

Snyder and his Critics

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Adding critical background to the interview of Timothy Snyder, also published today on *Books and Ideas*, Jacques Sémelin reviews the recent criticisms addressed to his book, *Bloodlands*. The following note is based on articles published in two journals, which have organised recent debates around the book, *Contemporary European History* (May 2012) and *Le Débat* (November 2012).

Reviewed: Timothy Snyder, *Terres de sang, L'Europe entre Hitler et Staline*, traduit de l'anglais par Pierre-Emmanuel Dauzat, Paris, Gallimard, 2012, 710 p., 32 €

There are some books which change the way we look at a period in history: *Bloodlands* is one of them. Some twenty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Timothy Snyder's work is contributing to the transformation of our conceptions of Europe's recent history. It seems as though he has catalysed a new collapse inside his readers: not of a physical wall, but of "mental walls" – or at least, he seems to have managed to open up some substantial holes in them. Does anyone remember this? After 1989, people spoke less and less about "Eastern Europe", and more and more about Central and Eastern Europe: the former division of the old continent into East and West was forgotten. Geography took over once more from a political differentiation between two ideological "blocks". Snyder's work is part of this transformation, starting with the very term he chooses to refer to his object of study: from his introduction, he tells us that he wants to offer a "human geography of the victims" in this Eastern-Oriental space where the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany came to dominate and confront each other. It is a well-known fact that Poland, the Ukraine, Belorussia and the Baltic countries were some of the most severely affected by repeated massacres perpetrated by these two totalitarian regimes against, among others, supposed counter-revolutionary enemies and Jewish populations.

In order to describe these serial killings – which, for the most part, were effected through starvation and mass killings – Snyder ignores state and national boundaries, so that he can examine these monstrous events within the context of a larger regional framework. He is made all the better able to adopt this approach by the fact that he is not mired in the ideological categories of the Cold War, which led to the comparison between Nazism and Communism. He has a quite different aim: to show the interactions between these two totalitarian regimes, whose empires overlapped in the regions he studies. In doing so, he is contributing to decompartmentalising the knowledge of Holocaust scholars and Slavic scholars: he thus enables a connection to be established between work on the Shoah and work on the crimes of Communism, and integrates both into one and the same historical and memorial narrative. Snyder is also able to successfully carry out this intellectual and moral performance because he is extremely proficient in Eastern European languages, which allows him to draw on works (untranslated into English) by a new generation of historians in these

countries. Snyder is therefore a ferryman of knowledge, or rather an exceptional “storyteller” of these mass executions: he brings them together into a creative narrative synthesis, hence the feeling of “newness” that is experienced by his readers, including those who thought they were already well-informed about these tragedies.

While observers on the whole all join in paying tribute to Snyder’s *tour de force*, they nevertheless don’t hold back from subjecting him to several incisive criticisms. One of the most virulent of these has come from historian Omer Bartov, who, during the 2000s, initiated a collective project entitled *Border lands*, with a similar objective to that of Snyder. The results of this enterprise, which was several years in the making, have just been published¹. In his review of Snyder, Bartov claims that, while his work may constitute an “admirable synthesis”, it does not fundamentally introduce any new ideas (“The book presents no new evidence and makes no new arguments. Facts and interpretations are culled from established authorities”). But if this is true, how are we to interpret the international success of this book, which was praised by the *New York Review of Books* from the very beginning? And how can we explain that this well-documented text should have given rise to numerous comments from journalists and historians? It would be interesting to carry out a comparative study of the reception of *Bloodlands* since its publication, first of all in the countries it covers; this is something we asked the author to discuss in the interview he gave us (which will be published tomorrow on *Books & Ideas*).

A questionable chronological breakdown

The first problem raised by Snyder’s critics is connected to his chronological construction of events. The fact that he starts his narrative with the famine of 1932-1933 has raised objections. For example, Jörg Baberowski accuses Snyder of not having taken into account both the consequences of the First World War and of the civil war in the nascent Soviet Union: “For the bloodlands were not, of course, a given. They emerged from the First World War and the Russian civil war, when a remote agricultural area turned into a battlefield and the struggle for power was resolved through armed force. In other words, the stage was set before the Bolsheviks and Nazis seized and devastated it.”

Similarly, Dan Diner regrets that Snyder has not integrated into his analyses the legacy of Polish-Russian hostility and of the war of 1919-1920 between Poland and the Soviet Union. According to him, Snyder should have mentioned these in order to partially explain the Soviet crimes in Kayn and Stalin’s decision not to intervene in 1944 during the Warsaw Uprising against the German occupier. Christian Ingrao expresses similar dissatisfaction in terms of the “chronological starting point”: Snyder could have started his analysis in 1914, by integrating into it the violence committed during the Great War: “Cossack abuses in Eastern Prussia, anti-German pogroms in the big cities of the Russian empire, the massive displacement of the Volga Germans, the huge massacres involved in the battles of manoeuvre warfare, massive flows of refugees into the towns (hundreds of thousands in Warsaw) seem to us to be part of the subject matter.” And why not, he adds, go even further by going back to 1905, i.e. to the great peasant revolts which shook Russia and the Ukraine? As we can see, Snyder’s critics do not necessarily focus on the same earlier events. But they do all agree on one point: going back in terms of chronology would have allowed him to offer a more complex analysis of the facts recounted in his book.

¹ Omer Bartov and Eric Weitz (Ed.), *Shatterzone of Empires: Coexistence and Violence in the German, Habsburg, Russian and Ottoman Borderlands*, Indiana University Press, 2013.

An arbitrary geographical delimitation

There is thus a geographical outlook at the heart of Snyder's approach. Proof of this is provided by the thirty or so maps that illustrate his narrative, and which, among other things, indicate the sites of mass murders. But several commentators stress that the delimitation of these "bloodlands" is arbitrary. "For no reason," observes Annette Wieviorka, "Snyder does not include all of the old area inhabited [by Jews] in the space he has chosen, since he leaves out Bukovina and its capital, Czernowitz, even though these too are 'bloodlands'. Part of [these], but not all of them, underwent a double occupation, both by the Nazis and the Soviets. [Others] were subjected to the famine organised by the Soviet authorities, but not all of them. Thus, the Southern part of these lands, which was located within the Austro-Hungarian Empire, experienced a different history." She observes that Snyder hardly mentions this, and does not explain the causes of such differences. Nor does he take into account other regions which could well have fallen within his field.

For why exclude the Caucasus when part of its population also suffered from the famine of 1932-33? And why Serbia, which was subjected to the iron rule of the Nazis? And Romania? Why do some territories in the USSR end up in the *bloodlands* and not others? We are not provided with any explanation. Peter Lagrou has rightly noted that: "The 'bloodlands' establish a perimeter which can be contested and to which other perimeters and other interpretations can be opposed." Some commentators are much more severe: they consider that what Snyder refers to as "bloodlands" does not in reality have any meaning to the extent that such a definition arises out of the author's artificial judgement.

A quantitative approach to violence which should be treated with caution

This rough delimitation of the "bloodlands" necessarily gives rise to a debate over the numerical values of the violence that occurred there. Snyder puts forward the figure of 14 million people assassinated by the Nazi and Soviet regimes. But Bartov notes that his methods of calculation are debatable. In reality, this is often the case. Our own experience at the [Online Encyclopaedia of Mass Violence](#) bears witness to this fact: it is rare that everyone can agree on a reliable assessment on the numbers of victims of a massacre. We are always working with rough orders of magnitude; and this question of the exact number is very often the subject of debates rooted in issues of memory.

Going beyond the problem of numerical values, another criticism is directed at Snyder: that he does not go beyond this quantitative vision of violence. "His restrictive definition of murderous policies raises doubts," notes Dariusz Stola. "His estimate of fourteen million dead only takes into account people killed within the framework of deliberate policies of mass murder. As a consequence, he is excluding, among others, all those who died as a result of abuse, of diseases or of malnutrition in concentration camps or during the deportations, or even while fleeing from the armies (even when these armies were deliberately pushing people into having to flee)."

What we can term "mass violence" thus goes far beyond mass murders per se. Thomas Khüne has a similar perspective, and furthermore accuses Snyder of giving too reductive an interpretation of mass murders when he holds that they are solely dependent on the will of Stalin or Hitler. According to him, "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." Ultimately, the

authors come to question the relevance of the framework for analysis that is developed in *Bloodlands*.

The weakness of the analysis of interactions

On this issue, of all the reviews, that of Marc Mazower is one of the most interesting. The author of *The Dark Continent*² welcomes the fact that Poland is at the heart of Snyder's work, as a "buffer zone" between the USSR and Nazi Germany. It is true that Hannah Arendt did not see the importance of the interactions between the two Nazi and Stalinist regimes as generators of violence. But today, he notes, Anglo-Saxon historians allow us to make steps forward in this direction. Mazower finds Snyder's approach innovative: "Snyder's approach is thus fresh and needed and draws on the recent turn to geopolitics in both fields. His Polish interest in particular allows him to make interesting observations on the Soviet fear of encirclement, and he reminds us of some important zones of activity where Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia did indeed interact." But according to him, this approach to the interactions does not go far enough: "Yet while the book has many virtues, the fine-grained exploration of the modes and occasions of inter-connection between the two regimes is not among them." He thus deplors the absence of an in-depth analysis of anti-Jewish violence in the East of Poland and in the Baltic states during the first weeks of the German occupation, which can in part be explained by the memory of the Soviet occupation, an analysis that has been made by Jan Gross³.

This lack of local players is also deplored by Dariusz Stola: "Another debatable exclusion of Bloodlands," he says, "is that of mass murders carried out by third parties, in other words by agents other than Nazi Germany and the Soviets. [...] Snyder leaves out mass murders perpetrated by agents of the state, or others, in the region – Baltic, Polish, Ukrainian or others. Part of these massacres were massive: this applies for example to the extermination of three hundred thousand Jews by the Romanians on the territory taken from the USSR, or to the hundred thousand or so victims of Ukrainian nationalists who died in the anti-Polish actions of Volhynia and of Galicia. The reasons for excluding these events is not clear."

Likewise, Jörg Baberowski is convinced that: "[w]ithout the excesses of Stalin's dictatorship it is impossible to understand the Nazi response." Unlike Bartov, he believes that Snyder is introducing new thoughts to the debate, but criticises the author's lack of coherence and the great number of questions left unanswered. According to him, Snyder does not really explain why the crimes of some people should have led to the radicalisation and justification of the crimes of others, nor why these crimes were committed in these "bloodlands".

More criticism of this type could be made. In our opinion, these are the most embarrassing for Snyder. Indeed, he defends his book, including in public conferences, as a fundamental contribution to this analysis between the two totalitarian systems. In particular, he puts forward the contribution made by his Chapter IV, "Molotov-Ribbentrop Europe"; but reading this chapter leaves the reader unsatisfied as to the relevance of his analytical writing about these interactions.

² Marc Mazower, *The Dark Continent: Europe Twentieth Century*. London: Penguin Press, 1998. Translation: *Le Continent des ténèbres. Une histoire de l'Europe au XXe siècle*, Brusells, Complexe 2005.

³ Jan Groos, *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland*. Princeton University Press, 2001. Translation: *Voisins: Un pogrom en Pologne, 10 juillet 1941*, Éditions Fayard, 2002.

Additional criticism is provided above all by authors whose work focuses on the history and memory of the extermination of Western Jews. No-one really opposes the fact that Snyder is moving the centre of gravity of the Shoah to the East. Nevertheless, this still raises some issues. Thus, Henry Rousso, while he acknowledges the “major historical jump” made by *Bloodlands*, asks this question: “Why does Hitler, if he is indeed the only one who should be taken into account, decide [...] to kill so many Jews in France, in Belgium or in Holland – in this latter country, they were exterminated in equivalent proportions (75%) to the Jews in the territories of the East? [...] How do we move, at the end of 1941, from a mainly territorial logic – the conquest of *Lebensraum* – to a mainly racial logic, which is no longer solely focussed on the Eastern space? And what indirect influence did the German-Soviet interaction have at this moment on the fate of the Western Jews?”

In the many debates and forums held around his book, Snyder has reacted to some of his critics, including in the interview he gave us. His new project is to write a general history of the Holocaust, starting from its epicentre: the territories of Eastern Europe.

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Purifier et Détruire. Usages politiques des massacres et génocides by Jacques Sémelin has just been published in paperback by Seuil (coll. Point Essais) and is also available in English from Columbia University Press.

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