

# Soldiers who desecrate the dead see themselves as hunters

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Modern day soldiers who mutilate enemy corpses or take body-parts as trophies are usually thought to be suffering from the extreme stresses of battle. But, research funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) shows that this sort of misconduct has most often been carried out by fighters who viewed the enemy as racially different from themselves and used images of the hunt to describe their actions.

"The roots of this behaviour lie not in individual [psychological disorders](#)," says Professor Simon Harrison who carried out the study, "but in a social history of racism and in military traditions that use hunting metaphors for war. Although this misconduct is very rare, it has persisted in predictable patterns since the European Enlightenment. This was the period when the first ideologies of race began to appear, classifying some human populations as closer to animals than others."

European and North American [soldiers](#) who have mutilated enemy corpses appear to have drawn racial distinctions of this sort between close and distant enemies. They 'fought' their close enemies, and bodies remained untouched after death, but they 'hunted' their distant enemies and such bodies became the trophies that demonstrate masculine skill.

Almost always, only enemies viewed as belonging to other 'races' have been treated in this way. "This is a specifically racialised form of violence," suggest Professor Harrison, "and could be considered a type of racially-motivated hate crime specific to military personnel in wartime."

People tend to associate head-hunting and other trophy-taking with 'primitive' warfare. They consider wars fought by professional militaries as rational and humane. However, such contrasts are misleading. The study shows that the symbolic associations between hunting and war that can give rise to abnormal behaviour such as trophy-taking in modern military organisations are remarkably close to those in certain indigenous societies where practices such as head-hunting were a recognised part of the culture.

In both cases, mutilation of the enemy dead occurs when enemies are represented as animals or prey. Parts of the corpse are removed like trophies at 'the kill'. Metaphors of 'war-as-hunting' that lie at the root of such behaviour are still strong in some armed forces in Europe and North America – not only in military training but in the media and in soldiers' own self-perception.

Professor Harrison gives the example of the Second World War and shows that trophy-taking was rare on the European battlefields but was relatively common in the war in the Pacific, where some Allied soldiers kept skulls of Japanese combatants as mementos or made gifts of their remains to friends back home.

The study also gives a more recent comparison: there have been incidents in Afghanistan in which NATO personnel have desecrated the dead bodies of Taliban combatants but there is no evidence of such misconduct occurring in the conflicts of the former Yugoslavia where NATO forces were much less likely to have considered their opponents racially 'distant'.

But, it would be wrong to suggest that such behaviour amounts to a tradition. These practices are usually not explicitly taught. Indeed, they seem to be quickly forgotten after the end of wars and veterans often remain unaware of the extent to which they occurred.

Furthermore, attitudes towards the trophies themselves change as the enemy ceases to be the enemy. The study shows how human remains kept by Allied soldiers after the Pacific War became unwanted memory objects over time, which ex-servicemen or their families often donated to museums. In some cases, veterans have made great efforts to seek out the families of Japanese soldiers in order to return their remains and to disconnect themselves from a disturbing past.

Professor Harrison concludes that human trophy-taking is evidence of the power of metaphor in structuring and motivating human behaviour. "It will probably occur, in some form or other, whenever war, hunting and masculinity are conceptually linked," he says. "Prohibition is clearly not enough to prevent it. We need to recognise the dangers of portraying war in terms of hunting imagery."

Provided by Economic & Social Research Council

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