Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands. Europe between Hitler and Stalin*. New York, 2010. 560 p. ISBN 978-0465-031-47-4

This book is worth reading, because it tells the story of the greatest tragedy of the 20th century, and it is written in a talented way. The author has gathered a great deal of information, and constructs historical images in an original manner. His language is rich and suggestive. It is no coincidence that the work has received numerous reviews and discussions.

On the other hand, the content of the book is schematic, and its style eclectic. The tragedy of the Second World War is associated only with Stalin and Hitler, or more accurately, with the Soviet Union and Germany. Little room is devoted to the role of other states, processes or persons. Neville Chamberlain and Edouard Daledje are mentioned only once. The concept of appeasement does not exist at all. The work is written essentially based on secondary sources. Moreover, the author's frequent statements or conclusions are not based on empiricism, they are just derived with the help of logic. Everything is nicely 'wrapped' in essayistic fiction.

The whole content of *Bloodlands* is pierced with hatred for Stalinism and Nazism as political systems (more for the first, as it existed for a longer time). The text is often directed toward emotion for stronger impact. But the impression can be created that the equalisation of the two systems (according to the 2008 Prague Declaration) is not an end in itself for the author. At the end of the book, the statements presented would let one believe that the author knows the similarities and differences between phenomena: 'In the National Socialism vision, inequality between groups was inherent and desirable ... The Soviet system, when it was expanded, brought to others the Soviet version of equality ... In Stalinism mass murder could never be anything more than a successful defense of socialism ...' (pp. 390–391); with Nazism (as opposed to Stalinism) 'ideological alignment was impossible' (p. 397). The different characteristics of Stalin and Hitler (pp. 387–389) are also discussed.

Overall, it is not easy to comprehend the author's intentions. It is possible that the real intention of the book is encoded in the very title *Bloodlands*. In a geographical sense, the land 'extends from central Poland to western Russia, through Ukraine, Belarus, and the Baltic States' (p. viii). As the author explains, the area was defined in this way because in it, in the period 1933 to 1945, very many people, around 14 million, were killed. But the number of deaths itself in a certain space is barely sufficient for historical exceptionality.

The maps provided in the book suggest an allusion to the area of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (*Rzeczpospolita Obojga Narodów*). But this conclusion is made more complicated by the non-inclusion of the western part of Poland, as well the inclusion of Russia's Northwest district with St Petersburg (!?).

'This is not political geography, but the geography of human victims,' the author explains further, and raises the obligation to write a *new history*: 'Without a history built and defended upon an entirely different foundation, we will find that Hitler and Stalin continue to defend their own works for us' (p. xviii). What this new history is and what are its foundations remain clearly unnamed; one should understand that the 'Bloodlands' have to represent themselves. So let us try to analyse the *new history*.

The first claims of the book are forthright and provocative: 'Stalin was deliberately starving Soviet Ukraine' (p. vii). However, in the further course of instruction, we see that the author does not identify with the orange 'versions': he does not call the famine in Ukraine genocide of Ukrainians, he even avoids the term *holodomor*, and limits the number of victims to 3.3 million (instead of 15 million and similar variations). By the way, there is also no pandering to the nationalistic versions of other nations of the defined region. Although in the text the concepts of 'Ukrainians', 'Belarusians', 'Russians', and others are used, it does not appear that the author is very interested in national identification; ethnonyms are used as completed constructs for building the carcass of the conception.

Although the chapter on the famine is entitled 'The Soviet Famines', it essentially only describes the famine in Ukraine in 1932–1933. 'Stalin knew what would happen when he seized food from the starving peasants of Ukraine in 1933, just as Hitler knew what could be expected when he deprived Soviet prisoners of war of food eight years later (p. x). Despite the ambitious aspirations to equate the so-called *holodomor* with the 'Hunger Plan', no concrete evidence of Stalin's 'conscious' goal to starve the Ukrainians is presented: there are just assumptions. The Soviet government measures, whose purpose was to extract food reserves from the peasants, are depicted vividly (pp. 42–46). As if the image should be formed that the mechanism of the Soviet government, as well as the Nazis, was oriented towards mass murder. But that is hindered by a number of suppressed circumstances, for example, how the same mechanism of the Soviet government took measures to provide assistance to the famine-affected regions; there was special attention to rescuing children.¹

¹ *Golod v SSSR 1929–1934*, t. 2: *Iiul' 1932–Iiul' 1933* (Moscow, 2012), pp. 653–654, 661–662, 667–669, 673–674, 695, 701–702, 703, 704–706.

Naturally, one should talk here not about the attempts to justify Stalinism, but about the duty of a historian to use all possible sources for the reconstruction of a maximally adequate historical image. Thus, after reading Soviet archival material, at least what is available, and comparing it with Nazi documentation, it is easy to see distinct differences in mentality and motivation; the objective circumstances in which the Soviets and the Nazis acted, were also fundamentally different. Not talking about what was the difference in the traditional approach to human life in Germany and Russia.

It is worth remembering the traditional conception of socialism in Russia, as a version of Western modernism. The historians Hugo Seton Watson, Arnold J. Toynbee, Isaac Deutscher, Hans Kohn, Edward H. Carr, A.J.P. Taylor, Winston Churchill, Richard Pipes, Fernand Braudel, Henry Kissinger and many others formed it. Although their moral values were sometimes very different, all of them tied the tragedy of communism in Russia to the historical traditions of that country, with its relative retardation from the West, and with Russia's frequently experienced special pressure from outside. Currently, a conception of a wholly different kind has become clear. It is largely based on an assessment according to which Bolshevism is treated as an anti-civilisation phenomenon formed under Russia's criminalised internal structure and its inherent permanent aggression. Maybe the latter concept, thanks to its supplied new impetus to public space, can help to overcome any psychological complexes related to interpretations of the past. But from a scholarly perspective, it only raises scepticism, especially due to its inherent selectivity with regard to historical facts.

Going back to the discussion of 'Bloodlands', one would have to state that the work has some special characteristics. For example, let us look at how it relates the impact of Poland on the processes in Ukraine in 1932–1933 on p. 30: 'Under Jozef Pilsudski, Poland never planned an aggressive war against the Soviet Union, but it did prepare contingency plans for the disintegration of the Soviet Union along national lines, and did take some steps designed to hasten such a course of events. Even as Ukrainians were fleeing Soviet Ukraine, Poland was dispatching its own spies in the opposite direction, to encourage the Ukrainians to revolt ...' or pp. 37–38: 'Perhaps as late as 1931, Stalin might indeed have interpreted Polish and Japanese policies as heralding an encirclement of the Soviet Union. The year 1930 was a peak time for Polish espionage in the Soviet Union. Poland had secretly a Ukrainian army on its own soil. Japan was indeed ever more threatening ... In fall 1931, according to a Soviet intelligence report, Poland and Japan had signed a secret agreement concerning a joint attack on the Soviet Union. This was not the case ... Poland never had any intentions of starting a war ... In 1932 and 1933, there could be no serious thought of Poland as a threat by itself ... Polish agents had not hindered collectivization during the chaos of 1930, and were helpless to rouse a starving population in 1932. They tried and they failed ...'

Presumably, such an impressionist elucidation of the situation does not contradict the reality of that time. In it we can find answers, why Poland encouraged the Ukrainians to revolt, and why Stalin 'tightened the screws'. On the other hand, we can treat such a style as a sort of euphemism, because it is not clear how it should be valued.

If the substantive part of the text has features of objectivism, there is an effort to provide emotional support for the orientation of the reader. In describing the famine in Ukraine, very many specific images are provided: how the people in Ukraine were starved, how they suffered or were tortured, how they died. While reading pages imbued with naturalism, one cannot remain indifferent. The author, by appealing to the reader's emotions, most likely wanted to strengthen the disgust with Stalinism. But for the reader not yielding to emotions so quickly, the question may arise: how would these images of famine in Ukraine differ from those of other places of massive famine, which were not absent in the 20th century?

It seems that an appeal to the emotions can hardly replace the traditional instrumentation of the science of history. By the way, the author himself does not hide the hypothetical nature (it would be more accurate to say bias) of his version of the *holodomor*. At the end of the book, we find the following sentence: 'I am counting the deaths in Ukraine as intended, and those in Kazakhstan as foreseeable. Future research might change the estimation of intentionality' (p. 504).

Similar doubts arise in reading the chapters 'Class Terror' and 'National Terror', devoted to the great terror in the Soviet Union in 1937–1938. For example, attention is drawn to the fact that, from a statistical point of view, members of national minorities, Jews, Germans, and especially Poles, comprised a disproportionately large part of the repressed. Relying on NKVD operations with code names 'Polish,' 'German,' 'Greek' and the like, terror was named not only as 'Class' but also as 'National'. The conclusion follows that the halo of 'the class struggle' was faltering: 'Kulaks as a group could at least be described in Marxist terms. The enmity of the nations of the Soviet Union towards the Soviet project was something else. It looked like an abandonment of the basic socialist premise of the fraternity of peoples' (p. 93).

The national labelling of repressive actions was truly a new phenomenon in the Soviet Union. In essence, it testified to the ever-growing paranoid exhaustion, conditioned largely by the fear of the approaching war. However, the conclusions made in *Bloodlands* seem premature. Other studies show that the operations of the NKVD with national titles essentially had a political content, usually associated with the 'hostile activity' of a neighbouring 'national' state. Even the notorious Order No. 00485, for which people of Polish nationality suffered the most, was formally

directed against Polish organisations (the POW, PPS and others), and that in the order there was no directive to repress Poles according to a national principle. By the way, the notion of *Poliak-liach* in Russia had not only an ethnic meaning. We should also not rush to the conclusion that repression of national minorities testified to the 'alienation' of Soviet nations and the Soviet project. It is known that many of the repressed Poles were communists, leaders of the Soviet NKVD and other government structures; the repressions against them mainly reflected the internal struggle between factions, rather than disappointment with the idea of communism.

Overall, in speaking about the disproportionately large share of ethnic minorities repressed, it is worthwhile remembering the circumstance that members of national minorities accounted for a disproportionately large share in the structures of Soviet management and public life. Even *Bloodlands* provides the following data: in NKVD organs, Jews accounted for 40% (p. 117), and even after the cleaning out of Jews from the structures of power began, in 1939 they still remained a surprisingly high percentage: of generals, 54%, among the leaders of the NKVD, 64%, among those holding leading positions, 67% (p. 520). But it would not be very reasonable to conclude that recruitment to these structures was based on an ethnic principle. Finally, the largest part of the repressed were still Russians (even if disproportionate to non-Russians).²

On the other hand, in *Bloodlands* it is surprising that the discussions on the great terror have almost nothing on the destruction of the local Bolshevik Party elite. Only a few sentences mention the murder of Sergei Kirov, and the trial of Lev Kamenev and Grigori Zinoviev (pp. 71–74). Only one paragraph (p. 75) is devoted to the destruction of other prominent figures ('of the Center of Centers'). The last names of Mikhail Tukhachevsky, Iona Yakir, Jaronimas Uborevičius, Vytautas Putna and their problematic cases are not even mentioned. Perhaps all these players are not treated as victims, because they were joint authors of the development of the system? But the crux of the matter, of course, is not in sympathies or antipathies, but again the most realistic as possible and maximally complete reconstruction of the historical process. The question arises: is it possible that the terror against the hundreds of thousands of Soviet citizens can be separated from the simultaneously occurring, even though begun much earlier, desperate fighting at the very top of the USSR government?

² To justify his ideas Snyder often appeals to Vasily Grossman's novel 'Life and Fate.' But the version developed in the chapter 'National Terror' is hard to make compatible with the following quote from the novel: 'Nikogda do voyny Shtrum ne dumal o tom, chto on evrei. Chto mat' ego evreika ... Nikogda za vremya uchenia v Moskovskom universitete ni odin student, professor, rukovoditel' seminara ne zagovoril s nim ob etom. Nikogda do voyny v institute, v Akademii nauk ne prishlos' emu slyshat' ob etom. (*Zhizn' i sud'ba* (Moscow, 2013), p. 75).

However, the author has a different view with regard to this struggle: 'By 1937 Stalin faced no meaningful political opposition within the Soviet communist party ...' (p. 72). Of course, to talk about opposition in the Soviet Union in the sense of a democratic system would really be frivolous. However, as is known, even if from current Russian historiography,³ in the Stalinist system there existed clans (brought together by Nikolai Bukharin, Felix Dzerzhinsky, Tukhachevsky etc), which usually had their 'own' opinions on both domestic and foreign policy issues. There were especially significant disagreements on strategy in the case of a possible war. It is therefore unlikely that these clans could avoid a conflict with the monolithic system reaching Stalin's clan. Meanwhile, the author suggests the opinion that both the internal opposition and the threat of foreign intervention were just a fancied bluff by Stalin to manipulate the consciousness of the people and to maintain absolute power (pp. 72–73).

One need not argue about Stalin's manipulative abilities. But the interpretation of the real situation in the Soviet Union in 1937–1938, speaking mildly, is surprising. It seems that the author has ended up in the conditioned trap of his own professed trend. His presented Stalin is a monster programmed to destroy, so any additional motives for his behaviour are simply unnecessary. In fact, this inclination in *Bloodlands* should not be too surprising, because the author, as has already been mentioned, relies solely on secondary sources, i.e. the interpretations of others, in which in many cases, Stalin and Stalinism are just evaluated and not analysed historically.

The author's extraordinary style of description reaches a kind of peak in writing about 1939. The first impression is that it is elementary journalism: the Munich Agreement is only mentioned, and not connected with the Soviet Union in any way; Soviet friendship with the fascists in 1939 is equated to 'friendship with the socialfascists' in 1934; the possible alliance of Germany-Poland-Japan against the USSR is called a 'phantom' not posing any threat to the Soviet Union; the dialogue between the Soviets and the Nazis was begun, you understand, when 'Hitler responded to Stalin's opening'; although, it seems, so far, no one knows how concretely in the night of August 23 to 24 the Kremlin decided on Poland, the author chooses an unambiguous statement: 'the Soviet Union had agreed to attack Poland with Germany'.

But it would be negligent to accuse the author of distorting reality, because in that kaleidoscope of propaganda clichés lies this statement: 'Stalin was quite aware that London and Paris were unlikely to intervene in Eastern Europe if Germany attacked Poland or the Soviet Union'

³ A.V. Shubin, 1937. *'Antiteror' Stalina* (Moscow, 2012); *Lubianka. Stalin i Glavnoe upravlenie gosbezopasnosti NKVD 1937–1938*, eds. V.N. Chaustov, V.P. Naumov, N.S. Plotnikova (Moscow, 2004); O.V. Khlevniuk, 1937–i. *Stalin, NKVD i sovetskoe obshchestvo* (Moscow, 1992).

(pp. 114–116). After such a sentence, it would seem that one could even hope for a discussion on how Stalin had to act in 1939, if, of course, one grants him the right to defend the security interests of the USSR.

The central chorus of *Bloodlands* is the Molotov-Ribbentrop line. In the book, it is presented as the essential expression of the systems of Stalinism and Nazism. Of course, it affected the level of the Second World War (although, as has already been mentioned, the author, from the aspect of international politics, is very perfunctory). It is also the main indicator of the killings of *Bloodlands*. According to the author, after the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, the mass killings on the eastern side of the line also jumped into the western half of the line, into Nazi-occupied Poland; after Hitler started the war against the USSR, the epicentre of the killings was again moved to the eastern side of the line; but after the final decision was taken, the west again became the arena of the killings and other tragedies, because the Nazi death factories were established there; and then later after the Soviets invaded (who would have thought!), the same Hitler ‘Generalplan Ost’ was carried out, only ‘turned on its head’ (p. 314). Finally, the conclusion follows that the common concern for the Nazi and Stalinist regimes was to kill the inhabitants of the ‘Bloodlands’, and this continued when Germany and the Soviet Union found themselves in a war against each other, ‘the two enemies killed civilians in a pattern of *belligerent complicity*’ (on p. 415 the Nazi murders are equated with the consequences of the Soviet-encouraged partisan war in Belarus). In this way, almost a transcendental status is bestowed on the conspiracy between the Nazis and the Soviets.

But the Molotov-Ribbentrop line is not only an elaborate metaphor, but has a very specific political expression. It divided Poland! The essential consequence of the evil is that later Western states essentially recognised this line, and in this way ‘betrayed Poland’ (p. 298). Unfortunately, the author hesitates to point out what line, in his opinion, the Western leaders had to set against the demands of Stalin. However, many of the maps presented in the book speak for themselves. In this way, the real *Bloodlands* code is decoded.⁴

In this context, perhaps, one should also evaluate the observations on the topic of modernism: Stalinism and Nazism, according to the author, being anti-civilisation phenomena, became united against Polish civilisation. Since Nazism is already internationally billed as an anti-civilisation phenomenon, and its consequences have been annulled (meaning civilisation has been

⁴ By the way, reviewers have already noted that ‘Bloodlands’ refer to the Polish Kress. The author is trying to deny this, see: T. Snyder, ‘The Causes of the Holocaust’, *Contemporary European History* 21(2) (2012), pp. 149–168.

restored on the western side of the Molotov-Ribbentrop line), it remained only to bestow the anti-civilisation characteristics on Stalinism (meaning to annul suitably the consequences of Stalinism on the eastern side of the mentioned line). Hence, Timothy Snyder is calling for the annulment of the effects of the Stalinism era in the space of his drawn 'Bloodlands'! This, apparently, would be the real mission of the 'new history'.

In summary, it is worth returning to one aspect of the Molotov-Ribbentrop line: the author's observation that the Germans revealed Soviet crimes, which were usually concealed, when they crossed the mentioned line. But due to the circumstances, these crimes became politics and only later history. 'It is impossible to unravel the facts used for propaganda from the policy of their initial submission,' the author states (p. 197). And in the final section 'Humanity', this conclusion is made: along the Molotov-Ribbentrop line, the systems of Stalinism and Nazism, their aspirations, and the consequences overlapped; this overlap became the mass deaths of Soviet prisoners of war, the Jewish pogroms, and ultimately the cause of the Holocaust (pp. 382–383, 392–394).

This is a valuable observation. In the case of Lithuania, it is vividly associated with the extremely sadistic murders occurring on 22–24 June 1941 in Rainiai and Panevėžys (all the circumstances of which still remain undisclosed up to now). Thus, emphasising the overlap of Soviet and Nazi crimes, and their considerable similarity, it is not worth ignoring the other side of the coin: the huge hate that developed (and was developed) between both sides of the Molotov-Ribbentrop line; there was hatred between societies, between individual nations, even between distinct individuals, and finally, in the most general sense, between East and West. It is not possible to bring together this hatred only under the political systems of Stalinism and Nazism, or the personas of Stalin and Hitler. It started and matured even before there was a Stalin or Hitler. It is true that Stalinism and Nazism accumulated this hatred and raised it to an unprecedented scale. But at the same time, due to the huge impact of these two systems on the history of the 20th century, the real genesis of the hatred remains veiled. The mission of history, it would seem, should obligate one to explain not only the causes of this hatred and the diversity of its expressions, but also its essence, in order to prevent it from happening again in the future. Unfortunately, the intention of *Bloodlands* is oriented in a totally different direction.

Česlovas Laurinavičius