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DESECRATING MEMORY: CONTEMPORARY FORMS OF VIOLENCE AGAINST THE DEAD AND THEIR CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

Zbezczeszczenie pamięci. Współczesne formy przemocy wobec zmarłych i ich kulturowe znaczenie

Summary

This study examines contemporary forms of violence against the dead, regarding them not only as criminal acts but also sociological phenomena rooted in broader cultural and institutional shifts. Drawing on the work of Philippe Ariès, Pierre Bourdieu, and others, this analysis examines how the disappearance of the communal mourning and other practices related to death and the rise of bureaucratic and privatised death has created conditions in which symbolic and institutional violence against the dead flourishes. Through the use of two case studies from 2025, one from Poland and one from Italy, it analyses the commodification of corpses and the desecration of graves. These examples illustrate how violence against the dead reflects a broader deterioration of collective memory, rituals, and social obligation. This article argues that these cases are not isolated incidents but representatives of deeper problems plaguing contemporary society.

Keywords: violence against the dead, symbolic violence, institutional violence, invisible death, grave desecration, Philippe Ariès, death taboos

Streszczenie

Niniejsze studium analizuje współczesne formy przemocy wobec zmarłych, traktując je nie tylko jako czyny przestępcze, ale także zjawiska socjologiczne zakorzenione w szerszych zmianach kulturowych i instytucjonalnych. Opierając się na pracach Philippe'a Arièsa, Pierre'a Bourdieu i innych, analiza bada, w jaki sposób zanik żałoby wspólnotowej i innych praktyk związanych ze śmiercią oraz wzrost biurokratycznej i sprywatyzowanej śmierci stworzyły warunki, w których kwitnie symboliczna i instytucjonalna przemoc wobec zmarłych. Wykorzystując dwa studia przypadków z 2025 r., jedno z Polski i jedno z Włoch, analizuje utowarowienie zwłok oraz bezczeszczenie grobów. Przykłady te ilustrują, w jaki sposób przemoc wobec zmarłych odzwierciedla szerszą erozję pamięci zbiorowej, rytuałów i zobowiązań społecznych. Niniejszy artykuł dowodzi, że przypadki te nie są odosobnionymi incydentami, ale reprezentują głębsze problemy nękające nasze społeczeństwo.

Słowa kluczowe: przemoc wobec zmarłych, przemoc symboliczna, przemoc instytucjonalna, niewidzialna śmierć, profanacja grobów, nekrofilia, Philippe Ariès, tabu śmierci

Introduction

When discussing the topic of violence, many things may come to mind: physical violence, emotional or psychological manipulation, sexual abuse, domestic violence, workplace violence, and school violence. All of them have in common their relation to the living. It is not surprising that, when discussing acts of violence, we focus our attention on the present and even in cases of murder the public attention given to the deceased person typically diminishes over time. Hence, violence is typically conceptualised in relation to the living:

those who can suffer, who can cause harm, and who can protest or resist. Yet, harm can also come to those who have left this mortal plane, and societies can and do enact violence upon the dead: through desecration of graves, the abuse and/or neglect of corpses and through the erasure of funerary rituals. Though physically silent, the dead remain deeply embedded in the moral and symbolic order of western culture. To violate the dead is to violate social norms that serve to protect memory and identity, as well as the boundary between the sacred and the profane. In this sense, violence against the dead is not merely criminal; it is sociological.

This article examines two contemporary instances of such violence: illegal disinterment in Italy and the defilement of Jewish graves in Poland. Such acts are neither isolated incidents nor are they a new type of violation, however, they reflect a broader structural transformation, namely the privatisation and bureaucratisation of death, the marginalisation of public mourning, and the fading of collective ritual. As Philippe Ariès noted in his book *The Hour of Our Death*, "society has banished death" (Ariès 2008: 560), putting it behind closed doors, hospitals, into the hands of professionals and ultimately completely out of public consciousness. Long gone are the times when "the death of each person was a public event that moved, literally and figuratively, society as a whole. It was not only an individual who was disappearing, but society itself that had been wounded and that had to be healed." (559). Therefore, as the death is no longer seen or ritualised, respect for the dead grows fragile, as does the social taboo against violating them.

In this article, the concept of "invisible death" will be brought up, a term which was coined by Philippe Ariès and is the title of Part V in his work. Drawing on this concept, this article argues that modern social order has dislocated death from its communal foundations, thereby enabling and encouraging new forms of symbolic and physical violence. By analysing selected cases from the current year, 2025, alongside Ariès' work the author seeks to discover what social conditions allow such desecration to occur, and to ask what such truths would reveal about the living who are ultimately responsible for guarding the dignity of the dead.

Historical and Cultural Context: From Public to Invisible Death

The Hour of Our Death by Philippe Ariès explores the historical, sociological, and cultural changes in responses to death and dying throughout the centuries. However, Part V, titled *The Invisible Death,* is central to this article, as it discusses how, through twentieth century, the "completion of the psychological mechanism that removed death from society, eliminated its character of public ceremony, and made it a private act" (Ariès 2008: 575) became a finalised cultural and societal shift. The public nature of death – with visitors coming for days before the passing, family, friends, neighbours – was eliminated, and death became a topic which, though always unpleasant, now was being clearly rejected and pushed aside.

Ariès engages extensively with Geoffrey Gorer's analysis of how twentieth-century society rejected the anthropomorphic eschatology that had dominated nineteenth-century belief. Throughout his personal experiences with grief (loss of father and grandfather almost at the same time, sister-in-law, friend, death of his brother, and so on) he noticed the profound change in the social function of mourning and people's attitudes towards death. Gorer observed this shift explicitly in his article *The Pornography of Death* saying that "In the 20th century, however, there seems to have been an unremarked shift in prudery; whereas copulation has become more and more 'mentionable'," particularly in the Anglo-Saxon societies, death has become more and more 'unmentionable' as a natural process." (Gorer 1955: 50). As noted by Gorer, an inversion took place, where sex, which once was unmentionable, became increasingly public, while death, previously acknowledged profoundly though elaborate rituals, retreated into silence. This rejection of traditional ways of acting in face of death struck Gorer, and he quickly noticed its harmful effects on society, which lead to the creation of his book *Death, Grief, and Mourning in Contemporary Britain* published ten years after his article. As with Ariès, the conclusion was clear: death was being removed. Visits to the deathbed, or even attending a funeral, became rarer, with children being strongly excluded – either by not being told about the death at all or being given unclear explanations, such as "going to a better place" or "being taken by Jesus", which, while they explain the absence, still cause confusion in the young mind. Another phenomenon is the decline in mourning and the dignity of funerals, with cremation becoming much more widespread. Cremation is generally cheaper and allows for private mourning, as people can keep urns at home, eliminating the need

for cemetery space and ongoing grave maintenance. This shift enables more private expressions of grief, and through it, mourning moves from communal cemetery visits to private homes; death becomes less visible in public spaces and ceases to be part of community life. The rise in cremation thus reflects the larger pattern of death being pushed out of public life.

Mourning became a thing for the home, as opposite to what was expected of people in past ages. The times of mourning dresses and veils of women and black suits and a "weeper" (a black band of crape around a gentleman's hat) or a black ribbon are long gone. In the 19th century, there were three stages of mourning: deep mourning, full mourning, and half-mourning (all with specific limitations and allowances). Nowadays, families mostly retreat into their homes, do not receive family visitors or condolences, and it is rare for anyone to wear black for a full year. Additionally, it is now much more encouraged and accepted by society to "move on" especially in a case of losing a spouse. What once would be considered indecent by society, now is considered as a positive change for the affected person. The codes of ritual behaviour that once seemed obvious no longer exist, and these changes were, in part, caused – or at the very least strongly influenced – by the devastating results and death toll of the First World War .

Hence, today, in the 21st century, "society refuses to participate in the emotions of the bereaved" (Ariès 2008: 580). Public demonstrations of mourning are often regarded with, at best, pity, more often, annoyance, and are considered morbid. One may be labelled over-dramatic or an attention-seeker for behaviour that was once not only ordinary but expected. The quotation, "The period of mourning is no longer marked by the silence of the bereaved amid a solicitous and indiscreet entourage, but by the silence of the entourage itself" (580), illustrates how social roles around mourning have inverted. Previously, the mourner remained silent while the community provided support; now the mourner may express grief, but the community is notably absent – withdrawn, uncomfortable.

This change did not stop at mourning. Anything related to death was pushed aside, labelled as morbid and, in a way, infectious. People avoid those who grieve, fearing that their sadness may spread and disrupt everyday life. Of particular interest is the rise of dark humour and "postromantic sarcasm" (Ariès mentions Mark Twain as an example). These changes have not gone unnoticed, as psychologists underline that such attitudes are often abnormal and potentially harmful to mental health. The industrial and urban revolutions of the 19th century, slowly but steadily, helped to alter how people related to death, and with advancements in medicine – through which death became less visible and dying individuals increasingly spent their final moments in hospital beds – this tendency only intensified.

This transformation from visible, communal death to private, often medicalised dying has weakened the cultural and moral frameworks that once protected the dead. With the decline of mourning rituals and the systematic removal of death and dead from everyday life, the social obligation to care for the dead has also faded. A brief visit to a cemetery can illustrate this, with many graves left in an unkempt state or maintained by hired individuals. Today, the body of the deceased is handled by institutions rather than communities, and, as discussed above, mourning is expected to happen behind closed doors.

With all this in mind, it should not come as a surprise that violence against the dead has become more likely, as, without reminders of the sacredness of the corpse, the dead become symbolically vulnerable. As society distances itself from the topic of death, it fails to protect the dignity of the deceased. When death is rendered invisible, violations become easier to ignore.

Contemporary Examples of Violence Against the Dead

Although violence against the dead is rarely discussed in the mainstream media, recent events from both Poland and Italy expose how it manifests in distinct but related forms: ethnic targeting in the former and commercial exploitation in the latter. These examples reflect not isolated incidents but a systematic and symbolic breakdown in how contemporary society protects the dead and their memory.

Profanation for Profit: Removal of Corpses in Sicily, Italy

In 2025 in Trapani, Sicily, a former gravedigger and his assistant were detained by Sicilian police for unlawfully removing bodies from tombs to create space for new burials and requesting money from families in exchange for accelerated services, following an investigation that began in 2023. The gravedigger allegedly diverted business to complicit mortuaries for profit-sharing, stole valuables from corpses, and obstructed proper cemetery management. This incident forms part of a larger problem in Italy, where a lack of cemetery space r – exacerbated by COVID-19 pandemic – has made it easier for corruption to flourish ("The Guardian" 2025).

The police quickly acted, arresting the former gravedigger and now are investigating 18 others who are also accused of reselling burial sites and removal of corpses from them. The offender was mentioned in the police report as offering locals quick burials in exchange for money, which he referred to as 'coffee for the burial director'. The whereabouts of the removed bodies remain mostly unknown. However, in at least one case a family who, upon visiting their loved ones, found their burial place renamed, discovered the corpse in a bag along with others in another part of the cemetery. (CBS News 2025). The number of documented cases was 25, with 10 of them involving corruption, not only by the offender but also by the medical examiner, who was apparently falsely declaring the decomposition of the body or omitting facts from the reports.

The situation in Sicily is a complex one, with the Sicilian Mafia, known as Cosa Nostra, controlling and influencing many areas of society, including cemeteries and funeral parlours. In the areas where oversight is weaker and cemeteries are in shortage their impact is clear, with illegal reuse of tombs, false death certification, and bribery of local staff being common elements of their shadow control. However, the Italian authorities are not passively observing; in 2025, during a major operation in Palermo against the Sicilian mafia that involved over 1,200 officers, they managed to arrest nearly 150 people (CTV News 2025).

This case illustrates the commodification of death, where corpses are seen as obstacles to profit from rather than sacred remains deserving protection. The symbolic violence present in this case does not operate merely through the gravedigger's actions, but also through the institutional structures that enable and normalise such exploitation. The broken system feeds the profanation, as institutional structures that are supposed to protect and support families in grief – such as funeral services and cemetery management – instead exploit them while appearing to provide the care they advertise. Funeral homes operate on a high level of trust from the deceased person's relatives, which is easily exploitable, within market conditions that create incentives for corruption and in which violations are difficult to detect.

Given that mafia influence and corruption have been an everyday reality in Sicily for decades, such exploitation appears both natural and inevitable, which aligns with Bourdieu's arguments that symbolic violence is at its most effective when there is no societal pushback, when a problem is ignored or not even recognised. However, in this case, there was, in fact, a significant resistance. This reveals another aspect of symbolic violence: how deeply integrated it can be. Even with strong institutional pushback, such as massive raids and arrests, the situation will not be immediately resolved, as it is the result of decades of multiple generations treating it as part of everyday life. Bourdieu's concept of habitus – internalised disposition – shapes how people perceive reality, and undoing such deeply embedded practices is neither quick nor simple. The framing of burial as a market transaction, where families can pay for 'accelerated services' transforms the sacred nature of death and grief into an economic logistic. The normalisation of such practices, the shortage of cemetery space and the trust placed in professionals who operate with minimal accountability together reveal deeper systemic and societal problems.

Ethnic and Political Desecration: Jewish cemetery in Poland

Burned tires, ashes, wires, and a freshly dug hole. The Jewish cemetery in Korczyn (Podkarpackie voivodeship), Poland, became the victim of desecration: a car tire was burned directly on a tombstone, leaving behind ashes and charred wires. Multiple fire pits were found near graves, as well as a freshly dug hole near one of the burial sites, approximately 70 cm deep, which may suggest an attempt to find valuable items. The discovery was made on the 9 April by employees of the Provincial Office for the Protection of Monuments and the president

of the Polish-American Foundation Rabbi Menachem Mendel. The cemetery in Korczyn, with an area of nearly 0.7 ha, is considered a place of great historical importance due to the presence of several hundred tombstones, including a mass grave of 123 Jews and seven Poles murdered by the Germans during World War II. As sites of collective memory, Jewish cemeteries in Poland carry not only individual graves but also the weight of community history.

Notably, the damaged (though not permanently) grave belonged to Wolf and Dawid Leib Kirschner, son and father, who were killed by German Nazis in 1942. The police began their investigation; however, no perpetrators had been identified as of October 2025, and the case has gone cold. Additionally, there does not seemed to be extensive media coverage. For the purpose of this article, I was only able to find three articles on different websites discussing this situation, all of which are referenced in the bibliography.

According to the representative of the Polish-American Foundation, speaking on behalf of Rabbi Menachem Mendel, such acts are not isolated incidents, and the broader picture reveals numerous cases of neglected and vandalised Jewish cemeteries and synagogues (TVN24 2025). He also pointed out that the protection of historic Jewish cemeteries appears insufficient, even though Jewish cemeteries are recognised as architectural and cultural heritage sites protected under Polish cultural heritage law (Mazurek 2020).

The lack of media coverage and the concern expressed by representatives of Jewish foundations raise a question: are Jewish cemeteries sufficiently protected? By law, this would appear to be the case; however, the reality is quite different. This desecration was an act, an assault on the memory and dignity of the Jewish community, reflecting how ethnic minorities continue to face violence even after death. Beyond the violence itself, there is also a clear atmosphere of insignificance – hence the minimal media coverage. One might argue that this was just a single cemetery, an isolated incident. However, it is important to ask whether public outrage, media attention, and preventive actions would have been the same if it had been a Polish cemetery. Desecrations of cemeteries rarely make front pages (unless in local newspapers), as they are often treated as minor acts of vandalism, rather than as serious violations of burial places. Yet Polish Catholic cemetery desecrations tend to receive greater media attention and more sustained institutional responses than Jewish cemetery desecrations. An example of this disparity can be the recent devastation of the Polish statue on the military cemetery in Miednoje in Russia, which received wide media coverage as well as official governmental statement from the Minister of Foreign Affairs (Ministerstwo Spraw Zagranicznych 2025). The public outrage and calls for action are understandable, but they also underline the disparity between Polish and Jewish cemeteries, communicating whose memory is seen as warranting greater protection.

That difference in response and public attitude represents a consequence of symbolic violence. It operates through omission: even though society does not explicitly state that 'Jewish memory does not matter', the evidence demonstrates that this is often the case. This is visible in the lack of adequate response, lack of media coverage, and the condition of many Jewish cemeteries. They are often forgotten, poorly maintained, with responsibility to up keep largely left to Jewish foundations with limited resources. All of this reveals whose dead are considered to matter more – whose grief is seen as legitimate, who is understood to belong to the national community, and who does not. It reflects how ethnic minorities continue to face violence even after death.

It is also important to consider the current political climate when discussing Jewish communities. Following the Gaza war, attitudes toward Jewish people have deteriorated globally, alongside the growing popularity of the Free Palestine movement. According to a report by the World Zionist Organization and The Jewish Agency for Israel, the number of antisemitic incidents worldwide rose by 340% between 2022 and 2024 (World Zionist Organization & The Jewish Agency for Israel 2025). With this drastic rise in reported incidents, antisemitism has re-entered public discourse and even gained a degree of acceptance. Violence against Jews and their place of worship and/or cemeteries has, unsurprisingly, become more common.

Symbolic and Institutional Violence Against the Dead

From a purely sociological perspective, two types of violence can be identified: symbolic and institutional. Together they help to show how modern society's relationship with death has created conditions that both enable and perpetuate harm against the deceased.

Symbolic Violence: Attack on Meaning and Memory

Symbolic violence, a term coined by Pierre Bourdieu, describes non-physical violence manifesting as power disparities between social groups (Bourdieu et al. 2013). It operates against the dead by disrupting the cultural codes and collective rituals that give death social meaning. It is a form of violence that victims themselves do not always recognize as violence because it is embedded in cultural norms, social structures, and institutional practices. In cases of symbolic violence against the dead – when graves are desecrated, bodies commodified, or mourning practices suppressed – symbolic violence occurs not only in the physical realm; it also attacks the symbolic structures that uphold the dignity in death.

Another concept that is particularly relevant when analysing cemetery desecration is *lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory), introduced by Pierre Nora. Sites of memory are specific physical or conceptual entities (e.g., monuments, museums, anthems, or historical events) that are imbued with symbolic meaning by communities in order to preserve collective memory when organic, lived memory fades. They serve as deliberate, constructed anchors for collective identity in the modern age (Nora 1989: 12). Cemeteries function as such physical locations where collective memory is anchored through various practices such as grave visitation and memorial rituals. Therefore, violence against these sites disrupts not only individual graves, but also the collective memory embedded within them.

When examining both the Polish and Italian cases of desecration, two distinct forms of symbolic violence can be identified.

In the case of the Jewish cemetery in Korczyn, Poland, symbolic violence operates through institutional neglect and unequal institutional response. The evidence is clear: minimal media coverage (only three articles found), a police investigation that yielded no results, no arrests, and a case that went cold, as well as the notable absence of any high-level governmental response. This stands in stark contrast to the desecration of a Polish military cemetery monument in Miednoje, Russia, which received extensive media attention, official statements from the Minister of Foreign Affairs, and sustained diplomatic action. Such disparity in responses communicates that Jewish memory holds a marginal position in Polish national identity. This lack of institutional protection presents this hierarchy as natural rather than chosen, normalizing the idea that certain dead warrant less care. This is a clear example of symbolic violence precisely because it is not explicitly stated that "Jewish dead matter less", instead, it is implied through inaction. The message is communicated through omission: what does not receive coverage, which investigations quietly close, which cemeteries remain neglected with maintenance left to under-resourced Jewish foundations burdened with the heavy task of preserving their memory.

In Sicily, symbolic violence presents itself in a different manner. Rather than manifesting through absence of response, it reveals how deeply embedded structural corruption can persist despite significant institutional intervention. In their fight with the Sicilian mafia, the police conducted an operation involving over 1,200 officers and arrested approximately 150 mafia members. There are also ongoing investigations and documentations of official corruption. Clearly, this is not a case of inaction. Yet despite this vigorous response, the underlying symbolic violence persists due to decades of mafia influence, which have produced a habitus: a disposition to regard certain behaviours as natural. The presence of the mafia and its practices became a normalized part of life on the Italian island. Families came to expect paying "coffee for the burial director" for accelerated services because that was simply how cemetery management functioned. Officials often looked the other way, not necessarily out of active malice, but through generational habituation to these practices. Even the most extensive and bold actions taken by the police and government institutions will not immediately break a generational cycle that has woven itself into the social fabric shaping how death and burial are understood. In the case of the desecration of the death on Sicilian cemetery, the symbolic violence

operates through the commodification of death: the normalization of treating burial as a market transaction, in which profit considerations become legitimate factors in handling the dead. Sicilian cemeteries, as sites of memory where families maintain ongoing relationships with their dead, become particularly vulnerable when subjected to such market logic. The symbolic violence succeeds not be concealing these practices, but by making them feel inevitable, practical, even reasonable given cemetery shortages and economic realities. What should be recognized as desecration becomes reframed as pragmatic management.

Institutional Violence: Enabling Harm Through Structure

Institutional violence (as a form of structural violence) refers to harm enabled by legal, bureaucratic (Turvey et al. 2022), and organisational systems that, in this case, fail to protect the dead or actively expose them to abuse. Such harm does not come from individual actions, but from structural arrangements that create conditions for exploitation.

In the Polish case, institutional violence manifests through the failure of the state to protect Jewish cultural heritage sites, specifically cemeteries. Despite legal protections under the Polish cultural heritage law, the enforcement of these laws remains inadequate, as demonstrated by the case. The investigation into the Korczyn case led to no arrests, no accountability, and was eventually abandoned, illustrating how legal frameworks exist on paper but lack effective implementation. The failure is therefore systemic rather than individual, reflecting institutional patterns, in which Jewish heritage sites receive insufficient resources for monitoring, maintenance, and investigation. The violence is institutional because it emerges from the structure and operation of the system itself.

In Sicily, institutional violence takes a different form: the infiltration and corruption of institutions by organised crime. Decades of mafia influence created social conditions, in which bribery, coercion, and exploitation became normalised. Here, the institutional violence is not the absence of protective structures or their inaction, but their perversion. Institutions that should protect the dead instead facilitate their exploitation, with officials falsifying documents, cemetery workers reselling burial plots, and bodies being removed from graves. The system does not merely fail to protect the deceased, it actively enables their desecration.

Both of these cases demonstrate that institutional violence, like symbolic violence, can function in different ways within society –through either the failure or the corruption of protective structures. Poland illustrates harm through institutional absence, where laws exist but lack enforcement, while Sicily illustrates harm through institutional corruption, where structures exist and function but are perverted for exploitation. In both situations the outcome is the same: the dead remain unprotected and vulnerable.

Conclusion

Violence against the dead, though often hidden or inadequately addressed, reveals fundamental failures within modern societies' relationship with death, memory, and dignity. Whether expressed through commodification, neglect, legal ambiguity, or simply symbolic erasure, such acts of the violence against the dead are not random anomalies but indicators of deeper problems. They reflect how increasingly privatised and medicalised approaches to death have created systemic vulnerabilities. Traditional social approaches death and the dead may now seem, to many, incompatible with contemporary practices and simply inconvenient. As Philippe Ariès (and Geoffrey Gorer, as mentioned by Ariès) observed, the ritual and communal dimensions of dying have been replaced by silence, efficiency, and individualism.

Through the two examples presented in this article – desecrated graves in Poland and systematic fraud in funeral industry in Italy – it is demonstrated that the dead can be violated not only physically, but also symbolically and institutionally. Such violence against those who cannot defend themselves, and who can only be protected by the living, undermines the moral foundations of social life, erodes the collective memory, and reveals the weakening of the taboos that once protected not only the deceased, but the living as well.

Understanding and drawing attention to these acts of violence helps to reframe them as not isolated obscenities, but as symptoms of deeper systematic failures in how society structures its relationship with

death. Through such understanding and reflection, changes can be made in how we treat the dead and in what we allow to befall them. The way we treat the dead reflects our social values and institutional structures, and reveals how society constructs meaning around mortality.

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