

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

## Historical lies in the service of imperialist reaction

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6 December 2022

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*This is part five 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.*

Even within the scope of an extensive review, only a portion of the falsifications, lies and distortions of history at the hands of Timothy Snyder could be addressed. The abundance of errors in his citations, the mistranslations and misrepresentation of scholarly works—all of these would be sufficient to disqualify any chapter in *Bloodlands* from even passing an undergraduate course.

The method Snyder employs in *Bloodlands*, to the extent that one can speak of method, is one of wild subjectivism and eclecticism: facts are thrown in or omitted in a completely erratic fashion, based not on the objective course of historical developments but on the requirements of Snyder's "narrative." Thoughts and motives are ascribed to historical actors without any serious examination of the social and economic context within which their decisions and actions are taking place and more often than not without any documentary basis. Horror stories about a no doubt horrific period in history are recounted with glee and the intention to shock, disturb and confuse the reader, not to explain. Frequently, they are embellished with details that are based not in the historical record but in Snyder's imagination.

Timothy Snyder is guilty, in the words of Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel, of

introducing all the anti-historical monstrosities that a vain imagination could suggest. Here we have the other method of making the past a living reality; putting subjective fancies in the place of historical data; fancies whose merit is measured by their boldness, that is, the scantiness of the particulars on which they are based, and the peremptoriness with which they contravene the best established facts of history.<sup>[1]</sup>

This is the method not of a historian but of a propagandist. Despite the often wild and erratic claims, however, there is an objective political and historical logic to the arguments advanced. *Bloodlands* is a work of conscious, right-wing historical revisionism. Its fundamental axis is the

ideological rehabilitation of the justification of fascism offered by Ernst Nolte as well as key elements of the propaganda of the Polish and Ukrainian far-right. Based on attacks on the October Revolution and the Left Opposition, Snyder falsely equates Stalinism with communism and Bolshevism. Then he proceeds to distort the nature of Stalinism and its crimes, which he not only equates with those of fascism but frequently declares to have been even worse.

This amalgam of distortions, omissions and pure invention culminates in an account of the Nazi-Soviet war and the Holocaust in which the crimes of the Wehrmacht and the Eastern European fascist allies of Nazism are systematically downplayed and relativized.

There is not a single newly discovered historical document that Snyder can cite in order to substantiate his extraordinary assertions. Whatever Snyder's bombastic claims about his "linguistic" skills and the supposedly "empirical nature" of his book, there is no indication whatsoever that he engaged in any significant research of his own for it. His account is not based on the historical record but is a falsification of it.

The books Snyder references to "substantiate" his claims largely fall into two categories. They either (1) originate in the political and intellectual right and far-right and provide the inspiration for Snyder's key claims, or (2) are legitimate scholarly works whose content and arguments are ignored, distorted or rejected by Snyder, without his readers ever being told what these scholars actually wrote. These distortions are willful. They are intended to revise the historical record of the crimes of Stalinism and fascism that has been established over the past decades and legitimize the lies and propaganda of the German and Eastern European far-right.

Timothy Snyder cannot lay claim to ignorance. He has studied the history of Eastern Europe, especially Poland and Ukraine, for three decades. He is well aware of the key literature on the crimes of both Nazism and its Eastern European collaborators. Indeed, it was through his work above all on the UPA and its mass murder of Poles in West Ukraine that Snyder established his authority in the field of Eastern European studies.

Commenting on the essential political content on Ernst Nolte's relativization of the crimes of fascism in the 1980s, the British historian Richard J. Evans concluded:

...Nolte seeks to rehabilitate, or at least excuse, the Germans, the Nazis, the bourgeoisie, and fascism in general by portraying Hitler's policies as a defensive reaction to the Soviet and Communist threat. Violence, he is saying, always comes first from

the left. Nazism was basically a ‘justified reaction’ to Communism; it simply overshot the mark.<sup>[2]</sup>

The same must, ultimately, be concluded about Snyder’s *Bloodlands*. With his account, Snyder minimizes and relativizes not only the crimes of the German bourgeoisie but of its fascist and nationalist allies in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. It is an account that is aimed, ultimately, at legitimizing the attempted nationalist and fascist reaction against the socialist October Revolution of 1917.

The political and intellectual implications of such a reactionary effort are of the most serious and dangerous character. The historical lie, as Leon Trotsky always stressed, serves a definite political and social function. The historical lies of *Bloodlands* are now central to the ideological justification of, first, the build-up of fascist forces, and, second, the imperialist war against Russia in Ukraine and the drive toward another world war, more broadly.

First, it must be stated that *Bloodlands*, when it was first published in 2010, was a milestone in the efforts by the right internationally to minimize and justify the crimes of fascism. The production and dissemination of *Bloodlands* was no doubt a well-planned and heavily funded endeavor. The book has now been translated into over 30 languages and has been showered with awards, unsurprisingly, in Poland and Ukraine, but also in the US, Germany and many other countries. For good reason, it was recognized by reactionary circles as a breakthrough in the efforts to rehabilitate and lend academic credibility to the historical lies of the far-right about the 20th century.

Thus, the right-wing extremist professor Jörg Baberowski from Berlin’s Humboldt University greeted the publication of *Bloodlands* with enthusiasm, writing, “20 years ago this would have been unimaginable: that a historian would relate the murderous excesses and strategies of annihilation by the National Socialists to the bloody deeds of the Bolsheviks in one single narrative (Geschichte).”

By February 2014, Baberowski declared, “Nolte was done an injustice. Historically speaking, he was correct...Of course, Hitler was not unaffected by what he knew about the Russian civil war and Stalinism. Hitler was no psychopath, and he wasn’t vicious. ... Stalin, on the other hand, delighted in adding to and signing off on the death lists. He was vicious. He was a psychopath.”<sup>[3]</sup>

It must also be noted that Snyder has been appearing and writing frequently for the German press, especially since the outbreak of the war, ridiculing the *Historikerstreit* and urging the German ruling class, which has embarked on the biggest rearmament program since the fall of the Third Reich, to escalate its involvement in the imperialist proxy war in Ukraine even more.

Second, the book and its lying claims about an alleged “Soviet genocide” of Ukrainians, as well as the systematic white-washing of Ukrainian fascism, have played a pivotal role in NATO war propaganda, first in relation to the imperialist-backed far-right coup in Kiev in 2014, and now in the imperialist proxy war against Russia.

In 2014, commenting on the role of intellectuals like Timothy Snyder in advancing imperialist propaganda, David North already concluded that “In the work of Timothy Snyder we are confronted with an unhealthy and dangerous tendency: *the obliteration of the distinction between writing history and manufacturing propaganda.*” (Emphasis in the original)

From rabidly anti-Russian threads and impressionistic claims of “Russian fascism,” to erratic tweets about an alleged “hunger plan” by Putin, to his obfuscation of the role of the far-right in Ukraine today: The relativization and minimization of the crimes of fascism, and especially of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists, is now the ideological cement for the alliance of the American state apparatus and the Democratic Party with fascist forces like the Azov Battalion in Ukraine. Snyder’s

propaganda is printed or recycled in the leading outlets of the Democratic Party and is being advertised to millions of workers by the AFL-CIO, which is deeply implicated in the war drive of US imperialism. The American Federation of Teachers (AFT), in particular, has been promoting Snyder, who even addressed its 2022 convention.

It must be plainly stated that Snyder, who deliberately exploits his prestige as a professor of history at Yale University, operates not as a historian but as a propagandist of US imperialism.

Serious and conscientious historians understand their work as both fundamentally scientific and, more often than not, a challenge to the status quo and the powers that be. Especially historians of Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe frequently find themselves under significant pressure from the political right, up to threats and even physical attacks. Often, they have to devote considerable time and resources to gain access to important archival materials controlled by the state.

Many of the pioneering historical works on the crimes of fascism and Stalinism—including Raul Hilberg’s seminal book, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, the first extensive study of the Holocaust, as well as the first history of the Soviet Left Opposition by Vadim Rogovin (to name but two examples)—were written at great personal cost, with little to no material rewards and in a conscious intellectual opposition to the prevailing political and cultural climate.

Despite differences in their respective political outlooks, ultimately these historians were motivated by the understanding that history is a science that has a vital function to play in the progress of society and in preventing a recurrence of the horrors of the past.

Timothy Snyder represents something very different. He is a “state academic” whose political and intellectual outlook is marked above all by cynicism, opportunism and a devotion to the American state and its war machine.

Indeed, if there has been one constant factor in Snyder’s career over the past thirty years, it has been his orientation to and connection with the American state apparatus. Snyder did his undergraduate studies during the final years of the Soviet Union at Brown University, where the then acting US ambassador to Poland, Thomas W. Simons Jr, who was deeply implicated in the restoration of capitalism, taught him “to love the endeavor of history.”<sup>[4]</sup>

He then wrote his dissertation at the University of Oxford—a study of the early Polish socialist Kazimierz Kelles-Krauz—under the tutelage of the notorious anti-Communist and anti-Marxist Polish scholar Leszek Kołakowski. His other mentor at Oxford was Timothy Garton Ash, who was soon to become one of the most prominent mouthpieces of British and US imperialism and their interventions in Eastern Europe. In the coming years, Snyder would continue to engage in serious research on the history of both Poland and Ukraine, but he always did so within the framework of institutions and in collaboration with individuals that were closely tied to the American state.

Since 1996, he has been affiliated with the Institute for the Science of Man in Vienna, which was founded by anti-Communist Polish intellectuals in the early 1980s with financial backing from the US. (That same Institute has become a central nexus for connecting right-wing intellectuals in Central and Eastern Europe. In 2021, it invited the former press secretary of the neo-Nazi Azov Battalion, Olena Semenyaka, for a fellowship.)

In 1997, Snyder received a grant from the Olin Institute for Strategic Studies at Harvard University to work on his book, *Reconstruction of Nations*. The Institute is one of the many “research outposts” of the State Department and CIA at US academic institutions. Its post-doctoral fellowships are awarded to individuals who conduct work “in the broad area of security and strategic affairs,” especially “into the causes and conduct of war, military strategy and history, defense policy and

institutions, civil-military relations, and the ways in which the United States and other societies can provide for their security in a dangerous world.”

At the time of NATO’s expansion into Eastern Europe, from the late 1990s through the early 2000s, the focus of Snyder’s work was in analyzing the forces involved in the so-called Intermarium alliance of the 1920s and 1930s. Spearheaded by the Polish nationalist dictator Józef Piłsudski, the Intermarium was meant to stretch from the Baltic to the Black Sea region and function as a bulwark of imperialism in the region. Its main target was the Soviet Union, and its main strategy for undermining the USSR was the promotion of ultra-nationalist forces that had fought the Bolsheviks in the Civil War. Snyder’s books, *Reconstruction of Nations* (2004) and *Sketches from a Secret War* (2007), are both devoted to tracing the history of these operations in the 1920s and 1930s in Poland and Ukraine, as well as how they were revived when the bureaucracy moved to restore capitalism in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

His apparent fascination with the intelligence services, state-embedded intellectuals and extreme nationalism also led him to write a book about one of the last princes of the Habsburg family, who, driven by hatred of socialism, ended up, in Snyder’s own words, as an “aristocratic fascist.” The Habsburg prince became an admirer of Hitler and fervent supporter of the OUN and UPA, before eventually becoming entangled in the world of US and British secret services.<sup>[5]</sup> (By January 2022, Snyder presented this “aristocratic fascist” on his blog as a role model for how people should “support Ukraine” today.)

But as late as 2010, just before *Bloodlands* first came out, Snyder wrote an essay for the *New York Review of Books* raising the alarm about the unabashed glorification of OUN-leader Stepan Bandera in Ukraine.<sup>[6]</sup> With *Bloodlands*, he has conclusively thrown overboard all of his previous research and, one must add, his credentials as a historian. To the extent that there is a continuity with his previous writings, it is his obsession with the regions that formed part of the Intermarium strategy and largely coincide with his otherwise arbitrarily devised “Bloodlands.” Everything about the book indicates that its political aims and historical claims were established before the “sources” were added to “substantiate” them.

Indeed, the errors are so glaring and the efforts to rehabilitate the Nolte thesis and other claims of the Eastern European far-right are so flagrant, that it should have been enough to destroy Timothy Snyder’s reputation as a historian. Yet it has not.

To be sure, several important historians, most notably Omer Bartov, Richard J. Evans, and Jürgen Zarusky, published scathing, even devastating reviews, rejecting, in particular, Snyder’s minimization of fascist collaborators of the Nazis in Eastern Europe and his trivialization of the Nazi war against the Soviet Union.<sup>[7]</sup> However, it is striking that even they hardly took issue with his unhinged attacks on the October Revolution, effectively accepting the false equation of Stalinism with communism. Nor did anyone openly address the rehabilitation of Ernst Nolte and other trends of right-wing historical revisionism that are clearly at the heart of *Bloodlands*. The reprint of *Bloodlands* amidst the imperialist proxy war against Russia in Ukraine has been met with almost deafening silence.

There is little question that much of the silence can be explained by intellectual complacency and even cowardice. In the upper echelons of academia, the financial and political tentacles of the state have left few untouched. And then there is the fear of what a layer of the upper middle class has come to care for more than anything else: their own career.

But not everyone is motivated by selfish interest and indifference to historical truth. In fact, historical scholarship over the past decades has made important advances in the study of the crimes of Nazism and even Stalinism. As this review has stressed, a central purpose of Snyder’s book

is to falsify, discredit and undermine this scholarship. Yet even among those historians whose work Snyder effectively assaults and perverts, most have, at least so far, remained quiet.

Ultimately, the *Bloodlands* phenomenon can only be understood as the diseased intellectual product of the destruction of the Soviet Union and the restoration of capitalism across Eastern Europe by the Stalinist bureaucracies and the period of imperialist reaction that followed.

Bourgeois pundits responded to the collapse of Stalinism by proclaiming “the end of history.” A large layer of the petty bourgeois ex-left which, in one way or another, had been oriented to the Stalinist bureaucracies used the collapse of Stalinism to declare the “end of socialism,” and dropping any association with the struggle for progress more broadly.

This political lurch to the right found its ideological expression in the dominance of postmodernism and its rejection of historical truth and science. For decades, the dominant trends at universities were shaped primarily by anti-Marxism, irrationalism and the promotion of racial and other forms of identity politics. It should be stressed that Snyder himself, even while engaging in the rehabilitation of Nolte and Ukrainian fascism, has been a champion of identity politics, including the racist falsifications of history by the *New York Times*’ 1619 project.

Underlying these political and ideological shifts were fundamental class developments. While the working class has been impoverished in a decades-long assault by the bourgeoisie on its living standards, and while US imperialism has engaged in one criminal war of aggression after another, layers of the middle class, especially those formally associated with the “left,” could make lucrative careers in academia by cultivating ties to the ruling class and by embedding themselves in the state apparatus.

In this climate, even those historians who have engaged in serious research have largely been left without a social and political axis and orientation in their work.

The fact that a work like *Bloodlands* could fester within academia and the public for over a decade is a serious warning and speaks to the urgent need for a fundamental political and social reorientation. At stake are fundamental principles and conquests of historical progress and the sciences.

The historical lies and falsifications of *Bloodlands* are not only part and parcel of the rehabilitation of fascism and preparations for a new imperialist world war. They also constitute a fundamental assault on historical consciousness and the very concept of history as a science.

The development of history as a science was one of the great intellectual advances of humanity in the past 250 years. Its foundations were laid primarily in the Enlightenment. If, before, there were no clear lines between the writing of a story and the writing of history (both are called “Geschichte” in German), through the development of empirical research, including statistics and the analysis of historical documents, the writing of history became more than just the writing of a story. It became grounded in verifiable, objective evidence and could thus be developed and, if necessary, revised and corrected.

The elaboration of historical materialism in the mid-19th century by Marx and Engels represented a qualitative advance over the empiricist approach to history that had been championed by the great historians of the early bourgeois period. The historical record could now not only be established and studied by historians. It became possible to reveal the inner logic and objective laws driving the class struggle. Moreover, in contrast to an empiricist approach to history, historical materialism makes it possible to analyze and understand the complex interaction of the “subjective”—decisions and actions of individuals, political tendencies, and entire classes—and the “objective”—the broader economic, social and political developments.

Marxism always seeks to uncover, in Engels’ famous words, “the motives behind the motives,” i.e., the objective tendencies that lie behind

the actions and decisions of historical figures and even classes. At the same time, however, it also makes possible and, indeed, requires, an understanding of the impact of programs, parties and individuals as representatives of definite class forces that are engaged in struggle, on the course of historical development. Without such an approach, it is all but impossible to fully appreciate the complex dynamic of the class struggle, the social revolution in the 20th century, and the emergence of phenomena such as Stalinism.

This approach in no way stands in contrast to historical objectivity. On the contrary. In his still unrivaled *History of the Russian Revolution*, Leon Trotsky described the tasks of historical objectivity as follows:

The serious and critical reader will not want a treacherous impartiality, which offers him a cup of conciliation with a well-settled poison of reactionary hate at the bottom, but a scientific conscientiousness, which for its sympathies and antipathies – open and undisguised – seeks support in an honest study of the facts, a determination of their real connections, an exposure of the causal laws of their movement. That is the only possible historic objectivism, and moreover it is amply sufficient, for it is verified and attested not by the good intentions of the historian, for which only he himself can vouch, but the natural laws revealed by him of the historic process itself.<sup>[8]</sup>

Ultimately, however, regardless of the particular method and political outlook of a historian, the scientific standards that have been worked out in over 200 years of the history of this discipline have to apply. Any historical study deserving of that name must ultimately be measured by the extent to which it enriches our understanding of both the facts of history and the laws underlying its development. The sources and facts must be properly indicated and be verifiable, the preceding scholarship must be taken into due account, and, through their own research, historians must work toward deepening our understanding of *what* happened in history, *how* it happened and *why* it happened. *Bloodlands* is an assault on and travesty of all of these fundamental principles of historical research and science.

It must be noted that before 1991 even anti-Communist historians, as hostile as they were to Marxism, sought to establish the broader social, political, and economic dynamics that led to the Russian Revolution and unfolded in its aftermath. But after 1991, the tone in academia changed dramatically. Professors at some of the most prominent universities—including Richard Pipes at Harvard University, Ian Thatcher and Geoffrey Swain at the University of Glasgow and Robert Service at Oxford University—engaged in crude attacks first on the October Revolution and, increasingly, on the figure of Leon Trotsky. In the Post-Soviet School of Historical Falsification, a toxic mixture of anti-Communism and the old lies and slander against Trotsky and the Left Opposition by the Stalinist bureaucracy was established as a “legitimate” part of the “discourse” in academia.

With only a few honorable exceptions, the overwhelming response among academics to David North’s devastating critiques of historians who had blatantly attacked and falsified the October Revolution, and above all, the life and work of Leon Trotsky was, in most cases, indifference and silence.<sup>[9]</sup> This acceptance of what were blatant historical lies, advanced in the service of political interests, has created a dangerous precedent for complacency in the face of attacks on historical truth. Now, with Snyder and Baberowski, this school of post-Soviet historical falsification has metastasized into a full-blown effort to rehabilitate fascism. But their efforts will fail.

The period of social and political reaction that allowed for the temporary

dominance of the historical lie in social, political and cultural life has come to an end. The poisonous and reactionary trends of postmodernism, identity politics and the rehabilitation of fascism are bound to be challenged and undermined by the emerging explosive development of the class struggle. The eruption of an open confrontation by the imperialist powers with Russia in Ukraine marks not only the opening chapter of a new world conflagration, but also of a new stage in the development of the world socialist revolution.

The re-entry of the international working class onto the scene of history will provide the objective conditions for the desperately needed cleansing of the air from the ideological filth and poisonous historical lies that are promoted by Snyder and his ilk. But this long-overdue process still requires a conscious effort. It is high time for serious historians, young people and students to reject the historical lies and the assault on history that this book represents, and fight for the defense of the historical truth about the most critical experiences of humanity.

This endeavor requires a serious reckoning with the political and ideological trends that have dominated academia over the past decades. Above all, it requires a turn to a serious study of the history of the revolutionary Marxist movement and to the working class as the social and political basis for the fight against imperialist war and for social progress.

*Concluded*

[1] Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, introduction, <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hegel/works/hi/history2.htm>

[2] Richard J. Evans, *In Hitler's Shadow: West German Historians and the Attempt to Escape the Nazi Past*, New York, NY: Pantheon 1989, p. 29.

[3] Jörg Baberowski “Hitler und Stalin: In verwüstetem Land.” *Zeit Online*, July 26, 2011/29/L-Snyder-Bloodlands. The quotes by Baberowski are from, Dirk Kurbjuweit, “Culpability Question Divides Historians Today,” *Spiegel Online*, February 14, 2014. URL: <https://www.spiegel.de/international/world/questions-of-culpability-in-wwi-still-divide-german-historians-a-953173.html>. For a thorough examination of the historical lies of Jörg Baberowski, see: Christoph Vandreier, “Jörg Baberowski’s falsification of history,” *World Socialist Web Site*, 5 December 2016, URL: <https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2016/12/05/sowj-d05.html>.

[4] Timothy Snyder, *Nationalism, Marxism and Modern Central Europe, A Biography of Kazimierz Kelles-Krauz (1872-1905)*, *Harvard Papers in Ukrainian Studies* 2017, p. xv.

[5] Timothy Snyder, *Red Prince: The Secret Life of a Habsburg Archduke*, Vintage 2009.

[6] Timothy Snyder, “A fascist hero in democratic Ukraine,” *New York Review of Books*, February 14, 2010/URL: <http://www.nyrb.com/a-fascist-hero-in-democratic-ukraine/>.

[7] Among the most serious and devastating critical reviews of *Bloodlands* were Jürgen Zarusky, “Timothy Snyders „Bloodlands,” *Kritische Anmerkungen zur Konstruktion einer Geschichtslandschaft*”, in: *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* Jahrgang 60 (2012), Heft 1, pp. 1-31. *Herald Online*, “Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin. By Timothy Snyder,” in: *Slavic Review*, Vol. 70, Issue 2, Summer 2011, pp. 424-428; Richard J. Evans, “Who Remembers the Poles?,” in: *London Review of Books*, Vol. 32, No. 21, 4 November 2010.

[8] *Leon Trotsky: The History of the USSR*, 1930, introduction, Preface. URL: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1930/1930-intro.htm>

[9] A notable exception to this silence were 14 German historians who protested the German edition of Robert Service’s Trotsky biography, based on the critique of David North. See: “Letter from historians to German publisher Suhrkamp on Robert Service’s biography of Trotsky,” *World Socialist Web Site*, November 23, 2011, URL: <https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2011/11/lett-n23.html>. The most important documents of that struggle are David North’s *In Defense of*

*Leon Trotsky* (Mehring Books, 2013), *The Russian Revolution and the Unfinished Twentieth Century* (Mehring Books, 2014), as well as the volumes on the history of the Left Opposition and Stalinist terror by Vadim Rogovin.



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