Introduction: why exhume? Why identify?¹

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This book arises from the second annual conference of the ‘Corpses of mass violence and genocide’ research programme held in Manchester on 9–11 September 2013, forming one part of a three-phase study.² The first phase, which was the subject of a conference in Paris in 2012 and subsequent publication, focused on the treatment of dead bodies just after the murders themselves.³ Studying the fate of cadavers that have been abandoned, destroyed, dismantled, hidden, traded, or desecrated in situations of mass violence has helped open new avenues of research, demonstrating, in particular, the procedural dimension of extreme violence and illuminating how the ideology of agents of death is once again translated into the very treatment of bodies.

The second phase of the programme, the preliminary findings of which are presented in this volume’s contributions,⁴ interrogates the treatment of corpses and human remains after the disaster, focusing specifically on their possible discovery and identification. The study of these two separate enterprises – the search for bodies and their identification – has traditionally remained in the hands of forensic science and has so far only marginally attracted the interest of history, social anthropology, or law despite the magnitude of their respective fields of application. In this context, one of the primary contributions of this volume is to connect the social and forensic sciences, for the first time, in a joint and comparative analysis of how societies engage in the process of searching for and identifying the
corpses produced by mass violence, and thereby to initiate a truly interdisciplinary dialogue.

The third phase of the programme, investigating the place of human remains in the process of patrimonialization and commemoration of extreme violence, was the subject of a conference in September 2014 and of a forthcoming volume published in this series.

The contributions to the present volume thus document, in very different contexts, the specific fate of dead bodies after life and the variety of techniques and technologies used for their location and identification. These texts take as their starting point the observation, which strikes anyone who simply reads the news, that the last decade of the twentieth century and the first years of the twenty-first century witnessed a tremendous resurgence of corpses produced by the extreme violence of the twentieth century: tens and sometimes hundreds of thousands in many countries. Cases are numerous, from the forensic anthropologists’ search for those ‘disappeared’ by the Argentine dictatorship from 1983, to the identification, now nearly systematic, of the bodies of victims of crimes committed in Bosnia and the utilization of the work of forensic pathologists by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia in 1995, or even the large-scale opening – only beginning in 2000 – of the mass graves of the Spanish Civil War. In Rwanda the victims of the genocide committed against the Tutsis were exhumed and reburied, sometimes repeatedly, by the tens of thousands between 1994 and today. This case of incomparable scale, which is sometimes accompanied by the exhibition of certain human remains or of entire bodies in memorials like those of Murambi or Ntarama, contrasts sharply with the situation in Cambodia, where mass crimes were perpetrated between 1975 and 1979. No extensive attempt to recover or identify bodies of victims of the Khmer Rouge has so far been undertaken, although some bones have been gathered in local memorials.

The studies on which this volume is based deal with the fate of the bodies of civilian victims resulting from mass violence and genocide, as delimited by the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. They are by no means intended to be exhaustive, but seek to treat a number of important case studies with a comparative and exploratory goal in mind. Thus, the treatment of soldiers’ remains does not fall within the scope of our research programme. Of course, the first mass exhumations of the previous century were initiated by European states after the Second World War, in an unprecedented enterprise of identifying and repatriating the bodies of combatants. In addition, techniques for the management of corpses and human remains on
a grand scale, for classification and record-keeping, were developed by the military before civilian agencies were forced to do so. And the Joint Prisoners of War/MIA Accounting Command, a large US Army forensics lab located on the island of Oahu in Hawaii, continues to work to identify the bodies of soldiers killed in the Pacific theatre during the Second World War. However, the search for and identification of the bodies of combatants follows a logic specific to the military world, which seemingly cannot be transposed to civil society without major theoretical and methodological difficulties.

From the outset, then, the questions addressed in this volume are organized around two distinct but intrinsically connected themes: search and identification. However, the search for bodies or human remains, and before them, of mass or individual graves, where these exist, do not automatically lead to attempts at identification. Therefore we have to carefully distinguish between the two enterprises. Thus, in the case of exhumation of the victims of the Great Purge, conducted in Russia in an extremely limited capacity after the fall of the USSR, the discovery of mass graves and bones was not accompanied by forensic procedures for the identification of bodies, much less by research on the victims’ DNA. Certainly, the artefacts, clothes, and documents found in the graves offer some legible indications, but to this day, no systematic attempt has been made to determine the identity of the human remains, as we are reminded in this volume by Viacheslav Bitiutckii, lawyer and head of the NGO ‘Memorial’, who oversaw the exhumations in the Voronezh region.

Additionally, sometimes bodies resurface without being sought for. This was the case in the ravine of Babi Yar in Kiev, where the city’s Jews had been killed and hastily buried (33,771 people, according to the German killers’ official statistics) in September 1941. A nearby dam gave way in the late 1960s, and the subsequent flooding unearthed hundreds of bodies that were then reinterred without any attempt at identification. Other cases may be cited, such as the graves of the Dachau concentration camp, discovered by chance during excavation work for the construction of a road in 1948. The unearthed bodies were then identified by means of the forensic medicine of the time. There are even cases where there has been the discovery and identification of bodies without their having been the subject of a prior search, but there remain numerous cases of a search for and localization of mass graves, of exhumations and reinterments of bodies without any attempt at identification. This fact can be explained primarily by the lack of technical and financial resources, but also, as in Rwanda or the territories of the former...
Soviet Union, for political reasons when the systematic identification of corpses risks destabilizing society or the political party in power, creating problems that outweigh the benefits expected from a reburial.

To date, the best-documented cases of a large-scale search for human remains (with or without identification) remain those of Rwanda, the Latin American dictatorships, Bosnia, and Spain. However, the dimensions of these killings are extremely varied, and the proportion of victims identified also differs considerably. Thus, only 500 of the 900 bodies recovered have been identified to date in Argentina (out of approximately 10,000 known to have disappeared). In Bosnia, out of the 100,000 war dead, 14,000 exhumed victims have been identified by their DNA, with 6,877 of these from the genocide at Srebrenica alone. More than 6,500 bodies have been exhumed in Spain since 2000, with the number of persons identified still unknown, but several hundred graves containing tens of thousands of victims remain untouched. And given that more than 250,000 bodies have been reinterred by the Kigali Memorial Centre alone, the total number of victims of the genocide of the Tutsi as well as that of the exhumations undertaken by Rwanda remains uncertain at present. As for the bodies and remains of the 6 million Jewish victims of the Holocaust, only a minuscule percentage of them were exhumed and even fewer identified.

These cases, emblematic of the twentieth century’s heritage of extreme violence, raise questions for us about the emergence of a ‘forensic turn’, in the words of historian Robert Jan van Pelt at the Paris Conference in September 2012. This forensic turn can be defined, in the first place, by the arrival of forensic pathologists and anthropologists on the scene of mass violence and genocide as the decisive agents of practices in the search for bodies; the political, social, and diplomatic dimensions of which are immediately manifest. These forensic pathologists and anthropologists now see their legitimacy buttressed by the increasing effectiveness of their work and the use of advanced technologies such as geolocation and DNA identification. This forensic turn is largely globalized, facilitated by the movement of professionals throughout the world, bringing their expertise – and their equipment – to the four corners of the globe and sometimes participating in the training of local teams. An account of its origins might even be in the process of being offered, centring on the figure of Dr Clyde Snow, an American pathologist present as a consultant in Bosnia since 1992, who brought his expertise to the teams in charge of the first exhumation conducted in
Argentina in the early 1980s. As a crucial figure in the emergence of this potential ‘forensic turn’, Clyde Snow helped found the EAAF (Equipo Argentina de Antropología Forense (Argentinian Forensic Anthropology Team)), which to this day has been working to identify the bodies of missing persons, intervening in dozens of countries around the world, and whose director, Luis Fondebrider, was a guest at our conference in Manchester.

The temporality of the search for and identification of corpses, and not just their globalized character, is thus an important element in the analysis of these phenomena. In some countries, the search for bodies began immediately after the massacres, such as in Poland in 1945, where Jewish survivors tried to give the victims of the death marches a dignified burial. But in Spain, it was not until sixty years after the end of the Civil War and twenty-five years after the restoration of democracy that the first exhumation of the Republican dead could take place (while the bodies of Francoist combatants and civilians had been honoured much earlier). We must therefore keep in mind that the timing of exhumation always depends on the political (and sometimes geopolitical) context, such as the national politics of amnesty or the local politics of memory. This chronology also depends on unique and complex social contexts that allow (through the emergence of a consensus) or else prevent (when divisions persist) the search for victims’ remains.

The contributors to this volume have thus attempted to answer many questions related to the conditions and terms of the rapid emergence of this ‘forensic turn’. They have inquired into the agents and agencies through which bodies are recovered and/or identified, the practices and techniques used, and, finally, the motives and interests that explain the emergence of mass exhumations. Who is then responsible for exhumations? Who takes the initiative, having been accorded the right to do so legitimately, and how is this legitimacy constructed? The agents present within this domain are often many and varied, including families, non-governmental organizations, civil, religious and judicial institutions, survivors’ associations, judges, and the media themselves. The combined contributions here show that the agents may be local or national, often reinforced by an intervention (technical, legal, political, or financial) emanating from elsewhere and frequently from abroad, by way of criminal courts, governmental or non-governmental organizations, or occupation or peacekeeping forces.

With regard to the techniques used for the search and identification of bodies, in the face of multiple constraints, these can range
from the most rudimentary – location of mass graves by direct witnesses or survivors, and exhumations by shovel or hand – to the most sophisticated, with the use of remote sensing equipment, the establishment of wide-area archaeological surveys for corpses, and the use of lab analyses to decode DNA samples. As such, the mass exhumations and identification procedures undertaken during the twentieth century generated substantial transfers of expertise and a progressive standardization of practices. These collective moments have, in turn, initiated new funerary practices including new social or religious rituals for the treatment of the dead. In this regard, the contributors to this volume have also undertaken the description of an entire economy – both material and symbolic – of the treatment of bodies.

The ten chapters collected here show how the motives governing the implementation of these exhumations are many, varying, and complicated, how they can give rise to power plays of varying intensity, and how they call an entire society into question. These motivations may arise in connection with identity and remembrance, with familial or collective ties, with politics, but also, let us not forget, with religions. Studying these motives and interests, then, considerably illuminates a society’s functioning after the catastrophe and the slow construction of a collective mourning process. These issues also address the emergence of the symbolic and legal status of corpses, a central point for all of the studies. They call for new anthropological studies of contemporary societies’ relations with human remains in all their forms: whole or dismembered corpses, complete skeletons or single bones, tissues, organs, appendages, and finally, ashes. Indeed, it seems important to us to understand what is at stake in the ‘exhumatory’ act itself, and thereby to attempt, as far as possible, to resituate the history, geography, and sociology of these mass exhumations.

One of the first results of the research presented here thus obliges us, quite unsurprisingly, to move away from a triumphalist narrative regarding the search for and identification of bodies, always and everywhere contributing to the march towards justice and truth and to the healing of post-genocidal societies. For exhumations are not all virtuous with many carrying their share of conflicts, opening up new gaps and new questions. Our works also encourage the hypothesis of a real paradigm shift in remembrance, a shift of which the forensic turn would constitute both a consequence and a cause. It in fact appears that societies involved in mass crimes have gradually, over the last thirty years, given up on constructing an intelligible
account of extreme violence from the survivors’ narrative, instead giving special attention to the material evidence of the disaster; collective memories would then no longer be drawn from the testimonial paradigm but from the paradigm of material evidence.

However, insofar as the studies presented here, like those presented at the conference, aim to open up new avenues of research, it also seems important to us to bring real lucidity to some points that have heretofore remained obscure. Thus, certain landscapes, certain incidents of mass violence, and not only a few, remain largely underdocumented when we raise the question of the search for victims’ bodies and there can be no doubt that we see a clear disparity in the existing studies. There is, for example, almost no research on the treatment of the corpses, human remains, or ashes of the millions of Jews murdered in the Holocaust, much less the other victims of Nazism, such as the Sinti and Roms. Similarly, we know very little about what happened to the remains of the victims of the Cambodian genocide. And nearly a hundred years after the disaster, we have so far seen no study on the fate of the corpses of the Armenian genocide. Does the very dimension of the mass murder, then, entail a singular difficulty in planning and implementing the search for and identification of human remains?

The linguistic aspect of practices of search and identification also remains largely unexplored. The terms and the manner in which human remains and corpses are designated in different contexts of violence still seem to be decisive. The Argentine and Rwandan cases show us that to name the dead is quite often to have already taken a political position. A study of the lexicon used in countries where the exhumations took place, lexicons which may differ depending on the agents (vernacular terminologies, technical or scientific nomenclatures, or classifications emanating from religion, poetry, or slang), could open up new vistas for research in this regard. The translation of these terms, by experts in both forensic medicine and law, but also by researchers who study these social facts, thus deserves to be given attention and fully analysed insofar as words seem to carry much more meaning than their speakers at first seem to attribute.

The specifically ethical issues raised by research on the fate of the victims of mass violence could also be articulated, although all the professionals involved in this research are in direct contact with human remains. For if handling such remains within cultural and research institutions is now largely framed by laws or administrative procedures in most Western countries, large-scale exhumations are still conducted that generate a set of unprecedented practices
and situations that go beyond the boundaries initially conceived by legislators. Moreover, the agents on the scene often act within a personal ethical vision that is not always fully expressed, composed of a concatenation of social and religious norms and sometimes of audacious symbolic improvisations and constructions. These often syncretic and heterodox approaches deserve to be examined and compared (in their origins as well as in their effects) to the ethical frameworks governing scientific research. To these must be added those issues posed by the long intimacy with death and the dead engendered through the very process of academic research, which few of the contributors to this book have sought to document.

At the same time, the rich contributions in this volume offer much to research, first by shedding light on the logic of the agents of these searches, exhumations, and identification procedures, which typically entail competing goals. We can establish a hierarchy of agents, from the single individual whose initiative may cause a political earthquake (as was the case in Spain), to the most powerful state institutions such as, in the case of Guatemala, the army. These agents may be invested with ideologies, but also with age-old religious traditions. The religious authorities nonetheless rarely initiate searches that are seen as likely to disrupt their own legitimacy, at a time when this rather demands to be strengthened or restored. These agents also live within a material, even sensory, culture – think of the smells of burned or rotted bodies, and those of bone-cleansing products – which is unique, within which they also establish new points of reference. The combined contributions here show in this regard the importance of all of this material culture of exhumations and of the treatment of human remains: coffins, shrouds, the uniforms worn by forensic pathologists or their equipment, and also, finally, the individual or collective tombstones and monuments erected at sites of reburial. Thus, as documented by several of the texts gathered here, new social and cultural practices are constructed through the search for bodies.

The contributions collected here also help bring to light a second logic of territories and their control. The study of the treatment of corpses during the phase of massacre has demonstrated the importance of the geography of murder sites, and of the topography, forests, rivers, etc. It has also underlined the degree to which the anthropological perception of the landscape has influenced the treatment of bodies. Exhumations, too, seem determined by this physical and mental geography. The texts in this volume show that it is often the status of the territories formed by mass graves and pits that is at
stake in the exhumation, as well as their control and ownership. The question generated by mass grave looting is, for example, situated within this logic, as well as the opening of graves by unaccredited agents, which is analysed in various contributions.

The third logic that emerges from this volume, of course, is that of politics. For exhumations also – primarily – form part of a process of community building or the construction of a post-genocidal state. The search for bodies, then, always takes place within constraints that remain to be negotiated and conflicts that remain to be resolved. And there are many cases – as almost all of the texts gathered here indicate – in which the stakes of diplomacy, of the quasi-diplomacy of non-governmental organizations, but also those of geopolitics, are involved. Questions of a specifically legal nature concerning the legality of exhumations and identifications ordered or protected by national and international courts also arise within this context. For this logic remains in broader terms the logic of transitional justice.

These three approaches – via the power of the agents, the territory, and state building – are interdependent in more ways than one, and several authors in this volume show that we can identify mutualities among them without thereby making it easier for them to be prioritized.

Thus, in a text which here serves as a preamble, Tony Platt describes the fate of the graves of Native Americans in California. Tacking against a narrative that describes this state as a liberal region, home to high-tech enterprises, the chapter shows that the European settlement was built on the almost total destruction of the indigenous populations during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Starting from a personal reflection on the experience of mourning for his son, he first questions the motives of agents engaged in the search for Indian graves, but also those of the social scientists who study the product of this search. He explains how the denial of the Native American genocide was bolstered by the instrumentalization of Indian graves and the systematic looting of the artefacts and bones they contained. The bones were sent to museums in bulk – with Platt giving the staggering figure of between 600,000 and 1 million tombs thus opened and destroyed – but they also constituted huge collections in the anthropology departments. UC Davis remains, as such, a veritable ossuary. In pointing this out, Platt warns against a triumphalist reading of exhumations, showing that they can instead participate in the creation and imposition of a largely mythic historical narrative through institutions and the general public.
In the first section devoted to the agents of the search for and identification of bodies, Gabriel Finder shows how the Polish Jewish survivors of the Holocaust themselves tried to give a dignified burial to members of their family and community in the immediate post-war period. However, even if the number of the bodies exhumed from mass graves and buried a second time with an official ceremony – and Jewish prayers – might seem substantial, it represents only a fraction of the bodies of 3 million Polish Jewish victims. The chapter analyses the real collective impact of individual initiatives undertaken locally under the tight control of the Soviet occupation authorities and relayed at a distance by diasporic Jewish communities. Karel Berkhoff, in turn, describes how the silence of Soviet and Ukrainian authorities on the existence of one major mass grave of the victims of the Stalinist purges was jeopardized for decades by many agents: German occupation troops during the war, grave robbers, and Ukrainian and Polish nationalists, with their differing motives, were the agents whose actions prompted a chaotic but progressive effort to mark the sites of the violence, ending in the construction of an official monument. Finally, José López Mazz explains how only a radical political change in Uruguay has permitted the formation of a commission to search for the bodies of those who disappeared under the dictatorship. Since 2010, with the aid of archaeological expertise, this commission has engaged in the difficult task of exposing and circumventing the strategies of concealment employed by the military, slowly and patiently bringing to light the physical evidence of the implementation of ‘Operation Carrot’, which involved the illegal exhumation and systematic destruction of the remains of the dictatorship’s victims.

Opening the section on the means and methods employed in the search for bodies, the Russian lawyer Viacheslav Bityutckii, head of the local branch of the NGO ‘Memorial’, describes the only exhumations of the bodies of Stalinist purge victims that took place on Soviet territory in the Voronezh region south of Moscow. Describing the extremely limited resources deployed locally by a group of volunteers to pursue the task of exhumation over the course of some twenty years, he analyses the reasons for the failure to complete the process of identification, underlining what continues to be the political dimension of the exhumation and identification of victims more than seventy-five years after the crimes were committed. By contrast, the next contribution in the ‘methods’ section illuminates the more technological side of this research, first focusing on the development of new techniques for identification in forensic medicine, with particular attention to the
scientific and ethical issues entailed by the use of DNA samples (Thompson and Fowler). Concluding this section, Wastell and Jugo show precisely how the multiplicity of practices employed during the exhumation and identification of victims in Bosnia and Herzegovina could themselves disrupt the process while helping to reconstruct Bosnian society as a whole.

In a third and final section, contributors examine the stakes arising from exhumations. Nicky Rousseau, who is herself an agent in the transition to justice in South Africa, takes advantage of her dual affiliation as a researcher and a member of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to describe and analyse the socio-political sources of the search for bodies of ANC militants murdered by the police of the apartheid regime. She shows this by clarifying not only the issues of political positioning, but also of social class, which are set up around families who are returning the body of a loved one. For his part, historian Rémi Korman analyses the interactions and competition between the different agents’ agendas towards the exhumations in Rwanda. He deconstructs the sources of state attempts to impose a funerary and memorial policy which is not always the one desired by the Church and survivors, including the routine anonymization of reinterred victims. The final text in the volume focuses on the Asian continent. Frances Tay is interested in the exhumations ordered in Malaysia by the British military courts in the course of trials for Japanese atrocities committed during the occupation of the peninsula. These exhumations have indeed reflected the policy of restoring the colonial regime, while the process of memorializing the victims – which later drew on other exhumations – revealed the importance of the Chinese minority in the construction of an independent Malaysian state. In this respect, the last section of the volume offers a perfect transition to the further studies we wish to conduct in turning attention to the fate of corpses and human remains in commemorative and patrimonial processes.

Ultimately, the ten contributions to this volume show both the diversity of situations and possible interpretations that can arise from the search for the bodies produced by mass violence and genocide. They show how the very drama of human destiny, of human beings facing their own death, was restaged in the twentieth century and is being restaged today – a drama that is even more incomprehensible in situations of mass death, of non-individualized death, when it is a matter of murder on a grand scale. Exhumations, as demonstrations of a willingness to learn, itself also a desire to see and understand, seem to represent, in this respect, one of many societal responses to the mystery of mass violent deaths.
Notes

1 Translation from the authors’ French by Cadenza Academic Translations.
2 Recipient of a starting grant from the European Research Council, no. 283–617. See the website: www.corpsesofmassviolence.eu.
4 Further studies will be published in Human Remains and Violence: An Interdisciplinary Journal by Manchester University Press in spring 2015.
8 Figures provided by the ICMP on their website, 15 October 2013; see www.ic-mp.org/icmp-worldwide/southeast-europe/ (accessed 20 January 2014).
10 On the circulation of forensic specialists, see C. Koff, The Bone Woman: Among the Dead in Rwanda, Bosnia, Croatia and Kosovo (London: Atlantic, 2004).

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