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The Hunt For Hitler's Teeth

How one forensic biologist stumbled across
the only remaining body parts of
Adolf Hitler... in a floppy-disc case in Moscow

WORDS MARK BENECKE

I'm a nerd. Spectacles, chequered shirt, no radio, no TV. I am also a forensic entomologist by profession. So when the National Geographic Channel called and asked me – "the most famous forensic biologist on Earth", at least according to my editors – to join an investigation into the whereabouts of the remains of Adolf Hitler, I rather nerdily assumed it would be a purely theoretical enterprise, and said yes.

Like most people – including most Germans – I'd always believed Hitler's

corpse had been 'lost' in the aftermath of the liberation of Berlin. I had no idea that it was only destroyed by the Russian KGB in 1970, and dumped in a river.

Destroyed, that is, except for a piece of his skull, and his teeth.

THE BODY IN THE LIBRARY

Since 1945, the charred body had secretly lain beneath East German soil, in the city of Magdeburg on the river Elbe 120km southwest of Berlin.

In 1970, Yuri Andropov, then head of the KGB who would go on to become the shortest-lived-ever leader

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of the Soviet Union in the 1980s, ordered his agents to finally – and, this time, genuinely – burn the body. So they did. Afterwards, the ashes were scattered into the river.

News of the destruction of the remains spread throughout the communist East – even the ultra-secret location of the exhumation and burning was mooted on the grapevine – but in West Germany nobody had a clue. This was the Cold War. This was classified.

The remaining fragments were hidden away by the KGB. At some point in the next 20 years a KGB agent moved them to the State Archives in Moscow and now I was going to track them down.

I started as I always do: not checking too much what people think they know already, but starting afresh, treating the case as a blank slate. I only read two books on the subject – one small paperback about the last 10 days in the Führerbunker, and the diary of Hitler's secretary, Traudl Junge.

In Moscow the old people I talked to sat with me for hours, and appeared happy to tell their stories one final time – they are very old – and to speak a little German again, even though it was physically tough for them.

I treated this case just like any other: no assumptions, and a full-blown investigation at the very spot. This is my personal style. Others would do it differently, travel less, dig less, but research more beforehand. I prefer to dive straight in. I did the same when I researched body modification in Manhattan, vampires in Transylvania, and one case in which the question was whether a dog had urinated against a wall or not.

The events of Hitler's last day were as comical as his rule had been tragic. His final command from the famous Berlin bunker was that his body be burnt to ashes. But in the bombed-out, besieged ruins of Berlin in the closing days of the war, it was difficult to find enough fuel to burn a human corpse. So new orders were received: Hitler's driver was to "obtain burning liquid".

Even here, things didn't go according to plan. The driver, Erich Kempka, searched high and low, but could only get his hands on around 180 litres of flammable liquids.

This meant that even after dousing it with the fuel and burning it as much as possible, Hitler's body, though severely blackened on the outside, still had its internal organs and bones intact – in the forensic sense.

A body is considered 'intact' whenever something can be identified – eg, the teeth can be blackened inside a chopped-off head but as long as the teeth themselves are recognisable they're considered intact.

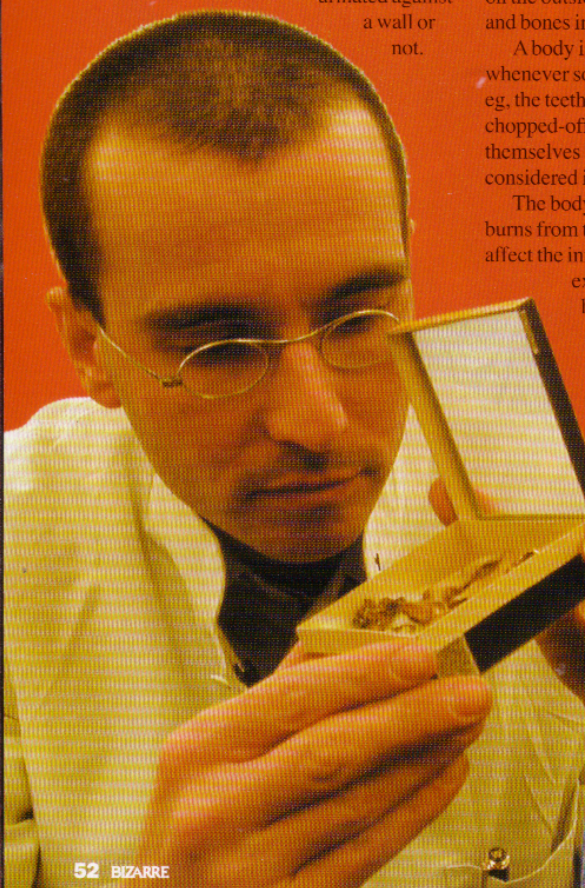
The body contains a lot of water so if it burns from the outside, the heat doesn't affect the inner core as much as you may expect. So one can still check if a heart attack caused death, if the person had cancer of the kidneys and so on. One can even check for poison.

In one of the autopsy reports, it was allegedly

mentioned that the smell of cyanide was prevalent, although this could be propaganda. Stalin wanted Hitler to die like a coward and poison was not considered 'manly'. On the other hand, Hitler's dog was poisoned, so there is a good chance that Hitler and Eva Braun took cyanide in addition to shooting themselves. Hitler was terrified of being captured alive by Stalin.

After establishing identifiable parts really existed, and because there are no high-resolution colour photographs of these remains, I gained access to the few surviving eyewitnesses of the events from 30 April 1945 – the day of Hitler's suicide – to 8 May 1945, the day the war ended. By interviewing several original witnesses separately, I ascertained that the skull and teeth in the archives might very well be real.

This



Hitler's skull is stored in a wad of old tissues stuffed inside a CD case kept because the archivist liked the lock





Hitler's X-ray and dental records (far left). The sofa where Hitler shot Eva Braun and then himself (left)

by Hitler's dentist. The teeth are stored in a KGB archive in a batch of large travel suitcases, packed together with Hitler's uniform and the original files of the investigation into his death.

MATCH THE TEETH TO THE NAZI

The reports of Hitler's dentist, SS man Hugo Blaschke, a former US dental student who was arrested and questioned in 1945, and other witnesses show clearly that the teeth must indeed be the Führer's. The details all correspond. For example, a massive piece of metal bridgework, which has survived remarkably undamaged, can also be seen on X-rays of Hitler's head from 1944, taken after Hitler complained of headaches following an assassination attempt.

Blaschke had told Hitler that he needed "something that would last" (he didn't, as it turned out). That's why he got such an ultra-strong structure. All features of the massive, bridge on the X-ray match the actual teeth.

Michel Perrier, a university odontologist from Lausanne with profound knowledge of – some would say an obsession with – forensic odontology, went a step further.

He compared contemporary footage in which Hitler shows his teeth while grimacing and smirking during speeches. He managed to identify shiny structures ("metal artefacts") on the sides, as well as severe paradontosis of the lower front teeth. These distinctive conditions were common to both the movies and the teeth in the KGB archive.

Hitler's teeth were so bad that his dental profile alone made it possible to identify his corpse. The state of his teeth might also explain why everybody complained about the Nazi leader's chronic bad breath.

Eva Braun's teeth are in the same vault... in an even smaller, crappier cigar box than the case containing Hitler's gnashers.

So, the skull and teeth were both authentic. Throughout all of this, though, did I feel the cold touch of history when examining Hitler's remains? No. But being a nerd, I believe it is highly appropriate to see the madman's remains in pieces, different archives all over Moscow, dumped in cheap plastic tubs, and forgotten. □

Riddles of the Dead: Hitler's Skull is on the National Geographic Channel through the autumn.

is interesting, because strictly speaking we cannot scientifically prove it unless we drill the bone open to recover DNA.

Criminalistically it was at least making some sense.

And so it was that I stumbled into one of the most bizarre forensic investigations in history. I say "stumbled" because that's almost literally the truth: the first archive I went into, the State Archive, was not only covered in thick layers of dust, but was also filled with piles of cardboard boxes, sheets, and drawers gone wild.

The State Archive was being renovated. This meant there were no toilets, no light in some parts of the building, and tons and tons of dust. Security was minimal – they trusted us – and I was allowed to work on my own, without supervision on the skull.

The archivist told me about how she found the Führer's remains. "When we were cleaning up one day we opened a box marked 'Operation Myth' and found a piece of paper saying 'skull piece Hitler'. The bones were inside the box," she remembers. At the time, she wrote to museums around the world to see if they wanted to display them but no-one was interested. She asked me why I thought that was and it took me a second to find a good answer. She obviously has no bitter feelings towards Hitler or his remains.

And there I made perhaps the strangest discovery of all. Hitler's head rests, not in peace, but on two sheets of Kleenex wedged inside a floppy-disc case.

When the archivist opened the box

containing the skull piece. I couldn't help laughing. All this time, she had stored the thing in a used plastic floppy-disc container, because of the nice little plastic lock attached to the front of the box. The remains are a bit underwhelming: tiny pieces stuck together with plasticine, they are slightly charred but the exit wound of a bullet is clear.

The formal identification of Hitler's remains (and therefore the confirmation of his death based on physical evidence) was published back in 1972. This identification was performed by comparing the teeth of the remains to the dental schemata that were drawn

