



Review of the publication: Timothy Snyder, *Black Earth. The Holocaust as History and Warning*, Toronto, Ontario: Tim Duggan Books 2015, ISBN 9781101903452

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*Black Earth: The Holocaust as History and Warning* is dense. You will probably put it down a couple of times yet pick it up again and again, trying to refocus on the entirety of a colossal tapestry rather than lose yourself in the infinite fine threads that make up the fabric. The interpretative patterns woven are no less complex: multi-layered across local and international settings, with many shades of grey, not white or black. All the same, Snyder's book on the Holocaust remains very readable: it is written with clarity, style, and an inquisitive readership in mind.

The book is also gloomy—not least due to its subject matter—yet it ebbs and flows with emotion, poetry, metaphysics. It pulls at your heartstrings and in some places, quite fiercely. This is because it is as much about human brutality as about human kindness, both of which lurk inside each of us, both oft unfathomable, as *Black Earth* shows in real-life examples taken from Holocaust history. As such, this is no traditional history book. It trespasses against the strict rules of the genre of historical scholarship that shuns ethical-philosophical deliberations and emotive overtones. The U.S. historical establishment will bristle at this more British way of writing history while east European historians will split into fans and adversaries: the fans who have grown tired of west-centric approaches and texts with mounds of facts only, and the adversaries who still see history-writing as descriptive accounting of glorious national moments and figures.

From a philosophical perspective, this book is about the complexity of the human condition in times of warfare and the accompanying ghastly violence and lawlessness. The implications of the narratives that Snyder unfolds will leave most readers unsettled in their thinking patterns, regardless of their national or personal myths, or their baggage of education and life experience. Yet whatever their background or place of descent, they will not walk away empty, especially if they hail from the areas and families the Holocaust touched in one way or another—they will walk away thinking. And to make one think, or readjust one's analysis of reality, even for the duration of a book's reading, is no mean accomplishment.

Thinking does not make everyone happy or comfortable. Nor will this book. It is a third book in what could be considered as a trilogy on modern east European and Russian history by the Yale University historian Timothy Snyder. *The Reconstruction of Nations: Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus, 1569–1999*, and *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* are the first two in this tripartite series. *Black Earth: The Holocaust as History and Warning* comes as a logical sequel to *Bloodlands* as it focuses more narrowly on how the Holocaust could happen in the "bloodlands," alongside how it happened and why. In a feat of comprehensiveness, Snyder traverses across east European nation-states, languages (Yiddish, Polish, Ukrainian, Russian, etc.), political legacies, as well as historical agents: partially sovereign or defunct governments, local administrations, city dwellers, peasants, policemen, soldiers, partisans, resistance fighters, alongside Nazi or communist collaborators (or both), who killed or denounced and helped or saved Jews. The social spectrum covered is expansive and deep as Snyder travels from the top to the bottom and from the bottom up. One gets to hear sundry voices.

Because of these multiple viewpoints, the book blurs the clear-cut dividing line between the "victim" and the "perpetrator," especially when Snyder discusses the regularity of dual, triple, and even multiple collaboration. Nazi and Soviet regimes in fact replaced one another in some east European countries not just once or twice but three times, leaving the once-occupied states in utter political and social disarray, turning them into zones of statelessness, which, as Snyder argues, has prepared the ground for making the impossible possible. It is the destruction of state structures, by Soviets as well as by Nazis, which made the Holocaust a "solution" to the Jewish Question, as Snyder maintains throughout the book.

This interpretative move will upset a good number of Jews in the U.S. and Israel, homes to the largest numbers of Holocaust survivors and their families, because it shows the complicated reality of the perpetrator and, in some cases, his humanity, too. For anyone more morally attuned, it might become difficult to blame Poland, with self-righteous indignation, for being a "Jewish graveyard," or Poles, for being inbred anti-Semites. After all, as Snyder demonstrates, the largest number of rescuers was from Poland, too. Consequently, Snyder's arguments are bound to evoke strong public and scholarly reactions. The book's characters are embedded in the high political tensions of the twentieth century and so are the book's twenty-first-century readers who have inherited the unsorted legacies of the twentieth.

Moreover, as the book puts back Jewish communities into the east European settings that they came from, it reestablishes the interwar Jewish-Polish historical connections and hence the instances of cooperation that Jewish history has neglected so far. Snyder's chapter on a deep political understanding that existed between Polish Revisionist Zionists and anti-Semitic yet also anti-Nazi Polish nationalists in interwar years challenges some Israeli historiography that prefers Zionist versions of history of the State of Israel.

On the other hand, to the east European scholarship appearing in various local languages, it brings a fresh gust of wind, too. The book's arguments challenge many post-Soviet, anti-communist nationalist interpretations of east European and Russian history. For one thing, it demonstrates the fallacy of the Judeobolshevik myth, alive and thriving in the region's traumatic collective memories to this day. It will not be news to informed European historians that, for instance, many more ethnic Lithuanians than Jews were communist in Soviet Lithuania, but the link between this myth and the collaboration of local inhabitants, administrations, and policemen in the killings of Jews will be, at least to most. For years, the burden of responsibility for the Holocaust rested squarely on the shoulders of Nazis. Then, in post-Soviet years, some of it merged with the concept of "double occupation," yet nobody dug any further. This is because the new-founded nation-states of 1991 still tend to resort to the "golden interwar years" of independence for their national myth making rather than the Soviet period or wartime years. The partaking of Soviet citizens in a big lie—that Jews should be and were killed for communism and the fact that these citizens watched or assisted in the killings (see pp.183-185)—will shock Snyder's east European readership.

From a broader scholarly perspective, Snyder's book de-colonializes the predominantly west-euro-centric historiography on the Holocaust. Snyder shifts his analytical lenses to eastern Europe and Soviet Socialist Republics, which never really get adequately incorporated into the narratives of World War II and the Holocaust in western scholarship, although that is precisely the area where the war was fought most intensively, where the Holocaust took place, and where most Nazi victims—Jews, Roma, Soviet prisoners of war, Poles, and many other groups—lived, fought, and perished. Instead, in the years up until the collapse of the Soviet Union, the focus of western historians has been, whether Jewish or not, on Germany and western Europe more broadly, that is, on the major aggressor and the states with the smallest numbers of Jews. To illustrate, Germany before 1933 was home to about 500,000 Jews, or less than one percent of its entire population, roughly half of which survived. Meanwhile, the largest Jewish communities in east Europe or Nazi-occupied Soviet territories, sometimes making up to 11 percent of some local populations (and around 30 percent of some urban populations, like in Warsaw, Vilnius, or Lodz) had a meager 3-5 percent survival rate. Thus, *Black Earth* brings about a paradigmatic shift in Holocaust history writing, particularly in the Anglophone scholarship. As it shifts east in its sources, languages, terminology, and interpretations, it introduces a more holistic European panorama of war.

Snyder does not stop here. He revises terminology. Some of the revised concepts, however, are elusive to grasp in the east European context, like the term "anarchy," "recolonial," and "decolonial," for example. In the conclusions, the author speculates, not always compellingly.

All in all, undergirding Snyder's conceptual edifice is a consuming metaphysical question as to what motivated the rescue efforts of non-Jewish Europeans—or, to employ the language of the European Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, their "acts of kindness"—as the latter faced terror, violence, depravity, and, in eastern Europe, assured death penalty. For the rationality of murder, one needs no explanation. Snyder notes: if found hiding a Jew, a rescuer was executed on the spot and so was his family, and anyone else present or living nearby. Paradoxically, denunciation or killing became rational choices during the Holocaust, whereas help or rescue turned into the most irrational act possible. So what motivated those who made this most irrational of choices? Snyder furnishes no definite answer.

The sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, who ascribed the state a role of supreme ethical authority, provides no clear answer either. In his *Modernity and the Holocaust*, Bauman analyzes the social nature of evil. He writes that immorality, as morality, can be societally produced, which, during the Holocaust, made complicity in the policies of state-destroying regimes rationally motivated. Yet to me it seems that, similarly to Levinas whose philosophy was inspired by the reports of the Soviet-Jewish writer Vasily Grossman travelling through the "bloodlands" during World War II, Snyder draws attention to the human capacity for an act of kindness—even under the most inhumane of circumstances.