Who remembers the Poles?

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BLOODLANDS: EUROPE BETWEEN HITLER AND STALIN
by Timothy Snyder.
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'WHO, after all, speaks today of the annihilation of the Armenians?' Adolf Hitler asked his generals in 1939, as he told them to 'close your hearts to 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 such a 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 Nazism's genocidal ambitions in Eastern Europe. A month before the invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, leading German military, economic and agriculture officials, following the direction indicated by Hitler and Göring, adopted a 'Hunger Plan' that prescribed the removal of food supplies from the areas shortly to be conquered, in order to feed German troops and civilians; the inhabitants of eastern Poland, the Ukraine and Belarus were to be left to starve. This was soon trumped by a more ambitious plan, pursued by the SS chief, Heinrich Himmler, and officially adopted just over a year later. According to the General Plan for the East, 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 85 per cent of Poles, 64 per cent of Ukrainians and 75 per cent of Belarussians would perish in this way.

As Timothy Snyder reminds us, the Nazis made a start on this scheme of racial annihilation with 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 Red Army 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 the 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 murderous in his pursuit of a utopian programme, different though Stalinist Communism might have been from the hierarchical racist ideology of the Nazis. Up to five million people, mostly Ukrainians, were sacrificed to 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 transmutation of Stalin's vision from social revolution to patriotic defence of the Russian homeland led to the forcible deportation of millions more – Poles, Volga Germans, Crimean 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 the western fringes of Russia – as Europe's 'bloodlands'. This was where the vast majority of Europe's Jews lived, 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, resulting 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 vented 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, scapegoating played a role in Stalin's terror, but so did his desire to create a new elite by eliminating the old, and his determination to modernise the country at all costs. These policies weren't confined to the collectivisation campaign in the Ukraine, but were directed against the entire population of the Soviet Union. Snyder's claim that the people of Soviet Russia were far less likely to be touched by Stalin's terror than national minorities in the 'bloodlands' doesn't stand up to scrutiny. The starvation policy of the early 1930s was directed not specifically against Ukrainians but against kulaks, allegedly well-off peasants, who included many inhabitants of Soviet Russia – and Ukrainian peasants were themselves incited by Stalin's political police to kill the more prosperous Don Cossacks in their thousands.

Other groups too, such as Kazakh nomads, were starved in huge numbers. Stalin's purges affected millions of Russians; the death rate of 10-15 per cent Snyder cites for the inmates of the Gulag is given by Robert Conquest in his classic *The Great Terror* as a minimum, exceeded many times over in some years; citing official Soviet documents, Anne Appelbaum records that a total of 2,750,000 people died in the camps and exile settlements under Stalin, again most likely an underestimate. The vast majority of these, as of the more than 28 million Soviet citizens subjected to forced labour in Stalin's time, were Russians. Snyder's relentless focus on Poland, Belarus, the Ukraine and to a lesser extent the Baltic states, and the large claims he makes for the victimisation of their inhabitants, sidelines 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 'Reinhard' 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 ghettoes 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 Belsen' (they did not; Belsen was not a concentration camp to which people were sentenced but a holding facility, or *Aufenthaltslager*, which gained its notoriety 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 1941 about the best way to defeat the Soviet Union, based on the realisation among 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 Snyder himself concedes 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 on 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 1990s 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 satraps 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 subsequently distanced himself from it.

Snyder portrays the Nazi decision-making process as far more clear-cut 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 European, even global scale of the Nazis' intentions towards the Jews that marked out the genocide 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 the beards of Orthodox Jews in Poland and forced them to perform gymnastic exercises in public until they dropped; they made Jewish girls clean public latrines with their blouses; they performed many other acts of ritual humiliation that they did not force on their Slav prisoners, however badly they treated them in other ways. The Slavs, 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 and a quarter million 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 200,000 mentally handicapped and sick Germans by Nazi doctors gets a brief paragraph; 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 fascist regime in Croatia, the 380,000 Jews killed on the orders of the Romanian government, and further afield still, the tens of thousands of Spanish Republican prisoners executed by the Francoists 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 Croatians 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 genesis of the Final Solution, is that Snyder isn't seriously interested in explaining anything. What he really wants to do is to tell us about the sufferings 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 same phrases and formulations are repeated over and over again in an almost incantatory 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 statistics, counting with an implausible exactness the numbers of the deported and dead, make it difficult to do this. As if he realises the dehumanising effect of his approach, Snyder at 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; then, in a cheap rhetorical trick, in the opening paragraph of the final chapter, entitled 'Humanity', he restores their identity to them by giving us their names. But merely 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 at either end of the book, a paragraph that covers no fewer than five individual victims. They remain essentially without human contours, as do all those whose fate is mentioned in this book: just names, no more. As a result the insertion of their stories into the narrative seems merely gratuitous. 'The Nazi and Soviet regimes turned people into numbers,' Snyder says at the end of the book: 'It is for us as humanists to turn the numbers back into people.' But for all the self-congratulation exhibited in this portentous exhortation, and in the sentimentality with which he briefly recounts the stories of individual victims, he fails in this task. To succeed, he would have needed to explore the lives of his emblematic victims in far more detail, using diaries, letters, personal testimonies, on the model of Saul Friedländer's recent, deeply moving *The Years of Extermination*.

Equally anonymous are the men 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, nothing more.

Snyder claims that his purpose in describing 'all of the major killing policies in their 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 all have a common setting. And to assert that they are the central event in the whole of European history is rhetorical overkill, 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. Despite the widespread misapplication of Hitler's statement about the Armenians, few claims advanced in Snyder's book are less plausible nowadays than the assertion that 'beyond Poland, the extent of Polish suffering is underappreciated.' In fact, we know about the events Snyder describes already, despite his repeated assertions that we don't. What we need is not to be told yet again the facts about mass murder, but to understand why it took place and how people could carry it out, and in this task Snyder's book is of no use. □