
Great Men and Large Numbers: Undertheorising a History of Mass Killing

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Scholarship is not only about gaining new insights or establishing accurate knowledge but also about struggling for political impact and for market shares – shares of public or private funds, of academic jobs, of quotations by peers, and of media performances. Timothy Snyder's *Bloodlands* fights for recentring contemporary European history.¹ No longer, his new book implies, should the centre of that history be Germany, which initiated two world wars and engaged with three genocides; even less should the centre be Western Europe, which historians for long have glorified as the trendsetter of modernity; and the Soviet Union, or Russia, does not qualify as 'centre' anyway. Introducing 'to European history its central event' (p. 380) means to focus on the eastern territories of Europe, the lands *between* Germany and Russia, which, according to Snyder, suffered more than any other part from systematic, politically motivated, mass murder in the twentieth century. The superior victimhood of the 'bloodlands' is a numerical one. Fourteen million people, Jewish and non-Jewish, in the territories of what is today most of Poland, the Ukraine, Belarus, western Russia, and the Baltic States did not become just casualties of war but victims of deliberate mass murder. Indeed, this is 'a very large number' (p. 411), one that stands many comparisons: ten million people perished in Soviet and German concentration camps (as opposed to the Nazi death camps, which were located within the 'bloodlands'), 165,000 German Jews died during the Holocaust (p. ix), and even the number of war casualties most single countries or territories counted in the Second World War was smaller.

Snyder is not alone in calling for a recentring of European history. Since the break-down of communism, many of those countries that previously counted as *East* European fought to be acknowledged as part or even the heart of *central* Europe, a term that for long had been reserved for the successor territories of the Holy Roman Empire. More specifically, historians have bemoaned the fact that the territories between Russia and Germany not only suffered most from two dictatorships but were

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¹ Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin* (New York: Basic Books, 2010).

also, more than other parts of Europe, marginalised from mainstream historiography. One of the most thoughtful contributions to this debate is a 2008 article by Omer Bartov in which he criticised the hegemony of Third Reich history over the field of Holocaust history.² For too long, Bartov argues, Holocaust history has kept itself busy with analysing German, that is, Nazi sources, institutions, perpetrators and decision-making processes. At the same time, Holocaust history has been uninterested in the perspectives, languages, actions and reactions of the Jewish and even non-Jewish victims of the Nazi terror in those areas where the Holocaust actually happened: east of Germany. This has had serious implications for the politics of memory, or rather non-memory, in those countries today. Decades of Communist dictatorship have ‘erased’ the commemoration and the representation of Jews and Jewish life in eastern Europe.³ Western Holocaust scholarship, in Germany as well as in the Anglophone world, may even have unwittingly contributed to the erasure of the remembrance of Jewish culture in Europe, which had been the ultimate goal of the Nazi extermination policy. These are serious issues, as even German Third Reich historians, such as the author of this review, should admit.

Snyder, however, is not concerned with the biases, gaps and holes of Holocaust history or Holocaust memory. On the contrary, what angers him is the preeminent place of the Holocaust in current European and American memory politics including historiography. Not the Holocaust or ‘June 1941’ shall be the vanishing point of European history, but ‘August 1939’ – the Hitler–Stalin Pact as the actual springboard of the two dictators’ collaboration in the destruction of Poland (and the Polish Jews); as the basis of Hitler’s attack on the Soviet Union; and more generally as the symbol of the links between Hitler’s and Stalin’s mass-murder policies. Snyder argues that it is not only the six million Jewish victims of the Holocaust, and all the other civilians and the Soviet POWs murdered or starved to death by the Nazis, who need to be remembered. Stalin’s victims need to be included in these stories as well, he points out, that is, victims of Ukrainian *holodomor* (death by hunger), of the Great Terror in 1937–8, and not least of Stalin’s ‘ethnic cleansings’ and antisemitic purges around and after 1945.

Snyder is not the first to think about what Hitler and Stalin had in common and how their murderous politics related to each other. The more provocative historians were in doing so and the more they thereby questioned the uniqueness, or the peculiarity, of the Holocaust, the more their work was met with resistance or even disgust, most prominently and controversially the German Ernst Nolte in the 1980s.⁴ Snyder’s move to link Soviet and Nazi crimes is as politically tricky today as it was then. As it seems to reduce the responsibility of the Nazis and their collaborators, supporters

² Omer Bartov, ‘Eastern Europe as the Site of Genocide’, *Journal of Modern History*, 80 (2008), 557–93.

³ Omer Bartov, *Erased: Vanishing Traces of Jewish Galicia in Present-Day Ukraine* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

⁴ Ernst Nolte, *Der europäische Bürgerkrieg 1917–1945: Nationalsozialismus und Bolschewismus* (Berlin: Propyläen Verlag, 1987); cf. Peter Baldwin, ed., *Reworking The Past: Hitler, the Holocaust, and the Historians’ Debate* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990); Richard Evans, *In Hitler’s Shadow: West German Historians and the Attempt to Escape the Nazi Past* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1989).

and claqueurs, it is welcomed in rightist circles of various types: German conservatives in the 1980s, who wanted to 'normalise' the German past, and East European and ultranationalists today, who downplay Nazi crimes and up-play Communist crimes in order to promote a common European memory that merges Nazism and Stalinism into a 'double-genocide' theory that prioritises East European suffering over Jewish suffering, obfuscates the distinction between perpetrators and victims, and provides relief from the bitter legacy of East Europeans' collaboration in the Nazi genocide.⁵

No author is safe from misappropriation. In recounting the grievances, and in trying to restore the dignity, of the victims of mass crimes other than the genocide of the Jews, Snyder may not have intended to cater for East European ultranationalists.⁶ Nevertheless, the fact that his book can be read as a 'bible of the Holocaust distorters in post-Communist Eastern Europe'⁷ is a result not only of some readers' misappropriation but also of the author's mis-narration. The book's dilemma is the way it presents history, or, more precisely, its obsession with large numbers and its resorting to great men when it comes to understanding what happened.

'For the time being', the reader is briefed at the end of the book, 'Europe's epoch of mass killing is overtheorised and misunderstood'. Rather than drawing 'theoretical conclusions' and thus confirming a 'disproportion of theory to knowledge', says Snyder, 'we must understand what actually happened, in the Holocaust and in the Bloodlands generally' (p. 383). This is a strong statement. It distorts the relationship between theory and knowledge and marks a decisive setback in the historiography of 'Europe's epoch of mass killing'. What is knowledge, what is theory, what does it mean to understand? No explicit answer is provided. Following Snyder's writing, 'knowledge' seems to consist primarily of 'the numbers of the dead', which 'are now available to us, sometimes more precisely, sometimes less, but firmly to convey a sense of the destructiveness of each regime' (p. 383). Indeed, there is no shortage of numerical knowledge in this book. Snyder, though, is aware of the trickiness of too many numbers in an account on the mass crimes of the Nazi and Soviet regimes which infamously 'turned people into numbers' (p. 408). As 'the sheer number of the victims can blunt our sense of the individuality of each one', Snyder says, it is to 'us as humanists to turn the numbers back into people' (pp. xv, 408). In order to counter the inhuman touch that radiates from the plethora of numbers, the book presents a variety of well chosen excerpts from testimonies of mostly named victims.⁸

⁵ See Efraim Zuroff, 'A Dangerous Nazi-Soviet equivalence', *guardian.co.uk*, 29 Sept. 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/cifamerica/2010/sep/29/secondworldwar-holocaust>; Dovid Katz, 'Why Red is not Brown in the Baltics', *ibid.*, 30 Sept. 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/cifamerica/2010/sep/30/baltic-nazi-soviet-snyder> (both last visited 15 May 2011).

⁶ Timothy Snyder, 'The Fatal Fact of the Nazi-Soviet Pact', *ibid.*, 5 Oct. 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/cifamerica/2010/oct/05/holocaust-secondworldwar>, accessed 15 May 2011.

⁷ Efraim Zuroff, 'The Equivalency Canard', *haaretz.com*, 11 May 2011, <http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/books/the-equivalency-canard-1.361051>, accessed 15 May 2011.

⁸ See the list in Snyder, *Bloodlands*, p. xv.

The combination of numbers and testimonies is what *Bloodlands* has been praised for. In giving voice to the victims, the book follows a popular tradition. For three decades many historians across the entire discipline have, as a response to anonymising tendencies in social and political history, worked on bringing the individual back in; they have done so not least in some general accounts on the Holocaust and on Stalinism.⁹ In the case of *Bloodlands*, some uneasiness seems to persist. Neither the numbers nor the testimonies provide an answer to that one ‘important question’ that not even historians can avoid who follow Leopold von Ranke’s famous (but often mistaken) dictum about writing history as ‘simply showing what actually happened’¹⁰ and prioritise description over explanation. ‘How could (how can)’, asks Snyder, ‘so many lives be brought to a violent end?’ (p. 387). The problem is that there is no such thing as ‘simply showing what actually happened’, as historians have known for a long time. There is no knowledge without theory. There are different types of theory, though. One notion of theory refers to our basic, conscious or unconscious assumptions about what makes men (and women), in history or in the present, act, think and feel, and about how they do so; our conscious or unconscious interests in history (why does one historian do witchcraft and another one Stalinism and Nazism); our conscious or unconscious ideas of what ‘drives’ history and historical change – grand ideas, powerful people, class struggles, gender conflicts, the chaos of contingencies, or the eternal struggle between good and evil? We can ignore or deny that such theory shapes our research and our writings, but it will do so anyway. The other notion of theory is the one of systematic generalisation or reflection on the principles of human (or non-human) action, thinking, and feeling. Often influenced by Max Weber’s methodology of ‘ideal type’, this kind of theoretically informed historiography is inspired by sociological, psychological or anthropological models. It proves particularly useful in comparative and integrative history, such as *Bloodlands* wants to establish.

It is the latter type of theory that bothers Snyder. His objection starts with Hannah Arendt’s book on *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951),¹¹ which Snyder vaguely summarises on three pages and then dismisses, mainly because of Arendt’s focus on mass killing by concentration in camps such as Auschwitz or the Gulag. Snyder rightly informs us here (and elsewhere in his book) that the Gulag was not a death factory in the way that Auschwitz was; he also states that Auschwitz ‘was not the height of the technology of death: the most efficient shooting squads killed faster, the starvation sites killed faster, and Treblinka killed faster’ (p. 383). Technically, this may be right, although Snyder does not offer comparative data (in terms of hours or minutes) on

⁹ See for instance, Saul Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews: The Years of Persecution, 1933–1939* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1997); idem, *The Years of Extermination: Nazi Germany and the Jews, 1939–1945* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2007); Orlando Figes, *The Whisperers: Private Life in Stalin’s Russia* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007).

¹⁰ Georg Iggers, ‘Introduction’, in Leopold von Ranke, *The Theory and Practice of History*. Edited with an introd. by Georg G. Iggers and Konrad von Moltke (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1973), xix–xx; Richard Evans, *In Defence of History*, revised edn (New York: W. W. Norton, 2000), 17.

¹¹ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1951).

the actual killing paces at these various sites of mass murder. Historically, however, it is at least problematic to prioritise the mass shootings over the death factories. Such priority ignores, among other things, the crucial learning process the Nazis went through in searching not only for the fastest killing method but for the one that generated the least dismay for the perpetrators and caused the least frictions within the perpetrator society. It is not least this learning process that made the Holocaust what it was.

As a second theory or ‘tradition of comparison’ of Soviet and Nazi terror, Snyder introduces Vasily Grossman’s literary writings of 1950s and 1960s, *Life and Fate* and *Everything Flows*, which, because they merely use ‘universal terms’ to deal with the ‘common inhumanity’ (p. 386) of the Nazi and the Soviet system, are dismissed even faster than Arendt’s totalitarianism theory.¹² No further theories are consulted to ‘understand what actually happened’. Are these two really the ones that have made ‘Europe’s epoch of mass killing overtheorised?’

The most popular theory, introduced by Rafał Lemkin during the Holocaust, revolves around the term ‘genocide’. It was disseminated all over the world by the United Nations and utilised many times by scholars trying to compare and understand the complexity of ideologies, institutions, decisions and actions that have generated mass violence, not least those in Europe in the 1930s and 1940s. Snyder introduces Lemkin’s concept without using its specific focus on that type of mass murder that intends to wipe out an entire people (pp. 53–4).¹³ It is this criterion that allows and urges us to distinguish the Holocaust from Stalinist mass crimes. Snyder may not equalise both, but in reading them as parallel and related histories he distracts from the fact that only the Holocaust aimed for the extermination of an entire people. There is no need to belittle the quantitative or qualitative dimensions of the suffering inflicted on the Ukrainians or other East European peoples by Stalin or Hitler. But all of these nations and peoples still (or once again) exist today, whereas there is no longer any Jewish culture in eastern Europe.

In fact, *Bloodlands* does rely on a theory, though not an explicit one, and maybe not even a conscious one. What drives Snyder’s narrative is the Great Men theory, according to which omnipotent individuals, not necessarily good yet always powerful ones, mostly men, shape and change history; its necessary complement is the trope of the impotent ordinary people, the passive subjects, the victims—those who suffer from the history made by Great Men. The two Great Men who made the history of the ‘bloodlands’ are Hitler and Stalin, of course. Not by accident do their names provide the title of the book and guide the introduction (p. 1), the book’s layout. The remainder of the book tells the story of the ‘bloodlands’ as shaped by, and from

¹² Vasily Grosman, *Life and Fate* (London: Collins Harvill, 1985), and *Everything Flows* (New York: New York Review Books, 2009).

¹³ This particular meaning is mentioned only in an appendix at the end of the book, 413, where Snyder dismisses the term, partly because it has given ‘rise to inevitable and intractable controversies’. Are we really to dismiss a concept (and with it a broad range of enormously powerful research) because it has invited controversies? See also the misleading remarks on the concept of ‘genocide’ in Snyder, ‘The Fatal Fact of the Nazi-Soviet Pact’.

the viewpoint of, Stalin and Hitler. The famines in the Ukraine and the Great Terror in the 1930s are told almost exclusively as made in Moscow, by Stalin, with regular references to what they meant not for the Nazis but for Hitler. Stalin takes control (p. 24), Stalin wins (p. 33), Stalin knows 'perfectly well' (p. 35), Stalin is 'the master of' (p. 35), Stalin seals the borders (p. 45), Stalin brings things to an end (p. 108), Stalin achieves 'exactly the result that he wanted' (p. 117), and so on. Even when Stalin is 'not yet an unrivalled dictator' his marionettes, 'his loyal and trusted allies', make sure that he does not 'face any obstacles' (p. 37).

And so it is with Hitler. Hitler uses the Soviet Union (p. 159), Hitler knows (p. 161), Hitler shows 'no interest' (p. 165). And so on. Notwithstanding decades of research that has shown that major parts of all ranks of the *Wehrmacht* willingly and voluntarily joined in genocidal warfare,¹⁴ *Bloodlands* presents the German army as a mere tool in Hitler's hands, as if the soldiers had no choices: 'German commanders would have to continue the war' and could not do anything about it, they fell into a 'moral trap', and 'for the soldiers and the lower-level officers, there was no escape . . .' (p. 170). The 'final solution' is presented in an oversimplified 'intentionalist' fashion with barely any mention of the polycratic chaos of competing local power centres of the Nazi Empire and a multitude of different types of German and non-German collaborators that have been subject of research over five decades and are now part of any serious textbook on twentieth century European history. In *Bloodlands*, the Holocaust appears as a smooth decision-making process with many marionettes and Hitler and Himmler as the puppet masters:

While Heydrich made bureaucratic arrangements in Berlin, it was Himmler who most ably extracted the practical and the prestigious from Hitler's utopian thinking . . . In the summer and autumn of 1941, Himmler ignored what was impossible, pondered what was most glorious, and did what could be done. (pp. 188–89)

There is no need to deny the destructive power of Hitler or Stalin, and there are good reasons to compare the two dictators, their ideologies, visions, politics, tactics and strategies. Many historians have done so, and most recently, with great success,

¹⁴ Helmuth Groscurth, *Tagebücher eines Abwehroffiziers 1938–40. Mit weiteren Dokumenten zur Militäropposition gegen Hitler*, ed. Helmut Krausnick and Harold C. Deutsch (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlagsanstalt, 1970), 534–42; Rolf-Dieter Müller and Hans-Erich Volkmann, eds, *Die Wehrmacht: Mythos und Realität* (Munich: R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 1999); Hannes Heer and Klaus Naumann, eds, *War of Extermination: The German Military in World War II, 1941–1944* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2000); Peter Lieb, 'Täter aus Überzeugung? Oberst Carl von Andrian und die Judenmorde der 707. Infanteriedivision 1941/42', *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte*, 50 (2002), 523–57; Christian Hartmann, 'Verbrecherischer Krieg—verbrecherische Wehrmacht? Überlegungen zur Struktur des deutschen Ostheeres 1941–1944', *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte*, 52 (2004), 1–76; Wolfram Wette, *The Wehrmacht: History, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006); Thomas Kühne, 'Male Bonding and Shame Culture: Hitler's Soldiers and the Moral Basis of Genocidal Warfare', in Olaf Jensen, Claus-Christian W. Szejnmann and Martin L. Davies, eds, *Ordinary People as Mass Murderers: Perpetrators in Comparative Perspectives* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008): 55–77; Kühne, *Belonging and Genocide: Hitler's Community, 1918–1945* (Yale University Press, New Haven), 95–136.

Richard Overy and Robert Gellately.¹⁵ But is a double-biography really the type of narrative *Bloodlands* aims for? In fact, this book claims to run *against* the traditional centres of historical writing about Europe. Which of such centres would be more traditional than Berlin und Moscow, Hitler and Stalin? *Bloodlands* argues on behalf of the peculiarity of an originally rich and lively, then dreadfully tortured, and finally decisively marginalised *region*. A regional history of the ‘bloodlands’ would be one that catches on local views, local traditions and local agency. It would explore how local traditions, local people and local choices clashed with the changing terrorist regimes; it would compare how different localities struggled with different regimes in different ways and possibly with different results. None of these themes are subject of *Bloodlands*, which is even more surprising as Snyder is the author of a brilliant book on them.¹⁶ *Bloodlands*, however, restricts agency almost exclusively to Stalin and Hitler and a few of their pawns. Only the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising in 1943 and the Polish Warsaw Uprising in 1944 are recounted in detail, based on the extensive existing literature; but limiting ‘Resistance and Incineration’ (the title of the related chapter) to this one place and its famous revolts does not question but rather aggravates the Manichean denial of agency of ordinary (including persecuted) people.

Unlike half a century ago, in the era of Hannah Arendt or Vasily Grossman, and contrary to Snyder’s assumptions, theoretically informed thinking and writing on mass killing has abandoned universalist or generalising master keys. Over the last two decades, such thinking has rather proved innovative and fruitful in ‘understand[ing] what actually happened’ by focusing on two things: first, the historically specific local context of violence; and second, the sociology of violence, its social dynamism. In other words: historians have learned how to historicise the creative sides of mass violence.¹⁷

Killing and even murdering other people, terrorising, humiliating, or causing harm to them, is not just destructive. For those who perpetrate violence and terror, it is creative and rewarding. It generates a social dynamic. As one historian has pointed out, the genocide against the Jews ‘served as a mechanism for social mobility—for moving into the better houses [of killed or deported Jews], taking over businesses, giving clothes and jewelry to one’s wife or mistress or fetching toys for one’s children, all facilitated by the shedding of blood.’¹⁸ In addition to social advancement, collective

¹⁵ Alan Bullock, *Hitler and Stalin: Parallel Lives* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992); Richard Overy, *The Dictators: Hitler’s Germany, Stalin’s Russia* (London: Allen Lane, 2004); Robert Gellately, *Lenin, Stalin, and Hitler: The Age of Social Catastrophe* (New York: A. Knopf, 2007).

¹⁶ Timothy Snyder, *The Reconstruction of Nations: Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus, 1569–1999* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).

¹⁷ A starting point was the critique of the ahistorical and deindividualising interpretation by Wolfgang Sofsky, *The Order of Terror: The Concentration Camp* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), see Omer Bartov, *Germany’s War and the Holocaust: Disputed Histories* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003), 99–121; see also Trutz von Trotha, ed., *Soziologie der Gewalt* (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1997), and the comments in Thomas Kühne, ‘Massen-Töten: Diskurse und Praktiken der kriegerischen und genozidalen Gewalt im 20. Jahrhundert’, in Peter R. Gleichmann and Thomas Kühne, eds, *Massenhaftes Töten: Kriege und Genozide im 20. Jahrhundert* (Essen: Klartext, 2004), 11–52.

¹⁸ Bartov, ‘Eastern Europe as the Site of Genocide’, 576.

violence establishes social bonds—or the hope of forging them. Both the military sociology of cohesion in combat units and the criminal sociology of gangs, with the Mafia as the most spectacular case, have long analysed community building through violence or crime, or more generally, through transgressing what is allowed in civilian societies. More recently, studies of genocides and mass violence in the twentieth century have profited from inquiring into this constructive side of violence, not least by learning from anthropological studies into ideas and ideologies of social purity and fears of social pollution.¹⁹ ‘Killing Tutsis’, observed Philip Gourevitch, ‘brought people together’. He concludes: ‘Genocide, after all, is an exercise in community building’.²⁰ Euphemistically introduced by Serb nationalists, the term ‘ethnic cleansing’ has made historians aware of the utopian power of genocide. In a widely praised book (ignored in *Bloodlands*), Eric Weitz has shown how different utopian ideologies of national homogeneity fuelled Stalinist terror in the 1930s, the German genocide of the Jews in World War II, mass murder in Cambodia, and the explosion of violence in Yugoslavia in the 1990s.

In times of crisis, genocidal regimes procured their dynamic not only from obsessive fears of the ‘pollution’ and dismemberment of the social body but also from desperate desires for regaining ‘purity’ and unity. Responding to societal uncertainties about collective identities and national cohesion, these regimes ‘sought to impose uniformity, to “fix” identities, yet the social realities they faced were invariably messier than their own categories.’ To fight ambiguities and confusion, people resorted to preemptive, clear and decisive action.²¹ In the German case, ‘redemptive antisemitism’ (Saul Friedländer) served as a Manichaean utopia that promised national salvation through extermination.²² In a way, this utopia became true. When Germans carried out genocidal war against the Jews and other ‘undesirables’ in order to realise the utopia of a purified nation, they not only destroyed what they considered to be dirty and dangerous. They experienced togetherness, cohesion and belonging, and they deluded themselves into believing they would attain a homogenous and harmonious social body, cleansed of pollution, conflict and inner enemies: the *Völksgemeinschaft*, a people’s community.²³

Sociologies and utopias of community building through mass violence do not apply universally in the same way but operate differently at different times, at different

¹⁹ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 2002; originally 1966); Alexander Hinton, ed., *Annihilating Difference: The Anthropology of Genocide* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Jacques Semelin, *Purify and Destroy: The Political Uses of Massacre and Genocide* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

²⁰ Philip Gourevitch, *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed with Our Families: Stories from Rwanda* (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 1998), 95. Cf. Keith Doubt, *Understanding Evil: Lessons from Bosnia* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), and Donald Bloxham, *The Final Solution: A Genocide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 261–99.

²¹ Eric D. Weitz, *A Century of Genocide: Utopias of Race and Nation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003); see Norman Naimark, *Fires of Hatred: Ethnic Cleansing in Twentieth-Century Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).

²² Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews*, and idem, *The Years of Extermination*.

²³ Kühne, *Belonging and Genocide*.

places, in different situations, in different organisations and in different societies; and there are certainly cases where other mechanisms and utopias are at work. When detecting these differences, historians are well advised to focus on intermediary and local levels of political violence. In fact, this is what has propelled historical research on mass killing for the last two decades. Neither Stalin nor Hitler alone would have sufficed to make the Great Terror or the Holocaust happen. They needed plenty of 'ordinary' perpetrators and even more 'by-standers' to do so. Not all of these may have embraced mass murder unanimously. Carrying out mass murder meant integrating different individuals and social entities, varying degrees of willingness to participate, different perpetrators, collaborators and accomplices, sadists, fanatics, cold-blooded killers, occasional doubters, more serious dissenters, and unwilling yet submissive collaborators into a single society. They came from different social backgrounds, classes, denominations, age-groups and regions. They were involved at different levels. At the same time, they all worked on establishing a new murderous society. Just as these historically variable social mechanisms and the lower levels of perpetrators, bystanders and collaborators have no place in the *Bloodlands* Manichaean focus on the few Great Men and large numbers of victims, the mutual fertilisation of state institutions and popular sentiments is not a subject of inquiry in this book.²⁴

Catching on to the massive turmoil experienced in eastern Europe after 1914, the concept of 'borderlands' has guided innovative inquiries into the interaction of state-directed and popular violence between different ethnic groups, which, in these regions, had often lived peacefully together for ages.²⁵ It was not only when Stalin or Hitler came to power and invaded their lands that they discovered their antagonisms, but much earlier, when the multi-ethnic empires that had ruled over these regions for centuries were first challenged by the nationalist movements – from the late nineteenth century – and they then, in and as a consequence of the First World War, dissolved and collapsed. These pre-1928 and pre-1933 experiences of mass death, brutal occupation and rapid political change generated unknown cultural, political, social and economic destabilisation. The Great Men theory and the statistical (rather than analytical) approach to mass killing that govern the narrative of *Bloodlands*, however, block any insights into the (possibly locally and historically different) ways these traditions laid ground for or could be exploited by Stalinist and Nazi terror.

The politically most sensitive aspect of the interaction of state-directed violence and popular violence was local collaboration, in particular in the Holocaust. Although no type and no degree of local collaboration is alone able to disqualify the Germans' responsibility, substantial research has shown how a broad variety of local help and local interest in annihilating the Jews facilitated the Holocaust all over East Europe

²⁴ 'Plunder and social advancement' as (sort of universal?) concomitant of mass killing is briefly mentioned only in the conclusion of the book, 395.

²⁵ See the project description of *Borderlands: Ethnicity, Identity, and Violence in the Shatter-Zone of Empires Since 1848*, Watson Institute for International Studies, Brown University, <http://www.watsoninstitute.org/borderlands/> (last visited 12 May 2011).

(and other parts of Europe as well).²⁶ People denounced their Jewish neighbours to the Germans; they were ready to take possession of their Jewish fellow citizens' properties; they gazed on or applauded when the Jews were rounded up, carried away or murdered; and in many cases they gratefully accepted the chance to initiate massacres. Whereas Snyder's book rightly and widely shows how even the East Asian diplomacies of the two dictators mattered for the destiny of 'bloodlands', the issue of local collaboration in the 'bloodlands' is not systematically analysed at all. It is occasionally and briefly addressed, among others in a six-page survey on the different attitudes Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Poland and the Ukraine observed towards the German invasion in the summer of 1941 (pp. 189–95). This survey at least touches on the crucial equalisation of Jews and Communists both in contemporary East European views on the Soviet occupation and in Nazi propaganda: 'The Nazi line was that suffering under the Soviets was the fault of the Jews, and it found some resonance. With or without German agitation, many people in inter-war Europe associated the Jews with communism' (p. 194). Finally, two pages of the conclusion (pp. 397–9) downplay 'local co-operation . . . as just as predictable as obedience to authority, if not more so', excuse 'local policemen serving with the Germans' as having 'little or no power' (p. 397) and obfuscate the entire phenomenon by stating that 'there would have been little collaboration' if 'people had served regimes only by following their own prior ideological preferences' (p. 398). Contrary to these speculations, the prominence and popularity of both Christopher Browning's book on German Police Battalion 101 and Jan T. Gross' book on the Polish town of Jedwabne result from their evidencing that there was never any automatism of obedience to authority or of local collaboration when it came to the massacre of Jews; individuals, groups and communities always had choices.²⁷

Snyder's book does not *deny* local collaboration in Nazi terror and genocide in East Europe. Rather, the book's strategy is twofold: it *marginalises* collaboration (and thus invites the abovementioned nationalist reading) and universalises it as a byproduct of state-organised mass killing. Either way, a whole plenitude of detailed local studies in the Holocaust in East Europe is ignored, and with them the quest for local differentiation of the phenomenon. Any further questions – on the types, degrees and meanings of spying and informing under Stalinist versus Nazi terror regimes,²⁸ on other precursors of or equivalents to the local collaboration in the Holocaust, or

²⁶ For instance: David Gaunt, Paul A. Levine, and Laura Palosuo, eds, *Collaboration and Resistance During the Holocaust: Belarus, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania* (Berne: Peter Lang, 2004); Martin Dean, *Collaboration in the Holocaust: Crimes of the Local Police in Belorussia and Ukraine, 1941–1944* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000); Leonid Rein, 'Local Collaboration in the Execution of the "Final Solution" in Nazi Occupied Belorussia', *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, 20 (2006), 381–409; Bartov, 'Eastern Europe as the Site of Genocide', 571–7. For a (cruel) anecdote on how the desire for community and purification fuelled local collaboration, see Kühne, *Belonging and Genocide*, 80–1.

²⁷ Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992); Jan T. Gross, *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

²⁸ See, for instance, Sheila Fitzpatrick and Robert Gellately, eds, *Accusatory Practices: Denunciation in Modern European History, 1789–1989* (Chicago University Press, 1997).

on the different ways the two terror regimes worked on local levels – are not even posed.

Snyder is right in calling for more attention to be paid to the violent history and terrible suffering of those parts of East Europe that have been marginalised from mainstream history for too long. But this history of the most victimised and most marginalised part of Europe still remains to be written.²⁹

²⁹ An excellent contribution to this task is Alexander V. Prusin, *The Lands Between: Conflict in the East European Borderlands 1970–1992* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).