

## Redrawing Boundaries: The 'Bloodlands' as Fact or Artefact?

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**Abstract** Timothy Snyder is a leading light among scholars engaged in the study of 20<sup>th</sup> century central and eastern European history. His latest book attempts to convince the reader of the usefulness and aptness of the coinage 'Bloodlands' as a way of identifying and describing a discrete historical phenomenon, the campaigns of mass murder waged by Hitler and Stalin in a swathe of the continent running between central Poland and Western Russia in the period 1933-45. This central claim is examined and found wanting in terms of an inner consistency in relationship to the unities of time, place and action. It is argued, however, that the book still contains much of real value, as for example in its discussion of Stalinist anti-semitism and the disappearance of the Holocaust from Soviet accounts of the 'Great Patriotic War' after 1945. The failure to establish an overarching framework is, then, a significant flaw, but not sufficiently damaging to wound the endeavor fatally.

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**Interdisciplinary Fields:** History, Geography, Demography

The problem rises up immediately to confront anyone setting out to write about the past. History is, famously, a 'seamless fabric', material that never rends itself into pieces single-patterned and of the right size to fit conveniently within the covers of a book. That being so, the historian's first and most difficult task is to discern a meaningful shape, to chalk the outline of a topic on the cloth. This cannot be done too carefully, for once completed one must dare to cut, safe in the knowledge that even the sharpest analytical scissors will leave plenty of rough edges.

In sketching out the lineaments of *Bloodlands*, Timothy Snyder, Professor of History at Yale, clearly believed that he had detected a shape in the past that had eluded all previous observers. He defines its parameters in clear terms at the very outset (pp. vii-viii).

In the middle of Europe in the middle of the twentieth century, the Nazi and Soviet regimes murdered some fourteen million people. The place where all of the victims died, the bloodlands, extends from central Poland to western Russia, through Ukraine, Belarus, and the Baltic states...[which witnessed] mass violence of a sort never before seen in history...The fourteen million were murdered over the course of only twelve years, between 1933 and 1945, while both Hitler and Stalin were in power. Though their homelands became battlefields midway through this period, these people were all victims of a murderous policy rather than casualties of war.

At first glance, the claim that between 1933 and 1945, in a clearly demarcated area of Eastern Europe, an unprecedented campaign of mass murder aimed at civilians took place certainly appears to satisfy the three Aristotelian unities of time, place and action. But Professor Snyder knows that the validity of his claim to have brought to light a previously unrecognized historical topic must be demonstrated, not just asserted; his book, then, is designed to 'test the proposition that deliberate and direct mass murder by these two regimes in the bloodlands is a distinct phenomenon worthy of separate treatment' (p. 411). How well does his concept pass the test?

The most compelling evidence presented in its favour comes from the wartime years, when the tide of fighting gave millions the experience of the inhuman brutality not just of one dictator but of two, of Hitler and Stalin both, nominal enemies but brothers in mass murder—a relationship recognized as early as the autumn of 1939 in the famous depiction of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact by the British cartoonist, David Low, in which the two dictators bow to and greet one another across the corpse of Poland. Professor Snyder's words on what happened to those in the bloodlands who found themselves caught in the vicious composite jaws of Hitler and Stalin deserve close attention.

These Europeans, who inhabited the crucial part of Europe at the crucial time, were condemned to compare. We have the possibility, if we wish, to consider the two systems in isolation; people who lived under them experienced overlap and interaction. The Nazi and Soviet regimes were sometimes allies, as in the joint occupation of Poland. They sometimes held compatible goals as foes: as when Stalin chose not to aid the rebels in Warsaw in 1944, thereby allowing the Germans to kill people who would later have resisted communist rule. This is what Francois Furet called their "belligerent complicity." 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 (p. 392).

Yet even here, where the boundaries seem most sharply defined, just a little probing reveals them to be in truth blurred and lacking in coherence. For, in respect of action, Professor Snyder has restricted the concept of the 'bloodlands' quite deliberately to the mass murder of civilians by the Nazis and Soviets. This is to define the concept in terms of victims, and only those who were not bearing arms at the moment of their deaths are to be considered as such. But this is simply too arbitrary and unnatural a use of the word 'victim' to be workable, and if it is to be enforced with any strictness, it leads to distinctions that cannot be defended seriously. If it is only the act of killing and the civilian dead themselves that are allowed to define the 'bloodlands', then this book has properly nothing to do with the wider experience of those who survived. The focus cannot therefore be on the 'people who *lived*' under the two regimes, but on those who *died* under them, those whose blood was shed. And here, by definition, there could have been no common experience, no grounds for comparison, because no-one died twice, once under Hitler and a second time under Stalin. Nor is this mere quibbling. There is a book, and a very important one, to be written about the experiences of those who could say with Nazedha Mandelstam, 'How we scurried about—trapped between Hitler and Stalin.' But that book will not be called 'Bloodlands'—something much broader will be needed, a concept that makes room for the terror and utter hopelessness that even those who survived experienced when they realized how inescapably they were caught between two inhuman forces. Professor Snyder does himself venture onto this wider territory at points and has much to say about it that is of interest and value, but in so doing he is forced to abandon any notion that he is testing a proposition that the 'bloodlands' is a 'distinctive phenomenon'.

It is in fact difficult to avoid concluding that the term 'bloodlands' was coined less for its explanatory than for its dramatic, emotive qualities. It may well be that these qualities alone will ensure that it becomes an accepted part of the historical terminology used to describe mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Europe, but this does not disguise the fact that events cannot be made to fit neatly inside it. Take just one example, that of the Warsaw Uprising, cited by Professor Snyder above as a clear instance of the 'belligerent complicity' of Hitler and Stalin. The Uprising certainly belongs to the 'bloodlands' in terms of time and space, but not in terms of action. For it was in large measure an armed conflict, not simply a massacre of defenceless civilians (though it was that as well). Is there really any overmastering need to fracture the unity of that event, to discriminate between two categories of the dead, those who fought in the Home Army with weapons and in uniform,

and those who had neither and did not fight (predominantly women and children). If the combatants are not to be admitted to the total of the 14 million in the company of those whom they died in part to defend, if they were somehow not also victims on an equal footing, a very compelling case must be made, and it is not made here. Why cannot the members of the Home Army who died be said to be part of the story of the 'bloodlands'? And indeed, when he come to give his own account of the Uprising (pp. 298-310), Professor Snyder rightly avoids any such artificial distinction, choosing instead to follow in the footsteps of much fuller studies such as that by Norman Davies. In so doing, however, his proclaimed theme disappears from view entirely—to the point where his concluding remark on the episode (p. 310) is that 'Stalin's cynical treatment of the Home Army was a slap in the face to his British and American allies. In this sense the Warsaw Uprising was the beginning of the confrontation that was to come when the Second World War was over.' An observation of real insight and interest—but what has it to do with the 'bloodlands'?

So the unity of action fractures—*Bloodlands* cannot be said to pass that aspect of the test Professor Snyder sets for it. Something of the same order happens to the unity of time. For Professor Snyder wishes to include the Ukrainian Famine of 1932-33 within the framework of his envisaged theme. This is to invite serious problems, some of them foreseen by the author, others perhaps not. We have quoted Professor Snyder to the effect that it is the central feature of the 'bloodlands' that its 14 million victims 'were murdered over the course of only twelve years, between 1933 and 1945, while both Hitler and Stalin were in power.' But the overwhelming proportion of the victims of the *Holodomor* (Professor Snyder eschews using the term itself on the grounds that 'it is unfamiliar to almost all readers of English' (p. 412), though he is happy to employ 'bloodlands', a term unfamiliar to every single one of them) died before ever the Nazis seized control of the government of Germany. Norman Naimark, in his recent study of *Stalin's Genocides*, is simply adverting to a very well-known fact when he remarks (p. 75) that at the beginning of 1933, when Stalin finally decided to allow minimal famine relief to the Ukraine, it 'was too little, too late; millions had already died, and thousands more deaths would follow.' So again we are faced with questions that seem not worth the asking. Do those thousands of death alone belong to the 'bloodlands', since only they occurred after Hitler became Chancellor on 30<sup>th</sup> January, 1933? How can they meaningfully be distinguished from the millions who had gone before them? Clearly they cannot—even for Professor Snyder they are part of the 14 million, and rightly so. But their inclusion is only possible if one abandons a time frame when Hitler and Stalin were both in power, and once that parameter is

breached, where and on what grounds does one draw the new line? 1930? But why not go further back, as Solzhenitsyn and others have done, to the Russian Civil War that followed on from the Bolshevik seizure of power in 1917 and in which peasants were deliberately targeted for extermination on the grounds of class. From this perspective the years 1922-29 were simply a truce, the *Holodomor* a resumption of war. But following that line of thought means that it is not simply the time frame of the 'bloodlands' that will have been distorted beyond recognition, but its final unity too, that of place—because the peasants who were slaughtered between 1917 and 1922 did not live in the Ukraine alone.

For all that, it is the unity of place that emerges from the 'bloodlands' test the least damaged—unsurprisingly, of course, since these are bloodlands, which gives the geographical dimension implicit priority. Even here, though, the walls do not hold, for Professor Snyder includes a chapter on 'class terror' (pp. 59-87) which in providing a summary of the 'Great Terror' of 1937-38 inevitably treats of the entire Soviet Union, including the Far East, some thousands of miles from the 'bloodlands'. He follows this with a chapter on 'national terror' which details the cruel fate of a multitude of Polish citizens at the hands of the NKVD in 1937-38. Here we would seem to be back in the 'bloodlands', and certainly the mass arrests and executions did take place predominantly in Belarus and the Ukraine. But Russian cities like Leningrad also contributed their share—should these Poles therefore really be counted amongst the 14 million, any more than the exiled Ukrainian 'kulaks' who perished in such large number in Siberia after 1933. And what of the tens of thousands who died in the construction of the White Sea Canal, and the many tens and hundreds of thousands more Gulag victims scattered across the length and breadth of the Soviet Union? What purpose is really served by trying to separate and shuffle them off to one side?

All in all, then, the term 'bloodlands' does not illuminate very much; to employ it systematically requires us to sever too many connections, and on grounds that do not bear close scrutiny. Yet this does not mean that *Bloodlands* has nothing to teach—far from it. The fact that the whole is less than the sum of its parts does not render some, though not all, of those parts of great interest and value. Prominent among the jewels of understanding, to take just one example, is the extended treatment of Stalinist anti-Semitism and what inevitably flowed from the decision to construct the official Soviet narrative of 1941-45 on the foundation that 'the Russian nation had struggled and suffered like no other...[meaning that] Russians would have to be the greatest victors and the greatest victims, now and forever' (p. 341). With this as a given, the fact of the Holocaust could only create insoluble 'ideo-

logical' problems for the Soviet dictator during and especially after the war. Professor Snyder is entirely right to argue that Stalinist mythmaking was therefore bound to downplay and then to airbrush from the record Hitler's annihilation of the Jews. It was unavoidable, given that 'The Jewish tragedy...could not be enclosed within the Soviet experience...[because] more Jewish civilians were murdered in absolute terms than members of any other Soviet nationality...[and because] more than half of the cataclysm took place beyond the postwar boundaries of the Soviet Union... Precisely because extermination was a fate common to Jews across borders, its recollection could not be reduced to that of an element in the Great Patriotic War' (p. 335). The truth, indeed any mention at all, of this central event had therefore to be suppressed immediately.

The inherent insanity that characterized the Stalinist rewriting of history has been a familiar topic ever since George Orwell's 1984, of course. But we are truly in Professor Snyder's debt for a remarkably clear account of how the 'logic' of this process worked itself out in a way that produced the most astounding of travesties—parodies of the past that can only be explained by a determined desire to hide completely the 'belligerent conspiracy' of the two dictators.

The whole Soviet idea of the Great Patriotic War was premised on the view that the war began in 1941, when Germany invaded the Soviet Union, not in 1939, when Germany and the Soviet Union together invaded Poland. In other words, in the official story, the territories absorbed as a result of Soviet aggression in 1939 had to be considered as somehow always having been Soviet, rather than as the booty of a war that Stalin had helped Hitler to begin...

No Soviet account of the war could note one of its central facts: German and Soviet occupation together was worse than German occupation alone. The population east of the Molotov-Ribbentrop line, subject to one German and two Soviet occupations, suffered more than any other region of Europe. From a Soviet perspective, all of the deaths in that zone could simply be lumped together with Soviet losses, even though the people in question had been Soviet citizens for only a matter of months when they died, and even though many of them were killed by the NKVD rather than the SS [!]...

The vast losses suffered by Soviet Jews were mostly the deaths of Jews in lands just invaded by the Soviet Union...[They] were the first to be reached by the Einsatzgruppen when Hitler betrayed Stalin and Germany invaded the Soviet Union in 1941. They had been shielded by the Soviet press from knowledge of German poli-

cies towards Jews of 1939 and 1940. They had virtually no time to evacuate because Stalin had refused to believe in a German invasion. They had been subject to terror and deportation in the enlarged Soviet Union in 1939-41 when Stalin and Hitler were allied, and then terribly exposed to German forces by the breaking of that alliance. These Jews in this small zone made up more than a quarter of the total victims of the Holocaust.

If the Stalinist notion of the war was to prevail, the fact that the Jews were its main victims had to be forgotten... (pp. 344-45).

Paragraphs such as these alone are worth the price of the book. The truth and the insights they contain more than compensate for the distraction caused by the coining of the term 'bloodlands'. They remind us that 'Holocaust denial' can take more than one form, that facts can be ignored even more effectively than they can be contradicted. They teach something of how impossible, setting aside for one moment the fact of terror, it must have been to live in the Soviet Union under Stalin when any notion of 'reality' was attacked so ruthlessly and where only ignorance and lies were offered in its place. They help us to understand why so many of the Jews remaining in the Soviet Empire after 1945 were so intent on leaving for Israel, where they would be able to speak freely and openly about their experience. Passages such as these offer copious material for thought and reflection.

Perhaps the chapter on Stalinist anti-semitism would have served better as the point of departure for a longer and more narrowly focussed study of the way in which the Holocaust was treated in the Soviet Union down to its collapse. That is in essence the problem with *Bloodlands*. It is a quarry from which a number of books could have been hewn, something that did not happen because of a misguided preoccupation with the single coinage of its title. It remains, nonetheless, a book of many virtues. Providing only that the prospective reader is warned not to expect to find a satisfying inner coherence among its various parts, it is a work warmly to be commended.

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