Introduction: the tales destruction tells¹

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The twentieth century was the century of mass violence and genocide. The size, diversity, and systematic character of the massacres, but also the inscription of killings in murderous ideologies and the use of new techniques for the systematic eradication of human groups, mark a new way of conceiving, justifying, and perpetrating crime. The role of states, as the totalitarian regimes formally defined by Hannah Arendt as well as 'traditional' dictatorships, was also a prominent feature of this century.² Forms of mass violence certainly differed, and continue to differ, widely from one country to another, from one system to another, from one continent to another; nevertheless, this 'age of extremes', in the words of historian Eric Hobsbawm,³ has seen an outburst of violence that has produced, as its logical consequence, mass death, ideological mass death, and therefore millions of corpses.

It may seem a truism, since this aspect of human destiny is shared universally, that every human body ends marked by rigor mortis before the decomposition of the flesh, and then of the bones, as a result of a combination of biological and chemical processes influenced by a wide variety of factors, such as climatic conditions, the nature of the ambient environment, or human intervention.⁴ Of course, the countless cultures and religions, small or great, have always treated bodies according to special rituals, the product of socio-cultural contexts but also of continual historical developments. One might even say that social anthropology, as a

field of knowledge, was partially constituted around the study of funerary rituals and the social logics of their perpetuation.⁵ However, despite mass violence and genocide increasingly appearing as structural elements of the legacy of the twentieth century, and despite research in the fields of Holocaust studies and genocide studies developing rapidly, the dead body seems to elude the attention of researchers, whether historians, anthropologists, or lawyers. Very few of them have taken an interest in what became of the millions of corpses produced by mass crimes or have asked by whom, how, and why these dead bodies were – or were not – handled.

To place the body, or rather the bodies, back at the centre of the attention of researchers working on extreme violence is the principal goal of a large-scale research programme that we launched in February 2012 (www.corpsesofmassviolence.eu) and which received a starting grant from the European Research Council. This volume is the result of the first annual conference of our academic programme,⁶ which was held at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in Paris, 12–14 September 2012. It presents original research, including a synthesis of the main results of a multidisciplinary study focusing on the first phase we have defined, relating to the treatment of bodies immediately after death. Its purpose is to consider the fate of the body in its diversity, at the time of the murder or just thereafter, against the tendency, too often observed in studies on mass violence, to remove the dead body from the scrutiny of research.

To accomplish this we built on a previous conference dealing with the central methodological aspects of the research. It is to be published in the same book series with Manchester University Press, titled *Human Remains and Mass Violence: Methodological Approaches*.⁷ Bearing this in mind, we attempt here to compare areas that may, *prima facie*, appear very different, both in their historical context and in the forms and extents of the persecutions and massacres concerned. Indeed, how can we compare the treatment of the corpses of the 6 million Jews murdered in the Holocaust with the disappeared persons of the Argentine dictatorship in 1976, of whom fewer than 10,000 have been identified by name and fewer than 1,000 of their bodies found? This is the very aim of our work – to attend exclusively to the means deployed to handle the bodies, their intrinsic logics, and their purposes – which allows us to draw these comparisons in order to understand the production of extreme violence, while bearing in mind, of course, the enormous

differences between, in that example, genocide on a continental scale and what was a cruel police repression, albeit politically motivated and very effectively organized.

This theme of the first phase of research, limited to the period during which the executioners dispose of the bodies (see below on the question of temporality), will continue through to the phases of our project concerned with the search for and identification of bodies and then with 'reconciliation', that is, political, social, or religious strategies aimed at inscribing the recovered bodies or human remains at the centre – or on the margin – of pacified societies.

What, then, have been the specific objectives of our initial research? What do we think we have shown and what have we revealed by this focus on the mass destruction of corpses? One of our initial questions concerned whether the treatment of corpses resulting from acts of mass violence (which we already know takes a variety of forms) proceeded from the same ideology of destruction that led to the murder itself. It was thus first a matter of describing the political and symbolic economy that motivates and structures the treatment of the dead, and second a matter of placing it within a more general economy of the production of mass death. Thus if, in the eyes of their executioners, Jews killed in the Holocaust should disappear not only from Europe but even from European history, then a perfect cremation of the corpses, erasing the last trace of the lives destroyed, was required.

Many questions were raised immediately, while others have arisen from the papers presented at the 2012 conference and fed the exchanges that followed: How, by whom, and when were these bodies treated? Was this done at the time of killing or afterwards, by the perpetrators themselves or by other entities? What were the technical methods used? While technology has sometimes played a part in the process of annihilation, this has not always, or everywhere, been the case, as the Rwandan genocide demonstrates. The industrialization of the destruction process can even be seen as an exception. The different ways in which bodies have been destroyed also raise the question of what happens to human remains. Bones, skulls, hair, and skin are sometimes put on display, as in Buchenwald or during the great famine in China, or simply left out in the open air, as was sometimes the case in post-Soviet Russia or in Cambodia.⁸ Exhibited, they can be made to serve as a political message of ultra-violence, as in Guatemala in the 1980s and in Eastern Europe during the Second World War (see chapter 3,

by McConnell). Bodies have also been reused, as resources, giving death and the dead an ultimately utilitarian purpose. Hair was collected at Auschwitz II – Birkenau, and gold teeth at Treblinka.⁹ Sometimes bodies have reappeared, without the knowledge of the murderers. This was the case with many of the bodies of victims of the Chinese Cultural Revolution that drifted to Hong Kong.¹⁰ What different kinds of status are therefore conferred upon these remains? What uses are made of them? What do these practices of destruction tell us about the societies affected by mass violence?

That first conference focused on ‘destruction’. While it has fallen to historians to document the precise historical and geographical contexts within which different methods of destruction have been employed and to examine their respective implications, legal scholars have concentrated on the charges relating to the destruction of bodies – and the legal status of the bodies themselves – with respect to both international criminal law and national legal systems. They also investigate the role played by corpses in the legal prosecution of perpetrators of mass violence, that is, as evidence of a crime; and when corpses are absent, legal issues arise regarding the status of the dead. Anthropologists, for their part, have addressed not only the question of how the destruction of bodies is integrated into the symbolic and social space of the societies in question, but also that of the hierarchies present among these corpses and of the dead more generally. Anthropological studies of blood and body parts are of immense value for an understanding of the role of societies in the process of collective destruction.

We have come to understand that it is possible to distinguish three distinct categories in the treatment of corpses in the initial phase. It can indeed be a matter of ‘disposal’, that is, an abandonment of the body, either at the massacre site, which in itself can be highly significant, or at another location. One of the most striking examples is the killing fields of the Cambodian genocide, the rice fields that served as places of execution, where the vast majority of the 2 million bodies of the victims of the Khmer Rouge were abandoned. The second category of treatment of the body is ‘concealment’, which can also take several forms, from an enforced disappearance under the seal of secrecy to a publicly orchestrated confiscation. The corpse is then removed from society, hidden, and sometimes buried, but not always; it can also be thrown into wells, caves, or lakes. It is therefore sometimes previously dismantled, cut into pieces to prevent its discovery, implicitly posing the question of the transportation of bodies and body parts. And the third

category of treatment of bodies arises directly from the process of destruction itself: usually by incineration, as in the seminal examples of the Nazi concentration and death camps and the Soviet case, but also sometimes using corrosive chemicals, as in the Argentine and Uruguayan cases.¹¹

These complex and multidimensional questions then allowed us to identify three avenues of study that have structured this work. The first concerns the agents of the treatment of the dead bodies. Who were they? How were they chosen? Were they the killers themselves or, rather, assistants? What uniforms did they wear: those of soldiers, police, or doctors? Can we observe, at least in some cases, a division of labour or a sharing of tasks leading to the production of social hierarchies and distinct criminal careers? It is within this first framework that the chapters comprising part I of the volume, 'Actors', fall: Max Bergholz's analysis of the role of the various agents of the mass violence committed in Bosnia in the 1940s, whose long and fatal posterity is well known (chapter 1), Elissa Mailänder's study of Erich Muhsfeldt, crematorium director of the concentration and extermination camps at Majdanek (chapter 2), and Michael McConnell's study of the agents of Nazi atrocities in Eastern Europe and their representations of violence (chapter 3).

A second avenue concerns the procedures for handling bodies. In association with lethal expertise and techniques, it is crucial to take this aspect of the production of death into account. This is a matter of examining the techniques and technologies used to treat the dead body, and to question both in the context of their production as well as their transmission and circulation from one massacre site to another, or even from one criminal sphere to another. How did the perpetrators handle corpses numbering in the tens, the hundreds, or sometimes hundreds of thousands? Can we observe phases of learning, of improving procedures for handling bodies? Part II of the volume, 'Practices', comprises the contributions of Raymond Kévorkian (chapter 4), who shows the extent and variety of the means used to make the bodies of the victims of the Armenian genocide disappear, Robert Jan van Pelt (chapter 5), who analyses the sources that shaped the conception of the Nazi crematoria, and Mario Ranalletti (chapter 6), who reconstructs the logics that came to legitimize the production of political violence in Argentina through a typology of the treatments inflicted on the bodies of the disappeared.

Our third avenue of study, finally, concerns the issues that arise in the differences between the ways in which corpses are handled.

Why are the bodies of the victims each time the subject of a singular treatment, and for what purpose? How do the three categories of disposal, concealment, and destruction come to resonate with one another? When we study the ideological, identitarian, political, or religious aspects associated with the confiscation, annihilation, or exhibition of bodies, do we not see a blurring of the distinctions between these categories, an overrunning of the boundaries between them, and the revelation of more complex logics? This third context is the subject of part III, 'Logics', in which we place Chowra Makaremi's contribution showing that the treatment of the bodies of Iranian dissidents forms part of the logic of building a revolutionary state (chapter 7), Nicky Rousseau's contribution highlighting of the properly political aspects of the breaking up of the body in apartheid South Africa (chapter 8), and Rémi Korman's nuanced reconstruction of the ideological and symbolic foundations of the massacre of victims in Rwanda, and particularly of the dismemberment of their bodies (chapter 9).

It is already possible to suggest that some research hypotheses have been confirmed. This is true of the link between the ideology that led to the mass murder and the modality of the treatment of corpses, which can be seen perfectly clearly in the cases of Rwanda, Argentina, South Africa, Iran, and Armenia, as well as in that of the Holocaust. Certainly, looking at the case studies in this volume, we can say that human ingenuity has no limits when it comes to defiling, dismembering, concealing, or destroying a body, to instrumentalizing and exploiting it. But the various outrages perpetrated upon the corpses do not constitute a simple outburst of sadism: they are thoroughly engaged with the ideological engine that has set in motion the destruction of lives, as demonstrated in most of the chapters. Let us merely note here the 'renaturalization' of the corpses, their return, in a denial of the religious ritual of the group to which they belong, to nature, caves, deserts, fields, natural pits. Physical geography is important, as is the landscape and the use made of rivers or mountainous areas, as we can see from the cases of Armenia, Argentina, and Bosnia with its karst caves, its crevices, its chasms, but also its peaks. Of crucial importance here is the contribution of anthropology, which can read the signs of fire (note that the human body is cooked by means of devices – ovens or grills – which are also used for the ordinary consumption of food, in a striking parallel with cannibalistic rituals of consumption), water (note that the corpses have been dumped in the sea, in lakes, rivers, or streams, such as the disappeared in the Argentine dictatorship,

thrown from aircraft into the Rio de La Plata, which offered one of the most effective and easily accessible spaces for symbolic purification and cleansing), and earth, as seen in the disposal of the corpses of the Armenian genocide.

Another achievement of our research programme lies in recognizing the importance of temporality in the treatment of the body. While most of the treatment and mistreatment suffered by corpses is carried out immediately after the murder – as was the case in the cremation of corpses at Auschwitz or Majdanek, or the desecrations perpetrated in Rwanda – it can also take place a number of days later, as in the case of Bosnia analysed by Max Bergholz, or even many years afterwards, as in the famous case of Operation 1005.¹² Usually, the killers or their proxies have to conceal or destroy the corpses, as they are tangible evidence of past violence and potential proof in the event of an investigation. This delayed treatment of the body reveals that the victims and their murderers are engaged in a long-term relationship that prompts us, in part, to consider the violence not as an event but as a long, diachronic process, of which death and the treatment of the body are distinct but intrinsically linked steps. This long-term linkage also leads us to enquire more systematically into what the treatment of the body reveals about the killers' consciousness of participating in a criminal enterprise.

It seems important to conclude by looking at the utility of the concept of biopower for the study of mass corpses. The theory, as taken up and transformed by Michel Foucault, is often cited in studies of mass violence and genocide.¹³ Placing the body at the centre of issues of control of the modern state, this theory seems attractive for the study of mass corpses a priori. But Foucault himself has written little – if at all – about mass murder, and instead refers much more broadly to policies of segregation and confinement. And the limits of this theory have to be stated.¹⁴ We agree with Enzo Traverso's recent analysis, which emphasizes that while we may concede that Foucault's theory of pastoral power helps us to understand the Nazi vision of the people's community (*Volksgemeinschaft*), for example, it must also be admitted that the theory of biopower 'does not provide the key to understanding the Holocaust', as it is true that Foucault is not concerned with genocidal configurations.¹⁵ We therefore lack a theoretical approach that takes into account the intentionally criminal nature of projects of mass destruction that would explain why victims' bodies remain for so long (well beyond their death, and sometimes as part of denialist strategies) an instrument in the murderers' hands. One

of the key contributions of our research may, then, be to highlight the systematic exploitation of victims' bodies by their executioners in the extremely diverse configurations of mass crime and extermination that were the Armenian or Rwandan genocides, the Holocaust, or the Argentine, South African, or Iranian dictatorships, and thereby to reveal the heuristic dimensions of the study of the fate of the dead and the afterlife of corpses.

Highlighting the scale and complexity of this instrumentalization allows us to show the highly globalized processes through which criminal methods are transmitted, including both the circulation of knowledge (as is the case with the doctrine of counter-insurgency warfare, the effects of which we can trace from Indochina and Algeria, where it was forged by the French military, to South America's Plan Condor and South Africa's apartheid) and the transfer of technologies and 'know-how'. The latter include for example the crematoria of the German engineering company Topf & Söhne, of which the first version designed to work day and night was delivered to the NKVD (the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs) in Moscow in 1926, before the development of the ovens commissioned for Auschwitz-Birkenau in 1943,¹⁶ or the death flights developed in the Bay of Algiers during the Algerian War of Independence and adopted by the Argentine military during the dictatorship as one of the safest ways to dispose of the bodies of political opponents.

In light of the complexity of the process of producing mass death, the concepts of hygienic biopolitics and the immunization of the body politic, as defined by Robert Esposito, may be of more help than the simple notion of biopolitics on its own.¹⁷ These notions are indeed relevant in their illumination of the Rwandan or Argentine case, as well as of the anti-partisan war during the Second World War in the European East. Here, Nazi officials were reprimanded because their execution of murder was both unsanitary and inefficient (i.e. it did not sweep up all the witnesses), their practices becoming explicitly a question of the sanitization of battle fields and beyond, as well as of society as a whole. But this hygienic dimension of biopolitics also enlightens the Armenian genocide, where, by disposing of corpses, the perpetrators intended not so much to conceal their crimes as to purge the new state of any 'foreign' material in a properly organicist sense.

This analysis of what is politically at stake in the treatment of corpses could thus be expanded to the entire destruction process from a necropolitical perspective, as defined by Giorgio Agamben.

More than an echo of *Remnants of Auschwitz*¹⁸ can thus be found in the present volume, informing for example the treatment of dying victims at the hands of the South African police forces during apartheid, and enticing us to draw comparisons to the way South American juntas dealt with the corpses of the *desaparecidos*, the disappeared.

However, these well researched theories on bodies and power do not exhaust the issues raised by the treatment of corpses themselves. Properly anthropological approaches to notions such as purity, dirtiness, cleanliness, or pollution, in their relation to collective representations of danger as described, among others, by Mary Douglas, may in these cases open an even wider scope of analysis.¹⁹ Practices of sorting bodies, or of specifically treating corpses, body parts, and human remains, thus appear in most of the cases presented in our volume. These ways of dealing with issues of purity and danger, while producing mass crime, reveal astonishing and strong symbolic oppositions, with structuralist resonances to these sorting practices. Thus, in post-revolutionary Iran, religious and ideological discriminations have been enacted in the treatment of corpses of political opponents and their burial, in contexts in which the state and its death apparatus bring forth differences between the undeserving 'dangerous others'. Traditional Muslim Shiite funerary rituals have therefore been not only performed and transformed in these situations, but also inversed in order to desacralize these bodies.

Moreover, all the cases analysed in this volume illustrate the emergences of rituals – among them bureaucratic practices – and specific norms of social behaviour elaborated for facilitating and legitimizing the destruction of the other. Some can be understood as a direct reinforcement of state identity which questions whether the treatment of corpses should mirror nationalism and even community, nation, or empire building. And if all the contributions ultimately show the extent to which the treatments of corpses are indeed political, this is demonstrated not only at the macro level of empire building, which has already been demonstrated by genocide scholars such as Mark Levene,²⁰ but also at a regional or even local level. This extends to the pursuit of controlling space, not necessarily aimed at territorial expansion, as well as, on a more intimate level, embodying a relation of domination between murderers and their victims. In the end, given the apparent links among the actors, methods, and stakes underlying the production of mass death, it is a complex and interconnected understanding

of the political dimensions in the production of extreme violence that we must now adopt, while taking into account the irreducible singularity of each event of mass atrocity, and of the fate of each victim.

Notes

- 1 The text of this chapter was translated from the authors' French by Cadenza Academic Translations.
- 2 H. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1951).
- 3 E. Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914–1991* (London: Abacus, 1994).
- 4 S. H. James & J. J. Nordby (eds), *Forensic Science: An Introduction to Scientific and Investigative Techniques* (Boca Raton: Taylor & Francis, 2005).
- 5 R. Hertz, 'A contribution to the study of the collective representation of death', in *Death and the Right Hand* (Glencoe: Free Press, 1960), pp. 27–86.
- 6 It is within the framework of this programme that the series 'Human Remains and Violence' has been established, published by Manchester University Press, of which this volume is one of the first.
- 7 É. Anstett & J.-M. Dreyfus (eds), *Human Remains and Mass Violence: Methodological Approaches* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014).
- 8 F. Dikötter, *Mao's Great Famine: The History of China's Most Devastating Catastrophe, 1958–1962* (London: Bloomsbury, 2010); É. Anstett & L. Jurgenson, *Le Goulage en héritage, pour une anthropologie de la trace* (Paris: Pétra, 2009).
- 9 R. J. Van Pelt, *The Case for Auschwitz* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002); J. Wiernik, *Une année à Treblinka* (Paris: Vendémiaire, 2012).
- 10 S. Leys, *The Chairman's New Clothes: Mao and the Cultural Revolution* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1977).
- 11 Van Pelt, *The Case for Auschwitz*; L. Fondebrider, 'The materialization of sadism: archaeology of architecture in clandestine detention centers (Argentinian military dictatorship, 1976–1983)', in P. Funari, A. Zarankin & M. Salerno (eds), *Memories from Darkness: Archaeology of Repression and Resistance in Latin America* (New York: Springer, 2009), pp. 57–77; C. Demasi, A. Marchesi, V. Markarian, R. Alvaro & J. Yaffe (eds), *La dictadura Cívico-Militar Uruguay 1973–1985* (Montevideo: Banda Oriental, 2009).
- 12 J. Hoffmann, *Das kann man nicht erzählen: 'Aktion 1005', wie die Nazis die Spuren ihrer Massenmorde in Osteuropa beseitigen* (Hamburg: KVV Konkret, 2008). Operation 1005 was launched by Heinrich Himmler in May 1942 to erase the traces of the massacres of Jews. A

special commando unit was systematically deployed at all the sites of the massacres to exhume the corpses and cremate them.

- 13 M. Foucault, 'The meshes of power', trans. G. Moore, in J. W. Crampton & S. Elden (eds), *Space, Knowledge and Power: Foucault and Geography* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), pp. 153–68.
- 14 Y. Alsheh, 'Corpses of genocide and biopower – how corpses challenge the biopolitical paradigm in genocide research', in E. Anstett & J.-M. Dreyfus (eds), *Human Remains and Mass Violence: Methodological Approaches* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014).
- 15 E. Traverso, *L'Histoire comme champ de bataille: Interpréter les violences du XXe siècle* (Paris: La Découverte Poche, 2012), p. 200.
- 16 J.-C. Pressac, *Auschwitz: Technique and Operation of the Gas Chambers* (New York: Beate Klarsfeld Foundation, 1989).
- 17 R. Esposito, *Bios: Biopolitics and Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).
- 18 Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive. Homo Sacer III* (New York: Zone Books, 1999).
- 19 M. Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966).
- 20 The idea of genocide as intrinsic to the development of the nation state and of empire is developed by M. Levene, *Genocide in the Age of the Nation State: Vol. I, The Meaning of Genocide, Vol. II, The Rise of the West and the Coming of Genocide* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2005, 2008).

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