Evidential remains: dead bodies, evidence and the death march from Buchenwald to Dachau, April–May 1945

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Abstract

This article utilises the theoretical perspectives of the forensic turn to further expand our historical understandings and interpretations of the events of the Holocaust. More specifically, it applies a theory of the materialities of dead bodies to historically reconstruct and reinterpret the death march from Buchenwald to Dachau from 7 to 28 April 1945. It focuses on dead bodies as ‘evidence’, but explores how the evidential meanings of corpses along the death-march route evolved and changed during the march itself and in the aftermath of discovery by approaching American military forces. While drawing on theories of the evidential use of dead bodies, it remains firmly grounded in empirical historical research based on archival sources. The archives at the Buchenwald Concentration Camp contain eyewitness accounts and post-war trial testimony that enable a deeply contextualised ‘micro-history’ of the geography, movements, perpetrators, victims and events along this specific death march in April and May 1945. This ‘thick description’ provides the necessary context for a theoretical reading of the changing evidential meanings of dead bodies as the death march wove its way from Buchenwald to Dachau and the war and the Holocaust drew to an end.

Key words: Holocaust, Nazi Germany, death march, Hans Merbach, SS, Buchenwald

The politics of dead bodies

As any amateur crime TV viewer can tell you: if there is no body, there is no crime. While not technically accurate, the popular adage reveals the perceived power of the body as evidence. Once discovered, the physical remains of the body take on heightened significance. Investigators can begin to forensically analyse the remains and draw conclusions about the act, motive and suspects. In its silence, the dead body is presented as objective – frozen in time and geographical space. Its objectivity empowers it as irrefutable evidence of the crime. Conclusions about innocence and guilt emerge from its use as objective evidence. Popularisation of the unquestioned relationship between forensics and objectivity has even prompted scholars

to explore the legal and cultural implications of crime-based TV shows or the 'CSI Effect'.¹

In the emerging interdisciplinary field of 'dead body politics', or necropolitics, it is precisely the objectivity of the body that is put into question.² Instead of dead bodies serving as inscrutable, objective evidence of a murder, mass atrocity or genocide, they are represented and analysed as sites of political, social and cultural 'meaning-creation'.³ According to Finn Stepputat, 'unlike the previous wave of interest in the history of death, which during the 1980s focused on societal attitudes towards death and the effects of death in terms of interpersonal relations, the past decade or two have seen a developing interest in dead bodies and human remains as objects of political analysis'.⁴ In this light, dead bodies and human remains continue as evidential, but that evidence is represented and used in a variety of ways to support or refute often competing political, social and cultural narratives or collective meanings of mass violence and genocide.

While this new theoretical and analytical perspective on dead bodies has led interdisciplinary scholars to explore far-ranging case studies, ranging from the post-communist reburials in Eastern Europe, to repatriation of the dead across the Mexico-US border, to politicised tours of the remains of the dead in Zimbabwe, it has only recently penetrated Holocaust studies.⁵ In the words Jean-Marc Dreyfus, 'It would appear that research into the Holocaust has avoided paying much attention to the millions of dead bodies that resulted'.⁶ This scholarly deficit has begun to change and a wave of interdisciplinary interest in the materialities of mass death and the politics of dead bodies has emerged within Holocaust studies itself. Architectural theorists, archaeologists, historians and geographers have meticulously reconstructed the materialities of the Nazi death camps, providing new perspectives on the processes of mass killing and their meanings at the time and in collective memory. Robert Jan van Pelt's pioneering work on the architecture of Auschwitz-Birkenau as evidence has inspired renewed interest in archaeological investigations of Nazi death camps and the processes and production of death within these camps.⁷ Other scholars have begun to analyse the complex history of post-war discovery and reinterment of the corpses of victims of the Nazi genocide and the Holocaust buried in temporary mass graves in Germany and throughout Eastern Europe. Atina Grossmann and Margaret Myers Feinstein both explored the social conflicts between Jews, Germans and Allied occupation forces around the burial of Holocaust victims immediately after the war.⁸ Jean-Marc Dreyfus interpreted the significance of the French government's effort to identify and repatriate the dead bodies of French deportees and 're-nationalise' the bodies after the war.⁹ Gabriel N. Finder used the *yizkor* books to explore how Jews returned to post-war Poland to locate Jewish corpses in mass graves on the periphery of camps and other remote locations, and their excavation and reburial using Jewish burial customs, often amid a resurgent Polish antisemitism.¹⁰

Other scholars have moved their focus from these post-war events and conflicts around the materiality of dead bodies and remains to the historical events of the Holocaust itself. Most prominent is the work of Father Patrick Desbois on mass shootings of Jews in Nazi-occupied territories of Eastern Europe.¹¹ Building on the

ground-breaking work of Christopher Browning's research on *Einsatzgruppen* and Order Police shootings in Poland, Desbois and his team of researchers use interviews with witnesses in Ukraine and other Nazi-occupied territories in the East to meticulously detail the mass shootings in remote villages. Desbois' attempt to objectively present the context and circumstances of the killings creates a forensic approach to shootings and the dead bodies, down to an analysis of bullet casings used in the killings, the individual role of villagers in collecting and burying these corpses in mass graves and the significance of these bodies and graves over time in the social experience and memory of villages and their local populations.¹² My own work on the US military's 'forced confrontation' of German civilians with dead bodies along death march routes in April and May 1945 explored the political uses of the reburial of dead bodies in the effort to impose collective guilt on Germans in the last days of the Second World War.¹³

The purpose of this article is to utilise the theoretical perspective of 'dead body politics' to further expand our historical understandings and interpretations of the events of the Holocaust. More specifically, it applies a theory of the materialities of dead bodies to historically reconstruct and reinterpret the death march from Buchenwald to Dachau from 7 to 28 April 1945. It focuses on dead bodies as 'evidence', but explores how the evidential meanings of corpses along the death-march route evolved and changed during the march itself, and in the aftermath of discovery by approaching American military forces. While drawing on theories of the evidential use of dead bodies, it remains firmly grounded in empirical historical research based on archival sources. The archives at the Buchenwald Concentration Camp contain eyewitness accounts and post-war trial testimony that enable a deeply contextualised 'microhistory' of the geography, movements, perpetrators, victims and events along this specific death march in April and May 1945. This 'thick description' provides the necessary context for a theoretical reading of the changing evidential meanings of dead bodies as the death march wove its way from Buchenwald to Dachau and the war and the Holocaust drew to an end.

The evidence trail: Hans Merbach and mass murder on the road to Weimar

Dead bodies were not abstractions in April and May 1945. They were an ever-present and oft-cited part of the landscape throughout formerly Nazi-occupied Europe and within a collapsing Nazi Germany itself. Since the Nazi invasion of Poland in 1939 and accelerating through Operation Barbarossa in June 1941, the Eastern front was a macabre scene of war dead, executed partisans and civilians, and mass graves of Jewish and non-Jewish victims of Nazi genocide. With the retreat of Nazi armies westward in 1943 and 1944, dead bodies multiplied as Hitler and Himmler ordered the disinterment and burning of bodies to hide evidence of mass graves from earlier wartime executions. By the winter of 1944–45, Nazi authorities ordered forced 'death marches' of mostly Jewish prisoners from death camps in Nazi-occupied Poland, including Auschwitz-Birkenau, back into the remains of the Third Reich in Austria and Germany. Tens of thousands of unburied corpses littered

the roads, paths and railway lines heading westward. At the same time, the Allied strategic bombing campaign of Germany reduced German cities to rubble and the dead lay stacked and unburied in the squares of many German cities. To some, it appeared that the entire continent was a mass grave of buried and unburied bodies. When the American military governor of Hesse reported to his superiors towards the end of the war, he explained how American troops 'came into towns and cities that were deathly quiet, that smelled of death and destruction'.¹⁴

The death marches from camps in the East to German-held camps in the West during the winter of 1944–45, and then between camps within the collapsing Third Reich during spring of 1945, directly confronted German civilians with the horrors of Nazi genocide. Since the outset of the Third Reich, most civilians in Germany were aware of the concentration camps within Germany and later had at least heard rumours of the camps in the East. While many had personally witnessed prisoners and slave labourers in their everyday lives during the Third Reich, the death marches in 1945 produced scenes of violence and murder previously hidden by the Nazi regime. In his authoritative study of the death marches, Daniel Blatman convincingly argues that these murderous marches were the 'final phase of the Holocaust'.¹⁵ During the last months of the war, German civilians witnessed or participated in this final phase. Hundreds of bisecting death marches of varying sizes trudged through cities, towns and villages throughout Germany. Civilians shuttered their windows to avoid seeing the hundreds and, in some cases, thousands of starving prisoners in striped pyjamas or wrapped in worn blankets walking down their town's streets escorted by armed SS guards. In most cases, civilians could not ignore the aftermath of these marches. Dead bodies with shots through the neck and the back of the head littered the roads, forest paths and fields in or near residential districts.

German civilians were not always passive witnesses to the death marches. As Blatman documents, German civilians feared the consequences of a death march travelling through their cities and towns. There was real fear when a death march approached. Escaped prisoners would frequently plunder local farms and residences for food and shelter and sometimes rob or assault civilians. It was not uncommon for local Nazi authorities or civilian leaders to organise 'zebra hunting' parties among the townspeople to track down and shoot escaped prisoners.¹⁶ In other cases, they feared that the death marches would leave behind dead bodies in their wake and that they would be blamed for the killings. With the imminent end of the war and the Allied armies approaching, a town's political leaders and townspeople would ask the SS leading the marches to avoid the town.

Thousands of concentration camp prisoners and SS guards marching along the roads and fields were only part of the chaos in Germany during the spring of 1945. Intensive Allied air attacks destroyed German cities and towns, killing thousands of civilians, wrecking factories, roads, bridges, railways and ports. Millions of refugees and displaced persons escaping Allied armies East and West compressed into Germany, clogging roads and overwhelming train stations. German and Axis military troops, Hitler Youth and *Volkssturm* units retreated inward, often towards the West in order not to be captured by the Red Army. For a brief moment in April and May 1945 it seemed that the whole world was in Germany and that world was a

combustible landscape of human misery, uncertain chaos and widespread death. Dead bodies helped to define that landscape.¹⁷

The death march from Buchenwald to Dachau concentration camps from 7 to 28 April 1945 provides a compelling case study to more fully analyse the lethal chaos surrounding death marches and to introduce the significance of dead bodies as evidence during the final phase of the Holocaust. In contrast to Daniel Blatman's *The Death Marches* and German historian Katrin Greiser's *Die Todesmärsche von Buchenwald*, this study applies a theoretical approach to the materiality and complex meanings of dead bodies as they accumulated in sight of German civilians in towns and cities along the death-march route.¹⁸ While earlier approaches aimed in different ways to demonstrate that death marches represent a final phase of the Nazi perpetration of genocide, my research assumes that conclusion and focuses instead on the changing meanings of dead bodies as evidence among and between various groups, from the Nazi perpetrators to German townspeople, to surviving prisoners, to US military liberating forces. This representation of dead bodies as evidence had different meanings at different moments for each of these social groups during the war. In April 1945, with the Third Reich collapsing and the war ending, these groups encountered each other among and through death marches and dead bodies. In the shifting context and orgy of violence during the last weeks of the war, these groups assigned and reassigned responsibility blame, and, finally, collective guilt in the presence of dead bodies.

The horrific journey that came to be known as the 'Death March from Buchenwald' or the 'Death Train from Buchenwald' began on 6 April 1945 when the Buchenwald Camp Commandant, Herman Fister, ordered the SS leadership in the camp to prepare the prisoners to be evacuated to the Flossenbürg camp the next day. The circumstances of these orders are a matter of historical debate. They were part of a series of contradictory messages emanating from the Nazi leadership in Berlin regarding the fate of concentration camps and their prisoners in early April 1945. Both Hitler and Himmler (head of the SS and administratively responsible for the concentration camp system) did not want any prisoners, especially Jews, to fall into Allied hands.¹⁹ Whether it was for ideological reasons, for fear of evidence for future trials against the Nazis for war crimes or for bargaining chips for negotiating better armistice or surrender terms with the Allies, this meant that every concentration or labour camp had to be emptied before the Allies overtook them. In the case of Buchenwald that reality was imminent. On 4 April 1945 the US Third Army overran the Ohrdruf camp (satellite camp of Buchenwald) about 65 km from Buchenwald. That, combined with increased Allied air attacks on rail lines and other targets such as Buchenwald's associated factories and labour sites, made it clear that the Allies would soon be at the camp itself.

The imminent approach of the Americans and the orders from Berlin prompted camp SS leaders to organise a massive evacuation of approximately 28,250 prisoners from Buchenwald. Since January, the camp population had swelled as Jews and other prisoners from Auschwitz and other large and small camps in the East were marched to Buchenwald and its subcamps. On 1 April prisoners from Ohrdruf and other subcamps were transported to the Weimar train station and from there marched

the 9 km north to Buchenwald. Conditions in the overcrowded main camp and the infamous 'little camp' at the northern end were beyond horrible, with open latrines, prisoners dying on camp streets and in adjacent fields and unburied corpses stacked like logs. The surviving prisoners – most of them marched hundreds if not thousands of miles from the East – were exhausted, weak, starving and suffering from disease. On 6 April these were the prisoners ordered to evacuate to Flossenbürg and, after a change of plans, to Dachau.

Pister gave orders to Hans Merbach (1910–49) (Figure 1) to take one of the largest transports of 4,500 prisoners. Merbach was an experienced, trusted and capable SS officer at the camp. Unlike many of the SS assigned to the camp, Merbach was quite young; he was only thirty-four years old in April 1945. According to post-war court records and existing biographical information, he joined the elite SS (member number 3,120) just after his twentieth birthday and joined the Nazi party (member number 259,233) a year later.²⁰ At the beginning of the Second World War he was promoted to the *Waffen* SS and assigned to the Buchenwald concentration camp

Figure 1 Hans Merbach, 'second protective custody camp leader' at Buchenwald, arrested at the end of the Second World War and tried at the post-war International War Crimes Tribunal. Photo credit: National Archives and Records Administration (NARA).

as adjutant of the so-called *Wachblock*. This sector of the camp usually consisted of guard barracks, buildings for camp administration and command including kitchens, private or shared residences for commissioned and non-commissioned officers.²¹ He worked in this capacity until May 1941, when an apparent heart muscle paralysis confined him to a hospital and home until the autumn of 1941. From the end of 1941 to mid-May 1942 and again from October to December 1942, Merbach was assigned as 'commander of the guards of the Buchenwald concentration camp'. After completing an officer training course in the summer of 1942 he was transferred to Auschwitz, where he served as commander of the dog squad from January 1943 until January 1945. In that month he and his fellow guards abandoned Auschwitz ahead of the invading Red Army and headed West towards Germany with the remaining prisoners. He returned to Buchenwald as the second protective custody camp leader from February 1945 until the death march of April 1945. Immediately after the war he was captured by Allied forces in Austria and returned as a prisoner to Allied-occupied Germany. He was then tried with other Nazi camp personnel at the 1946–47 'Dachau Trials' as part of the post-war International War Crimes Tribunals (Figure 2).²²

Hans Merbach and his actions during the death march of 7 to 28 April 1945 provide a unique lens to through which to analyse the complex and changing meaning of dead bodies as evidence during the Holocaust. Merbach had first-hand experience with dead bodies. Beginning as a twenty-year-old SS officer, he worked almost exclusively in concentration camps from Buchenwald to Auschwitz and then back to Buchenwald. He arrived and worked at Auschwitz during the height of the mass

Figure 2 Merbach being questioned at the Dachau Trials on 8 July 1947.
Photo credit: NARA.

industrial killing from January 1943 and stayed until evacuation and the death marches West towards Germany in January 1945. During that time at Auschwitz, the Nazis murdered approximately 1 million Jews and others, including some 400,000 Hungarian Jews during the summer and fall of 1944. As an SS commander of the dog squad, Merbach most likely witnessed or participated in the whole process of Nazi genocide at Auschwitz, from the unloading of prisoners from transports, to the long walk to the gas chambers and the disposal of bodies. In this context, dead bodies, particularly of Jews, represented ideological commitment. As historian Christopher Browning noted when referring to the shooting squads in the East after June 1941, it was one thing for an SS officer to be a bureaucrat in an office in Berlin; in the East one had to prove one's ideological commitment with one's willingness to 'dirty your hands' killing.²³ Merbach's assignment to Auschwitz in 1943 fits that pattern of evidence of ideological commitment. During the previous three years, he was essentially commander of a guard barracks at a concentration camp for political prisoners and Jews near Berlin. In 1943 he was an active agent in Nazi mass genocide, carrying out the ideological objective of a Jew-free Europe. As the transcript of the January 1942 Wannsee Conference illustrates, dead-body counts were objective measures of the success of the Nazi ideological project. By January 1945 Merbach could evidence his part in this project.

While Merbach's role in direct killing at Auschwitz can only be deduced from his role and the chronology of the camp, his actions at Buchenwald and during the death march from 7 to 28 April 1945 are part of the legal record of post-war International War Crimes Tribunals. Merbach's specific responsibility was detailed in the post-war Dachau Trials record of another war criminal, *United States of America v. Josias Prince zu Waldeck et al.*, documenting a trial held in the summer and fall of 1947.²⁴ This same trial testimony is the most complete record of the death march from Buchenwald to Dachau and central to analysing the meaning of dead bodies as evidence before, during and after this almost three-week-long mass killing.

According to the eyewitness testimony of two former prisoners, Martin Rosenfeld (Czech and unidentified age in 1945) and Henrick (Henryck) Zaif (Polish and 17.5 years old in 1945), the death march began for them on the afternoon of 7 April when guards began beating them with rubber hoses and forcibly drove them from the camp canteen to the *Appellplatz* for a sudden roll call. There they joined thousands of other prisoners, some of them already carrying or wearing blankets. After the roll call, the SS guards tore the blankets from the prisoners and kicked them towards the gates of the camp. As they exited the camp through the gates, Zaif recalls witnessing a macabre scene of dead bodies. In particular, he recalled seeing a truck carrying 80–100 corpses enter through the main gate and head towards the camp crematorium. All the victims had been shot.²⁵

In April 1945 dead bodies were becoming a problem for Nazi authorities. They were clearly a problem at Buchenwald. The deteriorating conditions of the camp itself and death marches to and from the camp resulted in thousands of bodies that needed to be moved, buried or burned. While it is impossible to know for sure, the fact that witnesses saw dead bodies transported to the gates of the camp and towards the crematorium by truck suggests that these corpses were outside the camp, most

likely collected along the route from the Weimar railway station to Buchenwald since the beginning of those marches on 1 April. Guards at the camp knew that within days the Americans would be coming up that same route and dead bodies with shots to the neck or back of the head could be used as evidence against the Nazi leadership, SS guards or camp personnel. Dead bodies, once counted proudly by the Nazis as evidence of ideological commitment to and the effectiveness of the 'final solution to the Jewish problem', were now becoming evidence to be hidden and destroyed to provide deniability of a crime.

However, numbers still mattered, even in the chaos of the death marches. Zaif testified that he overheard Merbach relate the number 4,500 to another guard when referring to how many prisoners he was taking from the camp and marching the 9 km towards the Weimar station. Despite the approaching Americans and the rising fear among guards of the discovery of dead bodies, Merbach ordered that all stragglers or those too weak to carry others be shot. According to Zaif, Merbach ordered 'That if any of the prisoners fell out of line but even [sic] one pace he was to be shot.'²⁶ This order was clear to guards and prisoners alike. When Rosenfeld fell out of line while carrying luggage for an SS guard on the march, that same guard told him to get back into line 'quickly because here comes the transport leader and then I got to know Merbach.'²⁷

Merbach's shoot-to-kill orders on this particular death march are revealing. They illustrate not only that the loyal SS officer was prepared to follow orders and kill Jews and other prisoners immediately prior to Allied victory and occupation, but that he was prepared to leave behind a path of unburied dead bodies along the route to Weimar that would surely be discovered by the liberating forces. There are multiple possibilities for why Merbach left behind dead bodies on the route. First was time, and the chaos of a collapsing Third Reich. The Americans were approaching in a matter of days, so there was no time to bury the bodies along the route or to have trucks transport them back to the crematorium or burial pits at the camp. There were undoubtedly existing dead bodies along the road from previous death marches, and Merbach's executed prisoners simply added to those along paths in the woods or ditches along the road. According to eyewitness testimony, however, it appears that Merbach was using dead bodies to confirm his continued authority as commander of the death march, a warning to those prisoners who fell behind or escaped and, most significantly, a sign of his commitment to the mission even as the Nazi regime collapsed around him. Some Nazi leaders and SS officers may have been concerned about dead bodies as evidence of a crime, but on 7 April Merbach saw dead bodies as evidence that he was still in charge of the prisoners and fulfilling his mission to the death march and the Nazi project of annihilation.

Over two weeks in April, Merbach continued to lead that project of annihilation as commander of the death march. Dead bodies evidenced it from the very beginning. Merbach, twenty SS guards and four to six non-commissioned officers left the camp from a gate at the south-east corner of the camp on the afternoon of 7 April (Figures 3, 4, 5 and 6).²⁸ According to Merbach, only 4,480 left the camp, as twenty had to return, due to 'bad feet'.²⁹ In order to avoid detection or attacks by Allied aircraft, Merbach led the prisoners about 4 km south-east through the woods near

Figure 3 View from the 'little camp' up to the crematorium in Buchenwald in the direction of where death march left on 7 April 1945. © Photo credit: Glenn Kessler, 2018.

Figure 4 Gate at south-east corner of Buchenwald. Most likely where the death march toward Weimar and then Dachau began. © Photo credit: Glenn Kessler, 2018.

Figure 5 South-east perimeter of the camp near where the death-march prisoners walked south towards Weimar. © Photo credit: Glenn Kessler, 2018.

Figure 6 South-east perimeter path showing direction of death march towards Weimar. © Photo credit: Glenn Kessler, 2018.

the camp towards Weimar. Once they intersected with the main road to Weimar (present-day Ettersburger Strasse), they headed directly south for 5 km towards the Weimar train station. With approximately 4,500 prisoners and guards, the line of men stretched between 3 and 3.5 km along the route.

The geography of the death march is significant (Figure 7). The main road south to the Weimar station was paved, wide and increasingly populated with residences and businesses as it neared the city.³⁰ Ordinary German civilians, accustomed to living adjacent to the concentration camp for over a decade and seeing guards and prisoners marching along the road or loaded and unloaded at the train station, witnessed the 7 April death march along the main road. They witnessed a slaughter. Rosenfeld testified that there were '300–350' dead bodies of French, Russians, Hungarians, Romanians and Jews shot to death in the back of the head or neck along the road. He stated that Merbach personally shot ten of these prisoners.³¹ During his trial Merbach refuted the charge, stating that the dead bodies which Rosenfeld and Zaif saw along the road to Weimar were killed during the earlier 1–2 April death march from Ohrdruf to Buchenwald or during the transport of 2,000 prisoners marched along that same route earlier in the day.³² Regardless of who ultimately murdered the 300–350 prisoners, the killings were done in public, the corpses were

Figure 7 Map of the region around the Buchenwald concentration camp. The thin line on the map shows the extension of the rail line between the camp and Weimar railway station. The superimposed dotted line on the map is the approximate route of the first day of the death march from Buchenwald to the Weimar station on 7 April 1945. Map and photo credit: © Glenn Kessler, Derek Barr, Chris Mauriello.

unburied and the SS guards, including Merbach, did not find it necessary to bury the bodies or hide them as evidence of a crime. At this point the Americans were less than four days away from travelling up the same road from Weimar to Buchenwald to take control of the camp. It did not seem to matter to Merbach or his guards. When they finally reached the Weimar rail station and loaded the prisoners into sixty-nine wagons there was an evidence trail of hundreds of unburied dead bodies all along the route from Buchenwald. Whether it was due to Merbach's ideological conviction and continued sense of mission, the fulfilment of superior orders, limited time in a chaotic situation or a combination of all three, the public display of dead bodies marked the death-march route for all to see.

This trail of dead bodies along the road and ditches outside Weimar challenges traditional understandings of the geography of the Holocaust. By April 1945, Allied air raids and advancing forces made killing in physical concentration camps impossible. Nor was murdering Jews and others in day-long shooting squads that defined the Holocaust by bullets in the East. During the last month of the war the Holocaust was conducted by individual guards shooting prisoners within a dispersed 'zone of killing' along death-march routes. In this zone, zealous Nazi officers and guards piled up bodies as evidence of their undying commitment to the Nazi genocidal project. Thus, for a few weeks in April and early May 1945, Germany became a killing field of unburied bodies in plain sight of German civilians who travelled the roads or paths through the field and farms around their cities, towns and villages. Unlike the camps or even the mass graves in the East, the only evidence of this zone of killing was dead bodies. The physicality of the corpses with bullet holes or smashed skulls revealed the methods and procedures of genocide. Their location defined the geographical space of genocide. For German civilians, the proximity of the dead bodies along death-march routes shaped some of their first direct experiences to Nazi genocide. The Holocaust was coming home to their villages, towns and cities.

'The acre of death': dangerous dead bodies at the end of the Second World War

As the death march, or in this case, the death train, from Buchenwald to Dachau continued from 7 to 28 April, the actions of Merbach and the Nazi guards changed, and with them, the representation and meanings of dead bodies as evidence. There are multiple accounts detailing the murderous transport of the Buchenwald prisoners to Dachau. Two eyewitness accounts are particularly detailed about the route and Merbach and the guards' role in mass murder along the way. One is from Henryck (Henryck) Zaif's Dachau Trials testimony noted above. The other is from a French survivor on the train, François Bertrand (Buchenwald Inmate No. 139865), who recorded the train's route from station to station as it moved from Buchenwald to Dachau.³³ According to Zaif's testimony, the group arrived on foot at the Weimar station on the evening of 7 April. They were divided into groups and loaded into wagons at 8:00 p.m. There were approximately 4,500 mostly French, Italian, Austrian, Polish and Russian Jews in forty-nine wagons. There were two guards assigned

to each wagon, and approximately ninety prisoners were jammed into half of the wagon (the other half was allocated to the guards) and ordered to only sit or to lie down on each other.³⁴ Apparently, the train laden with prisoners remained at the Weimar station overnight until the morning of 8 April. This delay was no doubt due to the constantly changing situation of the Allied advances through Germany and the availability of locomotives and clear track. The train and its prisoners were destined originally for Flossenbürg, until intensive Allied air attacks on the railways forced the train to head towards Dachau, shortly after leaving the station.³⁵ According to Zaif, the train left Weimar on the morning of 8 April in the direction of Leipzig, away from the advancing Allies. When the train stopped at Leipzig that day, Merbach and a team of SS guards went from car to car shooting any prisoners who were groaning from thirst, starvation and sickness. Zaif witnessed Merbach shoot three prisoners in the wagon he was in. After that, the train was rerouted to Dresden and then Pilsen, Czechoslovakia on 10–11 April. The prisoners had now gone for days without food or water. On 11 April at Pilsen, just inside the Czechoslovakian border, civilians attempted to approach the train with food but the guards fired shots over their heads to keep them away. Merbach went a step further and publicly shot a young Czech girl. Zaif also testified that Merbach personally assaulted him and three other prisoners while they were relieving themselves near a tunnel outside Pilsen. He claimed that Merbach stomped on his face, knocking out six teeth. During court questioning Merbach countered with a different story. He did not deny the killing, but defended the action stating that a group of fifteen to twenty prisoners had attacked and seriously wounded several guards. He also admitted that the remaining guards shot and killed the escaping prisoners during the incident.³⁶

Violent encounters such as these created dead bodies along the route of the death march. Initially, Merbach did not seem to care about burying the bodies or hiding evidence of the shootings. Like on the road to Weimar, he simply left the bodies in plain sight. According to Zaif, after the killing in Leipzig, Merbach ordered dead bodies to be thrown out of the train. Seven bodies from Zaif's wagon were simply 'thrown on a pile'.³⁷ But there were also hundreds of other prisoners dying from thirst, starvation and disease. At his trial, Merbach admitted that 'between 400, 450, 480 died of natural causes' due to poor physical health and work before and during their time at Buchenwald.³⁸ Increasingly, disposing of this many dead bodies was becoming a regular and necessary routine along the transport. Merbach turned to local German authorities in towns along the death-march route to dispose of the bodies. According to Merbach, 'Whenever I had a chance, which was the case, for instance, in Leipzig, in Pilsen, and later in Nammering, I would first call up the police and the police they would usually arrive with a truck. That is what happened in Leipzig and also in Pilsen'.³⁹

This marks a change in Merbach's thinking about the evidence of dead bodies. On the road to Weimar of the first day of the death march he was unconcerned about leaving a trail of dead bodies. After 10 April, and train stops at Dresden and Pilsen, he was calling ahead to local authorities to transport the bodies away from the train he was commanding. While there are a number of possible explanations

for this change in attitude, Merbach may have been concerned about leaving a trail of mass graves in cities and towns not associated with a particular concentration camp, as Buchenwald was with the city of Weimar. While Merbach could explain (and distance himself from) dead bodies on the road to Weimar as residual killing from the multiple death marches to and from Buchenwald, the dead bodies along the track between Weimar and Dachau could be directly linked to his transport and his command. If he were captured, Allied investigators could hold him directly responsible for the killings. This was becoming a concern for all SS commanders in April 1945 and fits a more general pattern of Nazi officers and guards calling on local authorities to dispose of or hide the dead bodies in dispersed, shallow mass graves beside the woods, paths and farms along the routes of death marches.⁴⁰

These dead bodies also presented a new problem for town or city mayors, elected officials, police and the townspeople along the death-march routes. When the advancing Allied armies inevitably arrived in their city or town, they would be compelled to explain the dead and mutilated bodies alongside the tracks. With Merbach, the train and the remaining prisoners gone, they feared that they would be held accountable for the murder of the forced labourers and Jews in their jurisdiction. For Merbach, the dead represented evidence of ideological commitment and the fulfilment of orders. For the townspeople, the corpses represented dangerous evidence of their collective responsibility for the Nazi crime of the mass murder of innocent civilians. This fear was not unfounded. In over thirty documented cases in April and May of 1945 occupying American Military Government (MG) and ordinary soldiers accused German civilians of collective guilt following the discovery of dead bodies in mass graves or open spaces in small towns and cities throughout defeated Germany.⁴¹

Merbach and the local authorities' evolving approach to dead bodies was most evident when the train pulled into the Nammering train station very early in the morning on 19 April.⁴² In what later became known as the 'Nammering Massacre', Merbach oversaw the mass murder and attempted disposal of 794 corpses of prisoners from his transport along the railway siding of the Nammering train station. This three-day genocidal killing and attempt to dispose of the bodies, as well as the subsequent discovery of dead bodies by the US military and forced confrontation of townspeople with the remains as evidence of collective war crimes, represents an extraordinary historical moment to explore the many dimensions of the politics of dead bodies at the end of the Second World War.

The ample documentary record of the events at Nammering from 19 April to 16 May 1945 discloses that there was a deliberate attempt to destroy the bodies as possible criminal evidence. According to the eyewitness testimony of the then thirty-one-year-old station manager, Heinrich Klössenger, there were moans and screams from inside the wagons as the train arrived and then waited at Nammering station on 19 April.⁴³ Merbach informed Klössenger that there were already 250 dead in the wagons who had died from starvation on the journey, and ordered surviving prisoners to unload the corpses from the train. As they set about their work, Merbach and the SS guards proceeded to shoot the prisoners assigned to this task. As the bodies piled up in the wagons and along the railway siding, Merbach ordered

prisoners to push the wagons containing dead bodies down the track a few hundred metres to a section near a steep embankment overlooking a muddy ravine that locals now refer to as 'the acre of death'. Prisoners were ordered to roll the dead bodies down the embankment into the ravine. The SS guards supervising the operation hoped that the muddy soil would help speed up the decomposition of the corpses and make the bodies unrecognisable or useless as evidence.

Burial, however, was increasingly insufficient to destroy the dead bodies as potential evidence. Merbach ordered prisoners to use the extra rails piled by the station, the wooden sides of the detached wagons and other wood to create a large 'roast' to burn the bodies. During his trial Merbach admitted to using this crude method of cremation by open fire, but passed the blame onto his guards:

That was done in the following manner, particularly after we left Czechoslovakia. We had no chance at all to bury the prisoners who had died on the way and who had then been put onto special cars. When (unreadable) Passau on the 20th, a non-commissioned officer, a German from Rumania [sic] had tried to burn some of the bodies but since that was not successful, not entirely successful that is, I had this stopped and had the prisoners buried in a grave.⁴⁴

US military sources investigating the scene after it was discovered in May 1945 provided an even more detailed description of the method of evidence destruction: 'The victims were made to lie down and iron crossbeams were placed on top, then another layer of victims and so on, until the pile was six layers high, then gasoline poured over the lot and ignited.'⁴⁵ As Merbach admitted at his trial, the method proved rather ineffective as the corpses were only partially burned. To be destroyed as evidence of mass murder, they now needed to be buried in the boggy ravine along with the other corpses. Merbach and the guards expected the soggy soil to decompose the bodies beyond recognition. Prisoners spent days moving the bodies from piles at the foot of the embankment or railway siding using handcarts which were soiled with blood and human remains. The townspeople heard shots all day and night, punctuated by screams and moans. By the time the massacre was over, 794 dead bodies lay in a massive shallow grave in the ravine beneath the railroad tracks at Nammering.

On 24 April, after four murderous days in Nammering, the transport departed in the direction of Pocking, towards Dachau. On 28 April it arrived at Dachau concentration camp, where the corpses lay in the wagons at the railway siding. These were discovered when American troops from the 42nd and 45th Infantry and 20th Armored Divisions converged on the Dachau on 29 April 1945. In what are now iconic images from US 'liberation', the Americans soldiers found and photographed the tangled corpses in the wagons on the railway siding in Dachau. The death train from Buchenwald to Dachau had travelled 220 miles in three weeks. Of the original 4,500 who left Buchenwald, less than 1,000 arrived at Dachau when the Americans arrived. Merbach tried to explain the discrepancy in these death figures (he claimed a maximum 480 dead) by referring to the separation of the train into three parts after Nammering.⁴⁶ Regardless of the total, the prisoners murdered along the way

by Merbach and his SS guards were some of the last victims of the death marches and Nazi genocide.

The Nammering Massacre of 19–23 April 1945 is significant in multiple ways. The SS mass murder (starvation and shooting) of almost 800 concentration camp prisoners makes it one of the largest killing operations within Germany during the Third Reich. But it is also significant in marking a change in how the SS guards represented and then handled the dead bodies of their victims. Twelve days earlier, on 7 April, Merbach and his SS guards had openly shot and left exposed dead bodies on the public road from Buchenwald to Weimar as evidence of their commitment to Nazism and power. At Nammering these same guards went to great lengths to secretly murder prisoners, and then to burn and bury hundreds of dead bodies over four days in order to hide them from local German civilians and, more importantly, the approaching US army. While dead bodies had formerly served as public evidence of SS power and control, in the ‘acre of death’ they had become potential evidence that Merbach and his SS guards were trying to destroy so that it did not fall into the hands of the Allies. As the war drew to a close, dead bodies as evidence of Nazi political power became transformed into evidence of Nazi crimes.

What circumstances account for the transformation of the meaning of these dead bodies? During the transport of prisoners, Merbach and the SS guards on the train undoubtedly realised the full extent of the Nazi collapse before the combined Allied forces within Germany. Almost two weeks of constant Allied air attacks, the disarray of any German defences and the boldness of civilians in offering help to the prisoners convinced even the hardened SS that the war was lost for Germany, and they would be left to account for the killings in the camp and on the death march. In a matter of days, what Merbach had perceived as a high-priority political programme directed by the Nazi state became perceived as a potential war crime where perpetrators could and would be held accountable by the victorious enemies of the Nazi state. Dead bodies and witnesses to the killings were evidence of these war crimes. If these dead bodies could be buried and the mud of the ‘acre of death’ did its job of decomposing the remains, there would be no physical evidence of the war crime. No body, no murder – even genocidal mass murder.

Forced confrontation: dead bodies as evidence of German collective guilt

When the Americans arrived in May 1945, the ‘acre of death’ became one massive crime scene. On 29 April elements of the 11th Armored and 26th and 90th Infantry Divisions defeated the remaining enemy forces and established MG occupation over the entire ‘Dreiburgenland’ region, which included Nammering.⁴⁷ According to the eyewitness testimony of Alois Schmidt, a resident of Nammering who was twenty-six years old in 1945, the Americans were at first welcomed as liberators. They got along very well with the German townspeople during the initial week of occupation and MG administration. All this changed a week later when the Americans were told about the massacre at the railway siding in Nammering and were then shown the mass grave in the ravine below.

Once news of the discovery at Nammering reached MG Headquarters in nearby Fürstenstein, the MG began the increasingly regularised process of investigation, interrogation and compelling German townspeople to carry out performative reburials of the victims' bodies that I have termed elsewhere as 'forced confrontations.' German civilian confrontations with the dead bodies – disinterring the mass grave in the 'acre of death', viewing the bodies under American MG supervision and then reburying them in multiple town cemeteries in the region –transformed dead bodies into yet another form of evidence. One week earlier, Merbach and his SS guards had burned and buried the bodies of prisoners to hide their perpetrator role in individual war crimes. Now the US-supervised viewing and reburial of dead bodies by German civilians politicised those bodies for another purpose. Forced confrontation aimed to use the evidential remains of the death-march victims to highlight the collective nature of the mass killing and the collective guilt of the German people for the crimes of the Nazi regime.

According to the aforementioned Alois Schmidt, who participated in the exhumation of the bodies, the Americans enlisted a small group of men from Nammering, along with some captured Germans from the *Organisation Todt* held at Tittling prison, to remove the bodies from the boggy ravine.⁴⁸ The disinterring of dead bodies had a deeply emotional impact on the American soldiers supervising the operation. As the Americans realised the scope of the mass grave, they became increasingly appalled and angry at the Germans exhuming the corpses. According to Schmidt, the American soldiers' mood noticeably changed from 'initially humane' to 'spiteful' as the gruesome work was undertaken.⁴⁹ Apparently, the work was made more difficult by the muddy conditions and the decomposing state of the corpses. Fearing that the picks and shovels would damage the victims' remains too much and hinder the war crimes investigation, the American soldiers ordered the Germans to use their hands to uncover and then drag the bodies from the muddy ravine. A series of atrocity photographs from the US Signal Corps show large, multi-age groups of German male soldiers and civilians marching under armed guard to the mass grave site. There, they are photographed digging up the bodies from a shallow mass grave, entering the mud and muck of the old riverbed and then removing the bodies by taking hold of them by the arms and legs. The bodies were laid out on in long rows, some three deep, on both sides of the higher, drier ground above the ravine. Under a warm May sun, the Bavarian meadow was transformed into a gruesome scene awaiting the forced confrontation of hundreds of German townspeople with the evidence of the dead bodies.⁵⁰

Due to the size and scope of the atrocity, the Americans included multiple towns in the surrounding area to participate in a well-documented regional forced confrontation at Nammering. It began with a 15 May MG order to towns around Nammering. A surviving copy of the order for the townspeople of Eging am See, a little over two miles north-east of Nammering, directed 'at 8:00 punctually, all women, men, and children of the village Eging to the place in Nammering where today the excavation of the executed men murdered by the Nazis will take place'. It warned that American soldiers would check the houses to make sure that no one was left behind. It further outlined the day and the collective grave digging that needed

to be done back in Eging. At '13.00 in the afternoon 200 graves about 1.5 meters deep are to be dug on the Freihofstraße in the village ... For this work, all able-bodied men and women were [sic] to be used.' In addition, 'a wooden cross with the inscription "Brutally murdered by the Nazi" is to be manufactured for each grave.' It gave the mayor the responsibility for carrying out these orders and timings and was dated 'Nammering, 15 May 1945'.⁵¹

By far the most significant moment of the two-week forced confrontation at Nammering was the US military forced witnessing of the 794 corpses laid out in the 'acre of death' on the morning of 16 May. The event was photographed by the US Signal Corps and by individual soldiers present at the event, and what is striking about the photographs is the attention they focus on the *interaction* between US soldiers and German civilians amid the dead bodies (Figures 8, 9, 10 and 11). The townspeople from the regions around Nammering arrived at the site and were met by armed American GIs at the cross atop the tracks with the sign reading in German, 'Here lies 800 murdered bodies killed by the Nazis of Nammering [sic], Germany in April 1945'. Photographs show groups of German civilians, primarily women and children, standing at the cross and sign, watching an American soldier point to the words with a pointer as if he were instructing them through the printed words. American soldiers are gathered around them as they read. The American soldiers

Figure 8 US soldiers preparing German civilians to enter the 'Acre of Death' in Nammering, Germany, 16 May 1945. Photo credit: NARA.

Figure 9 German civilians witnessing the corpses of victims of the 'Death March from Buchenwald' in Nammering, Germany, 16 May 1945. Photo credit: NARA.

transformed the forced confrontation with the evidence of dead bodies into an educational experience. They were now instructors of German civilians, compelling them to begin their witnessing of dead bodies with instructions about what they were about to witness at first hand in the meadow. Significantly, the sign placed the responsibility for the murders onto the 'Nazis of Nammering [sic]' and not simply the regime. Of course, the Americans did not yet know about the death train from Buchenwald to Dachau or the circumstances of the killings at Nammering. Through American eyes, the dead bodies laid out in the meadow were evidence of Nazi fanaticism that had permeated to the local level and the German townspeople themselves. The education, therefore, was to be local. Civilians could not stay in their homes and towns and close their eyes to the human devastation caused by twelve years of dictatorship, racist politics and mass murder. This was not simply a Nazi problem; it was a German problem. In Nammering under American MG, the sign and the cross were the entrance to a collective educational journey through the undeniable evidence of a field of dead bodies.

The day-long regional forced confrontation in the meadow at Nammering ended with the burial of dead bodies in individual coffins in at least three cemeteries in towns surrounding Nammering. To Americans, the individuation of the dead bodies in separate coffins and the marking of each with a cross or some memorial

Figure 10 Regional forced confrontation with dead bodies in Nammering, Germany, 16 May 1945. Photo credit: NARA.

stone identifying them as innocent victims of Nazism restored some form of identity and dignity to the victims. It also represented a particularly American ideal of individualism in death. This form of American reburial represented yet another representation and meaning for the dead bodies of the victims of the death march from Buchenwald. In American eyes, the dead bodies had been rescued from the indignity and anonymity of a mass grave and given some form of identity, even if only as 'victims of Nazism'. Their remains would speak beyond the grave. The investigations and the photographs of the dead bodies would be used as hard objective evidence to bring those responsible to justice in Allied courts. Two years later, these photographs and the forced confrontation at Nammering would be used to convict Merbach and sentence him to hanging by order of the International War Crimes Tribunal.

Conclusion: Holocaust studies and the politics of dead bodies

In her ground-breaking work on the political lives of dead bodies, Katherine Verdery writes that 'dead bodies serve as sites of political conflict related to the process of reordering the meaningful universe'.⁵² No place needed that reordering more than Germany in April and May 1945. Hitler's Third Reich and the Second World War had resulted in the deaths of approximately 35 million European soldiers and

Figure 11 Women and children view dead bodies as evidence of mass atrocities, Nammering, Germany, 16 May 1945. Photo credit: NARA.

civilians.⁵³ Nazi genocide claimed the lives of approximately 12 million innocent civilians, including 6 million Jews, in the Holocaust. Germany lay in physical and moral ruins, occupied by Allied forces preparing to divide the world, Germany and Berlin into two opposing Cold War camps. Buried and unburied dead bodies covered the landscape. During the final weeks of the war individuals, groups and whole armies represented and used these dead bodies as sites of political conflict to restore their version of moral and political order amid the chaos and violence of war. For Nazi SS officers like Hans Merbach, the dead bodies of Jews and slave labourers along the routes of death marches in early April 1945 represented the reassertion of Nazi ideology and confirmation of political control precisely as the Third Reich collapsed around them. But, as recognition of defeat became inevitable in late April, dead bodies became dangerous evidence of Nazi war crimes that needed to be burned and buried in a political effort to limit Allied retribution and the consequences of war crimes trials on men like Merbach. For German civilians along the routes of the death marches, the dead bodies were seen as potential physical evidence that they were somehow criminally and morally responsible for killing Jews and other civilians in their cities and towns. They feared that the advancing Allied occupiers would see the bodies and blame them for the crimes of Hitler and the Nazi regime. They helped to bury this toxic evidence in the ground and began the long (and continuing) road to coming to terms with the Nazi past. German

civilian fears were not unfounded. The occupying Americans made their own political use of dead bodies by forcing German civilians to disinter the evidence from mass graves and accept responsibility for the Nazi crimes committed in their names. These forced confrontations were one of the initial acts in the American reordering that created the ideal of the Second World War as a moral victory of good over evil, individualism over collectivism and democracy over totalitarianism.

Dead bodies were at the centre of the political and moral reordering of the 'zero hour' of 1945. They were not yet the abstractions or existential counterpoints of the living that they would become in the post-war histories and narratives of the Second World War and the Holocaust or in the memory of those catastrophes. The sight and smell of the corpses, the widely distributed Allied photographs of bodies stacked in camps, the geography of mass graves on the edges of cities or in small towns, the discovery, disinterment and reburial of hundreds of thousands of nameless victims were some of the first and most immediate *experiences* at the end of the war for surviving victims, perpetrators and witnesses. These experiences with and among dead bodies transformed perceptions of the meaning of the conflict for the Allies, Germans and the world. It was only *after* touring Ohrdruf and Buchenwald on 8 April and seeing dead bodies that Eisenhower declared famously that 'this is why we fight', thereby turning a military conflict with military objectives into a redemptive crusade with national moral purpose. Margaret Bourke White's *Life Magazine* photographs of stacked corpses provided the images that gave Eisenhower's words authority with US and world audiences. Interpreting Nazism, the Second World War and, ultimately, the Holocaust began in the presence (real and representational) of dead bodies.

The focus on dead bodies and their contested social, cultural and political meanings has potential to deepen our understanding of Nazi genocide and the Holocaust. While I have focused on dead bodies as evidence during the course of one death march, there is more work to be done on topics such as the act of civilian witnessing of dead bodies along death marches or at atrocity sites in Germany and across Nazi-occupied Europe during and immediately after the war. What was the relationship between German civilians' discovery of dead bodies and their recognition and understanding of Nazi genocide? While before and during the war they could attempt to ignore the camps and the living prisoners who moved between the town and the camps, witnessing dead bodies in the zone of killing around death marches was different. The physical human remains became part of everyday life and landscape throughout Germany during the last months of war. There was no longer any possibility of secrecy; Nazi killing was encoded on every dead body on their roads or in the fields and forests surrounding their residences or places of business. Due to American forced confrontation, German townspeople did not even have to follow Allied orders to tour the concentration camps to see dead bodies: the bodies came to them in their towns, up close, personal and immediate.

Dead bodies also reframe our understandings of the geographies of the Holocaust. Concentration camps and death camps in Germany and Nazi-occupied Europe had defined geographical locations, including structures to facilitate imprisonment, torture and killing. Conversely, mass-atrocity sites could be defined only

by the presence of dead bodies. As recent research has demonstrated, the Holocaust was geographically dispersed in the East, creating a massive zone of killing that followed the Nazi military advance after June 1941. As Jews, partisans, prisoners of war and others were murdered in villages, towns and cities there were thousands of mass graves that marked atrocity sites from Poland to the former Soviet Union. The only things these sites had in common were dead bodies left in unmarked mass graves. Death marches into Czechoslovakia, Austria and Germany in the spring of 1945 continued this dispersion of the dead and 'decentring' of mass killing and human remains into zones of killing. These sites raise new questions: how did the killings proceed? How did the bodies end up in a mass grave and who put them there? Were there witnesses to the killings and burial, and what was the relationship or role of these so-called 'bystanders' to the killings and the movement or placement of the bodies? What happened *after* the SS and their accomplices left the atrocity sites and life resumed in the villages, towns and cities and when Allied forces arrived in 1944 and 1945? What memory do the towns have of atrocities and the dead bodies and what meanings do townspeople attach to such historical memory?

There are also limitations to this approach to studying the Holocaust. First is the number of sources. Not surprisingly, since this was the most fluid and chaotic time of the war, there are very few surviving records from either the civilian or military sides to the conflict. Death-march victims and survivors, SS guards, German local authorities and civilians, and US troops were moving rapidly to an unknown fate or in active combat or violent encounters and did not have time to record their experiences, and they left very few records behind from this period of the war and the Nazi genocide. Second are the limitations of this focus on dead bodies and human remains during this particular period of the Second World War to interpret the causes and meanings of the death marches in the 'final phase of the Holocaust'. Historians of the death marches have meticulously reproduced the conflicting Nazi leadership orders that created the conditions for mass killing during the last month of the war and have documented the motivation and actions of the perpetrators. This study on the changing meanings of dead bodies as evidence essentially interprets the *aftermath* of the killings and the changing meanings of these human remains to different social groups as the war ended and into the early post-war period. The political uses of dead bodies reveal less about the causes of this orgy of killing or the motivations of the killers and more about how dead bodies became politicised as the Nazi regime crumbled the Allied occupation began and the victims tried to make sense of surviving an unimaginable destruction of life, family and culture.

Despite these limitations, the questions surrounding the politics of dead bodies and the evidential uses of human remains ask us to productively engage and not ignore the millions of dead bodies resulting from the Nazi genocide and the Holocaust. To treat dead bodies and remains as abstractions or an existential backdrop to the living is to reduce the power of their material existence and the meanings attached to that existence at the time by surviving Jews, German civilians and occupying Allied forces. Dead bodies do not stay dead; they have political lives that outlast the grave and continue to shape our understanding of history and memory.

Notes

- 1 M. J. Saks and N. J. Schweitzer, 'The CSI Effect. Popular Fiction about Forensic Science Affects Public Expectations about Real Forensic Science', *Jurimetrics* 47 (2007), 358, 357–364.
- 2 J.-A. Mbembe, 'Necropolitics', *Public Culture*, 15:1 (2003), 11–40.
- 3 K. Verdery, *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies: Reburial and Postsocialist Change*, The Harriman Lectures (New York, Columbia University Press, 2000).
- 4 F. Stepputat (ed.), *Governing the Dead: Sovereignty and the Politics of Dead Bodies*, Human Remains and Violence (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2014), p. 5.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 J.-M. Dreyfus, 'Renationalizing Bodies? The French Search Mission for the Corpses of Deportees in Germany, 1946–58', in J.-M. Dreyfus and E. Anstett (eds), *Human Remains and Mass Violence: Methodological Approaches* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2014), p. 130.
- 7 R. J. van Pelt, 'A Jack of All Trades in the Witness Box', in S. Dziuban (ed.), *Mapping the 'Forensic Turn'*. Engagement with Materiality of Mass Death in Holocaust Studies and Beyond, *Beiträge für Holocaustforschung des Wiener Wiesenthal Instituts für Holocaust-Studien*, 5 (2017), 39–62. Also see A. Bordeleau, S. Hastings, R. J. van Pelt and D. McKay, *The Evidence Room* (Toronto, New Jewish Press, 2016).
- 8 M. Myers Feinstein, *Holocaust Survivors in Postwar Germany, 1945–1957* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009) and A. Grossman, *Jews, Germans and Allies: Close Encounters in Occupied Germany* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2009).
- 9 Dreyfus, 'Renationalizing Bodies?'. The issue of reintering Jewish corpses after the war was taken up in two important books, Myers Feinstein, *Holocaust Survivors in Postwar Germany* and Grossmann, *Jews, Germans and Allies*.
- 10 G. N. Finder, 'Final Chapter: Portraying the Exhumation and Reburial of Polish Jewish Holocaust Victims in the Pages of Yizkor Books', in J.-M. Dreyfus and E. Anstett (eds), *Human Remains and Mass Violence: Methodological Approaches* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2014), pp. 34–58.
- 11 P. Desbois, *Holocaust by Bullets, A Priest's Journey to Uncover the Truth Behind the Murder of 1.5 Million Jews* (London, St. Martin's Griffin, 2009).
- 12 These conclusions about the process of killing and the perpetrators' actions is the subject of P. Desbois, *In Broad Daylight: The Secret Procedures behind the Holocaust by Bullets* (New York, Arcade Publishing, 2018).
- 13 C. E. Mauriello, *Forced Confrontation: The Politics of Dead Bodies in Germany at the End of World War II* (Lanham, Lexington Books, 2017).
- 14 Quoted in J. Gimbel, *The American Occupation of Germany: Politics and the Military, 1945–1949* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1968), p. 6. In the last two decades there has been increased historical interest in Germany at the 'zero-hour' at the end of the war in 1945. See I. Buruma, *Year Zero: A History of 1945* (New York, Penguin, 2013), J. Olick, *In the House of the Hangman: The Agonies of German Defeat, 1943–1945* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press,

- 2005), D. Stafford, *Endgame, 1945: The Missing Final Chapter of World War II* (New York, Little, Brown and Company, 2007), A. Beevor, *The Fall of Berlin 1945* (New York, Penguin Books, 2003), M. Gilbert, *The Day the War Ended: May 8, 1945 – Victory in Europe* (NY, Henry Holt and Company, 1995).
- 15 D. Blatman, *The Death Marches: The Final Phase of Nazi Genocide* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2011).
- 16 Blatman, *The Death Marches*, pp. 261–70 and 397–401.
- 17 See Buruma, *The Year Zero*.
- 18 K. Greiser, *Die Todesmärsche von Buchenwald: Raumdung, Befreiung und Spuren der Erinnerung*. Herausgegeben von der Stiftung Gedenkstätten Buchenwald und Mittelbau-Dora (Göttingen, Wallstein Verlag, 2008).
- 19 Y. Bauer, 'The Death-Marches January–May 1945', *Modern Judaism*, 3:1 (1983), 1–21.
- 20 The biography of Merbach comes from court records from the opening of his trial at Dachau on 24 February 1947. National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), RG 338 Box 432, Folder 4. There are multiple depositories for the records of the Dachau War Crimes Trials that were held in 1946–47 in the grounds of the former Dachau prison. The records cited here are copies of the original records held at the Buchenwald Archives. The original identifying section and page numbers of the printed trial transcripts are used. Biographical information cited here is from Buchenwald Archives (BA), File 5: 24.2.47. Also see the entry Hans Merbach, 'Life' in deAcademic, the German Wikipedia, <http://deacademic.com/dic.nsf/dewiki/578579#Leben> (accessed 1 February 2019).
- 21 The Trial of Amon Goeth Part 2, 'Initial Cross Examination and Witness Mr Mieczyslaw Pemper', www.holocaustresearchproject.org/trials/goeth2.html (accessed 1 February 2019).
- 22 Entry Hans Merbach, 'Life' in deAcademic, the German Wikipedia, <http://deacademic.com/dic.nsf/dewiki/578579#Leben> (Accessed 1 February 2019).
- 23 C. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York, Harper Collins, 1992).
- 24 BwA, o.S., Sammlung Katrin Greiser, Todesmärsche Stammlager, Bu. 7.4.45. The remaining citations use the original identifying section and page numbers from the printed trial transcripts.
- 25 Zaif-Direct, 1472.
- 26 Zaif-Direct, 1473.
- 27 Rosenfeld-Direct, 1457.
- 28 Merbach-Direct, 1473.
- 29 Merbach, *ibid*.
- 30 According to Merbach, the road was as wide as 'an autobahn' with ditches along the side (for drainage). Merbach-Direct, 3910.
- 31 Rosenfeld-Direct, 1457.
- 32 Merbach-Direct, 3910.
- 33 F. Bertrand, *Un Convoi D'Extermination Buchenwald-Dachau: Notre Devoir de Mémoire*. (Pau, Edition Art' Cool, 2003).
- 34 *Ibid*, 3209.

- 35 In April 1945 the Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force (SHAEF) shifted Allied air attacks to railways in Germany. Allied fighter planes strafed locomotives and wagons at railway stations and sidings and anything moving on the tracks that could imply troop movements. Unknowingly, they strafed a number of convoys carrying concentration camp prisoners, displaced persons and prisoners of war during this time. See Mauriello, *Forced Confrontation. The Politics of Dead Bodies in Germany at the End of World War II* (Lanham, MD, Lexington Books, 2017), pp. 54–55 and fn. 79.
- 36 Zaif-Direct, 1476 and Merbach-Cross, 3234–5.
- 37 Zaif-Direct, 1476.
- 38 Merbach-Cross 3245.
- 39 Ibid, 3223.
- 40 Mauriello, *Forced Confrontation*.
- 41 Ibid.
- 42 Bertram, document in handwritten form reprinted, 100–112.
- 43 Fürstenstein Town Hall Archives, Pfarrer-Bergmann-Steig 'Ehrt jetzt mutigen Aichaer Pfarrer Gedenkweg führt am Mahnmahl für ermordete KZ-Häftlinge vorbei. 19.05.2005.
- 44 Merbach-Cross, 3222.
- 45 NARA, RG 111-SC Records of the Office of the Chief Signal Officer Contact Prints 266341-266620 Box 486 PRINT-266552. Also see PRINT-266553.
- 46 Merbach-Cross, 3220.
- 47 The military battle for Dreiburgenland on 28–29 April is detailed in M. Himpf and W. Raster, *Das Schöne Dreiburgenland* (Saldenburg, Senning), pp. 389–92.
- 48 Ibid, p. 386. *Organisation Todt* was named after Fritz Todt, a senior Nazi later killed in a plane crash. Initially a uniformed division of engineers and construction labourers, during the war it increasingly relied on forced labourers, prisoners of war, military internees and concentration camp inmates, all under Speer's Ministry for Armaments and War Production. The soldiers used here were uniformed Germans captured in the battle for Tittling.
- 49 Himpf and Raster, *Das Schöne Dreiburgenland*.
- 50 NARA, RG 111-Contact Prints 206672-206950 Box 273 PRINT-206784-6 (Nammering). There is a second set of prints Box 487 PRINT-266691, 266692, 266698, 266670, 266672 (Passau). Also see German account, Himpf and Raster, *Das Schöne Dreiburgenland*, p. 386.
- 51 Flössenburg Archives, A939, 'Markt Eging am See'.
- 52 Verdery, *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies*, p. 51.
- 53 The statistics vary; these were taken from T. Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945* (New York, Penguin Books, 2005), pp. 17–18.