Who remembers the Poles?

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BLOODLANDS: EUROPE BETWEEN HITLER AND STALIN

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'A few years ago, all speakers of the annihilation of the Armenians?' Adolf Hitler asked his generals in 1943, as he told them to 'clothe your hearts with pity', 'act brutally' and behave 'with the greatest harshness' in the coming war in the East. It's often assumed that in reminding them of the genocide of at least a million Armenians by the Ottoman Turks during the First World War, Hitler was referring to what he intended to do to Europe's Jews. But he was not referring to the Jews: he was referring to the Poles. 'I have sent my Death's Head units to the East,' he told the generals, 'with the order to kill without mercy, men, women and children of the Polish race or language. Only in this way will we win the living space that we need.'

Over the past couple of decades, historians have been steadily uncovering the true extent of the Stalinist genocidal ambitions in Eastern Europe. A month before the invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, leading German military, economic and agrarian officials, followed by the SS, directed by Hitler and Göring, adopted a 'Hunger Plan' that prescribed the removal of food supplies from the areas shortly to be conquered. The purpose, originally announced and then revised, was to starve the inhabitants of eastern Poland, the Ukraine and Belorussia to be left to starve. This was soon trumped by a more generous plan, pursued by the SS chief, Heinrich Himmler, and officially adopted early in 1942. According to the General Plan for the East, the ethnic Germans were to be settled in Germanised towns and agricultural estates all across Eastern Europe, which, Hitler fantasised, would be linked to the Reich by high-speed railways and autobahns. Anywhere between 30 million and 45 million Slavs living in the region were to be left to die, deliberately deprived of food and medical care. The plan envisaged that some 45 per cent of Poles, 64 per cent of Ukrainians and 75 per cent of Belorussians would perish in this way.

As Timothy Snyder reminds us, the Nazis made a start on this scheme of racial annihilation in the blockade of Leningrad, which led to the death of a million of its inhabitants, and the deliberate murder by starvation and disease of more than three million other German prisoners of war who fell into their hands during the massive encircling movements with which the Wehrmacht defeated the Soviet forces in the first months of Operation Barbarossa. Many more civilians perished in the towns, villages and country areas invaded by the Nazis in the second half of 1941. Already hundreds of thousands of Poles had been expelled from their homes, enslaved, deported to Germany or killed.

But the Nazis were by no means the only architects of this programme of suffering that the people who lived in this part of Europe had to endure in the 1930s and 1940s. Hitler's enemy in the East, Joseph Stalin, was just as murderously in his pursuit of a utopian programme, different though Stalinist Communism might have been from the hierarchical racist ideology of the Nazis. Up to now, however, despite the fact that the Bolshevik plan to collectivise agriculture in the early 1930s three-quarters of a million Soviet citizens perished in Stalin's purges later in the decade; during the war, the transmission of Stalin's vision from social revolution to mass extermination, the forcible deportation of millions more - Poles, Volga Germans, Crimian Tatars and other ethnic minorities - under conditions so appalling that hundreds of thousands died. Altogether, Snyder reckons, some 14 million people perished in this part of Europe in the 1930s and 1940s as a result of policies enacted by the Nazis and their allies, or the Soviet Communists and theirs. Snyder describes these countries - Poland, Belarus, the Ukraine, the Baltic states and Western fringes of Russia - as Europe's 'bloodlands'. The reason why, as he says, most of the majority of Europe's Jews, and they also bore the brunt of the genocidal thrust of Nazi policy. Initially, Snyder argues, they were killed as useless consumers of much needed foodstuffs. But once Barbarossa got into difficulties a month after the invasion of the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941, Hitler began to see the mass murder of the Jews as an end in itself, an act of revenge against an imagined Jewish world conspiracy. At this point, Himmler's SS task forces began shooting Jewish women and children, as well as Jewish men; and as German forces suffered their first serious reverses in the East in December, Hitler went over to an unrestrained policy of annihilation, starting in the creation of the death camps and the murder of virtually the entire Jewish population of the 'bloodlands'.

Both Hitler and Stalin, Snyder argues, began, by trying to implement unrealisable visions: respectively, the conquest of the Soviet Union and the creation of a German-occupied 'living space' in Eastern Europe, and the rapid collectivisation of agriculture, mainly in the Ukraine, in order to feed an urban population created by a headlong rush into industrial modernity. Both these programmes failed: Hitler's armies were stalled in July 1941, then stopped before Moscow in December; Stalin's collectivisation met with massive resistance from the peasantry and proved impossible to implement in the short time he had allowed. Both dictators responded by blaming minorities for their failure, Hitler the Jews, Stalin above all Ukrainians, Belarussians and Poles; and both resorted to their anger by killing these people in their millions.

Snyder draws many other parallels between the motivation and behaviour of the two dictators in their policies of genocide and mass murder. Are they convincing? Certainly: a new critique of the old, and his determination to modernise the country at all costs. These policies were not confined to the collectivisation campaign in the Ukraine, but were directed against the entire population of the Soviet Union. Snyder's claim that the large claims he makes for the victimisation of their inhabitants, sidesteeps the fate of the millions of Russians who died at Stalin's hands.

A historian of East-Central Europe, Snyder hasn't really mastered the voluminous literature on Hitler's Germany. This leads him into error in a number of places. He wrongly claims, for example, that Hitler surprised his conservative allies in 1933 by calling a snap election (the calling of elections had been part of the original coalition deal that Hitler dissolved the Reichstag at this point (it was not Hitler, but Hindenburg, as president, who did this), that the 'Aryanisation' of Jewish property in Germany began on a substantial scale only in 1938 (it began immediately, in 1933); that the 'Reichsknoten' extermination camps were shut down in 1944, when they were actually closed the previous year because they had done their job of killing the Jewish inhabitants of the Polish ghettos to make way for new arrivals from the west, and not because, as Snyder states, the Red Army was approaching; that people received 'a sentence to the concentration camp before' they died. Nor was there a concentration camp to which people were sentenced but a holding facility, or Aufenthaltlager, which gained in importance at the end of the war when it was overwhelmed by thousands of evacuees from other camps; and so on.

Much more seriously, Snyder's assertion that the launching of the 'Final Solution of the Jewish Question in Europe' was the outcome of Hitler's rage and frustration at not being able to win the war against the Soviet Union does not stand up to scrutiny.
though there were impassioned debates within the German leadership in late July, August and September 1944 about the best way to defeat the Soviet Union, based on the realisation amongst some senior generals that it was proving more difficult than they had expected, nobody least of all Hitler, felt that the German advance had ground to a halt, let alone been defeated. Hundreds of thousands of prisoners continued to be taken by the German armies (and left to starve to death), major cities like Kiev continued to fall, and Hitler continued to think that the war in the east would soon be won. ‘Never before,’ he declared on 8 November 1941, ‘has a giant empire been smashed and struck down in a shorter time than Soviet Russia.’ At one point, Hitler himself conceded that it is perfectly possible that Hitler was prompted to give the order for the killing of the Jews in a moment of euphoria at the scale and rapidity of German victories rather than in a mood of despair brought about by German failures.

It was not until the Red Army fought the Germans to a standstill before Moscow and then forced them to retreat to defensible lines for the winter, that Hitler conceded that Barbarossa had gone wrong and looked for scapegoats; but the people he blamed were the generals, not the Jews. Relying on an article written in the 1930s by the German historian Christian Gerlach, Snyder asserts that it was at this moment that Hitler took the decision to annihilate Europe’s Jews, in fulfilment of his ‘prophecy’ of January 1939 that if the Jews started a world war, they would be the ones who would die. But while there is certainly evidence that he informed his generals that the Jews would be killed, this does not amount to a decision. In his argument that the decision to kill the Jews was taken on 12 December 1941, Gerlach pointed to the entry of the US into the war the day before as the trigger, not the Red Army’s success in pushing back the Wehrmacht from the gates of Moscow (that didn’t begin until 16 December). In any case, few historians have accepted Gerlach’s claim, and he has subsequently distanced himself from it.

Snyder portrays the Nazi decision-making process as far more cut-and-dry than most historians now think it was. The search for a single moment in which the Final Solution was decided on has long since been abandoned in favour of a more sophisticated understanding of a process that was driven from above by a ceaseless barrage of anti-semitic propaganda emanating from Hitler and Goebbels, beginning immediately after the invasion of the Soviet Union and continuing unabated until the end of the year, and implemented by Himmler, his deputy Heydrich and their agents on the ground in a relatively haphazard manner, though one that was always aimed at the goal of total annihilation.

It was not just events in the East, but also in the West, that directed Hitler’s attention to his ‘prophecy’ and intensified his drive to see it fulfilled. June 1941 witnessed not just the beginning of the titanic war between the Third Reich and the Soviet Union, but also the beginnings of the American entry into the conflict, with a sharp increase in military supplies shipped from the US to Britain and then the Soviet Union, followed by the signing of the Atlantic Charter in August. Nazi anti-semitic propaganda from this point was directed at Germany’s three principal enemies equally, portraying Stalin, Churchill and Roosevelt as tools of a worldwide Jewish conspiracy. In mid-August, Hitler was telling Goebbels that the Jews of America would eventually be made to pay just as the Jews of Europe’s East were already being made to pay, and by the beginning of October, Heydrich was telling people that all the Jews of Europe would be ‘evacuated’ to the East.

It was the comprehensive, even global scale of the Nazis’ intentions towards the Jews that marked out the genocidal from other mass exterminations of the period, or indeed any period. By addressing Nazi anti-semitism almost entirely in the context of Hitler’s plans for Eastern Europe, and drawing rhetorical parallels with the mass murders carried out on Stalin’s orders in the same area, Snyder distracts attention from what was unique about the extermination of the Jews. That uniqueness consisted not only in the scale of its ambition, but also in the depth of the hatred and fear that drove it on. There was something peculiarly sadistic in the Nazis’ desire not just to torture, maim and kill the Jews, but also to humiliate them. SS men and not infrequently ordinary soldiers as well set light to buildings in Eastern Europe and forced them to perform gymnastic exercises in public until they dropped; they made Jewish girls clean public bathrooms; they forced them to perform other acts of ritual humiliation that they did not force on their Slav prisoners, however badly they treated them in other ways. Even in the East, in the end, were for the Nazis a regional obstacle to be removed; the Jews were a ‘world enemy’ to be ground into the dust.

By focusing exclusively on what he calls the ‘bloodlands’, Snyder also demeans, trivialises or ignores the suffering of the many other Europeans who were unfortunate enough to fall into Nazi hands. Thus the eight million foreigners working in the Reich in the latter stages of the war were not all ‘from the East’ as Snyder claims. One quarter of them were French, more than half a million were Italian, and nearly half a million were Belgian or Dutch. The killing of up to three million non-Jewish women was neglected; and sick Germans by Nazi doctors given a well-illustrated graph; the hundreds of thousands of German and Western European Jews who were murdered are dismissed in a little more than a page, sites of mass murder that lie outside Snyder’s ‘bloodlands’ and where the killings were not perpetrated by the Nazis or the Soviets are dealt with in equally perfunctory fashion. The 300,000 Serbs slaughtered by the fascists in the autumn of 1941, the 350,000 Jews killed on the orders of the Romanian government, and further afield still, the tens of thousands of Spanish Republican prisoners executed by the Francosites and the hundreds of thousands more confined in brutal labour camps after the end of the Civil War, or the Gypsies killed in large numbers not just by the Germans but also by the Croats and Romanians—‘all of these get barely a mention or no mention at all.

The fundamental reason for these omissions, and for the book’s failure to give an adequate account of the Holocaust at all, is that Snyder isn’t seriously interested in explaining anything. What he really wants to do is to tell us about the suffering of the people who lived in the area he knows most about. Assuming we know nothing about any of this, he bludgeons us with facts and figures about atrocities and mass murders until we’re reeling from it all. The prose style in which he conveys his facts doesn’t help: the endless succession of short sentences hits us like a series of blows from a cudgel until eventually brain death sets in. The sentences and formulations are repeated over and over again in an almost incessant fashion, as if Snyder doesn’t want us to think critically about what he’s telling us, just to feel the pain he’s describing.

Yet his constant drawing of abstract rhetorical parallels and contrasts, and above all his obsession with the description of massacres with an implausible exactness the numbers, with the terrorized from the deported and dead, make it difficult to do this. As if he realises the debasingness of his approach, Snyder in various points inserts short accounts of some of those who fell victim to the murderous policies pursued by the two dictators. Some of these accounts are given at the beginning of the book without the victims’ names being mentioned, in a cheap rhetorical trick; in the opening paragraph of the final chapter, entitled ‘Humanity’, he restores their blocous and, by giving us their names, but merits naming them does not restore their humanity.

For that to happen, we would need to know much more about them than can be conveyed in a single paragraph or even a sentence of the book. Snyder says at the end of the book: ‘It is for us as humanitarians to turn back, and talk to people. But for all the self-congratulation exhibited in this portentous exposition of genocide, the book is in many ways no different than which he briefly recounts the stories of individual victims, he fails in this task. To succeed, he would have needed to explore paths that would allow him to achieve, in far more detail, using diaries, letters, personal testimonies, on the model of Saul Friedländer’s recent, deeply moving The Tyranny of Evil.

Equally anonymous are the men and women who planned and executed the atrocities. Snyder shows no interest in their character or motivation, in what turned them into torturers and killers. Nor does he have much to say about ideology, despite the fact that this was the driving force of mass murder in both the Nazi and Soviet cases. And the book gives us no sense at all of the ‘bloodlands’ as a region; its physical, social and cultural features are nowhere described, it too has no real identity here. That’s because it’s an entirely artificial construct—a label for the location of mass murder, noth ing more.

Snyder claims that his purpose in describing ‘all of the major killing policies in the common European historical setting’ was ‘to introduce to European history its central event’. But he has not described all the major killing policies and they did not have all a common setting. And to assert that they are the central event in the history of Europe is rhetorical oversell, to say the least. A number of other historians have written recently, and more perceptively, about this same topic, from Richard Overy in The Dictators to Robert Gellately in Lenin, Stalin and Hitler—some, like Norman Davies in Europe at War 1939-45, from a similar perspective to Snyder’s own. The wide-ranging implications of Hitler’s statement about the Armenians, few claims advanced in Snyder’s book are less plausible towards the assertion that ‘Holocaust suffering is underappreciated.’ In fact, we know about the events Snyder describes already, despite his repeated assertions of novelty. We need to be told yet again the facts about mass murder, but to understand why it took place and how and people could carry it out, and in This book is of no use.

Matthew Sweeney

The Night Post

‘Unmissable.’

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22 LONDON REVIEW OF BOOKS 4 NOVEMBER 2010