

REVIEW ARTICLE

Detonation of the Holocaust in 1941: A Tale of Two Books

Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin, by Timothy Snyder, New York, Basic Books, 2010, xix + 524 pp., ISBN 978-0-465-00239-9; London: Bodley Head, ISBN 978-0-224-08141-2

The Lands Between: Conflict in the East European Borderlands, 1870–1992, by Alexander V. Prusin, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2010, xii + 324 pp., ISBN 978-0-19-929753-5

Not for the first time, two fine historians have published in the same year their very different syntheses for the wider public, on the same topic, and based largely on known published sources, both having long proven their mettle as master researchers in previous publications rooted in archives and primary documents.

On this occasion the resulting contrast is unusually startling. One of these books, Alexander Prusin's *The Lands Between*, is a meticulously balanced and historically authoritative, but conventional and somewhat lacklustre history that will appeal to lecturers looking for a solid textbook on twentieth-century East European history and, of course, history buffs ever fascinated by the Second World War.

Timothy Snyder's *Bloodlands*, by contrast, is the work of a literary master who has what it takes to write a thriller. Deservedly, his book has captured the imagination of vast numbers of readers and pundits alike. It is also the work of a humanistic thinker who does not beat around the bush and has – very justifiably – made wilful state mass murder his topic, leading him to grapple with murder en masse, a forever captivating topic, all the more so within the Hitler–Stalin complex of issues that continue to fascinate, daunt and rebound potently in today's geopolitics.

Yet Snyder's *Bloodlands* suffers from some cardinal biases that are all the more regrettable in such a masterly and popular work. First, though, it is prudent to briefly cover the book's scope and at least a few of its highly consequential virtues.

Snyder tries sincerely to understand and recapture the humanity of the victims of all of the six major episodes of mass murder that he intertwines sequentially, geographically and vividly: events that took place between 1932/3 and 1944/5 in the "Bloodlands," a territory designated by the author as extending from western Poland to western Russia, and taking in the three Baltic states, Belarus and Ukraine. In his judgment, in these six episodes wilful state-initiated murder cost the lives, conservatively estimated, of 14.1 million non-combatants. His focus is on: (a) the Ukrainian famine of 1932–3 – death toll 3.3 million Soviet citizens (mostly Ukrainians); (b) Stalin's Great Terror of 1937–8 – 300,000 Soviet citizens (mostly Poles and Ukrainians) among the Terror's roughly 700,000 victims; (c) executions by Nazi and Soviet forces of Poles during the nearly two years of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact, 1939–41 – 200,000; (d) Nazi-engineered starvation during the war years in the east,

1941-4 – 4.2 million Soviet citizens (mostly Russians, Belarusians and Ukrainians); (e) Nazi murders of locals in “reprisals” during those three years – 700,000 (mostly Belarusians and Poles); (f) the Nazis’ annihilation of Jews in these territories, including, of course, Jews deported from other parts of Europe to the East European “Bloodlands,” mostly from the time of the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union of June 1941 until 1944 (in some cases until early 1945) — 5.4 million (411).

Snyder’s account reflects a genuine attempt to see individuals from all the affected groups as individuals, and an idealistic wish “to turn the numbers back into people. If we cannot do that, then Hitler and Stalin have shaped not only our world, but our humanity” (408). Even the penchant for providing unrounded figures, where they are available (“the 33,761 Jews shot at Babi Yar” 408), which has infuriated at least one reviewer (“quixotic and even annoying attempt at precision”),¹ is part of an earnest endeavour to preserve the memory of people as people, not an easy task with numbers of such magnitude. This attempt is bolstered by the older technique of interspersing brief quotations from individual members of the doomed groups who would soon die and yet managed to leave some message for posterity.

By deciding to integrate the Holocaust as one of six instances of state-sponsored mass murder in his selected geographic territory and timeframe, the author is able to make it part of the story of mass murder suffered in the territory in question during about a dozen years of the twentieth century, which he blames, depending on the event, on Stalin or Hitler, starting with Stalin whose failed collectivisation plan led, with full knowledge of the regime, to state-instigated starvation in Ukraine in the early 1930s.

It would be wrong, though, to accuse Snyder of turning the Holocaust into one-sixth of the story. He well understands its scope and magnitude, and the differences, even the difference between Stalin’s economic fiasco that turned into “vengeful extractions” and Hitler’s having “*planned in advance* [Snyder’s italics] to starve unwanted Soviet populations to death” (162). He also appreciates that “whereas the Germans excluded the majority of the inhabitants of their empire from equal membership in the state, the Soviets included almost everyone in their versions of equality” (390–1). If one looks, one can easily find in the book the salient facts underpinning the empirical uniqueness in European history of the annihilation of Jews on territories conquered by the Third Reich. But the author studiously avoids the formulation of such a conclusion, which would run counter to the spirit of the book as whole.

Still, on the history of the Holocaust per se, Snyder’s book corrects various popular misconceptions and explains how such misconceptions came about to start with. First, because the Americans liberated the more westerly concentration camps and enabled full disclosure of what was found (unlike the Soviet Union, where things were to clam up quickly) and, second, because concentration camps (for slave labour) had many more survivors than shooting sites or death camps, the concentration camps were what was remembered and what was to become the symbol of the Holocaust. In fact most Jews who perished in the Holocaust perished in Eastern Europe – in Snyder’s Bloodlands – mostly by bullets on shooting fields to the east of the Molotov–Ribbentrop line and mostly by gas in death camps to its west; not in labour camps. Auschwitz-Birkenau was both a labour and death camp and a major killing site for the Holocaust’s final-period victims, which explains its understandable emergence as the ultimate symbol of the Holocaust.

The recognition of the importance of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Line, which divided the Polish Second Republic between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, in the history

of the Holocaust is significant for the elucidation of another major point in Holocaust history which is often overlooked. For all the horrors of previous Nazi degradation, plundering, ghettoisation and killing, the Holocaust, in the sense of the actual carrying out of the mass killing of all the men, women and children of a certain population group wherever its members were to be found, started *after* the Nazis invaded the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941, and indeed it started in the newly invaded territories, in other words to the east of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Line.

Only then, in 1941, did the Final Solution emerge in the literal sense of killing all the Jews (save a minority saved for slave labour and murder at a later point in time). Snyder takes great pains at numerous points in *Bloodlands* (e.g., 144, 185, 188, 214, 217, 253–4, 389, 416, 484) to make clear the vital conceptual distinction between these two phases: the period prior to 22 June 1941, when the German authorities' deliberations on "final solutions" west of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Line (or outside the Bloodlands altogether) envisaged a reservation in Poland (the "Lublin Plan") or deportation to the USSR or Madagascar, on the one hand; and the period after June 1941, on the other, when the Final Solution proper, the systematic killing of all the Jews, was initiated to the east of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Line before being extended westwards (principally from 1942).

This is a teleologically structured, suspenseful and unusually thoughtful book and its mindfulness of human nature extends to a serious desire to understand the thinking of the perpetrators. Little wonder, then, that one of its key questions is: Why? Not "Why did the Nazis hate the Jews and want to get rid of them?" which is not this book's topic, but rather "Why did the Nazi state opt for the actual genocide known as the Holocaust at this juncture, after the June 1941 invasion of the Soviet Union?" Any kind of military or industrial logic would have dictated postponement of such a campaign at least until after the war. It has long baffled analysts in various fields that the Nazis hindered their own larger war efforts by their obsession with the genocide against the Jews.

Snyder's answer, given in a number of forms at different points in the book, is the Nazis' failure to very rapidly get to Moscow in the summer of 1941 and to destroy the independent Soviet Union as they had planned (in line with their then recent history of rapid conquests, including Poland and France):

Jews were now blamed for the looming disaster that could not be named. Nazis would have instantly grasped the connection between the Jewish enemy and the prospect of downfall ... As the war turned Stalin's way, Hitler recast its purpose. The plan had been to destroy the Soviet Union and then eliminate the Jews. Now, as the destruction of the Soviet Union was indefinitely delayed, the utter extermination of the Jews became a war-time policy. (214–15)

Elsewhere the murder of the Jews is regarded as a ruse "to claim a thin victory" (273), and the result of the "failure" of the invasion of the Soviet Union (416). This ultimately psychological analysis is bolstered by Nazi accusations of the time, blaming the Jews for the American–British–Soviet alliance (217).

The failure to mention, even in passing, a second contributing factor in reply to that "Why?" is inextricably linked to the book's two major weaknesses. The first of these is the determination to downplay or ignore the participation in, or cheering on of, mass murder by a disturbingly high proportion (though by no means the majority) of the ethnic majority populations in the Bloodlands, including many of their elites. The second is the proclivity to advance unchallenged the trendy "Red=equals-Brown" historiography of our times that acknowledges some kind of moral equivalence between

the Nazi and Soviet regimes as a cardinal principle of truth and point of departure rather than treating it as one of a range of competing evaluations.

The upshot of both convictions is an unfortunate, if coincidental, congruence of Snyder's *Bloodlands* with the macro-image of history currently promoted via ample investment by a number of right-wing governments and political forces in Eastern Europe. That image portrays two giant evils to the (German) west and (Russian) east, and a wad of helpless, innocent and historically pure victim nations wedged in between. As part of the extensive and expensive campaign to delete from history their own massive participation in the Holocaust, some countries have invested heavily in a campaign of what I have called "Holocaust Obfuscation."² It has included legislation to inflate the definition of genocide (so as to enable the inclusion of an array of Soviet crimes);³ glorification of local Holocaust perpetrators as national (anti-Soviet) heroes;⁴ a reinvigorated antisemitism rooted only indirectly in the older "Jewish–Bolshevist" equation, and directly, strange to tell, in disputation with the Western narrative of the Holocaust;⁵ criminalisation of the denial of "equal genocide;"⁶ and, above all, an insistence on the absolute "equality" of Nazi and Soviet crimes.

This "Double Genocide" movement, as it is increasingly known in Europe and beyond, was proclaimed by the 2008 "Prague Declaration" that called on the entire European Union to "recognize Communism and Nazism as a common legacy;" to ensure that communism will "inform all European minds to the same extent as the Nazi regime's crimes did;" to proclaim "substantial similarities between Nazism and Communism" and insist that "crimes committed in the name of Communism should be assessed as crimes against humanity ... the same way Nazi crimes were assessed by the Nuremberg Tribunal;" and to effect an "overhaul of European history textbooks so that children could learn and be warned about Communism and its crimes in the same way as they have been taught to assess the Nazi crimes."⁷ In other words, some of the newer European Union member states have been trying to turn acknowledgement of Double Genocide into European law. This movement suffered a setback in December 2010 with the European Commission's refusal to insert it into the "Stockholm Programme,"⁸ but regrouped in 2011 to set up the "Platform of European Memory and Conscience."⁹

The inexplicable free(ish) pass given by Timothy Snyder in *Bloodlands* to the local perpetrators (particularly those in Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and Ukraine) has been duly noted by a number of reviewers, including Rachel Croucher, Alexander J. Groth, Grzegorz Rossoliński-Liebe, Per Rudling and Efraim Zuroff.¹⁰

A word about the notion of "local perpetrators." The reference here is not to "collaborators" in the more usual and more westerly sense of participating in Nazi-directed governance, or even the identification, betrayal, degradation or guarding of Jewish residents. The east-of-the-Molotov–Ribbentrop-Line sense of "local perpetrator" by and large is, plain and simple, *killers*. Lithuanian, Latvian and Estonian fascists proved so efficient that Jews were deported from far afield to these countries for murder, and killers were exported, as from Ukraine, to other countries under Nazi occupation to participate actively in the Holocaust.

In a large number of locations, violence against Jewish neighbours, perpetrated by local "nationalists" and "partisan patriots" and their supporters, began immediately following the German attack on the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941. The perpetrators of this violence are now sometimes glorified as "anti-Soviet rebels,"¹¹ a phenomenon particularly in evidence in 2011 in connection with the 70th anniversary of 1941. After

Germans had taken control and brought “order” to the killing process, thousands of voluntary killers came forward in the Baltic states to do most of the shooting.

Alexander Prusin’s *The Lands Between* covers these events accurately. He sums them up in one sentence: “Substantial segments of the population took an active part in the Holocaust that heralded the end of the Jewish communities in the borderlands” (3; see also, e.g., 7, 9, 256). Prusin’s chapter on the Holocaust per se is called “The Holocaust and Local Collaboration, 1941–1944” (149–76). Significantly, Prusin understands that, “Although it was the German invasion that provided the over-all institutional and psychological framework for the genocide, it was the actions of the willing ‘neighbours’ that contributed to its totality” (150), a point eloquently made recently by Efraim Zuroff in response to an international conference convened in London with Lithuanian government funding.¹² Drawing on Jan Gross’s masterful account of the massacre in Jedwabne, Poland (itself situated east of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Line), Prusin adopts the notion of “The Jedwabne State” to characterise the entire killing territory east of the Line (150).¹³ In numerous locations in Lithuania (and elsewhere), barbaric torture, murder and mutilation of Jewish neighbours started before arrival of the first German forces.¹⁴

It is surely significant that the invading Germans – and their superiors in Berlin – were able to observe that “heroes of the local population” were already humiliating, plundering, injuring and *killing* Jews when they arrived and only too pleased to volunteer for the shooting squads that emerged once the Germans were in proper control and brought order to the mass murder. The euphoria with which the Nazis and their Jew-hatred were greeted in Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and western Ukraine was potentially a major factor in the realisation, from 22 June 1941 onward, that locals could easily be found to do most of the dirty work, and that the Final Solution would resonate with deep-seated aspirations among influential segments of the indigenous majority populations. This was all the more so the case in countries that had been occupied by the USSR in 1939 and 1940 (much of the eastern Bloodlands), and where many equated Jews and Bolsheviks.

By failing to address the massive and partly spontaneous East European participation in the Holocaust, Snyder narrows the focus of his inquiry into the motivations for the 1941 shift from the various final solutions to the Final Solution in problematic ways. Prusin suffers from no such squeamishness. He informs his readers, for example, that the Lithuanian Activist Front (LAF), in an appeal issued from its Berlin headquarters in March 1941, some two months before the Nazi invasion, promised countrymen back home a pardon for previous crimes if they could prove that they had killed at least one Jew (158).¹⁵ The reader will search in vain for any such reference in Snyder’s book.

As a student of state mass murder, Snyder rightly imparts the vile horror of these mass-killing policies. Speaking of the Ukrainian famine in 1933, he records that “countless parents killed and ate their children and then died of starvation later anyway. One mother cooked her son for herself and her daughter. One six-year-old girl, saved by other relatives, last saw her father when he was sharpening a knife to slaughter her” (50). Speaking of transports from Warsaw to Treblinka in 1942, he recounts that “children licked each other’s sweat” (266). Describing the gas chambers in Treblinka, he explains that “the bodies were twisted together, limb through limb” and “covered, as was the chamber itself, with blood, faeces, and urine” (270).

But there is no mention of the head of Rabbi Zalmen Osovsky (Zalman Osowski) of Slabodka (now the Vilijampolė suburb of Kaunas), which was cut off and put in a shop window by Lithuanian “partisans” before the Nazis arrived;¹⁶ or of the girl cut

in two, the halves left for show on a central street of Šiauliai before the Nazis arrived;¹⁷ or of the Lietukis Garage in Kaunas, where dozens of Jews were killed at a gas station by beating and the forced pumping of pressured hoses through various body orifices until they exploded, on 27 June 1941, when the Germans had arrived in town but were still acting as observers.¹⁸ As Konrad Kwiet put it, “In Kaunas (Kovno), the diabolic fervour of the antisemitic crowds rivalled anything known about the possibilities for human cruelty.”¹⁹

It is counterintuitive, to put it mildly, that such scenes, played out in numerous localities across Lithuania and other countries, would have no effect on the Nazis’ 1941 switchover from various final solutions to *the* Final Solution; or that this switchover was not at least in part influenced by the sudden availability of thousands of enthusiastic voluntary shooters in Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Ukraine and elsewhere. That a master of historical causality and counter-causality like Snyder could deem this possibility not even worthy of mention seems remarkable.

To be sure, Snyder does report that “Lithuanians, Latvians, and Estonians had taken part in the shootings almost from the beginning” (199). Yet that they had done so neither “almost from” nor at the beginning of the German occupation but prior to the initiation of the killings by Germans is surely crucial. Moreover, a significant proportion of the indigenous majority populations, especially in Lithuania but also in Latvia and Ukraine, were involved in widespread mass humiliation, plunder, dehumanisation, harassment and injury on a scale much greater than that of the immediate murder.²⁰ In explaining such violence against Jewish neighbours as he does incorporate into his account, Snyder largely limits himself to the “Judaeo-Bolshevist” argumentation and the popular prejudices blaming Jews, where applicable, for the Ukrainian famine, the Soviet occupation of 1939/40 or the murder of prisoners by the retreating NKVD (People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs) (e.g., 108, 194–6).

Because Snyder’s masterly prose underemphasises the behaviour of various East Europeans during the Holocaust, it is ipso facto prone to underemphasise the discussion of causation. Prusin is altogether more forthright in confronting a range of religious, political, ethnic and social guises of antisemitism. Take his discussion of the formation of Nazi-collaborating police forces:

Peasants became the predominant element in the police forces in Estonia, Lithuania, Byelorussia, Volhynia, and Galicia. The sense of authority and power, especially for those who had previously occupied low rungs of the social hierarchy, combined with material benefits, were too attractive to resist . . . Extreme brutality and a total lack of empathy marked the actions of the majority of the policemen, regardless of social differences and motivations. Having received almost unlimited power over Jews, not only did the policemen carry out their duties with zeal, but they beat and humiliated their victims without German supervision. The “Ponary shooters” tormented Jews before executions; during the liquidation of the ghetto in Daugavpils the Arajs commando members threw the old and sick Jews through windows and cracked the heads of small children against concrete walls. (171–2)

It is also known that many of the early (pre-German-arrival or pre-German-authority) degradations and murders in Lithuania targeted conspicuously religious Jews.²¹

Snyder’s rhetoric goes a long way towards equating Red and Brown. “Thanks to Stalin,” he suggests, “Hitler was in occupied Poland, to undertake his first policies of mass killing” (117); he refers to “a Nazi edition of a Soviet text” as “a joint production” (196) and speaks of “this same accumulation of Nazi and Soviet rule” (393). Referring

to a Soviet administrative building taken over by the Nazis after their invasion, Snyder explains that “those who came to report Jews to the German police passed by a guard wearing a swastika armband – standing before friezes of the hammer and sickle” (203–4). Many more examples could be presented to illustrate Snyder’s veering towards the relativism in which the Baltic states are currently so heavily invested that treats Nazi and Soviet crimes as aspects of one phenomenon, their very different empirical nature notwithstanding.

Nowhere in *Bloodlands* is it made clear that the vast majority of the east-of-the-Molotov–Ribbentrop-Line Jews who escaped the Nazis’ programme of total physical annihilation survived thanks to the Soviet Union and the inter-ethnic solidarity and humanity of so many of its citizens during the Holocaust era. One does not learn from *Bloodlands* that, from 22 June 1941 until the end of the war, “escape to the Russians” was for most of these “eastern” Jews in the Nazi death trap the only substantial hope of survival, whether by escaping eastwards to Russia proper, deeper into the Soviet Union, in the very early days of the war, or, in the case of those incarcerated in the ghettos, by escaping to join up with the Soviet partisans in the forests. To acknowledge this in no way minimises the efforts of the Baltic, Ukrainian and other local rescuers of Jewish neighbours whose bravery had to exceed that of citizens in other countries, and whose humanity and courage will always remain an inspiration. These rescuers were, after all, going to be considered traitors to their own nations by many of their fellow countrymen, rather than people resisting a foreign occupying power’s barbarism.

Nor would one easily infer from *Bloodlands* that, had it not been for the robust Soviet resistance in the east, the chances of the Americans entering the war might have been nil, the Nazis might have won and, as we *do* know from Nazi plans well described in the book, there would by 1991 have been no Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania or Poland (etc.) to become independent and eventually join the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation. Nor does one develop any genuine sense from Snyder’s account of the fact that most of the German population stood firmly behind Hitler during the perpetration of the Holocaust while large numbers of Soviet citizens were themselves victims of Stalinism who loathed its misrule.

The very last paragraph of *Bloodlands*, before the appendix chapters, starts with the words, “The Nazi and Soviet regimes turned people into numbers.” This holds true for much of Stalinist rule but not for all of Soviet rule; as bad as things were under Lenin or Gorbachov, theirs were not Nazi-like regimes, period. Prusin’s *The Lands Between* is every bit as deservedly tough on Stalinism and its horrendous crimes, but it offers a sense of historic balance. He acknowledges that “there were many definitely positive and attractive features of the Soviet regime” (139) and refers, for example, to the fact that the regime’s “well-tested methods” included not only mass terror but also “universal education” and “new social opportunities” (256).

By virtue of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact of 1939, the Soviets opened the way for the Nazis to the parts of Europe with substantial Jewish populations. By virtue of their being attacked, unprepared, and pushed back in 1941, the Soviets “allowed” the Nazis into the rest of the territory Snyder has designated the “Bloodlands.” Yehuda Bauer recently discussed the now trendy idea that “the war was initiated by both regimes equally, and that they therefore bear equal responsibility for the death of some 35 million people in Europe alone (if one adds the war in Asia, the total is, according to a number of historians, about 55 million).” He concludes, rightly, that this line of reasoning is “a total perversion of history. In the summer of 1939, Stalin would have

sold all Russian mothers for an assurance that Germany would not attack the USSR. He knew very well that his army was disorganized by the purges, and that the USSR was in no condition to withstand a German onslaught alone.”²² Committing genocide against one of the world’s peoples, seeking them out and killing them wherever they would be found on the planet, was the last thing on the Soviets’ mind. There is no amount of rhetoric that can change that. This is not to say that the crimes of the Soviet regime should not be studied, exposed and internationally recognised. They should and they must.

When it comes to the lands of Eastern Europe, straightforward empirical observation leads observers of the most diverse background and sophistication to a common conclusion. There are today *thousands* of towns, townlets and hamlets in which (among others) Belarusians, Estonians, Latvians, Lithuanians, Poles and Russians of all ages, shapes and sizes continue to live while of their former Jewish populations only architectural traces remain (erstwhile synagogues, schools, cemeteries, etc.). East of the 1941 line of invasion, of course, there are also the ubiquitous mass graves with the remains of the region’s large Jewish population.

Historians should not be expected to suppress their findings and interpretations because these happen to coincide with notions being abused by unsavoury political movements. But they may nevertheless comment upon such coinciding, especially when the movements in question are in part government-financed. Snyder finds room and political will to criticise Zionist use of the Holocaust (407) yet focuses not one syllable on the analysis of current attempts to minimise or write out of history local participation in the Holocaust and have the European Union declare Nazism equal to Communism. The 2011 Lithuanian Foreign Ministry book event held to mark publication of the Lithuanian-language edition of *Bloodlands*, featuring antisemitic misstatements wrongly ascribed to the book, is a case in point, where extreme misuse cries out for the author’s coherent and public repudiation.²³

One of the major points of congruence between the “Prague Process” and Snyder’s *Bloodlands* is the emphatic insistence upon the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact as the conceptually central event of World War II and the Holocaust. Following the 2008 Prague Declaration, the European Parliament voted in 2009 to recommend “the proclamation of 23 August as a Europe-wide Day of Remembrance for the victims of all totalitarian and authoritarian regimes, to be commemorated with dignity and impartiality.”²⁴ As Efraim Zuroff has made clear, the unspoken aspiration is to replace Holocaust Remembrance Day with a mixed Red–Brown day, not least because the former commemorates the Soviet liberation of Auschwitz.²⁵

The more aggressive proponents of this trend ultimately hope that a sufficient number of mainstream Western historians who approach these issues from diverse perspectives and do not themselves share their political agenda will nevertheless provide legitimacy for the Double Genocide movement to become mainstream. Moreover, in Hungary and in Lithuania, laws were passed in 2010 that would impose penalties, including prison sentences, on those who deny the Double Genocide, thereby leaving the citizens (and historians and budding historians) in these countries less free than their European Union counterparts elsewhere to discuss these matters openly.²⁶

To Snyder’s credit, he did at times join the public fray both before and after the book’s publication. On the eve of *Bloodlands* coming out, in a debate organised in its honour in September 2010 by Matt Seaton, editor of the *Guardian* newspaper’s “Comment Is Free” (American section), he engaged with Efraim Zuroff and myself, taking a rather

more strident position than he does in the book.²⁷ Some eight months later, Snyder shifted to embrace more understanding of both the eastern component in the Holocaust and the motivations for historical revisionism currently operative among some East European governments.

In the final chapter of *Bloodlands*, Snyder had argued that

the German Einsatzgruppen were able to mobilize local anger over the murder of prisoners by the Soviet NKVD. The twenty thousand or so Jews who were killed in these orchestrated pogroms were only a very small part, fewer than one half of one percent, of the victims of the Holocaust. But precisely the overlap between Soviet and German power allowed the Nazis to propagate their own description of Bolshevism as a Jewish plot. (392–3)

In a comment for the *New York Review of Books* blog, published in July 2011 with the title “Neglecting the Lithuanian Holocaust,”²⁸ Snyder wrote that “during the first few weeks of the German invasion, which first touched Lithuania and other lands that the Soviets had just annexed, local peoples took part in a few hundred extremely violent pogroms, killing some 24,000 Jews.”²⁹ Not only had the number of victims increased and the input of the Einsatzgruppen decreased,³⁰ responding to the July 2011 desecration of Ponár (Paneriai), Lithuania’s largest mass murder site,³¹ with “Hitler was right” graffiti, Snyder also offered the following welcome analysis: “The current Lithuanian government thus emphasises Soviet crimes, sometimes to the point of neglecting obvious opportunities to acknowledge the scale of the Holocaust in Lithuania and the role of Lithuanians in the mass shootings on Lithuanian territory.” He concluded with an appeal to the authorities to ensure “that immediate and decisive measures are taken to bring those involved to justice.”³²

It would, moreover, be important for a new study to estimate a number missing from the book of numbers: the *total* number of Jews killed in the Holocaust by volunteer perpetrators hailing from east of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Line, both those who started the killing before the Germans arrived, and those who voluntarily served the Germans as killers in (or even outside) the Bloodlands, whether at the shooting pits at home or as prime performers exported to mass-killing sites further afield.

Turning to the future of Holocaust studies, and the consensus that the genocide *per se* started after the launch of Operation *Barbarossa* in June 1941, we are led to the ultimate question of the historic status of the murders of Jews by locals before the Germans arrived. That process, and indeed the Germans’ own genocide, started in Lithuania, right on the other side of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Line. Both Prusin and Snyder, following their predecessors in the field, use the word “pogroms” for the immediate local outbreaks of violence that followed the collapse of Soviet rule.³³ A terminological and conceptual corrective may be called for. As Martin Gilbert has put it:

Even before the German killing squads reached a region, the local population often attacked the Jews who had lived in their midst for centuries. These attacks were not pogroms to beat and wound, to loot and burn, but attacks to kill: to destroy a whole community at one swift blow. The records of these attacks are scant. Few Jews survived to recount what happened. In hundreds of smaller villages, no Jew was left alive.³⁴

Virtually every survivor memoir makes it clear that from the moment of the collapse of Soviet authority (at different times on different dates depending on locality), until the ultimate making available of all Jews for killing, there was no tranquil interim or temporary reinstatement of civility. This was not a diachronic sequence of: pogrom

by locals in which some folks get hurt, robbed or killed → return to normalcy → moving on with life → entry of the occurrence into various versions of history and collective memory. No. There was an uninterrupted dehumanised horror of existence for any man, woman or child who happened to be Jewish from the moment the locals took control in the face of the Soviet withdrawal, a horror brought to its gruesome close only by murder, whether that murder was to come days, weeks or months later. The hundreds of testimonies about the shooting at Jews who were trying to flee Lithuania (in some cases also Latvia) are also very telling. This was not about getting rid of the Jews and taking their property; it was about ensuring they were kept within the trap for the perceived-as-glorious finale of humiliation and murder. That the Lithuanian government in 2011, on the 70th anniversary of those events, invested in events honouring the Lithuanian Activist Front, the Provisional Government and other major Nazi collaborators is a sad chapter for the country and the European Union, and one that Western historians should not let go unremarked.³⁵

The campaign of barbaric murder of Jewish civilians that started in Lithuania and elsewhere in the week of 22 June 1941 was not a series of “pogroms” like the classic late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century events that the word has come to signify. Konrad Kwiet has correctly called it what it is: the onset of the Holocaust.³⁶

Everyone has the right to the thought experiments of the what-ifs and what-if-nots of history. Snyder is as fixated on the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact as current right-wing governments in the east of the European Union, but not for the same reasons. But is Snyder really convinced that had Stalin not made the non-aggression pact with Hitler, and not invaded eastern Poland in 1939, that the Holocaust would not have occurred? That Hitler would not have invaded the Soviet Union (Stalin after all thought he was preventing an invasion of the USSR)? That all would be different?

It is a legitimate thought experiment, and it is right that historians will speculate and disagree. At the same time, there is room for other what-ifs and what-if-nots that are no less morally and conceptually consequential. What would have happened if a much larger segment of intellectual, political, religious, law-enforcement, educational and other elites of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia had acted in a different spirit? Would the various final solutions have equally morphed into the Final Solution in 1941? How different might the outcome have been if these nations’ nationalist activists had worked en masse to help the eastward escape of their Jewish neighbours instead of rushing to kill them?

Over two decades ago, before the collapse of the Soviet Union, Efraim Zuroff, the Holocaust historian and pursuer of Nazi war criminals, made clear in his writings the interconnection between the failure in most parts of Eastern Europe to take seriously the prosecution of suspected war criminals and the failure to tell the truth about the Holocaust. Referring to Lithuania in a 1990 piece, he called for “ending the intentional cover-up of the tragic fate of Lithuanian Jewry during the Holocaust.”³⁷ A few years after the USSR’s collapse, he witnessed the rise of the Double Genocide movement, which was in those years known as “symmetry” (between Nazi and Soviet experiences): “The desperate attempt to create a symmetry ... represents a total failure by certain elements of Lithuanian society to confront their past.”³⁸ Today that “symmetry” movement has grown into the European and international Double Genocide movement, which seeks to posit Nazi–Soviet equality as the standard history internationally, and whose discourse has unduly influenced Snyder’s book.

All that remains is for the sweeping narrative talent of a Snyder and the historic clarity of a Prusin to come together in a future historian’s still unwritten work.

Perhaps he or she will emerge from one of the East European countries themselves, all of which have a potential to be neither Bloodlands nor even just Lands Between or Borderlands, but proud nations that can, like all the world's nations, face the dark chapters of their history without resorting to artificial symmetries. In the meantime, both authors deserve very substantial credit for adding so significantly to the conversation.

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Notes

1. Groth, review of Snyder, *Bloodlands*, 124.
2. See Katz, "On Three Definitions."
3. See Donskis, "The Inflation of Genocide."
4. See e.g. Chersonski, "A 'Documentary Film' Tries to Establish the Legend of the 'Uprising of the Enslaved'"; Rossoliński-Liebe, "The Act of 30 June 1941, and Its 2011 Commemoration in Ukraine"; Katz, "In Delirium of Obfuscation"; Katz, "The Denial that is Part of Holocaust Obfuscation."
5. Scholars from diverse traditions have noticed the juxtaposition of the Holocaust narrative with the new antisemitism in Eastern Europe. See especially Zuroff, "Eastern Europe"; Donskis, "Another Word for Uncertainty"; Wistrich's chapter "Lying about the Holocaust" in *A Lethal Obsession*, 631–661, and most recently, and most directly relevant to the discussion at hand, Heni's "The Prague Declaration, Holocaust Obfuscation and Antisemitism." In fact, the Holocaust-revisionist component of the new East European antisemitism became evident during the period of Soviet collapse and the consolidation of the independence of the successor states. See e.g. Hančič and Chase, *Antisemitism in Post-totalitarian Europe*; Brahm, *Anti-Semitism in the Treatment of the Holocaust in Postcommunist Eastern Europe*.
6. Donskis, "Concept Inflation and the Criminalization of Debate"; Chersonski, "History – Education or Modern Politics"; *DefendingHistory.com*, "Red–Brown Bill with Two Years of Jailtime for Disagreeing with Government's Position is Signed into Law."
7. On the Prague Declaration, see sources on *DefendingHistory.com*'s page "The Prague Declaration" and the page on its opposition.
8. Phillips, "EU Rejects Eastern States' Call to Outlaw Denial of Crimes by Communist Regimes," *The Guardian*, 21 December 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/dec/21/european-commission-communist-crimes-nazism/print>
9. See <http://eureconciliation.wordpress.com/2011/09/29/statement-of-the-reconciliation-of-european-histories-group-on-the-occasion-of-the-founding-of-the-platform-of-european-memory-and-conscience>
10. See reviews of *Bloodlands* by Croucher, Groth, Rossoliński-Liebe, Rudling and Zuroff.
11. See e.g. *DefendingHistory.com*'s page "Glorification of Local Holocaust Perpetrators in Lithuania in 2011."
12. Zuroff, "A Shameful Shoah Whitewash."
13. Gross, *Neighbors*.
14. See, inter alia, Arad, "The 'Final Solution' in Lithuania in the Light of German Documentation," 239–41; Arad, *The Holocaust in the Soviet Union*, 88–95; Gilbert, *The Holocaust. The Jewish Tragedy*, 155–7; Klee et al. "The Good Old Days", 23–37; Kwiet, "The Onset of the Holocaust," 111–17; Levin, "Lithuania," 898; Rosin, *Preserving our Litvak Heritage*, vol. 1, vol. 2, vol. 3, all organised by town names; Rubenstein in *The Unknown Black Book*, 277–81; Rhodes, *Masters of Death*, 38–49; Sutton, *The Massacre of the Jews of Lithuania*, 95–133.
15. A selection of LAF documents including instructions to kill Jews, issued before 22 June 1941, is included in Levinson, *The Shoah (Holocaust) in Lithuania*, 163–9; online selections on "LAF Intentions in the Time Preceding German Control of Lithuanian Locations" on

- DefendingHistory.com*; earlier excerpts in English translation in Baranauskas and Rukšėnas, *Documents Accuse*, 123–5.
16. Greenbaum, *The Jews of Lithuania*, 307; Levinson, *The Shoah (Holocaust) in Lithuania*, 35; Oshry, *Khurbn Lite*, 23.
 17. Testimony of Shmuel Shrage. Video excerpt at <http://www.youtube.com/user/DovidFrom55thStreet?feature=mhee#p/c/A2BAA3ADC43CC101/2/Q81Yawju8I8>
 18. Klee et al., “*The Good Old Days*”, 23, 28–35; Melamed, “The Slaughter at Lietukis Garage.”
 19. Kwiet, “Rehearsing for Murder,” 13; Kwiet echoes Zvi Kolitz’s formulation in “The Physical and Metaphysical Dimensions of the Extermination of the Jews in Lithuania,” 200.
 20. Estonia fell later, giving much of the small Jewish community time to escape – to Russia, of course; there was no other plausible hope in most cases, east of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Line, for the targeted victims of the Holocaust. Of the close to 1000 Jews who remained in Estonia, virtually all were killed by Estonian “participants in the Holocaust” in that corner of the Jew-killing paradise that the Nazis found ready-made in various of their newly invaded territories in 1941.
 21. Kolitz, “The Physical and Metaphysical Dimensions of the Extermination of the Jews in Lithuania,” 199; Petersen, *Understanding Ethnic Violence*, 102.
 22. Bauer, “Remembering Accurately on International Holocaust Remembrance Day.”
 23. See <http://defendinghistory.com/?p=24072>
 24. Prague Declaration on European Conscience and Communism, §9; European Parliament, Texts Adopted, Brussels, 2 April 2009, §15.
 25. Zuroff, “A Combined Day of Commemoration for the Victims of Nazism and Communism?”
 26. *DefendingHistory.com*, “Red–Brown Bill with Two Years of Jailtime for Disagreeing with Government’s Position is Signed into Law.”
 27. Snyder, “Echoes from the Killing Fields of the East”; Zuroff, “A Dangerous Nazi–Soviet Equivalence”; Katz, “Why Red Is Not Brown in the Baltics”; Snyder, “The Fatal Fact of the Nazi–Soviet Pact.”
 28. Snyder, “Neglecting the Lithuanian Holocaust.” This piece contains some strange historical conclusions: “The mass murder of the Jews of Vilnius could not have taken place without the assistance of Lithuanians: the Germans did not have enough men for the job” (!) and the view that the Polish Jewish refugees saved by the Japanese consul Chiune (Sempo) Sugihara were by and large “fleeing not the Holocaust, which had not yet begun, but the threat of Soviet deportations.” Many were refugees from Poland who had seen the Nazis’ treatment of Jews from September 1939, and others had heard from them about what was happening under German occupation to the West. They hardly needed convincing that they were best off as far away from Hitler as possible. Most of those folks would have been quite thrilled to relocate to the far east of the Soviet Union, in fact, as far away from Hitler as possible.
 29. *Ibid.*
 30. Prusin puts the number at “upward of 30,000” (*The Lands Between*, 151).
 31. The attack – news and photographs of which were suppressed by the Lithuanian authorities, including the state-run Jewish museum that has a unit on the site – was exposed, with photographs, on *DefendingHistory.com* on 12 July 2011: “Authorities Cover up Desecration.” The main monument at Ponár (Paneriai), Lithuania’s largest mass murder site, was desecrated with a picture of a male organ and a vulgar reference to the 128 million litas of the parliament’s communal property restitution settlement passed by the Lithuanian parliament in June 2011. A fuller image was published there on 27 September 2011 (*DefendingHistory.com*, “First Full Photo”).
 32. At the time of writing, the Lithuanian government has continued its silence regarding the July paint attack at Ponár. There have been no arrests.
 33. For example Prusin, *The Lands Between*, 153; Snyder, *Bloodlands*, 192.
 34. Gilbert, *The Holocaust*, 155, 157.
 35. Materials assembled in *DefendingHistory.com*, “Glorification of Local Holocaust Perpetrators in Lithuania in 2011.”
 36. Kwiet, “The Onset of the Holocaust.” Dina Porat, in her study “The Holocaust in Lithuania,” has called it “The Starting Point of the Final Solution” (159).

37. Zuroff, "Justice from the Lithuanians."
 38. Zuroff, "Old Ghosts in Lithuania."

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