

Sarah E. Wagner, *What Remains: Bringing America's Missing Home from the Vietnam War* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2019, 304 pp., \$29.95 hardback).

Holding Sarah Wagner's new monograph, with its minimalist white cover illustrated with only the iconic triangle-folded US flag, the reader may feel invited to feel a peculiar sense of respect. American exceptionalism is one of its central topics, as *What Remains* is an attempt to make sense of an 'ethos of exceptional care' for the US war dead, in which the Vietnam War would have been a turning point. The book is beautifully written and cleverly crafted, with its six chapters interwoven with four interludes. These shorter texts, framed with decorated margins that give them an almost solemn tone, take a more intimate approach to unaccounted-for US service members or their relatives, in particular Lance Corporal Merl Allen and the communities of Bayfield and Red Cliff, Wisconsin, which constitute one of the book's main narrative arcs. The remains of Allen, who died in a helicopter crash in central Vietnam, were recovered in 2012 during a search mission, recounted in Chapter 4, in which Wagner took part while she was conducting research with US forensic teams. Indeed, during the decade of research on which this book is built, Wagner was able to gain privileged and repeated access to Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command in Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam, mainly in 2011 and 2012. Wagner also conducted broader research among what she calls the 'MIA accounting community', in particular MIA (Missing in Action) advocates, veterans and families of missing soldiers.

The book sheds light on the multiple, sometimes diverging interests and aspirations summed up in the notion of 'fullest possible accounting'. It also lucidly complicates the notion of 'missing in action', a 'deceptively neat phrase' covering the vast diversity of 'fates unaccounted for in any modern war' and numerous official categories such as 'last known alive', 'killed in action/body not recovered', 'believed to be . . .', among others. As the conclusion aptly sums it up, the book chiefly shows 'how forensic science has itself become part of a complex ritual response, changing the way the United States as a nation remembers and honors its war dead,' drawing inspiration from the works of Robert Hertz, Jay Winter, Thomas Laqueur, Catherine Verdery, Benedict Anderson and Victor Turner.

Forensic work per se is covered most in depth in Chapter 2, mainly set in the Central Identification Laboratory in Hawaii, which saw its staff grow from 25 at the time of its transfer from Thailand in 1976 to over 400 during Wagner's fieldwork. These few decades saw the laboratory's military leaning gradually shift towards increasingly civilian staff and academic standards, partly under the pressure of public criticism regarding its scientific integrity. The 2000s were critical to this shift, with the lab complying with several procedures of certification. The chapter also paints a general picture of MIA casework. Identifications often take many years and entail multiple lines of evidence: historical (with twelve historians working full time), archaeological, anthropological, taphonomical, dental (dental records have been kept since the early 1900s) and, of course, genetic (mtDNA, Y-STR and auSTR, mainly conducted under the supervision of the Armed Forces DNA Identification Laboratory [AFDIL], located in Dover Air Force Base, Delaware). Wagner guides the reader with much clarity through the general principles and stakes of casework. The chapter's panoramic approach is illustrated by two case studies, one in which a DNA plays a key role in the identification, while in the other the main line of evidence is dental. This chapter is both fascinating and frustrating, as it suggests that Wagner's ethnographic material is incredibly rich; but, despite an explicit reference to Latour's work, it keeps many of the lab's black boxes closed. For example, AFDIL's outreach programme, which aims at collecting relatives' genetic material in the absence of a self-reference, is evoked only briefly; a reproduction of its family reference sample chart is provided, but not much is said about this key aspect of identifications, and the document is not exploited.

One of my favourite sections, in Chapter 1, tells the fascinating story of the Vietnam Unknown Soldier. After the idea of adding a Vietnam War soldier to Arlington National Cemetery's unknowns was approved in 1973, forensics were faced with the somehow paradoxical task of selecting a suitable set of remains, that is, one certain to remain unknown. Three of the four candidates were ruled out, mainly because of their political profiles: a suspected deserter, a set of remains that had first been misidentified and one that was potentially not American. Wagner shows how the fourth candidate, First Lieutenant Blassie, had gradually become anonymous: fragilised by the loss of personal belongings during transfer of the pilot's remains, their hypothetical identification was deleted by the Armed Services Graves Registration Office review board after a hair blood-typing and anthropological stature evaluation mistakenly ruled the airman out. In fact, he was a good unknown because he was known enough to be unproblematic. The scientific staff who had initially expressed scepticism about 'foreclosing the possibility of scientific advance' was proven right in the end: after the then abandoned hypothesis of the remains belonging to Blassie was made public in the mid-1990s, newly available DNA identification confirmed their identity. This narrative is a great illustration of one of the book's greatest ethnographic merits: it shows how remains can become unidentified and circulate between administrative categories, domains of scientific and commemorative attention and degrees of uncertainty. According to Wagner, this case was historically paradigmatic: 'Blassie', she concludes, 'ushered in an era of exceptional

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care that to this day underwrites, at times haunts, the US military's efforts to account for its missing war dead.'

Indeed, one of the book's main theses is that the promise of DNA technology created new expectations among the US public and government. These new expectations are well illustrated by the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2010. This Act extended the 'fullest possible accounting' imperative to all US military losses since the Second World War, bringing the total of official unaccounted-for service members from 10,000 to approximately 82,000, gave a central role to evidence produced by forensic science and set an annual goal of at least 200 identifications per year (versus 72 on average between 2002 and 2012). Such policies and the controversies on so-called 'risk-averse' or 'outmoded' scientific practices are analysed in Chapter 3, which takes sides with forensic scientists against benchmarking policies, 'snowballing negative press' and 'layperson assumptions' about science, which would neglect the 'ethics of certainty' attendant to the 'ethos of exceptional care'.

Chapters 5 and 6 dive into 'small town America' and focus on the 'memory work' accomplished by MIA surviving kin and veterans. They describe how missing soldiers are commemorated in their unresolved absence or on the occasion of their 'homecomings', which are 'both highly public and intensely private affairs'. Indeed, drawing on the writings of Halbwachs and Winter, Wagner argues that this memory work is 'neither wholly individual nor exclusively national'. Describing creative practices of remembrance – from individual gestures of commemoration at the National Veterans Memorial to the slow renovation of a communal Veterans of Foreign Wars post – and rightly criticising the notion of 'closure', Wagner argues that these are also gestures of reclamation on personal and collective levels, embedded in a long history of dispossession, Red Cliff being a largely Native American community.

There is a tension throughout the book between such attempts to map MIA politics and an inclination to neutralise it: 'Homecomings enabled by forensic scientific innovations entwine the living with the dead in the project of national belonging, but they do so on local terms and according to the particular histories of loss and remembrance.' The limits of this approach appear in the book's occasional conversation with Viet Thanh Nguyen, in particular when Wagner argues against his critical observation that 'depictions of war as war' tend to be absent in commemoration. Arguing that more innocent narratives and 'hometown fashion' celebrations 'cleansed of the horrors' of war are 'a different kind of exceptional care' does not make what one could call, with Kundera, memorial kitsch, less problematic. Further, when Wagner discusses Georges Perec's idea that there are no 'intangible places', arguing that he 'overlooks other possibilities for keeping sites alive in our memories [as] spaces of communion and commemoration', she overlooks the fact that Perec's argument is a reference to concentrationary violence and the impossible memory of his childhood after his mother's assassination in a Nazi death camp.

It remains unclear to me whether the 'ethos of exceptional care' central to the book's argument is a cause or an effect of the historical process at work. It is alternatively described as a 'new sacred thing' created by the promise of forensic science, as an 'expedient narrative to push past the Vietnam War's embittering divisiveness'

or as pertaining to a 'cultural imperative'. It is at times said to be 'cultivated by the state', at others a deeply embodied 'American tradition' or 'sensibility'. Despite an attempt to historicise the notion back to the Civil War in Chapter 1, all of this contributes to a dilution of agency and tends to blur the 'politics and obstacles of exceptional remembrance' at play. Moreover, the cultural argument bypasses the global character of what readers of *Human Remains and Violence* know as the 'forensic turn'.

The recurrent and loose recourse to the semantic fields of 'ritual' and the 'sacred' was another limit in my enjoyment of the book. For the former, Wagner mainly refers to Turner's liminality and Van Gennep's *rites de passage*. Thus, she shows how ritual aspects of the handling of recovered remains contribute to transforming them from 'bits of bone found on a mountainside or objects of scientific examination' into 'emblems of national sacrifice'. But the notion loses much of its leverage when used too broadly, as when Wagner elaborates on the 'daily rites of digging and screening' during the search mission in Vietnam. If motifs of repetition and operations of purification can be features of ritual action, they are definitely not exclusive to it. Otherwise, much of what is accomplished in a science laboratory should be called 'ritual', and I doubt our understanding of either notion would benefit from such assimilation.

Similarly, there is no clear discussion of what the idiom of the 'sacred' covers, and I wondered whether it was mobilised under the influence of Hertz's Durkheimian vocabulary. However, Hertz barely taps into this idiom in his seminal study on death. Another hypothesis would be that the sacred appears in Wagner's book, although not explicitly so, as an emic notion, as in Laqueur's discussions on the status of human remains throughout European history in *The Work of the Dead*. Yet, while Laqueur describes, with Philippe Ariès, a gradual shift from metaphysics to memory, Wagner's vocabulary suggests a convergence. When reading Wagner's comments on the 'extraordinary power' of homecomings and their rituals infused with a 'sense of communion', I had the feeling that the book was itself, in some ways, a performative tribute to the missing soldiers, as suggested by the dedication using the same symbols as the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. I was sometimes tempted to read between the lines a desire to draw the portrait of a reconciled America, maybe in response to a broader context of US politics.

For a reader familiar with the issue only through popular culture, the book's many encounters with the figure of the Vietnam War veteran were very telling. I was particularly struck by the layers of meaning and care that Wagner's ethnography revealed under the chrome and leather of the Hero Bike (a motorcycle collectively built by veterans as a tribute to the fallen) and the Patriot Guard Riders' convoys. The book thus hints at different, but maybe no less problematic, homecomings of those who survived the war, as in Jim Northrup's beautiful poem quoted at the end of Chapter 6: 'How about a memorial/for those who made it/through the war/but still died/before their time.' Such insights fully justify the broad-rather-than-deep scope of the book's thick and sensitive ethnography, and the few frustrations I have expressed show to what extent it provides material for discussions encouraged by the critical apparatus's forensic precision. From this point of view, *What Remains* will

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definitely join Wagner's previous opus as a must-read in any bibliography on contemporary post-war forensic work and memory.

Paul Sorrentino
EHESSE

Joanna Tokarska-Bakir, *Pod Kłatwą: Społeczny portret pogromu kieleckiego (Cursed: A Social Portrait of the Kielce Pogrom)* (Warsaw, Wydawnictwo Czarna Owca, 2018, 768 pp., £21.00).

It is perhaps telling that, when reading Joanna Tokarska-Bakir's *Cursed: A Social Portrait of the Kielce Pogrom*, I could not stop thinking about another book: Graham Denyer Willis's *The Killing Consensus: Police, Organized Crime, and the Regulation of Life and Death in Urban Brazil*.¹ They could not be more different, one dealing with anti-Jewish violence in Poland in the immediate aftermath of the Holocaust, the other with routinised and normalised killings by the police and organised crime groups in the contemporary megacity of São Paulo; one based on intense ethnographic labour, the other on meticulous microhistorical study of archival materials, some of them never considered by historians of the Kielce pogrom (many collected in the second volume of *Cursed*), and a critical rereading of the known ones.

Denyer Willis's book constitutes a critical intervention into conceptualisations of sovereignty, with its control over violence and, thus, over life and death, as consolidated in the hands of the state and, instead, portrays it as decentralised. In contemporary urban Brazil, he argues, the right to kill in the name of social order is distributed between different actors (the police and organised crime) relatively 'peacefully' and symbiotically coexisting as they go after a common enemy. It is the 'expendable' population of 'killable' subjects: young, uneducated, racialised urban poor that die every day, at the hands of both, without even being noticed by the state. And it is exactly the moral consensus around their 'deservedness of death'² that renders the killing predictable and controllable, and the decentralised, and shared, order relatively stable. Tokarska-Bakir's book centres, in turn, on one, albeit particularly violent, event to critically intervene in the existing framings of the pogrom as either orchestrated from above or perpetrated by riff-raff. Instead, reconstructing step by step its unfolding and its social context, she shows that the pogrom's *communitas* of violence cut across all strata of Polish society and was composed of multiple and seemingly antagonistic actors, resorting to anti-Jewish violence as a means of exercising 'social control' (p. 247) – by turning against a common enemy. What the two books have in common, then, is the acknowledgement of the necessity to relocate the reflection on violence from its 'instance' (or a series thereof) to its structural, normative or social conditions – it is there that normative categories of the living are drawn and violence is legitimised and justified; it is there that certain categories of subjects are rendered expendable and killable, and this becomes a matter of (often unspoken) consensus.

While this normative underpinning seems obvious to the vast majority of contemporary anthropologists of violence,³ the Polish historiography of the Holocaust and its aftermath remains largely immune. This, as Tokarska-Bakir indicates in the opening paragraphs of *Curse*, has to do with deeply instilled cultural epistemologies, and with the political orders of knowledge, structured around ‘ideological history’ – a history fixated on, and perpetuating, dominant political narratives (nationalist and anti-communist) and distinctions (the Poles/the Jews, the communists/anti-communists, the elite/the riff-raff). But it is also a history driven by what Tokarska-Bakir termed elsewhere an ‘obsession with innocence’,⁴ which, in the name of an upheld national self-image, dismisses any need to fully acknowledge the scale of involvement of Poles in the Holocaust and the post-war violence, even at the expense of ‘facts’ and historical accounts. In order to disassemble this frame, Tokarska-Bakir resorts to the means of social history and performs a close reading of pre-war and wartime trajectories of the multitude of actors involved in the pogrom, many of whom enter the stage for the first time. This allows her to portray not only the relative weakness of the socialist state in the early post-war years, lacking legitimacy to, among other things, delegitimise the widespread anti-Semitism, but also the extent to which its institutions had been infiltrated by people who, during the war, were involved in the killing of the Jews. What we see in this portrait is a church perpetuating the anti-Semitic myth of blood libel (which acted as a direct incentive for the pogrom) and consequently refusing to acknowledge responsibility for it, a demoralised Polish army, whose members, abusing their licence to kill, join ranks with the pogrom crowd, a citizens’ militia largely recruited from anti-communist and far-right partisans and representatives of pre-war intelligentsia, equally ready to exercise their right to kill – in the name of ethnic loyalties.

Drawing from Richard White, Tokarska-Bakir explains this in terms of the *middle ground*: an unspoken alliance between seemingly antagonistic actors, regardless of their political, social and class positioning (the anti-communists and communists, the workers and intelligentsia) structured around the will to live, but also around the hostility towards those de facto deemed Other. ‘The figure of the bloodsucking Jew, the figure understandable for all: Catholics, nationalists, communists, became after the Second World War a binder of the Polish imagined community,’ writes Tokarska-Bakir (p. 246). But there is more to this *middle ground*, with deep pre-war but also wartime roots. At its heart lies what could be framed in terms borrowed from Denyer Willis as a *killings consensus*, a consensus around the killability of the Jews. And during the war, indeed, Poles – both the all too many who killed and those who merely watched, notwithstanding their class or political stance – learned that Jews are killable.

It is this normative frame that allows Tokarska-Bakir to understand why a lie, invented by a child (about being kidnapped for blood), had the ability to incite an eight-hour-long orgy of violence that cost fifty-two people their lives. This violence is made disturbingly palpable in the book through survivors’ accounts, but also through extensive quotes from autopsy reports of those killed in the pogrom. While this serves to ground abstract narratives of pogrom violence (and could be read as a moral demand not to look away and to *really* comprehend), the accounts

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of severely mutilated bodies speak, too, to the intensity of affect with which it was invested – an affect rooted in the depth of the shared anti-Semitic prejudice, both in its traditional modality (expressive in the legend of blood libel) and a modern one, in which the mere visibility of Jews, especially in spaces from which they were traditionally excluded, caused severe discomfort (p. 415). To kill meant to exercise and restore social control. Decentralised sovereignty does not always work in routinised ways.

Tokarska-Bakir's book is not an easy read, but a very important one. It is at once a social portrait of the pogrom and a mirror critically reflecting (and arresting) all historiographic attempts at externalisation and exoticisation of the early post-war violence. This because it is not only the understanding of past violence that is at stake but, also, the question as to how (and if) the deeply instilled cultural epistemologies, and the political orders of knowledge, perpetuate and redraw the normative categories of the living – both of the Other and of the Self.

Zuzanna Dziuban,
Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften

Notes

- 1 G. Denyer Willis, *The Killing Consensus: Police, Organized Crime, and the Regulation of Life and Death in Urban Brazil* (Oakland, University of California Press, 2015).
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 97.
- 3 See, for instance, N. Scheper-Hughes and P. Bourgois (eds), *Violence in War and Peace* (Malden, Oxford, Carlton, Blackwell, 2004).
- 4 J. Tokarska-Bakir, *Rzeczy mgliste: eseje i studia* (Sejny, Fundacja Pogranicze, 2004), pp. 13–22.