

People, Things, and Animals

# The Dignity of the Dead

Thursday, May 19 – Saturday, May 21, 2022

Conference

EINSTEIN  
FORUM

# *The Dignity of the Dead*

Conceived by  
Mischa Gabowitsch, Potsdam  
Frédéric Keck, Paris/Berlin

International Conference  
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In a time of war and plague, how do we treat the dead with dignity? How has this question been answered in different times and places? Why do we display the bodies of certain heroes or victims, of certain saints or political leaders? Why do we present some of our dead in museums in the name of medicine or as colonial artefacts? What is the duty of the living to the dead?

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Round table discussion

*Exposing the Dead. Human Remains on Display*

With **Isabelle Reimann, Holger Stoecker, Liv Nilsson Stutz, Aleksei Yurchak**. Chair: **Frédéric Keck**

Throughout human history, treating the deceased with dignity has often meant burying their bodies or otherwise hiding them from view. Yet time and again, some human corpses or parts thereof are put on display. This can be done both to honor and to dishonor the dead, and to warn or inspire the living. In the colonial era, European museums started collecting and displaying body parts in the name of science and medicine. What should museums do with such collections today? Should they always be restituted, and if so, to whom? Who has a claim to the dead? And do the dead have a claim on us?

**Sarah Benz**, Berlin

*Selbstbestimmt Abschied nehmen?*  
*[Saying Farewell Your Own Way?]*

Losing loved ones and saying farewell to them are fundamental parts of the human experience. Yet the ways in which we part with the dead vary considerably. Germany's formerly rigid funerary culture is currently evolving to allow more individualized practices. Sarah Benz illustrates these changes using examples from her everyday work and excerpts from her series of short films, *Sarggeschichten* (Coffin Stories).

**Sarah Benz** is a grief counselor, emergency pastor, funeral director, and lecturer. She was confronted with death at an early age and experienced first-hand how helpful it can be to design one's own farewell process. She created the short film series *Sarggeschichten* in 2015 and has advocated for more individual autonomy in mourning culture.

**Mischa Gabowitsch**, Potsdam

*Introduction: The Dead Among Us*

Dead human bodies embarrass and revolt us. Most of us approach them only if they have been altered to hide evidence of death. The dead are removed from the society of the living and re-enter them only in mediated manner: via lifetime portraits, grave markers, prayer or other ritual acts. Yet this attitude is recent, and even today there are many exceptions. The bodies of saints or political leaders are put on display. The poor and hungry sometimes refrain from burying their relatives as long as they can keep their death secret and continue to receive rations or benefits. Much controversy surrounds the presentation of dead bodies in museums, be it in the name of medicine or as colonial artefacts denied the dignity of burial. During the Covid pandemic, images of human corpses became powerful symbols of the viral threat and of public health failures. This introduction sets out some of the themes of the conference, which aims to explore some of the ways in which the dead have remained present among the living in different cultures and eras, and to examine the meanings of the taboos that surround them.

**Mischa Gabowitsch** is a senior researcher at the Einstein Forum. In addition to protest and social movements (*Protest in Putin's Russia*, 2016), his work has focused on the memory and commemoration of war and genocide. He is the editor of *Replicating Atonement: Foreign Models in the Commemoration of Atrocities* (2017) and of three volumes on war memory in Russian and German. He is currently working on a book about Soviet and post-Soviet war commemoration and a history of Soviet war memorials.

**Guo Yueshan**, Beijing

## The Handling of the Deceased During the COVID-19 Pandemic in China

This talk seeks to answer a range of questions about the ways in which Chinese society has dealt with victims of the SARS-CoV-2 epidemic. The number of funerary urns in Wuhan in January-February 2020 was seen as an indicator of the scale of the epidemic, but how were they produced and disseminated? How did quarantine measures affect funerary practice? How did public health agencies organize the work of funeral service professionals? Has the share of burials vs cremation changed? When families were unable to bid farewell to their loved ones, did they experience this as a break with previous funerary practices? Is the government erecting monuments to the Covid-19 dead the way it did for victims of the SARS epidemic in 2003? And can past changes in funerary practices, for example during the Taiping Rebellion or the Cultural Revolution, teach us anything about the most recent crisis? Has the treatment of the dead resembled the way they were handled during previous epidemics, or has it been more reminiscent of times of war?

**Guo Yueshan** is currently finishing his PhD dissertation at the Institute of Qing History, Renmin University, Beijing, on the history of the treatment of the dead in China, with a particular focus on the current pandemic.

**Frédéric Keck**, Paris/Berlin

*Human Remains in Baobab Trees and Anthropology Museums. Investigating Burial Practices in Senegal*

In 1965, anthropologist Guy Tillmans collected around thirty skulls from baobab trees in the Serer country of Senegal and conserved them at the Institut Fondamental d'Afrique Noire in Dakar. Fifty years later, a collaboration with the Canadian Institute for Advanced Research aimed at sequencing the microbiome on these human remains to document the changes in food and health diets. How does this collaboration between Senegalese archaeologists and Canadian microbiologists change the value of human remains? How does it include the source communities in producing their results? How do differences in burial practices reveal differences in social status?

**Frédéric Keck**, anthropologist and historian of philosophy, is a member of the Laboratory of Social Anthropology at the French National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS) and currently visiting professor at the Centre Marc Bloch in Berlin. His research investigates the role of microbes in mediating relations between human and non-human beings. After studying zoonotic pathogens in the context of avian influenza in Asia, he now explores relations between the living and the dead through a collaboration with African museums on the microbiome in human remains. He explores how microbes act as signs of environmental changes, and how non-human beings act as sentinels when they carry these microbes. His latest book is *Avian Reservoirs: Virus Hunters and Birdwatchers in Chinese Sentinel Posts* (2020).

**Nerija Putnaitė**, Vilnius

*Undignified Deaths of Outlaws in the Soviet Union. The Case of Lithuanian Deportees and Camp Prisoners*

The Soviet politics of death was shaped, in practice, by several complementary policies—modernization, atheism, and Soviet patriotism—and the tensions between them. The politics of patriotism accorded no positive meaning to the deaths of deportees and camp prisoners. Their death was devalued, and the accompanying rituals made this clear. This was a result of modernization policies that manifested themselves in practices shaping an anonymous, rational, and unemotional attitude toward the death of another person. Yet the deportees made efforts to resist the anonymization and debasement of the death of their loved ones. The analysis focuses on the memoirs of former Lithuanian deportees and camp prisoners published in 1989-95.

**Nerija Putnaitė** is an associate professor at the Institute of International Relations and Political Science at Vilnius University, Lithuania, and specializes in identity studies, including Soviet, national, and European identity. She focuses on Lithuanian Soviet national identity, accommodation and resistance, and Soviet society and atheization politics. She is the author of several books in Lithuanian and multiple articles. Her current research project is titled *Politics of Death in Soviet Lithuania*.

## Isabelle Reimann, Berlin

Isabelle Reimann is a PhD candidate at Humboldt University of Berlin and the Berlin Museum of Natural History. Her dissertation looks at how German museums and research institutes have managed human remains in their collections and how they are being rehumanized. As a freelance provenance researcher, she is working with the Dresden State Art Collections on skulls from present-day Tanzania.

She is a member of the *Arbeitskreis Provenienzforschung* association, where she is active in the study group on colonial provenance, with a special focus on digitization. She is also a member of the organizing team of the Network for Sustainable Research Structures to Process Collections and Holdings from Colonial Contexts (<https://www.evifa.de/en/about/fid-projects/network-colonial-contexts>).

In February 2022, her expert assessment on human remains from colonial contexts in Berlin collections was published as part of *Decolonize Berlin's* publication *We Want Them Back* ([https://decolonize-berlin.de/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/We-Want-Them-Back\\_deutsch-web.pdf](https://decolonize-berlin.de/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/We-Want-Them-Back_deutsch-web.pdf)).



**Iryna Sklokina**, Lviv

*Discourses on the Dignity of the Dead in the Ongoing Russian War against Ukraine*

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has led to numerous death casualties among both the military and civilians, as well as the destruction of infrastructure and residential areas, including cultural infrastructure and symbolically important objects. In media discourses and eyewitnesses' accounts, the death of humans and animals is discussed along with the destruction of things. Dehumanization and defamiliarization, the distinction between “our” dead bodies and those of the enemy that is typical of wartime propaganda, coexists with attempts to build alternative narratives of human rights, civility, humanity, and “Europe.” However, discourse on survivors prevails over the representation of death in Ukraine’s public sphere. In my talk I will analyze news media coverage and oral interviews with evacuated civilians collected between March and May 2022 by the Center for Urban History in Lviv.

**Iryna Sklokina** holds a PhD in history and is a research fellow at the Center for Urban History in Lviv, Ukraine. Her research interests include heritage and memory studies, the Soviet politics of WWII memory, and industrial history and heritage. Mostly recently she has co-authored and co-edited *The Political Cult of the Dead in Ukraine. Traditions and Dimensions from the First World War to Today* (with Guido Hausmann, 2021) and a special issue of the journal *Region: Regional Studies of Russia, Eastern Europe, and Central Asia* titled *Donbas Imaginaries: Heritage, Culture, Communities* (with Victoria Donovan, 2021).

**Holger Stoecker**, Göttingen

*Iwi Kupūna in Collections of the University of Göttingen. On the Provenance and Repatriation of Ancestral Remains from Hawaii*

Since 2020, the *Sensitive Provenances* project has been investigating the provenances of human remains from colonial contexts in the Blumenbach Skull Collection and in the Anthropological Collection of the University of Göttingen. The goal is to proactively inform the countries and communities of origin in Africa and Oceania about the results of provenance research and—if requested—to repatriate ancestral remains. An important concern is to de-objectify and re-humanize the remains held in the collections in the status of anthropological and anatomical objects. As far as possible, an individual biography is to be restored to the human remains. In February 2022, 13 Iwi Kupūna (ancestral remains) and the plaster cast of a skull were restituted to a delegation from Hawaii. The talk will highlight the historical contexts of acquisition in the 19th century, the methods of provenance research, and the repatriation of the Iwi Kupūna.

**Holger Stoecker** is a historian at the University of Göttingen and a member of the research project “Human remains from colonial contexts in Göttingen University collections.” He does provenance research on objects from colonial contexts in anthropological and natural science collections. Recent publications include: *Sammeln, Erforschen, Zurückgeben? Menschliche Überreste aus der Kolonialzeit in akademischen und musealen Sammlungen* [To Collect, to Research, to Restitute? Human Remains from the Colonial Period in Academic and Museum Collections] (ed. with Thomas Schnalke and Andreas Winkelmann, 2013); *Dinosaurierfragmente. Zur Geschichte der Tendaguru-Expedition und ihrer Objekte, 1906-2018* [Dinosaur Fragments. On the History of the Tendaguru Expedition and Its Objects, 1906-2018] (with Ina Heumann et al., 2018); *Human Remains from Namibia in German Collections* (ed. with Elise Pape, 2018); *En face und en profil. Fotografische Porträts toter Afrikaner für die Berliner Academia* [Photographic Portraits of Dead Africans

for the Berlin Academy] (2021), „... schweigend umgehen“. Zum Umgang der DDR mit Forderungen nach Rückgabe von Museumsobjekten kolonialer Provenienz [*...to Manage Silently. On the GDR's Treatment of Demands for the Restitution of Museum Objects of Colonial Provenance*] (2022).

**Liv Nilsson Stutz**, Växjö

## *Embodied Rituals and Ritualized Bodies—Making Sense of Death*

When a human being dies, two things occur: a social being disappears, and a cadaver emerges. Both of these cause a form of crisis that is experienced by humans across time and cultures. The responses to this shared experience, however, are incredibly diverse, and framed within a cultural structure. This talk will discuss the importance of mortuary ritual as a strategic way to act in the face of crisis. It will place the practical treatment of the dead body at the center—as a materialization of death, but also as a locus around which humans can make sense of death, perform it, and achieve a sense of control over it. Through a discussion of the complex relationships between the self and the body, the liminal character of the cadaver, the ritual process, and the human need for the world to “make sense,” I will explore examples of mortuary ritual from prehistory and our contemporary world in order to ultimately create a sense of deeper understanding of the human condition in the face of death.

**Liv Nilsson Stutz** is a professor of archaeology at Linnaeus University in Växjö, Sweden, specializing in the archaeology of death. She is trained in both archaeology and biological anthropology. Drawing on practice theory, ritual theory, and body theory in combination with the taphonomic approach to graves in archaeological contexts called archaeothanatology, she has developed an interdisciplinary approach to reconstructing and understanding the ritualization of the dead body in prehistory. In this work her focus is on how rituals allow survivors to handle the crisis of death and make sense of it. She has published widely on the archaeology of death (e.g. as co-editor of the *Oxford Handbook of the Archaeology of Death and Burial*, 2013) and on archaeological method and theory. She has also published extensively on the repatriation debate and is currently leading the research project *Ethical Entanglements. The Care for Human Remains in Museums and Research*.

**Małgorzata Wosińska**, Warsaw

*Commemoration of Human Remains in Rwanda as an Emancipatory Strategy Against the Dominance of Holocaust Discourse*

As a Polish researcher of Jewish descent who has worked in spaces of conflict and post-conflict (Rwanda, Congo, Uganda, Lithuania, Ukraine), I attempt to move beyond the representational paradigm in genocide studies, addressing in my research, for example, the subjectivity and agency of dead bodies and human remains. Rwanda can be considered a special case here since it is a land of thousands of pieces of material evidence of crime (buried and unburied bodies, personal belongings left in 1994, abandoned houses). Both memory and sites of mass murder undergo complicated processes of colonization and decolonization. My research on the identity of the 1994 genocide survivors indicates that the memory of the Holocaust and the resultant visual and literary representations have played a constitutive role for Rwandan perspectives on the country's own experience. In Rwanda there is a stark contrast between narrative museums, organised in line with the Western tradition of arranging exhibitions, and mass graves: places of memory, such as Murambi, that emerge as spontaneous grassroots initiatives. What can the remains of the Rwanda genocide victims teach us? Is it possible that their lesson may be emancipatory, liberating us from the domination of Holocaust discourse?

**Małgorzata Wosińska** is a genocide anthropologist and psychotraumatologist. She holds a PhD from the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań and works as a senior lecturer of the NOHA Network on Humanitarian Action at the Faculty of Law and Administration, University of Warsaw, Poland. Her research interests range from critical Holocaust and genocide studies to museum and forensic studies. Her doctoral dissertation dealt with the identity of genocide survivors in Rwanda (in comparison to those of the Shoah), where she conducted regular field research between 2009 and 2017. In addition to her research activity, she works on a daily basis with witnesses of traumatic events, including war refugees in Europe.

She is an expert in advising on the management of memorial sites and trauma for both governmental and non-governmental organizations that specialize in

prevention and commemoration character, such as the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Rwanda's National Commission for the Fight Against Genocide, the Aegis Trust, the European Network Remembrance and Solidarity, and the Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum. From 2018 to 2020, she was engaged in memory diplomacy, acting as representative of the Director for International Cooperation of the Emanuel Ringelblum Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw.

Recent publications in English include: "Turning to the Present. A Practical Approach to Human Remains in Comparative Genocide Studies," in: Zuzanna Dziuban (ed.), *Mapping the "Forensic Turn": Engagements with Materialities of Mass Death in Holocaust Studies and Beyond* (2017) and "Murambi is not Auschwitz: The Holocaust in Representations of the Rwandan Genocide," in: Mischa Gabowitsch (ed.), *Replicating Atonement: Foreign Models in the Commemoration of Atrocities* (2017). Forthcoming articles in Polish includes "Antropologia ludobójstwa jako praktyka prewencji" [The Anthropology of Genocide as a Practice of Prevention], in: *RAT. Humanistyka Prewencyjna* [Preventive Humanities] and "Upamiętnianie szczątków ludzkich jako strategia emancypacyjna. Ludobójstwo w Rwandzie a Holokaust" ["Commemoration of Human Remains as an Emancipatory Strategy. The Rwanda Genocide and the Holocaust"], in: Ewa Domańska (ed.), *Ekshumacje polityczne—teoria i praktyka. Antologia tekstów* [Political Exhumations—Theory and Practice. An Anthology of Texts].

**Alexei Yurchak**, Berkeley

*Bodies of Lenin. Ideology and Biochemistry in the Laboratory of the Future*

At the center of the Soviet project was the figure of Leninism. That figure was produced simultaneously in the spheres of language, visual image, and material artifact. It consisted of an enormous number of Lenin texts, quotes, images, and sculptures, as well as his physical body in the Mausoleum. Leninism as a field of knowledge occupied a sovereign position vis-à-vis the Soviet political system. This means that Leninism was treated as an expression of the foundational Truth of the Soviet project—Soviet political language had to refer to Leninism for legitimacy and could never question it. In reality, however, Leninism was not a fixed and static dogma; throughout Soviet history it was continuously changing and updating.

Lenin's texts were edited and censored, Lenin's images were retouched and reinvented, and Lenin's body was re-embalmed and resculpted with new materials. A central role in this process was played by the scientific fields of anatomy and biochemistry that maintained and updated Lenin's body in the Mausoleum. How was this biochemical work carried out at the level of laboratories, experiments, and anatomical procedures? How did ideology and biochemistry interact in the project of building communism?

**Alexei Yurchak** is a Professor of Anthropology at the University of California, Berkeley. He works in socio-cultural, political, and linguistic anthropology. His research has focused on the history of the Soviet communist project and on the post-socialist transformations in Russia and the former Soviet countries, on informal artistic scenes in the socialist and post-socialist worlds, and on the intersections of science, technology, and politics. He is the author of the award-winning book *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (2006), which has been translated into many languages. He is currently finishing a book on the political and scientific history and philosophy of Lenin's body.

# Program

## Thursday, May 19, 2022

7:00 PM

Round table discussion

*Exposing the Dead.  
Human Remains on  
Display*

with Isabelle Reimann,  
Holger Stoecker, Liv Nilsson  
Stutz, Aleksei Yurchak.  
Chair: Frédéric Keck

## Friday, May 20, 2022

10:00 AM

Mischa Gabowitsch, Potsdam

*Introduction: The Dead Among  
Us*

10:30 AM

Liv Nilsson Stutz, Växjö

*Embodied Rituals and Ritualized  
Bodies—Making Sense of Death*

11:30 AM

Guo Yueshan, Beijing (Zoom)

*The Handling of the Deceased  
During the COVID-19 pandemic  
in China*

2:30 PM

Alexei Yurchak, Berkeley

*Bodies of Lenin. Ideology and  
Biochemistry in the Laboratory of  
the Future*

4:00 PM

Nerija Putinaite, Vilnius (Zoom)

*Undignified Deaths of Outlaws in  
the Soviet Union. The Case of  
Lithuanian Deportees and Camp  
Prisoners*

5:30 PM

Iryna Sklokina, Lviv (Zoom)

*Discourses on the Dignity of the  
Dead in the Ongoing Russian  
War against Ukraine*

7:00 PM

Sarah Benz, Berlin

*Selbstbestimmt Abschied  
nehmen?*

## Saturday, May 21, 2022

10:30 AM

Frédéric Keck, Paris/Berlin

*Human Remains in Baobab  
Trees and Anthropology  
Museums: Investigating Burial  
Practices in Senegal*

11:30 AM

Małgorzata Wosińska, Warsaw

*Commemoration of Human  
Remains in Rwanda as an  
Emancipatory Strategy Against  
the Dominance of Holocaust  
Discourse*

1:00 PM

Holger Stoecker, Göttingen

*Iwi Kupūna in Collections of  
the University of Göttingen. On  
the Provenance and  
Repatriation of Ancestral  
Remains from Hawaii*