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# Timothy Snyder's Bloodlands

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In the middle of the twentieth century, state-sponsored mass killing took place in Europe on a scale unknown before or since. Although the figures are contentious, around six million civilians are estimated to have been deliberately killed under Stalin; around eleven million under Hitler (p. xiii). What makes this phenomenon all the more striking is that not only was it severely circumscribed in time – it came to an end by the early 1950s – but it was also highly localised. Eastern Europe – in particular Poland, the Baltic states, Belarus and the Ukraine – was the epicentre, and its inhabitants among the chief victims. It is the story of these lands – the ‘Bloodlands’ – that Timothy Snyder, one of our leading historians of eastern Europe, has singled out. If we are to see this extraordinary spate of murderousness as the central event of the century (as Snyder argues), then we need a much clearer view than we presently have of what happened in the Bloodlands. In particular, we need to jettison the view that modern mass murder took place chiefly in concentration camps – much of the killing happened through starvation or the shooting squad – and we need to appreciate the extent to which it happened as a consequence of the intimate relationship between the regimes of Hitler and Stalin. This, in a nutshell, is the rationale for this book.

The task of grappling with the conjoined meaning of the two great dictatorships automatically evokes the work of Hannah Arendt. However, Snyder distances himself explicitly from Arendt's idea that their drive to violence stemmed ultimately from alienation – as though man living in a modern mass society were able to realise himself only in the service of a bureaucratic regime that defined life's purpose in the killing of others. He rightly observes that Arendt the philosopher (not to mention the totalitarian theorists who followed her) provided a sociological abstraction of a process that took place in a very specific historical and political context and that she overlooked in particular the extent to which the two regimes descended into violence as a result of their interactions with one another.<sup>1</sup> To be sure, the charting of such interactions and their consequences requires careful footwork. Many years ago,

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<sup>1</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1951).

Ernst Nolte courted controversy by claiming (and failing to prove) that Nazi crimes emerged as echoes of Bolshevik ones and for many years this exercise in historical apologetics gave the interlinked history of Nazism and Stalinism a bad name. When Alan Bullock provided his resolutely atheoretical comparison of the two dictators, it was as a series of parallel lives that scarcely interacted at all. Richard Overy's recent account is more sophisticated, and weaves dictator and society together more firmly in each case, but does not fundamentally depart from this model.<sup>2</sup> The political sensitivities remain, above all in eastern Europe – as the recent campaign by some new member states to get the European Union to adjudicate on the relative iniquities of Nazi and Stalinist crimes shows. But among historians at least in the Anglo-American academy, times have changed and, as *Bloodlands* shows, the question of comparison can now be dealt with in a professional and less tendentious manner. The book itself promises to add two new dimensions – or perhaps three – to the comparison of these twin evils: it highlights interactivity between the two regimes; it focuses in particular on mass killing; and it frames the argument within a very specific region.

It is an achievement of Snyder's account that it makes one realise just how little we actually know about the interactions between the two dictatorships. Historiographical fashions have not helped. With the marginalisation of diplomatic history in the American academy, one of the chief tools for analysing relationships between the Reich and the USSR slipped from scholars' hands. Who now remembers Brest-Litovsk or Rapallo? The rise of social and cultural history turned Germanists and Soviet historians into introverts, capable of analysing the internal dynamics of their chosen object of study but loath to place them in their international setting. Snyder's approach is thus fresh and needed and draws on the recent turn to geopolitics in both fields. His Polish interest in particular allows him to make interesting observations on the Soviet fear of encirclement, and he reminds us of some important zones of activity where Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia did indeed interact.

A startling memorandum from the winter of 1939–40, for example, reveals that Eichmann and the SS approached their counterparts in Moscow to enquire whether they would be interested in extending the series of bilateral deportations then underway to encompass the Jews then living under the Reich. The very idea that the Nazis would have seen forced expulsion into the USSR – and thought that the Russians might agree – as a solution to their Jewish Question is remarkable and one the existing historiography has almost entirely overlooked. Another issue, much more widely discussed by the two regimes and of much more immediate importance at that time, was grain. In Berlin, Ribbentrop's foreign ministry hailed the non-aggression pact as a great achievement not least because it kept Soviet grain flowing into the wartime Reich. Hitler and others pressing for invasion from mid-1940 onwards had to insist that rapid victory over Stalin would in fact improve on this situation by bringing the grain lands of the Ukraine under direct German control. But the details of the argument still escape us. Snyder rightly emphasises the importance of the Ukraine as

<sup>2</sup> Alan Bullock, *Hitler and Stalin: Parallel Lives* (New York: Knopf, 1993); Richard Overy, *The Dictators: Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Russia* (London: Allen Lane, 2004).

breadbasket in the thinking of both regimes.<sup>3</sup> But while he amply demonstrates the devastating consequences this had for the region's inhabitants, he does not give us much detail about this debate or others like it.

An analysis focusing on interactivity might have identified not only issues (population policies; grain; a shared interest in the suppression of East European nationalism) but also vectors – from the high-level policy-makers in the two capitals, through the views of 'Bolshevik' and 'German' specialists, down to the encounters of soldiers and population experts on the ground. Yet while the book has many virtues, the fine-grained exploration of the modes and occasions of inter-connection between the two regimes is not among them. Snyder mentions that the memory of Soviet occupation in eastern Poland and the Baltic states fuelled anti-Jewish violence in the first weeks of German rule, but his Rankean mode allows for none of the extended analysis of how one occupation impacted upon the next that historical sociologist Jan Gross has provided in his work.<sup>4</sup>

In fact, while the book depends on such nodes of interaction for one of its central arguments, what it really provides for the reader is a storyline – familiar in its component elements, unfamiliar in their combination. This is a harrowing narrative account of the crimes of the two regimes – starting with the 1933 famine in the Ukraine and the Terror, reaching its apogee in the Holocaust, and ending with the forced deportations and anti-semitic campaigns of eastern Europe in the second half of the 1940s. Always scholarly, this account interweaves its stories of mass violence with less regionally specific surveys of the broader strategic, ideological and geopolitical arguments within the respective regimes' leaderships. Thus the *Bloodlands* become a peg upon which to hang a large history of Europe's mid-century.

The overall effect, however, is paradoxically to downplay the nature of the *Bloodlands* themselves, which are presented not as a 'political territory' but rather as the place where two criminal powers 'did their work' (p. xviii). It is as though the price of being revealed to be a key zone for European history is to be depicted in all your own powerlessness. This is not, then, a history in any conventional sense of 'the

<sup>3</sup> There is, of course, a large literature on the German planning for and occupation of the Ukraine: see in particular Alex J. Kay: *Exploitation, Resettlement, Mass Murder: Political and Economic Planning for German Occupation Policy in the Soviet Union, 1940–1941* (New York/Oxford: Berghahn, 2006) as well as the book by Christian Gerlach, *Krieg, Ernährung, Völkermord: Forschungen zur deutschen Vernichtungspolitik im Zweiten Weltkrieg* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 1998) and his *Kalkulierte Morde: Die deutsche Wirtschafts- und Vernichtungspolitik in Weißrussland 1941 bis 1944* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 1998) on Belarus. Snyder draws on this work but does not engage directly with its arguments.

<sup>4</sup> After his brilliant historical sociology of the German occupation of Poland, *Polish Society under German Occupation* (Princeton UP: Princeton, 1979), Gross went on to explore this subject in several major works: *Revolution from Abroad: The Soviet Conquest of Poland's Western Ukraine and Western Belorussia* (Princeton UP: Princeton, 1988) and *Neighbours: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne* (Princeton UP: Princeton, 2001). Snyder's closest engagement with Gross's ideas is found in a footnote (fn. 21 on p. 485). Ben Cion Pinchuk, *Shtetl Jews under Soviet Rule: Eastern Poland on the Eve of the Holocaust* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1990), also explores the impact of Sovietisation. See too Marek Jan Chodakiewicz's local study, *Between Nazis and Soviets: Occupation Politics in Poland, 1939–1947* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2004). Neither engages explicitly with the spill-over from one occupation to the next in the way that Gross does.

lands between'. Little attention is paid to the internal politics of independent Poland or the Baltic states, for instance, even to elements of their domestic affairs such as their own policies and attitudes towards minorities, which certainly had a bearing on the story of ethnic violence. That is because the book operates largely on the basis of a division between powerful outsider perpetrators (German; Soviet) and the powerless victimised inhabitants. Snyder does recognise the presence, especially under the German occupation, of native collaboration (about which more below). Yet the limited space allocated to this phenomenon is unexpected, particularly from a scholar who has written some first-rate work on the subject of the mutual wartime ethnic cleansing of Poles and Ukrainians.<sup>5</sup> Polish anti-Semitism is touched on rather lightly and there is no mention of Kielce or other anti-Jewish pogroms. One can certainly make too much of the importance of East European anti-Semitism – and not a few scholars can be criticised for this – but one can also make too little, and Snyder's treatment here veers in that direction. More strikingly, it consistently downplays the agency of local populations and in general, the multiple nationalistic wars within wars about which Snyder himself has written so importantly in scholarly journals hardly figure. Am I right in thinking that in the author's mind it might have detracted from the force of the central argument, which is about the criminal responsibility of the two totalitarian Great Powers, to have drawn attention to the additional bloodletting which Poles, Ukrainians and others contributed towards at the same time?

As one reads this litany of acts of appalling violence, one begins to look to the character of the acts themselves for clues as to why they happened. Arendt's focus on the camp – however misplaced in the light of what we now know about the geography and timing of the killings themselves – was also a way of explaining, through her analysis of what the camps represented, the causes of the phenomenon that concerned her. Snyder rejects her account and offers elements for alternative explanations: he notes, for instance, the contrast between the public character of much wartime German violence and the much more private Soviet *modus operandi*. On occasions, he sees similarities and even connections between the ways the two regimes murdered their victims, or allowed them to die. But (as happens often in this book), he veers away from sustained explanation back into narrative just at the moment one anticipates further discussion. 'Europe's epoch of mass killing', he asserts in the conclusion, 'is overtheorized and misunderstood'. Before theory, we need to understand 'what actually happened' (p. 383).

The question of comparanda is critical here. Why Germany and the USSR? Comparison with other genocides and mass murders – in wartime Croatia or Romania, for instance, or with Ottoman policy in Anatolia in the First World War – might have suggested possible avenues for exploration connected to the ubiquity of

<sup>5</sup> Snyder's key work includes two articles 'The Causes of Ukrainian-Polish Ethnic Cleansing, 1943', *Past and Present*, 179 (2003), 197–234, and "'To Resolve the Ukrainian Problem Once and for All': The Ethnic Cleansing of Ukrainians in Poland, 1943–1947", *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 1, 2 (1999), 86–120, and two books: *Sketches from a Secret War: A Polish Artist's Mission to Liberate Soviet Ukraine* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005) and *The Reconstruction of Nations: Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus, 1569–1999* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).

ideas of national purity and to the ways in which war itself fuelled revenge fantasies and made the previously unimaginable a possibility and even, for some, a necessity.<sup>6</sup> But Snyder's comparison confines itself to the two European totalitarian giants and the implications of the parallel genocides carried out by the Ustasha and by the Antonescu regimes – arguably much more relevant to understanding the Nazi case than the Stalinist terror – are not pursued. Hence the concept of the Bloodlands is not conceptualised against the broader idea of a borderlands zone of genocide which Mark Levene, Aviel Roshwald and others have seen as stretching from the Baltic through the Black Sea to Anatolia and the Mediterranean. Such an approach, by linking together the post-imperial experiences of the Ottoman, Habsburg and Romanov territories, has shifted the focus away from totalitarianism and back towards empire and the rise of nationalism.<sup>7</sup> But neither this idea, nor the by now significant literature on comparative mass violence and genocide is taken up. I am not sure why not – since they would have served, if nothing else, to clarify the utility of the comparative framing of the Bloodlands themselves – although a reading of the book suggests a few answers. One is that Snyder really does see the Nazi and Soviet regimes as different in kind from any other. Another is perhaps that there is at bottom no explanation in Snyder's view for the scale of the killings that took place in the Bloodlands apart from the coincidence of the fact that they contained the bulk of European Jewry and some of the most fertile grain lands on the continent. Hence nothing that took place elsewhere could have much bearing on understanding what happened there.

More basically, it might be that the author is not primarily concerned in this book with explanation per se (contrast the highly analytical approach he takes in his important *Past and Present* article), perhaps because he regards this as secondary to the historian's main duty when confronted with this grimmest of subjects, namely to restore humanity to the victims. I found it striking that one of his main objections to Arendt is her depersonalisation of both killers and killed; hence the recounting of the life and death of individuals which is such a deliberate stylistic feature of the book, and the eschewing of more sociological approaches.

The concluding chapter promises the explanation for which the reader has been waiting, and after an exhortation to remember the humanity of the victims (the chapter's subtitle too reads 'Humanity'), there follows a set of more general reflections.

<sup>6</sup> On Croatia, see especially the work of Tomislav Dulic, notably his 2005 dissertation: *Utopias of Nation: Local Mass Killing in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 1941–42*, PhD thesis, Studia Historica Upsaliensia, 218 (Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 2005), and his 2006 article 'Mass Killing in the Independent State of Croatia, 1941–45: A Case for Comparative Research', *Journal of Genocide Research*, 8, 3 (2006), 255–81; on Romania, Vladimir Solonari, *Purifying the Nation: Population Exchange and Ethnic Cleansing in Nazi-Allied Romania* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009); on Anatolia, Donald Bloxham, *The Great Game of Genocide: Imperialism, Nationalism and the Destruction of the Ottoman Armenians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Taner Akcam, *A Shameful Act: The Armenian Genocide and the Question of Turkish Responsibility* (London: Picador, 2007) and more generally, the comparative analysis of Donald Bloxham, *The Final Solution: A Genocide* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>7</sup> Mark Levene, *Genocide in the Age of the Nation-State*, 2 vols. (London and New York: Routledge, 2005); Aviel Roshwald, *Ethnic Nationalism and the Fall of Empires: Central Europe, Russia and the Middle East, 1914–1923* (London: Routledge, 2001).

One returns to the idea already highlighted above – namely, the connection between the impracticability of Nazi and Stalinist utopianism and the turn to mass murder. Faced with historic error, killing people offered regimes a way of demonstrating their truth in the face of the facts. In Snyder's words, 'Dead human beings provided retrospective arguments for the rectitude of policy.' Snyder hints at the idea that mass violence emerged from frustration, that it erupted where reality foiled unfeasibly utopian plans – an argument that suggests an underlying anti-utopianism it would have been interesting for the author to have clarified. Yet to see the Ukrainian famine, the Holocaust or even the (failed) efforts to trigger off a new round of anti-Jewish violence by Stalin in the late 1940s as born of ideological frustration strikes me as reliant on an implausibly rationalistic and functionalist view of violence itself.

Another factor raised in the conclusion as contributing to the bloodletting is the idea of surplus populations: Snyder notes that in both regimes, policy makers believed more people lived in the countryside than were strictly necessary. Of course such ideas de-individualised people and turned them into demographic problems. But that was how demography operated – and still does – and in fact 'experts' believed in the problem of surplus populations pretty much everywhere at this time, except inside a small number of East European peasant parties. Post-war Anglo-American modernisation theory was based on such a premise, and owed a considerable debt to inter-war students of 'surplus labour' in the agrarian economies of eastern Europe. Snyder then comes to the war itself as a kind of explanatory variable. Snyder notes the striking fact that the war brought most of the killing to an end in the USSR yet triggered it off in the Third Reich. Yet while this seems to be important as a clue to what happened, like many of the insights the book offers, it is not pursued. Instead, Snyder points out that these mass murders resulted from 'an accumulation of Nazi and Soviet rule' which would appear to be true of some but not all of the crimes he recounts. (As he points out, time saw Soviet killings wind down.) He then turns to the collaboration problem, discounting the importance of ideological convergence as a factor in collaboration, reminding us instead of the weak position in which Poles and Ukrainians for instance found themselves.

Remembering rather than explaining thus seems to be at the heart of this book. Hegel saw men as playthings, their suffering amid mass violence as necessary for history to move to its appointed goal. In *Bloodlands* this fundamentally Hegelian approach is radically revised: mass suffering is, from the historical point of view, purposeless – its sole function being to allow regimes increasingly disconnected from reality to defend themselves in the eyes of their own followers from the reckoning that will eventually be visited upon them. Part of their defence mechanism is their deliberate forgetting of their own crimes. It is not surprising that such an approach would lead one to emphasise memory's ethical force, and the historian's particular role in universalising the particular and bringing competing memories together and adjudicating between them. To remember is to restore dignity to the victims and to prove – finally – the falsity of their masters' position. It turns out that the historian has a central historical role after all because s/he has a powerful responsibility to bear witness to what actually happened, to force the living to remember what they would

rather forget, and to help the nations escape from the cage of their own recollections and see things more broadly. From this perspective, *Bloodlands* and its cataloguing of crimes and responsibilities possesses a logic of its own.

Yet perhaps I suffer from a professional deformation when I feel the need for more answers than this allows. So, in order to tease out the explanatory elements that are embedded in this account, let me conclude with a series of questions. One concerns the temporal frame: what is the reason for starting *Bloodlands* in 1933, and for laying the stress on *Stalinism* rather than Communism? Was the figure of Stalin so important? After all, it was under Lenin that Bolshevism demonstrated its capacity for mass terror, and that the Ukraine endured its first major famine. (I pass over the fact that going back to the violence of 1914–1919, and addressing the question of pogroms and other forms of ethnic violence in the First World War would, again, have cast the events of the Second in a different light.) Second, what is meant by claiming that the ‘belligerent complicity’ of the regimes was responsible for mass violence? Does it imply that co-operation between the two along the lines of Eichmann’s 1940 proposal would have been preferable, since it might actually have saved Jewish lives instead of sacrificing them, for example? The continuation of the Ribbentrop–Molotov Pact would have prevented the massive death toll that followed Barbarossa, at the cost of the eternal partition of Poland. Snyder sometimes sounds as though partisan resistance to the Nazis was regrettable because it involved playing Stalin’s game of goading the Germans into further brutality: surely there is more to be said about the partisan war than that, and (once again I come back to this point) more credit to be given to the agency of those involved. Which brings me to the third point: why not have given greater weight to indigenous agency – the role of Ukrainians, Poles, Jews and others – in accounting for the violence that took place in these years? And finally, what is at stake in prioritising *Bloodlands* over *borderlands*, in other words, by leaving out or including the zone stretching south through the Balkans into Anatolia and the Middle East? Ethnic cleansing in the mid-1940s took place in many parts of the world – eastern Europe but also the Middle East and South Asia. How does the geographical framing of mass violence shape the explanations one may offer for its rise and fall?