

BOOKS

HAARETZ **הארץ**

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Jerusalem sacred and profane **5**
James Carroll's look at a city and an idea

Everyone's favorite comfort food **16**
A cookbook of potatoes

'No worse than "elite" TV' **18**
Reality shows under examination

HOLOCAUST STUDIES



The equivalency canard

An innovative historical approach lumps Nazi and Soviet murder campaigns together, ignoring the implacable ideological roots behind the Shoah and giving Holocaust collaborators a free ride

Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin
by Timothy Snyder. Basic Books, 524 pages, \$29.95

By Efraim Zuroff

In this bold attempt to reframe a critical period in modern Eastern European history, Yale historian Tim Snyder redraws historical boundaries to create an artificial geographic entity that he

dubs “the Bloodlands,” taking in the area from central Poland to western Russia through Ukraine, Belarus and the Baltics. It is in this region that, by his account, more than 14 million civilians were murdered as a result of deliberate policies of mass annihilation implemented by Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union during the years

1932-1945. These murderous campaigns are the central subject of Snyder's book, which has earned lavish praise from historians, as well as considerable public attention, not normally the case with similar academic studies.

Snyder identifies six major murder campaigns carried out by the German and Soviet dictatorships

Continued on page 4

Equivalency

Continued from page 1

during the period that roughly corresponds to the existence of the Third Reich. During the first, some 3.3 million Soviet citizens, mostly Ukrainians, died of starvation as a result of a famine purposely engineered by Stalin to advance collectivization in 1932-1933. This was followed by the "Great Terror" of 1937-1938, during which the Soviet security apparatus killed 300,000 Soviet citizens, most of them Polish and Ukrainian citizens, in the Bloodlands. From the start of World War II until the German invasion of the USSR in June 1941, an additional 200,000 Poles were executed by both occupiers, and during the German occupation of parts of the Soviet Union (1941-1944), 4.2 million local residents were deliberately caused to starve to death. If we add Snyder's estimate of 5.4 million Jews shot or gassed in the Bloodlands by the Nazis during the same years and 700,000 civilians, mostly Belorussians and Poles, shot by the Germans in reprisals during the same period, we reach a total of 14.1 million, which Snyder considers a conservative estimate of the civilians deliberately murdered in the same territory between 1932 and 1945.

While none of these facts were unknown, the murderous policies of both Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union having been extensively researched, Snyder asserts that the "deliberate and direct mass murder by these two regimes in the Bloodlands is a distinct phenomenon worthy of separate treatment." To reinforce his argument, Snyder presents some startling comparisons that point to the ostensible uniqueness and significance of the extremely high number of victims in the murder campaigns described in the book. Thus, for example, 14 million victims is 13 million more than the number of U.S. and British soldiers killed during World War II, more than 10 million more than the total number of victims who died in Nazi and Soviet concentration – as opposed to death – camps throughout the existence of both regimes, and two million more than the number of German and Soviet soldiers killed in battle in World War II (excluding those who starved to death and POWs executed by shooting). Snyder then proceeds to present his version of the history of the Bloodlands, one that integrates all the murder campaigns into a single narrative.

As shocking as this litany of mass suffering is, the question we must ask is whether Snyder's decision to combine such disparate tragedies is historically justified. In fact, the only characteristics shared by these murder campaigns are that they were carried out by dictatorships in a specific geographic area (of Snyder's creation) during a specific time period, with similar horrific results. These factors, however, do not necessarily create a true equivalency between them. Their scope was not the same, the motivation to launch them was not the same (aside from the desire of dictators to destroy perceived enemies), and their implementation was not the same, neither in principle nor in practice.

Snyder, however, does not allow these critical differences to dissuade him. In that respect, the very first page of the book appropriately sets the stage by presenting brief, poignant vignettes about individual victims of the first five murder campaigns, without any historical context, as if all victims of such murders are equal, regardless of whether they were killed because of their nationality or religion and irrespectively of the circumstances of their deaths.

There are, however, very important differences between these tragedies, and it is the Holocaust, the worst of them in practi-



A child walks past a row of bodies at the newly liberated Bergen-Belsen camp, in Germany, April 1945.

The problem is that this book is already on its way to being the bible of the Holocaust distorters in post-Communist Eastern Europe.

cally every respect, that suffers the most from Snyder's faulty comparisons. By relating to the Shoah as merely one of six equally terrible murder campaigns, he ignores the absolute totality of its implacable ideological roots, which would have doomed every Jew in the world regardless of their politics, religious practice or communal affiliation, as well as its enormous geographic scope and the Nazis' success in enlisting the assistance of so many other Europeans in its horrific implementation. Nor should the creation of unique industrial mass murder installations in Treblinka, Belzec, Sobibor and Chelmno to carry out the Final Solution be ignored. All these factors make the Holocaust unique among the murder campaigns that took place in the Bloodlands (or anywhere else) – but acknowledging such would apparently detract from Snyder's re-configuration of the history of mass murder in Eastern Europe between 1932 and 1945.

No longer center stage

Thus, most of the treatment of the Shoah in this book focuses not on its uniqueness or historical significance, but rather on a fact that reinforces its connection to the other tragedies, namely, that the overwhelming majority of the Jews murdered were killed in the Bloodlands and not in their countries of origin, all over Europe. That is a true historical fact, and Snyder's explanation of why this important element of Holocaust history is often overlooked is accurate. The two main reasons he cites for this phenomenon (that is, the overlooking) are that the Western Allies liberated the German concentration camps (photographs of which became iconic images of the Shoah), whereas the bulk of the mass murder of Jews took place in the death camps, all of which were located in the Bloodlands, which were overrun by the Red Army and were virtually inaccessible to Westerners

after World War II. The second reason is the far larger number of survivors from concentration camps, as opposed to death camps; Auschwitz is the exception, since it also functioned as a labor camp.

Snyder's well-taken points on these Holocaust-related issues do not make up for the major flaw in his treatment of the Shoah, which he relativizes by according all the other murder campaigns the status of "genocide," although none truly fit the definition coined by Raphael Lemkin, the most important component of which is the intent to wipe out an entire people. The problem is that though the victims of these other tragedies deserve to have their suffering recognized, their perpetrators punished and their losses restituted, for the most part this has still not taken place, certainly not at the level accorded to the victims of the Holocaust. Snyder, a historian of Eastern Europe who reads many of the local languages, obviously feels the pain of the other victims of totalitarian crimes and seeks to contribute to a redress of their legitimate grievances by reframing the events of 1932-1945 in such a way that the Holocaust will no longer occupy the center stage it deserves in European history.

To add insult to injury, Snyder claims that he seeks to restore the dignity of the victims of these crimes by remembering them as individuals, stripped of their national identities, to prevent their fates from being exploited for political remembrance. Yet if there is any group that would consider such treatment a grave injustice, it is the Jewish victims of the Nazis, who were murdered only because of their Jewish origin. So while it is true that some sang the Czech national anthem or the "Internationale" on their way to the gas chambers, the numbers of those who screamed "Shema Yisrael" or sang "Ani Ma'amin" was far greater, and the overwhelming majority of the victims were first and foremost Jews, who no doubt

would have been appalled to have their Jewish identity denied, when it is clear that it was the reason for their murder. In this respect, Snyder's postmodern approach attributes attitudes popular now to individuals who lived and died in the 1930s and '40s and identified Jews, Poles, Ukrainians, etc.

If these issues were purely philosophical and not the subject of intense contemporary political debates with highly important practical implications, it would have been far easier to appreciate the scope of Snyder's research, his novel approach to the subject, his command of so many languages, his creative and surprising historical comparisons and his wonderful prose. The problem is, however, that this book is already on its way to becoming the bible of the Holocaust distorters in post-Communist Eastern Europe.

Ever since the fall of the Soviet Union and the transition to democracy, the nations that suffered under Communism (both inside and outside the Bloodlands) have suffered from a severe case of "Holocaust envy," which lamentably spawned the Prague Declaration of June 2008, which calls for a rewriting of historical studies and textbooks to reflect the (historically false) equivalency between Communist and Nazi crimes. The declaration also warns that Europe will never be truly reunited until it recognizes its "common legacy" of Nazism and Communism, and lobbies for a joint memorial day for all victims of totalitarian regimes. The proposed date is August 23, the day in 1939 on which the Molotov-Ribbentrop agreement was signed, and it was deliberately chosen to reflect the ostensibly "equal blame" of Hitler and Stalin for the atrocities of World War II – a theme that finds clear expression in Snyder's book, in which not a word is mentioned about the role of the Soviets in defeating Hitler.

In view of the fact that collaboration with the Nazis in Eastern Europe was not only widespread, but also particularly lethal in its consequences, it is obvious that all those promoting the Prague Declaration have a clear political agenda that seeks to change their status from nations of perpetrators to those of victims, and help them to hide or at least minimize their own complicity in Holocaust crimes.

An accepted equivalency between the crimes committed by the two dictatorships will grant Communist crimes the status of genocide, something that will relieve the pressure on these societies to confront their past, since they will then be able to point to the participation of Jewish Communists in genocidal crimes against them, thus undermining any quest for justice and historical truth. In that respect, Snyder's unfortunate downplaying of the significance of the role played by Eastern European Nazi war criminals and Holocaust collaborators, which barely distinguishes between local victims and native perpetrators and ignores the enormous number of those who volunteered to murder their neighbors and other Jews (and did so in many cases with zealous cruelty), will be warmly welcomed by those behind the misguided efforts to promote the canard of equivalency between Communism and Nazism.

In summation, I can only express a sense of frustration and sorrow that a historian of Snyder's stature and obvious talent, who clearly recognizes the dangers of the exploitation of history, has written a book that, while innovative and monumental, will ultimately be misused by those intent on distorting the annals of the worst tragedy in human history.

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