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# Topography of Interpretation:

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## Reviewing Timothy Snyder's

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### *Bloodlands*

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Timothy Snyder's book on the conjoint, albeit opposing synergy between German National Socialism and Soviet Stalinism at the high point of the Second World War, and situated in the context of the East European lands lying between them, is tellingly, in a sense almost emblematically, entitled *Bloodlands*. The neologism that Snyder coined is a synthetic appellation for the murderous dynamics that unfolded there. Titles generally intend to lead the reader towards the book's core thesis, and this coinage seems, perhaps more than is usual, to be of special importance to the author.

The choice of title does indeed appear to reveal the book's covert concern. Rhetorically, and with its mild alliteration, the term 'bloodlands' evidently alludes to the topographical designation of the historical borderlands, the Polish *kresy*, an eastern frontier region that marks the transition between Latinity and Orthodoxy, situated between the fraying fringe of early modern Poland and its emerging absolutist Russian rival, increasingly expanding to the south and west. This was a core constellation that significantly shaped Polish fate and memory well into the twentieth century.

*Bloodlands* – borderlands – *kresy*. It is from this topographic chain of lexis and signification that the deeper meaning and the more covert perspective elaborated in this work by Timothy Snyder probably emerges. It is a prism that is Polish in tint and dioptré. That qualification is by no means associated with any pejorative suspicion. All historical description is always the outcome of a particular and preceding narration, channelled by memory and identification, whether intentionally presupposed from the outset or arising spontaneously, guided by the invisible hand of recollection. In any case, as a necessary consequence emanating from the stipulations of the historian's craft its task culminates in seeking a meaningful reduction of complexity. Snyder's methodological artifice produces meaning – so it appears – by extending the historical borders of the previous Polish frontier, the *kresy*, both eastwards and westwards. Quite reasonably, this would appear to be in keeping with the author's aim of constructing

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a space for narration that is basically underpinned by the Polish historical tale, yet at the same time extends over and beyond its original reach. And this plot is arranged in particular to integrate the Ukrainian historical narrative, traditionally in constant rivalry with its Polish counterpart, for the purposes of the author's encompassing historical undertaking in reinterpretation.

Having designated the spatial frame of historical events afresh, the author constructs the suitable temporal equivalent for the unfolding chain of events – its proper periodisation, so to say. The timeframe Snyder suggests for his tale – the years 1933 to 1945 – appears ubiquitously familiar. However, its meaning becomes completely transformed, and this against the backdrop of the common historical canon. Generally that period of events is exclusively assigned to the course of German history, relating to Hitler's access to power and Germany's capitulation as its immediate outcome. In *Bloodlands*, Timothy Snyder infuses these iconic temporal ciphers with another story, relating to a much more extensive arsenal of events, containing matters not only German but also, indeed to a greater extent, Soviet, and extending from the Soviet famine in 1932/33 that ravaged the Ukraine especially – though by no means exclusively – up to the establishment of Communist rule in eastern Europe, accompanied by ethnic cleansing at the war's final stage and beyond. Such a revision of common co-ordinates of space and time by means of topographical dislocation, transforming and augmenting the patterns of the historical Polish Borderlands, the *kresy*, into the interpretative trope of Bloodlands, permits Snyder to emboss the latter deeply into the domain of events occurring simultaneously inside the Soviet Union. Such a design allows the author first and foremost to follow conjointly the contours of the traditional Polish historical narrative – a long-established tale reflecting the nation's tragedy, incarcerated between overwhelming powers to its West and to its East, Prussia and Russia – and to elevate that very design into a dominant, all-embracing historical account of the crucial and most destructive years that followed: 1941–5.

To establish such a narration is not an easy task. In order to affiliate Soviet domestic affairs with the Polish fate of political subjugation and ethnic victimisation, the historian has to venture a balancing act between two modes of interpretation, while allowing for their entanglement: the murderous class-character of the regime, eliminating its evidently more imagined than real enemies, and this on social and political grounds ('class') on the one hand, and allegations grounded in national or ethnic affiliation – in mere origin, so to speak – on the other. So it was, as Timothy Snyder shows in his book, that Soviet Poles settled primarily in border areas, and Soviet Poles even scattered in the interior, were in 1937/38 earmarked and labelled as a chronically disloyal and treasonous element, who must therefore be persecuted and purged.

It is slightly surprising that according to his reinterpretation of Polish-Soviet history (which innovatively includes the persecuted Soviet Poles in the tale of the Great Purge) Snyder rather neglects previous Polish-Russian enmity and indeed ignores completely the crucial event of the Polish-Soviet war of 1919/20. After all, he could have drawn an obviously convincing line of interpretation from that foundational

event to the occurrences of 17 September 1939 – the Soviet invasion of Poland, hard on the heels of the German onslaught – a line that would run on directly to the Soviet crimes at Katyń and the other Soviet killing sites of Poles, and lead finally to the equally reprehensible Soviet forbearance to act during the August 1944 Warsaw Uprising, which was put down in a sea of blood by the German occupiers. But the events of 1919/20 obviously do not fit into Snyder's scheme of periodisation, which should, for the purposes of comparative narration, begin with the iconic year of 1933 and its crucial domestic Soviet events, most notably the catastrophic famine.

The distinctive, albeit moderate, Polono-centricity of Snyder's book leads at some points also to some slight factual readjustments, which in context are of some significance, even though they could otherwise be overlooked. Such readjustments can be traced, for example, in his altogether excellent description of the international political constellation encompassing events in the late 1930s, especially relating to Japanese–Polish relations, previously rather poorly treated, and now shifted more front and centre. Thus, the timing of the battle at Chalchin Gol launched by the Soviets on 22 August 1939 – in the context of ongoing hostilities between Japanese and Soviet forces in the Mongolian–Manchurian border area after mid-1938 – becomes, in Snyder's book, associated directly with the conclusion of the Molotov–Ribbentrop pact the next day. And Snyder suggests this causal link despite the fact that this accord was concluded in great haste and came largely as a surprise, contrary to prevailing expectations. However, the massing of Soviet troops, and especially tanks and armoured vehicles, required for the decisive battle launched the day before at the Japanese–Soviet front line in the Far East, had obviously been in preparation well in advance. In any event, those preparations were under way as a reaction to the deteriorating state of affairs at the Mongolian–Manchurian frontier, which had reached a climax as early as May 1939. By contrast, the Soviet invasion of eastern Poland on 17 September the same year was actually not until one day *after* the conclusion of the Japanese–Soviet ceasefire far away in Asia. Moreover, the fact that there was scarcely any serious fighting between the Red Army and the Polish forces was not only due to the looming Polish defeat at its western front and the associated rapid advance of the German troops eastwards, but was also a consequence of Polish preferences. The Polish command had issued orders to the troops not to engage the Soviet forces unnecessarily.

From a commonly held Polish perspective, both Germany and Russia posed a persistent menace to Polish sovereignty, re-established in 1918 – and this quite apart from the ideological conversions each of them underwent in the interim. In Germany, a National Socialist regime was established. Russia, traditionally perceived as no less serious a foe, had turned Bolshevik much earlier and so appeared even more perilous. Seen from the geopolitically dire Polish perspective, an already intimidating configuration was charged by further ideological motivation. Their fusion – the fusion of the unalterable geopolitical constellation of being situated eternally between Germany and Russia, now radicalised by their respective regimes – gave, from the specific Polish angle, birth to a notion and understanding that focused on the two regimes' commonality under the rubric of the concept of totalitarianism. Poland's

difficult position, poised in the mid-twentieth century between considerable forces of power and domination – Bolshevik Russia and Nazi Germany – was nothing new. It reached much further back, deep into the nineteenth century – a collective experience that lodged itself profoundly into the very tissue of Polish national memory.

Irrespective of the totalitarian character of Poland's two prodigious neighbours, the historically common ethnic, religious and social entanglement in the Bloodlands – the Borderlands, the *kresy* – had traditionally generated its own fabric of strife and violence. In that connection, the relationship between the Polish (minor) nobility and the Ukrainian or White Russian peasantry, since the most distant past, may indeed be instructive: it is a conflict-ridden relationship, in which layers of ethnic and social belonging are clearly enmeshed in a constellation carefully explored in Snyder's previous research. It is also crucial to remember the horrors committed first and foremost by the Imperial Russian Army during the First World War against allegedly disloyal and treasonous populations dwelling in the area of the *kresy*, a region generally isomorphic with the Jewish Pale of Settlement; and that, in the winter of 1916, the Russian army waged a war of annihilation directed against Turkish-speaking Muslim nomads of the Kirghiz–Kazakh Federation in Central Asia. They were deliberately driven into the desert and left to die in terrible misery.

All this contributes to the suggestion that Stalin's murderous policies concerning various nationalities and ethnicities inhabiting the border regions might be interpreted as the persistence of a distinctive imperial Great Russian tradition, now ideologically infused with an even more ruthless, ideological yet regressively brutal force: Bolshevism. However, the Great Purge in the later 1930s, together with the ethnic moment Snyder alludes to, was first and foremost a 'socially' motivated elimination of entire leadership echelons in the party and the military – crossing ethnic divisions, ostensibly a kind of preventive 'civil war' waged from above, as friendly critics interpreted it at the time. The number of people murdered deliberately during the purge went beyond those who fell victim to the Great Russian imperial tradition of preventive subjugation and resettlement, and decimating the nationalities settled primarily in border regions, in which – in the eyes of the rulers of Russia and of the later Soviet Union – lurked threats and dangers.

By means of his unique topographically impregnated historical approach, Timothy Snyder seeks to remove the 'special feature' label generally given to the Holocaust. He embeds the mass murder of the Jews in the broader context of an even more comprehensive history of rank bloodshed: the story of indiscriminate violence executed by two genocidal regimes, first separately and then at mutual loggerheads in the tormented area that separated them, the Bloodlands. Such an endeavour deserves much support. However, whether the author has succeeded in his venture is questionable. In fact, Snyder is highly ambivalent. On the one hand, his approach might be characterised as decidedly Shoah-centric: he portrays a separate war, unleashed against the Jews, and this in the face of an emerging German military disaster in the East. Had the Soviet Union been brought to its knees, this would have allowed the Jews to be transferred – as it was allusively put – to the 'East';

but if the USSR were to resist the assault, then the Jews would have to be targeted specifically and completely in a radical and total annihilation. On the other hand, Snyder obviously intends to question the established perception that the Holocaust simply meant industrial killing, leading to extermination – especially at Auschwitz – and to suggest that it was instead massacre and indiscriminate death. This intention is repeatedly emphasised by his reminders that many more Jews may have been killed by shooting (the so called ‘Holocaust by bullets’) than by gassing. The picture shifts from concentration and extermination camps to the domain of war and arbitrary execution of violence, which is the version of the Holocaust embedded in the broader picture of *Bloodlands*.

It is true that Snyder places great value on describing events in the execution facilities of Operation Reinhardt, particularly in Treblinka. But the intention of such extreme descriptions of horror is less the exposition of a specific death, but the humanist incitement to redeem the individual fate hidden behind impersonal statistical abstractions, in other words, to recover names, fates and faces, thus returning to them their basic humanity. However, when Snyder refers to Auschwitz, in fact he mainly seems to mean its labour camp, the Monowitz complex. He also suggests that most of the narrations composing the image of the Holocaust have relied on the experience of those who had survived Auschwitz as forced labourers. They were able to tell their story simply because they had survived, and their narration gained hegemony.

Aside from the fact that Birkenau, Auschwitz’s death factory, was not fundamentally different from the industrially run killing facilities of Operation Reinhardt, the downgrading of Auschwitz for the construction of the tale of the *Bloodlands* argument seems to expose a pivotal weakness in Snyder’s argument; moreover, Auschwitz is located much further west, beyond the core killing fields of the author’s narration. In fact, the very existence of the labour and extermination camp in Auschwitz serves significantly to compromise the topographic and systematic architecture of the historical concept inscribed in *Bloodlands*.

Auschwitz compromises the concept of *Bloodlands* in two ways. First, it contains another, a different historical topography, a topography that competes with that of Snyder’s ultimate space of destruction, namely the topography of western and south-eastern Europe – the Netherlands, France, Greece and Hungary, to name the major countries – from where Jews were sent to Auschwitz. And second, this alternative, indeed competing topography is also imbued with a different historical epistemology – an epistemology which possibly impinges on our understanding of the mass killings in the context of the war as well as beyond the war, especially where the Soviet Union in the 1930s is concerned. What I am referring to here is the understanding of a specific, a unique form of death differing from other violently inflicted modes of death. This evidently touches on one of the central, indeed very ethical concerns of Snyder’s book, namely his rejection of any distinction between and among victims caused by politically motivated violence – that is to say, of genocide. In order to undermine such distinctions, to him spurious, Snyder establishes a common space, a battle-ground in which they are intimately aligned – the killing fields of *Bloodlands*.

The pan-European topography of annihilation associated with Auschwitz is the spatial manifestation of collective death. Its extension to the west, notably into countries that were relatively spared the ravages of indiscriminate warfare commonly experienced in the east, points up the absolute Nazi intention of total destruction: *all* Jews were to be killed, and *everywhere*. That was true even for the very few Norwegian Jews, who had to be hand-picked for shipment to Auschwitz; or the deportation of the Jews from Rhodes, an undertaking which required substantial logistical efforts, and that in the front end of the German retreat from Greece and the Balkans. These and other individual events might carry little quantitative weight in face of the hecatombs of the dead that were piling up on the killing fields of the Bloodlands. Nonetheless, their epistemic significance and qualitative meaning for the distinction between death and death must be seriously considered. It sheds some light on possible significant distinctions in the Bloodlands themselves.

Is it justifiable to distinguish between death and death brought on humans? In principle, certainly not. Obviously not with regard to the individual victim where every death is in itself absolute, however inflicted – be it by starvation, by bullets or by poison gas, whatever the duration of the agony or the associated mental or physical pains. The important issue is the moral questions conveyed by reality and introduced into the historical construction of the narration. In short, a historical narration entails fundamental questions of historical judgment. That is certainly true for an event of such apocalyptic dimensions as the Holocaust.

Death under Stalin's rule of horror left contemporaries and posterity aghast. Death unleashed under his regime likewise had its distinctive features, in particular its uniquely arbitrary disposition. State murder at random was committed to a large extent without reason and without cause. Anybody could turn into a victim of the regime, falling into the claws of its henchmen, not knowing when or why – to a certain extent, uncommon in other despotic regimes, even and especially those who belonged to the higher echelons of the party, the military and the special agencies of repression, who had themselves committed dire crimes in the name of state and party.

The contours of this despotic arbitrariness were both dramatic and perfidious, and exacerbated by the unique Soviet entanglement of perpetrator and victim in one and the same person, which hampers *a posteriori* an appropriate mode of mourning and remembrance. This phenomenon distinguishes the Stalinist regime to a significant extent from that of its Nazi revenant. The latter succeeded in establishing an almost full identification and simple compliance between *Volk* and regime. The enemy was intrinsically the *Other*, grounded on a construction of race, and enemies were victimised solely on grounds of belonging to a supposedly 'alien' ethnicity. Victimising the Other, as defined collectively by their origin, subsequently gave rise to a ubiquitous culture of commemoration regarding mass crimes committed by one's own ethnicity. This is evident in the case of Germany, where Nazism as a unique variation of extreme nationalism entrapped the Germans collectively, as a nation, in the crimes of the regime. The Soviet case was different, since most of the victims of the regime were Soviet citizens themselves.

Distinctions of fate and death can also be discerned among the victims of Nazism: the distinction between political prisoners in Auschwitz or in other concentration camps, and those who solely and simply because of their origin or identification with a specific group were separated and selected for certain death. The former were able to contemplate a time beyond Hitler; the latter were doomed to die a collective death without any possible expectation of survival. There is also a distinction, introduced by the Nazis, between Jewish and Polish victims, a distinction that became manifest spatially, between those compelled to remain on one side of the ghetto walls, and those on the other – a difference lyrically foregrounded by Czeslaw Milosz in his poem 'Campo di fiori'. In Warsaw, there was a disparity between the Jewish ghetto uprising of 1943, which was triggered by the creeping advance of collective death that presented a choice between certain death in struggle and certain death in the gas chambers, and the Polish Warsaw uprising of August 1944, triggered by political calculation. The fact that a certain collective death was basically reserved for the Jews is not an insight constructed in retrospect, but was concretely experienced and acknowledged both among the Jews and among the non-Jews surrounding them. All were aware of that fundamental difference.

It is perfectly clear that the suffering of a Ukrainian child dying of starvation cannot be distinguished in any way, in terms of individual suffering, from that of a Jewish child in the ghetto, or facing the gas chamber. Yet not *all* Ukrainians were put to death simply for being Ukrainian, and certainly not *everywhere*. By contrast, for the Jews death was the rule. In the face of this murderous consistency, survival was the exception. Of course, Timothy Snyder is well aware of these and of other distinctions that led to this extreme situation. He also expresses them repeatedly in this book. Yet their meaning is in the nature of a severability clause: they are actually inconsequential for the overarching narrative he constructs.