

From early 2020, the COVID-19 crisis generated global stupor and brought most countries to a stand-still. After first emerging in China, the virus soon spread across the whole northern hemisphere, and it is generally recognised that Western Europe and the United States of America were hit the hardest during what is now known as the first wave, in spring 2020. The subsequent waves then drastically affected the southern hemisphere and the Global South from summer (local winter) 2020 onward. At the time of writing, early July 2021, the pandemic is far from over and the emergence of variants is creating new risks.

The first wave created an unprecedented situation: for the first time, Europe suddenly closed up entirely, people were kept at home and the daily news focused on the evolution of the pandemic, on the global and local sanitary situations and challenges and on the death toll. Soon news emerged as to how the bodies of those who died from the disease were being disposed of. It thus rapidly became obvious to us that we should endeavour to use the specific epistemological tools we have developed in our research on ‘corpses of mass violence and genocide’ to investigate and try to understand – even if in a limited way – how the corpses of individuals who die from pandemics are treated and disposed of.

Our research and this journal consider occurrences of mass violence and genocide, whether in the distant or the most recent past, through the treatment of corpses and human remains generated en masse by these atrocities. It has initially nothing to do with the global sanitary crisis the world is going through. Certainly, *Human Remains and Violence* had published one article on the corpses generated by an epidemic – namely, cholera – which focused on the handling of soldiers’ corpses, a focus which established a clear link with conflicts and mass violence. The article by Benoît Pouget, ‘I am here and I am here to stay’, on the death and burial of soldiers with cholera during the Crimean War (1854–56),<sup>1</sup> appeared in December 2019, just as the world was witnessing with dismay the spread of the virus in China and just before COVID-19 became a global issue making international headlines. The article deals with the handling of soldiers’ corpses and the topic is thus linked to mass violence, even if this journal is more focused on the cadavers of civilians – but the role of the army in innovating on the treatment of corpses is a topic of our research and publications. Not surprisingly, various armies were called upon almost immediately

## Editorial

to help, replace and supplement the medical systems in most of the countries hit by the current global pandemic and, in some cases, to help with handling the surplus of dead bodies. The journal has also published several articles on the treatment of corpses after natural disasters.

However, through numerous online discussions held from our respective homes during the first lockdown we realised that the surprisingly high death toll confronted nations, health systems and funerary companies worldwide with questions, problems and challenges that sound familiar to us, as we are accustomed to working on death-crisis situations. Families were deeply struck by losses and pain, but also by the many restrictions imposed on the usual funerary and mourning practices. As these radical changes became widely reported, we realised that the questioning, methodologies and theoretical approaches we had carefully developed over many years of research on mass death could and should be applied to the crisis we were going through.

We also realised that a strong social demand was emerging to use the tools and methodologies of the social sciences to explain the new situations. The novelty of the crisis, coupled with the unsatisfying and often problematic media coverage of it, created the need for rigorous research to be conducted, even in the course of an unfolding situation. This demand was made more concrete by the numerous calls for projects published by various funding bodies, and the diversity of calls for papers issued by different editors.

This is the reason why we decided very early – in fact as early as April 2020 – to publish an issue of the journal *Human Remains and Violence* focused on the treatment of dead bodies en masse in a time of COVID-19. We have commissioned our colleagues Gaëlle Clavandier (Université Jean Monnet Saint-Etienne, France), Graham Denyer Willis (University of Cambridge, United Kingdom) and Finn Stepputat (Danish Institute for International Studies, Denmark) to produce and guest-edit this issue. A call for articles was drafted and disseminated in several languages, with a view to being, in line with the journal's policy and philosophy, as inclusive and global as possible – greatly supported by the fact that our intent was from the very beginning to be as global as possible. The three colleagues are renowned experts in the study of mourning and funerals and of the treatment of corpses in peacetime in so-called developed societies, and the response to the call for articles was so successful that two issues were ultimately planned, the first published in autumn 2021 and the second to be published in spring 2022.

Interestingly, and while, as alluded to, pandemics are not situations of mass violence, the link to mass violence does arise in several contributions. In particular, some consider that the failure of certain governments to provide adequate medical care and prevention to all the population can be assimilated to an intent to let die, if not murder. While this statement can be discussed, what appears more striking is the similarities in the challenges posed by the handling of corpses of mass violence and by that of corpses of pandemics. Both raise indeed very comparable questions of chains of custody and of power dynamics. Tellingly, the many agents – families, medical staff, medical systems, governmental agencies, local authorities – in charge of the corpses of pandemics are the same individuals who deal with victims of mass

violence. Against this background, the research published in this journal on corpses of mass violence can thus prove instrumental in grasping and addressing the challenges posed by corpses of pandemics. Two articles show the importance of the past disappearance of opponents and of corpses (in Mexico and in Brazil) to analysis of the current situation in relation to the treatment of COVID-19 victims and of their corpses.

Furthermore, the already-framed thematic of mass death can serve as a key tool in studying the corpses of pandemics and of COVID-19 when it comes to funerary rituals, to the place of religion even in highly secularised societies, to the publication in the media of pictures of cadavers and/or funerals and of course to communication technologies, with the emergence of 'Zoom dying' and 'Zoom funerals'.

All these matters are at the core of the articles published in these two special issues. For this first issue, entitled 'Burial and the politics of dead bodies in times of COVID-19', the authors were confronted with a number of practical difficulties, including – but most likely not limited to – the inherent problem of analysing contemporary history, the difficulty of conducting ethnographic research during lockdown, the near-impossible access to documentation in a time of pandemic, but also the brouhaha of a media frenzy in which information is both scarce and lavishly distributed by self-proclaimed experts.

We thank the authors and the guest editors warmly for their brilliant contributions to a much-needed work, to a work that is necessarily in progress.

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## Note

- 1 *Human Remains and Violence*, 5:2 (2019), 56–71.