

Cahiers du
MONDE RUSSE

Cahiers du monde russe

Russie - Empire russe - Union soviétique et États
indépendants

53/4 | 2012
Varia

Timothy Snyder, Bloodlands

Amir Weiner



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/monderusse/7904>

DOI: [10.4000/monderusse.7904](https://doi.org/10.4000/monderusse.7904)

ISSN: 1777-5388

Publisher

Éditions de l'EHESS

Printed version

Date of publication: 15 December 2012

ISSN: 1252-6576

Electronic reference

Amir Weiner, « Timothy Snyder, Bloodlands », *Cahiers du monde russe* [Online], 53/4 | 2012, Online since 29 October 2013, connection on 10 December 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/monderusse/7904> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/monderusse.7904>

This text was automatically generated on 10 December 2020.

© École des hautes études en sciences sociales

Timothy Snyder, Bloodlands

Amir Weiner

REFERENCES

Timothy SNYDER, **Bloodlands. Europe between Hitler and Stalin**. New York : Basic Books, 2010, XIX + 524 p. [version française : *Terres de sang. L'Europe entre Hitler et Staline*, Paris : Gallimard, 2012, 712 p.]

- 1 *Bloodlands or a Bloody Nose to History? Timothy Snyder's Bloodlands*
- 2 Long ago, the study of the Soviet and Nazi enterprises turned into a cottage industry, and numerous monographs, articles, memoirs, diaries and collections of documents continue to emerge. With so much written, separately and in tandem, one wonders if there is a room for yet another study of the so-called totalitarian twins. Certainly so, argues Timothy Snyder. Snyder takes to task the entire body of literature that preceded his own *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin*. "This is a moment that we have scarcely begun to understand, let alone master," declares Snyder. "Only an unabashed acceptance of the similarities between the Nazi and Soviet systems permits an understanding of their difference," Snyder breaks the news to his readers. This is a bold statement and one that deserves close scrutiny, the more so when it comes from a scholar who is a specialist in neither Nazi Germany nor the Soviet Union and whose book is based almost entirely on other scholars' findings and arguments.
- 3 More than fourteen million people perished at the hands of the Nazis and the Soviets on the territory that encompasses Poland, Ukraine, Belarus, the Baltic States, and the western frontier of Russia. Between 1933 (the onset of the devastating Soviet famine) and 1945 (the collapse of Nazi Germany) the region literally became Europe's main cemetery for its inhabitants and outsider who were brought there to die in six waves of mass state terror. In captivating prose that sets him apart from most historians, Snyder gives voice to multiple individual victims who died as a direct result of two sadistic regimes that pursued unrealizable utopias and radicalized their murderous drives whenever they saw their plans frustrated. "This is where the power and the malice of

the Nazi and Soviet regimes overlapped and interacted,” states Snyder. This sounds reasonable enough, not to mention useful—combining several historical and national episodes in a single volume. Herein, however, also lie the difficulties and fundamental weaknesses that undermine the premise of the book’s main arguments, which include a chronic downplaying of the role of local perpetrators and indigenous anti-Semitism in the region. To this reviewer, the argument of the Nazis and Soviets interacting and enabling each other, the historicity of the territory of the so-called Bloodlands, and the chronological framework are nothing but unproven assumptions and the fruits of the author’s personal agenda rather than historical evidence.

- 4 For one, the argument for the two systems and leaders teaching and enabling each other is not exactly novel and to put it mildly, has not taken root since Ernst Nolte’s debunked argument of Nazism as a copycat of Bolshevism. Repetitive assumptions do not constitute evidence no matter how eloquent and playful the language employed. After several hundred pages the assumption that there was any link between the Soviet famine of 1932-1933 (which is presented as a deliberate ethnic-oriented act despite serious arguments to the contrary) and the Nazi genocidal policies remain just that: an unsubstantiated assumption. It goes without saying that the Soviets and the Nazis were watching each other closely. In private, Stalin and Hitler expressed admiration for the ruthlessness of each other, and for a brief moment in 1939-1941 actually collaborated in the dismemberment of Poland, the Baltic States, and parts of Romania. Regrettably, Snyder never elaborates on actual interactions between the two. He justly points to the Nazi attempts to seek Soviet absorption of Jewish refugees in 1940. He could have gone further—but ultimately does not—and identify certain spheres of mutual learning and direct impact between the two sides.
- 5 First was the policy of population exchange. In 1939-1941, the Soviets were nervously watching, carefully studying and reluctantly collaborating in the Nazi evacuation of *Volksdeutschen* from the territories allotted to the Soviets in the 1939 pact. Three years later, they proceeded to implement the population exchange with newly established Poland using the very same infrastructure created and left by the Germans, down to the Nazi original documents from 1939-1940. The same applies to the postwar re-collectivization drive—a major event that is not even mentioned in the book. In the absence of any meaningful socio-economic stratification in the countryside the Soviet regime invented new social category based on individual wartime conduct, mainly collaboration with the German occupiers and anti-Soviet armed resistance. Notably, both episodes relate to the brief prelude of war years, the only period when the two systems actually interacted.
- 6 But was there any policy that either side learned from the other and had not executed already or was there any policy that enabled the other? Did the Soviets need a Nazi example of “decapitating Polish society”? Hadn’t they done just that inside the Soviet Union for two decades prior to the Second World War, if only with much more thoroughness than the Nazis? The history of the Bolshevik Revolution was marked by the destruction of *any* autonomous elite and its replacement by another that was deemed bereft of all self-interest. And did the Nazis draw inspiration from the Soviet calamitous collectivization and famine when they gassed tens of thousands of mentally disabled on German territory proper before the war, an exterminatory campaign that is considered as the forerunner of the Holocaust? Did the stubborn Soviet resistance to the Nazi invasion that frustrated resettlement plans pave the way to the Holocaust, or

maybe one should be alerted to the lethal combination of racist, genocidal ideology and ongoing brutalization of conduct? At most, the two regimes responded to perceived threats by the other, as the Soviets did in deporting over one million ethnic Germans whom they suspected would shift their loyalty to the invading Germans. It would be a stretch to define even this operation as interaction and in any case it took place beyond the territory under discussion.

- 7 Zila Rennert would have made an honorary citizen of the Bloodlands, had such a territory existed. She opens her riveting memoir, *Trois wagons à bestiaux* (*Three Cattle Wagons*) with the German bombardment of her native Vilnius, which launched a crisscross fatal journey between Vienna, Vilnius, Lviv, Krakow and Warsaw. Along the way she managed to escape Soviet deportation by jumping off a Soviet train, survive the German occupation and genocide under an assumed identity, cheated death numerous time while losing her husband and the father of her only daughter to the Gestapo, witness the Warsaw Ghetto burning with some Poles expressing their admiration for the rebels and compassion for their fate only to hear them laughing at the site of the burning ghetto (“Look at the Yids fry!”) and depart Poland when the postwar anti-Semitic wave became too much to bear. Rennert had experienced and seen it all. Rennert does not appear in *Bloodlands*’ exhaustive bibliography. Nor could she be there without compromising its basic assumptions. Her first memory refers to the German bombing of Vilnius in 1914, just as the subtitle of her memoirs (*D’une guerre à l’autre à travers l’Europe Centrale, 1914-1946*) points to a more appropriate periodization of the era of mass state violence in Europe, which was earlier and significantly more multifaceted.
- 8 The same applies to the classic memoir of Lev Kopelev, *The Education of a True Believer*. This uniquely candid reflection of the self-styled communist zealot-turned-dissident has long served as the introduction of students of the Soviet epoch to the world of the perpetrators-collectivizers in Soviet Ukraine. Kopelev, too, is absent from *Bloodlands*’ bibliography. It may well be that the author, not a specialist in Soviet history, is simply unaware of the famous memoir. But even if he were, it would be an improbable source to use given that many of Kopelev’s protagonists acquired their credentials in the horrifically brutal requisitions of the Civil War, some twelve years earlier. And this goes to a core problem of this book: the arbitrary choice of time and geographical frames that do not make sense either historically or geopolitically. Ideologically based mass violence in East-Central Europe did not erupt in 1932-1933 nor was it limited to the so-called Bloodlands. By conservative estimates, the Russian Civil War claimed the lives of some 8 million people—far more than any event described by Snyder. Moreover, it came in the wake of the First World War, a cataclysm that saw the death, deportation and starvation of millions in this vast territory, often based on similar rationale that Snyder confines to the 1930s-1940s.
- 9 And so it is with geography, too. For one, the Nazi genocidal campaign against the Jews did not know geographical boundaries. The fight against the “eternal Jew” was not limited to a certain territory or an ad-hoc campaign. Simply put, the Nazis slated the Jews of western and southern Europe to the same fate as their East European brethren and that the bulk of the genocide took place in the Bloodlands is neither here nor there. Second, along the way, the reader finds that when convenient, Kazakhstan—the Central Asian Soviet Republic that suffered the harshest consequences of Soviet collectivization but left unmolested by the Nazis—is integrated into the discussion of

the European Bloodlands, but neighboring Romania, armed with fascist state ideology and genocidal policies it developed before the war and which accounted for the death of some 380,000 Jews, is not. Its role is limited to a cameo appearance (p. 218-219) that emphasizes the distinction between the Nazi principled and the Romanian pragmatic genocidal polities. In the same vein, the Baltics, and Lithuania in particular, with their indigenous murderous movements that struck their Jewish minority even prior to the Nazi arrival and after that often independently, are allotted four rushed pages of superficial survey that again assign the recent Soviet occupation with responsibility for the lethal indigenous anti-Semitism that swept the region (p. 192-96). *Bloodlands*, it seems, is an elastic category that corresponds to the author's agenda and knowledge rather than to any historical reality. The arbitrary and ahistorical delineation of the site of mass atrocities allows Snyder to focus on regimes and personalities (Nazi and Soviet, Hitler and Stalin) and conveniently turn a blind eye to the fact that they worked to such extreme levels because they were embraced by large sectors of the societies that populated the region and were brewing with resentments and violence well before the chronological markers of the present study. Which turns our attention to the most glaring MIA of *Bloodlands*: the role of local perpetrators and collaborators in the genocide of European Jewry.

- 10 No credible historian would counter the argument that the Holocaust was a Nazi-orchestrated enterprise, just as no credible historian would contend that without mass collaboration and active participation of local perpetrators, the Holocaust would not have reached the magnitude it did. The Nazis and the Soviets did not arrive at, nor did they operate on virgin lands and tabula rasa populations. Nor were they the only powers aspiring and practicing revolutionary, violent transformation of the region. By the time the totalitarian regimes arrived, these territories were already crowded with a variety of political forces driven by different ideologies and goals but sharing a common illiberal ethos and practices in their quest for consolidated territory and homogenized populace. The gap between the political and ethnic maps of post-World War I East-Central Europe was supposed to be bridged by good governance of minorities. Yet right from the start, the concessions to minorities were perceived as the humiliating price tag exacted by outside powers in exchange for their support of independence of the new states and intrusion in the nationalizing political and economic agenda. The rise of the radical revolutionary right saddled these polities with a dual polarization: the widening gap between the relatively liberal constitutional obligations and the intense nationalizing propaganda, and the growing rift between conservative nationalistic regimes and radical nationalistic movements. These tensions led to the simultaneous attrition of minority rights and the suppression of the radical right by the conservative regimes. The strict enforcement of order in the streets held political violence in check, but with a price tag of further weakening whatever institutional integrity that survived the authoritarian turn in the mid-1930s. On the eve of World War II the territory of Bloodlands was dense with governments seeking ways to get rid of their minorities, racist movements and violent public and private discourse.
- 11 And yet, a book that centers on mass murder in the region between 1932 and 1945, hardly dwells on these developments, and worse, ignores their wartime consequences. With the exception of a few cursory pages on local collaboration that refer to the phenomenon as basically a by-product of the Nazi and Soviet violence—one will look in vain for a discussion of the local perpetrators. Locals, in Snyder's *Bloodlands*, had

neither agency nor ideology. They were all members of an unfortunate human cohort that struggled to survive, whether they were Jews, Ukrainians, Balts or Poles. Whether numerous active perpetrators who launched lethal pogroms against the Jewish communities in the Baltics, Ukraine, Belorussia *before* the Nazi arrival, the hundreds of thousands enlisted in the German auxiliary police and participated in rounding up, beating, humiliating and killing Jews, and the prevalent hostility toward Jews that isolated them and often left them on their own, Snyder's locals, had no agency in the mass violence that engulfed these territories.

- 12 *Bloodlands*, however, does not stop there. When Snyder focuses on Poles, the constituency he cares most about and the one he actually knows, the sins of omission turn crude. If one wishes to celebrate Polish noble conduct during the dark days of the war, suffice to consult the list of Righteous among the Nations in Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial in Jerusalem. Poles make the largest group, and by far: 6,394 out of 24,811 recognized by early 2013. But what purpose is served by omitting any reference to Polish responsibility and their role in wartime atrocities? Snyder's Ukrainians bear the brunt of responsibility for the wartime interethnic violence in the region, the best-known episode being the cleansing of Poles from Volhynia in summer 1943. How about a word on the interwar Polish state that did its best to suffocate its minorities, whether it was the planned Polonization of Ukrainians and Belarusians, the economicide of the Jews and their constant harassment and humiliation across the mythical divides of 1926 and 1935 hoping they would all lead to out migration. Two decades of bigoted policies provided a fertile ground for the future perpetrators. After celebrating the so-called "Volhynian experiment" in his previous publications as one of eastern Europe's most ambitious policies of toleration" with hardly a word about the intended schemes for the Jews, we now learn in a passing remark that the interwar government actually sought their departure. Even this concession is paired with saluting the policy of military training of right-wing Zionist organizations.
- 13 Further, the reader learns that for every local display of indifference and cruelty there was a mitigating, balancing act. The Home Army, we are told, indeed had a minority of anti-Semites in its ranks but it did combat them. The most we can account for is a single case of killing Jews. Maybe, but only at the cost of ignoring the well-known studies of other historians who meticulously recorded numerous hostilities of all factions of the Home Army and the regional factor where most help offered by Poles to Jews was in prewar southeastern District of Galicia, in sharp contrast to the central regions.¹ The Home Army provided the Ghetto uprising with some weapons from its modest arsenal, we learn. How modest it was even the sources cited do not convey. When Poles made cutthroat gestures to Jews on the trains to death camps, they did not rejoice the calamity: all they meant was "to communicate to the Jews that they were going to die—though not necessarily that the Poles wished this upon them" (p. 266). A novel interpretation, indeed. And then comes the rewriting of Czesław Miłosz. In his heart-wrenching and guilt-stricken poem, "A Poor Christian Looks at the Ghetto," the great humanist poet talks about the "guardian mole who distinguishes human ashes by their luminous vapor; the ashes of each man by a different part of the spectrum." And in Snyder's summation: "No earthly agent could sort the Jewish ashes from the Polish ones." (p. 297) Well, the earthly Nazis, the Poles and the Jews did. To the long list of victims paraded in the book, one could add Miłosz's spirit and intent. Finally, we learn in a passing comment that after the war, Poles beat, killed and threatened Jews who tried to return home (p. 352), an impressively laconic phrase to describe the murder of

more than 1,000 Jews between 1944-1947, of whom 351 were murdered between November 1944 and December 1945 alone. And this is in a book that is obsessed with statistics and gory details of atrocities.² Needless to say, there is hardly a word on the wave of the postwar pogroms, including the most notorious in Kielce. Apparently, some numbers and events are less important than others, especially when they do not fit the overarching argument and narrative. There is a lot to celebrate and admire in the often-tragic history of Poland. The soul-searching that the nation has gone through following the publications of Jan Gross on local perpetrators during and after the Holocaust stands in stark contrast to most eastern European countries that still avoid the issue. Creating and celebrating a false equilibrium is the last thing that Poles or any other European society emerging from the disastrous communist experience needs.

- 14 The bulk of *Bloodlands* draws on well-known and rich works that define the study of totalitarianism, but at no point does Snyder bother to engage the concepts and argument of the many scholars he relies on. With one awkward exception of an incomprehensible footnote (485-486, n. 21) that criticizes the studies of Jan Gross—without actually addressing Gross’ seminal studies of Polish perpetrators—the only other scholar that figures in Snyder’s treatise is Hannah Arendt. Pairing oneself with and against Arendt is a tall order for anyone. Suffice to say that Snyder would have done himself a service had he followed Arendt’s full investigation of the perpetrators in her seminal *Origins of Totalitarianism*. Emphasizing that most of the killing in the Holocaust was carried out not in the death camps but rather by shooting in the open is an interesting observation. However, the death camps for Arendt mattered not because of the numbers killed or the methods employed there, rather as the only site where totalitarian movements could reach the ultimate goal of total control. More important, Arendt did not limit herself to the question of *what* happened—the stated and timid goal of *Bloodlands*—but boldly, even if controversially, pursued the questions of *how* and *why* European civilization reached Auschwitz.
- 15 When all is said and done, one is left with the troubling sense that despite the outlandish promises of *Bloodlands*, the conventional wisdom that the Nazis stood in a league of their own and operated in a different realm remains intact. Not only were the Nazis responsible for the absolute majority of the victims in *Bloodlands*, ten out of fourteen million according to Snyder’s calculation, as Snyder himself concedes but fails to elaborate on the reasons for this difference. At stake is not only statistics. Who was the Soviet equivalent to Heinrich Himmler, the architect of the Holocaust who presided over the murder of millions and traveled to Finland in July 1942 to persuade its government to deliver a handful of foreign Jews who managed to escape his death machine? Who were Nazi counterparts to the kulaks, a cohort that was divided into three categories with corresponding punishments, many of whom were reintegrated into society following their participation in World War II? Does the Jewish-kulak bind lead us anywhere? If one insists on the comparison, then probably a more appropriate comparison would be to the *bandenkampf*, the persecution of “asocials” and a comparison to concentration, not death, camps. This, however, would have required the actual mastering of both Soviet and Nazi history. Falling back on Vasilii Grossman’s oft-quoted insights into the similarities between the Soviets and the Nazis does not absolve the historian from probing the fundamental differences between the two regimes, especially those that accounted for the one being nihilistic and genocidal, and

the other not. Long on promises and short on delivery, replete with equations that are often baseless and at times tasteless, *Bloodlands* ends up as a bloody nose to history.

NOTES

1. Israel Gutman, Shmuel Krakowski, *Unequal Victims: Poles and Jews during World War Two* (New York: Holocaust Library, 1986), 216-223; Shmuel Krakowski, "The attitude of the Polish Underground to the Jewish Question during the Second World War," in Joshua D. Zimmerman, ed., *Contested Memories: Poles and Jews during the Holocaust and Its Aftermath* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 97-106.
2. Israel Gutman, *Przegląd prasy zagranicznej* 2, 3-4 (1986), "Żydzi w Polsce po II Wojnie Światowej —akcja kalumni i zabójstw."