

# An interview with historian Christian Gerlach on the Nazi war of annihilation against the Soviet Union

Clara Weiss  
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Christian Gerlach, professor of modern history at the University of Bern, Switzerland, is one of the world's leading experts in the history of the Holocaust and the Nazi war of annihilation against the Soviet Union. In 1998, he defended his dissertation about the Nazi occupation of Belarus at the Technical University of Berlin, where he had studied under Wolfgang Scheffler, a pioneer of Holocaust research in Germany. Published in 1999 in German under the title "Kalkulierte Morde" (Calculated Murders), it was a pioneering study and to this day ranks among the most important works on the Nazi war of annihilation.

Other major works of Gerlach include the two English-language volumes *Extremely Violent Societies: Mass Violence in the Twentieth-Century World* (Cambridge University Press, 2010) and *The Extermination of the European Jews* (Cambridge University Press, 2016). With Clemens Six (University of Groningen, Netherlands), Gerlach also co-edited *The Palgrave Handbook of Anti-Communist Persecutions* (PalgraveMacmillan, 2020).

In his work, Gerlach has exhaustively documented the origins and economic rationale behind the Nazis' Hunger Plan, which aimed at the starvation of 30 million Slavs; the plans and implementation for the murder of up to 3.5 million Soviet prisoners of war; and the brutal anti-partisan warfare of the German Wehrmacht in occupied Belarus. He also exposed the fact that key leaders of the bourgeois nationalist resistance to Hitler, who helped organize the failed assassination attempt on him on July 20, 1944, had, in fact, been war criminals.

Gerlach's findings provoked deep political hostility and vicious attacks on him by substantial sections of the German political and academic establishment, and he was never granted a permanent position at a German university.

Through dozens of references to Gerlach's works in *Bloodlands*, Yale University's Timothy Snyder creates the false impression that he was relying on Gerlach in his discussion of the Nazi war of annihilation against the Soviet Union and, in particular, the brutal warfare by the German Wehrmacht against the Soviet partisans and the civilian population of Belarus. In reality, Snyder seeks to resurrect the myth of a German Wehrmacht that had to "respond" to violence by the Soviets—claims that were conclusively debunked not least of all thanks to Gerlach's research.

The following is an interview with Christian Gerlach, who himself wrote a highly critical review of *Bloodlands* for the *American Historical Review* in 2011.

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Clara Weiss: *Could you describe both the public perception of the Second World War and the state of research into the war of annihilation at the time when you began your research? What questions were you preoccupied with, and how did the political and social climate of the time*

*impact your work?*

Christian Gerlach: In the early and mid-1990s, parts of the German population still lived in denial or ignorance of the whole extent of German mass violence in World War II and the extent of mass participation in it. Another part of the population acknowledged it. The political elites had already adopted the tactics of (seemingly) acknowledging nearly everything, making this a hallmark of their rule and deriving from that a high moral ground based on which, in their mind, any kind of German imperialism was possible. They started to send military troops abroad and adopted "sanctions" to fulfill, as they called it, their "responsibility." Thus, it required no courage to do research on Nazi crimes.

Among scholars, there was little outright denial of Nazi violence, but some still defended various aspects of the latter, and there were major gaps of knowledge. One of the most important problems was the unfounded belief that German mass murders in World War II had been irrational and contradicted any economic logic. This opinion was also held by many scholars outside of Germany, and by many who thought of themselves as radical leftists. I set out to explore the political economy of mass violence and to show that there were no major contradictions between murder and collective (and private) economic interests. In the persecutors' perspective, economic and ideological motives for violence were often in tune, even though their motives were, of course, complex and sometimes contradictory. Also, I made it a point in analyzing the policies of violence against *all* major affected groups of non-combatants instead of one, as all lives have the same value.

CW: *In your work, the responsibility of the entire German state apparatus, of the Wehrmacht and also of big business, for the crimes of National Socialism emerges very clearly. You have also documented that leading members of the resistance against Hitler that was centered in military and nationalist circles were, in fact, involved in war crimes by the Wehrmacht. What was the response to your research at the time?*

CG: My work did not only show the responsibility of different parts of the German state and its elites for mass violence but also the eager participation and initiatives for violence from mid- and low-level functionaries (and big but also small business, actually). And I found—like other scholars did in the 1990s—that many non-Nazis were among the persecutors. The German army, for example, mirrored the class structures of Nazi Germany and was not fully Nazified, but it did provide some freedom for lower echelons' own initiative and action, which, for the most part, worked pro-violence, that is, against a milder stance. One aspect of the activities of non-Nazis was the active involvement of opponents and conspirators against Hitler as mid- and high-level military officers in various policies and acts of violence, especially in the targeting of Soviet civilians during anti-guerrilla warfare and in killing certain types of prisoners of war. They acted like this out of national chauvinism and

anti-communism, among other reasons.

To publish about this blocked at once any options for me to be hired at many German universities. My findings stirred academic controversy (I also enjoyed some support). In particular, I was attacked in the mass media and in parliament by politicians, including a former German president and former federal ministers, who accused me of spoiling the youth and “smearing the resistance.” In their view, these opponents of Hitler symbolized the “other” Germany, an immaculate conservative Germany—which, however, did not exist.

*CW: You have done significant research into the origins and implementation of the Hunger Plan, in particular. What were the central goals of the Hunger Plan? Who was behind the Plan, and how was it worked out? How did it relate to the policies of the Nazi regime toward the Jewish population and the Soviet civilian population?*

*CG: Because of the British naval blockade in World War II, Germany could no longer rely on shipments of food, edible oil and mineral oil from overseas. Its reserves were soon exhausted. From the perspective of the Nazi leadership and military leaders, such lack of resources might lead to military defeat and revolution, as it had in World War I. To avoid this, German politicians in charge of food and agriculture, military and economic strategists developed in the months prior to the German attack against the Soviet Union the plan to extract these resources by force from Soviet territories to be occupied. The idea was to starve to death tens of millions of Soviet citizens by cutting them off from food deliveries, namely the urban population in the Western Soviet Union and certain regions called “deficit areas” (Northern Russia, large parts of Central Russia and, to a degree, Belarus).*

The food thus acquired was not primarily to be sent to Germany. Rather it was to be used to feed the German armies at the front attacking the USSR, whose rear supply lines (railways) from Germany would be feeble and which therefore needed to carry as many supplies in the form of troops, weapons and ammunition as possible, instead of food. The hunger policy seemed bitterly necessary to win the hard fight against the Soviets. This aspect led to much support for the hunger plan in the armed forces, down to the lower ranks. And targeting the cities also meant to strike two enemy groups that might lead any anti-German resistance—the communist movement and the Jews who were concentrated in urban areas. These arguments resonated with Nazis and military officers alike.

Relatively simple as it was, the hunger plan could not fully be implemented. With their weak rear forces, the Germans could not prevent urban dwellers from procuring some food and from escaping to the countryside. And the Germans needed some residual urban workforce in the occupied territory for military purposes. When the German military entered a crisis at the front in the fall of 1941, the wholesale hunger plan was dropped, and more specific policies of violence against certain groups were adopted who were under tight German control. This meant, simply put, starving the Soviet POWs and shooting the Jews, especially in regions under military administration.

*CW: One of the hallmarks of your books on the crimes of Nazism has been the emphasis on the mass murder of Soviet prisoners of war, up to 3.5 million of whom were murdered in German captivity, mostly by starvation and most of them by the spring of 1942. To this day, this is a little-known aspect of the crimes of National Socialism. Could you describe the policies and war plans that underlay the treatment of Soviet POWs?*

*CG: Before the German invasion of the USSR and in its early days, the German military’s plans included a general undersupply of Soviet POWs with food, buildings and heating, as well as the killing of certain categories of POWs, especially political officers. In fact, Germans shot a great many Soviet soldiers and officers upon surrender. After all, the POWs were almost the only obvious representatives of the Soviet state who fell into German hands. Soviet POWs were undersupplied from the*

beginning, but the starvation policy against them was aggravated in the fall of 1941, actually with the onset of the cold season. Their rations were significantly lowered, especially for non-working POWs. As a result, about 2 million died by February 1942. They died either from starvation, exhaustion or cold. Many were also shot because they were unable to continue walking during marches. They died under the “care” of the German army, not of the SS, as part of the radicalized policy of destruction that targeted certain groups which I described before. German camp guards adopted a “nothing can be done” attitude. After the spring of 1942, Soviet POWs became more important to the Germans as a labor resource, and yet another million perished (or almost one-third of those remaining) until the end of the war.

The destruction of Soviet POWs in German hands has been systematically marginalized in public memory and in scholarship, where it was often belittled or denied. There is some scholarship in Russian and German, but, to my knowledge, until now there is not a single scholarly monograph in English exclusively devoted to this topic. None. This illustrates how humanistic and universal the Anglo-American scholarship about World War II is.

*CW: In Bloodlands, but also in general political discourse—be it by politicians or the media—there is a marked tendency to downplay the suffering of the Russian civilian population in the Second World War. Could you speak on the impact of the war of annihilation on the civilian population in greater detail?*

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In his faulty and tendentious book *Bloodlands* of 2010, Timothy Snyder downplays Russian suffering not only in respect to World War II. For example, he downplays the number of Russians (that is, inhabitants of the RSFSR [Russian Socialist Federative Republic], not Soviet citizens in general) who died as a result of the Soviet policies of enforced collectivization of agriculture in the early 1930s. Further, he suggests that even many of those who starved to death in Russia were Ukrainians (pp. 48, 53; this was true for many deportees, but, in fact, many who perished in that famine in Ukraine were probably Russian speakers, whatever that means). His whole argument that the Soviet state targeted Ukrainians selectively with deadly hunger would not work if he would include the Soviet famine in 1920-1922. This famine was in part also connected with Soviet policies, caused possibly even more victims than that of 1930-1933 and centered in Russia, but it is glossed over in a few lines by Snyder, with no mentioning of Russians (p. 11). Moreover, he minimizes the number of Jews murdered by the Germans in Russia, underestimates the number of Russians who perished in German hands as Soviet POWs (p. 505, note 15) and omits that the German hunger policy targeted central Russia (p. 162). Snyder’s book is, of course, anti-Soviet, but also distinctly anti-Russian.

As for the factual record, civilians in Soviet Belarus and Ukraine suffered disproportionately more losses in the German-Soviet war because all of their territory was under German occupation while for Russia it was only parts. On the other hand, Russians had higher military losses than people from other Soviet republics because they represented most of the recruitment pool that was left, especially from 1942 onward. Many Soviets who fell into German captivity were from Russia. Among Russian (not Soviet) civilian losses, 600,000 to 1 million perished in German-besieged Leningrad, starving and freezing to death; Jews who had not managed to flee eastward were killed; German anti-partisan warfare killed many unarmed civilians in Northwestern Russia, West Central Russia and the Crimea (then part of Russia); German-organized hunger killed many in the Crimea and towns and villages around Leningrad, in West Central Russia and elsewhere; and German troops victimized and killed many by forced labor, forced deportation and deliberate destruction of towns and cities, especially during retreat, in particular in West Central Russia and,

for example, in Stalingrad. A great number of Russians (and evacuees) perished in the unoccupied territory in 1942-1943 in a famine primarily caused by the (necessary but reckless) war effort and the loss of important agricultural areas to the Germans.

*CW: In your review of Bloodlands for the American Historical Review, you noted that the book downplays the role of local collaboration and anti-Semitism and ignores social conflict within the occupied territories. As a result, what emerges is a narrative that largely overlaps with the historical myths of nationalists in Belarus, Ukraine and Poland. How would you describe the social and political dynamics that were unleashed by the Nazi invasion in the occupied territories of the Soviet Union?*

CG: The German occupation led to much geographic but also social mobility. It resulted in the impoverishment of the masses but also created opportunities for some groups to rise at the expense of others. Communists and Soviet functionaries fled, went underground or were murdered; Jews were crammed into ghettos and killed; Poles were systematically disadvantaged. There were also tensions between urban and rural dwellers and between men and women.

Those who rose in the ranks of the local indigenous administration and police (under German command or supervision), forming a new elite, usually belonged to the majority ethnicity (Ukrainians, Byelorussians, Latvians, etc., depending on the area) and came from different walks of life. Some were exiles returning from Germany and other countries, some were formerly repressed bourgeois or other old enemies of communism. But most belonged to neither of these groups. For example, among them were many young men from peasant or collective farm worker families and some urban intellectuals. Some could be called fascists but most not quite, but almost all of them were aggressive nationalists, who did not necessarily love Germans. This is why I don't speak of collaboration (a term that in Europe has the air of committing treason against one's nation). These people participated, often actively, in murdering, robbing and mistreating Jews, hunting down communists, sending people from families that they did not like for forced labor to Germany, and attacking civilians in anti-partisan warfare.

A civil war in Western Ukraine and the area of Lublin, Poland, in 1943 illustrates where these tensions could lead. Under German occupation, and hardly to the liking of the Germans, Ukrainian and Polish nationalist groups attacked villages of the other ethnicity, which resulted in at least 50,000 people killed and hundreds of thousands of refugees, mostly Poles (and, actually, including a number of Jews in hiding). The military wing of the Ukrainian OUN (Bandera) and the Polish Home Army fought each other. In the summer, pro-Soviet partisans also interfered. And many rural dwellers just wanted to be left in peace. The existence of several parties highlights the social fragmentation that was also typical of other civil wars during World War II (for example, in China, the Philippines, Burma, Yugoslavia, Greece and Italy). As for Western Ukraine, the infighting appears insane, but it addressed past grievances and was about different visions of the political and societal future: When the Germans would be gone, was the area [Volhynia, which in 1919-1939 was part of Poland] to become part of an independent, anti-communist Ukraine or of an anti-communist Poland or of the Soviet Union? Who would dominate society: Ukrainian peasants and intellectuals? Polish landlords and civil servants? Soviet cadres and workers? Or, as many then believed and feared, "Jews"? Such outlooks determined who was attacked. Locals had their own agency and were not only passive objects of Nazi (and Soviet) rule and violence.

*CW: You have done extensive research into the genocidal policies of Nazi Germany but also other genocides. Today, the term "genocide" is regularly used by politicians and the media but with little to no evidence provided and no serious discussion of what the term actually means. Can you explain to a lay audience what issues a historian needs to consider when it comes to the assessment of whether or not a given historical event*

*constitutes a genocide?*

CG: Genocide is an analytically worthless concept made for political purposes. I don't use it. It serves for political condemnation and intervention, that is, as a pretext for war (whether with aerial attacks, ground forces or deadly "sanctions," as economic warfare is warfare). It also serves for prosecution in show trials, as part of the two main remedies that bourgeois regimes offer: enforced regime change and a bit of re-education. But since the socioeconomic problems and conflicts underlying mass violence are not being addressed in that way, such interventions are as "successful" in stopping violence as they were in Iraq or Libya; often they aggravate it.

Historically, the term of genocide was coined in 1944 in the context of US imperialism, and the academic field of genocide studies became big in the 1990s and 2000s as an instrument of liberal imperialism, which was on the rise. The field reached its peak in the early 2010s and then entered a stagnation period together with a crisis of liberal imperialism.

As an action-oriented concept, "genocide" needs to be overly simplistic. It prevents people from understanding the deep roots and complexity of mass violence. Genocide studies tend to focus on ethnic or racial issues instead of multi-causality; on the state instead of social actors; on long-term "intent" for violence, on planning and centralization, instead of a process and autonomous groups; and on one victim group instead of many (See Christian Gerlach, "Extremely Violent Societies: An Alternative to the Concept of Genocide", in: *Journal of Genocide Research*, vol. 8, no. 4, 2006, p. 466.). Thus, the concept of genocide also produces hierarchies of victims of different value, hierarchies which are actually racist.

Everybody knows that the term "genocide" is being used abundantly and arbitrarily in public. I don't have to explain this to a lay audience. This arbitrariness is also widespread among scholars, including "experts," and to call something "genocide" (or not) is therefore merely a political statement and says nothing about what is going on in the country one refers to. Unfortunately, many people who think of themselves as radical leftists also employ the term "genocide" and think along its lines. This is a sign of the lamentable state of the left in industrial countries (and in many others), its reformism and analytical weaknesses.



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