

Timothy Snyder's *Bloodlands*: Right-wing propaganda disguised as historical scholarship — Part One

The false presentation of the Soviet famine as a “deliberate” policy of mass murder

Clara Weiss

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This is part one of a five-part review of Timothy Snyder's book Bloodlands. There is also an accompanying timeline reviewing the critical historical background.

Unless otherwise indicated, all page references are to Timothy Snyder, Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin, 2nd edition, New York: Basic Books, 2022.

Introduction

In April, Basic Books published a second edition of Timothy Snyder's 2010 book *Bloodlands*, advertising it as the “essential historical background to the war in Ukraine.” The extraordinary role that Snyder is playing in justifying the imperialist proxy war against Russia in Ukraine and the alliance of US imperialism with the Ukrainian far right make it imperative to investigate this work more closely.

Since the beginning of the war in February, Snyder has appeared countless times on television, has published multiple pieces in the *New York Times* and the *New York Review of Books* and has spoken at numerous academic events. In his appearances, Twitter threads and other writings, he has buttressed US imperialist war propaganda against Russia with historical distortions and lies, ranging from false claims of “genocide” to an alleged “hunger plan” by Putin and the existence of a “fascist regime” in Russia. As the WSWS has documented, his Twitter threads have repeatedly sought to deny or downplay the role of Ukrainian fascists both in contemporary Ukrainian politics and the army and in the annihilation of 900,000 Ukrainian Jews during the Nazi-led Holocaust in World War II.

Most of Snyder's current war propaganda relies on *Bloodlands*. At the heart of *Bloodlands* is the claim that the crimes of Nazism in Europe were a response to the crimes of Stalin in Soviet Ukraine in 1932-1933, which “began Europe's era of mass killing” (p. vii), and the “national terror” that Stalin allegedly launched against Poles in the Soviet Union in 1937-1938.

The focus of the book, Snyder claims, are the 14 million people that were murdered “by the Nazi and Soviet regimes” in Eastern Europe.

Deliberately excluding most of the former Soviet Union, he only pays attention to what he calls the “Bloodlands” that extended “from central Poland to western Russia, through Ukraine, Belarus and the Baltic states.” (p. viii)

The reader is not given any coherent explanation as to where this focus on these “Bloodlands” is coming from and why much of the former Soviet Union was excluded. Snyder just makes up this new geographic category without even so much as an attempt at a historical justification.

Nor is there any explanation given for why, suddenly, the famine in Soviet Ukraine of 1932-1933 should be seen as the beginning of “Europe's era of mass killing.” Why not the First World War of 1914-1918, in which at least 20 million people were killed, and which led to both the October Revolution and the emergence of fascist movements throughout Europe? The fact that during World War II alone, at least 27 million Soviet citizens perished, almost twice the number of victims that Snyder chooses to focus on, is also simply ignored. With over 12 million victims of Nazism in the former Soviet Union left out of his account, Snyder insists that “Stalin's own record of mass murder was almost as imposing as Hitler's. Indeed, in times of peace it was far worse.” (p. x)

The significance of these claims can only be understood in their broader historical and political context. In advancing these arguments, Timothy Snyder echoes, in all essentials, the positions of the far-right German historian Ernst Nolte. Beginning in 1980, Nolte argued that the crimes of Nazism, including the Holocaust, were *caused* by the “violence” unleashed by the Russian Revolution of 1917. Nolte explicitly spoke of a “causal nexus” between the Russian Revolution and Nazism. He insisted that the crimes of Nazism could only be understood as a “fear-borne reaction to the acts of annihilation that took place during the Russian Revolution.” These “acts of annihilation” were, according to Nolte, the class war of the Bolshevik regime against the bourgeoisie and later against the peasants in the forced collectivization campaign that began in the late 1920s. These “acts of annihilation” were the “original,” Nolte claimed; those of Nazism “a distorted copy.” The Russian Revolution, in his words, was the “most important precondition” of the Nazi regime.^[1]

Nolte's claims prompted the so-called *Historikerstreit* (Historians debate) and were refuted and rejected by the overwhelming majority of German historians at the time. Following the *Historikerstreit*, Nolte's career became largely confined to lecturing in openly far-right and neo-fascist circles. Repeating them became tantamount to acknowledging political and intellectual affinity with fascism.

In his afterword to the new edition, Snyder acknowledges that Nolte's "shadow hung over my more descriptive and empirical project." Without rejecting Nolte's central claims, which he casually describes as a "series of connections between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany," Snyder criticizes the far-right revisionist for having advanced them "without linguistic knowledge or a source base." In contrast to Nolte, Snyder boasts, "I knew east European languages (and German and French and so on), was using east European sources, and treated interaction as a hypothesis to be tested rather than as a kind of dreamy dialectic." (pp. 416-417)

As this review will show, what Snyder presents in *Bloodlands* is not an "empirical" project. In fact, it cannot be called "history" in the actual sense of the term. Exploiting his prestige as a professor at Yale University, one of the most elite institutions in the world, Snyder presents an account of some of the most important historical experiences of the 20th century that is based on an amalgam of half-truths, lies, distortions and horror stories. Its central axis is the revival of the justification of fascism provided by Ernst Nolte, with modifications and additions that are derived primarily from the ideological arsenal of the Polish and Ukrainian far right.

PART 1: The false presentation of the Soviet famine as a "deliberate" policy of mass murder

The Soviet famine of 1931-1933 claimed the lives of an estimated 7 million people, roughly half of them in Soviet Ukraine. Even excluding the Urals, Siberia and the Far East—which also suffered famine—over 70 million out of the 160 million people in the USSR were living in famine areas. This included not only Soviet Kazakhstan and Soviet Ukraine, but also the Lower and Central Volga regions, the Central Black-Earth region and the North Caucasus.^[2]

Yet even though Snyder offhandedly admits that "collectivization was a disaster everywhere in the Soviet Union" (42), his own discussion of the famine is limited almost entirely to Soviet Ukraine. Snyder claims that "the evidence of *clearly premeditated mass murder* on the scale of millions is most evident in Soviet Ukraine... Famine had struck parts of Soviet Russia as well as much of Soviet Ukraine in 1932. Nevertheless, the policy response to Ukraine was special, and lethal." (p. 42, emphasis added)

Throughout the book, Snyder puts the famine on par with the killing policies of the Nazis, claiming that it served as an inspiration for the latter. Echoing Nolte's claims that the crimes of the Nazis were a "copy" of those of Stalinism, he writes, "It helps to know that Nazi planners were aware that Soviet policy had brought about devastating famine in Ukraine in 1933, because then we understand that they sought to do the same thing." (p. 415)

While Snyder himself is careful to not expressly use the term "genocide" for the famine in Soviet Ukraine, he clearly insinuates that it is appropriate. Thus, he mentions that Rafa? Lemkin, "the international lawyer who invented the term *genocide*, would call the Ukrainian case 'the classic example of Soviet genocide'." (pp. 53-54)

Yet Snyder fails to produce a single document proving the *intention* to kill a large number of people, let alone a large number of specifically Ukrainians, on the part of the Soviet leadership. This, however, would be the necessary precondition to substantiate the very serious allegation and historical assessment of a "genocide," based on the definition provided by the United Nations. It must be stressed that such documents proving the intent to kill exist in abundance for the Nazi policies of mass murder of the Jews of Europe, several other victim groups, or, for that matter,

Stalin's Great Terror of 1936-1938.

Snyder cites no such documents because they do not exist. Despite many volumes of documentary collections and historical studies of the subject since the opening of the archives of the former Soviet Union since 1991, not a single document suggesting that Soviet leaders had the intention to kill a large number of people, let alone on an ethnic basis, has been found. The famine was the result of criminal policies, but these policies were of a very different nature than the genocide perpetrated by the Nazi regime against European Jewry.

The Russian Revolution and Soviet society in the 1920s

To understand the phenomenon of the Soviet famine, it must above all be placed in the historical context of the development of the Soviet Union and the emergence of Stalinism. It is precisely this type of analysis that Snyder rejects. To the extent that Snyder discusses any historical background of the famine, he engages in a mixture of anticommunist outbursts, snarky comments and half-truths.

Insinuating that the Stalinist policies that led to the famine were rooted in the 1917 Revolution and Marxism, Snyder denounces the October Revolution as a coup brought about by a German-funded Lenin. He writes that the Bolsheviks sought "mastery of both peasants and nations" and that "they were the enemies of their own peoples, whether defined by class or by nation. They believed that the people they governed was historically defunct, a bookmark to be removed before a page was turned." (11)

This is not history but a political rant. Snyder fails to even attempt to substantiate any of his claims, as any historian must. He does not address or refute the historical scholarship that has shown that the Bolsheviks were brought to power in a social revolution, after having won the political confidence of the working class and sections of the peasantry.^[3]

Nor is there any historical basis for the accusation that the Bolsheviks were "enemies of their own peoples." In reality, the early Bolshevik government initiated the arguably most radical democratic and socialist measures of any government in world history. Upon seizing power in Petrograd, the revolutionary government under Bolshevik leadership immediately ended Russia's involvement in World War I and granted full democratic rights—including the right to national self-determination—to the oppressed nationalities of the Tsarist Empire. The landowners were expropriated, and the land was nationalized.

The Soviet government also nationalized the major banks and most of heavy industry and transportation, canceled the foreign debt and established a monopoly on foreign trade that ensured that international private capital could not undermine the foundations of the newly created workers' state and its economy. The eight-hour workday was introduced, and the Soviet Union, despite its relative poverty, established one of the most advanced social and public health systems in the world.

The conquests of the revolution were extended to a large portion of the former Russian Empire, including the eastern part of what is now Ukraine, in an almost four-year-long civil war against imperialist invading armies and nationalist forces in which the Red Army, led by Leon Trotsky, prevailed. During these years of civil war, revolutions and insurrections erupted in Germany (1918-19), Hungary, Slovakia and Bulgaria. However, contrary to the expectations of the Bolsheviks, the working class—above all, because of the betrayal of its old Social Democratic leadership—failed to take power in other countries. The end of the civil war in 1921-1922 coincided with a relative ebb of revolutionary struggles by the working class internationally.

The combination of international isolation and the relative backwardness

of the Soviet economy generated immense social and political pressures upon the fledgling workers' state and its ruling party. A bureaucracy had already begun to take shape during the civil war and now gained in social and political strength. By the end of 1923, a sharp shift in the international political situation—above all, the aborted revolution in Germany—had driven the internationalist wing of the party, led by Leon Trotsky, into a minority opposition against the majority faction around Joseph Stalin, which spoke for the interests of the nascent bureaucracy. By the fall of 1924, this faction would articulate the social interests of the bureaucracy in the nationalist program of “socialism in one country.”

The unfolding inner-party struggle within the Bolshevik Party is brushed off by Snyder in a few paragraphs and ended, in his words, when “Trotsky left the country.” (p. 14) Moreover, Snyder insinuates that the policies of collectivization and industrialization, which, in his words, resulted in the “mass starvation of 1933,” were only adopted as Stalin “associated himself with the policies of those purged rivals [in the Left Opposition].” (p. 13)

This mixture of omissions and half-truths makes it impossible to understand the background to collectivization and the famine of 1930-1933. The policy of forced collectivization was adopted in 1929 as part of a five-year plan that envisaged a rushed industrialization of the Soviet Union and the end of the New Economic Policy (NEP) that had been introduced in the spring of 1921.

Snyder cynically refers to the NEP by stating, “The Bolsheviks had first to perform the constructive work of capitalism” (p. 10). Again this formulation is incorrect and explains nothing. The NEP did indeed entail concessions to the capitalist market and peasant layers within the Soviet state, concessions without which the Bolshevik government would have lost the support of large portions of the still predominantly rural population, and without which it would have been impossible to recover the economy.

However, industry remained nationalized and, critically, the overall control over the economy remained in the hands of the workers' state. The contradictory and transitional nature of the Soviet economy was intrinsically tied to the objective problems confronting the revolution in Russia.

The former Russian Empire, an economically relatively backward country, had become the first country in which the working class was able to seize state power and initiate the world socialist revolution. This international isolation not only deprived the Soviet economy of desperately needed technology and other economic resources, it also deepened and complicated socio-economic relations within the Soviet Union. While Snyder repeatedly refers to a “war against kulaks” or attempts to “subordinate the peasantry to the state,” he fails to offer his readers any explanation whatsoever of the society and economy of the Soviet Union and the problem of the peasantry.

Without such an analysis, however, it is impossible to grasp the origins of the famine in the early 1930s.

Precisely because of the belated development of the Russian economy and because there had been no bourgeois democratic revolution, many of the revolutionary measures of the socialist October Revolution were, ultimately, of a bourgeois not a socialist character. The land had been nationalized, giving the state the power to distribute and allocate it. However, in practice, the revolutionary measure of giving peasants land had led to a substantial *increase* in small, privately-owned farms. The Soviet economy as it developed in the 1920s entailed both a “socialist” sector—heavy industry and transportation, which were virtually completely nationalized—and a “capitalist” sector, namely agriculture, where private capital still played a major role. The influence of private capital was kept in check above all by the Soviet state's monopoly over foreign trade, which preempted direct trade relations between wealthier peasants, traders and enterprises with foreign capital.

The policies of the NEP period in the 1920s accelerated a growing differentiation within the peasantry, which was divided between the most impoverished layers, the so-called *bednyaks*, the middle peasants (*serednyaks*) and the better off peasants, which were called the *kulaks*.

Collectivization, the famine and the position of the Left Opposition

From 1923 onward, the Left Opposition had advocated a focus on industrialization and the strengthening of heavy industry, in order to increase the social and political weight of the industrial working class in Soviet society. The Opposition repeatedly warned that bourgeois layers in the peasantry could become the basis for the emergence of a new bourgeoisie and the restoration of capitalist relations should they manage to establish direct trade and political relations with capitalists in the more advanced capitalist countries. The Opposition, therefore, insisted that the party had to base its work and support in the countryside on the most oppressed and impoverished masses of peasants.

The Stalin faction rejected the policies of the Opposition. Explicitly arguing against Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution, which insisted that the contradictions of the social revolution in Russia could only be resolved through its extension on a world scale, the chief theoretician of the Stalin faction, Nikolai Bukharin, claimed that the economic interests of the working class and wealthy peasants could be reconciled and that the Soviet Union could move toward socialism in one country “at the pace of a tortoise.”^[4] Based on these conceptions, the Stalin faction adopted policies that effectively undermined the development of Soviet industry, while strengthening the most privileged layers of the peasantry.

The international corollary of this nationalist and opportunist orientation was the subordination of revolutionary movements by the working class and peasants to bourgeois forces, most notably in China in 1926-1927. The resulting defeats of the working class in Germany, England and China reinforced the international isolation of the workers' state, further consolidating the position of the bureaucracy and its political faction in the party as opposed to the revolutionary left wing of the party.

In December 1927, the Left Opposition was expelled from the Soviet Communist Party. Its leaders and much of its membership were arrested and exiled. In 1929, Trotsky was exiled from the USSR, finding refuge initially in Prinkipo in Turkey.

But just as the bureaucracy escalated the persecution of its Marxist opponents, its economic policies began to backfire. In 1928 a massive grain crisis hit the Soviet economy. The crisis prompted a turn to forced grain requisitions by the regime. The grain requisitions failed to yield the necessary results, and mass starvation loomed. In response to this desperate situation, in 1929, the Stalinist leadership shifted to a policy of forced mass collectivization. Small, private peasant holdings, which still dominated Soviet agriculture, were rapidly forced into collective farms, so-called *kolkhozy*, or socialized farms, the *sovkhozy*.

Like its policies before 1928-1929, the industrialization and collectivization drive was based on the conception that socialism could be built in “one country,” that is, that all the resources necessary for rapid economic development at the most advanced level could be leveraged from the Soviet population and raw material resources. This was a reactionary delusion. Neither Soviet industry nor Soviet agriculture was anywhere close to the technological level necessary for the establishment of large-scale collectivized farming, which, among other things, required the industrial production of advanced agricultural equipment on a mass scale.

While the Soviet government declared “war” on the “kulaks,” collectivization often hit hardest the poorest peasant households and those

of the middle peasants, which were often also very small and impoverished. Peasant households were forced to give up their livestock to the collective farms under conditions where the overwhelming majority of households that owned animals only owned one cow or pig and two or three sheep.^[5]

This policy had two main consequences: First, animals taken from different households were now herded together in often unhygienic conditions, with insufficient shelter and food. The result was mass starvation among animals and the spread of epidemic diseases among both livestock and the human population. Second, many peasants slaughtered their stock en masse to protest collectivization. In the USSR as a whole, the stock of cattle and pigs declined by half by 1933. It would take until 1958, i.e., an entire generation, for the Soviet cattle and sheep population to recover to its 1914 levels.^[6] The rushed collectivization of individual peasant holdings also virtually destroyed established crop rotation, undermining future harvests.^[7]

Compounding these disastrous policies, poor weather conditions made the Soviet harvests of 1931 and 1932 exceptionally bad. One historian estimated that the combination of drought, rain and infestation of crops in 1931 and 1932 destroyed at least 20 percent of the harvest and would “have been sufficient on its own to have caused serious food shortages or even famine.” Thus, even though grain quotas for 1932 were, in fact, substantially lower than in previous years—i.e., less grain was requisitioned from the peasantry than in previous years—peasants were left with substantially smaller reserves.^[8]

The policies adopted as part of forced collectivization provoked not only famine but also a near civil war in the countryside, with uprisings against food requisitions and collectivization by desperate and starving peasants rocking large parts of the Soviet Union by 1930. The bureaucracy responded to mass social unrest with brutal repression and mass deportations, often of entire peasant families. At the same time, famine began to hit the cities, where the urban working class was growing by leaps and bounds because of the policy of rapid industrialization. The result was a horrific decline in living standards and a famine among both the urban and rural population.

The catastrophe of collectivization impacted the political and economic development of the Soviet Union for decades to come. In addition to the tremendous human toll of at least 7 million dead, malnourishment impacted multiple generations, epidemics spread among both humans and animals and the livestock suffered an unprecedented collapse. Politically, collectivization dealt a massive blow to the political prestige of socialism in both the Soviet peasantry and oppressed masses throughout the world.

To insinuate, as Snyder does, that these adventurist and irrational policies, which had no basis in socio-economic reality, had been pioneered by the Left Opposition and were then “adopted” by Stalin is a falsification of the historical record. The Left Opposition had indeed advocated the collectivization of peasant households as a higher organizational economic form to the dominant small peasant holdings. The Left Opposition, however, always viewed this policy as a gradual one, whose pace was necessarily dependent on the overall development of the Soviet economy and a much higher level of both industrial and agricultural productivity. In 1930, Trotsky wrote

This [new] course [in the Soviet economy] is the negation and adventurist complement of the opportunistic course that prevailed in 1923 and which was especially pronounced from 1926-28. Today’s course is in no way less dangerous, and in certain respects is a more serious danger, than yesterday’s. ... In essence, this is not a new theory. It is the old theory of socialism in one country, but shifted into “third gear.” Earlier, we had been taught that socialism would be built in backward Russia “at a

snail’s pace,” with the kulak growing into socialism.

Now the snail’s pace has been replaced by a speed almost that of an aircraft. The kulak is no longer growing into socialism—at such speeds it is not possible!—but is simply being liquidated by administrative order.

Explaining the policies of the Opposition, Trotsky continued:

Again and again we decisively rejected the task of building a national socialist society “in the shortest possible time.” Collectivization and industrialization we bind by an unbreakable tie to the world revolution. The problems of our economy are decided in the final analysis on the international arena.^[9]

Even with Trotsky in exile and all other leading oppositionists imprisoned, the Soviet Left Opposition developed sharp analyses of the unfolding disaster. Thus, in December 1932, the imprisoned opposition leaders demanded “an end to the policy of complete collectivization,” warning of the eruption of a civil war. They correctly ascribed the causes of the economic disaster to the bureaucracy’s “lack of consideration for material resources, and [its orientation] toward the construction of a closed national economy isolated from the world market” which resulted in a “complete violation of the planning principle.” They wrote:

Most of the producing regions—the Urals and the Volga, the North Caucasus and the Ukraine, the main breadbaskets of the Union—find themselves almost under siege. Shootings and exile of communists and collective farmers are becoming part of the system and the main methods of grain procurements in the producing regions of the USSR. ... We must make it clear not only to the agricultural workers, but also to the more significant strata of the peasantry, that the Leninist opposition has never succumbed to the frenzy of total collectivization, has never been infected with the illusion of eliminating the kulaks by administrative methods. [10]

These documents disprove Snyder’s claim that the policies of collectivization and industrialization in the form adopted by the Stalinist leadership constituted a realization of the policies of the Left Opposition and Marxism.

Snyder's distortions of historical scholarship

The archival materials published on the subject since 1991—and they are vast—confirm, essentially, the assessment put forward by the Left Opposition at the time. Among the most important studies are the works of historians Stephen Wheatcroft and Robert W. Davies. Snyder references different works of theirs no less than 27 times in the first chapter alone, giving the impression that he relies on their research to advance his claims about a “deliberate policy of mass murder.”

Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, Davies and Wheatcroft are among the best known scholarly opponents of the claim that famine constituted a “genocide” or was a “deliberate” policy of mass murder. Snyder references their 2004 volume *Years of Hunger* almost two dozen

times in his chapter on the famine. In contrast to Snyder, however, Wheatcroft and Davies discuss the famine as a *union*-wide, that is, *not* a Ukrainian phenomenon, which was brought about by a combination of catastrophically wrong policies, the legacy of a backward agriculture and poor weather conditions.

But Snyder never openly tells his readers what Davies and Wheatcroft actually say. Moreover, many of the references to this work in *Bloodlands* are misleading.

Thus, Snyder references the book to substantiate the serious allegation that in Soviet Ukraine, “Doctors and nurses were forbidden [by the authorities] from treating (or feeding) the starving who reached their hospitals.” (p. 22) But Davies and Wheatcroft write no such thing. Rather, on the page referenced by Snyder, they discuss the no doubt horrific decisions by local and central authorities to preference those who could work on collective farms in the food distribution. They quoted a “chilling decision of the Ukrainian party central committee on March 31” concerning peasants in the Kiev region who were hospitalized because of hunger. The hospital workers were instructed: “Divide all those hospitalised into sick and improving, and considerably increase the food of the latter so that they can be released for work as quickly as possible.”^[11]

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In another case, Snyder refers to this book to substantiate the claim that 2,505 people were sentenced for cannibalism in 1932 and 1933 in Ukraine. No such figure is provided on the given page, which does not refer to cannibalism at all. In yet another example, Snyder purports to rely on Wheatcroft and Davies when claiming that the famine resulted in both Kazakhstan and Ukraine in a shift of the “demographic balance ... in favor of Russians.” The page referenced in *Years of Hunger* (p. 316) offers no discussion whatsoever of demographic shifts in the ethnic composition of Soviet Ukraine or any other part of the Soviet Union.^[12]

In fact, Davies and Wheatcroft have produced volume after volume over the past 30 years, including several edited collections of archival documents, that disprove the entire presentation of the famine as an ethnically targeted policy of mass murder.

In an essay referenced but never accurately summarized by Snyder, Wheatcroft explicitly denounced attempts by Nolte and others “to draw a simplistic causal link between the repression and mass killing in the Soviet Union and in Germany. These claims ... are generally based on a poorly defined understanding of the complexities of these phenomena, an inaccurate understanding of their scale and a weak appreciation of their chronology.”^[13]

Wheatcroft distinguished between the causation of the premature death of people through policies that were catastrophic, on the one hand, and deliberate killings, on the other. While he discussed the mass executions of the Great Terror and Hitler’s genocide of European Jewry as deliberate killings, he accurately described the deaths of the famine as having been caused by the Stalinist regime through disastrously incorrect policies but not a deliberate policy of mass murder.

Davies, too, is a well known opponent of the claim that the famine was a “genocide.” Contrary to all the claims by Snyder, Davies observed that Stalin treated the unfolding famine “... as a more or less normal bureaucratic problem, as due to the mistaken distribution of the grain procurement plan and to the need for local leaders to ‘devote a proper amount of attention’ to agriculture.” Davies concluded that Stalin’s correspondence with Lazar Kaganovich, then the second most important figure in the Soviet Politburo, testified to Stalin’s preoccupation with the “routine activity of the machinery of party and state” which “fully corresponded to his belief in the power of the state and party machines, and of administrative measures.”^[14]

This passage is a devastating indictment of the bureaucracy and its head,

but it also disproves claims that Stalin’s policy had been one of deliberate mass murder.

Snyder’s failure to acknowledge that two of the best known experts on the famine that he references repeatedly in fact opposed his claims cannot be regarded as an innocent mistake. Nor are his obsessive focus on Soviet Ukraine and the unsubstantiated claims of a “deliberate” policy of “mass killing” that targeted Ukrainians the result of merely a poor historical method.

Timothy Snyder’s claims of the famine as a “deliberate” act of mass murder targeting Ukrainians have a long history, going back to the Ukrainian far right, which collaborated with the Nazi occupation of Soviet Ukraine during World War II. As part of their occupation of Ukraine, the Nazis encouraged “revelations” of Stalinist crimes by their journalist hirelings in occupied Ukraine. Many of these “journalists” were members or sympathizers of the fascist Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN). Without using the term “genocide,” which was not yet in use, they presented the famine as such and blamed “Muscovite imperialism,” the “Russification of Ukraine” and spoke of a “destruction of Ukrainian culture by the Bolsheviks.”^[15]

The tradition of this narrative has always included a heavily anti-Semitic element, as the famine was routinely presented as the outcome of the workings of the “communist Jews” in Moscow. After the war, this far-right falsification of Soviet history was promoted by far-right elements in the Ukrainian diaspora who enjoyed the backing of Western intelligence agencies and had ties to prominent academic institutions in the US and Canada.

The large-scale legitimization of this far-right narrative began in the 1980s and was advanced primarily by American academics with close ties to the US state apparatus. In 1986, Stanford University’s Robert Conquest published the book *Harvest of Sorrow*. It was the first work of a well known Western academic that claimed that the famine constituted a “genocide” directed against the Ukrainians in the form of a “terror-famine.” Conquest denied that the famine had any natural origins and compared it instead explicitly to the crimes of the Nazis.^[16] It should be noted that Conquest later himself revised his claims and refused to speak of a “genocide” by the early 2000s.^[17]

Arguably even more consequential for the rehabilitation of the Ukrainian far-right narrative on the famine was the work of James Mace, who was affiliated with Harvard University and headed a US Congressional Commission on the Ukraine Famine. In 1988, Mace gave a report to Congress about its “findings,” claiming that the “investigation” had established that the famine constituted a “genocide.” Mace explicitly compared the famine to the Holocaust, going so far as to claim that it was even worse, with an alleged 7 million as opposed to 6 million dead.^[18]

As part of this deliberate effort to put the famine on par with the Holocaust, the term “Holodomor,” which literally means murder by starvation, was brought into use by the Ukrainian diaspora.^[19]

In the Soviet Union, where the bureaucracy was moving toward the full-scale restoration of capitalism, Ukrainian nationalist intellectuals and former Stalinist hacks were eager to parrot the historical lies of the Ukrainian diaspora and its academic allies.

The “genocide” narrative within the context of NATO’s expansion in 2000s

The biggest push of the claim that the famine constituted a “genocide,” however, occurred in the context of NATO’s expansion into Eastern Europe and the aggressive intervention of the US in Ukrainian politics in the early 2000s. In 2003, the Ukrainian parliament, the US Congress, as

well as the Canadian parliament all passed resolutions that condemned the famine as a “genocide,” effectively adopting as official narrative that of the Ukrainian fascists.

In 2004–2005, the pro-NATO government of Viktor Yushchenko came to power after the US-backed protests of the so-called “Orange Revolution.” The government undertook major efforts to rehabilitate the World War II-era Nazi collaborators in Ukraine and their historical falsifications. The “Holodomor” became a subject taught in schools to children, and the government supported the issuing of a documentary collection that explicitly called the famine the “Ukrainian Holocaust.”^[20]

This campaign extended beyond Ukraine and also involved international historians, all of whom now claimed that the famine constituted a “genocide,” disregarding entirely all evidence to the contrary.^[21]

Snyder’s account is largely based on works that emerged out of this campaign. Thus, among his most important sources is *The 1932–1933 Famine as Genocide* by the prominent Ukrainian historian Stanislav Kulchytsky. Ignoring all findings to the contrary, the book reiterates Robert Conquest’s claims that the famine was a genocide targeting Ukrainian peasants in the Soviet Ukrainian republic as well as the Kuban.^[22] (Kulchytsky himself had rejected the claim that the famine was a “genocide” until 2003.)

Another important reference point for Snyder is Robert Ku?nierz’s *Ukraine in the years of collectivization and the Great Famine (1929–1933)*, which was published in Polish in 2005 and is referenced no less than 28 times in Snyder’s 99 endnotes for the chapter on the famine. In his references to this work, Snyder not only makes numerous mistakes, but also introduces, in an underhanded manner, propaganda by the Ukrainian right.

Ku?nierz is one of Snyder’s preferred sources for his numerous “horror stories” about cannibalism and other aspects of collectivization with which he intends to shock and disturb his readers. In several cases, however, he inaccurately summarizes this source and adds or omits critical details.^[23]

Thus, in one passage, Snyder describes, based on Ku?nierz, harrowing crimes by party brigades and members of the youth movement, the Komsomol. He portrays them as little more than a gang of marauding gangsters who were raping and killing people on behalf of the state.

Like an invading army the party activists lived off the land, taking what they could and eating their fill, with little to show for their work and enthusiasm but misery and death. ... They would urinate in barrels of pickles, or order hungry peasants to box each other for sport, or make them crawl and bark like dogs, or force them to kneel in the mud and pray. ... In one village the brigade got drunk in a peasant’s hut and gang-raped his daughter. Women who lived alone were routinely raped at night under the pretext of grain confiscations—and their food was indeed taken from them after their bodies had been violated. This was the triumph of Stalin’s law and Stalin’s state. (pp. 39–40)

Yet even Ku?nierz, who is a bitter anticommunist, acknowledges that the Komsomol members were expelled for their “un-Bolshevik attitude” and punished for their crimes. In other words, unlike what Snyder suggests, their behavior was everything but condoned. Ku?nierz also notes that members of brigades who had been guilty of crimes were put on trial and sentenced to prison or camp. This goes unmentioned in *Bloodlands*.^[24]

There is one more revealing case. In one of his many ghastly descriptions of the famine, Snyder writes, “In one village in Soviet Ukraine, the triumphal arch built to celebrate the completion of the Five-

Year Plan was surrounded by the corpses of peasants.” (p. 54)

As the source for this claim, Snyder refers to Ku?nierz (p. 178) who tells us that this description is based on the account of an “eyewitness,” who is supposedly cited in the 1976 English-language issue of *Ethnocide of Ukrainians in the USSR* of the journal *Ukrainian Herald*, an “underground” journal by right-wing Ukrainian dissidents that was published with the help of Robert Conquest.

The story cited by both Ku?nierz and Snyder can be found on page 47 of that journal. The article in question is authored by Maksim Sahaydak and entitled “Soviet fascism.” It rants about the alleged slow-motion genocide of Ukrainians without even purporting to be an objective analysis of anything or a credible scholarly source. The story with the arch is mentioned without any source provided (no eyewitness is referenced). In other words, it has no scholarly credibility whatsoever. Ku?nierz inaccurately identified this source in a Polish book. Then, Snyder simply repeated this right-wing propaganda in his supposedly scholarly work, well aware that most of his readers would not be able to check his Polish-language references.^[25]

It must also be pointed out that in several cases, Snyder provides inaccurate page numbers for figures and quotes that he takes from Ku?nierz.^[26]

Moreover, Snyder repeatedly references the Polish translations by Ku?nierz of Russian-language articles and speeches by Joseph Stalin. This includes references to well known articles by Stalin such as “Dizzy with Success,” which is readily available not only in Russian but also in English. This is comparable to a German historian of the American Revolution citing a Chinese translation of the American Declaration of Independence, instead of citing the widely available original or the German translation. It is not only absurd but illegitimate.

Historians are dutybound to make the references they use as easily accessible as possible and at the same time to get as close as possible to the original document. This means that, unless an established translation of a document or text exists, the original must be cited. The goal is to make it both as easy as possible to verify the sources and to stick as closely as possible to the written record. Yet Snyder cites neither one of the many English translations of these documents nor the original Russian but rather the hardly accessible translation into a third language, Polish.

As any academic of his training and standing, Snyder is well aware of the rules and principles guiding citation. Historians must not only substantiate their claims with accurate references to other historians and primary documents but also correctly identify and summarize the findings and arguments of other historians, whether they agree with them or not. When they develop a different or new assessment of any historical phenomenon or event, they must cite the historical evidence that forms the basis for their conclusions and assessments.

Snyder’s many mistakes in the citations and his reliance on sources in lesser-known languages, even when translations are available, not only testify to an extraordinary degree of sloppiness. They also make it difficult to verify his claims and check his sources. For the majority of his readers, this makes it all but impossible to understand that Snyder hides essential facts from them which do not fit his “narrative,” while making up others for which there is no historical record. He either ignores, falsifies or refutes established historical scholarship without ever openly saying so, while deriving his main arguments from right-wing propagandists.

To be continued



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