

Since its creation, already five years ago, this journal has developed the study of corpses in situations of mass violence and genocide. However, the Holocaust, as the most extensive case of mass killing in the twentieth century with 6 million victims, has to date received very little treatment in the pages of *Human Remains and Violence*. This is a paradox. While the research programme itself – ‘Corpses of mass violence and genocide’ – has been crafted with the Holocaust in mind as a seminal example, as the main site of questioning, even as a starting point for reflection on the treatment of corpses, the remains of the six million European Jews only rarely appear in our journal. One can mention the article by Therkel Streade on the single survivor who collected the remains of Jews killed in the Belarussian town of Bobruisk;¹ the article by Joachim Neander on the burial of soap believed to have been produced from human flesh from Jewish corpses;² and also my own work on the transfer of ashes after 1945.³ Research on corpses in the Holocaust appears scarce and limited. Does this mean that the vast field of Holocaust studies has shunned the study of corpses and human remains? It is certainly not the case for the study of the killings themselves. The destruction of corpses during the atrocities – one of the main features of the Holocaust, that even gave its name to the genocide⁴ – has been studied, and for two reasons: first because the crematoria attached to the infamous gas chambers in Birkenau have become a seminal ‘site of memory’ of the killings; and second because those gas chambers have become a singular argument for Holocaust deniers (whereas the crematoria are not). The link between Holocaust denial and the study of the very architecture of Birkenau and the killing facilities is masterfully described in the book that historian Robert Jan van Pelt wrote after the Irving trial. He had been an expert witness in the trial.⁵ Robert Jan van Pelt has also been instrumental in defining the argument of a ‘forensic turn’ in Holocaust studies and has been a proponent of its development. In a recent, massive piece of research Andrej Angrick even reconsidered most of Holocaust history in Central and Eastern Europe via the study of the Operation 1005 (the systematic destruction of corpses⁶). Corpses, bones, human remains are everywhere in Holocaust studies. However, they are neglected much more by the huge scholarship on the ‘aftermath’ of the Holocaust, probably due to the influence of cultural studies. Cultural studies tend to ‘disembody’ the research, with their focus on representations (literary,

filmic, artistic) and on affects. This does not mean that a cultural studies approach to the Holocaust could not seize the materiality of the massacres, as a description of the affects towards cadavers and body parts could be developed.

But the term 'forensic turn' can itself be understood in several different ways. The first apprehension of it is the relatively recent turn to exhumations conducted by non-governmental organisations in the context of post-mass violence and transitional justice. The most commonly examined case is Spain in the twenty-first century, with the opening and forensic examination of mass graves from the Civil War; but Bosnia, Rwanda and Argentina are also currently studied as places where the 'forensic turn' is operative. The literature is growing but, while reference to the Holocaust is almost systematically made, the research on the Holocaust itself via the lenses of the 'forensic turn' remains sketchy.⁷ The second acceptance of the term is more academic: historians, anthropologists (mostly), but also other specialists in the social sciences and humanities, reconsider occurrences of mass killing and genocides in placing human remains at the centre of their attention. The articles collected for the issue of *Human Remains and Violence* clearly respond to both definitions, but the second one is given more weight. Some of the contributors are in fact practitioners: Andrzej Grzegorzcyk is a museum curator who was in charge of the Kulmhof memorial and museum; Jon Seligman, for his part, is an archaeologist employed by the Israel Antiquities Authority, which dedicates part of its time to conducting excavations in Lithuania, both on the site of the main synagogue in Vilnius and non-invasive surveying of sites of killing.

This issue of our journal does not intend to give a complete overview of the treatment of corpses in the Holocaust, but it brings a diversity of approaches, ranging from France to Lithuania, with stops in Germany and Poland. In their diversity, the contributions show how fruitful is the 'forensic turn' in Holocaust studies.

In his article Andrzej Grzegorzcyk describes the excavations that took place in Kulmhof/Chełmno between 1986 and 2016. Over this long time span the excavated objects and bones completely reshaped the knowledge of how the killing facility was organised, a site for which survivors' testimonies are few. Grzegorzcyk argues that the 'excavations have played a key role in the rise in public interest in the history of the camp'. Jon Seligman shows how a careful use of modern forensic technologies to read what is below ground level, together with a close reading of written sources, allows the drawing of a precise map of the Ponar killing site and its evolution between 1941 and 1944. In her ground-breaking article Johanna Lehr describes the transfer of the corpses of Jews who died in the Drancy transit camp before their deportation to Auschwitz. She shows that the traditional curation of dead bodies by the French authorities (judiciary, municipal and state ones) continued even in occupied France. Her findings reveal that, contrary to what has been previously written, corpses were not thrown into a forgotten mass grave but were given individual graves. It shows the duality of French policy towards the Jews, in which a measure of normalcy was maintained, alongside their extraordinary rendition to the Nazi genocidal politics. In his article 'Evidential remains: dead bodies, evidence and the death march from Buchenwald to Dachau, April–May 1945', Christopher Mauriello follows the 'forced confrontation'⁸ with corpses that American soldiers

and the German population went through in the very early days of Liberation and Allied occupation. Kitty S. Millet,⁹ in a close reading of four survivors' testimonies from four different death camps, analyses their fragmented selves. Developing an original analysis, she argues that those survivors became both the subject in liberation and the subject of ashes, but also introduces the 'compensatory notion of a third path that holds both positions together in one space, the space of literature'.

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Notes

- 1 T. Straede, 'The Dead Bodies of Bobruisk, Belarus 1941–1945', *Human Remains and Violence: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 1:1, 23–38.
- 2 J. Neander, 'Symbolically Burying the Six Million: Post-war Soap Burial in Romania, Bulgaria and Brazil', *Human Remains and Violence: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 2:1, 23–40.
- 3 J.-M. Dreyfus, 'The Transfer of Ashes after the Holocaust in Europe, 1945–60', *Human Remains and Violence. An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 1:2, 21–35.
- 4 A 'Holocaust' is a sacrifice that is entirely cremated.
- 5 R. J. van Pelt, *The Case for Auschwitz: Evidence from the Irving Trial* (Bloomington IN, Indiana University Press, 2016).
- 6 A. Angrick, 'Aktion 1005', *Spurenbeseitigung von NS-Massenverbrechen 1942–1945: eine 'geheime Reichssache' im Spannungsfeld von Kriegswende und Propaganda*, 2 volumes (Göttingen, Wallstein Verlag, 2018).
- 7 The most complete volume on the forensic turn referencing the Holocaust is, to my knowledge, the one edited by Zuzanna Dziuban: Z. Dziuban (ed.), *Mapping the 'Forensic Turn': Engagements with Materialities of Mass Death in Holocaust Studies and Beyond*, Beiträge zur Holocaustforschung des Wiener Wiesenthal Instituts für Holocaust-Studien (VWI), Band 5 (Vienna: New Academic Press, 2017). See particularly the detailed introduction by the editor, pp. 7–35.
- 8 See his seminal book: C. Mauriello, *Forced Confrontation: the Politics of Dead Bodies in Germany at the End of World War II* (Lanham, MD, Lexington Books, 2017).
- 9 See also her ontology of victimhood: Kitty S. Millet, *The Victims of Slavery, Colonization, and the Holocaust: a Comparative History of Persecution* (London and New York, Bloomsbury Academic, 2017).