This is an important book, a synthesis of solid historiography, a volume of moving prose and essential questions, a must-read for anyone interested in the Holocaust, World War II or totalitarian regimes. The «bloodlands» in the book’s title are a specific geographical area: the part of Europe extending roughly from the pre-war German-Polish border to western Russia, between the Baltic and the Black Sea. These lands were defined by the policies of Stalin’s USSR and Hitler’s Germany. There, as Snyder conservatively estimates, fourteen million non-combatants lost their lives as a consequence of Stalin’s and Hitler’s deliberate policies of extermination. Yet, the book is not only about these lands. It is about Europe between Hitler and Stalin, about Europeans and their civilisation in the nadir of the age of extremes.

Darkness once covered the dark continent in a highly uneven way. Joseph Conrad, who located his Heart of Darkness in the Belgian Congo, saw the abyss in European colonialism, but he could not foresee that a few decades later the ghosts unleashed in the colonies would return to Europe and the heart of darkness would come to reside in his homeland. Conrad’s very own hometown of Berdychev in northern Ukraine, where he was born as Józef Korzeniowski, became the scene of cannibalism and child-hunting during the Soviet-made famine of 1933, as well as the systematic killing of Jews – almost 30,000 men, women and children – in 1941. Vasily Grossman, another great writer from Berdychev, did not have to go far to give us powerful prose on the darkness. His family perished in the Holocaust.

The Book and its Reception

As a historian and a native of the lands, I am glad the book has been published and has attracted so much attention and praise. On the other hand, this attention and praise make my present task more difficult than it would otherwise have been. Commenting on Bloodlands is difficult, as it has been broadly reviewed in journals and newspapers and by the leading experts in its fields. Less than two years after its original publication, the book has already been translated into 23 languages. Yale University’s website lists 50 reviews of the book in major newspapers and magazines. This number does not include academic journals, which have published more than a dozen reviews. Adding anything new and meaningful about the topic is increasingly unlikely. Similarly, my praise would only marginally increase the mass of praises accumulated so far. Therefore, it is rather time for a comparative study on the reactions to Bloodlands. Both the praise and criticism I have seen so far seem to express certain patterns of thinking that are worthy of their own analysis. Yet, as the subject of this article is the book, not its reception, I will limit myself to a few comments with the slight hope that they have not been made and widely circulated yet. If they have, my only excuse is that many discoveries in the humanities have resulted from the ignorance of previous scholarship.

The book itself does not make, or claim to make, discoveries which can be understood as unearthing previously unknown evidence on the topic. As Christian Gerlach has calculated, only 2 per cent of its footnotes refer to archival sources. Its strength comes rather from mastering the secondary sources: some 800 publications (the bibliography fills 39 pages with small print) in English, German, Polish, Ukrainian, French and Belorussian. The bibliography of a book of such scope can never be complete, but Snyder’s choices show in-depth knowledge of the relevant scholarship and languages. He has accumulated this familiarity over many years. The bloodlands coincide to a large extent with the lands of the old Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, which he already focused on in earlier publications, in particular in his outstanding The Reconstruction of Nations: Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus, 1569–1999 (2003). The Commonwealth disappeared in the eighteenth century and was partitioned by the neighbouring absolutist states. After World War I, it was partitioned again by modern nationalists and Bolshevik Russia, and then, following the Ribentrop-Molotov agreement of August 1939, by the two totalitarian regimes. This last stage was a sequence of two or three consecutive occupations intersected by two or three waves of the most destructive warfare. For the inhabitants of the lands («Ribentrop-Molotov Europe») it meant experiences and choices that west Europeans probably could not imagine, and a very practical exercise in the comparative analysis of the two regimes.


Scholars of the Holocaust or German studies are likely not to be surprised by the book’s data and interpretations regarding Nazi criminal policies, nor will scholars dealing with the history of communist regimes be surprised by what it has to tell about the Soviets (yet not the other way round, supposedly). Other readers, including historians outside these specialised fields, will find plenty of new information. All will benefit from the book’s bringing together interrelated histories that are usually presented separately. The three main currents of these histories are the Soviet killings of the Stalin era, the Holocaust, and the Nazi killings of the Slavs. By bringing these together, the book (re)connects these lethal policies to an important historical context, in other words to events of a similar nature that took place nearby at roughly the same time. This helps to better understand the agents of the drama (the perpetrators, victims and others) and tells readers, western readers in particular, something important about the part of Europe where the dramas unfolded. Another achievement is the book’s integrative goal to overcome the tendency of national historiographies of the region to lean towards separate, insular perspectives. In telling the story of the bloodlands, the book (re)connects histories that were fragmented by state borders and historiographies. This produces added scholarly as well as political value. It may even contribute to the inhabitants of the lands’ understanding that we share one past: one that is dramatic and difficult to discuss, but common.

To be sure, a few Holocaust scholars have expressed criticism of the book because of the very combination of the several histories that I praise, as it seems. I have difficulties understanding some of their arguments, however. The book proves that such a contextualising of the Holocaust does not displace or relativise it. On the contrary, it shows some key aspects of the particularity and centrality of the Holocaust more clearly and precisely. Is it wrong that the book does this without marginalising the losses and suffering of other groups of Nazi and Soviet victims? Or that it pays attention to the east European experience and presents it to a western audience? I have also not found, as some readers have, any equating of Hitler and Stalin, or their crimes. On the contrary, the book provides empirical data that displays striking differences between the crimes – from Germany’s dominant share in the total of fourteen million deaths to the expressed intentions of the Nazis to kill many more inhabitants of the bloodlands in the future. Notably, to make such grim comparisons and such accounting for genocides more meaningful, we should probably calculate not only absolute totals but the killing rates of Hitler’s and Stalin’s states, in other words what per cent of the population under their respective rule fell victim to murderous policies in a given time.

Defining Victims

Speaking of methodological issues, the restrictive definition chosen by the author for murderous policies raises doubts. His estimate of fourteen million dead takes into account only the people killed in *deliberate* policies of mass murder. He consequently excludes from the count, among others, the people who died of extortion, disease or malnutrition in concentration camps or during deportations or flight from armies (even if the armies deliberately induced the flight). The reason for this choice was, the book states, the «wish to test the proposition that deliberate and direct mass murder by these two regimes in the bloodlands is a distinct phenomenon worthy of separate treatment» (419–411). Such a restricted definition, leading to more conservative yet still enormous estimates of the death tolls, was possibly a precaution to avoid any inflation of figures, but it comes with a price. Making the policymakers’ intentions the criterion for considering several lethal policies and their victims while excluding others is difficult in application in not a small number of cases. It is sometimes most difficult, if possible at all, to find evidence of the motives of people whose actions brought many thousands of deaths. The policies of various government agencies and their administrators may be ambiguous or ambivalent, as exemplified by the debates amongst German officials in charge of the ghettos in occupied Poland, between the «productionists», who advocated better nutrition somehow as a rational policy of economic exploitation of the ghettos, and «attritionists», who welcomed indiscriminate starvation.7 Mortality in the Warsaw ghetto was enormous well before the beginning of the systematic killing of all Jews in 1941. It certainly was a consequence of German policies. But how could we define what part of it resulted from deliberate actions or inactions, and what part from neglect? How and where can we draw a line between the deliberate and not so deliberate victims of such policies? Similarly questionable would be the distinction between a concentration camp prisoner who died because of malnutrition and hard labour and his fellow inmate selected for killing because he is no longer fit for work. Millions of deportees and prisoners in the USSR were victims of the «spoiler state», as Jan T. Gross named Stalin’s USSR. They died prematurely because of criminal neglect and abuse, not deliberate killing.8 And yet, was not their fate an exemplary punishment meant to terrifyise others, a deliberate part of the disciplining system, which pushed Soviet subjects to hard work and obedience? There are good reasons not meant to exclude such victims and relevant policies of lethal neglect, which were almost as criminal as the deliberate policies for which they also quite often paved the way.

A Spatial Turn and Ecosystems of Violence

Another disputable omission in Bloodlands is the exclusion of killings by third parties, in other words by neither Nazi Germany nor the Soviets. The fourteen-million death toll consists only of the victims of the two states. It excludes killings by state and non-state actors from the region, be they Baltic, Polish, Ukrainian or otherwise. Some of these killings were massive, such as the extermination of 300,000 Jews by Romanians in the territory taken (back) from the USSR, or the approximately 100,000 people killed by Ukrainian nationalists in the «anti-Polish action» in Volhynia and Galicia.9 The reasons for their exclusion are not clear. Taking them into account would not substantially increase the total death toll: the figure of fourteen million would rise by only a few per cent. What it would do, however, is first of all make the presentation of the drama that unfolded in the bloodlands complete. Second, it would not distract us from the key role of the Nazis and Soviets. Instead it would highlight yet another of their contributions to the tragedy. We cannot understand these killings without taking into account the prior Nazi and/or Soviet occupation, their revolutionary policies and the influence these had on the natives. There were many pogroms in Eastern Europe in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but not until 1941 did some of them transform into the total killing of all the Jews in town. There had been many Polish-Ukrainian clashes and a strong mutual animosity, but ethnic cleansing did not begin until 1943. Even regular violent criminality, such as banditry, took unprecedented scales during that time. Third but not least, excluding the third-party killings is inconsistent with the spatial perspective of the book, which is its particularly valuable feature. In this perspective we may see that various geographically concentrated acts of violence are often interrelated; they jointly form ecosystems of violence with inner dynamics of their own.

Bloodlands departs from (and repeatedly returns to) a key theme. This is an apparently simple observation – that a great majority of the mass killing in modern Europe took place in a relatively small part of the continent and in a relatively short time. This spatial and temporal concentration is reason enough to combine in one book the histories of the policies which produced this and ask why these histories coincided. It also gives the book a literary quality similar to the cohesion of ancient tragedies with respect to the three classical unities of place, time and action. The apocalyptic events that the book presents did not happen in twenty-four hours; nor did they occur in a single place, although, from a continental and centennial perspective their proximity is striking. Less obvious is the book’s unity of action, in other words the degree to which several policies of two similar yet distinct states fit within one overarching narrative. The author presents these as different facets of the same phenomenon, or

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9 For killings by Ukrainians, Snyder gives a lower estimate, but G. Motyka argues convincingly for «about 100,000» as the most likely figure; G. Motyka, Od rzezi wołyńskiej do akcji «Wisła»: konflikt polsko-ukraiński 1943–1947, Kraków 2011, 446.

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at least as cases belonging to the same category: murderous population programmes by totalitarian regimes guided by similarly utopian visions, economic considerations and the perverse minds of their dictators. Moreover, Snyder points up causal relations between these policies and highlights the cases where they interacted to escalate each other, or where they overlapped. Such were, for example, the parallel German and Soviet policies of elimination of Polish elites in their respective zones of occupation in Poland 1939–1941; and the strategies of Soviet partisan and German anti-partisan warfare, which devastated Belarus 1942–1944; or the consequences of the German invasion of the USSR for the food supply of Gulag inmates, which led to a surge in death rates. The two regimes could have compatible goals even as foes, as when Stalin failed to help the Warsaw uprising of 1944, allowing the Germans to kill people who could later have resisted Soviet domination. These are telling examples, but they make up only a minority of the two regimes’ lethal policies and a small part of the total death toll. Most of the policies, especially those responsible for the large majority of the toll – the Soviet famine of 1933, the German starvation of Soviet prisoners of war 1941–1942, and the Holocaust – were unilateral, so to speak, outside the field of double complicity.

We can see that the book is an expression of and contribution to a spatial turn in recent history, a turn both promising and welcome. It puts a space into focus, rather than any of its national territories or policies, as has usually been the case in the past. It presents some 30 maps, more than we usually find in books of this kind. The maps are mostly simple illustrations that assist the narrative and visualise basic information about state borders, frontlines or locations of key sites of the killings. But we could go much further in this regard. With accurate base maps, available data, and the technology and methodology developed by human geography we could present and find out more about the bloodlands and the dramatic events the book narrates. It would not be difficult to make a map of Europe on which the isolines or shades of gray show what we read about the density of the mass murder. Such a map would leave no doubt about the particularity of the bloodlands. The difference between eastern and western parts of the continent would be striking, whatever measure of the (un)human geography we may consider: the number of killings per square kilometre or per thousand (pre-war) inhabitants, or the death rate of the local population. Similarly, a more detailed spatial analysis of this kind could help to rethink the policies and practices of the Holocaust and shed new light on questions that have caused controversies for years, such as when and how total killing became the Nazi Final Solution of the Jewish question.

Notably, the deep dark colour on this map would certainly mark the areas where the Nazis located the death camps for the Final Solution and the starvation camps for the Soviet prisoners. Most of their victims were brought from outside these areas, meaning more violent deaths occurred here than the number of inhabitants before the war. The darkest areas would be the Lublin district, the location of the gas cham-
bers of the Belżec, Sobibór and Treblinka camps, each being the cemetery of several hundred thousand Jews; the large concentration camp in Majdanek, where almost 80,000 Jews and non-Jews were killed; and several camps for Soviet prisoners of war. In addition, thousands of Jews perished in or nearby the district’s ghettos, and thousands of non-Jewish Poles were killed in German reprisals. Eastern parts of the district were the scenes of mass and often deadly deportations under a pilot project for the General Plan East in 1942, or were affected by the cruel Polish-Ukrainian «war within war» since 1943. A more detailed map with smaller territorial units would make the uneven density even more striking. The Treblinka camp was a rectangle of 400 x 600 meters but was the place where 780,000 people died.

*Bloodlands* can broaden readers’ sensitivity, enhance their historical imagination and deepen their understanding of the twentieth century, but it will not make this understanding easier or redemptive. I hope it finds many readers and followers.

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**Dariusz Stola**  
Institute of Political Studies  
Polish Academy of Sciences  
18 Polna Street  
PL-02–929 Warsaw  
e-mail: stola@isppan.waw.pl

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