

Bloodlands
Timothy Snyder

Gives you some perspective on Eastern European mentality

Ukrainians themselves are constantly frustrated by the grasping nature and short-term thinking of their leaders. Take what you can get all you can get it. The oligarchs steal everything in sight, by brute force, a corrupt government, and supremely corrupt courts. How did they get this way?

Bloodlands gives a chilling perspective of Ukraine and the rest of central Europe during the period 1932-45. As the other reviews indicate, this was the theater in which Stalin carried out his systematic murders of Soviet citizens through the hunger of 1931-2 and the terror of 1937-8. He does not call this by the Ukrainian name, Holodomor, which they equate to the Holocaust. Snyder does point out that the Ukrainians have attempted to inflate the numbers of their dead, to claim the crown of victimhood from the Jews, who vociferously defend their status as the victims of the world's most pervasive genocide. It is a grim contest. Ukrainians lost approximately 10,000,000 over this period, in equal parts to Stalin's forced starvation, Hitler's deliberate murder of civilians, and the deaths of soldiers conscripted by both sides. This is greater than the number of Jews who died, but of course the Ukrainian nation was much more numerous than the Jewish peoples in these lands.

Ukrainians have obviously internalized the survival skills learned in this grim period of their history. Rather, these horrors reinforce lessons already learned. Ukrainians had been victims of oppression by the czars, and before them the Poles, the Lithuanians, the Tatars, the Mongols, and just about every neighboring country. According to Orest Subtelny's authoritative "Ukraine, A History," among their oppressors were the Jews themselves, forced into that position by the Polish landlords. Through many depressing centuries of oppression, the Ukrainians learned to trust no one and to keep their elbows out.

This corroborates one of Snyder's most significant conclusions. His history is not one of clear oppressors and clear victims, but for the most part, people put into extraordinarily difficult situations and impossible moral dilemmas. Soviet citizens being forced to kill Jews as an alternative to dying themselves. Ukrainians and Poles with no affection whatsoever for either the Soviets or the Germans casting their lot with which ever side appeared stronger at such point in time as they had to make instantaneous decisions, and then doing what was bidden of them. Ukraine has been in turmoil over Stepan Bandera, a wartime partisan and strong anti-Communist who made some unsavory deals with the Nazis. This book provides an understanding of the context in which he made his decisions.

Every nationality suffered during this period, and all of the survivors claim a special victimhood. Snyder emphasizes that the perpetrators themselves, Stalin and Hitler, use the cry of victimhood to rally their partisans. The suppose it oppressors were the capitalist powers and Jews, respectively. It should make us properly skeptical of all pretensions of victimhood. Snyder's point is that we must understand history is like this to understand the humanity of both the perpetrators and the victims, and our own humanity, and recognize in this our vulnerability and the danger of falling into such bloodletting again. It goes on all the time in modern Africa, and it could well return to Europe. We Americans have to be especially alert to our own blindness. The most destructive war in the history of the New World was the American Civil War, which killed 600,000 soldiers and civilians combined.

That number is a lost decimal point in comparison with the deaths that Snyder records. Our smug American beliefs that we can confidently identify perpetrators and victims, and the belief that reason, enlightened self-interest, and pacifism are enough to prevent bloodshed are born out of our own happy naïveté with regard to history. Snyder's job is to make us a bit more realistic.