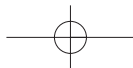


Timothy Snyder, **Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin**. New York: Basic Books, 2010. Pp.524. £25.00 (hb). ISBN 978 0465002399.

In his important new book, *Bloodlands*, Yale historian Timothy Snyder tells the horrific story of mass killing in the borderlands between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union during the 1930s–40s, where some 14 million human beings, men, women and children, all non-combatants, were destroyed. The Nazi Holocaust



against the Jews, which is often emphasized as a set of events apart from the Second World War and as surpassing in history all other genocides, here recedes in Snyder's retelling into a broader context of terror, wanton killing and political mass murder that began before the war and extended after in the area between Berlin and Moscow, Hitler and Stalin.

While Snyder hardly minimizes the Holocaust – some aspects like Babi Yar, Belzec, and Treblinka become more visible, and the death camps are shown to be only a part of the determined Nazi programme against the Jews – the result of his scholarship aimed at integrating the Final Solution into the mass killings of many peoples across two decades is to press a marked change in view and perspective. As Istvan Deak says, there has been nothing like this book – in what it seeks to do and does. Anne Applebaum calls it 'a brave and original history', and Samuel Moyn terms it 'new and compelling' in many specifics and a 'triumphant accomplishment'.<sup>1</sup>

Yet one cannot shift perspective and focus on the Nazi Holocaust without also inviting some concern. One cannot fit the Holocaust into the arc of mass killing in Europe without risking flattening key differences among the killing campaigns. Nor should one erase or elide the numerous ethno-national conflicts among peoples in the borderlands in seeking to comprehend fully the fate of Europe's Jews.

As important as the book is, it must also stir discussion about what ultimately explains the Holocaust as distinct from the other mass killings – Snyder reports more than he explains. Equally important, it must stir controversy about whether, how and why the events he treats ought to be handled together or dealt with apart.

## I

The central aspect of *Bloodlands* and its great originality is Snyder's insistence that the terrible atrocities he explores – famine in the Ukraine, the Great Terror in the Soviet borderlands, the decapitation of the Polish intelligentsia, the killing of Soviet prisoners of war, the Nazi Holocaust and more – ought to be comprehended in a single historical frame. To say it another way, Snyder seeks to 'anchor the Holocaust', he has written, 'along with the other mass killing campaigns of the time and place in European history'.<sup>2</sup> He places the killing of more than five million Jews then into the broader context of the successive campaigns that claimed the lives of fourteen million civilians, Ukrainians, Poles, Belorussians, members of the Polish intelligentsia, Jews, ethnic and religious minorities, and more.

The mass murder of the Jews, Snyder says, was unprecedented in its horror and no other campaign involved such rapid, wanton and targeted killing or was so tied to the idea that a whole people ought to be exterminated. Snyder does not relativise the Nazi atrocities nor de-centre them.<sup>3</sup> But he insists there were multiple sets of events amounting to genocides in Europe in this era, and they included all those mentioned above except the famine. The Nazi Holocaust was exceptional therefore as one among many genocides, but it must be seen as part of a single wider historic reality – shaped by the designs of two radical tyrannies

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seeking to transform the territory and populations between them and employing political mass murder as a tool.

Snyder does not treat the two tyrannies as Cold War scholars once did, flattening distinctions between Nazism and Stalinism; nor does he diminish the Nazi genocide by showing that Stalin clearly led the way in mass terror in the 1930s. Instead, *Bloodlands* shows how actions by the two tyrannies *interacted*, first escalating mass killing in this fateful arena independently, then gobbling up the separate countries in the region collaboratively after the Nazi-Soviet Pact, and then, during the war and the terrible confrontation that followed, leading to Nazi escalation of the mass killing of Jews.

Here Snyder argues that the Nazi decision to kill the Jews evolved alongside Nazi strategic decision-making and geopolitical failure. That is, Nazi designs for the Jews were originally to extrude them from Europe and then, after the invasion of Poland, to set them apart in reservations – on the continent, outside Europe near the coast of Africa, or perhaps deeper in the Soviet Union, which Hitler sought to conquer. But during Operation Barbarossa, the Nazis escalated mass killing early, and then the slowdown of Nazi progress before Moscow due to stiff Soviet resistance in late 1941 led to the decision to kill all the Jews in east and west Europe. The Nazis innovated with modern killing installations in Poland but continued employing bullets further east, spreading the genocide beyond the ‘bloodlands’ as well as inside.

A novel contribution is the book’s vivid exploration of mass killing in German-controlled Soviet territory, before and after the Nazi decision for mass extermination – in Belarus, eastern Poland, the Ukraine and the Baltic states. Snyder has written elsewhere that these were the bloodiest areas on earth at the peak of the Second World War.<sup>4</sup> We see here Nazi intentions played out during 1941–42 in a remarkable crescendo of bloodletting focused on Jews in small towns and larger cities, with mass killings in nearby forests and ravines. Most of the victims, Snyder insists, never saw a death camp or a concentration camp at all. Together with Yehuda Bauer’s new book, *The Death of the Shtetl*, which covers similar ground, readers will find new information and insight about Nazi murders in the east.<sup>5</sup> Such bloodletting also extended viciously to non-Jews as well, escalating with rising anti-partisan warfare. In Belarus, for example, nearly two million people were killed and more than half the population was murdered or moved in this era.

Nonetheless, the impact of Snyder’s reorientation and re-contextualization of the Holocaust amidst multiple mass murders is to shift attention away from Nazi ideology and worldview and peculiar hatred of the Jews. Snyder does not draw a sharp enough difference between the Holocaust and all other genocides, distracting from those features that made the Final Solution in conception and in execution distinctive. There was something different about killing the Jews than killing other groups and nationalities, shaped by the Nazi fantasy of a world to be cleansed entirely of Jews.

## II

In a rebuke, Richard Evans writes that *Bloodlands* fails to respect or comprehend

the uniqueness of the Nazi war against the Jews or to realize the special humiliation the Nazis aimed at Jews:

That uniqueness consisted not only in the scale of its ambition, but also in the depth of the hatred and fear that drove it on. There was something peculiarly sadistic in the Nazis' desire not just to torture, maim and kill the Jews, but also to humiliate them ... The Slavs, in the end, were for the Nazis a regional obstacle to be removed; the Jews were a 'world enemy' to be ground into the dust.<sup>6</sup>

Many Slavs, it should be added, although targeted by the Nazis for mass hunger and death, actually became part of the forced labour supply in Germany's wartime economy; whereas in the Nazi imagination and in reality the Jews were gathered and mostly summarily annihilated. Evans also argues that Snyder misunderstands the origins and implementation of the Final Solution by insisting that the Nazi decision was a response to the defeat or frustration of the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union.<sup>7</sup> In the end, Evans expresses deep antipathy to the recirculation in *Bloodlands* of a discredited idea that Stalin's and Hitler's ideas of mass genocide influenced each other, or that the genesis of the Final Solution was in revenge for the defeat of Operation Barbarossa.

In Snyder's view, the Nazi Final Solution might well have awaited the outcome of the war. Hitler's utopian intention was to win lightning victory in the Soviet Union and then to create a massive continental Nazi empire in the east based on exterminatory colonialism, ethnic cleansing and slavery.<sup>8</sup> In fashioning this racial empire, Hitler would brutally starve and enslave millions and reverse modern Soviet history, turning all into an agricultural paradise. But the intention to destroy the Soviet Union and only then deal with the Jews gave way because of the failure before Moscow, followed soon after by the American entrance into the war, to the commitment to annihilate the Jews.<sup>9</sup>

Such an understanding makes the Holocaust derivative in timing, scope and ambition, a reflection of goings on in the war and in the more important and potentially more destructive Nazi imperial scheme. Thus a war to destroy and colonize the Soviet Union and then deal with the Jews, Snyder says, was transformed into a war for extinguishing the Jews. Then another continental-scale state and its resources were thrown into the balance before Hitler could consolidate his own empire. Hitler railed that the Grand Alliance created after Pearl Harbour was also the fault of the Jews.

### III

Snyder's claim is that grounding the Holocaust in a single frame of political mass murder and atrocity helps us to better grasp the Nazi campaign and Jewish fate, for the Nazi decision was deeply conditioned by the rivalry between the tyrannies and by the bloody context. Hitler basically thought of the Soviet Union and of Jewish power together. It is also his claim that the frame helps us to better understand the willingness of non-Jewish populations to be involved in, or stand by during, the mass killing of Jews, since many who had suffered under Soviet rule 1939–41 were willing to be mobilized against the Jews or to tolerate their

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demise and take the spoils because they believed (wrongly) that the Jews had cooperated with the Soviets during occupation a few years before.

Yet Snyder's historical frame works simultaneously also to hide a great deal. Even as he takes us toward a unified European continental history of mass killing, assisting us to better see the linkages between Nazi views on Soviet Russia and Jews and to appreciate the comparative victimization of Poles, Slavs and others (among whom casualties outpaced the Jews), he elides additional perspectives and emphases about the Nazi genocide that are critical to helping us comprehend why the Jews. Why were the Jews targeted for total annihilation but others were not? Similarly, in emphasizing all mass death primarily as a consequence of the rivalry and interaction between the tyrannies, the Nazi worldview and special hatred of the Jews appears to fall to secondary and to be treated as less than a key factor.

Readers will find little in *Bloodlands* about Nazi antisemitism. Specifically, there is little drawn on that portion of a generation of scholarship, capped most recently by Saul Friedlander's magnificent opus, which emphasizes the Holocaust as an intended outcome of Nazi thinking.<sup>10</sup> Nor will they find much that takes seriously Alon Confino's claim that 'we cannot understand why the Nazis persecuted and exterminated the Jews unless we are ready to explore ... Nazi fantasies, hallucinations, and imagination'.<sup>11</sup> In addition, unlike Christopher Browning or Daniel Goldhagen, Snyder wrestles little with the conundrum of motivation among the ordinary killers. The main attention to antisemitism is as the form and style in which Hitler's frustrations and anger periodically expressed themselves (and not as the constituent force shaping Hitler's or others' Nazi utopia or influencing killing behaviour).

Given his expertise on nationalisms, Snyder also surprisingly plays down local and regional interethnic frictions and hatreds that were separate from the interaction of Nazi and Stalinist ambitions. These social dynamics were more deeply rooted than the brief 1939–41 interlude or even the histories of the two tyrannical regimes. Snyder skips past earlier sources of regional antisemitism, when the Judeo-Bolshevik myth first took root after the First World War, as well as deeper roots in the various nationalist movements from which varied ethno-national versions of 'the longest hatred' emerged. His book also has the curious flattening effect of making all people in this intervening territory into fellow victims of the two tyrannies, robbing them of some of their own agency in events, especially as auxiliaries in or beneficiaries of Nazi killings. Some behaviour of certain Jewish neighbours here is just too quickly or easily explained away.

In a final chapter, Snyder shifts to broad interpretation. The Holocaust and the other genocides were not products of modernity or of totalitarian society, as Hannah Arendt and others theorized, he says; they were consequences of the *interactions* of totalitarian systems. They were also not the outcome of modern bureaucracy, as Raul Hilberg posited – for even in the Holocaust more deaths occurred outside than inside the killing installations. Mass death came because of the utopias these regimes sought to create, their frustration by reality, and their option then for mass murder. Hitler was frustrated in his plans and blamed the Jews, reformulating his continental utopia to mean a Europe without Jews.

## BOOK REVIEWS

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Others then participated, winning promotions, plunder or status, or simply obeyed.

Snyder's creativity, learning and ambition to offer a unified history of mass killing are impressive. The optic he offers is startling and deeply unsettling. Snyder also explodes simplistic categories like 'perpetrators', 'bystanders' and 'victims' that have long dominated discussion of genocide in Europe. Instead, *Bloodlands* shows that the Holocaust took place among peoples and in lands shaped by a larger history powered by the annihilationist rivalry of radical tyrannies and unfolded in the context of multiple overlapping occupations and liberations. Familiar categories, he also warns us, do not always work clearly and sometimes offer false moral clarity – worthy cautions indeed.

Yet in the end it is simply unclear that in anchoring the Nazi Holocaust with other mass killing campaigns in Europe that Snyder has succeeded in providing the best history of what the Nazis thought and fantasized about the Jews or how and by what process or timing they decided to annihilate them. Nor is it clear that his history has explored fully the fate of Europe's Jews at the Nazis' hands or in the local spaces they inhabited amidst their neighbours. In this reviewer's view, it is in more specialized work focused on the Nazi regime and the Holocaust and on the Holocaust in specific regions and locales of the 'bloodlands' that we continue to find greater possibilities for understanding the Nazi Final Solution and for comprehending the fate of Europe's Jews in context.<sup>12</sup>

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## NOTES

1. See Istvan Deak, 'The Charnel Continent', *New Republic*, 2 December 2010, pp.35-9; Anne Applebaum, 'The Worst of the Madness', *New York Review of Books*, 11 November 2010, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2010/nov/11/worst-madness>; Samuel Moyn, 'Between Hitler and Stalin', *Nation*, 6 December 2010, <http://www.thenation.com/article/156518/between-hitler-and-stalin>.
2. Timothy Snyder, 'The Fatal Fact of the Nazi-Soviet Pact', *The Guardian*, 5 October 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/cifamerica/2010/oct/05/holocaust-secondworldwar>.
3. Adam Kirsch congratulates Snyder for better contextualizing the story of East European Jewry without relativising their fate, in 'Devastated', *Tablet*, 30 November 2010, <http://www.tabletmag.com/arts-and-culture/books/51671/devastated/>.
4. Timothy Snyder, 'Holocaust – The Ignored Reality', *New York Review of Books*, 16 July 2009, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2009/jul/16/holocaust-the-ignored-reality/>.
5. Yehuda Bauer, *The Death of the Shtetl* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010).
6. Richard Evans, 'Who Remembers the Poles', *London Review of Books*, 4 November 2010. On the theme of humiliation, see Avishai Margalit and Gabrielle Motzkin, 'The Uniqueness of the Holocaust', *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, Vol.25, No.1 (1996), pp.65–83.
7. Antony Polonsky has defended Snyder, arguing he relied on Christopher Browning's two stage view of Nazi decision-making, first during a moment of euphoria after the

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beginning of Operation Barbarossa, and second, during a slowdown in Nazi progress in the late fall. But Snyder clearly draws not on Browning, for whom the Final Solution was decided during key turning points in summer (July) and autumn (October) 1941, but on Christian Gerlach, and also on Mark Mazower, who date the Nazis' decision-making later. On Gerlach's views, see 'The Wannsee Conference, the Fate of German Jews, and Hitler's Decision in Principle to Exterminate all European Jews', *Journal of Modern History*, Vol.70, No.4 (1998), pp.759–812.

8. This was General Plan Ost, a grand design for exterminatory colonialism. Interestingly, Snyder explores this fantasy but not the Nazi fantasy of a world without Jews.
9. Snyder's view that the Holocaust was decided as the consequence of a fateful conjuncture in December 1941 appears also in his review of Mark Mazower's *Hitler's Empire: Nazi Rule in Occupied Europe*, which appeared in the *Sunday Times Literary Supplement*, 13 August 2008, [http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts\\_and\\_entertainment/the\\_tls/article4522802.ece](http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/the_tls/article4522802.ece)
10. Saul Friedlander, *The Years of Extermination: Nazi Germany and the Jews, 1939–1945* (New York: Harper Collins, 2007).
11. Alon Confino, 'Fantasies about the Jews: Cultural Reflections on the Holocaust', *History and Memory*, Vol.17, No.1–2 (2005), pp.296–322, p.297.
12. See Omer Bartov, 'Eastern Europe as the Site of Genocide', *Journal of Modern History*, Vol.80, No.3 (2008), pp.557–93. Bartov suggests genocide of the Jews at the local level in Eastern Europe often assumed the character of communal massacres.