

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

## Snyder's falsification of the Great Terror

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*This is part two 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.*

Along with the false portrayal of the famine in the Soviet Union as a deliberate act of mass murder targeting Ukrainians, the misrepresentation of the Great Terror as a campaign of nationally and ethnically targeted killings is central to Snyder's attempt to portray the crimes of fascism as a response to and mere copy of those of "communism."

Snyder claims that the Great Terror, in which some 1 million Soviet citizens were killed, was "chiefly a kulak action which struck most heavily in Soviet Ukraine, and a series of national actions, the most important of them the Polish, where again Soviet Ukraine was the region most affected." (p. 107)

The main basis for Snyder's claims are two operations by the Soviet secret service, the NKVD: Order No. 00447, the so called "anti-kulak" order from July 30, 1937, and Order No. 00485, the basis for the "Polish operation" from August 11, 1937. Together, these two operations claimed the largest number of total victims during the Great Terror. Order No. 00447 became the basis for the persecution of almost 800,000 people between August 1937 and November 1938; about 350,000 of them were executed. It is estimated that the "Polish operation" claimed almost 140,000 victims, including over 111,000 deaths. It was the largest of the so called "nationalities operations" by the NKVD.

Snyder not only falsifies the character of these orders and their implementation, but also tears them out of their historical context. Again, his selection of facts and categories is not only riddled with mistakes but completely arbitrary.

The Great Terror is one of the most horrific and complex chapters in modern history. Among the groups victimized were members of a vast number of nationalities, homeless and unemployed people, people categorized as "kulaks" (often simple peasants), a large number of workers, artists, scientists, engineers, and, in particular, hundreds of thousands of members of the Soviet Communist Party and the Third (Communist) International (Comintern). Indeed, it is the last group that is the best-known target of the terror, and that is key to understanding its character. Yet Snyder, without any attempt at an explanation, virtually ignores this category of victims, as well as virtually all others who do not fall into the categories of "kulaks," Ukrainians and Poles. (Even those

categories, as we shall see, are arbitrarily and incorrectly used by Snyder.)

### The Moscow Trials and the political genocide in the USSR

Snyder all but ignores the beginning of the Great Terror and its most infamous aspect—the Moscow Trials, which began in August 1936 and lasted through March 1938. In these trials, the most prominent leaders of the October Revolution were accused of "counter-revolutionary sabotage" and dragged through the mud before world public opinion before being executed. Snyder deals with the Moscow Trials on less than one page, and makes it sound as if they had exactly three defendants—Lev Kamenev, Grigory Zinoviev and Nikolai Bukharin. He omits the "minor" detail that it was Leon Trotsky and Lev Sedov, his son and closest collaborator, who were the main defendants of the trials and that Trotsky was assassinated in 1940 by a Stalinist agent. (Sedov's death in 1938, too, was likely the result of a GPU operation to assassinate Trotsky and his closest comrades.)

Nor are any of the other defendants mentioned. Among them were Grigory Piatakov, Evgeny Preobrazhensky, Karl Radek, Nikolai Muralov, Vagarshak Ter-Vaganian, Christian Rakovsky and dozens of other members of the Central Committee of the Bolshevik Party under Lenin who later supported the Left Opposition, but eventually succumbed to the immense political and social pressures of the bureaucracy and abandoned the struggle of the opposition.

No serious work on the Great Terror can afford to ignore these names. But mentioning them would cut across Snyder's efforts to conceal the political content and character of the terror and portray it as both a direct result of the October Revolution and a precursor to the genocidal policies of the Nazis.

These omissions are all the more central, as there is perhaps no other crime by Stalinism that invites as direct a comparison with the Nazi regime as the Great Terror. Unlike with the Soviet famine, there is no question that at the heart of the Great Terror was a deliberate policy of mass murder. The documentation is overwhelming, with thousands of killing quotas, and shooting lists for the mass shooting sites, the camps and prisons from across the Soviet Union. In many cases—including but not only the Moscow Trials—the directives can be traced back directly to Joseph Stalin.

It is, moreover, appropriate to speak of a genocide in the context of the

terror. However, it was not an ethnically targeted mass murder, as Snyder suggests. Rather it was, as the Soviet scholar Vadim Rogovin defined it, an act of “political genocide.”<sup>[1]</sup>

The combination of international isolation and economic backwardness had led to the emergence of the Soviet bureaucracy as a privileged and parasitic caste on the body of the workers state. Its very existence and nationalist program of “socialism in one country” stood in violation of the fundamental principles of equality and internationalism of the October Revolution. In order to consolidate its precarious position, it sought to liquidate not only all the revolutionists, but all those who had had any connection to and memory of the October Revolution, and the political and state institutions that emerged out of it—including much of the Soviet state apparatus and especially the Red Army—as well as the international workers movement as a whole.

This driving motive was accurately recognized by Leon Trotsky, who wrote in October 1937, at the height of the terror:

No one, not excluding Hitler, has dealt socialism such deadly blows as Stalin. This is hardly astonishing since Hitler has attacked the working-class organizations from without, while Stalin does it from within. Hitler assaults Marxism. Stalin not only assaults but prostitutes it. Not a single principle has remained unpolluted, not a single idea unsullied. The very names of socialism and communism have been cruelly compromised, from the day when uncontrolled policemen making their livelihood by a “communist” passport, gave the name socialism to their police regime. . . .

The social and political meaning of the purge is clear: The ruling stratum is ejecting from its midst all those who remind it of its revolutionary past, the principles of socialism, liberty, equality, fraternity and the unsolved tasks of the world revolution. The bestiality of the repressions testifies to the hatred which the privileged caste bears to the revolutionists. In this sense the purge increases the homogeneity of the ruling stratum and seems to reinforce Stalin’s position.<sup>[2]</sup>

Even for Trotsky, the sheer scale of the purges—most of which were never publicized, unlike the Moscow Trials—was difficult to fathom. Because of the systematic cover-up of the Great Terror by the Stalinist-controlled state apparatus it was, in fact, not understood for many decades. Its implications are difficult to grasp even today, as the political and intellectual traditions whose bearers were murdered by Stalinism still remain to be fully recovered and reingrained into the historical consciousness of the working class.

Mass graves with thousands of victims were not exhumed until the 1990s. Many remain uncovered to this day. Key documents of the terror—including the Orders No. 00447 and No. 00485—were not published until well after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. Order No. 00447, for instance, was printed in full for the first time in 1996. Only a small portion of the archival materials on the terror and its victims, most of them still held and controlled by the Russian secret service, the FSB, the successor of the NKVD, has been made available and reviewed by researchers.

However, the documents that have become accessible since the collapse of Stalinism only add to and confirm the Marxist assessment of the Great Terror as a political genocide. In his false account of the terror, Snyder is again misleading his readers as to what the historical scholarship has actually established.

## Order No. 00447

Order No. 00447, issued on July 30, 1937, formed the basis for the single largest mass operation of the NKVD during the terror. Extrajudicial institutions, the infamous troika (meaning “group of three people” in Russian), would sentence the accused without even the slightest pretense of a trial, often signing hundreds of verdicts, including death sentences, within an hour, based on files and false testimonies that had been compiled by the NKVD, and “confessions,” which more often than not had been extracted through torture.

The German historians Bernd Bonwetsch, Marc Junge and Rolf Binner, have compiled extensive documentation of the way in which this order was implemented across various parts of the Soviet Union. While Snyder references their work, he omits key findings of their research whenever they contradict his “narrative.”

While those labeled “kulaks” by the NKVD in the early 1930s and after were certainly among the targets, it is completely misleading to present the operation as only targeting “kulaks.” First, the classification of “kulak” is notoriously problematic. It was often used randomly and employed to target real or suspected political opponents as well as simply peasants. But, above all, Order No. 00447 did not target only “kulaks.” A large group of victims, especially in the beginning, were, in fact, people without any occupation; another group were people who had violated the Soviet criminal code on theft, and other offenses. However, a very large number of those targeted within the framework of Order No. 00447 were suspected or actual political opponents of the bureaucracy.

Thus, several of the largest mass executions of former political oppositionists, including massacres of leading Trotskyists of the 1930s, took place within the framework of Order No. 00447. These are completely omitted from Snyder’s account, even though his sources provide ample material on these political persecutions.

Bonwetsch, Junge and Binner have shown in detail how these political persecutions developed as part of the implementation of Order No. 00447. Regional NKVD divisions received quotas from Moscow for arrests and executions that they had to fulfill in their respective areas. However, regional and local NKVD divisions had the right to appeal to Moscow for “corrections” of these quotas and frequently made use of this right. Thus, the order had called for the execution of a total of 75,890 people, including prisoners of the labor camps (Gulags), and the imprisonment of 193,000 people in camps and prisons. In the end, however, around 350,000 were executed as part of Order No. 00447, and almost 800,000 were victimized overall.

Many of the most significant “corrections” that local NKVD officials proposed to the quotas coming from Moscow on the basis of Order No. 00447 concerned camps and political prisons in which oppositionists were incarcerated. Overall, the figure of executions in camps was “corrected upward” three-fold: the initially proposed quota of 10,000 was turned into the basis for the shooting of 30,178 people.

There were also mass executions of prisoners in the so-called political isolators, where 60 percent of the prisoners had been party members. Thus, at a meeting of the “troika” in Yaroslavl on September 3, 1937, 28 political prisoners were sentenced to death because of “collective protests, the dissemination of leaflets, the violation of the prison order, the continuation of political struggle, the organization of hunger strikes, suicide attempts.”<sup>[3]</sup>

At the camp of the Uchtinsko-Petsorskii political isolator in the Komi republic, local officials gave the order on August 30, 1937 to primarily target “the organizers of hunger strikes and people who are refusing to work, as well as prisoners, who are conducting counter-revolutionary agitation, and are corrupting prisoners and runaways.”<sup>[4]</sup> Many if not most of the hunger strikes of this period were led by Trotskyists. Indeed, it

appears that the largest massacres of active Trotskyists, that is of fighters of the Left Opposition who had *not* capitulated to Stalinism, occurred within the framework of Order No. 00447.

Among the leaders of the Soviet opposition who were murdered during “cleansing” of the camps and prisons in 1937-1938 were the last two of Trotsky’s four secretaries from the 1920s who were still alive: Nikolai Martynovich Sermuks, who was executed in a mass shooting in Magadan on the Kolyma on October 25, 1937, and Igor Moiseevich Poznansky, executed as a prisoner of the Ukhtpechlag of the NKVD on March 30, 1938.

On March 1, 1938, one of the biggest massacres of Trotskyists in history took place when 173 prisoners were summarily executed with shots in the back in the Vorkuta camp. They had led a hunger strike in the Ukhtpechlag which had lasted from October 18, 1936 through February 13, 1937, a staggering five months. Among those shot on that day were Viktor Borisovich Eltsin, who had been one of the editors of Trotsky’s *Collected Works* in the 1920s, and was the son of the Old Bolshevik and former general secretary of the Left Opposition, Boris Eltsin. The victims of the massacre also included Grigory Yakovin and Sokrat Gevorkian.<sup>[5]</sup>

All of them—Sermuks, Poznansky, Eltsin, Yakovin and Gevorkian — had been leaders of the Soviet opposition in the 1930s and, with the exception of Sermuks, they are known to have co-authored and co-signed the documents of the Left Opposition denouncing the policy of forced mass collectivization in the early 1930s. But to Professor Snyder, clearly, their murder is as irrelevant as their political struggle.

Another infamous mass shooting, that of 1,111 prisoners of the Solovki camp in the Karelia forest on the 20th anniversary of the October Revolution in October 1937, also occurred within the framework of Order No. 00447. Among the victims were prominent Old Bolsheviks and former oppositionists from Soviet Russia and the Baltics. They included Nazdezhda Smilga-Poluyan, an Old Bolshevik and wife of Ivar Smilga, one of the main leaders of the October Revolution and the Left Opposition in the 1920s; the Old Bolsheviks Grigory Shklovsky and Georgy Yakovenko, who had signed declarations of the Left Opposition in the 1920s; and Martin Jakobson and Aleksandr Blaufel’d, two Estonian Old Bolsheviks, fighters for socialism since the 1905 revolution. Overall, of the 1,627 Solovki prisoners who were executed that year, 1,448 had been imprisoned based on accusations of “counter-revolutionary crimes” (Article 58). Of those, 780 had been accused of “Trotskyist activities.”<sup>[6]</sup>

The Order was officially set to last only until the end of 1937 but was extended in early 1938. The primary targets now officially became “other counter-revolutionary elements.” Former anarchists, Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries were now among those most commonly arrested and executed. By then, the Stalinist bureaucracy had begun to engage in a full-fledged assault on all different tendencies of the workers’ and socialist movement. None of these facts found their way into Snyder’s *Bloodlands* because they undermine his false claims of a “class terror,” directed primarily against “kulaks.”

### Order No. 00485

Order No. 00485 formed the basis of the “Polish operation,” the largest of the so called “nationalities operations” by the NKVD. Snyder’s falsifications of this order and its implementation are, if anything, even more crass. Explicitly minimizing the Nazi persecution of Jews, he writes:

In 1937 and 1938, a quarter of a million Soviet citizens were shot on essentially ethnic grounds. ...the Soviet Union in the late

1930s was a land of unequalled national persecutions. ...The most persecuted European national minority in the second half of the 1930s was not the four hundred thousand or so German Jews (the number declining because of emigration) but the six hundred thousand or so Soviet Poles (the number declining because of executions.) Stalin was a pioneer of national mass murder, and the Poles were the preeminent victim among the Soviet nationalities. (p. 89)

We will examine Snyder’s conscious minimization of the Nazi persecution of Jews in Part Four of this review at greater length. For now, it must be stated clearly that the comparison between the Polish operation by the NKVD and the racial persecution of Germany’s Jewish population by the Nazis lacks historical foundations.

Snyder’s own referenced sources contradict his assessment of the “Polish operation.” A valuable essay by James Morris on the “Polish operation” is referenced at least three times, but in two of these cases, Snyder’s citations are misleading.

In one reference, he cites Morris to substantiate his calculations of the victims of the Polish operation, claiming that Morris’s calculations of victims were “almost identical” to his own.<sup>[7]</sup> But the page referenced by Snyder in Morris does not support his calculations. Instead, it includes a passage that directly refutes Snyder’s assessment of the Polish operation as an act of near-genocidal ethnic cleansing. Morris notes that troikas reviewed 26.2 percent of all cases in the Polish operation. However, only 54.7 percent of these involved ethnic Poles. He writes:

*These numbers show that many of the victims of the Polish operation were not ethnic Poles. Thus, the Polish operation was not a systematic attempt to cleanse the Soviet Union of Poles. In fact, the Polish population of the USSR shrank by only 1.0% between 1937 and 1939 at a time when the total Soviet population grew by 4.1%. It would be of great use to know the ethnic breakdown of the Polish operation’s victims by region. It is likely that the ethnic composition varied widely from region to region, since Poles were most heavily represented in the west of the Soviet Union but the operation’s victims were distributed more evenly throughout this large multi-national state. Thus the Polish operation was most probably a very different affair in Siberia than it was in Ukraine. Further research is needed on the nature of the Polish operation in order to draw definite conclusions about its true character. However, it is clear that the operation had a large non-ethnic component which precludes classifying it as simply an expression of xenophobia. ... The testimony shows that the Polish operation was a blind strike against potentially hostile elements. People with any sort of foreign ties, including many non-Poles, were arrested and shot in this operation.<sup>[8]</sup>*

This assessment is confirmed by Nikolai Petrov and Arseny Roginsky, two of the most authoritative Russian historians of the Great Terror, who both happen to be anti-Communists. While Snyder again claims to rely on them, they, in fact, also insisted that the statistics available preclude the conclusion that the “Polish operation” was an act of national genocide. They wrote:

...even in the last months of mass repression our information about the national affiliation of those taken into custody is perforce incomplete. In our opinion, the sole reliable figures are likewise

not complete: they include no final figures for the total numbers arrested, merely those sentenced by special troiki in the period September to November 1938. *These statistics seem to confirm the thesis that it would be wrong to equate “Poles” with the “Polish” operation.* In these three months, special troiki condemned a total of 105,032 persons arrested in the course of all “national” operations. The biggest national group was that of the Poles (21,258), followed by Germans (17,150), Russians (15,684), Ukrainians (8,773) and Belorussians (5,716). “Poles”, in this instance, meant those who were so described in their passports and other official documents or declared so on the random decision of the NKVD investigating team, which simply wrote in the prisoner’s file that he or she was a Pole. From this total figure of 105,032, those convicted during the “Polish” operation numbered 36,768. ... During the same period Poles also fell victim to other “national” operations, roughly 500 during the “German” sweep and 209 during the “Latvian” one.<sup>[9]</sup>

There is no question that there was a strong element of xenophobia in the Stalinist terror. But Snyder’s false presentation of it as an operation in “ethnic cleansing” is aimed at concealing the fundamentally political motivations for the terror. Even the eruption of racism and xenophobia within the bureaucracy can only be understood as a particularly sharp expression of the nationalist reaction against international socialism and Marxism that lay at the heart of the Stalinist terror. The bureaucracy’s anti-Polish chauvinism was intimately bound up with its deep hostility and fear of the internationalist traditions that were embodied in the Polish communist movement.

With all his talk about the Polish victims of the Great Terror, there is one group that Snyder notably omits completely—members of the Polish Communist Party. Founded in December 1918 through a merger of Rosa Luxemburg’s Social Democracy of Poland and Lithuania (SDKPiL) and the left wing of the Polish Socialist Party (PPS-Lewica), it was one of the most influential and important communist parties in Europe of the inter-war period. Many of its members played leading roles in either the Bolshevik party or the German Communist Party, or both. Several of them, including Luxemburg herself, as well as Leo Jogiches, were tragically murdered in the campaign of White terror following the defeat of the German Revolution of 1918/1919.

Despite political weaknesses and inexperience, the Polish CP was steeped in the traditions of internationalism and the struggle of Rosa Luxemburg against reformism. In 1924, the Central Committee of the Polish Communist Party sided with the opposition of Trotsky in the Soviet Union, something that Stalin never forgave them.<sup>[10]</sup>

Moreover, from 1932 onward, the Polish Left Opposition developed into one of the most influential in Europe. That same year, the Soviet bureaucracy launched a vicious campaign to slander Luxemburg, with one article after another in the press denouncing her for having developed positions that were similar to Trotsky’s theory of permanent revolution.<sup>[11]</sup>

It is for these political reasons that the Polish CP (KPP) became one of the main targets of the Stalinist bureaucracy’s assault on the socialist workers’ movement in the terror. Even before the first Moscow Trials had begun in August 1936, historian James Morris writes:

The Comintern apparatus began reviewing the KPP membership and helping the NKVD locate political émigrés. Lacqueur estimates that 5,000 Polish communists lived in the Soviet Union at this time and contends that “the majority was arrested and killed”. The culture of denunciation in the Soviet Communist

Party and the Comintern reached a new level in the spring of 1937. At the February–March plenum of the Central Committee many Old Bolsheviks were accused of belonging to a terrorist Trotskyite conspiracy that was working for fascist governments. While the Soviet Communist Party persecuted its own members, the Comintern turned on its member parties. Chase estimates that 30 of 37 members of the Central Committee of the KPP were arrested at this time. The Politburo of the Central Committee of the KPP, located in Paris at the time, was recalled to Moscow and arrested en masse. By the summer of 1937 the KPP was a moribund institution and the large majority of its leading members were in prison or dead. For reasons that are still unclear, the Presidium of the Comintern waited until August 1938 to formally dissolve the KPP, although Dimitrov had already penned a resolution calling for dissolution in November 1937.<sup>[12]</sup>

The campaign of mass murder of Polish communists also involved the destruction of their historical record. In the Soviet Union, books and journals that had published material on the revolutionary history of the Polish workers’ movement disappeared from the shelves in libraries, some were destroyed. None of this is mentioned by Snyder.

It must be emphasized, moreover, that Snyder’s focus on the Polish operation is as artificial and misleading as his almost exclusive focus on Ukraine during the Soviet famine. While the Polish operation was no doubt the largest of the nationalities operations, it was far from the only one. There were national operations directed against Germans, Greeks, Latvians and Tatars, to name but a few of the other targeted nationalities. In the process of these and other NKVD operations, the Kremlin eliminated virtually the entire cadre of the Comintern. More than one-third of the three thousand Bulgarian communist emigrants in the USSR and the great majority of the Hungarian emigrants, most of whom had fled fascism in Hungary, were killed in the Terror—national groups that are never mentioned by Snyder. As Vadim Rogovin pointed out, “Altogether more communists from Eastern European countries were killed in the Soviet Union than died at home in their own countries during Hitler’s occupation.”<sup>[13]</sup>

Snyder, clearly, is entirely indifferent to these communist victims of Stalinism—Polish or not—and therefore leaves them out entirely. His concern for “Poles” is that of the Polish right-wing nationalists whose outrage over the Stalinist terror stops when it comes to the murder of Marxists and revolutionaries. Indeed, a striking number of Snyder’s sources come from right-wing Polish authors.<sup>[14]</sup>

In a particularly stark example of the marriage of Polish and Ukrainian right-wing historiography that forms the basis for Snyder’s account, one of his main sources for “horror stories” on both the famine and the Polish operation is a volume put out by the late Roman Dzwonkowski, an ordained Catholic priest who obtained a doctorate after studying the “philosophy of Christianity” but had no credentials whatsoever as a historian. Dzwonkowski was also a regular contributor to the Polish far-right radio station Radio Maryia, which is notorious for its anti-Semitism and ultra-nationalism.

The volume Snyder cites includes “reports” of interviews with victims that were taped by a Ukrainian physician, Piotr Jaszczuk, from 1985–1995—that is, over a half century after the events in question took place. There are serious methodological issues raised by interviews with survivors and eyewitnesses of historical events, a field of historiography that is known as “oral history” and has come to play an important role in the writing of 20th century history. People tend to forget and misremember details, especially when a long period of time has passed and when the events in question were of a traumatic character. This does not necessarily invalidate accounts given by survivors or eyewitnesses,

but any conscientious historian will carefully evaluate and explain the context of the events recalled, the background of the interviewees and the method with which the interviews were conducted.

Yet, in this volume, no information is provided whatsoever as to the methods followed by this Ukrainian physician in taping these interviews. The only thing that the reader learns about the background of this initiative is that the publication of these interviews was funded by the notoriously right-wing Ukrainian diaspora in the US.<sup>[15]</sup>

In short, in terms of a historical source, this volume is highly questionable. At the very least, Snyder should have made his readers aware of the origins of these interviews. But Snyder not only fails to properly discuss his source but again repeatedly misquotes it. There are no fewer than 12 references to it in the chapters on the famine and the Polish operation, but half of them are either entirely misleading or only partially correct. In one case, he cites the book to substantiate the following passage: “As one Pole remembered, people went to bed each night not knowing whether they would be awakened by the sun or by the black raven.” But the paraphrased quote in Dzwonkowski comes from a Pole who recalls his experiences and thoughts from 1933 and 1934, that is not from 1937–1938, and well before the “Polish operation.”<sup>[16]</sup> In another case, Snyder added details to the horrific description of an event that cannot be found in the account by the interviewee. While Snyder claims that the man was arrested just as “his wife was giving birth to their son” (p. 102), the interviewee himself indicated that his arrest occurred shortly thereafter.<sup>[17]</sup>

## The Hitler-Stalin Pact

In his discussion of the Hitler-Stalin Pact (also known as the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact) and the invasion of Poland by both the Wehrmacht and the Red Army in September 1939, Snyder also parrots the line of the Polish right and portrays the pact as a deal between two supposedly imperial, predatory regimes.

He writes:

The two regimes immediately found common ground in their mutual aspiration to destroy Poland. Once Hitler had abandoned his hope of recruiting Poland to fight the Soviet Union, Nazi and Soviet rhetoric about the country was difficult to distinguish. (p. 116)

The claim that Stalin wanted to “destroy Poland” remains completely unsubstantiated. Nor does Snyder provide any evidence that would prove that “Nazi and Soviet rhetoric about the country was difficult to distinguish.”

The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, named after the German and Soviet foreign ministers who signed it on August 23, 1939, was a formal non-aggression pact, presumably guaranteeing that the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany would not launch a military attack upon the other. A secret protocol provided for the partition of Poland into two zones of influence in case of a “territorial and political rearrangement” in Eastern Europe. The Baltic States as well as Eastern Belarus and Western Ukraine, which were not yet part of the Soviet Union in August 1939, would be incorporated into the USSR on the basis of this pact.

However criminal the pact, it is not true that it was motivated by Stalin’s alleged “aspiration to destroy Poland.” Rather, it was a politically bankrupt maneuver by the Kremlin, aimed at preventing, or at least

delaying, the attack of Nazi Germany on the Soviet Union.

One of the German historians that Snyder again falsely claims to rely on, Jürgen Zarusky, powerfully refuted Snyder’s arguments in the very essay that Snyder cites. Explicitly contradicting attempts to equate the Soviet and Nazi regimes, especially over the 1939 pact, Zarusky insisted that it was “Hitler who had the upper hand in 1939 and who was the main figure that determined the dynamic of events with his war mongering attitude [kriegstreiberische Haltung].”<sup>[18]</sup>

Zarusky cites the assessment of another scholar who noted, “Hitler would have gone to war in 1939, with or without the pact with Moscow. ... In 1939, he was scared of peace, not of war.” Zarusky added:

Nevertheless, the pact, of course, enormously facilitated Hitler’s plans. It alleviated the danger of a war on two fronts, and the subsequent strategic and economic cooperation brought Germany significant advantages. A commonly used metaphor says that Stalin gave Hitler “the green light” for the attack on Poland and, thereby, the beginning of the Second World War. This is true, but by the summer of 1939, Hitler had proven—to stick with this metaphor—that he was not a driver who would stop even at a red light if it threatened to delay his own schedule.<sup>[19]</sup>

Indeed, the real crime of Stalin was to allow Hitler to remain in the driver’s seat of European politics. The ultra-left policy of denouncing Social Democratic workers in Germany as “social fascists”—the corollary to the ultra-left economic adventure of collectivization—had preempted a united front by socialist and communist workers in Germany to fight against the fascist threat. As a result, the largest workers’ movement in any imperialist country was paralyzed and the Nazis could come to power without mass organized resistance by the socialist and communist working class movement.

Then, the Stalinist bureaucracy, under the banner of the “popular front” policy, misled revolutionary movements of the workers in France and Spain onto the path of collaboration with the “democratic” bourgeoisie and into certain defeat. It was this sabotage of the workers movement in Europe and the massacre of generations of revolutionary leaders in the USSR and Europe that made possible the advent of fascism in several European countries and created the conditions for the Second World War.

While a certain personal affinity by Stalin, the Great Russian chauvinist and mass murderer of revolutionists, with Hitler, the German fascist and sworn enemy of the workers movement, no doubt played a role in their rapprochement, Stalin’s bankrupt and doomed maneuvers were ultimately the response of the bureaucracy to the isolation of the Soviet Union on the world scale, to which it itself had mightily contributed through a series of betrayals of the international revolution.

Faced with an imminent attack by imperialism, the bureaucracy turned to imperialism instead of the working class, in order to horse-trade its way out of a dilemma it had itself created. Criminal though they were, these policies did not change the character of the Soviet Union, which had emerged as a workers state from the 1917 revolution and retained this historical and social origin, despite its bureaucratic degeneration.

Snyder’s equations of Hitler and Stalin, and the Nazi regime with the Soviet Union, are not only false. They aim to obliterate any distinction between fascism, Stalinism and communism as three fundamentally distinct phenomena. The ultimate goal of this false equation of communism with Stalinism, and the amalgam of distortions, half-truths, omissions, and falsifications, about the crimes of Stalinism, is to whitewash the crimes of fascism—both of the Nazis and their Eastern European fascist allies. It is to this sinister aspect of *Bloodlands* that we will now have to turn.

- [1] Vadim Rogovin, *Stalin's Terror of 1937-1938. Political Genocide in the USSR*, Detroit: Mehring Books 2009.
- [2] Leon Trotsky, *The Beginning of the End*, 1937/October 1937.
- [3] Rolf Binner, Bernd Bonwetsch, Marc Junge, *Massenmord und Lagerhaft. Die andere Geschichte des großen Terrors*, Berlin: Akademie Verlag 2009, p. 134.
- [4] Ibid., pp. 132-133. Translation from the German by this author.
- [5] A full list of the names of those executed was published in: V. M. Poleshshikov, *Za semiu pechatiami. Iz arkhiva KGB*, Vyktyvkar: Komi khnizhnoe izdatel'stvo 1995, pp. 15-19.
- [6] Rolf Binner, Bernd Bonwetsch, Marc Junge, *Massenmord und Lagerhaft*, p. 134.
- [7] In another case, he refers to Morris as a source for the claim that the "total number of deaths" of Poles in Soviet Belarus was 61,501. But Morris writes that the total "loss" of the Polish population—meaning absolute demographic decline—in Soviet Belarus was 61,501. This formulation does not suggest that all of these people were killed. Many may have been deported or otherwise imprisoned and sent to camps. It is, in fact, not clear and Morris himself insists that the statistical data available on the operation is limited. James Morris, "The Polish Terror: Spy Mania and Ethnic Cleansing in the Great Terror," in: *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 56, No. 5, July 2004, p. 759.
- [8] Ibid., p. 762. Emphasis added.
- [9] Nikolai Petrov, Arsenii Roginskii, "The 'Polish Operation' of the NKVD, 1937–8," in: B. McLoughlin et al. (eds.), *Stalin's Terror: High Politics and Mass Repression in the Soviet Union*, Palgrave Macmillan 2003, p. 170. Emphasis added.
- [10] In 1924, Stalin stated in a speech, "It is clear to me that in the first struggle within the VKP (b), the struggle against the opportunist opposition, the leaders of the Polish party unambiguously supported the opposition." Quoted in Morris, "Polish Terror," p. 755.
- [11] Trotsky wrote an important article on this campaign. Leon Trotsky, *Hands off Russia!* <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1932/06/luxemburg.htm>
- [12] Morris, "Polish Terror," p. 756.
- [13] Rogovin, *Stalin's Terror of 1937-1938*, p. 316.
- [14] It is impossible to address all of them in detail here. It should be pointed out, however, that many of his Polish-language sources on the Soviet occupation of Poland in 1939-1941 were penned by historians affiliated with the Instytut Pamięci Narodowej (Institute of National Memory, IPN), an institution funded by the Polish state and notorious for its anti-Communism and right-wing Polish nationalism. These include Rafał Wnuk's *"Za pierwszego Sowietą." Polska konspiracja na Kresach Wschochnich II Rzeczypospolitej*, Warsaw: IPN 2007. The book was issued as part of the IPN's commission on the "crimes against the Polish people." Wnuk was named a professor by the right-wing Polish president Andrzej Duda from the far-right Law and Justice Party (PiS). Another IPN work referenced by Snyder is Janusz Wróbel, Joanna Żelazko, *Polskie dzieci na tuższych szlakach, 1939-1950*, Warsaw: IPN 2008.
- [15] Roman Dzwonkowski, "Wprowadzenie," in: Ibid., (ed), *Gód i represje wobec ludności polskiej na Ukrainie, 1932-1947*. Lublin: Towarzystwo naukowe KUL 2004, pp. 5-36.
- [16] The story by Snyder is found on pp. 97-98, in Dzwonkowski it is on pp. 235-236.
- [17] Dzwonkowski, *Gód i represje wobec ludności polskiej na Ukrainie*, p. 168. In that same passage by Snyder, he also misspells the name of another interviewee he cites, "Eleanora" should be "Eleonora." Her story is in Dzwonkowski, *Gód i represje*, pp. 151-160.
- [18] Jürgen Zarusky, "'Hitler bedeutet Krieg': Der deutsche Weg zum Hitler-Stalin-Pakt," in: *Osteuropa*, 2009, Vol. 59, No. 7/8, p. 99.
- [19] Ibid., p. 113.



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