

Conference organized by the team
of the SNSF research project
**“Mass Death, Science and Medicine:
Handling the Corpses of War in Modern Europe (1850-1960)”**

DISRUPTIVE BODIES

DEATH AND BURIAL

IN EARLY MODERN ENGLAND AND WWI FRANCE



Source: A street during the plague in London with a death cart and mourners, Wellcome Collection, London

3 MARCH 2026

Uni Dufour | Room U260
12h15- 14h

unige.ch/mdh/massdeath

Death in Times of Crisis: Dead Bodies, War and Plague in 17th-century England

Martin Christ (University of Erfurt, Germany)

The 17th century was one of the most tumultuous periods of English history. It included wars with other European powers, a civil war, the repeated collapse of government and even the execution of a king. London was the epicenter of many of these events. The last serious outbreak of the plague in 1665 and a fire that destroyed much of the city added to the perception of the century as one defined by crises. This presentation investigates what it meant for early modern polities to deal with a sudden increase in dead bodies. It uses early modern England, and especially the metropolis of London, to draw attention to the ways in which dead bodies were placed, analyzed and used during times of crisis. It argues that while initially disruptive, times of crisis also provided a possibility for new systems to be established. On administrative, scientific and religious levels, periods of war and plague were highly dynamic.

The French Military and the Disposal of Metropolitan and Colonial Bodies during WWI and its Aftermath

Meriam N. Belli (University of Iowa, USA)

How did battlefield experiences and conditions, as well as political and sociocultural attitudes affect the *science of disposal of corpses*? How were bodies disposed of during the war and what became of them after the war? What forms of knowledge informed French burial practices during the war with respect to Muslim colonial soldiers? What distinctions did military institutions establish, if any, between metropolitan and colonial corpses? Indeed, for the first time in European history, hundreds of thousands of colonial soldiers fought on European soil. As a result, metropolitan military institutions were forced to integrate Islamic practices as they disposed of colonial corpses. Institutional adaptation was however essentially ritual: to this day, coffin-less Islamic burial is considered as presenting a health hazard and is forbidden on French soil. While the science of body disposal could and can technically adapt burial methods to religious prescriptions, French institutions did not then, and do not now, seek to do so.

ORGANIZATION & INFORMATION

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