

5. Bloodlands

András Schweitzer, The idea and reality of East-Central Europe, Masaryk University,
Brno, Dec. 2020

Required and recommended texts to read

- Snyder, Timothy: Holocaust: The Ignored Reality. The New York Review of Books. July 16, 2009.
<https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2009/07/16/holocaust-the-ignored-reality/>

Mass killings in 1930s and 1940s in Europe (numbers in general)

the five largest policies of mass killing of civilians carried out by Nazi Germany and the Stalinist Soviet Union

- the German attempt to exterminate European Jews (circa 5.7 million deaths)
- German starvations of Soviet citizens (circa 4 million)
- German mass reprisals against civilians (at least 750,000)
- Soviet starvations of Soviet citizens (circa 5.5 million)
- the shootings of the Soviet Great Terror (circa 700,000)

Three groups of European victims of comparable size
(between 5-6 millions in each case; with examples)

- **Jews killed by Germans** (60,000 Jews of the Warsaw ghetto who died of starvation or disease in 1940–1942)
- **non-Jews killed by Germans** (atrocities against Roma and Sinti primarily in Eastern Europe)
- **Soviet citizens killed by the Soviet regime** (murdered peasants and Orthodox priests)

As a general rule, the German regime killed civilians who were not German citizens, whereas the Soviet regime chiefly killed civilians who were Soviet citizens.

Our understanding of European mass killings should be modified

- **Auschwitz was less important** to the Holocaust than Operation Reinhardt in occupied Poland and the death pits in the occupied USSR
- the **Germans planned to kill more non-Jews** than Jews and in the end killed the two in about equal numbers
- **German and Soviet killing policies overlapped** in territory and should be considered together as part of a larger phenomenon

Our understanding of European mass killings should be modified

=> Why is Auschwitz (the Gulag) not an adequate symbol of the mass killings of the totalitarian regimes? (“Lost historical balance”)

- the victims of the Holocaust
- the victims of Stalin
- how people were killed
- the time when people died
- the location where people died

=> Why do we have (wrongly) Auschwitz and the Gulag as symbols of the mass killings of the totalitarian regimes?

=> Further German plans

Why is Auschwitz (the Gulag) not an adequate symbol of the mass killings of the totalitarian regimes? (“Lost historical balance”)

the victims of the Holocaust: Auschwitz is where **West European Jews** were usually sent. *The Diary of Anne Frank* concerns assimilated European Jewish communities, the Dutch and German, whose tragedy, though horrible, was a very small part of the Holocaust. Auschwitz as symbol of the Holocaust excludes those who were at the center of the historical event. (...) The largest group of Holocaust victims—**religiously Orthodox and Yiddish-speaking Jews of Poland**, or, in the slightly contemptuous German term, ***Ostjuden***—were culturally alien from West Europeans, including West European Jews. To some degree, they continue to be marginalized from the memory of the Holocaust. (...) relatively few Polish Jews and almost no Soviet Jews died there. **The two largest groups of victims are nearly missing from the memorial symbol.....** (...) An adequate vision of the Holocaust would place Operation Reinhardt, the murder of the Polish Jews in 1942, at the center of its history. Polish Jews were the largest Jewish community in the world, Warsaw the most important Jewish city. This community was exterminated at Treblinka, Bełżec, and Sobibór. Some 1.5 million Jews were killed at those three facilities, about 780,863 at Treblinka alone. Only a few dozen people survived these three death facilities.

Why is Auschwitz (the Gulag) not an adequate symbol of the mass killings of the totalitarian regimes? (“Lost historical balance”)

the victims of Stalin: What we read of the Great Terror also distracts us from its true nature. The great novel and the great memoir are Arthur Koestler’s *Darkness at Noon* and Alexander Weissberg’s *The Accused*. Both focus our attention on a small group of Stalin’s victims, urban Communist leaders, educated people, sometimes known in the West. This image dominates our understanding of the Great Terror, but it is incorrect. Taken together, **purges of Communist Party elites, the security police, and military officers** claimed not more than 47,737 lives. The largest action of the Great Terror, Operation 00447, was aimed chiefly at **“kulaks,” which is to say peasants who had already been oppressed during collectivization**. It claimed 386,798 lives. A **few national minorities**, representing together less than 2 percent of the Soviet population, yielded more than a third of the fatalities of the Great Terror. In an operation aimed at ethnic Poles who were Soviet citizens, for example, 111,091 people were shot. Of the 681,692 executions carried out for alleged political crimes in 1937 and 1938, the kulak operation and the national operations accounted for 633,955, more than 90 percent of the total. These people were **shot in secret, buried in pits, and forgotten**.

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how people were killed: All in all, as many if not more Jews were killed by bullets as by gas, but they were **killed by bullets** in easterly locations that are blurred in painful remembrance. The second most important part of the Holocaust is the mass murder by bullets in eastern Poland and the Soviet Union. It began with SS Einsatzgruppen **shootings** of Jewish men in June 1941, expanded to the murder of Jewish women and children in July, and extended to the extermination of entire Jewish communities that August and September. By the end of 1941, the Germans (along with local auxiliaries and Romanian troops) had killed a million Jews in the Soviet Union and the Baltics. That is the equivalent of the total number of Jews killed at Auschwitz during the entire war. By the end of 1942, the Germans (again, with a great deal of local assistance) had shot another 700,000 Jews, and the Soviet Jewish populations under their control had ceased to exist.

Why is Auschwitz (the Gulag) not an adequate symbol of the mass killings of the totalitarian regimes? (“Lost historical balance”)

the time when people died: Two thirds of the Jews who would be killed during the war were already dead by the end of 1942

the location where people died: The emphasis on Auschwitz and the Gulag understates the numbers of Europeans killed, and **shifts the geographical focus of the killing to the German Reich and the Russian East**. Like Auschwitz, which draws our attention to the Western European victims of the Nazi empire, the Gulag, with its notorious Siberian camps, also distracts us from the geographical center of Soviet killing policies. If we concentrate on Auschwitz and the Gulag, we fail to notice that over a period of twelve years, between 1933 and 1944, some 12 million victims of Nazi and Soviet mass killing policies perished in a particular region of Europe, one defined more or less by today’s Belarus, Ukraine, Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia. More generally, when we contemplate Auschwitz and the Gulag, we tend to think of the states that built them as systems, as modern tyrannies, or totalitarian states. Yet such considerations of thought and politics in Berlin and Moscow tend to overlook the fact **that mass killing happened, predominantly, in the parts of Europe between Germany and Russia**, not in Germany and Russia themselves.

Why do we have Auschwitz and the Gulag as symbols of the mass killings of the totalitarian regimes? (“Lost historical balance”)

- We know about **Auschwitz because there were survivors**, and there were survivors because Auschwitz was a **labor camp as well as a death factory** (...) Bełżec, though the third most important killing site of the Holocaust, after Auschwitz and **Treblinka**, is hardly known. Some 434,508 Jews perished at that death factory, and **only two or three survived**.
- The Gulag, for all of the horrors of slave labor, was not a system of mass killing. (...) We know about the Gulag because it was a system of labor camps, but not a set of killing facilities. The **Gulag** held about 30 million people and shortened some three million lives. But a **vast majority of those people who were sent to the camps returned alive**. Precisely because we have a literature of the Gulag, most famously **Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s *Gulag Archipelago***, we can try to imagine its horrors—much as we can try to imagine the horrors of Auschwitz.
- West European Jewish survivors were **free to write and publish** as they liked, whereas East European Jewish survivors, if caught behind the iron curtain, could not

Further German plans “Auschwitz is only an introduction to the Holocaust, the Holocaust only a suggestion of Hitler’s final aims”

- **Hunger Plan** in the Soviet Union in the winter of 1941–1942. As Ukrainian and south Russian agricultural products were diverted to Germany, some 30 million people in Belarus, northern Russia, and Soviet cities were to be starved to death
- **Generalplan Ost**, the colonization plan for the western Soviet Union, which foresaw the elimination of some 50 million people.



„Kőrösmező” (Ясіня) vs official Hungarian history

July 1, 1941. Proposal for the deportation of „foreigners” approved by the Council of Ministers

July-August, 1941.

deportations are carried out, approx. 20 thousand people taken to concentration camp in Kőrösmező, then to „Ukraine”

End of August, 1941. Mass-executions near Kaments-Podolsk

From September, 1941.

Extended security to guard the Eastern border of Hungary



The epicentre of the „Bloodlands“: Belarus

By starving Soviet prisoners of war, shooting and gassing Jews, and shooting civilians in anti-partisan actions, **German forces made Belarus the deadliest place in the world between 1941 and 1944.** Half of the population of Soviet Belarus was either killed or forcibly displaced during World War II: nothing of the kind can be said of any other European country.

Belarusian memories of this experience, cultivated by the current dictatorial regime, help to explain suspicions of initiatives coming from the West. Yet West Europeans would generally be surprised to learn that **Belarus was both the epicenter of European mass killing and the base of operations of anti-Nazi partisans** who actually contributed to the victory of the Allies. It is striking that such a country can be entirely displaced from European remembrance. **The absence of Belarus from discussions of the past is the clearest sign of the difference between memory and history.**

Thank you for your attention!

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