

## **Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin** by Timothy Snyder

In **Bloodlands** Snyder describes the murder of fourteen million men, women and children by Stalin's Soviet Union and Hitler's Germany in the area encompassing central Poland to western Russia, including the Baltic States and the Ukraine, from 1933 to 1945. He describes the mechanisms by which this murder was accomplished and the ideological motivations that were its engines, the key to understanding them being that both States sought "... to deprive groups of human beings ... their right to be regarded as human (387)."

In the Soviet Union Stalin and others are driven by an incomprehensible political hubris – *we are driving history. We are the messianic engine of history. Therefore we have the right to kill.* On a practical level that hubris looks like this: during the great man-made famine of 1933, peasant Ukrainians must die so that the USSR can industrialize, so that the Party/nation can survive, so that it can grow stronger, so that it can lead the revolution. In this logical structure a peasant is reduced to "...containers of calories that should be emptied (178)."

Hitler is driven by an incomprehensible racial hubris – *we are the master race. All other inferiors, Jews, Slavs, Poles, must give way before us. The German race is by natural rights deserving of supremacy. All others must be exterminated or enslaved.* On Nazi Germany's practical level that hubris looked like this: A Hunger Plan was formulated in May of 1941: "During and after the war on the USSR, the Germans intended to feed German soldiers and ... civilians by starving the Soviet citizens they would conquer.... (162)."

"The Hunger Plan involved the "extinction of industry as well as a great part of the population in the deficit regions (163)."

Mass murder was a political and moral choice made by political elites and enforced by hundreds of thousands of mostly ordinary men (and a few women). Weed out the sadists and psychopaths and the fanatics. Ordinary men committed most of these murders.

In his preface Snyder describes one of his three fundamental methods of study – an "acceptance of the irreducible reality of choice in human affairs (xviii)."

*Lots of ordinary men operating by choice.*

**As a teacher, how does one make sense of this to a classroom full of bored, safe, 16 year olds?**

How does one make sense of this to anyone of us who live in the comfort provided by peace and law?

*"Only two or three Jews who disembarked at Belzec survived: about 434,508 did not (260)."*

Or this:

*The Party created zones of starvation in the Ukraine in 1933; “in that spring...people died at a rate of more than ten thousand a day (47).”*

Or this, a description of one of the executioners of Polish officers:

*“The chief executioner at Kalinin, whom the prisoners never saw, was Vasily Blokhin. ...he wore a leather cap, apron and long leather gloves to keep the blood and gore from himself and his uniform. Using German pistols, he shot, each night, about two hundred and fifty men, one after another (137).”*

Or this, one terrible incident that strikes my heart with a bolt of recognition. I can imagine these victims:

*“One investigation in Leningrad led to the shooting (not the deportation) of thirty-five people who were deaf and dumb (84).”*

**Your students have to be able to imagine these scenes.** You have to find a way to reach their imaginations. You have to find a way to help them make the empathetic leap into the lives of the peasants, the Jews, the Polish Officers, the deaf and dumb. As important, and much more difficult, you have to help them find a path into the minds of the killers, those ordinary men. That is where the deepest act of imagination has to take place. You cannot leave the killers as faceless monsters who emerge from a moral darkness, conduct their nightmares and then return to darkness. If students do not have some deep understanding of them, they cannot understand the larger actions of the Soviet and German governments. Snyder argues that “... a legitimate comparison of Nazi Germany and Stalinist Soviet Union must not only explain the crimes but embrace the humanity of all concerned ... including the victims, perpetrators, bystanders and leaders (387).”

Maybe your class will understand this – political murder involves embracing a political ideology that mutates and then metastasizes, becoming theological and then sacred. Maybe it has its origin in the power of the group where all others conform in a sea of delirious yeses and thus one, alone, is unable to say no, or maybe when a malignant authority creates “others” as scapegoats and then gives permission for the crossing of moral boundaries, for the destruction of the “others.”

I tell you that I do not know how to imagine this evil unless it can be made personal. I do not know how well-fed, secure American kids can understand it unless the personal, real nature of morally reprehensible actions can be explicitly connected to their own stories. There is no suggestion here, none, that a moral or psychological equivalency exists between the actions

taken by the USSR and Hitler's Germany and the stories that you and your students tell in your well-lit classrooms, but "the error bred in the bone" of human beings is in all of us, teacher and student, parent and administrator, custodian and school board director. We too are ordinary men and women.

As teachers we have to find a way to make these events of 70 years ago explicable to new generations. They need the facts and figures, the description of processes and political theory, the stories of individual combatants and killers and victims, but then they need to be *electrically* connected so that they can imagine themselves in similar positions. They have to be able **to see and feel** themselves **inside** these distant realities.

They must tell their stories of cruelty and violence.

They must witness.

They have to get down to the bone.

You must tell yours first.

### **Three Vignettes:**

On a summer day when I was 12 or 13 I was chasing a boy behind the neighborhood school. Faster than me, he juked in and out of the swing sets, mocking me, shouting ugly things I no longer remember. I slipped down and, on the run, picked up a cast iron drain lid from the gravel. One side of it was broken, sharp, jagged.

I threw it as some movie-warrior might spin out a throwing star. My reaction was instantaneous: I thought it was going to split him open. It skimmed past his left ear by a few inches. I stopped. I stopped breathing. All my fury drained out. I was sick with fear and relief. What had I almost done?

At the Reading Museum soon after this, maybe even the same summer, walking along a path next to the Wyomissing creek, my friend and I, joking and running, spotted three or four ducks upstream, forty feet away, and again without stopping, I picked up a fist-sized heavy rock, and again on the run, as thoughtlessly as one can imagine, I chucked it on a straight line to the center of their grouping. It broke a rising duck's wing with a snapping crunch. The duck pin-wheeled down. Now I felt it – shame and disorientation and a sense of heat flushing my face. I have never again done anything like this.

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Until I finished second grade we lived in Myerstown on old Rt. 422. Directly across from our home was a country lane that led past fields and woods to railroad tracks and a creek. Someone had once dug clay out of a pit that connected to the lane. A spiraling access road led

down to the bottom. In the winter we sledded there, loving the tight right curve that seemed to help us pick up speed.

We had off from school one day. The snow had come down heavily all night. By nine the next morning my brother and sister and I were dressed for sledding. We walked across the empty highway, down the lane, and to the edge of the pit. Neighborhood kids were already lined up, laughing, jumping on their sleds and disappearing around the curve.

Someone, I never found out who, but he must have done it that morning for their colors were a deep oxygen blood red and cobalt blue, someone had shot two cardinals and a blue jay, tied their feet with wire and hung them upside down directly over the sled run. I was repulsed and mesmerized and utterly unable to understand why anyone would have done this. Even at 7 or 8 I think I understood on my child's simple level that this was killing done for killing's sake, for the pleasure of killing, for the thoughtless sake of filling up time with heedless action, for killing because he could.

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These stories contain shocks of recognition – in two of them, of the capacity of an ordinary person, me, to commit violence out of rage and entertainment; in one of them, an object lesson in violence exercised as a right, as a whim; in all three, of the abrupt awakening of conscience. The importance of conscience is a good place to end the stories.

I taught literature and writing for 36 years, but I love history too. **Bloodlands** is as good a description of the mind-set and machineries of 20<sup>th</sup> century mass murder as I have read. It is a great book. As teachers, we must take our students on the kind of journey that will give them deep and memorable and morally enduring access to such realities.