



The Political Lives of Dead Bodies

By Katherine Verdery

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Since 1989, scores of bodies across Eastern Europe have been exhumed and brought to rest in new gravesites. Katherine Verdery investigates why certain corpses—the bodies of revolutionary leaders, heroes, artists, and other luminaries, as well as more humble folk—have taken on a political life in the turbulent times following the end of Communist Party rule, and what roles they play in revising the past and reorienting the present. Enlivening and invigorating the dialogue on postsocialist politics, this imaginative study helps us understand the dynamic and deeply symbolic nature of politics—and how it can breathe new life into old bones.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

In *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies*, Katherine Verdery tries to jazz up political science by adding a dash of anthropology, examining the ways in which political upheavals are often accompanied by incidents involving the corpses of former leaders or other cultural heroes. "Dead bodies," she says, "have properties that make them particularly effective political symbols. They are thus excellent means for accumulating something essential to political transformation: symbolic capital."

Unfortunately, much of the inherent interest in matters such as the return of Transylvanian Catholic bishop Inochentie Micu's bones to his homeland more than two centuries after his death is crushed under the weight of Verdery's prose. By all rights, the role of historical personages in shaping nationalist myths *ought* to be a fascinating subject, deserving of analysis more dynamic than this: "Because corpses suggest the lived lives of complex human beings, they can be evaluated from many angles and assigned perhaps contradictory virtues, vices, and intentions." (Simon Schama's *Landscape and Memory*, for example, discusses several cases of the intersection of nationalism, historical memory, and natural landscape in a lively, engaging style perfectly accessible to a broad audience.) And although Verdery presents her work as a counterpoint to "the rationalistic and dry sense of politics that so many political analysts employ," readers--even those with patience for vehemently academic writing--may ask themselves who *hasn't* figured out by the end of the 1990s that culture shapes politics in chaotic and unpredictable ways. --Ron Hogan

From Library Journal

In this intriguing book, anthropologist Verdery by her own admission a student of dead-body politics points out that some corpses have lived interesting lives above all in Eastern Europe since the fall of communism. Her central question is, What is it about a corpse that seems to invite its use in politics? In the case of her chosen region, the answer is frequently, Plenty. While citing the examples of Nicholas II, Lenin, Imre Nagy, and others, she concentrates most attention on the post-death adventures of a Transylvanian bishop unknown outside Romania and little known inside. She freights this choice with a heavy significance whose justification is not readily apparent. Verdery's profiles of these exhumations of sacred and profane figures and their posthumous travels should appeal to an academic audience in anthropology and sociology. Robert H. Johnston, McMaster Univ., Hamilton, Ontario
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Review

A pithy, and highly readable, example of current anthropological approaches to national-level politics. The emergence of such a focus on national-level processes is one of the most important developments in the anthropological study of politics today.

(David I. Kertzer *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*)

Unusual and provocative... designed to provoke discussion and debate, rather than close it.

(*Slavic and East European Journal*)

Verdery certainly deserves praise for having opened up an intriguing (and understudied) topic. The book

leaves us hoping for a sequel.

(Derek Bickerton *The New York Times Book Review*)

For those jaded by a view of nationalis as ' a matter of territorial borders, state-making, "constructionism", or resource competition,' Verdery's work offers welcome refreshment.

(*Social Anthropology*)

Were Verdery not one of the premier anthropologists and specialists on eastern Europe, most readers might not take seriously a book that the author herself half-jokingly calls a study in political necrophilia...But this exploration... is entirely serious.

(*Foreign Affairs*)

The affairs of Eastern Europe, and especially those of the lands that were once Yugoslavia, now hold the attention of the entire world. Verdery gives readers a new angle of vision on this troubled region.

(Carl L. Bankston III *Commonweal*)

Writing about a topic involving corpses and reburials presents its own challenges, and Verdery has mastered them admirably. Neither lurid nor cynical, neither too dry nor too sanctimonious, her prose is on the whole matter-of-factly, but not without lighthearted moments.

(Gerhard Sonnert *Canadian Review of Studies in Nationalism*)

Users Review

From reader reviews:

William Phillips:

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