The Worst of the Madness

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

Stalin's Genocides
by Norman M. Naimark
Princeton University Press, 163 pp., $26.95

Once, in an attempt to explain the history of his country to outsiders, the Polish poet Czesław Miłosz described the impact of war, occupation, and the Holocaust on ordinary morality. Mass violence, he explained, could shatter a man's sense of natural justice. In normal times,

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Soviet Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov, center, arriving in Berlin to meet with Adolf Hitler, November 12, 1940. At front left are German Field Marshal Wilhelm Keitel and Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop.

> had he stumbled upon a corpse on the street, he would have called the police. A crowd would have gathered, and much talk and comment would have ensued. Now he knows he must avoid the dark body lying in the gutter, and refrain from asking unnecessary questions….

Murder became ordinary during wartime, wrote Miłosz, and was even regarded as legitimate if it was carried out on behalf of the resistance. In the name of patriotism, young boys from law-abiding, middle-class families became hardened criminals, thugs for whom "the killing of a man presents no great moral problem." Theft became ordinary too, as did falsehood and fabrication. People learned to sleep through sounds that would once have roused the whole neighborhood: the rattle of machine-gun fire, the cries of men in agony, the cursing of the policeman dragging the neighbors away.

For all of these reasons, Miłosz explained, "the man of the East cannot take

Americans [or other Westerners] seriously." Because they hadn't undergone such experiences, they couldn't seem to fathom what they meant, and couldn't seem to imagine how they had happened either. "Their resultant lack of imagination," he concluded, "is appalling."[1]

But Miłosz's bitter analysis did not go far enough. Almost sixty years after the poet wrote those words, it is no longer enough to say that we Westerners lack imagination. Timothy Snyder, a Yale historian whose past work has ranged from Habsburg Vienna to Stalinist Kiev, takes the point one step further. In *Bloodlands*, a brave and original history of mass killing in the twentieth century, he argues that we still lack any real knowledge of what happened in the eastern half of Europe in the twentieth century. And he is right: if we are American, we think "the war" was something that started with Pearl Harbor in 1941 and ended with the atomic bomb in 1945. If we are British, we remember the Blitz of 1940 (and indeed are commemorating it energetically this year) and the liberation of Belsen. If we are French, we remember Vichy and the Resistance. If we are Dutch we think of Anne Frank. Even if we are German we know only a part of the story.

Snyder's ambition is to persuade the West—and the rest of the world—to see the war in a broader perspective. He does so by disputing popular assumptions about victims, death tolls, and killing methods—of which more in a moment—but above all about dates and geography. The title of this book, *Bloodlands*, is not a metaphor. Snyder's "bloodlands," which others have called "borderlands," run from Poznan in the West to Smolensk in the East, encompassing modern Poland, the Baltic states, Ukraine, Belarus, and the edge of western Russia (see map on page 10). This is the region that experienced not one but two—and sometimes three—wartime occupations. This is also the region that suffered the most casualties and endured the worst physical destruction.

More to the point, this is the region that experienced the worst of both Stalin's and Hitler's ideological madness. During the 1930s, 1940s, and early 1950s, the lethal armies and vicious secret policemen of two totalitarian states marched back and forth across these territories, each time bringing about profound ethnic and political changes. In this period, the city of Lwów was occupied twice by the Red Army and once by the Wehrmacht. After the war ended it was called L'viv, not Lwów, it was no longer in eastern Poland but in western Ukraine, and its Polish and Jewish pre-war population had been murdered or deported and replaced by ethnic Ukrainians from the surrounding countryside. In this same period, the Ukrainian city of Odessa was occupied first by the Romanian army and then by the Wehrmacht before being

reoccupied by the Soviet Union. Each time power changed hands there were battles and sieges, and each time an army retreated from the city it blew up the harbor or massacred Jews. Similar stories can be told about almost any place in the region.

This region was also the site of most of the politically motivated killing in Europe—killing that began not in 1939 with the invasion of Poland, but in 1933, with the famine in Ukraine. Between 1933 and 1945, fourteen million people died there, not in combat but because someone made a deliberate decision to murder them. These deaths took place in the bloodlands, and not accidentally so: "Hitler and Stalin rose to power in Berlin and Moscow," writes Snyder, "but their visions of transformation concerned above all the lands between."

Beginning in the 1930s, Stalin conducted his first utopian agricultural experiment in Ukraine, where he collectivized the land and conducted a "war" for grain with the kulaks, the "wealthy" peasants (whose wealth sometimes consisted of a single cow). His campaign rapidly evolved into a war against Ukrainian peasant culture itself, culminating in a mass famine in 1933. In that same year, Hitler came to power and began dreaming of creating *Lebensraum*, living space, for German colonists in Poland and Ukraine, a project that could only be realized by eliminating the people who lived there.[2] In 1941, the Nazis also devised the Hunger Plan, a scheme to feed German soldiers and civilians by starving Polish and Soviet citizens. Once again, the Nazis decided, the produce of Ukraine's collective farms would be confiscated and redistributed: "Socialism in one country would be supplanted by socialism for the German race."

Not accidentally, the fourteen million victims of these ethnic and political schemes were mostly not Russians or Germans, but the peoples who inhabited the lands in between. Stalin and Hitler shared a contempt for the very notions of Polish, Ukrainian, and Baltic independence, and jointly strove to eliminate the elites of those countries. Following their invasion of western Poland in 1939, the Germans arrested and murdered Polish professors, priests, intellectuals, and politicians. Following their invasion of eastern Poland in 1939, the Soviet secret police arrested and murdered Polish professors, priests, intellectuals, and politicians. A few months later, Stalin ordered the murder of some 20,000 Polish officers at Katyn and in other forests nearby as well.

Stalin and Hitler also shared a hatred for the Jews who had long flourished in this region, and who were far more numerous there than in Germany or anywhere else in Western Europe. Snyder points out that Jews were fewer than

one percent of the German population when Hitler came to power in 1933, and many did manage to flee. Hitler's vision of a "Jew-free" Europe could thus only be realized when the Wehrmacht invaded the bloodlands, which is where most of the Jews of Europe actually lived. Of the 5.4 million Jews who died in the Holocaust, four million were from the bloodlands. The vast majority of the rest—including the 165,000 German Jews who did not escape—were taken to the bloodlands to be murdered. After the war, Stalin became paranoid about those Soviet Jews who remained, in part because they wanted to perpetuate the memory of the Holocaust. At the end of his life he purged and arrested many thousands of them, though he died too soon to carry out another mass murder.

Above all, this was the region where Nazism and Soviet communism clashed. Although they had signed the Molotov–Ribbentrop pact in 1939, agreeing to divide the bloodlands between them, Stalin and Hitler also came to hate each other. This hatred proved fatal to both German and Soviet soldiers who had the bad luck to become prisoners of war. Both dictators treated captured enemies with deadly utilitarianism. For the Germans, Soviet POWs were expendable: they consumed calories needed by others and, unlike Western POWs, were considered to be subhuman. And so they were deliberately starved to death in hideous "camps" in Poland, Russia, and Belarus that were not camps but death zones. Penned behind barbed wire, often in open fields without food, medicine, shelter, or bedding, they died in extraordinary numbers and with great rapidity. On any given day in the autumn of 1941, as many Soviet POWs died as did British and American POWs during the entire war. In total more than three million perished, mostly within a period of a few months.

In essence the Soviet attitude toward German POWs was no different. When, following the Battle of Stalingrad, the Red Army suddenly found itself with 90,000 prisoners, it also put them in open fields without any food or shelter. Over the next few months, at least half a million German and Axis soldiers would die in Soviet captivity. But as the Red Army began to win the war, it tried harder to keep captives alive, the better to deploy them as forced laborers. According to Soviet statistics, 2.3 million German soldiers and about a million of their allies (from Romania, Italy, Hungary, and Austria, but also France and Holland) eventually wound up in the labor camps of the Gulag, along with some 600,000 Japanese whose fate has been almost forgotten in their native land.[3]

Some were released after the war and others were released in the 1950s. There wasn't necessarily any political logic to these decisions. At one point in 1947, at the height of the postwar famine, the NKVD unexpectedly released several hundred thousand war prisoners. There was no political explanation: the Soviet leadership simply hadn't enough food to keep them all alive. And in the

postwar world there were pressures—most of all from the USSR's new East German client state—to keep them alive. The Nazis had operated without such constraints.

Though some of the anecdotes and statistics may be surprising to those who don't know this part of the world, scholars will find nothing in *Bloodlands* that is startlingly new. Historians of the region certainly know that three million Soviet soldiers starved to death in Nazi camps, that most of the Holocaust took place in the East, and that Hitler's plans for Ukraine were no different from Stalin's. Snyder's original contribution is to treat all of these episodes—the Ukrainian famine, the Holocaust, Stalin's mass executions, the planned starvation of Soviet POWs, postwar ethnic cleansing—as different facets of the same phenomenon. Instead of studying Nazi atrocities or Soviet atrocities separately, as many others have done, he looks at them together. Yet Snyder does not exactly compare the two systems either. His intention, rather, is to show that the two systems committed the same kinds of crimes at the same times and in the same places, that they aided and abetted one another, and above all that their interaction with one another led to more mass killing than either might have carried out alone.

Mike King

He also wants to show that this interaction had consequences for the inhabitants of the region. From a great distance in time and space, we in the West have the luxury of discussing the two systems in isolation, comparing and contrasting, judging and analyzing, engaging in theoretical arguments about which was worse. But people who lived under both of them, in Poland or in Ukraine, experienced them as part of a single historical moment. Snyder explains:

> The Nazi and Soviet regimes were sometimes allies, as in the joint occupation of Poland [from 1939–1941]. They sometimes held compatible goals as foes: as when Stalin chose not to aid the rebels in Warsaw in 1944 [during the Warsaw uprising], thereby allowing the Germans to kill people who would later have resisted communist rule…. Often the Germans and the Soviets goaded each other into escalations that cost more lives than the policies of either state by itself would have.

In some cases, the atrocities carried out by one power eased the way for the other. When the Nazis marched into western Belarus, Ukraine, and the Baltic

states in 1941, they entered a region from which the Soviet secret police had deported hundreds of thousands of people in the previous few months, and shot thousands of prisoners in the previous few days. The conquering Germans were thus welcomed by some as "liberators" who might save the population from a genuinely murderous regime. They were also able to mobilize popular anger at these recent atrocities, and in some places to direct some of that anger at local Jews who had, in the public imagination—and sometimes in reality—collaborated with the Soviet Union. It is no accident that the acceleration of the Holocaust occurred at precisely this moment.

To look at the history of mid-twentieth-century Europe in this way also has consequences for Westerners. Among other things, Snyder asks his readers to think again about the most famous films and photographs taken at Belsen and Buchenwald by the British and American soldiers who liberated those camps. These pictures, which show starving, emaciated people, walking skeletons in striped uniforms, stacks of corpses piled up like wood, have become the most enduring images of the Holocaust. Yet the people in these photographs were mostly not Jews: they were forced laborers who had been kept alive because the German war machine needed them to produce weapons and uniforms. Only when the German state began to collapse in early 1945 did they begin to starve to death in large numbers.

The vast majority of Hitler's victims, Jewish and otherwise, never saw a concentration camp. Although about a million people died because they were sent to do forced labor in German concentration camps, some ten million died in killing fields in Poland, Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia—that means they were taken to the woods, sometimes with the assistance of their neighbors, and shot—as well as in German starvation zones and German gas chambers. These gas chambers were not "camps," Snyder argues, though they were sometimes adjacent to camps, as at Auschwitz:

> Under German rule, the concentration camps and the death factories operated under different principles. A sentence to the concentration camp Belsen was one thing, a transport to the death factory Bełz·ec something else. The first meant hunger and labor, but also the likelihood of survival; the second meant immediate and certain death by asphyxiation. This, ironically, is why people remember Belsen and forget Bełz·ec.

He makes a similar point about Stalin's victims, arguing that although a million died in the Soviet Gulag between 1933 and 1945, an additional six million died from politically induced Soviet famines and in Soviet killing fields. I happen to think Snyder's numbers are a little low—the figure for Gulag deaths is

certainly higher than a million—but the proportions are probably correct. In the period between 1930 and 1953, the number of people who died in labor camps —from hunger, overwork, and cold, while living in wooden barracks behind barbed wire—is far lower than the number who died violently from machine-gun fire combined with the number who starved to death because their village was deprived of food.

The image we have of the prisoner in wooden shoes, dragging himself to work every morning, losing his humanity day by day—the image also created in the brilliant writings of Primo Levi, Elie Wiesel, and Alexander Solzhenitsyn—is in this sense somewhat misleading. In fact, prisoners who could work had at least a chance of staying alive. Prisoners who were too weak to work, or for whom work could not be organized because of war and chaos, were far more likely to die. The 5.4 million Jews murdered in the Holocaust mostly died instantly, in gas chambers or mobile vans or in silent forests. We have no photographs of them, or of their corpses.

The chronological and geographical arguments presented in *Bloodlands* also complicate the debate over the proper use of the word "genocide." As not everybody now remembers, this word (from the Greek *genos*, tribe, and the French *-cide*) was coined in 1943 by a Polish lawyer of Jewish descent, Raphael Lemkin, who had long been trying to draw the attention of the international community to what he at first called "the crime of barbarity." In 1933, inspired by news of the Armenian massacre, he had proposed that the League of Nations treat mass murder committed "out of hatred towards a racial, religious or social collectivity" as an international crime. After he fled Nazi-occupied Poland in 1940, Lemkin intensified his efforts. He persuaded the Nuremburg prosecutors to use the word "genocide" during the trials, though not in the verdict. He also got the new United Nations to draft a Convention on Genocide. Finally, after much debate, the General Assembly passed this convention in 1948.

As the Stanford historian Norman Naimark explains in *Stalin's Genocides*, the UN's definition of genocide was deliberately narrow: "Acts committed with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group." This was because Soviet diplomats had demanded the exclusion of any reference to social, economic, and political groups. Had they left these categories in, prosecution of the USSR for the murder of aristocrats (a social group), kulaks (an economic group), or Trotskyites (a political group) would have been possible.

Although Lemkin himself continued to advocate a broader definition of the

term, the idea that the word "genocide" can refer only to the mass murder of an ethnic group has stuck. In fact, until recently the term was used almost exclusively to refer to the Holocaust, the one "genocide" that is recognized as such by almost everybody: the international community, the former Allies, even the former perpetrators.

Perhaps because of that unusually universal recognition, the word has more recently acquired almost magical qualities. Nations nowadays campaign for their historical tragedies to be recognized as "genocide," and the term has become a political weapon both between and within countries. The disagreement between Armenians and Turks over whether the massacre of Armenians after World War I was "genocide" has been the subject of a resolution introduced in the US Congress. The leaders of the Orange Revolution in Ukraine campaigned to have the Ukrainian famine recognized as "genocide" in international courts (and in January 2010, a court in Kiev did convict Stalin and other high officials of "genocide" against the Ukrainian nation). But the campaign was deliberately dropped when their more pro-Russian (or post-Soviet) opponents came to power. They have since deleted a link to the genocide campaign from the presidential website.

As the story of Lemkin's genocide campaign well illustrates, this discussion of the proper use of the word has also been dogged by politics from the beginning. The reluctance of intellectuals on the left to condemn communism; the fact that Stalin was allied with Roosevelt and Churchill; the existence of German historians who tried to downplay the significance of the Holocaust by comparing it to Soviet crimes; all of that meant that, until recently, it was politically incorrect in the West to admit that we defeated one genocidal dictator with the help of another. Only now, with the publication of so much material from Soviet and Central European archives, has the extent of the Soviet Union's mass murders become better known in the West. In recent years, some in the former Soviet sphere of influence—most notably in the Baltic states and Ukraine—have begun to use the word "genocide" in legal documents to describe the Soviet Union's mass killings too.

Naimark's short book is a polemical contribution to this debate. Though he acknowledges the dubious political history of the UN convention, he goes on to argue that even under the current definition, Stalin's attack on the kulaks and on the Ukrainian peasants should count as genocide. So should Stalin's targeted campaigns against particular ethnic groups. At different times the Soviet secret police hunted down, arrested, and murdered ethnic Poles, Germans, and Koreans who happened to be living in the USSR, and of course they murdered 20,000 Polish officers within a few weeks. A number of small

nations, notably the Chechens, were also arrested and deported en masse during the war: men, women, children, and grandparents were put on trains, and sent to live in Central Asia, where they were meant to die and eventually disappear as a nation. A similar fate met the Crimean Tatars.

Like Snyder's, Naimark's work has also ranged widely, from his groundbreaking book on the Soviet occupation of East Germany to studies of ethnic cleansing. As a result his argument is authoritative, clear, and hard to dispute. Yet if we take the perspective offered in *Bloodlands* seriously, we also have to ask whether the whole genocide debate itself—and in particular the long-standing argument over whether Stalin's murders "qualify"—is not a red herring. If Stalin's and Hitler's mass murders were different but not separate, and if neither would have happened in quite the same way without the other, then how can we talk about whether one is genocide and the other is not?

To the people who actually experienced both tyrannies, such definitions hardly mattered. Did the Polish merchant care whether he died because he was a Jew or because he was a capitalist? Did the starving Ukrainian child care whether she had been deprived of food in order to create a Communist paradise or in order to provide calories for the soldiers of the German Reich? Perhaps we need a new word, one that is broader than the current definition of genocide and means, simply, "mass murder carried out for political reasons." Or perhaps we should simply agree that the word "genocide" includes within its definition the notions of deliberate starvation as well as gas chambers and concentration camps, that it includes the mass murder of social groups as well as ethnic groups and be done with it.

Henri Cartier-Bresson/Magnum Photos

Refugees at a transit camp, Dessau, Germany, April 1945

Finally, the arguments of *Bloodlands* also complicate the modern notion of memory—memory, that is, as opposed to history. It is true, for example, that the modern German state "remembers" the Holocaust—in official documents, in public debates, in monuments, in school textbooks—and is often rightly lauded for doing so. But how comprehensive is this memory? How many Germans "remember" the deaths of three million Soviet POWs? How many know or care that the secret treaty signed between Hitler and Stalin not only condemned the inhabitants of western Poland to deportation, hunger, and often death in slave labor camps, but also condemned the inhabitants of eastern Poland to deportation, hunger, and often death in Soviet exile? The Katyn massacre really is, in this sense, partially

Germany's responsibility: without Germany's collusion with the Soviet Union, it would not have happened. Yet modern Germany's very real sense of guilt about the Holocaust does not often extend to Soviet soldiers or even to Poles.

If we remember the twentieth century for what it actually was, and not for what we imagine it to have been, the misuse of history for national political purposes also becomes more difficult. The modern Russian state often talks about the "twenty million Soviet dead" during World War II as a way of emphasizing its victimhood and martyrdom. But even if we accept that suspiciously large round number, it is still important to acknowledge that the majority of those were not Russians, did not live in modern Russia, and did not necessarily die because of German aggression. It is also important to acknowledge that Soviet citizens were just as likely to die during the war years because of decisions made by Stalin, or because of the interaction between Stalin and Hitler, as they were from the commands of Hitler alone.

For different reasons, the American popular memory of World War II is also due for some revision. In the past, we have sometimes described this as the "good war," at least when contrasted to the morally ambiguous wars that followed. At some level this is understandable: we did fight for human rights in Germany and Japan, we did leave democratic German and Japanese regimes in our wake, and we should be proud of having done so. But it is also true that while we were fighting for democracy and human rights in the lands of Western Europe, we ignored and then forgot what happened further east.

As a result, we liberated one half of Europe at the cost of enslaving the other half for fifty years. We really did win the war against one genocidal dictator with the help of another. There was a happy end for us, but not for everybody. This does not make us bad—there were limitations, reasons, legitimate explanations for what happened. But it does make us less exceptional. And it does make World War II less exceptional, more morally ambiguous, and thus more similar to the wars that followed.

If nothing else, a reassessment of what we know about Europe in the years between 1933 and 1953 could finally cure us of that "lack of imagination" that so appalled Czesław Miłosz almost sixty years ago. When considered in isolation, Auschwitz can be easily compartmentalized, characterized as belonging to a specific place and time, or explained away as the result of Germany's unique history or particular culture. But if Auschwitz was not the only mass atrocity, if mass murder was simultaneously taking place across a multinational landscape and with the support of many different kinds of people, then it is not so easy to compartmentalize or explain away. The more we learn about the twentieth century, the harder it will be to draw easy lessons or make

simple judgments about the people who lived through it—and the easier it will be to empathize with and understand them.

Letters
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1 Czesław Miłosz, *The Captive Mind* (1953; Penguin, 2001), pp. 26–29. ↩

2 Typical is the story of a house I own in northwest Poland: intending to "Germanize" the region, the Nazis evicted the Polish owners in 1939 and installed a German family from Lithuania in their place. These Germans were evicted again in 1944, and the house became state property. ↩

3 These figures come from Richard Overy, *Russia's War* (Penguin, 1997), p. 297, and from *Voennoplennye v SSSR, 1939–1956: dokumenty i materialy*, edited by M.M. Zagorul'ko (Moscow: Logos, 2000), pp. 331–333. ↩