

A Decent and True Understanding of the Past An Interview with Timothy D. Snyder

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Published in 2010, Timothy Snyder’s book *Bloodlands* is a magisterial rereading of the history of mass murder in Eastern Europe between 1933 and 1945, which has excited interest and controversy in Europe. In this interview, T. Snyder highlights the necessity to go beyond national boundaries in order to achieve “a decent and true understanding of the past”.

Writing A Human Geography Of Victims

Books and Ideas: *Bloodlands*,¹ recently translated in French, is a book based on years of research in Slavic Studies. But its general theme tackles problems that more broadly concern the history of WWII, the interaction of Nazism and Stalinism, mass murders, in a way that seem to completely do away with the frontiers of national historiographies. Can you tell us about this intellectual itinerary, about the environment, the choices or encounters, which made it possible? Where did you get the idea of working on a “human geography of victims”, on the 14 million deaths that occurred in the territories stretching between the Baltic and the Black Seas between 1933 and 1945?

Timothy Snyder: Comparing Nazism and Stalinism is nothing new. It is been done since the 1930s. The idea of totalitarianism existed then, well before Hannah Arendt used it. Hannah Arendt did not exactly compare. She tried to show the two regimes as representing a single type of totalitarian polity. She is publishing in the 1940s, early 1950s. And of course during the Cold War there were plenty of comparisons of individual crimes or of the whole systems. If there is anything new about my book, it is not the comparison. The book deals with a territory where the two regimes were present. Its method is to keep the reader’s and the researcher’s eye on that territory and to observe what happens there regardless of who is occupying the territory, regardless of whether there are nation-states there, regardless of who the people are. That is what is new in terms of method.

How did I get this idea? I became an East European historian because I was coming of age in 1989. Between 1989 and 2001 when I got a job at Yale, I spent most of my time in Eastern Europe. My presence there helped me to see that these ideas and these systems had a geography. You cannot help but see this if you spend a lot of time, for example, in Warsaw. All these crimes are recorded in various kinds of monuments; and if they are not recorded in monuments, they are in people’s memory. The family histories with which you become familiar as you get to know people then become connected to these abstract ideas and to these

¹ Timothy D. Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin*, Basic Books/Random House, 2010.

ideas about institutions that you already have. At a certain point, I understood that the history of Stalinism and Nation-Socialism could be written geographically. In a way, I expected that someone else would write this book. The idea is quite obvious and once the archives became accessible in Eastern Europe, such a study became plausible. The opening of the archives meant that we could now try to understand Stalinism, but also about National-Socialism because, as East European historians and some Holocaust historians know, most German crimes were in Eastern Europe. Only a tiny minority happened in Germany.

When I started this project, I had a sense of triple inadequacy. The first was the place of the Holocaust in East European history. As an American also familiar with French and German, I could see the problems between East and West European histories as they emerged. In Central and Western Europe, people treat the Holocaust as a very important symbol, but the historical event did not mainly happen in Central or Western Europe. The account that Western and American historians have of the Holocaust is consequently quite narrow. In Eastern Europe, on the other hand, it is a terribly difficult historical question, not as important as a symbol, but ever present in a certain way—because that is where all of the Jews were murdered. East Europeans are concerned that West Europeans remember communism, and fear that West Europeans interpret this concern as an attempt to deny Nazism. As though there were only so much suffering and we have to divide it somehow. A second sense of inadequacy was that East European historians generally work on national questions. Even if they generally do it very critically, it means that in some sense they are not taking responsibility for the Holocaust epistemically or morally, because the Jews did not have a nation state. Some of my East European colleagues have realized this and have started working on the Holocaust, but there are relatively few of them. Few will actually say: “We East Europe historians have to take responsibility for everything that happened in the region, even if it took place outside of national history.” The third sense of inadequacy had to do with the relation between Jewish and European history. The history of the Holocaust has been written in a way that made it touch on European history only through Germany. To write that history, one had to find a way to put the Jews in Europe, so to speak. The bloodlands were where most Jews lived, and were the historical Jewish homeland. Any account of the Holocaust that does not begin from this basic assumption cannot be adequate.

This idea of looking at place, in a simple, human way, was a way to embrace these problems and to try to solve them. The reason why it has not been done before has to do I think with our tendency to prefer working on one subject—on national history, on one regime. I see at least two other factors that explains why place was not really a subject before. First, because the Holocaust is so sensitive, its historiography is often so conservative as to be reactionary. It is a couple of generations behind what everybody else is doing in the field of history. So that in Holocaust studies it is considered perfectly acceptable to use only German sources in your study. No one would write about Paris in 1943 without using French sources, whereas it is perfectly acceptable to write about Eastern Europe and people there without using East European sources. There is a certain kind of epistemic colonialism there which, interestingly enough, most German historians and historians of Germany do not even notice. And of course, and that is the other explanation, the problem is that you cannot write a book the way I wrote it unless you use sources in Ukrainian, Russian, Polish, etc. There is definitely a linguistic element in this. That is true of writing the book, but also of writing about the book. The fact that reviewers do not use all the languages that I use, but know that they should, explains part of the defensiveness of some of the comments it has attracted.

Reactions To The Book

Books and Ideas: You first published the book in English two years ago and it has since been translated into twenty-five languages. How did historians and non-professionals react to its central theses? How has it been received, and how has it interacted with the different national historiographies in the U.S. and in European countries?

Timothy Snyder: In the U.S., a lot of the public reactions were simply: “We did not know about Stalinist crimes.” During the Cold War, discussions of Stalinist crimes were quite prominent, because the evils of Stalinism were essential to our self-definition in the world. Somehow between 1989 and 2010, we as a nation have forgotten all about it. But American reviewers reacted graciously to that and were generally willing to say this: “I did not know”—which in general has tended not to be the case with European reviewers. It is actually in France that the reactions have been the most cosmopolitan in the sense of bringing a certain sense of distance to the discussion: “This is why Snyder is doing it, this is what he achieves.”

In Germany, the book was also well received, and won some awards. In some of the professional reviews we find a kind of reverse nationalism. The German will to take responsibility for the Holocaust is laudable but it had also led to protecting an incredibly narrowly German vision of the Holocaust, a vision guided by what German historians think is going to be the best thing for other Germans to hear, and, more recently and more disturbingly, what Germans who do not know East European languages think it would be best for East Europeans to hear. As a consequence, the journalists and specialists of Holocaust history liked *Bloodlands*, but the guardians of national memory did not. Real professional historians cannot really care about national memory too much. They should rather worry about giving some kind of decent and true understanding of the past.

The subject of the interactions between Nazism and Stalinism was of course particularly loaded in Germany since the *Historikerstreit* prompted by Ernst Nolte’s book about “The European Civil War”.² When I lived in Paris, the first serious book in French I read was François Furet’s *Le passé d’une illusion*,³ that was an important book for me and I think some of Nolte’s ideas were important to Furet. But I am not sympathetic to Nolte’s book. Our fundamental difference lies in our training: I am a historian of Eastern Europe, and Nolte is really a historian of Italy and fascism. He did not really know anything about Eastern Europe. On top of that, as he was writing at a time when generally we knew less than we do today, he uses a lot of literary material that is simply untrue. His argument that the Germans reacted to the Soviet Union has a certain chronological logic; the Soviets did kill millions of people before the Germans did. But his hypotheses of interactions are not confirmed by the evidence. The Germans did not really learn much from the Soviets. Hitler thought the Soviet Union was a Jewish state that was going to collapse. The state that he really admired was the United States—though no one really likes to say it very loudly. Hitler only starts to admire Stalin around 1942, describing him in the later part of the war as a beast, but a beast on a grand scale. That is after Hitler had killed the Jews, and after his recognition that the Soviet Union is not a Jewish state.

² Ernst Nolte: *Der europäische Bürgerkrieg 1917–1945. Nationalsozialismus und Bolschewismus*. 4. Auflage. Herbig Verlag, Frankfurt/M. [1989]. Version française : Ernst Nolte, Stéphane Courtois (préface), Jean-Marie Argelès (traduction) *Guerre civile européenne 1917-1945*, Éditions de Syrtes, 2000.

³ François Furet, *Le passé d’une illusion, Essai sur l’idée communiste au XXe siècle*, Livre de Poche, 2003 [Robert Laffont/Calmann-Lévy, 1995].

In fact, Germans reviewers of my book have not attempted to replace it within the controversy created by Nolte's book. Most people now realize that we cannot describe the Holocaust without the Jews and without their homeland, which were essentially ignored in the *Historikerstreit*. One colleague went so far as to say "the *Historikerstreit* is over and Snyder has won." I personally think the debate was interesting in the 1980s, but not anymore. It was a nationalistic debate, where Nolte offered an apology for Germany; but the people who opposed him were very often nationalists as well, just operating in another key. Habermas's position was that whatever the historical record was—and he did not know much about it—the purpose of history was to educate the German people of today. It meant that he, as an intellectual, had the power to say which history would be helpful and which would not.

Regarding reception of *Bloodlands* east of Germany, people were often happy that what they knew had been integrated into European history. It might seem like a good reaction, but actually I do not particularly like it. I might write something about Polish history that is unfamiliar in Poland itself, but nevertheless Poles will say: "It is good that you are writing about these things so that West Europeans finally learn about it." When the book was translated into Polish, it was actually the first time that the Poles could read about such things as the Polish action of Stalin's Great Terror, which was the second-largest operation of the terror overall, and which took more than 100,000 lives. In Ukraine, where everyone knows about the 1932-1933 famine regardless of what their politics are, the reaction was: "We used to have to explain it to people all the time, now someone has finally taken this and made it part of a larger European history." But despite the national coloring to these reactions from place to place in Eastern Europe, and for that matter in Germany, Israel, and the US, in general I have been surprised at how flexible and open-minded people have been.

What Words Can Be Used?

Books and Ideas: Because you address mass murders, you inevitably run into the question of terminology: what words can be used? Genocide, in your view, is too impractical and political a notion to be of service to historians. In particular, you doubt its analytical power because it includes the intent to kill a specific group as such, a definition which, you feel, hides a great number of victims. At the same time, you yourself draw limits according to a notion of intention, for example between the victims of targeted mass starvation and the victims of penury or malnutrition in other places. Can historians really ignore the question of intention? Can their scholarly judgments about the different kinds of victims be absolutely disentangled from moral and political judgments?

Timothy Snyder: The notion of genocide is a useful legal tool. Its applicability beyond the world of law is problematic. Two positions are put forward regarding genocide: a) genocide is the attempt to physically exterminate an entire group, so only the Holocaust is a genocide; b) genocide should be evaluated using the legal standard, which is much lower than the actual extermination of an entire group, and makes genocides of many, many other mass murders. The second argument is often made polemically to say: "Our massacre was like the Holocaust." My book could not solve that issue, so I kept the word genocide out. My focus was on intentional mass killing, whether or not it meets the definition of genocide. If you have a policy that kills millions of people, it does not matter whether it meets the technical definition of genocide. It is still significant. I could have decided to focus only on intent to destroy an entire group—a history of the Holocaust. Or I could have written about famine, whether or not it was intentional. Both histories would have looked a little bit like *Bloodlands*,

and they would have captured things that are not in the book. But they would also have missed important parts of the story. It is a choice of form.

What struck me was the amount of intentional mass killing in Eastern Europe. That seemed to me to require the specific method I am using in the book. Methodologically I tried to make self-explanatory choices: I simply looked at a place where an incredible amount of intentional killing happened. You could change the borders I am using; you could exclude Estonia, add the Caucasus (I sometimes wish I had done it), or you could even go further east into Russia. But fundamentally, the story would have been the same. You have this valley where, whether you come from the East or the West, you cannot but notice that more and more people are dying. Almost all of the German killing is there, as is most of the Soviet killing—in a “valley” centered around Minsk. True, Romania killed a quarter-million of its Jews, 300,000 or more Jews who died in the Holocaust were Hungarian. But what took place in the bloodlands is different: it is about the belligerent complicity of two different powers in destroying nation states. It defines the social dynamics of the place, and it is important to the Holocaust: if you are a Jew living in a place where the nation state has been destroyed, your chances of survival are very, very small; but if you live in a state—even if it is but a puppet state, an allied state, a perverted state—your chances are much greater. Hungarian Jews survived until the Germans came in and destroyed the Hungarian state. Rumania had its own policy of killing the Jews, but because it was a sovereign state, it reversed that policy in 1942. The Romanian and Hungarian stories are stories related to the bloodlands, but they are not the same story. I could have written a chapter about them, but it would not have changed the overall argument.

And if you want to make the argument that the bloodlands are not a place in the sense that, say, Poland is, you have to face the fact that Poland is not a real place either in the sense of a fixed, stable, limited place! Poland is heterogeneous, is constantly being destroyed and recreated. During the period we discuss all three Baltic States were destroyed. The interest of thinking in terms of bloodlands is to think in terms of people and policy rather than in terms of state. During the war, Germany went from being a medium-sized state to becoming an empire. The size of the Soviet Union changed too. That leads to confusion. More than a million of the people who are now counted as Soviet Jews who died in the Holocaust were in fact Polish Jews that had been in the Soviet Union for less than two years when the Germans came and started killing them. None of these places are “real” places; they are all construct that changes over time and sometimes very rapidly so. In a way, bloodlands are more stable than those places, in that they allow us to maintain our focus on the human beings.

Books and Ideas: The book has been criticized—contradictorily—for displacing the Holocaust as the center of the narrative on mass killing in Eastern Europe during WWII, as well as for questioning the place Auschwitz occupies in that narrative; but you were also criticized for using the word Holocaust, which was seen as a way to preserve the singularity of the Jewish mass murder. How do you interpret these contradictory criticisms?

Timothy Snyder: The book has always attracted the criticisms of nationalists. Nationalists have all said it helps somebody else. For the Ukrainian nationalists, the book helps the Jews, not them; for the Polish nationalists, the Ukrainians, and so on. But it was not written for any one group! As far as displacing the Holocaust as the center of the narrative, that criticism comes, I think, from the confusion that many in the West make between Auschwitz and the Holocaust. Auschwitz is an incredibly important symbol, but also a confusing and in a sense

inadequate one. It is confusing because Auschwitz was simultaneously a camp and a death facility, which was unusual. Moreover, associating the Holocaust with Auschwitz survivors like Primo Levi means ignoring the fact that most people that came off the train at Auschwitz were immediately gassed at the death facility. True, many West European Jews were sent to Auschwitz—that explains why Auschwitz represents the West European perspective on the Holocaust.

This importance of Auschwitz must be qualified in two ways. First, most of the Jews who died there were not West European Jews. Second, many others did not die in Auschwitz at all. Out of 3 million Polish Jews, 7 per cent were killed at Auschwitz. That 7 per cent is still bigger than the number of West European Jews killed, but it means that 93% Polish Jews were killed somewhere else. More than a million Soviet Jews were killed in the Holocaust: basically none of them were killed at Auschwitz. Treblinka killed about as many Jews as Auschwitz. It is much more representative, in terms of the people that died there, of the Jews that were killed in the Holocaust. Its method of killing is more representative as well: immediate killing for almost everyone, with no work camp. Auschwitz gives an Occidentalized view of the Holocaust. The idea that by adding to Auschwitz I somehow minimize the Holocaust does not make any sense to me, because Auschwitz is itself a minimized version of the Holocaust. Westerners feel comfortable with this version because it allows them to identify with the victims, and to keep at a distance the killing that happened by imagining—wrongly—that it was somehow industrial and somehow distant. It was actually a very intimate process all the way down to the end. For all these reasons I think Auschwitz as a symbol means an alienation from the people who died there and from the huge majority of the victims who were killed at other places.

Now regarding the singularity of the Holocaust, it is true that there were many ethnic-based policies that involved the killing of millions or thousands of people, but the Holocaust was the only one that was designed to kill the children, the women, and the men—all the group. Apart from the fact that everyone knows the term "Holocaust" and that it is useful as such in discussing the mass murder of Jews, that is what the word specifies. In the book I make a distinction between Final Solution, which was the German conception of eliminating the Jews, and the Holocaust, which was the actual way they came upon to do it: to kill them all, usually where they lived. Yehuda Bauer refers to the Holocaust as unprecedented, and I think it is the right way to describe it. The problem with the word "unique" is its tendency to push things out of history. By claiming that something is unique, you take command over the future. You say that something never happened before, and that it will never happen again. None of us should really say that. Claiming uniqueness for the Holocaust is taking the risk of being on the defensive all the time, and of missing other cases of human suffering and in the end of not being able to understand how the Holocaust differs from other events, because one simply stops taking those other events into consideration.

Historical Reality vs Theory

Books and ideas: There is a self-restraining aspect to the book. Although it touches upon notions like totalitarianism it does so very gingerly, as if you really did not want to engage with those issues. Can you explain why?

Timothy Snyder: Yes, I tried very hard not to theorize in the book. I cut out the theoretical parts, because I knew that whatever new word I invented would attract all the intention

instead of the historical reality that I was trying to bring to the fore. Instead, I wrote a theoretical annex at the end of the book where I use words like de-Enlightenment, modernization, de-modernization. My main purpose, when discussing issues of totalitarianism with Arendt or modernization with Baumann, was to show how the concepts block us from seeing things. If Arendt were right, mass murder would have proceeded from the center of the state out and it would have taken place inside one state. It simply did not happen that way: the killing happened on the borders or the outside of the German and the Soviet states, and in a place where these two regimes overlap. Arendt has little to say about these things. Thinking in terms of modernity is also misleading because you see three different modernizing projects going at the time in this region: the Nazi project, the Soviet project, and the Polish project, and the first two are bound on destroying the third, and on destroying each other. That is a problem for the whole idea of modernity: modernity is not supposed to work like that. Everyone is supposed to be moving toward modernity, and it is supposed to be the same modernity. For me, what is important is the contact between these projects, and modernization theory does not touch about that.

I will one day make a general argument about the history of statehood in this area and about how it affected the story in the twentieth century. East European countries were divided between empires, then they became nation states, and later the Soviet Union and Germany intervened. That is one part of the story. There is also a colonial aspect to it: Ukraine is seen as a place to be developed, whether by Polish nobles in the 16th century, by settlers sent by the Russian empire, or by German settlers according to *Generalplan Ost*.⁴ This colonial tradition is revived periodically, including today by the Chinese—the only reason they do not succeed is because corruption makes it very difficult to secure contracts in Ukraine! This *longue durée* approach would make for another book. But one must also do justice to contingency, which is one of the reasons that I chose the short *durée* for *Bloodlands*. If Hitler had not won the election in 1933 and the Soviet Union had not arisen, you would not have had the type of event I describe: the concentration of two empires on the same region that resulted in such mass killing. That means that the future of that kind of research is in local studies which look at both the Soviet and the German occupations. There is already a book about Donetsk that does that, and one about Grodno⁵. Double or even triple collaboration should be looked at much more closely. That would allow us to understand better the importance of ideology in the entire process instead of always taking it for granted, which is sometimes a way to look at it very abstractly. This type of study would allow us to write a kind of grounded transnational history, instead of a history that is transnational because it looks at people and things that move around.

Books and Ideas: You almost never allude to resistance. Would not acts of resistance yet modify your perception of Eastern Europe during the war as a place of death and nothing else? Are you not downplaying important aspects of the way human beings tried to prevent mass killings?

⁴ Drafted in 1940, *Generalplan Ost* planned for the Nazi colonization of Eastern Europe by way of genocide and ethnic cleansing of most Slavic peoples in Europe.

⁵ For Donetsk see, Tanja Pentec, *Kohle für Stalin und Hitler: Arbeiten und Leben im Donbass, 1929 bis 1953*, Essen, Klartext Verlag, 2010; for Grodno, see Felix Ackermann, *Palimpsest Grodno: Nationalisierung, Nivellierung und Sowjetisierung einer mitteleuropäischen Stadt 1919-1991*, Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz Verlag, 2010.

Timothy Snyder: I talk about the uprising of the ghetto in Warsaw in 1943 and the Warsaw Uprising of 1944, as well as the Soviet partisan resistance in Belarus. And I try to do justice to the desperation and courage of those involved. But we must see that resistance rarely offered a way out. The history of resistance is very often a way to make these events brighter than they are, to write a way out of the story, to find an exit where there was no exit. But the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, which is the most important example of Jewish resistance, does not change one way or another the fate of Jews in the ghetto. The Germans send everyone to the camps as they had planned to do, and a few months later the Jews are shot in *Aktion Erntefest* (Operation Harvest Festival). The Warsaw Ghetto uprising creates a symbol for the Israeli state, and indeed for many others around the world, but it does not change much to the fate of Jews at the time. The Warsaw Uprising of 1944 functions similarly for the contemporary Polish state. It is different from the Ghetto uprising in the sense that it leads to the deaths of at least one hundred thousand civilians who probably would not have died had it not occurred. This killing is the fault of the Nazis who used the occasion to pursue a criminal policy of the mass murder of civilians, not of the people who made the decision to launch the uprising, but the very fact that the Poles who launched the Warsaw Uprising had a choice and those who began the ghetto uprising did not is a difference worth noticing. Both events are events of resistance but they are part of the history of mass killings, and in the case of the Warsaw uprising, of the history of German-Soviet collaboration, because the Soviets encouraged the uprising and promised help, and then instead watched the Germans kill civilians.

All the major forms of resistance keep you in the same story, whether as a victim or as a perpetrator or participant. There is no way out. The human capacity for resistance is not a capacity to break out of the narrative and leave the bloodlands. That is my dark answer to your question. In the U.S. and Israel, there is tradition of looking at the history of the Jewish Soviet partisans as both heroic and a chance of surviving. It certainly was. At the same time, the Soviet partisans also killed Jews, raped Jewish women. And Jews who join the partisans will do what those partisans do, which include atrocities that are part of the history of Stalinism.

Books and Ideas: You are now working on a book project entitled *Why Don't We Understand the Holocaust?* Are you still not done with this history?

Timothy Snyder: It is now called *Global Holocaust. Bloodlands* tries to add explanatory elements to put the Holocaust into its setting. Talking about the book for two years has forced me to specify how I would proceed to explain the Holocaust alone. But I am going to change my focus from a regional approach to a global one to try to understand how Hitler understood the entire world as in crisis and the Holocaust as its solution. I also want to look at Hitlerian politics and the way the destruction of states in Eastern Europe made the Holocaust possible. There is also going to be a chapter about individuals and their reactions, and one about public policy: if we did understand the causes of the Holocaust, what could we recommend for public policy. If I ever stop talking about *Bloodlands* and sit down and write, that is what I am going to be writing.

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