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Book Review: Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin

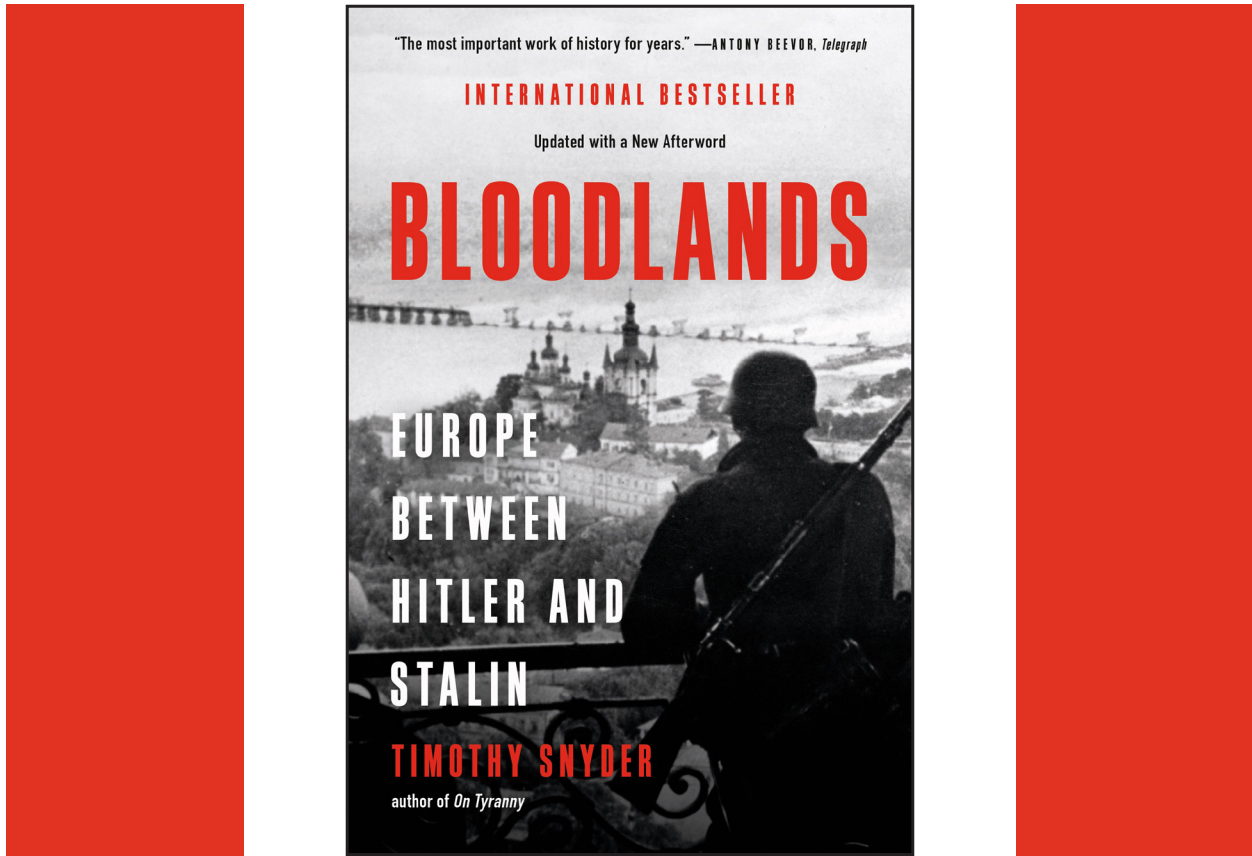
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Reviewed by Rev. Dr. Wylie W. Johnson, US Army War College class of 2010

Beginning 90 years ago and continuing for more than two decades, Eastern Europe became a human abattoir. *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin* explores two great ideological powers that worked out their Darwinian fantasies at the expense of peoples they identified by religion, ethnicity, ideology, and location. Fourteen million, mostly noncombatants, died in addition to military casualties. This book does not focus on the horrors of the Jewish holocaust, although it is discussed. Instead, the attention is on the millions of humans deliberately exterminated throughout the bloodlands of Eastern Europe.

Timothy Snyder's 2022 historical work more fully details the horrific events of the Eastern

European genocide that occurred between 1933 and 1945. *Bloodlands* is a difficult book to read because it reveals horrible evils and consequences of human wickedness. Snyder describes individual agonies contained in mass executions, cannibalism to survive, murder of infants and children, and more.

Bloodlands is an important book for US military leaders of all ranks for two reasons. First, it is a stark warning to professional warriors about the evils perpetrated by military forces unbridled by ethical and religious morality. Second, given the ongoing Ukrainian conflict, one must recognize that the historical roots of today's conflict are intensely personal to the people of Ukraine. American leaders have long been uncomprehending of historical realities as they have attempted to bring peace to places of generational conflict.

America's wars, except its civil and Native American wars, have been in other countries. We fight and go home, leaving the human debris behind. Culturally, we have not come to grips with the damage our civil war or the various Native American wars have done because these continue to bedevil our nation. Why should it be different among other peoples?

Snyder identifies a first period (1933–38) when the Soviets conducted almost all the mass slaughter. During the second defined period (1939–41), the German-Soviet alliance freely and equally exterminated classified persons. Beginning with Operation Barbarossa (1941–45), Nazi Germany conducted almost all the political murders (155). The German "Final Solution" began in earnest at the end of July 1941 with the industrial killings of humans, to the detriment of Germany's war effort.

The various genocides began in the 1930s as Stalin deliberately began eliminating the Ukrainian Kulaks through genocidal starvation, executions, and other means. The Soviets freely massacred educated elites in subjugated nations. Jews were the primary target of the Nazi regime, but they also targeted "asocial" people such as homosexuals, vagrants, alcoholics, drug addicts, Romanis, Jehovah's Witnesses, political dissidents, Asians, Slavs, circumcised Muslims, Byelorussians, Ukrainians, resistance fighters, and many others.

Primarily caught up in this slaughter were Jews of Polish, Lithuanian, Romanian, and Latvian origin. Just how many were killed in (subsequently) Soviet-controlled lands during the closing months of the war remains a state secret. Snyder remarks that it is troubling that so many were killed in a short time and that the Germans must have had significant help from Soviet citizens (342). Ironically, in 1945 as the Nazi regime collapsed, Jewish Holocaust survivors were brought to Germany to populate factories and farms and meet labor needs.

The military profession requires wisdom gained from the consequences of war and the conduct of war. Ours is a human profession. The then Secretary of War Elihu Root founded the US Army War College "Not to promote war, but to preserve peace." Books like *Bloodlands* are important reads for the profession of arms because, as philosopher George Santayana wrote, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."

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Keywords: Final Solution, Stalin, Soviets, Ukraine, civil war

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