Once and for all: The encounter between Stalinism and Nazism. Critical remarks on Timothy Snyder's *Bloodlands*

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Twenty years ago it would have been unthinkable for a historian to combine the National Socialists' murderous excesses and programme of extermination with Bolshevik atrocities in a single history. He would have been accused of 'relativising' one set of murderous crimes by relating it to the other. The comparison does indeed have a relativising effect in that it puts the events in a new light and so makes them, for the first time, comprehensible. But at that time, when historians still treated all historical questions as moral ones, nobody wanted to anything to do with that comparison because it ran counter to the political will. You could compare anything with anything, except the Holocaust, which had to remain unique. Nobody could write about the excesses of Stalinist violence without acknowledging that the Nazi murder programme was unique. Nonetheless everybody knew, even then, that uniqueness cannot be established without comparisons and contrasts.[1] Since then, a view that used to be considered shocking has become a self-evident: no examination of state atrocities is now possible without a comparative element. But this change can also serve political ends: the Holocaust has become the sole yardstick for measuring state-organised crimes of violence. It seems that such crimes can only be taken seriously if they are comparable to Nazi atrocities.[2]

Timothy Snyder remains aloof from this contest in frightfulness. He too knows that historians are neither judges nor plaintiffs. Their aim is to understand the deeds of people now dead. Snyder not only tells readers what they already know: he has

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[1] See the documentation of the 'historians' dispute' in *'Historikerstreit': Die Dokumentation der Kontroverse über die Einzigartigkeit der nationalsozialsozialistischen Judenvernichtung* (Munich: Piper Verlag, 1987); Richard Evans' *In Hitler's Shadow: West German Historians and the Attempt to Escape from the Nazi Past* (New Yok: Knopf, 1989) is a tendentious and one-sided view of the quarrel.

[2] See, for example, Norman Naimark, *Stalin's Genocides* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

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new and spectacular things to convey. The atrocities of the twentieth century, he writes, did not come out of the blue: they occurred in the only space where the perpetrators could fully develop their potential for violence. Snyder calls this space the 'bloodlands': the killing fields of Eastern Europe where the thinkable became doable, where totalitarian fantasies of murder and extermination could be turned into realities, because things could be done in these devastated lands that were not feasible elsewhere. Thus the bloodlands became the site for experiments in repression and violence unparalleled elsewhere in Europe. Nowhere, says Snyder, did so many people die in such a short time as in Belarus and the Ukraine: during the agricultural collectivisation and the Great Terror of 1937–8; between 1939 and 1941 when Hitler and Stalin rampaged through Poland, the Baltic Republics and the western Ukraine with terror and blood; and during the Second World War, when the Nazis carried out their monstrous programme of human extermination in these same bloodlands. Nor did the violence end with the war. In the Ukraine Stalin's regime fought a bloody war against partisans and deserters, and several hundred thousand peasants starved to death because Stalin had decreed the plundering of the empire's breadbasket and the enslavement of its population. When the Nazis overran the Ukraine they found it already laid waste by Stalinist violence, and when Stalin's armies returned in 1944, they were confronted with evidence of the atrocious Nazi exterminations. Hitherto historians have described either the one or the other. Snyder links the two: not in a comparison, but as an account of interrelated praxes of violence. Without the excesses of Stalin's dictatorship it is impossible to understand the Nazi response.

Synder recounts successively what were actually simultaneous events, but the events should still be comprehensible in his interwoven narrative. This is probably the only way to ensure clarity and order, but it comes at a price: much that the author would have liked to say remains unsaid. Snyder spares the reader none of the frightful details. Nowhere will you find a more gripping and absorbing account of the horrors of famine in the Ukraine, of deportation and mass terror. Snyder's description of Nazi atrocities in Eastern Europe is equally blood-curdling. Historians need to write well, because they are not only custodians of knowledge but also authors with stories to tell. If the quality of the narrative is taken as a yardstick for appraising history books, Snyder's must be considered a masterpiece for that reason alone.

This fine book is not beyond criticism, however. Snyder is talking about murder on a huge scale, but he does not tell the story from the viewpoint of the perpetrators or the victims. The course of events in Stalin's USSR is no longer terra incognita for most historians; the Nazi policy of deporting Jews, and its cumulative radicalisation, have been fully described by Saul Friedländer in his book on the Holocaust.[3] But how did the Nazis react to the fact that Stalin's functionaries had waged war against their own people and seemed to be cruelly and pointlessly killing people who had been identified as enemies by pure chance? And what did Stalin's henchmen expect from their opponents when the latter invaded the USSR in 1941 and turned the Soviet ethnic pyramid on its head?

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[3] Saul Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews*, vol. I: *The Years of Persecution* (London: Phoenix, 1998). For a comparison of the interrelatedness of both regimes see Sheila Fitzpatrick and Michael Geyer, eds., *Beyond Totalitarianism: Stalinism and Nazism Compared* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

Snyder does not answer the question as to why the crimes of one side radicalised and legitimated the crimes of the other, and why this radicalisation took place in the bloodlands of Eastern Europe. For the bloodlands were not, of course, a given. They emerged from the First World War and the Russian civil war, when a remote agricultural area turned into a battlefield and the struggle for power was resolved through armed force. In other words, the stage was set before the Bolsheviks and Nazis seized and devastated it. Only on this remote scene of violence could the Bolsheviks do what Hitler in 1933 could only dream of, because they were no longer facing organised resistance and neither victims nor perpetrators needed to be inducted into violence.[4] Snyder, however, begins his Soviet episode with the famine of 1932–3 and ends it with the Great Terror. He then goes on to describe the Nazi exterminations, without explaining clearly the link between the violence of the one said and the excesses of the other, or why we need 'bloodlands' as a category if we are to understand what happened in the killing fields of Europe. Merely pointing out that the thing had to happen somewhere is not going cause any great astonishment.

How did the people living in this space of violence experience what other people did to them? With what expectations did they encounter those who had the power of life and death over them? Who did they themselves identify as their enemies, and how could they contrive to use totalitarian power for their own ends? Where did the perpetrators come from and what had they been through before they entered the bloodlands and confronted their victims? Did the Nazi perpetrators, as they entered this space for the first time, realise what had happened in Eastern Europe before they came? And did this realisation influence their own deeds of violence? If the bloodlands had not existed, the Nazis would have had to invent them. I think it can be no coincidence that they carried out their worst crimes in a space where the Bolsheviks had already spread death and decay. Outside all the safeguards of civilised living, in a space that was utterly lawless, Hitler's and Stalin's henchmen could be lords of life and death without need to justify their crimes to anybody. Snyder speaks in terms of convictions and ideologies rather than constraints placed on the perpetrators by the violence in the bloodlands. At one point he mentions Friedrich Jeckeln, chief of police in the *Reichskommissariat Ostland*, who ordered the first mass shooting of Jews in Kamianets-Podilskyi in August 1941. Was it irrelevant that Jeckeln had been born and brought up in Riga? In any case he evidently believed that he could do things in the Ukraine that would have been forbidden to him elsewhere. The bloodlands were inhabited by people who had experienced the inferno of Stalinist terror and inter-ethnic warfare. Nobody went there without some preconceptions, and nobody operated there without consequences. When the *Wehrmacht* marched into the western Ukraine and the Baltic republics, the soldiers must surely have discovered that Ukrainians and Lithuanians had been killing Jews and Communists without any prompting from the SS. Snyder too sees a connection between these atrocities and the Stalinist terror:

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[4] See also Jörg Baberowski, 'Totale Herrschaft im staatsfernen Raum: Stalinismus und Nationalsozialismus im Vergleich', *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft*, 57, 12 (2009), 1013–28.

> Yet this psychic nazification would have been much more difficult without the palpable evidence of Soviet atrocities. The pogroms took place where the Soviets had recently arrived and where Soviet power was recently installed, where for the previous months Soviet organs of coercion had organised arrests, executions and deportations. They were a joint production, a Nazi edition of a Soviet text. (p. 196)

Bolscheviks and Nazis learned from each other when they met in the bloodlands. But one side was on familiar ground, the other in a terra incognita that they did not understand and where they could win no victories. Stalin's thugs were professional killers who had learned and tested their murderous skills before the war. Hitler's agents had first to learn how to deport whole peoples and shoot and gas them. Those who start a war of extermination can scarcely be surprised if they are exterminated in their turn. Hitler and his generals grasped that fact in the second year of the war, because Stalin left them in no doubt that he too was engaged in a war of extermination. In such a war nobody was going to care about civilians, or conventions or rules. The population of the bloodlands had to pay in blood for this removal of the boundaries of violence. Snyder tells how the Nazis murdered the Jews in the territories of the Soviet Union and the extermination camps of Eastern Europe, but does not connect this with the excesses of Stalin's dictatorship.

Snyder's story ends in 1953, when Stalin died and the exterminations and paroxysms of violence came to an end even in the USSR. But why does he describe this event if all he has to say is that by the end of the Stalin era antisemitism had also triumphed in the USSR and Poland? Was late Stalinism a response to the devastation of the bloodlands by the German occupiers? Snyder does not answer this question. My answer would be this: when Stalin died, his successors could agree to cease using violence against their own people, because they no longer needed enemies in order to compel loyalty. Once Nazism had been defeated, Stalin's heirs could make peace. The bloodlands disappeared for ever.