

# Historian Timothy Snyder falsifies history at German-Ukrainian conference

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A conference called “Revolution and war: Ukraine in the great transformations of modern Europe” took place in Berlin on May 28 and 29. It was the first conference of the German Ukrainian Historical Commission founded in February.

The 170 participants included well-known eastern Europe historians from Ukraine, Germany and the United States, as well as journalists, members of NGOs, the head of the Green Party Heinrich-Böll Institute, the Ukrainian ambassador in Germany and representatives of the German Foreign Office and the American Embassy. Most of the participants already knew one another from their work together in support of the February 2014 Maidan coup in Kiev.

Martin Schulze Wessel, professor of Eastern European history at the Ludwigs-Maximilian University in Munich and president of the new commission, opened the conference with the remark that the commission follows “only a scholarly logic” and will “obviously not” become “an agent of a definite political definition of history.”

In the case of a historical commission, such a declaration ought to be obvious. That Schulze Wessel felt the need to state it explicitly underscores the fact that in this instance it was neither obvious nor true. As the course of the meeting demonstrated, the commission is not only an “agent of a definite political definition of history,” but places history in the service of politics and distorts it in line with the interests of German and American foreign policy.

As though to further underscore the lack of independence of the commission, Schulze Wessel explicitly thanked the German government for its financing. The Imre Kertész College in Jena and the Institute for German Culture and History in Southern Europe at the Ludwigs-Maximilian University in Munich initiated the commission in collaboration with the historical society. They are receiving payment for this work from the German Ministry of Education.

It is significant that Yale historian Timothy Snyder gave the opening talk at the conference. Snyder is a member of the Council on Foreign Relations, a think tank that is close to the US government. He has been on tour for months as a propagandist for Ukrainian nationalism. The WSWWS wrote about him previously: “In the writings of Timothy Snyder we are confronted with an intellectually unhealthy and dangerous tendency: the *obliteration* of the distinction between the writing of history and the manufacturing of propaganda in the service of the state” (David North, *The Russian Revolution and the Unfinished Twentieth Century*, p. 330).

Snyder’s speech confirmed this evaluation. He does not want to see the work of the commission restricted to researching Ukrainian history and its connection with Germany, he said. Rather, its task was to develop “an understanding of a common European history.” This is “impossible without Ukraine.”

What he has in mind is the rewriting of European history of the twentieth century from the standpoint of Ukrainian nationalism. He proposed this in a way as to leave an unbiased listener speechless. Without presenting any new evidence or arguments, he developed a narrative in which acknowledged historical circumstances were falsified, ignored or presented as their direct opposite.

Snyder referred to World War I—an imperialist war in which the world was reorganised by the great capitalist powers—as the “high point of an era of decolonisation.” With its concept of decolonisation on an international level, Serbia, which he claimed began the war with its struggle for national sovereignty (!), emerged as the victor not only militarily but also intellectually.

The period between the two world wars was, according to Snyder, shaped by the “intellectual victory of decolonisation.” The idea of building a large number of new, small national states was then applied to the rest of Europe. On the other hand, the “two rival imperial powers in Europe, the Soviet Union and Germany,” saw this as an invitation to develop a neo-imperial policy for colonising these countries.

At the beginning phase of the Second World War, from 1938 to 1941, both powers destroyed the European system of national states. Beginning in 1941, there was a “collision” (!) between the two rivals. In this underhanded way, Snyder transformed the German invasion of the Soviet Union into a “struggle over Ukraine,” in which the two powers claimed the most important, central resource area in Europe “for themselves as a colony.”

Snyder simply ignored Hitler’s declared aim of erasing the Soviet Union from the world map, the “Generalplan Ost,” and the “Hunger Plan” of the Nazi leadership—which led to the deaths of 30 million people and was aimed at providing “living space in the east”—as well as many other historical facts. He claimed that some of these facts are “highly exaggerated” or mere “myths.” He made these claims less than 200 metres from the Jewish Museum in Berlin, one of many places that serve as reminders of the grisly crimes committed by the Nazis before they were finally stopped by the Soviet Army.

In the *Historikerstreit* (historian’s dispute) of 1986, Ernst Nolte downplayed the crimes of the Nazis, which he described as an understandable reaction to the “destructive acts of the Russian revolution.” Snyder goes even further. He erases the German invasion of the Soviet Union from history without further ado and transforms the war into a struggle between two aggressors over Ukraine (which was an integral part of the Soviet Union).

The political motives behind this revision of history are transparent. It serves to justify the regime in Kiev, which has criminalised the display of Soviet symbols, while venerating Nazi collaborators in

World War II as freedom fighters. The government, installed by the coup last year, is collaborating closely with Berlin and Washington. It is not by accident that Snyder has assembled his crude conception of Ukrainian history from the propaganda arsenal of the Ukrainian right wing.

Snyder used the rest of his lecture to glorify the European Union (EU). Having presented the First World War as the high point of decolonisation and the Second World War as an attempt of two neo-imperial rivals to recolonise Europe, he now described the EU and its predecessor as the “post-colonial” and “post-imperial projects” of a “civil society” that Russian president Putin seeks to destroy.

According to Snyder, the EU provides the only way of guaranteeing the national sovereignty of small states. In principle, Germany views states such as Luxembourg and the Czech Republic as “partners on the same level,” claimed Snyder. This characterisation is a grotesque distortion of the reality of present day Europe, where Germany claims the right to act as the “leading power” in Europe and impose brutal austerity on weaker countries.

Snyder did not weary of emphasising that the future of the EU and Ukraine are entwined. He claimed there was an existential conflict between the EU and Russia. In the discussion that followed his lecture, he said, “You [Europeans] can give Ukraine to Russia, but this doesn’t mean that you’ll win.” Compromises and concessions would “not hold Putin back from reversing the whole thing. Putin is intent on destroying the EU project.”

Snyder received considerable applause and met with no open disagreement. Vladislav Hrytsak (from the Catholic University in Lemberg), one of the founders of the commission, thanked Snyder for “this brilliant speech.” Schulze Wessel, who is also a member of the Germany Historical Society, praised Snyder’s presentation as a “fresh interpretation of Ukrainian history and Russian-Ukrainian history.”

This adulation prompted Snyder to press even harder for war against Russia in the discussion that followed. Completely distorting reality, he claimed that Ukraine is a low priority of the American elite. The US “did not jump to the aid of Ukraine this time.”

Repeating statements made at a meeting in March of the Green Party-affiliated Heinrich-Böll Institute, Snyder pleaded for a European army. He claimed that even 30,000 men would be enough to keep back the Russian armed forces, in which only a few thousand men were capable of fighting.

However, not all the participants at the meeting were ready to accept everything Snyder said. There was some discussion over how far one could go in whitewashing the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA), which killed tens of thousands of Poles, Jews and Ukrainians.

Tanja Penter (University of Heidelberg), who is also on the new commission, argued that only a critical reappraisal of the “history of Ukraine as perpetrator” could guarantee long-term political stability and “democracy.”

This was countered by Schulze Wessel on the grounds of political expediency. “Ukraine is in a de facto war,” he said. “A critical reworking can only be expected in post-heroic circumstances. Now we still find ourselves, so to speak, in heroic circumstances.”

Włodzimierz Borodziej (Imre Kertész College in Jena, University of Warsaw) declared bluntly that the “boundless glorification of the UPA” that one encounters in the novels of the Ukrainian author Oksana Sabuschko are the “price” one has to pay for a “master narrative” of Ukrainian history. He added that one runs the risk of “providing even more arguments to Russian propaganda,” if one

works through the history of Ukrainian fascism.

Such arguments show the real nature of the Historical Commission: the prostitution of historical scholarship to reactionary political aims. It has been founded within the framework of Germany’s return to an aggressive great power policy, which the German government has systematically propagated since the Munich Security Conference in 2014.

One of the great obstacles to this effort is the fact that the population views Germany’s role in the First and Second World Wars as criminal and catastrophic. It is for this reason that the rewriting of the history of the twentieth century is an important step in laying the ideological groundwork for new wars.

This was the aim of the conference in Berlin, in which not only historians, but also politicians and journalists participated. Their conscious task is to spread a new historical narrative.

Gerd Koenen, who took part in the conference as a representative of the Imre Kertész College in Jena, had written an article in *Die Zeit* the previous week under the title “What drives Putin,” in which he said, “Despite the broad majority in parliament and the coalition government and the imperturbable way in which majority of journalists carry out their work, it cannot be overlooked that in this question, both political parties and the media confront a serious and to some extent shrill dissonance with a substantial segment of the German public.”

Putin’s propaganda has had an effect, he claimed, because Germany provides “potentially fertile soil” on account of its history. The country is shaped by “fear of war and a shying away from conflict,” the inclination “to shield itself on account of its chauvinistic prosperity and keep its powder dry like the Swiss,” lamented Koenen.

The rest of Koenen’s article provided him with the opportunity to “re-align” the traditional view of history of Germany with Snyder’s concepts and jargon, so that the country could once again demonstrate “steadfastness” in the face of “Putin’s neo-imperial project.”



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