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## The Q&A: Timothy Snyder, historian

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SOME topics are so dark that even scholars feel intimidated. Yet Timothy Snyder is not so easily daunted. A professor of Eastern European history at Yale, his most recent book, "[Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin](http://www.amazon.com/Bloodlands-Europe-Between-Hitler-Stalin/dp/0465002390) (<http://www.amazon.com/Bloodlands-Europe-Between-Hitler-Stalin/dp/0465002390>)", examines some of the most devastating collective memories of the modern world. With scholarly rigour and engaging prose, he seeks to explain both the causes and effects of the two most haunting mass murderers of the 20th century. The "bloodlands" of the title describes the area where the Nazi and Soviet regimes murdered 14m civilians. *The Economist* has praised (<http://www.economist.com/node/17249038>) the book for being a "revisionist history of the best kind", one that "makes the reader rethink some of the best-known episodes in Europe's modern history."



The book has been controversial among some Holocaust scholars, many of whom argued that Mr Snyder does a disservice by comparing the crimes of the Nazis with those of the Soviet Union (something Mr Snyder [discussed](#) in an interview with *The Economist* when the book first came out last year).

Mr Snyder was recently in Poland to promote a Polish-language edition of his book. This month his tour will take him to the Netherlands, England, Australia and Israel. In a conversation with *More Intelligent Life*, Mr Snyder talked about his approach to the book, which is meant to clarify some common misunderstandings about the second world war.

### **What are some of the most common misconceptions of the history of the so-called "bloodlands"?**

The first is that there's something that people think they understand and it turns out that they don't, and that thing is the Holocaust. The reality of it is, if anything, worse than they think, much more face-to-face, much more barbaric, much more unforgettable. People think that the Holocaust is something that happened in Germany, generally to German Jews. They think it's something that happened only in Auschwitz. They generally don't know about any of the other death facilities besides Auschwitz; they generally don't know that half of the Jews who were killed were shot rather than gassed.

Hitler and Stalin killed virtually in the same place, and that is Ukraine, Belarus, Poland, the Baltic states, western Russia. The Holocaust happened in a place where millions and millions of people have just been killed due to the Soviet policies.

And the third thing I would point to is the habit of reduction. For example an approach saying: it must have all been the Germans, or it must have all been the Soviets. Both of these systems brought tremendous death and suffering. If you want to avoid criticism then you shouldn't be a historian, because historians are trying to understand and explain. If you're trying to please people then you should go into the fashion business, or the candy business.

**You've lived in Eastern Europe for a while, and you have learned the languages spoken in the 'bloodlands'. Would you say it's much harder, or even impossible, to get to certain information if you don't speak the local language?**

The question of languages is very important. If you don't know Russian, you don't really know what you're missing. Imagine that you're in a huge country house and you have keys, but your keys only open some of the rooms. You only know the part of the house that you can wander in. And you can persuade yourself that that's the whole house, but it's not. We can only see as much, and we can only go as far as our languages take us. I wrote this book in English, but there are very important conversations that are happening in German, Russian, Polish and so on among those historians, and the book is addressed to all of them.

**At a lecture at the Kosciuszko Foundation a few months ago, you said that your goal is not to compare the crimes of Hitler and Stalin. But how does one write about the casualties caused by both without forcing the reader to compare? How do you resist the urge to draw clear comparisons while writing such a book?**

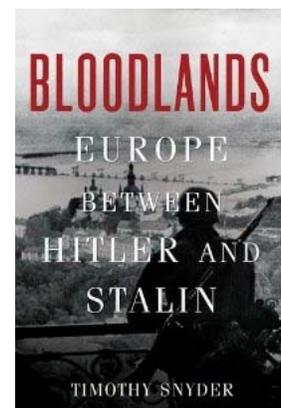
It's not that I'm against comparisons per se. On the contrary, I think a comparison is totally natural. It's just that if you want to compare you have to know what it is you're comparing. People often generate these comparisons thinking: 'I already know about the Nazis' or 'I already know about the Soviets. Therefore, I know that the Nazis were worse.' Often they don't know a lot about the other side of the conflict. I like to think that people will read this book and then be able to make better comparisons.

**Westerners tend to know the history of Nazi Germany better than the history of the Soviet Union. Why is that? Is there more literature about the Nazi crimes than the Soviet ones in English?**

Something interesting happened when the cold war ended: the US stopped being so concerned about the Soviet Union. Our teachers and professors strive desperately to save something from the 20th century, and that something is the Holocaust. It's been happening since the fall of the Soviet Union.

Part of this has to do with an issue of identification. People in the West tend to identify with western victims. So even when they think about the Holocaust, they really think about the German or French victims, they're not thinking about the Polish, Hungarian or Soviet victims. And when they think about the German crimes, they're not thinking about the starvation of Soviet prisoners of war, which also killed 3m people; they're not thinking about the partisan campaigns in Belarus, which no one has ever heard of, which killed hundreds of thousands of people. They're thinking of the people they can identify with—nice, middle class, western-looking people. So it's not that people only know about the Holocaust. It's just that they have this very western idea of the whole tragedy. What I try to do in my book is to make the Holocaust more 'eastern', which it was.

**How did you pick the individual, personal stories that are included in the book? They are effective in giving names and faces to the otherwise inconceivable numbers of casualties.**



It was important to me that a book that was mainly about a tragedy on a tremendous scale be comprehensible. I did my best to explain the policies, but also to make sure the readers understood that the victims were human beings. That's why I have the material about these individuals. It's about life and death, and life is made of individual human beings. And the significance of death is that it ends a life.

Writing a book like this you don't want to seem too mechanical, but you also don't want to be sentimental, and say that only because they died all these people were good. That's not the point. I was trying to make these people real. And if you make them ideal, they're not real.

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