Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin

Review Number: 2036
Publish date: Thursday, 15 December, 2016
Author: Timothy Snyder
ISBN: 9780099551799
Date of Publication: 2011
Price: £56.08
Pages: 544pp.
Publisher: Vintage
Publisher url: https://www.penguin.co.uk/books/1074401/bloodlands/
Place of Publication: London
Reviewer: Tom Lawson

Tim Snyder’s ambitious Bloodlands set out to place the murderous regimes of the Third Reich and Stalin’s Soviet Union in their overlapping European contexts. Snyder proceeded from the central observation that the annihilation fantasies of Hitler and Stalin were to a large part played out in the same space: ‘in the middle of Europe, in the middle of the twentieth century, the Nazi and Soviet regimes murdered some 14 million people. The place where all of the victims died, the bloodlands, extends from central Poland to western Russia, through Ukraine, Belarus, and the Baltic states’ (pp. vii-viii) And yet, Snyder argued, these histories were seldom considered together – not least because the Holocaust overshadows all as a result of its dominance in modern memory cultures, preventing understanding of a wider culture and history of murder and annihilation.

To be asked to review such a text nearly seven years after its original publication is to an extent to be asked not only to consider the success of the book in meeting these fundamental aims, but its impact on a wider field and understanding of its subject matter. Snyder set out to change our understanding of the Bloodlands – so, to put it crudely, how far did he succeed? My answer to that question needs of course to be read with an understanding of my own position as a reviewer – I am a Holocaust scholar who has become progressively more concerned with setting my own understanding of the Shoah within a wider context of the history of genocide, and as such read Snyder’s book with these concerns at the forefront of my mind.

However, we cannot assess the impact of Snyder’s analysis before we understand what exactly Bloodlands set out to achieve. In some senses, as Snyder acknowledges, Bloodlands was a history for its own time. It is, self-evidently, a post-Cold War project (not least because in practical terms it has access to insights that were unavailable to scholars before the collapse of the Soviet Union). But perhaps more importantly it is a post-Holocaust analysis too. By which I mean it is an analysis cast after the Holocaust had been cemented within a wider historical consciousness. As with most books, some of the claims as to the novelty of approach in Bloodlands were somewhat overblown – especially as regards the originality of Snyder’s attempt to place Nazi violence in a wider context. The attempt to set the Holocaust in a history of violence has for example been a consistent part of scholarship since even before the Second World War ended. The history of Holocaust historiography is in some senses a history of a discourse precisely concerned with the question of context – from the idea that anti-Jewish policy needed to be understood alongside German
population policy more generally; to efforts to understand Nazi violence as part of a history of totalitarianism; to the assertion that the Holocaust’s only context was the history of a peculiar form of antisemitism; to the reassertion of a totalitarianism thesis and the suggestion thatNazism was a response to Soviet violence. All of these were efforts to position the Holocaust in a particular context. So, when Bloodlands set out to place the murder of Jews in a wider history of violence within Europe, it was following in a rich tradition. The novelty was therefore not so much the aim of contextualisation but in the choice of context – in this case a geographical space.

Snyder’s aim was to reassert the Holocaust as part of the history of that space. In doing so he was effectively arguing, and I have some sympathy with this view, that the image of the Holocaust that predominates was one without historical and geographical grounding – as such he wished to assert that the murder of Jews was a part of European history against a culture which had ‘stripped’ the Holocaust from its geography.

Snyder reasserted that European history of the Holocaust by putting Nazi anti-Jewish violence in the context of wider German violence against European populations, especially Poles, and also in the context of Soviet violence in the same spaces, for example in terms of the Holodomor. For the non-specialist there is much to learn in the first part of the book about the terror-famine in the Ukraine which Snyder convincingly renders as a kind of self-fulfilling bureaucratic fantasy as well as a human tragedy.

Yet Snyder’s attempts to think about Nazi and Soviet violence together is also from the outset somewhat curious, and the events he wishes to relate Nazi violence to appear somewhat arbitrary. First, understanding the Nazi and Soviet dictatorships together is of course not in itself novel – such efforts had been a Cold War staple. Second, Bloodlands begins in the Soviet Ukraine because it was this campaign that Snyder argues ushered in ‘Europe’s era of mass killing’. Even if we were just to confine ourselves to Snyder’s designated Bloodlands this seems an unlikely claim – ignoring the violence of the Great War or the pogroms that followed it. But if we consider an extended geographical context, then it of course ignores the huge violence and population movements associated with the collapse of the multi-ethnic Empires in Europe and on its borders throughout the first part of the century. When one considers that the only thing that really links Snyder’s analysis of the Holodomor and the Holocaust is the spaces in which they (to an extent) occurred, then it becomes difficult to understand why Snyder chose this particular point of contextualisation. Or to put it another way, Snyder draws only geographical links between the two tragedies – he does not attempt to find even partially overlapping explanations or implications for them.

Indeed, Snyder’s book might be more properly be described, at times, as an act of juxtaposition rather than contextualisation or comparison, because throughout Bloodlands one is left rather searching for the analysis that links either the hugely violent events described or the lists of the numbers of the dead which follow each other relentlessly (with a precision that pushes the boundaries of plausibility past breaking point). How do we join the dots between the events described? For example, Snyder (following Christian Gerlach) offers a long description of German hunger policies and their relationship, ultimately, with the murder of Jews as ‘useless eaters’. These hunger policies are linked then to Soviet famine policies from a decade previously, for example he writes that ‘Goring … behaved strikingly like Kaganovich … Both men laid down instructions for a food policy that guaranteed death for millions of people’ (p. 170). Yet we are given nothing to causally link these two approaches to food policy.

At the end of the book Snyder describes the 14 million murders perpetrated in the Bloodlands as European history’s ‘central event’. This designation is striking, event singular not plural. It is also rather jarring – precisely because at times it is difficult to discern the causal or analytical framework in which we are being invited to understand this litany of violence in such a fashion. The answer to the question what renders it a single event is unanswered.

It is also striking that Bloodlands offers very little analysis of the actual geographies in which the violence took place, beyond the designation of the space. If we have recently witnessed the spatial turn in Holocaust studies, it is not really evident in Snyder’s book even though it is explicitly concerned with a particular
space. Perhaps the discovery of geography has come late to Holocaust studies, but we know, thanks to the work of scholars such as Tim Cole, that the landscape itself was an important protagonist in Holocaust history. Such an analysis is not present here. At the same time, it is also difficult to find an investigation of the people within the Bloodlands. Who carried out the 14 million murders that define this history; what motivated them? To put it bluntly why did they kill? There is little analysis to be found here, despite the voluminous and sometimes heart-breaking detail around some of the violence. For the most part, our perpetrators are the familiar leaders of this destruction.

If a thesis is put forward in Bloodlands at all, it is where Snyder suggests that Nazi and Soviet violence interacted. At different times the twin totalitarian devils prepared the ground for one another. Hitler and Stalin co-operated in their violent campaigns against Poland – similarly targeting Polish leaders in an effort to effectively destroy the Polish nation. Nazi violence in Poland was in part ‘thanks to Stalin’ for example. In the Baltic states, Soviet policies paved the way for mob-violence against the Jews in 1941 to the extent that Snyder describes them as a ‘joint production’ between the Nazi and Soviet states. The Bloodlands were literally the lands between Hitler and Stalin and as such the most violence occurred in a struggle for supremacy over and within those lands. Indeed, towards the end of the war Snyder argues that Stalinist violence was enabled by Hitler’s policies – for example the relationship between the attempted Germanisation of Europe under the Third Reich and the deportation of that German population at the hands of the Soviet Union.

The argument that it was in the interaction of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union that the most lethal violence occurred has two main implications for our understanding of the Holocaust according to Snyder. The first is in the rejection of the over-theorisation of Holocaust studies as he sees it – not least the idea that the Holocaust reveals (in general terms) something about the logic of modernity (or as Zygmunt Bauman described it, that it revealed the truth of modernity). For Snyder the very opposite is the case, Nazism and Sovietism were an attack on the European Enlightenment not a consequence of it. This is a theme that he recently returned to in his provocative history of the Holocaust entitled Black Earth which argues very clearly that the Shoah cannot be considered as a consequence of the development of the nation-state, perhaps the central story of modern European history, and the effort to remake such a state but in fact can only really be understood in terms of the absence of the state. It is clear Snyder can only go so far in his designation of the Holocaust as a part of European history.

Second, Snyder places great emphasis on the war-time context of violence against the Jews asserting, in a thesis that the late David Cesarani has continued, Snyder highlights the centrality of the relationship between the progress of the war, Germany’s military fortunes, and violence against Jews. He argues, in repetition of debates about decision making from the 1990s, that the Nazi Final Solution emerged in revenge for Nazi perception of their failure to win the war in the Soviet Union. As with so much of the scholarship on decision making for the Final Solution, Snyder’s thesis is markedly provisional here however. For example he writes: ‘Hitler’s decision to kill Jews (rather than exploit their labour) was presumably [emphasis added] facilitated by his simultaneous decision to exploit the labor of Slavs’ (p. 215).

Snyder is more willing to tie his understanding of the ‘central event’ of European history to the currents of European imperialism than to a more general modernisation or the emergence of nation states. He writes that the ‘answer to the question of 1941 [and why such murderousness developed] has less to do with the intellectual heritage of the enlightenment and more to do with the possibilities of imperialism’ (p. 156). Both Nazi and Soviet regimes dreamed of empire, and both saw within empire the same possibilities – namely economic security and self-sufficiency. As such, the violence that underpinned both regimes and the struggle between them can be realistically understood as part of the general history of European imperialism. This is a welcome argument, notwithstanding the links between that imperialism and the Enlightenment, but it is a contextualisation that requires a history beginning long before 1933, and as such Snyder really only begins to ask the question about how we might situate these events within our understanding of the violence exported from Europe rather than finding any particular answers.
All of the above suggest that *Bloodlands* was at best partially successful in illuminating what Snyder described as the ‘central event’ of European history, but what about its impact? How far has *Bloodlands* shaped or impacted understanding either within the academy or in terms of a wider public?

To deal with the latter first, this is an almost impossible question to answer, but I can offer some speculations. Snyder was in part motivated by what he felt were the limitations of a general understanding of the Holocaust in the 21st century despite the widespread acceptance of the importance of remembering these events. I would personally argue that the deficiencies in the general picture of the Holocaust that exist, for example in modern Britain, might be better understood as a consequence of that widespread memorialisation rather than despite it, but that is an argument for another day. It would be difficult to argue that works such as Snyder’s have had much of an impact however. In general terms understanding of the Holocaust remains shallow, and indeed in Britain we now have empirical evidence to support that view (in the shape of the Centre for Holocaust Education’s recent analysis of students’ understanding of the Shoah [2]).

Within this there is little evidence that Snyder’s fears that misunderstandings of institutions such as the concentration camps – which he argued were seen as the most diabolical aspects of the Nazi and Soviet regimes, when in actual fact the majority of the lethal violence of those regimes occurred within the *Bloodlands* beyond them – have been addressed. Auschwitz remains the central symbol of the Holocaust, for example, with little or no sense that the complexity of this institution is widely appreciated or the fact that before it began its operation the vast, vast majority of the victims of the *Bloodlands* had already been murdered. To be clear, that this culture of misunderstanding exists is the responsibility of us all – but works such as Snyder’s seem to do little to bridge that gulf. It is notable that David Cesarani’s posthumously published history of the *Final Solution*, while it offers a very different contextual analysis of the Holocaust, begins with a very similar analysis of the gap between popular and academic understandings of the Shoah, suggesting that little has changed.

In terms of scholarship, it is perhaps best to reflect that *Bloodlands* asked several of the questions that continue to detain scholars of the Holocaust in particular, and of mass violence more generally. The question of the context in which we should understand the genocide of the Jews remains the central concern for scholars of this period, even if answers are often widely and politically differentiated. As suggested above, the question of geography has been a major concern in Holocaust Studies’ spatial turn, and the role of landscape in shaping the history of persecution and mass murder is better understood now than it was when Snyder first speculated on the existence of the *Bloodlands*. Similarly, we see a steady stream of scholars attempting to assert the wider contexts for Nazi violence – in terms of the history of imperialism; the wider history of genocide or of inter-ethnic tensions beyond simply a history of German antisemitism. As such while Snyder did not provide many of the answers in *Bloodlands*, he did begin to ask the questions.

**Other reviews:**
- Guardian  
- New York Review of Books  
- New York Times  
- Wall Street Journal  
- Telegraph  

**Source URL:** [https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/2036](https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/2036)

**Links**
[1] https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/163450