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Bloodlands

Europe Between Hitler and Stalin

Timothy Snyder • Basic Books © 2012 • 524 pages

History

Take-Aways

- From 1930 to 1945, the Nazi and Soviet regimes murdered 14 million people in the “bloodlands” – from Estonia through Belarus to Poland and the Ukraine.
- To industrialize, Stalin needed a farm “surplus” to earn foreign capital to buy machinery.
- From 1931, “Gulag” camps jailed 18 million and killed 1.5 to three million people.
- Stalin believed that Ukrainian famines were acts of “betrayal” by corrupt local party officials, peasant saboteurs and Polish spies.
- As collectivization failed, desperate brigades of party activists ransacked the countryside, stealing seed grain, and raping and pillaging the peasantry.
- Stalin’s 1937-38 “Great Terror” murdered thousands, including 70,868 Ukrainians.
- Germany saw killing Jews as a substitute for battlefield losses, a victory within defeat.
- Himmler sent 20,000 troops into the bloodlands to kill all Jews in those territories.
- As the bloodlands changed hands, Soviet militia became Nazi collaborators, killing Jews to prove their allegiance.
- The brutality in Warsaw in 1944 illustrated the cruelty of German policy, but – when the Red Army stopped at the Vistula River – also foretold the Cold War.

Recommendation

So much has been written about the atrocities committed in Eastern Europe during the 1930s and 1940s – not to mention all the feature films and documentaries – that casual observers of history might think they already know this story. Then along comes Yale historian Timothy Snyder, who recasts the drama of the 14 million people starved, shot and gassed during a 12-year period. Snyder precisely documents how Stalin and Hitler utilized the “bloodlands” – the borderlands between their nations – to execute their genocidal plans. Snyder’s great contribution is to “turn the numbers back into people.” *getAbstract* thinks his meticulous history should be required reading, particularly for new generations who may not understand the full horror or impact of Europe’s greatest murder mystery. And what is that mystery? It is not who committed the crimes or why; that is mostly known from this source and many others. Rather it is how each victim faced death, often in the most cruel circumstances, and how the killers, millions of people, and their witnesses, millions more, lived with these crimes, and even justified them.

Summary

“Bloodlands”

With the end of World War I, Europe fractured, populations dispersed and emperors gave way to elected leaders. Eastern Europe, or the bloodlands, became a buffer between Germany and the Soviet Union. The territory stretched from the Baltics south through Belarus, Poland and the Ukraine. Here in the brackish currents of ethnicity, race and tribe, Stalin and Hitler pressed their ideologies and their dreams for empire – dreams that cost the lives of 14 million people.

“The one very large number that withstands scrutiny is that of the Holocaust, with its 5.7 million Jewish dead, 5.4 millions of whom were killed by the Germans.”

In 1932, Soviet collectivization and bad weather undermined food production. To meet government quotas, farmers had to surrender their seed grain, leaving them with nothing to sow for the next year. By that summer, in Kazakhstan alone, more than a million people had starved to death. Stalin saw “the starvation of Ukrainian peasants as a betrayal by members of the Ukrainian communist party.” He ordered his loyal, forceful administrators to fix the problem, but the bad times returned. In the “Soviet famines of 1933,” more than five million people starved to death, mostly in the Ukraine. Instead of benefiting from the revolution, peasants were recast as enemies of the state and divided into classes. The result was disruption, dislocation and barren fields.

“But this number...must be seen...as 5.7 million times one.”

Impromptu tribunals labeled more prosperous farmers “kulaks,” although the way people were labeled was inevitably highly subjective. The Great Terror in 1937 and 1938, the kulaks were executed, sent to concentration camps or otherwise hurled into “a single system known as the “Gulag.” The Gulag’s purpose was to stifle dissent and build a proletariat for a nation scrambling to reach the 20th century. Stalin sent this new labor force to build infrastructure projects like the Belomor canal, his dream link between the White Sea and the Baltic. More than 170,000 prisoners, often digging with bits of pottery or bare hands, completed 40

miles of man-made canal. It was too shallow and proved of limited economic value, but 10% to 15% of the laborers died.

Survival of the Fittest – and Most Treacherous

The World War II history of the bloodlands has three periods. From 1933 to 1938, the Soviet Union did the killing; from 1939 to 1941 – during the German-Soviet alliance – the two nations shared mass murder, and from 1941 to 1945, Germans were mostly responsible. In 1939, Hitler and Stalin both yearned for vast inland empires, not dependent upon faraway colonies. They believed in Darwinian progress: quick jolts of evolution triggered by violent conflict between races and classes – a far cry from the slow, orderly pace promised by the Enlightenment.

“Fourteen million is not a complete reckoning of all of the death that German and Soviet power brought to the region. It is an estimate of the number of people killed in deliberate policies of mass murder.”

The road to victory for both sides led through Poland; hence the decision to invade it together in 1939. This led to the murder of 200,000 civilians during the next two years. Soviets in the Katyn forest and other sites in Poland and the Ukraine killed most of the Polish intelligentsia. The Germans jailed starving Polish Jews in ghettos to await deportation to labor camps and, finally, to the notorious death factories at Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka, Chelmno, Auschwitz and Majdanek.

Operation Barbarossa

On May 23, 1941, weeks before Germany invaded the Soviet Union, German planners issued guidelines for a “Hunger Plan,” the first among various policies designed to kill vast numbers of people. The plan, a bizarre reflection of Stalin’s Five-Year Plan, imagined postwar Russia returned to the 19th century, with an agricultural economy and no big cities. When Germany’s attack on Russia began on June 22, commanders encouraged German troops to devastate, lay waste to and eliminate Soviet elites. Wehrmacht soldiers shot male civilians randomly, then shot women and soldiers trying to surrender. The soldiers used human shields and tried to implement the starvation policies of the Hunger Plan – designed to undermine Soviet modernization and spare German noncombatants from food shortages. As hopes for a quick victory turned to prayers for survival, expectations of living off the land were dashed. Three million German soldiers eventually found themselves in competition for the same resources as civilians at home.

“The tremendous majority of the mortal victims...never saw a concentration camp.”

In the opening months of the battle, the Germans took three million prisoners with no plan to care for them. Barbed-wire corrals offered no shelter or food. As Soviet prisoners starved, some turned to cannibalism. In the last 10 days of October 1941, 45,690 of the prisoners died of starvation; by year’s end, some 500,000 had starved. Operation Barbarossa was supposed to be a brief summer campaign, but within weeks the German invasion stalled. Leningrad fell under siege. Stalingrad became a vast, bombed-out ruin. Hitler diverted his forces away from Moscow toward the Ukraine. In an improbable miscalculation, German troops were unprepared for the coming winter.

Final Solutions

Himmler replaced the Hunger Plan with the “Final Solution,” initially planned for after the anticipated quick war in the East. As the front deteriorated, the Final Solution distracted citizens from the bad war news and fulfilled the Nazi desire to destroy all racial and ideological enemies. The Nazis exploited popular support against Russians in the bloodlands, particularly in the Baltics. The Nazis institutionalized killing Jews. The SS directed local commanders to work with collaborators to shoot as many Jews as possible. Arriving to supervise, Himmler ordered them to shoot women and children as well as men.

“Stalin was able to realize his fictitious world, but to restrain himself when necessary.”

On September 29, 1941, in Kiev, the Nazis brought together 30,000 Jews not yet deported and escorted them out of the city along Melnyk Street toward the Jewish cemetery. As Dina Pronicheva, then in her 30s, was walking with her parents, she could hear distant gunfire. At a checkpoint, with her mother’s urging, Dina insisted she was not Jewish. Her parents surrendered their valuables and walked on. German soldiers held Dina until sunset. Fearing she knew too much – Jewish or not – they took her to a forest ravine called Babi Yar. They told her to line up with the other captives above the ravine. She did not have to undress. When the first shots rang out, she plunged into the gorge, landing on top of layers of other Jews who had been shot earlier. She pretended to be dead. German soldiers later trod upon her as she lay on her back. The nearby voice of a small child calling for its mother became a message to Dina to survive, to find her own children. As night fell, she crawled out of the pit and escaped into the forest.

“Generalplan Ost”

The German general staff forecast 500,000 casualties on the Russian front by September, when they projected that their campaign would end. By late December, the war was still going on, with one million casualties. Hitler had planned to destroy Russia and then annihilate the Jews, but unable to do the former, he focused on the latter. Hitler portrayed Germany as the victim of Jewish cabals that united capitalist America and Communist Russia. Killing Jews became a substitute for battlefield losses, a victory within defeat.

“Hitler moved from one fictitious world to another and brought much of the German people with him.”

That autumn of 1941, Himmler sought ways to kill more Jews more quickly. Austrian Odilo Globocnik, an SS leader in the Lublin district, began to experiment with poison gas and its delivery systems in Belzec, Poland. Over the next year, the killing began in earnest. The Germans made no effort to hide or minimize what they were doing. The process of killing was intended as a warning and a vindication. In Minsk, the Germans staged a parade of Jews, wearing their finest clothes, waving Soviet flags, singing revolutionary songs and smiling at the cameras. The Germans marched them out of town into the woods, and shot them: 6,624 in all. By early 1942, the Germans had killed one million Jews in the bloodlands.

“Workers in Vologda questioned whether ‘the journey to world revolution’ had to pass ‘through the corpses of these children’.”

As the war in Belarus dragged on and killing became more widespread, anti-German partisans assumed a greater role. Some were Russian; others Polish and still others, Jewish. They rarely worked together, and saving Jews was not a common goal. Jews sometimes found themselves fighting alongside partisans who had been German collaborators leading them into the woods just months before. Meanwhile, the Germans were running out of people to kill in Minsk. By the end of 1943 they were sending the last trainloads west, to Poland, to a newly built death factory called Sobibor. It was all part of the grand plan, *Generalplan Ost*, intended to spread German culture and agricultural domination across all Europe. The plan depended on moving or eliminating entire populations to make room for new racial colonies. Operation Barbarossa failed, but it showed the Nazis they could exterminate Jews by the millions with no consequences.

The Euthanasia

Belzec was the model for Sobibor, and the program was the same. German police rounded up Jews from local ghettos and forced them to a camp where a largely Jewish workforce, under threat of death, maintained order. The Nazis killed with carbon monoxide from an “internal combustion engine.” Sobibor was so successful, so effectively managed, that in June the Germans built Treblinka. The director was a doctor, Irmfried Eberl. During the construction he wrote his wife, “It’s going very well for me. There’s lots to do and that’s fun.”

“On the way to the killing sites, prisoners would throw notes from the truck, in the hope that passersby would...convey them to their families...the notes would surprisingly often find their way to their destination.”

Eberl’s goal was to prove that his camp could kill more Jews than any other. He proved an ineffective commandant and brought more Jews to the camp than could be properly executed. Soldiers simply shot many of them and left their bodies to decay at the camp terminus. Franz Stangl, the SS administrator who replaced Eberl, took a more professional approach. In the fall of 1942, he reworked the camp’s aesthetics. He planted flowers and created the infamous train station with a clock and ticket counters, establishing a small string orchestra of condemned Jews. Soldiers sorted Jews, told them to undress, fold up their belongings and tie their shoelaces together. They called out attractive women and raped them before gassing them. Sometimes they saved a few men for labor. The whole process – arrival to cremation – took about two hours.

Warsaw’s Betrayal

Between September 1939 and January 1945, perhaps no city west of the old Molotov-Ribbentrop line suffered more than Warsaw. No city was so bombed, burned or betrayed by Russians and Germans. The Poles left Warsaw like an abandoned carcass to be devoured by German forces. On the east bank of the Vistula River, the Russian army watched as the Nazis destroyed the city. Stalin encouraged Polish anti-German resistance so the Germans could kill Poles for him.

“If German soldiers wanted to eat, they were told, they would have to starve the surrounding population. They should imagine that any food that entered the mouth of a Soviet citizen was taken from the mouth of a German child.”

In the final orgy of violence, Himmler was the city's master destroyer. He assembled the most ruthless units to do his bidding. He ordered troops to shoot combatants and noncombatants alike and to burn the city to the ground. No one was saved. Nothing was forbidden. The infamous Dirlewanger Brigade used women and children as shields and attacked three hospitals, including one with German wounded. The fighters brought nurses and doctors back to their camp, whipped and gang-raped the women, and hanged everyone from an impromptu gallows, all to the accompaniment of flute music.

"Without history, the memories become private."

The Germans killed 30,000 civilians during this Warsaw campaign. Soviets entered the city and took over where the Germans stopped, executing any Polish Home Army soldiers they could find. Retreating German units hastened Jews to labor camps in Germany; thousands died along the way and perhaps 300,000 more perished in the camps from starvation and neglect.

The Great Forgetting

Stalin gained from the horror in the bloodlands. After the war, various populations were deported and redeported from one country or region to another. All this movement helped muddle the causes of the calamity. This muddle undermines the idea of the Holocaust. Stalin claimed that the Soviets were victims; honoring that claim meant forgetting their atrocities against Jews.

"Only a history of mass killing can unite the numbers and the memories."

After the war, anti-Semitism raged once more in Poland – among other places. Residents blamed Jews for economic failure and cast them as agents of Western imperialism. Five million Jews were killed east of the Molotov line and the Germans killed five million non-Jews. Paradoxically, the Holocaust, which everyone agrees is so important to remember, has not found a secure place in European history.

About the Author

Yale University history professor **Timothy Snyder** specializes in the Holocaust and Central and Eastern Europe.



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