



A82 Crossing Borders: Conflict Evolution and Climate Change—The Humanitarian Consequences on Human Migration

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Learning Overview: After attending this presentation, attendees will understand how displacement and its temporal dimensions affect processes of recovery and identification of persons missing as a result of violent conflict, specifically in relation to delayed responses and prolonged uncertainty.

Impact on the Forensic Science Community: This presentation will impact the forensic science community by emphasizing the temporal elements and obstacles inherent in forensic efforts to recover and identify missing/unknown persons and how those, in turn, affect surviving kin and their perception (and reception) of the forensic processes. In doing so, it highlights the asymmetrical relationship between those controlling and implementing the forensic response and those awaiting its results.

From the pressure to locate remains, collect and analyze evidence, and deliver definitive results, humanitarian responses to incidents of mass fatality are often cast—understandably so—in terms of the urgency of time. A race against the proverbial clock, forensic efforts grapple with time-sensitive conditions as varied as environmental exposure and degradation and the fading memories of potential witnesses to clandestine burial. Yet time is a complicated metric when applied to the identification of victims of mass fatalities, particularly when it comes to the social consequences of violent conflict and mass displacement.¹ Grounded in the premise that “time and space are integral to each other,” this presentation focuses on these consequences to illustrate how such displacement introduces obstacles and often delays in processes of recovery and postmortem identification.² It also invites a more nuanced consideration of how prolonged uncertainty shapes the way families perceive and evaluate the efficacy of forensic responses. Finally, time as an analytic sheds light on the interplay between humanitarian and political aims underwriting forensic efforts to reclaim and return the remains of victims of violent conflict.

Time unfolds unevenly, in war and its aftermath. The seconds it takes to destroy a single life or the hours involved in the illicit disposal of bodies may require years, even decades, of investigation—archaeological, anthropological, and genetic—to reassociate an individual identity with a set of unnamed remains. All the while, relatives of the missing wait: for news of life, of death, and eventually of recovery and return. The disparity between these temporal dimensions is compounded when conflict scatters not only the bodies of the missing, but also those who survived them. Two examples document this asymmetry and its import. The first relates to forensic efforts to identify the 31,000 missing persons from Bosnia and Herzegovina, specifically the more than 8,000 Bosnian Muslim (Bosniak) men and boys missing as a result of the Srebrenica genocide, where mass displacement of surviving relatives complicated both the DNA-led forensic response and the community’s ability to mourn for and commemorate its victims.³ In the Srebrenica case, the tension between the urgency of immediate postwar humanitarian action and the longer-term memory politics of national belonging emerge most sharply at the annual commemoration and mass burial of identified victims in the communal cemetery of the Srebrenica-Potočari Memorial.

The second example addresses the United States military’s decades-long efforts to account for its service members Missing In Action (MIA) and presumed dead from the Vietnam War. Akin to the recent initiative to identify Argentina’s unknown soldiers buried on the Malvinas Islands, although set to the political calendar of shifting administrations and geopolitical relations, the American MIA accounting mission in Southeast Asia is explicitly termed a “humanitarian” program. Gradual diplomatic rapprochement has indeed opened doors for archaeological recoveries and eventual identifications. But time has also adversely affected the mission’s results. Landscapes are altered; remains are degrading; witnesses are dying, and memories fading. Beyond these physical and social forms of decay, time also troubles surviving kin. Some go to their own graves without burying their loved ones. Outsized expectations further fray trust in expedient results and prolonged uncertainty exacts tolls that not even the most certain of forensic evidence can assuage.⁴

In examining the temporal dimensions of conflict, displacement, and delayed care for the dead through the examples of postwar Bosnia and Herzegovina and contemporary United States, this presentation demonstrates the sociopolitical complexities of humanitarian forensic intervention when time is continually of the essence, but results come decades later.

Reference(s):

1. Mundorff, Amy and Sarah Wagner. (Forthcoming.) Immediacy and Authority: Identification Efforts in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the World Trade Center Compared. In *Silent Witness: Applying Forensic DNA Evidence in Criminal Investigations and Humanitarian Disasters*, edited by Henry Erlich, Eric Stover, and Thomas White. New York: Oxford University Press.
2. Nunn, Nancy. 1992. The Cultural Anthropology of Time: A Critical Essay. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 21:94.
3. Wagner, Sarah. 2008. *To Know Where He Lies: DNA Technology and the Search for Srebrenica’s Missing*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
4. Wagner, Sarah. 2019. *What Remains: Bringing America’s Missing Home from the Vietnam War*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Displacement, Humanitarianism, Time