HUMAN REMAINS & VIOLENCE

Editorial

In this time of health crisis, the treatment of corpses has unexpectedly appeared as a matter of public health. Corpses are usually not shown in our societies; they are hidden from the view of most people, they are taken care of by professionals and no longer by families or communities. Nurses, doctors, undertakers and, less and less frequently, clerics assist the dying, care for the dead and handle the corpses. Death has gone into hiding, some say even gone underground. The COVID crisis reshuffled all of this in only a few days. In Western Europe, it was mid-March 2020. As a consequence, corpses *en masse* reappeared in the public sphere: hospital morgues and repositories proved insufficient and, in some regions, cemeteries could not handle all the dead. The city of New York reverted to mass graves. In Brazil, hundreds of individual graves were prepared in cemeteries: photos of them remind us of First World War images.

Human Remains and Violence does not usually deal with 'natural death': since its creation, it has published numerous articles on the treatment of corpses *en masse* after occurrences of mass violence and genocide. It has recently added the thematic of corpses produced by natural disasters, because of the handling of these by local facilities and by humanitarian, often international, organisations. But we did not expect to publish on a health crisis of that kind. Many of our contributors and our correspondents make it clear that the knowledge, analysis and expertise we have gathered through the journal should be used to bring some understanding of the current crisis. We have decided to publish a call for articles on the theme 'Burial and the politics of dead bodies in pandemic times'.[1] We expect to publish one or two issues on this topic in 2021. The sheer scale of this management of death is not without similarities with the situations of violence the journal is used to covering. The call states: 'Epidemics tend to reveal the state's management and rationalisation of public health. Crucially, too, acute mortality also reveals the what-and-whereabouts of dead bodies, and their ordering. Amidst an exceptional moment, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought with it acute discussions and disturbing images of queues of people waiting to receive urns with the remains of their loved ones in Wuhan, of military trucks bringing away coffins in Bergamo, and of temporary mass burials at the potter's field on Hart Island in New York City. Here, and in myriad places, the pace of dead bodies has outstripped the capacity of existing institutions and

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spaces with assumed responsibility for the proper treatment and/or disposal of dead bodies. The scale of the management of death has been reordered in dramatic ways, such that in São Paulo, Brazil, drones have become important to visualise mass burial in cemeteries from a different height.'

This is of course challenging for historians, who are not used to working on the present, to analysing an unfolding, unfinished crisis. Anthropologists, jurists, are admittedly more used to working on current situations. The interdisciplinarity of our journal is its strength and we thus strongly believe in the importance of the upcoming issue(s) on COVID-19.

This issue of *Human Remains and Violence* is in some ways exceptional too, as it is composed of varia. Since its creation, the journal has been used to present thematic issues, but significant and important articles have been submitted, and favourably reviewed. They are presented here. If they appear to be very diverse, they also have much in common. They cover different countries – Cambodia, Poland, Tanzania/Germany, Bosnia and Portugal – but they all show how political the treatment of corpses and human remains in post-conflict societies can be. The politisation of bones while they are on display or on demand appears as a common feature of these otherwise differently oriented contributions. The dual question of the visibility and of the display of those human remains also emerges in all of the articles.

In her path-breaking article, LeGall argues that the missing head of Ngoni leader Songea Mbano 'haunts the future of German–Tanzanian relations in culture and heritage'. The missing head is a sad reminder of past violence and subjugation in a colonial setting. The author also describes the many current efforts to deal with this loss, including with a theatre play performed in various German cities. Not only the politics of missing body parts prove to be transnational: the way to cope with it also goes beyond national borders. Jurist Caroline Fournet, who is also one of the editors of this journal, analyses minutely the use of forensic evidence related to the Tomašica mass grave during the prosecution of General Mladić before the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia. She argues that, contrary to what the trial judges found, the forensic reports supported the qualification of genocide for crimes perpetrated in Prijedor (Bosnia-Herzegovina).

Marije Hristova has done field research in Poland, observing the exhumation of the 'cursed soldiers' of the nationalist Resistance movement in the Second World War. Those soldiers were 'cursed' by the communist regime, and post-communist, nationalist Poland has redefined the identity of those corpses and has made them heroic. The politisation, though denied by the participations of exhumations and by the Polish officials in charge, is here blatant not only in the exhumation process itself but in the celebration of it. She shows how 'community archaeology', 'public archaeology' can lead to a remilitarisation, though gradual and subtle, of those remains. In her contribution, Fiona Gill analyses the politics behind the display of human remains in the memorialised killing sites of Cambodia. She suggests that such analyses fail to account for the motivations of scientific and forensic research, and that respect and personhood need not, indeed cannot, be situated wholly in the process of identification. She pleads for a different approach to human remains, which would

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'situate their meaning in themselves, rather than the interpretations of observers'. And finally, Greer Vanderbyl, John Albanese and Hugo F. V. Cardoso describe how corpses can be removed from their graves in today's Portuguese cemeteries, in the name of science. A social exhumation of a sample of those corpses, considering the length of time between their inhumation and their exhumation, but also the socio-economic status of those dead – who were buried in the cemeteries of the city of Lisbon between the 1890s and the 1980s – shows that the violence is structural and that the dead bodies of those who, while alive, held a high social ranking are no less prone to being exhumed.

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Notes

1 See https://networks.h-net.org/node/73374/announcements/6181850/call-publications-special-issue-human-remains-and-violence.

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