Looking Into the Abyss



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Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin. By Timothy Snyder. New York: Basic Books, 2010. 544p. $29.95.

In order to understand the forces that brought Hitler and Stalin to power and permitted them to commit almost unbelievable horrors, we must first appreciate how desperate times bring about entirely unpredictable political reactions. As stabilizing traditional institutions no longer seem to work, people become frightened and disoriented. They look for simple answers and turn to ideologies and leaders that might have seemed dangerously extreme in normal times. Wild ideas and extremist political entrepreneurs come to the fore precisely because they offer salvation.

There are many such situations today. For example in troubled Arab countries that have turned away from corrupt, failed regimes, there seems to be a tendency to turn toward reactionary forms of Islam, some of which promise only extreme repression and brutality. This is what happened in Yugoslavia when Serbs accepted the murderous regime of Slobodan Milošević, whose promise of national revival seduced enough followers to produce Europe's bloodiest war since World War II. Likewise, it is what happened in Cambodia in the 1970s, and in Rwanda in the early 1990s. Revolutionary situations that turn societies upside down do not always result in such horrors, but many do. Most of the worst political violence, past and present, has been produced by this deadly combination of failed institutions, desperation, and leaders willing to go to extremes in order to satisfy an unrealistic ideological urge to fix their world. We have yet to see whether such violence will reoccur if our current economic crisis spreads and plunges us back into a time like the years after World War I, and the Depression of the 1930s.

As social scientists, we have not analyzed such situations well. In suggesting that successful revolutions are necessarily progressive events in which a new and better class takes power from an old and obsolete one, several generations of politically leftist historians have blinded themselves to the negative outcomes of the French Revolution, and even more, to the horrors perpetrated by Leninism, Maoism, and their offshoots.[1] By insisting that revolutions must lean in a certain direction to meet the approval of Marxist theory, a good many social scientists and historians have refused to believe that fascism, particularly as practiced in Nazi Germany, was truly revolutionary; yet, Hitler aimed to create a very original kind of political and economic system, and was willing to engage in limitless brutality in order to achieve his goals.

In fact, it has been mostly historians, rather than those in the disciplines that claim to be more "scientific," who have led the way toward a better understanding of how a simplified and utopian ideology that comes to power risks producing a nightmare result. There are exceptions, of course, notably Benjamin Valentino (2004) in political science and a few others. But mostly, those in the social sciences who have tried to understand the evils resulting from strong ideologies have been too politically biased. An example is Michael Mann (2005), who blames democracy for genocides and leaves questions surrounding Hitler, Stalin, Mao, and Pol Pot unanswered. Rather, it has been historians like François Furet (1999), Gérard Prunier (1995, 2009), Eric Weitz (2003), Ben Kiernan (1996, 2007), and Frank Dikötter (2010) who have led the way; great journalists such as Philip Gourevitch (1998) have also contributed greatly.

If we as social scientists want to better analyze the monstrous evils perpetrated by various kinds of ideological extremism, we need to better incorporate into our models the knowledge provided by major historians. We have to accept the reality that currently fashionable theories seeming to explain how various class and individual preferences operate in routine, bloodless politics fail badly when the extraordinary happens. And we have to remember that just because the politics of revolutionary and ideological extremism rarely succeed, when they do the consequences may be both cataclysmic and long lasting because they leave an institutional legacy of their own that may only be overcome through more violence.

This makes the widely and very well reviewed book by Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin,* one we should all read. Hitler and Stalin were

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responsible for causing at the very least 25 to 30 million deaths, and probably many more. Snyder scrupulously limits the estimate of those killed to avoid some of the exaggerated claims made in the past, and closely analyzes the 14 million non-combat deaths that these regimes caused in the lands situated mostly between what was then Germany and the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic—today's Russia (though some parts of far western Russia are included because they were occupied or besieged and starved by the Germans during the war). These lands were chiefly pre-World War II Poland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Belarus, and Ukraine. Snyder calls this territory the "Bloodlands," and the term carries theoretical significance, for he argues that while many works of historical scholarship have documented the mass murders that Hitler and Stalin perpetrated in this area, in general these works ignore the complex dynamics of interaction and competition between these two murderous regimes that played out on this territory and caused so many non-combat deaths. As Snyder argues, the focus of his analysis ". . . arises not from the political geography of empires but from the human geography of victims. The bloodlands were no political territory, real or imagined; they are simply where Europe's most murderous regimes did their most murderous work" (xviii).

Snyder does not include other parts of Europe and the Soviet Union where many were also killed, though his numbers do incorporate the deaths of those deported from these areas into the Bloodlands. Nor does he include battle deaths. He limits most of his detailed analysis to the years from 1932 when the Soviet-induced famines began, through the time in 1940 to 1941 when Hitler and Stalin as temporary allies ruled almost all of Europe, to 1945. But this does not diminish his book, and indeed by focusing on the theme of "Bloodlands" he has produced the best ever account of what happened in the most deeply affected parts of Europe.

Snyder does not find persuasive the widely admired explanation provided by Hannah Arendt 60 years ago[2] that the alienation of modern mass society was responsible for the mass murder, largely because so much of the killing did not take place in the depersonalized, bureaucratized settings she emphasized (p. 380–381). Nor is Arendt's famous characterization of Adolf Eichmann in her 1963 book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil,* correct. She accepted Eichmann's own defense, presenting him as a mere faceless bureaucratic cog who followed orders and hardly understood what was taking place. That may have fit her own theories, but in reality Eichmann was a capable and ideologically motivated official who fully embraced the idea that exterminating Jews was necessary for German success.[3] Bureaucracies had to be staffed by ideologically committed managers and leaders in order to carry out mass murder; and if modernity is responsible in some ways, as Zygmunt Bauman has suggested (1989), why is such mass killing not more widespread? In a recent, widely publicized and important book that opposes those who want to blame the modern age for the catastrophes of the mid-twentieth century, Steven Pinker (2011) has argued that on the contrary modernity has made killing and all forms of cruelty less common, not more so. He may go too far in suggesting that the nightmarish events we are discussing here were just anomalies; yet, his impressive marshaling of statistics to prove his point makes it hard to believe that modernization is the essential culprit, because it has not widely reproduced the mass murders experienced by the Bloodlands. That required specifically evil ideologies, and as Tony Judt has pointed out, whatever her historical and theoretical errors, Hannah Arendt's main focus on the problem of evil in our times redeems her work.[4]

Snyder shows that Stalin was not responsible for as many deaths as was previously thought, and only (as if "only" seems the right word) about a million died in his concentrations camps, the gulag outside of the Bloodlands. On the other hand, Snyder documents how in those lands 3.3 million, mostly Ukrainian peasants, were deliberately starved to death in 1932–33 during Stalin's collectivization. Kazakhstan, where another 1.3 million also died during the Stalinist collectivization drive of the early 1930s, is mentioned but not included in the more detailed analysis of what happened in the Bloodlands. Later, 300,000 mostly ethnic Poles (living in the western Soviet Union) and Ukrainians were shot as part of the great purges of 1937–38 in the Bloodlands out of some 700,000 who were killed in the entire Soviet Union during that period. When Hitler and Stalin divided up Poland and occupied it from 1939 to 1941, 200,000 more Poles were shot.

In these same lands, Hitler had 5.4 million Jews gassed or shot. 4.2 million Slavs (mostly Russians, Belarussians, and Ukrainians, including Soviet prisoners of war) were deliberately starved to death. 700,000 mostly Belarussian and Polish civilians were shot by the Germans as "reprisals" for partisan actions against their occupying forces. (These numbers, carefully taken from archival research by Snyder and many others that he cites, add up to the 14 million who died in the Bloodlands. The summary numbers are on p. 411, but the details make up the bulk of the entire book.) Without minimizing the horror of it all, Snyder leaves out the Jewish and non-Jewish deaths in occupied Western Europe. For however traumatic these were, the numbers pale in comparison to what happened in the Bloodlands.

Snyder hits exactly the right note when he writes toward the very end of his book that both the Soviet and German projects, especially in Poland, were aimed at "de-Enlightenment" (p. 415). Referring specifically to Poland, both occupiers from 1939 to 1941 were intent on decapitating Polish society by destroying its intellectuals and political elites, those most steeped in Enlightenment European

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culture who might have led resistance. This led Stalin to order the massacre of Polish officers at Katyn and the Nazis to close Polish secondary and university institutions.

Stalin and Hitler did their best to eradicate most of the humanistic and ideological tradition of tolerance and respect for human rights championed by the Western Enlightenment. They did accept the technological advances resulting from the scientific revolution fostered by the Enlightenment, and even some limited aspects of its classical artistic expressions. What they utterly rejected was the openness of political thought and moral philosophy that had originally come with that liberal Enlightenment. To be sure, attacks against "Jewish science" on the one hand and "bourgeois science" on the other, slowed both Nazi and Soviet scientific progress, but not as much as was previously believed. It proved quite feasible to continue to accept most natural science (though biology was far more subject to interference than other sciences) while rejecting the rest of the Enlightenment, a fact that should remind us not to take for granted the inevitability of the ultimate triumph of liberal values in states captured by ideologies that strongly reject them.[5] Both Hitler and Stalin firmly believed that their ideologies were based on science, one "biological" and the other on Marxist analysis of historical class relations. In his writing and conversations, Hitler repeatedly stressed his belief that Jews were the spreaders of biological diseases, and that by mixing with others they deliberately polluted strong races. In a recorded dinner conversation with Heinrich Himmler, the head of the SS that carried out much of the killing in the Bloodlands, Hitler said in February 1942:

> The discovery of the Jewish virus is one of the greatest revolutions that have taken place in the world. The battle in which we are engaged today is of the same sort as the battle waged during the last century by Pasteur and Koch. How many diseases have their origin in the Jewish virus![6]

As for Stalin, far from being the intellectually mediocre bureaucrat that Leon Trotsky tried to discredit, all the evidence we have about him shows that he was deeply committed to what he believed to be Marxist science, and in fact spent much energy trying to force Soviet science and philosophy into an acceptable Marxist paradigm.[7]

It was this emphasis on being "scientific" that has prompted arguments about why ultimately the Enlightenment was responsible for totalitarianism's worst excesses. This misses the point. An essential part of the Enlightenment was liberalism as it used to be understood, meaning a respect for the individual's freedom to reason and the protection of individual rights to property and security, a refusal to accept any dogma as absolute just because it is official, and a rejection of any imposition of belief from above. Liberalism in that sense was central to the thinking of Enlightenment writers from John Locke to Baron de Montesquieu to Adam Smith and Immanuel Kant. That is also precisely what both Hitlerism and Stalinism not only absolutely rejected but also tried to exterminate. Both placed their elite group's interests far above any individual rights, their dogma over any possible doubt, and both operated with complete certitude that it was their right to kill those who might stand in their way. Theirs were ideologies that had roots in the perversions of Enlightenment thinking that first came to the fore during the French Revolution's reign of terror, but they took them much further.

Nazism and Communism both saw history as endless struggle. In one case it was a matter of races struggling against each other, and in the other, a struggle of economically based classes. Both thought that those who were against them were absolutely evil, and that their own righteous side was leading the world toward a utopian future. But in order to reach that promised land, an apocalyptic struggle against the enemy had to be won at any cost. Both essentialized the enemy so that every member of the hated race or class was evil incarnate, and responsible for any setback that occurred on the march to utopia. All of them, therefore, had to disappear lest they block the desired outcome, and indeed, the more resistance there was, the more of them had to die.

Snyder makes it painfully clear that there was no mercy for apolitical innocents. For Stalin, peasants resisting confiscation of their food, or even shirking work because they were weak from starvation, were defined as saboteurs, and so were their families. Therefore, it was strictly forbidden in Ukraine to help them. For Hitler, Jews were the cause of the war that he had begun and then started to lose, even as he was destroying millions who were entirely helpless. Slavs were meant to be docile slaves and were deemed guilty for resisting. Both Hitler and Stalin bizarrely saw themselves as the victims of those they were killing, and spun conspiracy theories consistent with their ideologies to explain anything that went wrong in their plans. They both demanded more deaths to overcome obstacles. In Stalin's case, quotas were handed down from above to make sure that the requisite number of victims were murdered. Futhermore, in 1933 he sealed off Ukraine and forbade peasants from obtaining train tickets in order to escape, deporting to the gulag even those who obediently worked on collective farms if they failed to produce enough (pp. 46–49).

Of all the terrible stories about the collectivization of the Ukraine told by Snyder, perhaps the most heartrending is the one told by a surviving woman who witnessed her parents and five siblings die. Her little brother hallucinated as he was dying of hunger, thinking he could see food growing in the ground where there was none. Each night before going to sleep he declared, "Now we will live," until one morning when he awoke and finally declared, "Now everything dies."

From 1937 to 1938, Stalin went beyond mere class warfare to ethnic cleansing. Minorities in border areas,

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particularly Poles, were accused of being spies and traitors and huge numbers were killed or deported from the western Soviet Union. The same went for Koreans near Manchuria, even though the assumption that that they would welcome Japanese rule in Siberia amounted to an absurd stereotyping of a whole ethnic group. Snyder also shows that this was only a prelude to even wider episodes of Soviet ethnic deportations and killings in the Caucasus and the Baltic republics during and right after World War II. For those who think that somehow Marxism precluded ultra-nationalism, ethnic prejudices, and murderous policies based on these, Stalin's record stands as proof to the contrary. Even his rising anti-Semitism that culminated just before his death in 1953 with the infamous "doctors plot" was justified by the assumption that Jewish perfidy was linked to the Jews' class positions and "cosmopolitan" (that is, treacherous allegiance to something outside his control) predilections. For this Stalin could rely on traditional Russian anti-Semitism and his own hatred of Trotsky, Kamenev, Zinoviev, and all the other Jewish intellectuals who had been close to Lenin and had looked down on him as a less worldly colleague. But he could also look to Karl Marx's 1844 essay "On The Jewish Question," which contains some of the nastiest anti-Semitic tropes in the history of modern political thought.

Hitler's atrocities have been widely known for many years, but Snyder explains that because they first came to light in areas liberated by the Americans and British in Western Europe, a somewhat underreported version prevailed for a long time. It was in the Bloodlands, all of which fell under Soviet domination at the end of the war, that most of the killing took place in unbelievably brutal ways, but the Soviets minimized the Jewish component of this and of course covered up their own killings in these same areas.

What is perhaps most revealing about the Nazi murders is the widespread sadism that accompanied them. One of the few surviving witnesses to the massacre of 33,761 Kiev Jews (according to German records) at Babi Yar on September 29 to 30, 1941 noted that many had been beaten while being herded to their deaths and that people "were already bloody as they were to be shot" (p. 202). Many, especially babies, were tossed into the pits of the dead while still alive and were buried under corpses covered with dirt. Once a certain ideological framework is in place, anything goes, no matter how senselessly cruel.

Hitlerism and anti-Semitism had their defenders in the democratic West before 1939, though often, particularly in the United States, this was more a result of sheer hatred of Jews than an admiration for fascism.[8] Today, however, despite the persistence of some Holocaust deniers and marginal anti-Semites, it is only in some Muslim societies that one can find such widespread anti-Semitic beliefs that minimize the severity of the Holocaust and support Nazi plot theories about Jewish-Zionist conspiracies to rule the world.[9]

Stalin's policies, however, were not only accepted by the far left in the West, but continued to be justified, or at least excused, and still find distinguished apologists. In 1932, Walter Duranty of the *New York Times* won a Pulitzer prize for his reporting on the Soviet Union in which he claimed that stories about a Ukrainian famine were lies (p. 56). There was also the famous British Fabian socialist Beatrice Webb who was pleased that Stalin's later purges had "cut out the dead wood" (p. 74). She typified a large number of Western admirers of what was going on in the Soviet Union at that time.[10] What is perhaps even more astonishing is that excuses continue to be made for Stalin among the ideologically committed who still idealize Marxism, despise capitalism, and wish for a future socialist utopia. The brilliant Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm, who has never denied his Communist idealism,[11] could bring himself to condemn the worst of Stalinism in only the most elliptical of ways. In a revealing interview in 1991 he did say that the purges were ". . . terrible and inhumane and indefensible . . . " but soon after, in response to a question about collectivization in the same interview, he answered, "I know practically nothing about this." He then expatiated at length about how Russia was then a backward peasant country surrounded by enemies, and that the New Economic Policy, ". . . drowned what remained of the revolution in a huge sea of petty bourgeois independent producers who might well regenerate capitalism."[12] So, one of our era's greatest historians of the modern age somehow claimed ignorance about and then later defended these events on the condition that socialism could continue to flourish.[13] That is, of course, exactly what Stalin believed as well.

This highlights the great theoretical importance of Snyder's work. Strong ideologies shape the world views of major transformative political figures, and belief in those same ideals is what inspires their followers. If their leaders obtain power, the acolytes will work to implement their goals. But the more utopian the ideology, and the farther it strays from humane Enlightenment skepticism about fixed dogmas, the more likely that it will founder in practice because social reality will intervene.

To recognize that this was Friedrich Hayek's major intellectual finding in *The Road to Serfdom* ([1944] 1994), one need not accept the economic fanaticism of his own later economic thinking or that of his conservative and libertarian followers today. Hayek misunderstood social democracy because in the West it remained democratic and continued to follow liberal Enlightenment values, but he was entirely correct about communism. The project could not succeed because it ran counter to human and social reality, and thus required ever greater amounts of violence to keep it going. When the terror diminished, the failures became too evident to keep the system alive.

The same thing was true of Nazism, not because, as Hayek claimed, it was socialist, but because its racial utopia

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required non-Aryans to accept being exterminated or enslaved forever. Resistance was inevitable. As Snyder and others have pointed out, many Ukrainian and Belarussian peasants were happy to see German soldiers liberating them from Stalinist starvation and terror. However, these sentiments were short lived, as they soon discovered that under Nazi rule collectives would be maintained to extract food from them, and that they were condemned to slavery and slow starvation (p. 160–163). If Hitler had treated the conquered Slavs better, he might have won his war; but of course that ran against the very basis of his racial ideological utopia. Likewise, we could suppose that Stalin's outcomes would have been more successful, and certainly less painful had he maintained the New Economic Policy and let some limited capitalism flourish, but doing so would have required him to abandon his utopian dreams.

That communist utopias inevitably led to mass murder is now well known, though the extent of killing has varied widely.[14] Mao Zedong's Great Leap Forward resulted in as many as 45 million deaths, and it was much closer than once believed to being like the violently enforced Stalinist famines of the 1930s. Mao's fantasy about an agrarian utopia was disastrously stupid; moreover, in order to carry it out large numbers were deliberately killed.[15] The Khmer Rouge mass killing of roughly two million—about a quarter of the population of Cambodia from 1975 to 1979—was also based on an ideological fantasy about an idyllic collectivized rural utopia. Combined with theories about Khmer racial purity, it uniquely blended the worst of Maoism, Stalinism, and Hitlerism.[16]

We cannot understand such atrocities if we fail to take into account the power of seductive ideas that promise utopian solutions and place blame on scapegoats. Nor can we neglect the role of individual leaders whose convictions and persuasive talents put them at the head of ideological fantasies. Such leaders need followers who accept their ideas and who will become the elite if power is achieved. Today there exist many religious, ultra-nationalist, racial, and other paranoid anti-Enlightenment theories on which to base resentful ideologies that promise a utopian future. In any chaotic situation in which established institutions no longer work properly, there will be followers, and opportunities will arise for such leaders to mobilize. It has happened before, and Snyder's book details two of the worst cases in history. Unfortunately, such events can very well happen again, but if we understand past examples, we might see future ones coming before they blossom into full scale horrors.

Notes

1 Furet 1999.
2 Arendt 1951.
3 See Delpla 2011 and Lipstadt, 2011.
4 Judt 2008, 73–92.
5 On Soviet science see Graham 1972 and Pollock 2006. On Nazi science see Walker 1995 and Macrakis 1993.
6 Hitler 1973, 332.
7 Pollock 2006.
8 On British support for Hitler, see Griffiths 1980 and Taylor 1996; for France see Weber 1994 and Jackson 1985; for the United States see Baldwin 2001 and Dinnerstein 1994, chapters 5–6.
9 This is directly related to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. See Roy 2004, 49.
10 Furet 1999, especially 125–208.
11 See Hobsbawm 2002.
12 From 1921 to 1928 the New Economic Policy allowed markets to flourish in order to rebuild the Russian economy, but this was ended by Stalin when he decided to initiate forced industrialization and finance this by feeding the cities with confiscated peasant production, something that inevitably led to the famines that killed so many millions.
13 Hobsbawm 1991, 16–17.
14 Courtois et al. 1999.
15 Dikötter 2010.
16 Kiernan 1996.

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