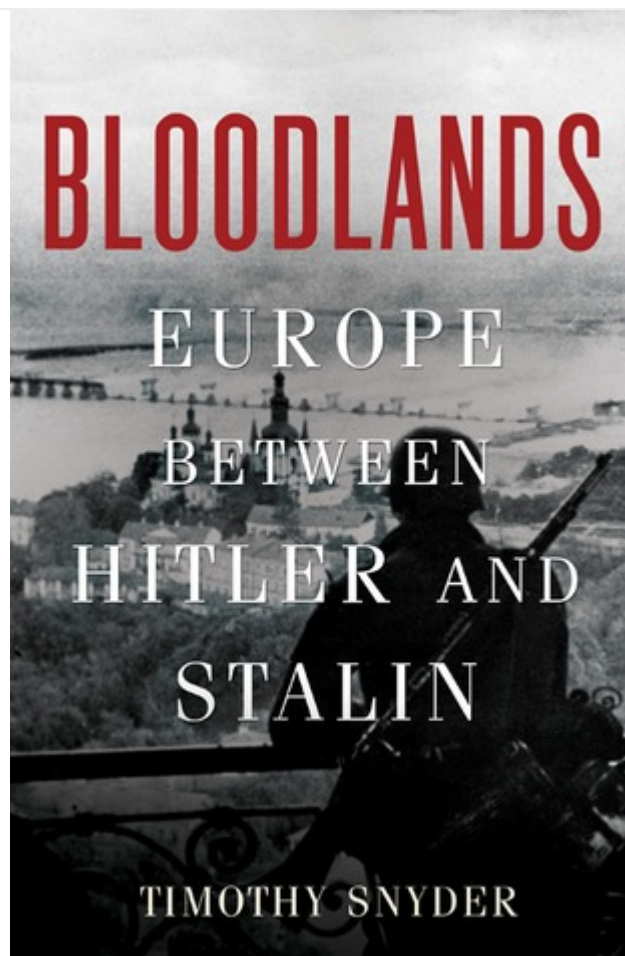


# {essays in history}

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## Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin



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Reviewed Work(s)

*Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin.* By Timothy Snyder (New York: Basic Books, 2010). Pp. 524. Cloth, \$29.95.

Timothy Snyder's *Bloodlands* lie within borders unrecognizable as those of any past or present Eastern European state. In the 1930s and 1940s, however, these bloodlands became central to both Hitler's and Stalin's master plans for Europe. Each dictator sought to create a utopia nourished by the celebrated soil of the bloodlands, and while neither succeeded, the two did transform this part of the continent, reducing in turn the people of the bloodlands into dehumanized and disposable bodies. Snyder condemns the totalitarian cruelty that turned people into numbers, and balances his own detailed calculations of mass killings with the narratives of those whose stories somehow survived. Snyder strives to tell these stories with numerical precision, yet at the same time, he accords dignity to the range of human experiences within these territories, by respecting the individuality of each of those who died. As such, his book serves as a successful model for other historians struggling to write about mass suffering.

Over twelve years, two competing regimes committed fourteen million murders throughout a rich tract of Europe, disfiguring these territories into the Bloodlands. While much has been written about the Second World War's vast and violent eastern front, Snyder identifies a new category of victim neither confined to the period of war, nor limited to predictable geography. Snyder's victim is not defined by ethnicity, language, or religion, but rather by the space he inhabited: the part of Europe brutalized by *both* Nazi and Soviet police power between 1933 and 1945. Most existing scholarship on Nazi and Soviet occupation considers either the two separately or by contrast; Snyder's exclusive treatment of those territories where the two regimes first bordered, then crossed, and finally replaced one another provides a nuanced perspective openly engaging this extensive literature. Given this focus, Snyder's book creates a new physical and figurative center from which to consider not only Nazi-Soviet interaction, but also conceptions of mass killing in Europe during the twentieth century.

Snyder's bloodlands begin in central Poland, end in western Russia, and span Ukraine, Belarus, and the Baltic states. These lands have long

experienced the ebb and flow of changing political borders, and many communities throughout the bloodlands were multiethnic, multilingual, and included Jews, Catholics, and Orthodox Christians. Such mixed communities provided fertile ground for occupiers seeking real and imagined enemies. The Nazis and Soviets found victims in abundance in the bloodlands, but Snyder's count of fourteen million is a selective number that includes most, but not all, of those killed throughout the territories. Snyder excludes the deaths of soldiers on active duty, as well as the civilian casualties of military bombing campaigns. He includes neither those who died from forced labor serving the Third Reich nor those who expired while digging canals in the Gulag. Snyder does not want his reader to associate mass killing with concentration camps, where those imprisoned had at least a chance to survive. Snyder's fourteen million were never given such an opportunity: they were purposely killed through deliberate starvation, mass shooting, or chemical asphyxiation. If they ever reached a camp, they were shot or gassed on arrival. Snyder's count of fourteen million dead represents only those who were directly targeted for death in the bloodlands, rather than a complete tabulation of all the victims from the area, and as such his count is highly unconventional.

Snyder's book is about mass murder defined more narrowly than most investigations of Nazism and Stalinism. This approach does not, however, compromise the breadth of his analysis into the origins and evolution of the killing policies implemented by the two regimes. Snyder reveals how competing ideological, political, and economic considerations, shifting in the context of the Second World War, altered how the Nazis and Soviets perceived the bloodlands over time. Since both Hitler and Stalin coveted the territories and hoped to harness the rich earth of the region to feed their statist ambitions and populations, neither could conceive of a future without victory. Regime survival was at stake for the Nazis and Soviets, but the people of the bloodlands, as inhabitants of one giant battlefield, were guaranteed to suffer regardless of the victor. Readers less familiar with the eastern front will be surprised to find the dictators more unstable than oftentimes imagined: they are at times highly practical and at others blinded by ideology. Scholars focused on this part of Europe will find little new material of substance, but will be exposed to a narrative atypical in what it sweeps into a single arc. Snyder's particular flash points, including famine in Ukraine, the

destruction of the Polish intelligentsia, and battles over Warsaw, Leningrad, and Minsk, have all been subject to extensive research elsewhere. In his studies of these events, Snyder touches upon existing historiographical debates, either explicitly in his text or detailed in his notes. His interpretations are often novel and concise, and his thoughtful reconsiderations of colleagues' arguments will undoubtedly spur further dialogue among specialists.

As Snyder moves from one end of the bloodlands to the other, he humanizes his fourteen million victims, restoring their professional, ethnic, and religious identities, and breathing life and color into their stories. He gives voices to these groups and recreates individual lives from details pulled together from firsthand accounts and archival documents. Snyder's writing weaves overwhelming victim counts – 21,892 Polish officers shot in Katyn Forest in 1940, and 33,761 Ukrainian Jews shot at Babi Yar in 1941 – alongside the personal accounts of artists like Jozef Czapski and mothers like Dina Pronicheva. Most of these personal accounts are new to English readers as Snyder depends on sources in as many as nine foreign languages. Stalin and Hitler turned people into numbers, Snyder writes, while it is the duty of historians-cum-humanists to turn these numbers back into people. He achieves this goal admirably with regard to his fourteen million victims, but some may take issue with Snyder's treatment of their murderers. Beyond the domineering personalities of Hitler and Stalin, both of whom are granted full-throated presence throughout the text, the Germans and Soviets on the ground in the bloodlands never develop the voices with which Snyder promises to provide them. Likewise, Snyder may have mined more of the burgeoning literature on the collaborators and bystanders who assisted the Nazis and Soviets. This group, straddling the categories of victim and victimizer, continues to complicate the national memories of suffering in the modern day states that have inherited pieces of the bloodlands.

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