

Desirable Death?

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REVIEW OF: *La Mort du Bourreau: Réflexions Interdisciplinaires sur le Cadavre des Criminels de Masse*, ed. by Sévane Garibian (Paris: Éditions Pétra, 2016). 296 pp. €23.00 (pb). ISBN: 978-2-8474-3151-3.

How do mass criminals die? What do we do with their corpses? How does the perpetrator's death affect society at large? These questions are not new, but the death in the past decade of Idi Amin Dada, Augusto Pinochet, Saddam Hussein, Slobodan Milošević, Osama bin Laden, Mouammar Gaddafi, and Ieng Sary makes them highly topical. Yet, they remain under-theorized, a 'taboo within a taboo', as the editor of *La Mort du Bourreau*, Sévane Garibian, argues in her introduction to the book (p. 25). Of course, *damnatio memoriae* and martyrology have long been studied in different disciplines, starting with archaeology and anthropology. However, they have not made their way yet into the specific realm of man-made mass violence. Academics who work at the intersection of body studies and genocide studies usually focus on the victims. Recent years have brought a growing number of studies on aspects as diverse as body count, exhumation and forensics, evidence, rituals and re-interring, political and social uses of the victims' remains in the aftermath of massacres.¹ So far, perpetrator studies has paid more attention to living perpetrators than dead ones — a tropism which reflects to some extent the fascination in the public with the mass murderer's psychology and intimate life (p. 25). Confessions and testimonies are a source of information on the crimes themselves, the individual process of radicalization, the role of ideology, social circumstances, and peer pressure. There are, obviously, some studies on the perpetrator's body, but much work is still to be done on this topic.² *La Mort du Bourreau*, thus, fills a gap. Garibian defines three areas of inquiry:

- 1 See for instance the research conducted by anthropologists Élisabeth Anstett and Jean-Marie Dreyfus in the framework of the European research program Corpses of Mass Violence and Genocide, and the affiliated interdisciplinary journal *Human Remains and Violence*; see also, *Necropolitics: Mass Graves and Exhumations in the Age of Human Rights*, ed. by Francisco Ferrándiz and Antonius C.G.M. Robben (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 20015); Julie Fleischman, 'Working with the Remains in Cambodia: Skeletal Analysis and Human Rights after Atrocity', *Genocide Studies and Prevention*, 10 (2016), 121–30; Laura Major, 'Unearthing, Untangling and Re-articulating Genocide Corpses in Rwanda', *Critical African Studies*, 7 (2015), 164–81; Layla Renshaw, *Exhuming Loss: Memory Materiality and Mass Graves of the Spanish Civil War* (New York: Routledge, 2016); Victor Toom, 'Whose Body Is it? Technological Materialization of Victims' Bodies and Remains after the World Trade Center Attacks', *Science, Technology and Human Values*, 41 (2016), 686–708.
- 2 *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies: Reburial and Postsocialist Change*, ed. by Katherine Verdery (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999); *Death of the Father: An Anthropology of the End of Political Authority*, ed. by John Borneman (New York: Berghahn Books, 2004); Sergio Luzzato, *The Body of Il Duce: Mussolini's Corpse and the*

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the modalities of the perpetrator's death, the post-mortem treatment of the body, and the transformation (or not) of the perpetrator's grave into a site of pilgrimage (p. 23). The case studies from all the continents cover three key moments: the emergence of the concepts of war crime, genocide, and crime against humanity in the aftermath of the First and Second World Wars; the rise of the global human rights discourse during the Cold War and the decolonization period; and the birth of transitional justice in the post-Cold War era (p. 27).

La Mort du Bourreau puts emphasis on the legal dimension of the topic. Still, the interdisciplinary perspective is broad enough to accommodate readers with different academic backgrounds. The opening essay of the book sets the tone. Élodie Tranchez discusses the relation of tyrannicide and international law as it was shaped by conventions and treaties over the past century. As she convincingly argues, the difficulty in reaching a universal definition of the tyrant — head of state or terrorist, civilian, or combatant — has generated many grey zones between war and peace, intervention and protection, and the military and political nature of the act of killing the tyrant. The contribution of Tranchez provides the overarching structure of the book. It is in the light of the issues it raises that the other essays may be read.

The first part of *La Mort du Bourreau* looks into the 'death-escape' of the perpetrator — when he dies of natural causes — and its effect in terms of legal impunity and collective remembrance. Two contributions address more specifically the question of locality. Anne-Yvonne Guillou focuses on the cenotaph of Pol Pot at Anlong Veng in Cambodia, a former Khmer Rouge stronghold turned a few years ago into a tourist spot and a 'new frontier' area. At the intersection of memory politics, dark tourism, and economic liberalization, she examines the appropriation of the dictator's grave by different groups. The rituals of villagers who just arrived in the region and transform Pol Pot into a 'guardian spirit' of the territory offer a particularly striking example of alternative memorialization. The combination of indigenous practices and political myths is a central issue too in historian Karin Ramondy's essay on Jean-Bedel Bokassa (Central African Republic) and Idi Amin Dada (Uganda). Ramondy compares the relative 'rehabilitation' of the two dictators in their countries and the international perception still influenced by media images of Bokassa and Idi Amin's excesses at the time. This opposition perfectly illustrates the relevance of a postcolonial interpretation of the perpetrator's death in some contexts. The two other contributions in this part investigate the legal dimension of 'death-escape'. Rosa Ana Alija Fernández uses the cases of Franco and Pinochet to describe the effect of international law on the social perception of the dictator. Franco, buried in full impunity at the Valley of the Fallen, remains at the heart of unresolved memory conflicts in Spain. In contrast, Pinochet, who was prosecuted, ended up in a half-abandoned chapel on the family

Fortunes of Italy (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2005); Thomas Keenan and Eyal Weizman, *Mengele's Skull: The Advent of a Forensic Aesthetics* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012).

estate. Linking these legal and symbolic developments, Fernández advocates a ‘privatization’ of the perpetrator’s remains, which prevents him from haunting public life in a period of democratic transition. Florence Hartman explores an ‘in-between’ situation, the unfinished trial of Slobodan Milošević due to his death by a heart attack and the controversy that ensued as his supporters contested the forensic report and depicted him as the victim of a Western conspiracy. It is an absorbing account (with the occasional dig at the former Yugoslavia tribunal), which persuasively argues that this premature end reinforced Milošević’s legacy in Serbia and hampered the collective process of mourning and taking responsibility.

Hanging, both as punishment of the dictator and a political and symbolic message addressed to the population, is the theme running through the second part of the book, the ‘death-sentence’ or judicial execution of the perpetrator. The two essays emphasize the degrading dimension of hanging, in marked contrast with an honourable death by firing squad or on the battlefield. Nicolas Patin looks into the fate of two groups of high-ranking Nazis, the ‘masterminds’ in Berlin (prosecuted at Nuremberg), and those who carried out regional politics in occupied areas (some prosecuted in Yugoslavia, Poland and Latvia). Seen as a form of controlled violence, the judicial hanging was meant as the founding moment of the ‘new world order’. With this in mind, Patin examines the visibility of these executions, either as public event or in the press, and the role of visual mediation in postwar social dynamics. Ana Arzoumanian raises similar questions with respect to the execution of Saddam Hussein. She explores several aspects of his hanging, such as its religious connotations, the video and its remediation, the disappearance of the dictator’s body, and the resulting lack of closure for the Iraqi people. One may regret, though, that she overlooked the resonance between Saddam Hussein’s death and his hiding in a ‘spider’s hole’ for almost a year before being captured. The last part of her essay, which could easily do without any references to Barthes and Deleuze, provides an interesting view of the role of art where justice fails.

The third part of *La Mort du Bourreau* deals with spectacular ‘death-revenge’. As all the contributions make clear, extra-judicial killing often fails to bring any form of closure, whether it is historical, legal, or social. Sévane Garibian focuses on the trial of Soghomon Tehlirian, the Armenian survivor who killed Talaat Pacha in Berlin in 1921. In spite of its strong impact on the German public at the time, the trial was only a brief disruption in the long history of impunity and forgetting that characterizes the Armenian Genocide. While the acquittal of Tehlirian was a powerful gesture, it was replaced twenty years later by that of Hitler giving back Talaat’s remains to Turkey. Didier Musiedlak confronts the multiple narratives of Mussolini’s execution and autopsy that have emerged in Italy since 1945. His masterly contribution demonstrates the extent to which the discrepancy between the different versions is what actually keeps Mussolini’s memory alive — until today — by fuelling interrogations, nostalgia,

and speculations about the involvement of the Allied Forces in his execution. The role of external powers, especially France, in the death of Muammar Gaddafi is one of the questions Muriel Montagut raises in her essay. She discusses the media coverage of the Libyan dictator's lynching and the public effect of these gruesome images. More importantly, she wonders what kind of society may emerge out of this violent event. Is catharsis, as a reversal of social order, capable to put an end to violence, or is it on the contrary a door open to new atrocities? Her answer, as might be expected, is far from being optimistic. A similar criticism of extra-judicial killing is to be found in Frédéric Mégret's analysis of the assassination of Osama bin Laden by the Obama administration. It is a good and meticulous — if at times a bit abstruse to the non-specialist — illustration of the issues encountered in Tranchez's text. Mégret uses the example of bin Laden to reflect on the execution of the terrorist as either an outcome of international law or an exception to it. He examines the integration of transgression as part of the project of eradicating terrorism and questions the consequences of such a move as the state must confront its own limits in terms of biopower and sovereignty.

Since the book aims to explore the perpetrator's death in relation to international law and the pursuit of justice, it would have been fascinating to look into more ambivalent situations — or a less obvious choice of perpetrators. Ariel Sharon, whose body was maintained in a permanent vegetative state for eight years, neither dead nor alive, would certainly have made an arresting case study. Moreover, the gender dimension is missing. The execution of Nicolae and Elena Ceaușescu after a parody of a trial would have been an opportunity to deal with this aspect of the dictator's death. That being said, *La Mort du Bourreau* canvasses an impressive array of material. It successfully demonstrates the potential of adopting an international scope in understanding differences and commonalities in the fate of perpetrators worldwide. As such, it provides a welcome addition to the existing body of literature on the subject. Furthermore, it is a very timely reading in a period of sanctioned and non-sanctioned military interventions, emotional engagement with atrocity by Western leaders and populations alike, and a generalized disparaging of international courts and institutions. When many war-torn countries are on the verge of collapse and/or transition, the question of the dictator's end and the impact it may have on the future should occupy centre stage. As Antoine Garapon aptly points out in his foreword, a new life starts for the perpetrator after his death. It is a life in which the living, whether they are survivors, relatives of victims, or new generations, have a role to play. A role that is in part already shaped by the kind of death the dictator met. Montagut gives the example of children in Libya re-enacting the lynching of Gaddafi as a game. Is that really what they want? Is that really what we want? She quotes — and the last words should be his — the former French diplomat in Tripoli Patrick Haimzadeh. Violence, he says, does not give birth to democracy; democracy is learning how to end conflicts in a peaceful way (p. 289).

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