

Review

Reviewed Work(s): *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin* by Timothy Snyder

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In 1846, a large-scale rebellion of the Polish nobility aimed at the restoration of independent Poland. In Galicia, the rebellion was suppressed less by the Austrian army than by self-armed peasants, whether Polish or Ruthene. This jacquerie for which, all Polish accusations to the contrary, the local Habsburg authorities were not responsible, seems to have been a case of genuine class struggle from which the government profited as did the idea of a unified Galicia. As opposed to this dramatic event, the murder of Viceroy Andrzej Potocki, in 1908, by a Ruthene student nationalist foreshadowed the Sarajevo murder. After all, Potocki and Franz Ferdinand both favored reconciliation among Slavs. In Wolff's words, the two "assassinations expressed the violent rejection of the politics of Habsburg rule . . . and both reflected national tensions that rendered Habsburg rule ultimately untenable" (332).

By the late nineteenth century, the historian Mikhailo Hrushevsky used Galician history to articulate Galician Ruthene demands; others connected contemporary Galicia to medieval Halych and foresaw a Ruthene-dominated Galicia. The collapse of Austria-Hungary in 1918 led to the temporary absorption of Galicia by Poland, whose soldiers at first engaged in cruel pogroms. This led to considerable and justified nostalgia for a Galicia ruled by a benevolent emperor, primarily among such Jewish writers as Joseph Roth, who wrote in German; Shmuel Yosef Agnon, who wrote mostly in Hebrew; and Bruno Schulz, who wrote his literary pieces in Polish. Yet with Schulz's death, in 1942, as a victim of the Holocaust, there disappeared the last illusion about a country called Galicia in which Poles, Ukrainians, Jews, Germans, and others lived, if not in harmony, at least with some respect for the rights and passions of the others.

Perhaps it would have been better if in the late eighteenth century an enlightened despot would have understood that the only way to establish a rational government in the long run would be drastically to separate the ethnic groups in Galicia, as well as elsewhere. It might well have spared the inhabitants of Galicia the horrifying massacres and violent expulsions of the post-World War II period. But who in Joseph II's age cared about the diverse Slavic dialects?

Certainly, as Wolff so admirably demonstrates, Galicia proved infinitely more beneficial to its inhabitants than the successor states that claimed to be based on the self-determination of nationalities and that murdered each other's inhabitants with abandon, unless they combined forces to murder Jews.

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Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin. By Timothy Snyder. New York: Basic Books, 2010. xix, 524 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Maps. \$29.95, hard bound.

A book dedicated to exploring the most violent period in the twentieth century that zooms in on the region where much of this violence occurred and that presents Stalinism and Nazism as having goaded each other to ever more murderous actions can be expected to attract much attention. Timothy Snyder's ambitious new monograph, *Bloodlands*, has indeed been widely reviewed in the press, is being translated into several languages, and is having a significant impact on its numerous readers' understanding of World War II, the Holocaust, and Stalinist crimes.

A point of departure for this discussion can be the *Historikerstreit*, the German historians' controversy of the mid-1980s. The debate was set off by German political scientist Ernst Nolte's assertion that, apart from the gas chambers, Nazi policies and practices of mass killing were merely a copy of Soviet ones. German genocide, argued Nolte, was a fearful response to the perceived threat of communist violence. The *Historikerstreit* introduced no new documents; it merely rearranged existing knowledge to reproduce an old argument. The Nazis had already presented themselves as a bulwark against Judeo-Bolshevism; early postwar Germans depicted the Wehrmacht's war in the east as a struggle to save civilization. Antisemitism was said to have been provoked by Jewish overrepresentation in communism and the professions and by western Jewish leaders' threats of war against Nazism. And in any case, the argument went, with so many other cases of genocide and atrocity, it was time to stop obsessing about the Final Solution.

A quarter of a century later, *Bloodlands* seeks to fit the Holocaust into an appropriate historical context by examining the struggle between the Third Reich and the USSR from the perspective of the civilian populations caught in between. The book presents no new evidence and makes no new arguments. Facts and interpretations are culled from established authorities: Christian Streit on the Soviet prisoners of war (POWs); Christian Gerlach on "hunger politics"; Nicolas Werth and Lynne Viola on the Ukrainian famine; Dieter Pohl and Karel Berkhoff on German-occupied Ukraine; Peter Longerich, Christopher Browning, and Andrej Angrick on the Holocaust. Admirably synthesizing this voluminous scholarship, Snyder stresses that most civilians (and POWs) died in the east. While not a revelation for scholars of the period, this argument may appear startlingly new and shocking to nonexperts. Snyder's designation of this site of mass killing as "bloodlands," though evocative, lacks any historical existence: none of the protagonists would have recognized it, and it excludes large numbers of victims on both sides. And his penchant for citing vast figures to the last digit cannot be reconciled with the notorious unreliability and contentiousness of such figures.

The book's claim to novelty relies on its juxtaposition of systems and events. By describing the sequential or simultaneous actions of the Soviets and Nazis in the "bloodlands," Snyder suggests the impact they had on each other. The book begins in 1933, thereby implying a link between Adolf Hitler's "seizure of power" and the mass famine in Ukraine. Yet this single largest mass crime by Stalinist Russia, chillingly described in the book, along with the Great Terror on the eve of World War II, had little to do with German policies. *Bloodlands* then examines the genocide of the Jews within the context of Nazi crimes against other populations, continued maltreatment of civilians in the Soviet Union, and partisan warfare. Reiterating Götz Aly's 1995 thesis, Snyder argues that the single-minded focus on the genocide of the Jews came only after Nazi plans for resettling eastern Europe collapsed in the face of Soviet resistance (251–52). But whether one accepts this argument or not, surely a defeat of the USSR would not have prevented the Holocaust.

Another suggestive juxtaposition is of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising in 1943 and the Polish Warsaw Uprising the following year. Yet the book elides the most important and painful aspects of the fraught Jewish-Polish relationship, already explored by the Jewish historian Emanuel Ringelblum before he was denounced by Poles and killed by Germans. Snyder explains the Polish Home Army's refusal to supply the Jews in the ghetto with more than a few pistols by its fear that it would thereby be arming the communists (284) and suggests that "almost certainly" (302) more Jews fought in the Polish uprising than in the ghetto. But he

misses an opportunity for a more useful comparison between Catholic Polish indifference to the destruction of the ghetto and Red Army indifference to the destruction of the Polish Home Army. Even as he alludes to Czesław Miłosz's condemnation of Polish attitudes toward Jews in his poem, "A Poor Christian Looks at the Ghetto," he makes the opposite observation that "no earthly agent could sort the Jewish ashes from the Polish ones" (297). Snyder's concern with Poland's tragic fate prevents him from delving into the murkier aspects of Polish responses to Jewish persecution: Polish peasants' gestures of fingers across the throat to Jews on trains to Treblinka are depicted as merely informing them of their imminent slaughter (266); antisemites in the Home Army are said to have been a minority (286); the widespread phenomenon of denunciation and blackmail is not discussed; comparisons with nations that offered Jews more sympathy and help are not made.

This exercise in historical juxtaposition allows for implying arguments rather than spelling them out. The vivid descriptions of famine in Ukraine clearly indict Iosif Stalin's regime; but the assertion that this was a deliberate anti-Ukrainian policy is not proven, non-Ukrainian victims are downplayed, and no link is made between the Holodomor and the Holocaust. Nor is it clear why *Bloodlands* does not begin with the vast pogroms of 1919—missing from the brief outline of that period (6)—or with the brutal Jewish policies of the Russian army in World War I, especially considering the book's opening statement that "the origins of the Nazi and the Soviet regimes, and their encounter in the bloodlands, lie in the First World War of 1914–1918" (1).

The link between Soviet and Nazi policies can be established most clearly for 1939–44, when the "bloodlands" were subjected to several Soviet and German occupations. In Snyder's account of this titanic clash between two brutal regimes, the occupied populations are depicted largely as victims, helpless pawns who, even when they resist or collaborate, do so within severe constraints that greatly limit their choices. This perspective deprives the narrative of the complexity and ambiguity of those times, suppresses the intensity of local fraternal conflicts, and elides the communal massacres that constituted so much of daily existence, especially in 1941–44. We find no mention of Jedwabne, the town made infamous by Jan T. Gross's book *Neighbors* (2001), where in summer 1941 the Polish inhabitants murdered their Jewish neighbors. The vast massacres of Jews by their Ukrainian neighbors throughout eastern Poland at that time receive scant attention and are swiftly related to prior Soviet crimes (196). Snyder's attempts to explain why Ukrainians butchered their Jewish neighbors, joined the German-controlled police, enrolled in the SS, or served as extermination camp personnel seem quite feeble in view of the violence these men perpetrated.

Thus the Trawniki men (mostly former Soviet Ukrainian POWs who assisted the Germans in killing operations and the extermination camps) are often described side by side with the Jewish police, with the latter being more numerous during roundups in ghettos (e.g., 259, 263–65). The motivation of collaborators—a category Snyder generally questions—such as local policemen, and of Jewish policemen in ghettos, is described as emanating from a similar "negative opportunism," defined as "the hope to avoid a still worse personal fate" (397–98). For Snyder, "almost none of these people collaborated for ideological reasons" (397), and because they were so low on the Nazi scale that only "the Jews were below them . . . their behavior requires less (not more) explanation" than that of German perpetrators. To be sure, Snyder recognizes that local policemen and Trawniki men often killed Jews, whereas the Jewish police, whose corruption and callousness is referred to in some detail (263–65), were eventually almost all

killed as Jews (269). Yet this fatal distinction is not integrated into any explanatory scheme. It is as if all were more or less equal participants in the same undertaking whose ultimate product happened to have been dead Jews.

In Snyder's view, the violence of the era can be attributed in large part to Hitler, Stalin, and their henchmen: "Stalin oversaw the starvation of millions . . . killed his own citizens no less efficiently than Hitler killed the citizens of other countries . . . Stalin . . . seized food from the starving peasants . . . Hitler . . . deprived Soviet prisoners of war of food" (x). Thus the reader gains little insight into what, for the populations of these "bloodlands," became their existential reality during the war, a vast fraternal conflict, where Poles and Ukrainians were killing each other and both became involved in, and often profited from, the mass murder of the Jews. Here traditional prejudices and radicalized ideologies of integral nationalism, as well as resentment and greed, motivated people who may have had little taste for either Hitler or Stalin.

The book is also permeated by a consistent pro-Polish bias and fails to critically engage with Polish policies and attitudes. It thus neglects to mention that Madagascar was viewed by Polish politicians as a site for exporting their Jews long before the Germans ever thought of it (112; Saul Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews*, 1997, 1:219 and n. 22); it omits the fact that the October 1938 expulsion of 17,000 Jews with Polish citizenship from Germany to Poland was instigated by the Polish decision to strip citizenship from people living abroad and that the expelled Jews were not allowed into Poland for days, were left between the lines without food or shelter, and eventually either ended up in a Polish concentration camp or were allowed back into Germany (110; Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews*, 1:267–68); and it makes no reference to the postwar pogrom of Kielce, analyzed in Jan T. Gross's recent book *Fear* (2006). Greater use of Jewish memorial books and testimonies would have revealed the deeply traumatic effect on survivors of massacres, denunciations, and betrayals by Polish and Ukrainian neighbors, colleagues, classmates. This intimate, gratuitous, often sadistic violence cannot be explained merely by resorting to Stalin and Hitler. Yet without the willing collaboration of thousands of locals who proclaimed the cleansing of their land of Jews as a national duty, the mass killing of the Jews by the Germans—who were very thin on the ground in those "bloodlands"—might not have been nearly as total.

Conversely, partisan resistance to Nazi occupation is presented as a contributor to brutalization rather than its consequence. For Snyder, "partisan warfare was (and is) illegal," and because partisans, "like the occupier, must subsist on what they take from civilians," they "bring down, and often intend to bring down, the occupier's retaliation against the local population" (233–34). Indeed, as Snyder sees it, partisan warfare was a tool in the hands of both Hitler and Stalin, serving as "the supreme occasion for each leader to tempt the other into further brutality." Thus "Stalin encouraged guerilla actions in occupied Soviet Belarus" precisely because "it would bring down massive reprisals against his own citizens," while "Hitler welcomed" partisans as providing "the opportunity to kill 'anyone who looked at us askance'" (392). This presentation of the vast partisan movement as a Stalinist ploy and Hitlerite tool misconstrues the nature of the war in the east, where rage and hatred against the occupier, combined with local and national patriotism, ultimately displaced animosity toward the Soviet regime. The extraordinary sacrifice of Soviet soldiers, partisans, and civilians was ultimately motivated not just by coercion and calculation but also by choosing what came to be seen as the lesser evil.

Bloodlands also tends to present German and Soviet soldiers' conduct as simi-

larly criminal for similar reasons. As Snyder writes, “right after the invasion” of the Soviet Union, “the Wehrmacht began to starve its Soviet prisoners”; it also supported and participated in the murder of the Jews (e.g., xi, 175–76, 189, 200, 242). German army brutality in Poland and the USSR is related to the fact that “soldiers had been prepared to see the Polish civilian population as devious and subhuman” (121), and that they “often held essentially the same views as the SS” (206), making the Wehrmacht “inseparable from the Nazi regime” (178). German troops also indulged in raping Jewish women (123), at times as a prelude to murder (230), with some units becoming “known for systematic rape” (303). As for the Red Army, it “followed a dreadfully simple procedure” during the march on Berlin, raping women and seizing men for labor. One reason for this brutal conduct was that “Soviet soldiers . . . were reading” the “hate propaganda” of Il’ia Erenburg: “‘From now on,’ he had written in 1942, ‘we have understood that the Germans are not humans’” (316–17).

By equating partisans and occupiers, Soviet and Nazi occupation, Wehrmacht and Red Army criminality, and evading interethnic violence, Snyder drains the war of much of its moral content and inadvertently adopts the apologists’ argument that where everyone is a criminal no one can be blamed. He opens by stating that “the bloodlands were where . . . Hitler and Stalin’s imperial plans overlapped, where the Wehrmacht and the Red Army fought, and where the Soviet NKVD and the German SS concentrated their forces” (xi); and he concludes: “As so often, Stalin’s crimes were enabled by Hitler’s policies” (318).

Long ago, Vasilii Grossman and Arthur Koestler noted the irony that Europe was liberated from Nazism only by subjecting half of it to communism. Indeed, one group’s liberation was another’s occupation: some experienced Nazi conquest as liberation from Soviet rule, and the arrival of the Red Army as communist occupation. Others felt delivered from hell by Stalin’s troops, though they were soon disillusioned. Some recalled German rule with nostalgia. We know of the crimes committed by the communists after 1945; we can only guess, but with a fair degree of certitude, that Nazi rule would have been even more destructive of nations and cultures and would have likely made impossible the revival of eastern Europe we saw after the fall of communism. In this somewhat qualified sense we can still say that we are the beneficiaries of a horrendously bloody yet ultimately just and necessary struggle against Nazism.

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Nabokov, Perversely. By Eric Naiman. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010. viii, 305 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Illustrations. \$35.00, hard bound.

Speak, Nabokov. By Michael Maar. Trans. Ross Benjamin. London: Verso, 2009. viii, 148 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$24.95, hard bound.

Like any well-established field, Nabokov studies has its share of stagnant conformity, so challenging it is a healthy critical stance—especially if the challenge is grounded in a quest that is both critically reasonable and open-minded. What these two recent books on Vladimir Nabokov have in common is that they indeed bravely locate themselves outside the mainstream of Nabokov studies by going into territory neither Nabokov nor Nabokov loyalists would approve of. For Eric Naiman, it is reading Nabokov’s texts almost entirely through sex; for Michael