discusses historical and archaeological data regarding war crimes committed by Nazi occupants during Second World War in the vicinity of the SS Prison Camp Falstad in Central Norway, and the issue of still unknown graves of executed prisoners in the Falstad Forest. Specialists from several Norwegian and foreign institutions are at present developing a set of advanced methods to be deployed during surveys of the Forest in search of hidden graves.

Key Words

Falstad camp, dead bodies, hidden graves, archaeology, forensic science

Introduction

Dead human bodies are part of crucial biological and cultural factors of all societies. The omnipresence of death as the most natural final stage of human existence has created complex mind sets, ideologies, frameworks, and rituals. Death by natural causes is usually followed by mourning processes, burial rituals, and creations of social memories of the dead seen as crucial element of *post-mortem* human dignity. Death caused by war crimes often creates contradictory processes such as the confiscation of dead bodies by perpetrators, hidden anonymous graves and attempts to erase the victims from social memories and depriving them of fundamental elements of *post-mortem* human dignity.

During the Second World War, Norway gained special status within the Nazi Germany war-strategy to secure Nazi supremacy in northern Atlantic and Barents Sea. According to Adolf Hitler himself, Norway was the Destiny Area (*ger. Schicksalszone*) for the outcome of WWII (Fricke 1942). Consequently, enormous numbers of Nazi troops, weapons, navy ships, and other military resources were deployed. The construction of *Festung Norwegen* (Fortress Norway), consisting of the Norwegian part of

the *Atlantervollen* (the Atlantic Wall and other giant investments, such as the Arctic Railway and main motorway to the northernmost part of continental Europe, Finnmark (*Norlandsbanen* and *Riksvei 50*), demanded a massive and constant supply of manpower. Norway housed the largest number of German troops and foreign prisoners (when seen in relation to the native population) of all Nazi-occupied countries in Europe. More than 140,000 prisoners of war and slave labourers from at least 15 European nations were transported by German Nazis to Norway, most of them from the Soviet Union, Poland, Yugoslavia, and Germany, of whom about 20,000 died on Norwegian soil as a result of multiple executions, cruel treatment, disease, or malnutrition. These horrors took place within a network of approximately 500 (smaller and larger) Nazi camps for prisoners of war, slave labourers, political and penal prisoners and Norwegian Jews, which was run by the Wehrmacht (in cooperation with Organisation Tod) and the SS from 1941–1944, and from 1944 exclusively by the SS (Reitan 1999; Soleim 2004). Apart from these forced labour camps, the Nazis established in 1941 some special Prison Camps run by the SS and Gestapo, the two most infamous were *Polizeihäftlingslager* Grini, close to



Figure 1. The Falstad Camp after liberation (Courtesy of the Falstad Center).

Oslo, and the SS *Straffgefängelerlager Falstad*, the biggest prison camp established in Central Norway.

In the European context, the Falstad Prison Camp must be considered a rather minor camp and cannot by any means be compared to the most infamous Nazi concentration and extermination camps in terms of the number of prisoners and atrocities on its grounds (Jasinski et al. 2013; Jasinski 2015, 2018). And yet it encapsulates the trajectory of violence albeit on a smaller scale: from social/spatial isolation and frequent executions to *confiscation* of dead bodies and burials in hidden graves. Established in the fall of 1941 as a punishment prison camp, Falstad drew on the existing spatial infrastructure of exclusion. The main building of the camp was erected in 1921 as a special section for delinquent boys in an ordinary, state-run boarding school and was based on a model of traditional prisons and houses of correction. The prison-like design was the most probable reason for the Nazis to take over the building and further adopt it for their purposes. From 1941 to 1945, altogether some 4,300 to 5,000 people of at least 16 different nationalities went through Falstad, many to be deported to other camps or executed in the nearby Falstad Forest.

During the Nazi occupation, the Falstad camp-complex consisted of several main structural elements, namely the camp itself with its main square building with courtyard, surrounded by newly constructed prisoner barracks, a guards barrack, and watch towers, as well as a commander's villa, the stone quarry in the vicinity of the camp, and execution grounds a walking distance away in the Falstad Forest, one km from the camp. In addition to Soleim's article in this volume on the post-war exclusion of Soviet prisoners from Norwegian memorial culture, the present paper focuses on the physical fate of these, and other,

'forgotten' bodies of executed prisoners in the forest. Besides the traces in the archival sources, our research revolves around the application of new forensic-archaeological methods to investigate traces of hidden graves in this darkest part of the former Nazi campspace.

The Falstad forest on the eve of liberation

On the evening of May 4, 1945, several lorries with German soldiers from Trondheim arrived at the SS Prison Camp Falstad. The following night, lorries drove repeatedly between execution areas in the nearby Falstad Forest and the small harbor at the village of Ekne in the vicinity of the camp. This activity was noticed by some prisoners of the Falstad Camp and inhabitants of the local village. An old wooden fishing boat docked at the harbor was loaded with the 'cargo' from the lorries. The purpose of the operation was to exhume the bodies of camp victims buried in the Falstad Forest, transfer them to the harbor, put them on board the boat, and then make them disappear in the depths of Trondheim Fjord. Although the initial aim was to disinter the human remains of all prisoners executed and buried at the site, which at the time was estimated to be 300 people, only around 20–30 bodies were dug up and loaded onto the boat. It transpired that the operation was more difficult than anticipated and it was eventually called off on the evening of May 5 (Risto Nielsen and Reitan 2008). The next night, on May 6, 1945, the vessel – laden with bodies and weighed down with stones – was ultimately allowed to sink in the fjord.

The search for the vessel, framed in the local narratives as a “corpse boat”, was initiated immediately after the liberation of Norway on May 8, 1945. The efforts by the Norwegian Navy to locate the boat on the bed of the fjord and recover the remains of the victims of the camp ultimately proved futile. Similarly, a search carried out in 2007 by archaeologists and marine scientists from the Norwegian University of Science and Technology, commissioned by the newly opened Falstad Center tasked with providing documentation and education about the history of the camp, did not produce the expected results (Jasinski and Stenvik 2010). The application of advanced technologies of deep-water archaeology, such as sonars and remote operated vehicles (ROV), did not help to locate the boat in the vast fjord. It could therefore be said that the operation carried out at the beginning of May 1945, although on a smaller scale than the Germans had initially planned, was ultimately successful. The bodies loaded onto the vessel and sunk in the fjord effectively disappeared and will, perhaps, never be recovered. For those 20–30 people, there will be no reburial, no graves with assigned names and no relatives receiving repatriated remains. The violence exercised on them claimed them in their totality: not only their lives but also their bodily remains became subject to its reign.

The case of the Falstad boat serves as a telling example of the role dead bodies play in the ontology of political violence. The forms of disposal of victims’ corpses – whether those of genocidal atrocities or political opponents – not only complement but also correspond to the ‘logic’ of exclusion which political violence instantiates and through which it operates. This starts with the production of political and/or social frameworks that lead to atrocities and legitimize mass killings based on the ‘othering’ and exclusion of a specific group, either in terms of social/political belonging or from social geographical spaces. By placing people in detention centers or camps, where committing crimes is simpler from a logistical

point of view, the violence (and those excluded) can, at least temporarily, be hidden from the view of society. This exclusion does not, however, cease after death. In most cases of state-sponsored violence, the dead bodies of victims are not returned to their families but ‘confiscated’ by the regime: they are buried in unmarked graves, disposed of in rivers or caves, cremated and mixed with the ashes of other victims (Anstett and Dreyfus 2017). The main incentive behind the practice of the *confiscation of bodies* is to erase all traces of the crime: the corpses offer the most compelling evidence that the crimes occurred. In her seminal work on the Soviet GULAG camps, Élisabeth Anstett argues, however, that the consequences of the *confiscation of bodies* are even more far-reaching. The practice itself comes to serve as a powerful means of terror: its objective is to keep society in a state of uncertainty resulting from the lack of information on the date of death, the causes and circumstances of deaths, and burial places (Anstett 2014). This affects, first and foremost, the relatives of the dead, yet it also has political and social ramifications. Deferred mourning puts the relatives of the dead in an emotional vacuum between psychological presence and physical absence, effectively preventing closure, while it also postpones the eventual rise of opposition. Moreover, by *confiscating* victims after their death, the perpetrators work towards their erasure from the realm of social memory, thus completing the victory.

Transformed into both an execution ground and a burial site for murdered inmates, the forest constituted the darkest element of the Falstad landscape. It was there that the prisoners were placed on the edge of a prepared grave and murdered by a gunshot to the neck or head from a pistol. This method of killing was confirmed in 2018 by two surface finds discovered during a short one-day archaeological trial survey of a selected area carried out in 2018 by the present authors. The two objects were an unfired pistol round, caliber 9 mm and a casing of fired round of the same caliber both of German production dated to the 1930s.



Figure 2. Monument in front of the main execution area in the Falstad Forest (Photo by Marek E. Jasinski).

Between 1942 and 1943, several mass executions were carried out at the site. On November 6, 1942, martial law was imposed by the German *Reichskommissar* Josef Terboven. The very next day, ten prominent inhabitants of Trondheim were taken by the Nazis as hostages and executed in the forest in retaliation for acts of sabotage carried out by the Norwegian resistance. The bodies of these ten victims have not yet been found. Another mass execution of Norwegians took place on October 8 and 9, 1942. Twenty-four men were executed in Falstad Forest after facing a military trial for their role in hiding weapons. They were buried in two mass graves located in two different burial fields of the Falstad Forest. During the operation of the camp, Soviet and Yugoslav Prisoners of War (POWs) and forced laborers were also frequently executed in the forest. An account of an execution of Soviet POWs was given to British officers during their postwar interrogations of Josef Schlossmacher, a Gestapo official in Trondheim:

“In the wood a grave had already been made ready. One of the Schutzpolizei then brought a prisoner to the grave side. [Walter] Hollack [a Gestapo officer tasked with prosecuting political opponents] shot the prisoner in the neck with his pistol. He then fell dead to the ground and was laid in the grave. Hollack then gave orders to shoot the other Russians in the same way and they were all brought to the grave. I carried the order out with my 7.65 mm pistol.” Schlossmacher also

recounted an execution of Yugoslav prisoners: “Four or five of us then fetched 13 Serbs out of the barracks and bound their hands behind their back. These were then put in a closed truck. Here they had to wait about an hour until Hollack and [Werner] Jeck [the camp commander] came out. They were both drunk. When they came to the graveside, Hollack ordered a Serb to be brought to him, whereupon Hollack shot him with his pistol [...] We then returned to Falstad Camp, were given a *schnapps* of vodka and drove on later to Trondheim.” (War Crimes Investigation Branch of the Allied Land Forces in Norway. Interrogation of Joseph Schlossmacher, 24.10. 1945. National Archives London, WO 331/21-90416).

It is estimated that at least 100 Soviet POWs, 74 Yugoslavian and 43 Norwegian political prisoners, and several Jewish men were killed and buried at the site (Reitan 2006, 47). The task of digging the graves before planned executions was often delegated to prisoners of the camp. Some of those requisitioned to prepare the graves survived the war, like the Serbian prisoner Ljuban Vukovic, who later gave an account of his work. The operation of May 1945 was, therefore, an attempt to erase the presence of both bodies and the graves – but also one countered by the memory of the former inmates and the material presence of buried remains, neither of which the Nazis managed to destroy.



Figure 3. German prisoners exhuming graves in the Falstad Forest after liberation of the camp (Courtesy of the Falstad Center).

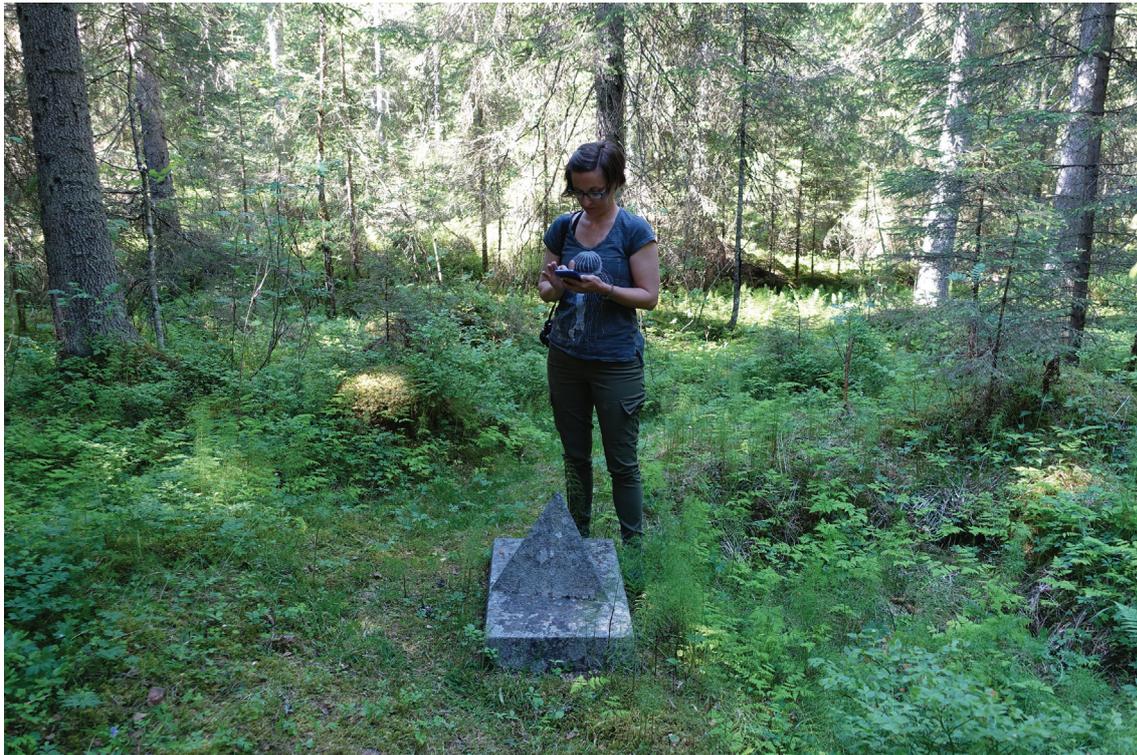


Figure 4. Kate Spradley surveying graves in Falstad Forest in 2018 (Photo by Marek E. Jasinski).

It is largely thanks to Vukovic’s testimony that, immediately after the liberation of the camp, Norwegian authorities were able to locate 40 of the graves hidden in the Falstad Forest (Langaas 2012). Directed by Vukovic, exhumation teams searched for and opened the graves, some of which, however, turned out to be empty as a result of the actions associated with the “corpse boat”. Most of the exhumation work was done by German soldiers and Norwegian collaborators now imprisoned in the camp¹, who were directed by Norwegian experts whose primary objective was finding and identifying the bodies of Norwegian victims; they succeeded in this endeavor for 28 individuals. Far less attention was paid to the 60 bodies believed to be Eastern European victims, most of whom were exhumed in 1953 and cremated immediately afterwards without any attempt at personal identification. The reasons for this lack of identification attempts were most probably threefold. First, it was obviously much easier to identify Norwegian victims on the basis of family statements and medical/dental records than to contact foreign families and authorities for this purpose. Secondly, there was a strong national demand to discover and exhume *Norwegian* graves, so that the bodies could be returned to their native region for a proper reburial, giving closure to the families and allowing the victims to live on in memory. Finally, the case of Soviet and Yugoslav war victims was even more complicated. The social pressure to identify “communist” victims disappeared soon after liberation due to the escalation of

the Cold War and the transformation of both the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia from war allies to enemies of the West. All in all, between 1945 and 1953, when these state-run exhumations were put to a halt, 49 graves were opened and 88 bodies disinterred – a number far removed from the estimated, but still contested, number of between 220 and 300 victims of the camp. Many unidentified and unmarked graves might still exist in Falstad Forest.

The Falstad archaeology and forensic science program

In the wake of the failed attempt in 2007 to localize and recover the boat sunken in Trondheim Fjord (and, thus, the bodies of the anonymous victims of the Falstad camp), a broader archeological project devoted to the material legacy of the camp was launched by my team from the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU). Between 2008 and 2011, geophysical surveys were carried out throughout the camp, including the Falstad Forest (Jasinski and Stenvik 2010; Jasinski 2015, 2018). The objective was to evaluate possible geophysical methods that could be used to detect unmarked and unknown mass graves. Nevertheless, as with the search for the boat, this research has not produced conclusive results: no new graves could be identified and opened.

¹ Immediately after liberation in May 1945, the former SS *Strafgefängenenlager Falstad* was handed over to the Norwegian Ministry of Justice’s Department of High Treason. Under Norwegian administration, the *Innherred Tvangsarbeidsleir* functioned until 1949 as a forced labor camp for Norwegian Nazi collaborators and sympathizers convicted of treason (Nilssen and Reitan 2008).

As part of archaeological field works of the iC-ACCESS project (funded by the EU HERA program “Uses of the Past”), a new survey conducted in 2018 identified some areas in the forest as possible sites of unknown graves. This prompted the authors of this article to establish the *Falstad Archaeology and Forensic Science Program* (2020), which benefits from the exchange and deployment of expertise in forensic anthropology, archaeology and forensic genetics, and direct cooperation of the authors on similar projects in Poland and Texas, USA. In 2022 the program established close co-operation with technology company BioDrone from Trondheim, and the program team is at present developing methods to be employed in the Forest. GIS, LIDAR and GPR aerial surveys and the use of artificial intelligence with specially developed algorithms will facilitate further searches for still hidden and unknown graves in the Falstad forest and hopefully lead to the future rediscovery of lost bodies and their return to public memory.

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