

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

## Snyder's minimization of the crimes of Hitler's Wehrmacht

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*This is part three 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.*

### The Nazi war of annihilation against the Soviet Union and Ernst Nolte's justification of fascism

The real political purpose of Snyder's false equations of Stalinism with communism, and of the Soviet Union with Nazi Germany, is revealed in his account of World War II. In *Bloodlands*, the Nazi war of annihilation and the crimes of Hitler's Wehrmacht are systematically trivialized and relativized as a "reaction" to, or as part of, an "interaction" with violence from the Soviet side.

The Nazis attacked the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941, launching the bloodiest war in human history. The estimated death toll among the Soviet population is 27 million, but may well have been higher. The war also marked a critical turning point in the development of the Nazis' genocide of the European Jews. Within less than two years after the beginning of the Nazi-Soviet war, almost the entire Jewish population of Eastern Europe had been murdered.

The falsifications and omissions with regard to the Nazi-Soviet war in *Bloodlands* are of the most fundamental character. It is impossible to enumerate them all. Let the reader be reminded that over half of the victims of the Nazi-Soviet war do not even figure in *Bloodlands* as part of the death toll of the Nazi regime. Some of the most important chapters in the history of this war are effectively ignored. This includes the battle of Stalingrad, which led to the first major defeat of a German army, in February 1943, and is widely seen as the beginning of the end of the Third Reich.

Above all, however, Snyder falsifies the character of the Nazi war, which was one of both imperialist aggression and counterrevolution. The Nazi movement had historically arisen out of the capitalist reaction to the October revolution and the revolutionary struggles it initiated across Europe, including the German revolution of 1918/1919. The National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP) was founded in 1920 in

Bavaria, southern Germany, which was then the center of the counterrevolutionary terror against the workers' movement. The infamous shock troops of the SA trace their origins to the Freikorps (Free Corps) units that were first formed to crack down on the revolutionary movement of workers in Germany, and then to aid the war by German imperialism against the Soviet Republic in Eastern Europe in 1918, when Berlin sought to bring much of the region under its direct colonial control.

Early on, Adolf Hitler spelled out the relationship between the bloody crackdown on the Marxist and workers movement and the realization of the foreign policy goals of German imperialism. In a speech given to the Hamburg business elite in 1926, Hitler unequivocally stated that the destruction of Marxism and the workers movement—first and foremost in Germany itself—was the essential precondition for the rebuilding of a German Reich [Empire] in Europe. He declared:

It is on the basis of this recognition that the movement which I try to make great and bring to power was once founded. Its task is very narrowly defined: the destruction and annihilation of the Marxist world view.<sup>[1]</sup>

The enormous scale and brutality of the war against the Soviet Union can only be understood within this context. The geopolitical and economic war aims of German imperialism in the East in World War II were in many respects similar to those it had in World War I: Control over the agricultural and raw material resources of the Soviet Union—especially Ukraine—were regarded as the essential precondition for the ability of German imperialism to wage war against its main imperialist rivals, chief among them the United States. But it was impossible for German imperialism to either gain full control over these resources or to keep the German and international working class in check without a wholesale reaction against and destruction of the socialist workers' movement and the Soviet Union, which, in spite of the horrendous crimes of Stalinism, remained a degenerated workers' state.

As a result, the war against the Soviet Union assumed, to a significant extent, the character of a civil war. The Soviet population and the Red Army, despite the crimes of Stalinism and the beheading of the Red Army in the Great Terror on the eve of the war, rose up to defend the conquests of the October Revolution against the fascist invasion and counterrevolution.

In that sense, when claiming that fascism represented a reaction to the Russian Revolution, Nolte was not wrong per se. However, he advanced

these arguments from the standpoint that this reaction *justified* the crimes of fascism, effectively recycling what the Nazis themselves had said and written. The entire war against the Soviet Union had been justified by the Nazis as a “preemptive war,” and by the need to “annihilate Bolshevism” and “Marxism.” Nolte was doing little more than echoing this fascist line of argumentation when he described National Socialism in 1987 as a “predictable reaction” to the Russian Revolution, which “in essence was justified by the subsequent course of history.” He wrote:

...the relationship to communism, filled with fear and hatred, was indeed the moving force of Hitler’s feelings and of Hitler’s ideology ... and ... all of these feelings and fears were not only intelligible but to a large degree also understandable and, up to a certain point, even justified.<sup>[2]</sup>

All serious historical research into the crimes of Nazism and the Nazi-Soviet war since the 1980s has developed in direct opposition to Nolte’s attempt to justify fascism.

In this work, historians had to contend with a climate shaped by the resurgence of far-right forces across Europe, including in Germany itself and in Eastern Europe, in the aftermath of the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991.

It must also be recalled that in West Germany, the old elites of the Third Reich—from the judiciary to many politicians, journalists and academics—had fundamentally remained untouched after 1945 and remained deeply hostile to any serious historical and political reckoning with the crimes of fascism. As a matter of fact, in Germany, many of the most significant works of historical research into the Nazi war in the East, and the crimes of the Wehrmacht, were only produced in the 1990s, that is, almost half a century after the fall of the Third Reich.

This research by German, other European and North American scholars was facilitated by the opening of the archives in the former Soviet Union, which had held vast archival materials on the Nazi occupation of the Soviet Union and the Holocaust.

The historical scholarship has established above all two historical facts:

First, the Nazis had extensive, detailed plans for the war of annihilation against the Soviet Union which violated all established conventions of warfare and could be realized only through policies of mass murder of unprecedented brutality. All levels of the German state and army, as well as a large number of academics, were involved in the elaboration of these plans and in their implementation. In other words, the crimes against the Soviet population were planned for by the entire German state apparatus, and *not* perpetrated in a mere “reaction” to the Red Army.

Second, local far-right forces, particularly in Ukraine and the Baltics, were deeply involved and complicit in the crimes of the Nazi regime, above all in the Holocaust.

With *Bloodlands*, Snyder seeks to revise this historical record. He falsely claims to rely on some of the most important historical works produced over the past quarter century. In reality, however, he is engaged in a systematic attempt to downplay the crimes of the Nazis and their fascist allies, and present them as a mere “reaction” to crimes by the Stalinist regime, parroting and even surpassing the falsifications and minimization of fascism in which Nolte engaged during the 1980s. This part (Part Three) will deal with his relativization of the crimes of Hitler’s Wehrmacht. The following part will discuss his attempt to whitewash the crimes of the Nazis’ Eastern European fascist collaborators in the Holocaust.

## The Nazis’ Hunger Plan

In the lead-up to the invasion of the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941, the Nazis, relying on the assistance of German academics, worked out the so-called “Generalplan Ost,” or General Plan for the East, a blueprint for their occupation policies and war goals. A critical component of the Generalplan Ost was the so-called Hunger Plan, which envisioned the starving to death and deportation of 30 million Slavs. This plan, in contrast to the Soviet famine of the early 1930s, clearly constituted an act of premeditated mass murder. Yet Snyder creates a false parallel between the two, and engages in an extraordinary minimization of the criminal and brutal character of the Wehrmacht. He writes:

Hitler’s henchman Göring in September 1941 behaved strikingly like Stalin’s henchman Kaganovich had in December 1932. Both men laid down instructions for a food policy that guaranteed death for millions of people in the months that followed. Both also treated the starvation their policies brought not as a human tragedy but as enemy agitation. Stalin and Kaganovich had placed the Ukrainian party between themselves and the Ukrainian population in 1932 and 1933, forcing Ukrainian communists to bear the responsibility for grain collection, and to take the blame if targets were not met. Hitler and Göring placed the Wehrmacht between themselves and the hungry Soviet population in 1941 and 1942. ... For the soldiers and the lower-level officers, there was no escape but insubordination or surrender to the enemy, prospects as unthinkable for German troops in 1941 as they had been for Ukrainian communists in 1932. (p. 170)

Moreover, Snyder alleges that the German Wehrmacht only decided to participate in this criminal endeavor *after* the war had begun:

... it was the *lack* of victory in the Soviet Union that made the Wehrmacht inseparable from the Nazi regime. In the starving Soviet Union in autumn 1941, the Wehrmacht was in a moral trap, from which National Socialism seemed to offer the only escape. (p. 178, italics in the original)

These claims are not only false, they constitute an attempt to resurrect the old myths promulgated for decades after World War II by the German right and political establishment about the supposedly honorable Wehrmacht. The official claim was that, to the extent the Wehrmacht was at all involved in the crimes of Nazism, it only engaged in these crimes against its will or in a forced “response” to “circumstances” and “violence” emanating from the Soviet side.

In making these claims, Snyder purports to rely on the German historian Christian Gerlach, whose 1,250-page study of the Nazi occupation of Belarus, *Kalkulierte Morde* (Calculated Murders), is referenced almost 40 times. This is a deliberate attempt by Snyder to lend false credibility to his right-wing historical revisionism. Christian Gerlach has played a central role in refuting all efforts to minimize the crimes of the Nazi regime in its war against the Soviet Union. His book from 1999, *Calculated Murders*, was a pioneering study that reconstructed in detail both the Nazi war plans for the East and their implementation in Belarus.

Contrary to Snyder’s claims that the Wehrmacht only decided to implement the Hunger Plan in the autumn of 1941—months *after* the invasion—Gerlach has documented in detail that already by

January/February 1941—that is, *half a year before* the invasion—all levels of the German state, including the army leadership, had agreed on the essential outlines of the Hunger Plan.<sup>[3]</sup>

The Hunger Plan, Gerlach wrote, was an “inseparable component of the military side of the aggressive war against the USSR and appeared as the precondition for its success.” The successful subjugation of the Soviet Union, in turn, was seen as a necessary precondition for the ability of German imperialism to wage war against both the US and Great Britain. Calculating, erroneously, that the Soviet state would collapse almost immediately upon attack, the Nazis were determined to starve 30 million Slavs to death in order to guarantee food supplies for the German population and army. Gerlach stressed that the realization of the economic policies and the resulting crimes—including the Hunger Plan—“lay in the interests of the Wehrmacht,” because it was through the starvation of the Soviet population that the German army would be supplied with food.<sup>[4]</sup>

Yet, distorting Gerlach, Snyder insists:

The Wehrmacht could not implement the Hunger Plan. ... The German occupiers never had the ability to starve when and where they chose. ... They could apply terror, but less systematically than the Soviets had done; they lacked the party and the fear and faith that it could arouse. They lacked the personnel to seal off cities from the countryside. And as the war continued longer than planned, German officers worried that organized starvation would create a resistance movement behind the lines. (pp. 166, 168)

At another point, he notes:

The Wehrmacht was not implementing the original Hunger Plan but rather starving where it seemed useful to do so. (p. 172)

These statements not only constitute, again, a staggering minimization of the brutality of the Wehrmacht, they are deliberately misleading. It is certainly true that the Wehrmacht could not “fully” implement the Hunger Plan, not least of all because massacring the entire population in what became a much more prolonged war than the Nazis expected would have created logistical challenges for the Wehrmacht’s food supplies. But it certainly tried to do its best.

Snyder again gives the false impression that his statements about the supposed “failures” of the Wehrmacht to implement the Hunger Plan are substantiated by the work of other historians. Yet Alex J. Kay, whom Snyder references, stressed, on the contrary:

... one should by no means conclude from the failure to bring about the death from starvation of thirty million Soviets that the implementation of this policy was not attempted. The occupation authorities on the spot knew how they were to treat the indigenous population. During a speech held in 1942, Plenipotentiary for Labor Deployment Fritz Sauckel recalled that during a visit to Ukraine in late autumn 1941, all German authorities there were convinced that in the winter of 1941/42 “at least ten to twenty millions of these people will simply starve to death.” During a discussion in Berlin in late November 1941, Göring told the Italian foreign minister, Count Galeazzo Ciano, that certain peoples had to be decimated and twenty to thirty million inhabitants of the Soviet Union would starve during 1941.<sup>[5]</sup>

Among the cities that were subject to months-long, sometimes years-long, sieges, only three are mentioned by Snyder, and that briefly. Leningrad, the city of the revolution, was subjected to an almost 900-day siege, the longest in modern history. Moreover, Snyder mentions only the lowest estimate of the civilian death toll, 1 million, and ignores the fact that another estimated 1 million Red army soldiers are believed to have died defending the city.

In discussing the Nazi siege of Kiev, in which the German forces starved the population, Snyder even claims that the Soviet authorities in 1933 had been more brutal toward the city’s population, writing: “The Germans were unable to seal the city as the Soviets had done in 1933.” (p. 172). Many other sieges that technically fall within the arbitrarily defined geographic framework of Snyder’s *Bloodlands* are not mentioned at all. Among them was the siege of the relatively small city of Pavlovsk, where 6,000 out of 11,000 residents were starved to death, as well as the siege of Sevastopol on Crimea by both Romanian and German Wehrmacht soldiers, which lasted eight months.

Another central target of the Hunger Plan were the Soviet prisoners of war. Between 3 million and 3.5 million Soviet POWs were starved to death in German captivity, and over 2 million of them by the spring of 1942, that is, within the first 10 months of the war. In fact, up until the spring of 1942, the single largest victim group of the Nazis was not the Jews, but the Soviet prisoners of war. They were shot and starved to death systematically in camps and on death marches at a rate of up to 300,000 per month in the fall and spring of 1941/1942. In this time period, between 85 to 90 percent of all Soviet POWs in German captivity were killed.

The responsibility of the Nazis for this horrendous crime is purposely minimized by Timothy Snyder. He claims, “the Soviet prisoners of war died as a result of the *interaction* of the two systems.” (p. 381, italics in the original)

This, again, is a direct rejection of the historical record. Historians Christian Streit and Christian Gerlach, in particular, have provided irrefutable evidence for the planned and intentional killings of these millions of Soviet prisoners of war at the hands of the Wehrmacht, as part of the Hunger Plan.<sup>[6]</sup> Both Streit and Gerlach also insist on the role of the infamous “Commissar Order,” which Snyder ignores. Issued by the German army leadership on June 6, 1941, it openly called upon German troops to murder captured Soviet political commissars.

Snyder references these historians, whose works were not translated into English, but fails to tell his readers that these two preeminent experts on the subject matter emphatically rejected his central claims.

### **The Nazi occupation of Belarus and the war against the partisans**

Perhaps no country during World War II suffered a civilian death toll higher, in relative terms, than Belarus. During the more than three years of occupation, at least 1.5 to 1.6 million people were killed out of a population of 9 million, i.e., between 18 and 19 percent of the entire population. Among them were between 500,000 and 550,000 Belarusian Jews (over 90 percent of the pre-war Jewish population) and 700,000 prisoners of war. On top of the civilian death toll, it is estimated that over half a million Belarusians died as soldiers of the Red Army.

Apart from the genocide of the Jewish population and the systematic annihilation of POWs, the war crime that claimed the highest casualty figures among the civilian population was the Nazis’ war against the partisans. It resulted in the murder of at least 345,000 people and the destruction of over 600 villages.<sup>[7]</sup>

In few countries did partisan resistance to the Nazis during World War II assume such enormous popular dimensions as in Belarus. By 1943, the

partisan movement had grown to encompass large sections of the population. Some 39.6 percent of the partisan units was comprised of peasants, 17 percent of workers, 20 percent of intellectuals and 12.2 percent of teenagers.<sup>[8]</sup>

In *Bloodlands*, Snyder launches an embittered attack on this anti-fascist resistance movement. He denounces the partisans as engaging in “illegal” warfare, and depicts them as little more than marauding bandits, who deliberately held the civilian population hostage. The partisans, Snyder claims, are as much to blame for the hundreds of thousands of civilian deaths from the German “antipartisan warfare” as the Nazis themselves.

Snyder rants:

Partisan warfare was a nightmare of German military planning, and German army officers had been trained to take a severe line. ... Partisan warfare was (and is) illegal, since it undermines the convention of uniformed armies directing violence against each other rather than against surrounding populations. In theory partisans protect civilians from a hostile occupier; in practice, they, like the occupier, must subsist on what they take from civilians. Since partisans hide among civilians, they bring down, and often intend to bring down, the occupier’s retaliation against the local population. (pp. 233-234)

In another passage, he calls the “partisan war in Belarus” a “perversely interactive effort of Hitler and Stalin, who each ignored the laws of war and escalated the conflict behind the front lines.” (p. 250)

While Snyder begins his account of the German war against the partisans and the civilian population of Belarus by declaring the partisans’ struggle against the invaders “illegal,” he devotes exactly one sentence to the far-reaching plans of the Nazis for their conduct in the war, and does not even describe it as “illegal.” He notes casually, “Even before the invasion of the Soviet Union, Hitler had already relieved his soldiers of legal responsibility for actions taken against civilians.” (p. 234)

What Snyder vaguely refers to here in one fleeting sentence is the *Kriegsgerichtsbarkeitserlass*, known in English as the Barbarossa Decree. It was one of the seminal documents of the Nazi war against the Soviet Union, and ranks among the most sinister documents in world history. Issued on May 13, 1941 by the head of the Wehrmacht’s command, General Field Marshal Wilhelm Keitel, this document did not only “relieve soldiers of legal responsibility” for the killing of civilians, it explicitly called for mass reprisals against the Soviet civilian population and the annihilation of entire villages and towns. In no uncertain terms, the German army command justified these criminal steps as retaliation for the October Revolution and the socialist and communist movement in Germany itself.

The decree stated:

1. There is no obligation to prosecute actions by the Wehrmacht and its helpers [des Gefolges] against hostile civilians, even if the action constitutes at the same time a military crime or offense.

2. In judging these actions, every procedural action must take into consideration that the collapse of 1918, the subsequent period of suffering for the German people and the fight against National Socialism with the countless bloody victims for the movement, were all decisively influenced by Bolshevism and that no German has ever forgotten that.<sup>[9]</sup>

In the words of one historian:

The Barbarossa Decree empowered every single officer of the Eastern army to order the extralegal execution of Soviet civilians, it allowed for collective reprisals against entire towns and obliged the Eastern army to engage in the most radical possible response to any kind of active or passive resistance. By eliminating any form of law enforcement for crimes committed by members of the Wehrmacht against civilians, the Barbarossa Decree turned the occupied territories de facto into a virtually law-free space, thereby creating the conditions for the German rule of violence in the Soviet Union.<sup>[10]</sup>

Snyder all but ignores not just this document, which played a critical role in establishing and predetermining the criminal character of German occupation policies in the East. In fact, he does not clearly reference or cite this or any of the five criminal orders that formed the basis for the Wehrmacht’s conduct in the war of annihilation. They included most notably the Barbarossa Decree (May 13, 1941), the Guidelines for the Conduct of the Troops in the East (May 19, 1941), and the Commissar Order (June 6, 1941), which were all issued over a month before the invasion began. They placed the warfare of the Wehrmacht outside all established international laws and conventions.

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Instead, he spends much of his ink on portraying the partisans as thugs and gangsters, indifferent to the plight of the civilian population. As a result, Timothy Snyder is effectively reiterating the trope of “bandits” that had been propagated by the Nazis themselves to justify their mass reprisals. In the process, he makes mistakes in translating documents by the Nazis that are difficult to explain on the basis of either “linguistics” or mere sloppiness. Thus, he turns “Feindtote,” which translates as “dead enemies,” into “partisans,” and the term “Bandenverdächtige,” which translates as “suspected bandits,” into “partisan suspects” (p. 241). In other words, Snyder simply changes the terms “enemies” and “bandits,” which are as unambiguous in German as they are in English, into the term “partisans.”<sup>[11]</sup>

But contrary to what the Yale professor wants his readers to believe, the Nazis’ brutal war on the civilian population was *not* a response to the partisans. If anything, it is this war on the civilian population which made the ranks of the partisans swell enormously by 1943. As one historian, whom Snyder cites, noted:

the foundations for the cruelty and brutality [of the war against the partisans] were already rooted in the structure of the war against the Soviet Union, which had been determined in the planning phase. ... The fundamental and systematic brutalization of the warfare was determined by German war aims and their means. ... The cruelty of the German conquerors provoked the stubborn resistance, not the other way around.<sup>[12]</sup>

No one has demonstrated this more powerfully than Christian Gerlach. In a 200-page chapter on the Nazis’ war against the partisans in Belarus in his study *Calculated Murders* about the Nazi occupation of Belarus, Gerlach unequivocally concludes that the war on the partisans constituted “a mass crime, organized by the [German] state.”<sup>[13]</sup>

Moreover, Gerlach proved in detail that many of the most horrific acts of mass murder of the civilian population, termed “antipartisan operations,” were conditioned not so much by the military course of the campaign per se, but rather by the plans of the Nazis to exploit Belarus’ peasantry to supply food for the German army.

Yet Snyder, who, in defiance of the historical record, tried to make his readers believe that the Soviet famine was the result of a deliberate policy of mass murder, simply ignores the historical fact that entire regions in Belarus were depopulated by the Nazis because the local peasants did not deliver on the desired quotas.

In Gerlach's words:

From the standpoint of the Germans, the most important task of the Belarusian peasants was to deliver agricultural produce. As far as unarmed civilians were concerned, their most serious form of resistance consisted in not delivering produce. It is not just that they thereby demonstrated or seemed to demonstrate their political attitude: From the standpoint of the Germans, they simply had forfeited their purpose of existence.<sup>[14]</sup>

In many of the largest "anti-partisan operations" dozens of representatives of the agricultural ministry were present to requisition agricultural produce. In fact, many of these operations were *ordered* by the agricultural ministry, targeting farms and villages that had failed to fulfill the quotas set by the Nazi occupiers, sometimes by just a few cows.

The brutality of these "operations" defies comprehension even to this day. They have become deeply ingrained in popular consciousness in the former Soviet Union and formed the basis for one of the most powerful anti-war films of the 20th century, *Come and See*, which depicted the torching of one village and its residents in such an "anti-partisan" operation.

Christian Gerlach described these operations as follows:

The course of the massacres in the doomed places makes clear that the German units and their helpers proceeded in an organized fashion. Thus, in quite a few cases, it was a matter of pit shootings which were carried out with machine guns, and were very similar to the executions of Jews by the SS, police and Wehrmacht. In other cases, the extermination took place in barns, stables or larger buildings, sometimes with the Germans burning the people alive. These execution sites were intended to prevent the victims from dispersing and escaping. The third possibility was that each individual family was placed under arrest in their house and killed there with bullets—especially with machine guns—and hand grenades. Afterwards, the houses were set on fire. Special squads were responsible for burning the villages. Sometimes all the inhabitants of each house [in one village] were registered days before, and in individual cases gas vans were used as murder tools.<sup>[15]</sup>

The German air force also participated in the destruction of villages, dropping bombs measuring thousands of tons in thousands of raids.

Despite this incredibly brutal warfare by the Nazis, and despite the fact that Stalin had dismantled schools for the training of partisans as well as ammunition and weapons storage for partisan warfare during the Great Terror, the Soviet partisans were able to inflict considerable damage on the Nazi war effort. It is worth noting how differently Snyder and Gerlach evaluate this fact.

To Timothy Snyder, whatever damage the partisans caused to the German war effort is yet another testament to the criminal character of their undertaking. He denounces the partisans for blowing up locomotives, and again references Gerlach in doing so. By contrast, Gerlach in the passage referenced stressed that these actions had "European-wide

consequences" and an effect on the outcome of the war "that should not be underestimated": The partisans, with their attacks on railroads and locomotives, destroyed every month as many locomotives as the entire train industry controlled by the Germans in Europe was able to produce at the time, thus seriously undermining the Nazis' war effort.<sup>[16]</sup>

For reasons that are best known to himself, Snyder repeatedly emphasizes that Jews fleeing the ghettos joined the partisans. "Germans killed Jews as partisans, and many Jews became partisans. The Jews who became partisans were serving the Soviet regime, and were taking part in a Soviet policy to bring down retribution upon civilians." (p. 250) It is difficult to read this passage other than as an insinuation that Holocaust survivors who became partisans were to blame for the consequences of the Nazis' anti-partisan warfare. And it is difficult to believe that Timothy Snyder, who has worked on the history of Eastern Europe for now close to three decades, is unaware of the fact that the Eastern European far-right routinely justifies fascist violence during the war with "Jewish participation" in the Soviet regime.

### Timothy Snyder's reliance on Bogdan Musia?

Indeed, as was the case in his misrepresentation of the crimes of Stalinism, the affinity of Timothy Snyder's arguments to those of the Eastern European right is all but impossible to deny. In fact, his own sources speak to it. While Snyder distorts and revises the findings of historians like Christian Gerlach, his real source of inspiration is the German-Polish right-wing historian Bogdan Musia?

In contrast to Gerlach, who has devoted most of his career to documenting the crimes of the German Wehrmacht, Musia? is known above all as an *opponent* of the exposure of the crimes of the Wehrmacht and Nazism. When an exhibit in Germany in the 1990s revealed, for the first time since 1945, the full scope of the Wehrmacht's complicity in the war in the East, Musia? became one of its most outspoken opponents, advancing many of the false arguments that provided the pretext for the exhibition's shutdown by German politicians.<sup>[17]</sup>

Musia? is also notorious for being one of many Polish right-wing intellectuals who have opposed the exposure of the involvement of Poles in anti-Jewish pogroms during World War II. As is typical in the Eastern European far right, Musia? justified "anti-Jewish emotions" among Poles with the alleged "behavior that quite a few Jews had engaged in" under Soviet rule in Eastern Poland.<sup>[18]</sup>

Despite the dubious and well known record of Musia?, his 2009 book about the Soviet partisans in Belarus is one of the works most frequently cited by Snyder for his chapter on the partisans. As usual, Snyder hides from his readers the nature and main claims of the work he references. There are good reasons for this decision. Musia? makes two central claims in this work: First, he presents, in an underhanded manner, the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union as a response to alleged long-standing plans for "an attack" by the Bolsheviks on both Germany and Poland.

He writes:

Both on the eve of the German attack on the Soviet Union and in the 1920s and 1930s, the military-strategic conception of an "offensive war" or "the policy of an offensive", i.e., of an aggressive war in the West, was in effect in the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union began at least in 1930 to massively arm for it [an aggressive war in the West].<sup>[19]</sup>

This is little more than a revised version of the old trope that the war against the Soviet Union was forced upon Germany by the Kremlin to prevent an attack by the USSR. In fact, this was the justification that the Nazis themselves provided for the attack on June 22, 1941, when the German embassy declared to the Kremlin that the invasion was a “preemptive war.” Although he did not go so far as to openly embrace the “preemptive war” thesis, Ernst Nolte clearly sought to pave the way for its full rehabilitation. In 1987, he portrayed the attack on the Soviet Union as an “objectively caused and inevitable decisive battle,” which had to be understood as a preemptive response to what the Nazis perceived as a permanently existing threat, going back to the Russian revolution and the civil war.<sup>[20]</sup>

But Snyder not only fails to inform his readers as to what this book by Musia? represents, he also adopts, with close to no modification, the second central argument advanced by Musia?: That the campaign of mass murder against Belarusian civilians was a reaction by the German army to what he called the “terror of the partisans.” Clearly providing the blueprint for Snyder’s narrative in *Bloodlands*, Musia? wrote:

With the growth of the partisan movement beginning in 1942 the situation of the civilian population became ever more precarious. The German occupiers responded to the avalanche-like figure of partisan actions and attacks with smaller and bigger operations that were nominally directed against the partisans. It was the population in the contested regions that became the primary victim.<sup>[21]</sup>

This claim is not only false, as has been shown above, but it is part and parcel of the effort to present the crimes of Nazism as a forced, if somewhat misguided or “excessive,” response and reaction to the crimes of the Soviets. In the guise of historical research, Snyder resurrects all the old arguments that were historically advanced by the German and Eastern European far right to minimize and justify the crimes of fascism against both the Soviet population and European Jewry.

*To be continued.*



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