

PIOTR DASZKIEWICZ^{1,2} , DARIUSZ IWAN³ 

Removal of Warsaw zoological collections in 1915 – evacuation or unpunished theft?

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¹ Instytut Historii Nauki PAN, Warszawa, ul. Nowy Świat 72, 00-330 Warszawa, Polska

² AFB-Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle, Paris, 57, Rue Cuvier-CP 41, 75231 Paris Cedex 05, Francja,
e-mail: piotrdas@mnhn.fr

³ Muzeum i Instytut Zoologii PAN, ul. Wilcza 64, 00-679 Warszawa, Polska, e-mail: darek@miiz.waw.pl

Abstract: The article presents the state of knowledge regarding losses suffered by the Zoological Cabinet of the University of Warsaw as a result of the Russian tsarist administration removing part of its collection in 1915. Only losses concerning the typical specimens of bird species (at least 115) were investigated by Domaniewski and Sztolcman during the period between the two World Wars. The estimation of losses has been made more difficult firstly because of the missing inventory ledgers which were also taken by the Russians, and secondly as a consequence of the 1944 intentional burning of the museum's archives by the Germans following the Warsaw Uprising. There are only very fragmented information related to the lost specimens of other types of animals, such as, for example, Dybowski's Baikal fish, Jelski's neo-tropical reptiles and amphibians or such "spectacular" specimen as Stellar's sea cow. A similar problem is encountered in relation to books and documents taken from the library. Poland has never recovered any collections or, contrary to the provisions of the Treaty of Riga, has never been compensated for these losses. The authors conclude that there exist legitimate legal grounds to demand compensation for those lost collections.

Key words: Zoological Cabinet of the University of Warsaw, evacuation of 1915, balance of losses, re-vindication of natural collections, history of museology.

What do we know about the 1915 taking of Warsaw's natural collections? What is the current situation of specimens which were then taken from Warsaw? Has the matter been settled legally and how? Despite nearly a century passed since the loss of those valuable specimens, we still know relatively little about the issue even though, for the last several years, it has aroused the interests of historians and naturalists alike (BOHUN 2001, DASZKIEWICZ & IWAN 2019). Indeed, it has not been possible to create a detailed list of the losses suffered by Warsaw's zoological collection since its inventory ledgers were also taken by the Russians,

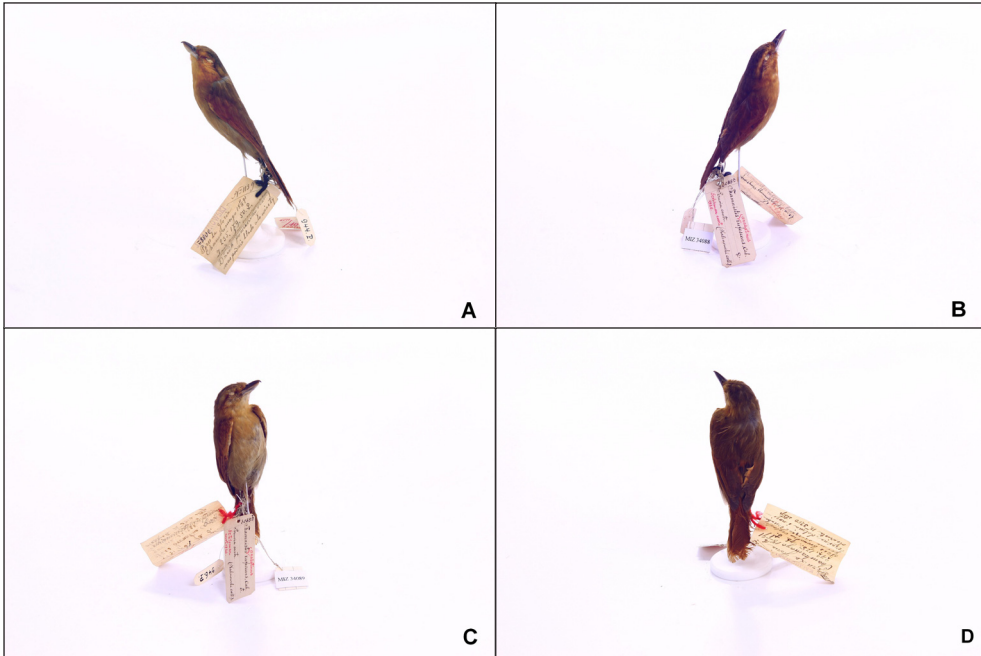


Fig. 1. *Thamnistes rufescens* CABANIS, 1873. A, B – female, C, D – male (collection MIZ PAS in Warsaw).
 Ryc. 1. *Thamnistes rufescens* CABANIS, 1873. A, B – samica, C, D – samiec (kolekcja MiZ PAN w Warszawie).

and, just like the specimens, have likewise never been returned to Poland. In a letter written on May 21st, 1917, Benedict Dybowski asked Janusz Domaniewski, who managed Warsaw's collections at that time whether 'Is it not possible for the University to demand the return of its inventory? The current government in Russia may order the return of those items that have been plundered or stolen' (DASZKIEWICZ *et al.* 2019 p. 22). A lot more is known about lost ornithological collections. In 1889, Władysław Taczanowski published a list of typical specimens of birds that were part of the collection (TACZANOWSKI 1889). As early as 1917, Dybowski acknowledged that this work can become a basis for determining what had been 'stolen from the collection' (DASZKIEWICZ *et al.* 2019 p.6). During the interwar period, Jan Sztolcman and Janusz Domaniewski prepared another list of typical specimens of birds making up the collection of the Polish National Zoological Museum, the successor of the Zoological Cabinet of the University of Warsaw and the National Museum of Natural History (Fig. 1–4) This list contained also specimens taken and never returned by the Russians, specifying that they were still considered the property of the museum. The authors succeeded in adding 112 typical specimens which are still in Rostov-on-Don where they were taken in 1915 (SZTOLCMAN & DOMANIEWSKI 1927). It is worth mentioning that this was not a list of specific losses. The authors believed in the goodwill of Soviet authorities and the return to Warsaw of its zoological specimens, according to the 1921 Treaty of Riga. Since it was created only 12 years after their abduction, this published list is an important document concerning the history of Warsaw's zoological collections and their 'evacuation' in 1915. Jan Sztolcman was very familiar with their state prior to their removal. Not only did he work closely with Władysław Taczanowski and Konstanty Jelski, a prominent Polish naturalist and explorer of the South American fauna, but a significant number of the seized specimens came



Fig. 2. *Thamnistes rufescens* CABANIS, 1873. A, B – female, C, D – male (labels, collection MIZ PAS in Warsaw).
 Ryc. 2. *Thamnistes rufescens* CABANIS, 1873. A, B – samica, C, D – samiec (etykiety, kolekcja MiIZ PAN w Warszawie).

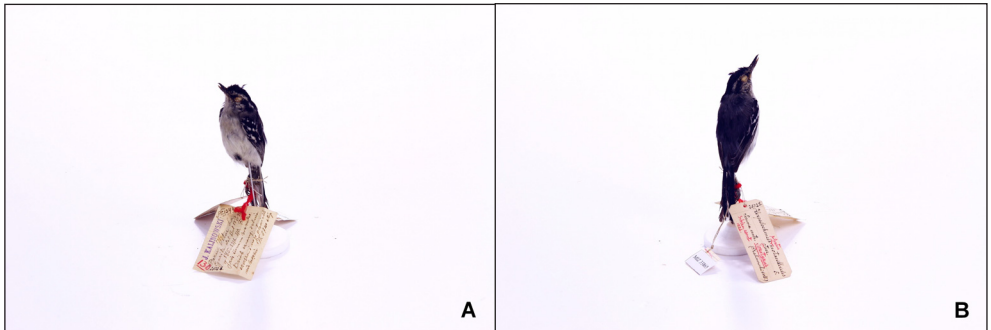


Fig. 3. *Herpsilochmus motacilloides* TACZANOWSKI, 1874. A, B – male (collection MIZ PAS in Warsaw).
 Ryc. 3. *Herpsilochmus motacilloides* TACZANOWSKI, 1874. A, B – samiec (kolekcja MiIZ PAN w Warszawie).

from Sztolcman's own scientific exploration of Peru and Ecuador. It can be assumed that the list of birds taken to Rostov-on-Don prepared by him is complete. Unfortunately, there is a lack of similar documents concerning other taxonomic groups. More recent research on the typical specimens of the University of Warsaw's collections was conducted by Mlíkovský (MLÍKOVSKÝ 2007a, b, 2010, MLÍKOVSKÝ & FRAHNERT 2009). Thanks to this work, we know,



Fig. 4. *Lampraster branickii* TACZANOWSKI, 1874. A, B – male, C, D – labels (collection MIZ PAS in Warsaw).
 Ryc. 4. *Lampraster branickii* TACZANOWSKI, 1874. A, B – samiec, C, D – etykiety (kolekcja MiIZ PAN w Warszawie).

at least approximately, the size of losses suffered by the ornithological collection. We also know, from the correspondence exchanged between Dybowski and Domaniewski, that the collection's books were also taken, as shown by: the letter from January 20th of 1917, which also contains mentions to a part of its Baikal fish collection; the letter from February 12th, 1917 in which Dybowski very realistically highlighted that '[y]our hopes for the recovery of that which was taken seem futile', and reference to two specimens of sea otter and a skeleton of Steller's sea cow; and the letter from May 21st, 1917 (DASZKIEWICZ *et al.* 2019 p. 7). The correspondence of Władysław Taczanowski and Alexander Strauch, kept in the Archives of the Russian Academy of Sciences in St. Petersburg, indicates that the herpetological collection gathered by Konstanty Jelski in French Guiana contained numerous specimens of frogs. Recently, this collection was the subject of a study and analysis (MASSARY de & DASZKIEWICZ 2009) and currently does not contain a single specimen of "French Guiana frog". Several species of reptiles mentioned in Taczanowski's letter are also missing – two species of lizards, *Kentropyx calcarata* and *Eumeces spixii*, current scientific name *Varzea bistrata* (SPIX, 1825), and a snake *Xenodon typhlus*, current scientific name *Erythrolamprus typhlus* (LINNAEUS, 1758).

In a monograph concerning neo-tropical mammals described by Polish naturalists, Piechnik and Kurek point out that the collections from Warsaw lack a number of South American mammals included in describing literature (PIECHNIK & KUREK 2016). All of these sources provide us only with very fragmented information concerning solely typical specimens rather than the entire plundered collection. The unknown fate of specimens is also important to taxonomy since if they have truly been destroyed, then, in accordance with the rules of zoological nomenclature, new neotypes need to be designated.

What is the story of these collections and what is their legal status? On March 18th, 1921, Poland, along with Russia and Ukraine (this occurred prior to the creation of the Soviet Union) signed a peace treaty in Riga, the so-called 'Peace of Riga'. In this treaty, the issue of the return of taken collections was addressed in detail. Article 11 (Dziennik Ustaw N° 49, poz. 300 p. 830-835) states that:

§ I. Russia and the Ukraine shall restore to Poland the following objects which were removed from the territory of the Polish Republic to Russia and the Ukraine subsequent to January I, 1772.

[...]

(b) libraries, archaeological collections and archives, collections of work of art, collections of any nature and objects of historical, national, artistic, archaeological, scientific and general educational value.

[...]

§ 9. Russia and the Ukraine agree to make restitution to Poland of such of the following objects as belong to the State or to National institutions, autonomous bodies, private or public institutions, and in general to all legal and physical persons, and were taken with or without consent into Russia and the Ukraine from the territory of the Polish Republic after August Ist, 1914, that is to say, in the period from the outbreak of the great war until October I, 1915;

[...]

(c) scientific and scholastic laboratories, collections of all kinds, scholastic and scientific accessories, instruments and apparatus and all auxiliary and experimental material. It shall be permissible to make restitution of the individual objects referred to under the heading (c) of this paragraph or to replace them by an equivalent object to be decided upon by agreement between the two Parties represented on the mixed Committee provided for in § 15 of this article. Objects, however, which date from a period prior to 1870 or which have been offered by the Poles may only be replaced by a suitable equivalent after agreement between the two Parties represented on the afore-mentioned mixed Committee.

[...]

§ 10. The two Contracting Parties undertake reciprocally to make restitution in a similar manner of collections and objects specified in § 9 of this article, taken with or without consent from the territory of the other Party after October I, 1915.

[...]

§ 12. [...] ***The obligation to prove that the object has been lost or destroyed shall rest with the State making restitution. If the objects enumerated in §§ 9 and 10 of this article are in the possession of third persons, legal or physical, these persons shall be obliged to deliver them up with a view to their restitution.***

[...]

§ 13. The State making restitution shall pay the expenses incurred in connection with

the return and the restitution of the objects within the limits of its own territory as far as the frontier. The return and the restitution of objects shall be made notwithstanding prohibitions or restrictions on export, and such objects shall not be liable to any duty or any tax.

In accordance with the paragraphs cited above, the zoological collections should have been returned. In the event of their destruction, the Russian administration should prove their destruction and provide compensation. This has never occurred. Supposedly, the collections taken from Warsaw were destroyed in a fire in Rostov-on-Don. Nevertheless, as has been shown by historical studies carried out within the last several years, such as the one considering Wojkow's secret report, the Soviets deliberately hindered the return of collections that were stolen, let us not be afraid to use this term rather than evacuated (KUMANIECKI 1991). It was impossible during the time of the Polish People's Republic not only to ask for the return of property belonging to the Zoological Cabinet of the University of Warsaw, but even to write about it. However, maybe the time has finally come for the Republic of Poland to demand the return of this property, the achievement of the lives of several generations of Polish naturalists.

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STRESZCZENIE

Wywiezienie warszawskich kolekcji zoologicznych w 1915 roku – ewakuacja czy bezkarna kradzież?

Artykuł przedstawia stan wiedzy na temat strat jakie poniósł Gabinet Zoologiczny Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego w rezultacie wywiezienia przez Rosjan części kolekcji w 1915 roku. Problem typów opisowych gatunków ptaków (przynajmniej 115 okazów) został przedstawiony jeszcze w okresie międzywojennym przez Janusza Domaniewskiego i Jana Sztolcmana. Szacowanie wykazu strat jest utrudnione przez brak ksiąg inwentarzowych, również wywiezionych przez Rosjan, a także celowe spalenie muzealnego archiwum przez nazistów w 1944 roku po Powstaniu Warszawskim. Istnieją jedynie bardzo fragmentaryczne informacje na temat utraconych okazów z innych grup zwierząt np. ryb bajkalskich Benedykta Dybowskiego, gadów i płazów neotropikalnych Konstantego Jelskiego, czy tak „spektakularnych” okazów jak krowa morska Steller. Podobny problem dotyczy wywiezionych z biblioteki książek i dokumentów. Polska nigdy nie odzyskała zbiorów, wbrew postanowieniom traktatu ryskiego, ani żadnego zadośćuczynienia. Autorzy stwierdzają, że istnieją uzasadnione podstawy prawne do wystąpienia o rekompensatę za utracone zbiory.

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