

THE IVANSK PROJECT e-NEWSLETTER

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Are Jewish day schools focusing too heavily on the history of Jewish victimhood and persecution? As a consequence, are their students ignorant and uninterested in national and global affairs? These important issues are raised by Burstein and discussed by readers who respond (pro and con) to her conclusions.

○ **Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin** *by Timothy Snyder*
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David Herman characterizes Timothy Snyder's "*Bloodlands*" as one of the most important contributions to our understanding of 20th century European history. I've just completed the book and enthusiastically recommend it, because of Snyder's keen analysis and new interpretations of Hitler's and Stalin's brutal assaults on the peoples (including the Jews) of eastern Europe from 1933-1945.

Thanks are again extended to Laurie Naiman for his critical review of the e-Newsletter prior to publication.

An Amazing Thing Happened On Our Trip to Poland

by **Judy Tolkan**, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, USA

There is a power in this world that is greater than all of us, that I do not understand.

Introduction: My paternal grandfather, Joseph Zemel was born in *Lagov* (*Yiddish*) also known as *Lagów* (Polish). He immigrated to America around 1910 where my father, Albert Zemel was born in 1918. Ever since I can remember my father spoke about his father's hometown and in 1989 my parents made the journey to *Lagov*. They brought back numerous photographs of their experience. I saved these in a very special place, because I knew that someday I too would go to *Lagov*.

Last year my father died. After his death I felt compelled to visit the shtetl that was so important to him. So, Howard (my husband) and I made plans for a summer trip to Poland. In Krakow we would hire a driver/guide to take us to *Lagov*. In addition, we wanted to take time to see *Ivansk* where my paternal Grandmother, Sarah Lipovitch was born.

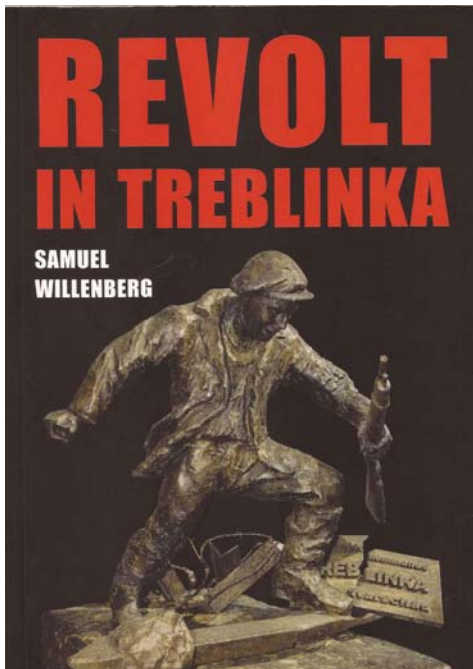
Before we left a cousin alerted us to an art exhibit at The Jewish Museum in New York featuring the work of Mayer Kirshenblatt (1916-2009). Mayer Kirshenblatt was from *Apt* (Opatów, Polish). In 1934, when he was 18 years old, his entire family immigrated to Toronto, where he lived for the rest of his life. Mayer owned a paint and wallpaper store. He retired in his early '70s. He then became depressed. His daughter (Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett) knew that her father retained vivid memories of his childhood, and as a possible way of relieving his melancholy she urged him to paint his recollections on canvas. And that's what he did. I viewed many of his paintings on the The Jewish Museum's web site (<<http://www.thejewishmuseum.org/exhibitions/MayerJuly>>). Mayer produced a remarkable number of bright, beautifully detailed paintings illustrating the people and places of his childhood. His voice was a central part of the exhibit explaining the background of each painting. I came away with a real sense of what life was like in *Apt* during the 1920s. [Ed: See a review of Mayer Kirshenblatt's book in [The Ivansk Project e-Newsletter, No. 29, 2008.](#)]

I opened a map of Poland and much to my surprise *Apt* was very close to *Lagov* and *Ivansk*. In fact, the 3 towns form a triangle and are about 15 miles from each other. I was very excited and decided to include *Apt* in our itinerary

Our Trip: Howard and I arrived in Krakow on Thursday evening, July 28, 2011. After dinner, we went to bed early in anticipation of our first day of sightseeing. We spent the next day in Krakow visiting 7 hauntingly beautiful synagogues, and an ancient Jewish Cemetery. Now, these holy places are museums to a destroyed civilization. Anyone who's been there will understand the sadness and the empty feeling that overwhelmed us knowing that these structures were tangible

symbols of what had happened to our people during the Holocaust. The Nazis exterminated almost the entire Jewish population of Poland, including my relatives whose towns I would be visiting the following day.

A recently opened “Galicia Museum”, dealing with the history of Polish Jewry, was the last place we visited in Krakow. The museum contains a large book shop featuring hundreds of titles on the Holocaust. I have not read much Holocaust literature but was so moved by what I had seen that day, that I decided to buy a book on the subject. I browsed through many tables piled with books leaving an exhausted Howard sitting on a bench. After about 20 minutes Howard’s patience was at an end: “Come on already, I want to get going.” “Just give me a few more minutes, I’ve got it narrowed it down to three books”, I replied. Still dissatisfied, Howard rejoined, “Well, just buy all 3 of them, I want to go.”



I knew I wouldn’t read all three on the trip and wanted to travel light. So, I very deliberately and methodically chose: “*Revolt In Treblinka*”, a memoir by Samuel Willenberg who was one of the very few who escaped from the death camp. The narrative was written in the first person and seemed easy to read. From the back cover I learned that after the war Willenberg had been living in Israel and that in retirement he became a sculptor. Many of his cast-iron figures, which were reproduced in the back of the book, were modeled after people he saw in Treblinka. I was very moved by what he had done. I love art; I am a watercolor artist. The combination of what looked like a good read plus the photographs of the sculptures convinced me that this was the book I should purchase.

Early next morning we set out into the Polish countryside, together with our guides, Andrzej and Mike. Our first stop was *Ivansk* where we found my Grandmother’s house. We also went to the Jewish Cemetery outside the town. The cemetery was rededicated about 5 years ago by *Ivanskers* whose ancestors once lived there. It was sad to see the graveyard in its present state, completely overgrown with weeds because no one has yet been found to take care of it. *[Editor: We have constantly been searching for someone or some agency to maintain the cemetery. We are willing to pay a fair price. But thus far, our efforts have yielded nothing.]*

Our next stop was *Apt* (Opatów). For a Saturday afternoon the town was very quiet with only a few people on the streets. We found someone who told us where the synagogue was, or where it had been. But when we reached that spot none of us felt certain that the building had really been a synagogue...it just looked too new. Then I noticed an elderly man walking along the sidewalk next to the building: “Andrzej, roll down the window and call him over. Perhaps he could give us some information.”

In Polish Andrzej asked him whether the building was a synagogue. To our amazement the gentleman became extremely angry and started screaming at us. Howard and I even feared that he might strike Andrzej.

“What’s he saying?” I asked.

“He says the synagogue was here; it was from the 15th century and they knocked it down”, replied Andrzej.

“Find out find out if he lives here in Opatów”, I continued.

“He says he used to live here, but now he lives in Israel”, came the reply.

Upon hearing this, and because the man seemed so agitated, I thought it might calm things if I said something in Hebrew. “*Ani, m’daberet, Ivrit*”, I exclaimed. In disbelief he came back in a loud and excited voice, “*Aht, m’daberet Ivrit?*”

I got out of the car and a lively conversation ensued. The man asked who I was and what we were doing here. All this was in Hebrew (I must tell you that I am not that fluent in Hebrew and cannot carry on a conversation in any depth). By coincidence, his wife, daughter and son-in-law came on the scene and joined our company.

At this point I asked if he spoke English. He answered in the affirmative. I explained that I was from the United States, that my grandfather was from Lagov and that I was searching for my roots. Then I asked what he was doing in Poland. He indicated that he grew up in *Apt*. The Nazis sent him to Treblinka and after the war he made *Aliyah*. “Oh that’s very interesting” I exclaimed. “Just yesterday in Krakow I bought a book called, “*Revolt In Treblinka*”.



The look on my face as I stand with Samuel Willenberg and his wife, Ada, expresses my astonishment at having met the man whose book I had purchased only the day before.

Then the biggest surprise of all followed. The man looked at me and with a big smile, “That’s my book, I wrote that book!”

“What? You are Samuel Willenberg? You made all those sculptures that were shown in the book?” “YES! YES!” he said. I literally thought I would faint. Howard had to hold me up for a minute. How was this possible? Mr. Willenberg and I hugged each other. And then his wife and I embraced. I was happy, shocked, and felt very connected to the history of my people.

Yesterday in the Jewish Museum I scanned so many books and for some reason felt compelled to pick “*Revolt In Treblinka*”. What on earth are the chances that I would encounter the author the very next day? What

are the chances? There is a power in this world that I don’t understand!

In the photos taken at the scene by Andrzej, I looked like I had seen a ghost. I couldn't believe the encounter was real. I still get goose bumps thinking about what happened that day. Friends have asked if I had Willenberg sign the book. No! The book was still in the hotel room. How would I have known that I would meet the author in a little town in Poland?



The Zemel Home and Store in Lagov

My great grandfather had a "general store" just off the main square. The building now is a "resale shop". Apparently, this also served as the family home, although it is hard to imagine that a family with 10 children could fit into this small space. Who really knows?



In the Jewish Cemetery?

Howard and I standing in what might have been the Jewish Cemetery in Lagov. A townspeople directed us there...but there were no markers or anything to indicate a cemetery.

After *Apt* we drove on to *Lagov*, the town I heard so much about since childhood. Although my primary objective was to "return" to *Lagov*, I must admit that nothing could beat the experience we had in *Apt*. Still, we did find the Zemel house. I stood there transfixed...the same place where my father stood in 1989 and where my grandparents' family once went about their lives. I felt the presence of my ancestors, most of whom I never knew. My father was always mindful that his father had the wisdom and the foresight to leave their home and come to the United States. My grandfather was one of 10 siblings. He could only convince his youngest brother to come with him. The rest of the family was destroyed in Treblinka.

The following day, July 31, we went to Auschwitz. I cannot describe the unimaginable horror of that place. We returned to the hotel and immediately began reading "*Revolt in Treblinka*". Throughout the remainder of our journey (to Prague and Salzburg) every spare moment was spent immersed in the book. You must read it for yourself. The narrative is extremely powerful. The vast majority of Jews who were transported to Treblinka were gassed within 1-2 hours after arrival. Willenberg is one of only two survivors who are still alive today. What a courageous human being! What a hero! What a privilege to have met him!

Post Script: What is the power that we do not understand?

A friend suggested that my father's spirit was the force behind my one in a million chance of meeting Willenberg. Another idea invokes a collective unconsciousness among artists. Like Willenberg and Kirshenblatt, I think of myself as an artist. Viewing Kirshenblatt's art prompted me to go to *Apt*. Willenberg's sculptures convinced me to purchase his book. Everything came together in the middle of nowhere...on a nameless street in *Apt*. I will never understand how it all happened.

It is also hard to understand why Willenberg became so agitated when we asked him about the synagogue. I suspect he is tortured by what happened to him and that his emotional outburst reflects a manifestation of the scars that lie deep within him. By the way, Willenberg was in Poland in August because the very next day he was scheduled to be interviewed in Treblinka by the BBC. I shall keep alert for the documentary of his testimony.

Below, I have provided two links where you can learn more about Samuel Willenberg's life and memories:

Holocaust survivor preserves Treblinka in art

<<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-13241973>>

Survivor Samuel Willenberg recounts Treblinka uprising

<<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-14368147>>

Finding Leah Tickotsky. A Discovery of Heritage in Poland.

A film by Sarah Golabek-Goldman

[*e-News editor*] Several Ivanskers indicate that their visit to Ivansk added a new dimension and deeper appreciation of the world of their ancestors. Sarah Golabek-Goldman had a similar experience in Poland when she explored her ancestor's shtetls. Her personal journey of self-discovery has been documented on film. Sarah Golabek-Goldman's story raises important ethical issues and questions pertaining to the painful past as well as a more hopeful future of Polish-Jewish relationships. You'll want to want to see this film.

Below, I have copied a review of ***Finding Leah Tickotsky*** written by Pauline Dubkin Yearwood

Finding 'Leah' and family roots

by *Pauline Dubkin Yearwood*

The Chicago Jewish News (01/28/2011)

< <http://www.chicagojewishnews.com/story.htm?sid=7&id=254342> >

When 19-year-old Stanford University sophomore Sarah Golabek-Goldman decided to spend a summer teaching English in Poland, members of her family were, as she describes it, “terrified.”

She could have had her choice of countries; why go to the place where your relatives were murdered?

That, as it happened, was one of the reasons for Golabek-Goldman's decision. “I had always heard about my relatives in Poland,” she said. “I was really interested in learning about my family.”

What Golabek-Goldman found in Poland in the summer of 2007 and the journeys it inspired are the subject of a documentary film, “*Finding Leah Tickotsky: A Discovery of Heritage in Poland.*”

Leah Tickotsky was Golabek-Goldman's great-great-grandmother, and the discovery of her gravestone was a highlight of the visit to Poland, where Golabek-Goldman lived in a small village while teaching English to schoolchildren. Her reception, she says, was warm and her host family welcoming.



After the teaching job ended, “I decided to try to visit the villages my family members were from,” Golabek-Goldman said in a recent phone interview from her home in Los Angeles. She hired a local historian, Tomek Wisniewski, as a guide and they traveled to the towns where family members on both sides lived before the Holocaust.

In one tiny village the travelers discovered the remains of a Jewish cemetery. Wisniewski explained that the Nazis had removed most of the headstones to use for cement; only about 30 gravestones remained out of hundreds that had once been there.

Golabek-Goldman and Wisniewski spent a day cleaning the cemetery, washing the headstones with sponges and water. “We were about to leave when he called my name -- 'Sarah, Sarah!'” Golabek-Goldman relates. He had found the grave of “Leah Tickotsky, wife of David.” She had told him that was her great-great-grandmother's name.

Finding the grave “was really a spiritual experience for me,” Golabek-Goldman says. “When I thought of Poland in the past I thought of Auschwitz, of Treblinka, where my family had died. When I found the tombstone I realized my family had lived there hundreds of years before the Holocaust.”

When Golabek-Goldman returned to the United States, with memories of Poland fresh in her mind, she applied for and won a Davis Project for Peace Fellowship grant. The scholarship is awarded to 100 students annually and allows them to create and implement a project that will promote peace.

Golabek-Goldman collaborated with Phyllis Pollak, a teacher at a school in New Jersey, to create a Holocaust memorial program linking students at that school with their peers in the Polish city of Bialystok.

“We had children at both schools write stories about photos that were found at Auschwitz, of people we know nothing about,” Golabek-Goldman says. “We wanted children to recognize the humanity of each individual victim.” The Bialystok students also cleaned the Jewish cemetery in their city, which, with no Jews left to care for it, had fallen into decay. A plaque now marks the children’s contribution.

The project gave Golabek-Goldman the idea for a documentary, and two years later she returned to Poland. Meanwhile a TV news station in Bialystok had become interested in the story, especially one aspect of it. “There was just one other Jew in Bialystok at that time, and it used to be majority Jewish,” Golabek-Goldman says.

She enlisted Pollak, the teacher who worked on the school project with her, and her aunt, Mona Golabek, who had made other documentaries, and together they produced the 48-minute film. “It explores Polish-Jewish relations, both the positive and the negative aspects,” Golabek-Goldman says. “It explores the history of Jews in Poland and my personal journey to discover my roots there.”

Golabek-Goldman, who directed the film along with Wisniewski, interviewed Polish historians, clergy, government officials, presidents of organizations, university professors and students to paint a fuller picture and to understand how family stories influence memory.

The film has already been screened at a Jewish festival in Poland and at a number of universities in that country, and has been hailed by Polish and American historians.

Golabek-Goldman hopes that U.S. audiences take away a number of messages from the film. “It’s so easy for the Holocaust to become a footnote in history,” she says. “The last survivors are dying out. I had an opportunity to meet survivors growing up, and it’s so important that my generation really tries to promote Holocaust awareness. There continues to be genocide and human atrocities on a daily basis.” She hopes to “teach the younger generation about the dangers of apathy and intolerance.”

In addition, she says, “there has been a controversy between Poland and Jews for a long time. It’s important to look at it together, to explore, be really honest, have a dialogue, to explore our rich history together, not just to focus on the negative but on our shared experiences for centuries.”

Golabek-Goldman graduated from Stanford in June and is now in the midst of applying to law school. Her aspirations in that direction are not as far from her filmmaking project as it might appear, she says.

“I hope to be a human rights attorney and I want to work with refugees who have lost their homes. I’m inspired by the fact that my family lost Poland, lost their homes and had to rebuild their lives. This Polish journey impacted my life and my life goals,” she says.

Meanwhile she is continuing to explore her family's roots in Poland. On her last trip there she found the home where family members lived; she was guided by a woman in her 90s who knew the family before the war.

"You always fear you'll meet someone who says they remember, but they really don't," Golabek-Goldman says. "But with this incredible woman I knew it was accurate. I asked her where did (the family) live and she showed me the house. She told me stories about how when she was a child she used to be invited to my great-grandparents' home for tea. There were positive interactions between Poles and Jews. Those positive everyday relations are important to remember."

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Watch the trailer to the film: < http://holdontoyourmusic.org/video/FLT_trailer.html >

You can order a DVD of the film from The National Center for Jewish Film:
< <http://www.jewishfilm.org/Catalogue/films/finding Leah.htm> >

Jewish School Graduates Focus on Themes of Persecution.

by Rachel Burstein

Published on-line in *The Jewish Daily Forward*, September 19, 2011

< <http://forward.com/articles/142809/#idc-cover> >

Thousands of graduates of Jewish day schools will head off to college this September. But unlike graduates of public school, they will begin their higher education with credentials in Hebrew, Tanach and Talmud, along with mathematics, English literature and biology. And many of these students will enter secular colleges, bringing their uniquely Jewish worldviews into college history courses like the ones I taught at Brooklyn College, a diverse public university in New York City. They will share classrooms with students who know nothing of Jewish history or culture, and they will confront, for perhaps the first time, curricula that emphasize larger narratives, which place the Jewish experience alongside that of other minority groups.

Are these day school graduates prepared for this secular approach to studying the past? How will they cope with seeing a history that they were taught to view as central suddenly placed in this new, broader context?

As a teacher, I found I could answer these questions on the first day of my world history course. I could pick out the Jewish day school graduates from the moment that my students handed in index cards with their identifying information. Alongside the names, e-mail addresses, majors and reasons for taking the course, I asked students to list several areas of history that were particularly interesting to them. In an effort to render a required class more engaging, I tried to find ways to include the contents of my students' lists within the parameters of the curriculum.

The index cards bore a striking pattern. The Jewish day school students were primarily interested in studying two subjects: the Holocaust and the Spanish Inquisition. Maybe this should not have been so surprising; it was common for my students' historical interests to break down along ethnic, religious or cultural lines. African-American students wanted to learn about African liberation movements, slave resistance and the civil rights movement. Immigrants studying for citizenship exams wanted to learn more about the American Revolutionary War and the Constitution. And Muslim students took particular interest in the policies of the Mughal, Safavid and Ottoman empires.

But whereas other groups emphasized points of cultural pride in their historical selections, those educated in Jewish day schools were concerned primarily with persecution. Subsequent classroom discussions of the founding of the State of Israel and the contemporary politics of the Middle East provoked considerable comment from these same students. However, rarely did one identify such topics as deserving of study in his index card appraisal. Furthermore, the selected narratives of persecution were listed as topics in and of themselves, unconnected to larger historical themes. In my students' listings, the Holocaust remained separated from fascism and World War II, and the Spanish Inquisition was removed from colonial expansion and monarchal politics. For the students who had attended Jewish day schools, the most interesting aspects of history were those in which the Jews were savagely acted upon, with little recourse as political agents in their own right.

This is not to say that their parochial education couldn't also be an asset at times. With the details of lived Jewish experience at their fingertips, they were able to offer important examples and counterexamples of the larger themes defining the history we studied. Their vast knowledge of Jewish engagement with hostile states provided an important counterweight to classmates who claimed that "people in the X empire did Y" or that "the Z regime was known as tolerant of all religious and ethnic difference."

But somewhere along the way, these otherwise well-prepared Jewish day school graduates — capable writers, gifted public speakers and conscientious students — had picked up a distorted notion of history.

For them the Jewish experience existed in isolation, with outsized importance in the scope of the larger story. And this Jewish history itself was reduced to suffering. Absent was any sense that Jews could shape their own destiny, that they were active participants in history. If such was the case of the past, I worried for my students of the present. I wanted them to feel empowered to engage politically, socially and culturally with the state in which they lived. I wanted them to be active citizens not only within their Jewish communities, but also as Americans.

Jewish day school teachers need to present their students with a dynamic story of Jewish existence — and not just persecution — over time, and then place it within the larger framework of world history. By doing this, they would be performing a vital role in shaping the scholars and citizens who will enter the halls of secular colleges. Educating future generations of Jews means more than just getting them to appreciate our often tortured past; it also means learning that the small and the large are often two sides of the same coin.

Rachel Burstein is a doctoral candidate in history at the City University of New York's Graduate Center. From 2008 to 2010 she taught courses in world and American history at CUNY's Brooklyn College

Selected Correspondence, Assorted Pros and Cons. (sorted by date)

Joel A. Levitt

The focus on the persecution of Jews promotes isolation from other ethnicities and from evolving world culture. It also discourages some from remaining actively Jewish or Jewish at all.

Jewish communities have been persecuted, but Jewish communities have also been spectacularly successful -- consider the Jewish experience in the Carolingian Empire, in 11th and 12th century North Africa, and in the United States.

Individual Jews have been world leaders, in physics, economics, medicine, psychology, etc., being awarded more Nobel Prizes than members of any other ethnicity. And, in politics, consider Premier Mendes-France and President Sarkozy, and Senators Lehman , Javits and Schumer.

What about studying the ideas about society developed by the Jewish people and preserved in Halacha, ideas which we can contribute to the world even today.

Jewish culture has been enriched by contact with the majorities among whom we have lived - Ram Bam's contribution being the finest example. If we do not continue to be open to the evolving world, we will become a fossil, an outmoded and vanishing people.

* * * * *

Yehuda

I think that what's needed to prevent our being a "vanishing people" is a return to particularism. The whole article above is actually quite strange. Ms Burstein wants the Jewish students to be active American citizens. Why? They are already active American citizens, and I would imagine that they're more active than most Americans. It's almost like calling on the Jews in America to abandon Yiddish and to adopt English. Why? They have done that already. Once upon a time, being Jewish was self-evident, so parents would send their children to summer camp to learn how to be Americans. Now, being an American is self-evident, so parents have to send their children to summer camp to learn how to be a Jew. The American Jews no longer need advice about fitting in and contributing to the society around them. That is already a fact of life. Now, it's urgent to take a step back from that reality and to re-assert some particularism.

* * * * *

Israeli Jew

If I could give this article a standing ovation I would.

I see every day an obsession with victimhood that is feeding paranoia and it is deeply entrenched in organized Jewry. One of the best funded and most high profile Federation departments locally is the Holocaust remembrance group. Never a week goes by without its inestimable head in the paper. Try getting funding for Diaspora education- a celebration of the Jewish world's achievements (without focusing on the destruction of those communities) and it's like pulling teeth. This also feeds in to all other politics and our collective ability to see a boogeyman behind every rock before we really take the time to examine the potential threat.

It's a sad and hollow way to live.

* * * * *

Ben Levi

The interest of today's Jews in the Holocaust should be regarded as normative and positive. The Holocaust is a trauma that overshadows any other event in our history. The Bible reminds us again and again of slavery in Egypt, and the Jewish prayer book is focused on that story. Would a Jewish educator in today's world wish to comment that our exaggerated focus on the Exodus gives us a distorted or "isolated" view of history? And

what about the destruction of the Temple that the entire Jewish civilization is focused on? Should I conclude that our public is being given a narrow perspective of itself, "an outsized importance in the scope of the larger story"? Now, if we Jews are so busy with ancient events, it is only natural and normal that an event witnessed by our grandparents should be of tremendous importance for young students. They have every right to be particularistic in their view of history. They have a right to their own identity and their own angle. By the way, an American view of history is also particularistic - no less particularistic than a Jewish view of history.

* * * * *

Rabbi B. Rosenberg

Judaism, with its realistic approach to man and his place in the world, understood that evil could not be blurred or camouflaged, and that any attempt to downplay the extent of the contradiction, and fragmentation to be found in reality will neither endow man with tranquility, nor enable him to grasp the existential mystery. Whoever wishes to delude himself by diverting his attention from the deep fissure in reality, by romanticizing human existence, is naught but a fool and a fantasist. "When the impulse of intellectual curiosity seizes hold of a person, he ought to do naught but find strength and encouragement in his faith in the Creator, vindicate G-d's judgment, and acknowledge the perfection of his work." (People have an obligation to recognize that evil exists, but understanding its essence is beyond human intellectual capacity.)

* * * * *

Ron Edge

Ms. Burstein and those who agree: To put it shortly: You Jews are commanded, by God, to "Remember", Remember!! And not only the Holy Days and Feasts. When you cease to "Remember", you will cease to exist as yourselves truly are. So, tell me Ms. Burstein, et al: Do you "Remember" inter alia as He Commands?

* * * * *

Mitch

The irony is that emphasizing the Holocaust helps Jews "fit in" more easily than do other issues. Israel is controversial, especially on college campuses, and religious rules like Shabbat and kashrut tend to force a separation from non-Jewish peers. But remember the Holocaust, while African-Americans remember slavery, Armenians recall their WWI slaughter, Japanese-Americans remember internment camps etc. is our way of claiming a seat at the table of remembrance (victimhood). Keeping kosher or celebrating Israel doesn't have the same claim on our neighbors' respect.

* * * * *

Rivka

Students in Jewish Day schools learn Jewish History in the context of religion. Our long exile from the land of Israel is the result of not having obeyed the Mitzvot. We are also taught that everything happens for a reason even though we may not know what it is. We also know the end - the Moshiach will come and we will once again be restored to our Land. Thus, the whole context of Jewish history in general is taught differently than World history. World history includes putting the Jewish experience in context but Jewish history is a separate topic.

* * * * *

Mark K

Personally, I always thought that my day-school-alumni university students' interest in the Holocaust and the expulsion from Spain stemmed from a concern, potentially a subconscious one, that our strong, vibrant, and rather integrated Jewish community in America could at some indeterminate future time be subject to the same pressures that led to the destruction of the strong, vibrant, and rather integrated Jewish communities that existed in Germany and Spain prior to the Holocaust and expulsion

Frankly, I think that posing historical, academic questions about historic precedents in the classroom is appropriate, and students then are free to decide outside the classroom how that information will affect how they interact with the world. In contrast, ethnic or other group studies programs that place a stronger emphasis on empowerment and advocacy as an educational objective for the classroom seem, to me at least, to be doing something beyond their proper academic mandate.

* * * * *

Lilach Taichman

I am a history teacher at Barack Hebrew Academy (formerly Akiba Academy), a Jewish day school in Bryn Mawr, outside Philadelphia. At present, I am preparing the Holocaust teaching unit that's part of our 9th grade "World Cultures" course. In the Holocaust unit we discuss the role of European nationalism in the development of anti-Semitism during the 19th and 20th centuries. But the focus of the course is not centered on the history of persecution. Rather, it seeks to provide students with a sense of how Jewish history relates to the world in which we live. For instance, my students participate in our annual arts festival, "The Barack Museum of Jewish Culture before World War II". Here, they research and design exhibits on European Jewish history and culture featuring Yiddish literature and theater, Klezmer music and dance, visual arts, and so on. Last year we highlighted Czech Jewry; this year it's the Jewish experience in pre-war Poland. In this context, the catastrophe that was on the horizon during the interwar period will surely be part of the story. In fact, several students are exploring their family's histories to document how they remembered those times on the eve of the Holocaust.

Burstein believes that her day school students are saturated with Jewish victimhood. She points her chalk at them for suggesting topics such as the Spanish Inquisition, or the Shoah. If my students did that, I believe it would reflect a desire to educate their peers and to provide key areas of historical literacy. At Barack, and I am sure at many American Jewish day schools, secular and Jewish history are not artificially separated – Jewish life in the Diaspora did not develop in an isolated petri dish, nor should it be taught that way. Our students begin to study the History of Western Civilization in grade 10. Jewish themes are examined *in situ*, via a secular lens that sees Jewish life as one of the many elements shaping, contributing and impacting on the development of Western civilization.

Finally, as Burstein trashes day school education, she also bemoans the inability of Jewish students "to shape their own destiny". In her mind they are poorly prepared to "engage politically, socially and culturally with the state in which they live". Is she serious? I challenge her conclusion. I think that the majority of Jewish college students are interested and involved in national and global affairs. I have taught hundreds of Jewish day school students: they are not intellectually isolated. They go on to be scholars, politicians, directors, journalists, businessmen and businesswomen, entertainers and educators contributing at the highest levels to their society.

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BOOK REVIEW

Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin

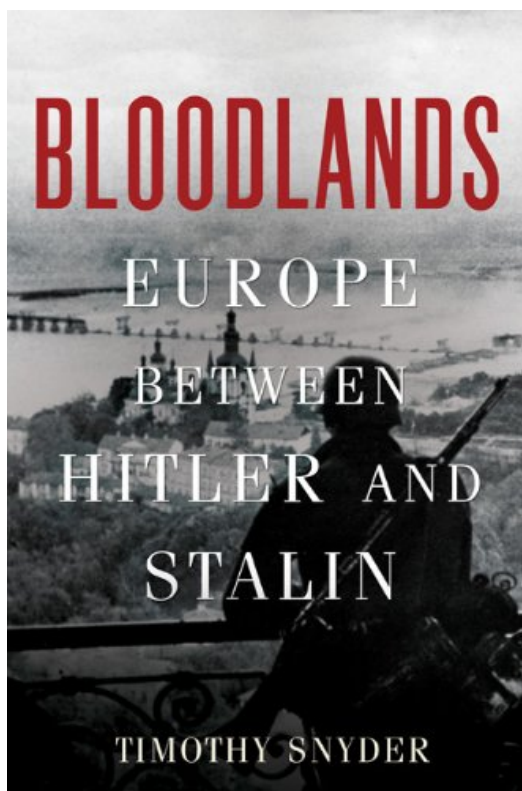
by Timothy Snyder (Basic Books, New York, 2010)

Reviewed by David Herman

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< <http://www.newstatesman.com> >

30 November 2010:



When the Soviet Union invaded east Poland in 1939, many Poles and Jews panicked and fled to the Nazi-occupied west. Nothing, they thought, could be worse than Stalin. At one bridge an SS-officer watched this in disbelief. "Where on earth are you going?" he exclaimed. "We are going to kill you."

It wasn't just Poland. Millions of east Europeans were trapped between Germany and the Soviet Union, the two most murderous regimes in European history. Their story is at the heart of Timothy Snyder's outstanding book. What he calls "the Bloodlands", that huge area stretching from the Baltic to the Black Sea, is "where Europe's most murderous regimes did their most murderous work".

For Snyder, this period of violence begins in 1933 not with Hitler's rise to power but with Stalin's decision to starve more than three million Ukrainians to death. Then came the killing of 700,000 Soviet citizens, shot during the Great Terror of 1937-38. At this point, the Soviet Union was "the only state in Europe carrying out policies

of mass killing". Before 1939, the Nazi regime "killed no more than ten thousand people. The Stalinist regime had already starved millions and shot the better part of a million."

200,000 Polish citizens were shot by the Soviets or Germans at the beginning of the Second World War. When Germany invaded the Soviet Union in 1941 the atrocities escalated. Four million Soviet citizens were starved to death by the Germans, including three million Soviet prisoners of war. More than five million Jews were gassed or shot by the Germans. In total, Snyder concludes, in the middle of Europe in the middle of the 20th century, the Nazi and Soviet regimes murdered some 14 million people. This doesn't include soldiers killed on the Eastern Front. The Bloodlands were the site of the Nazi death camps, mass shootings by the NKVD and the *Einsatzgruppen*, campaigns of

mass starvation by both the Soviet Union and the Nazis, and the scene of the worst fighting of the war. And it could have been worse. If the Nazis had won, tens of millions of Slavs would have been killed, creating a living space in the east for German colonist-farmers.

We think of the Germans as the main perpetrators. Snyder has none of this. The point is, he argues, that murdering was most intense in the countries which were occupied first by the Soviet Union, then by the Germans and then, again, by the Red Army. That dynamic is crucial. Ukrainians and Latvians welcomed Germans because they couldn't believe anything could be as bad as Stalin. Two inhuman utopian visions clashed and for those caught in between the result was catastrophe.

In addition to the mass killings, there were huge deportations. In Soviet Belarus about two million people were killed, but two million were also deported and a million more fled from the German invasion. "By the end of the war," writes Snyder, "half of the population of Belarus had either been killed or moved." Nor did it stop in 1945. Then came the ethnic cleansing and mass population movements of the post-war years. Snyder takes the story up to Stalin's death in 1953.

Bloodlands is well written, clear and accessible. The book is packed with up to date statistics -- many simply astonishing -- but there are also moving accounts of individuals. Stories like that of Jozef Sobolewski, a toddler, starved to death with his mother and five of his brothers and sisters in 1933 in the Ukraine. The one brother who survived was shot in 1937, in Stalin's Terror.

Some of this is familiar. A great deal, however, isn't. Snyder is a key figure in the new thinking about eastern Europe which is transforming the way we think about Stalinism, Nazism and the Holocaust. Any illusions you might have about the decency of the Wehrmacht or of Stalin's regime will not survive reading this book. We think of German concentration camps and the Gulag as the worst symbols of totalitarianism, but most of those who entered German concentration camps survived. 90 per cent of those who entered the Gulag left it alive. Most of the killings went on in pits, forests, death camps and "starvation zones", some gassed, most shot or starved, in east Europe and the west of the Soviet Union. Not, Snyder is emphatic here, in Russia. But in the non-Russian periphery of the Soviet Union, above all, the Ukraine, Belarus and formerly Soviet-occupied east Poland. Even Stalin's Great Terror was not concentrated in Russia. Of nearly 700,000 executions carried out for political crimes in 1937-38, few were poets or old Bolsheviks. More than 625,000 were kulaks or members of non-Russian minorities.

Snyder has pulled together a huge amount of new thinking and research, much of it not yet translated. It is a formidable work of scholarship, shattering many myths, and opening up a fascinating new history of Europe.

03 December 2010

Why *Bloodlands* is still one of the books of the year.

Bloodlands is "an outstanding book". It is "a formidable work of scholarship, shattering many myths, and opening up a fascinating new history of Europe." I am not the only person who thinks this. The *Economist* called it "revisionist history of the best kind." Anne Applebaum in the *New York*

Review of Books called it "a brave and original history". Antony Beevor wrote that it was "the most important work of history for years." And the *Atlantic*, the *Independent*, the *Telegraph*, and the *FT* joined John Gray and myself in the *New Statesman*, in choosing *Bloodlands* as one of the books of the year.

Here are ten reasons why *Bloodlands* is one of the best history books in recent years:

1) It is well-written and accessible, often moving.

The book is full of terrifying statistics but the use of individual stories (see the opening page, the first page of the conclusion and the final two pages) gives a powerful sense of the human realities of these figures.

The writing is lucid and clear, free of jargon. For example, the opening paragraph of the introduction (p 1) is a superb summary of the origins of the Nazi and Soviet regimes in the catastrophe of the First World War. The paragraph ends: "No adult European alive in 1914 would ever see the restoration of comparable free trade; most European adults alive in 1914 would not enjoy comparable levels of prosperity during the rest of their lives." (p 1)

Or this on the western sense that "the living skeletons at Bergen-Belsen and Buchenwald seemed to convey the worst crimes of Hitler." Snyder goes on:

"As the Jews and Poles of Warsaw knew, and as Vasily Grossman and the Red Army soldiers knew, this was far from the truth. The worst was in the ruins of Warsaw, or the fields of Treblinka, or the marshes of Belarus, or the pits of Babi Yar. The Red Army liberated all of these places, and all of the bloodlands. All of the death sites and dead cities fell behind an iron curtain, in a Europe Stalin made his own even while liberating it from Hitler. Grossman wrote his article about Treblinka while Soviet troops were paused at the Vistula, watching the Germans defeat the Home Army in the Warsaw Uprising. The ashes of Warsaw were still warm when the Cold War began." (p 312)

2) Snyder has a tremendous mastery of languages and recent scholarship.

Following the revolutions of 1989/1991 new archives have opened up in east Europe and the former Soviet Union. Some of the best new history of central and east Europe in the mid-20th century is being written by historians like Snyder and Mark Mazower who can read these findings and the flood of new monographs and academic articles being written in these languages. As Snyder makes clear, "This study involved reading in German, Polish, Russian, Ukrainian, Belarussian, Yiddish, Czech, Slovak, and French, as well as English." (p 420) Exactly. This is where the next generation of modern European history writing is going to come from.

The bibliography consists of almost forty pages. There are over forty pages of footnotes. This is pulled together into a clear and accessible book, where a flood of statistics and details never obscures several overarching themes.

3) Facts and statistics ...

Bloodlands is packed full of extraordinary statistics and facts. I listed some (perhaps too many) in my original review, but they bear re-telling. The Nazi and Soviet regimes "murdered some fourteen million people" (p vii); "not a single one of the fourteen million murdered was a soldier on active duty" (p viii); the number of German Jews murdered by the Nazis made up "fewer than three per cent of the deaths of the Holocaust" (p ix); "The Germans murdered about as many non-Jews as Jews during the war" (p x); "in the first six and a half years after Hitler came to power, the Nazi regime killed no more than about ten thousand people. The Stalinist regime had already starved millions and shot the better part of a million" (p x-xi); Ninety per cent of those who entered the Gulag left it alive (p xiii); "the tremendous majority of the mortal victims of both the German and the Soviet regimes never saw a concentration camp" (p xiii); "of the fourteen million civilians and prisoners of war killed in the bloodlands between 1933 and 1945, more than half died because they were denied food" (p xiv), etc, etc. And we are still in the preface.

4) ... and details and anecdotes

When the Germans took Danzig, 38 men were sentenced to death and shot for defending the post office -- one was the uncle of Gunter Grass (p 120); Shostakovich was "a volunteer for a fire brigade (during the siege of Leningrad) when he wrote the third movement of his Seventh Symphony" (p 173); "The invasion of the Soviet Union was supposed to resolve all economic problems, which it did not. In the end, occupied Belgium ... was of greater economic value to Nazi Germany" (p 185); "On any given day in the second half of 1941, the Germans shot more Jews than had been killed by pogroms in the entire history of the Russian Empire" (p 227); "Women, with more fatty tissue, burned better than men" (p 271); when the Red Army invaded Germany and raped countless German women Gunter Grass's mother "offered herself so that his sister might be spared" (p 317).

These are not mere facts. It is the range of victims - and therefore the range of sympathy - that is important. Poles, Russians, Jews, Germans were all among the victims. And then there are the Ukrainians and Belarussians, starved by Stalin, shot by German soldiers, and the Soviet minorities deported to godforsaken parts of the Soviet Union.

5) Revisionism

Numerous myths do not survive the book. Anyone who still thinks the Soviet Union was a humane or decent state will not think so after they have read *Bloodlands*. The millions of victims, starved, shot, deported, raped. Similarly, anyone who still thinks the *Wehrmacht* were just decent soldiers while the SS and Einsatzgruppen did the dirty work, should read pp 121-3, 166, 175-182 (especially p 179) and on and on. Many still think that the suffering on the western front is comparable to what happened in east Europe and the non-Russian periphery of the Soviet Union. Snyder demolishes this assumption. For decades, the Soviet Union proclaimed that it was the Russians who suffered in their millions during the German invasion; Snyder makes clear that it was non-Russian populations - Ukraine, Belarus, the Baltic Republics - where most of the killing happened. Many in the west still think that the vast majority of Jews were killed in concentration

camps. They were not. Most Jewish victims of the Holocaust were shot, starved or gassed in vans and death camps.

Some reviewers have argued that little of this is original. Original to whom? We can't assume that all readers of a non-academic publication are professional historians or specialists. These myths, many of them sixty years old and counting, have a tenacious grip, especially in the west, and many of them have been sustained by nationalist and government propaganda in the east (as Snyder makes clear in his conclusion).

6) From West to East

Much of the historiography of the Second World War and of 20th century Europe in general, has focused on the great powers of west and central Europe and then the Soviet Union. By and large, the small countries of south-east and east Europe have been missed out or at best marginalised. Snyder's emphasis on the countries caught between Germany and the Soviet Union - Poland, the Baltic Republics, Belarus, the Ukraine - shifts our focus. He corrects a serious imbalance, continuing a process that started with the work of Norman Davies in the 1980s and '90s.

7) Food and agriculture

Historians have tended to focus on the importance of the industrial revolution, the industrial working class and revolutions which happened in cities, rather than on the countryside or what Snyder calls "the peasant question" (p 18). Snyder shifts our attention to the countryside: to those who were starved in their millions and to the central importance of food and agriculture to the catastrophe of the 1930s and '40s. Ukraine mattered to Stalin and Hitler because it was the breadbasket of east Europe and its wheat fields mattered to their different utopian visions.

8) Empire

We tend to think of the Soviet Union as a country (many of us still call it "Russia"). It wasn't. It was an empire, largely built between the 17th and late 19th centuries. Snyder is very good at separating out the different histories of the Ukraine and Belarus from the history of Russia. They are centre-stage in his narrative, along with Poland and the Baltic Republics. These are the "bloodlands". This is where Stalin starved millions of Ukrainians and shot hundreds of thousands of non-Russian Soviet citizens in the Terror, where the great land battles of the eastern front were fought, where the Germans starved three million Soviet prisoners of war, where the *Einsatzgruppen* shot two million Polish and Soviet Jews, where the Nazis gassed millions of Jews, and where, in total, fourteen million civilians were killed.

The Germans were not just fighting to defeat the Soviet Union, but to build their own empire, fired by visions of the empires built in America and Russia during the 19th century. Snyder suggests a fascinating connection between the 19th century genocides outside Europe (for example, in America) and the 20th century genocide in the centre of Europe.

9) Totalitarianism

Rather than just see Nazi Germany and Stalin's Soviet Union as comparable totalitarian regimes, Snyder suggests new ways of seeing their relationship. For example, most of their victims in east Europe lived in countries that were occupied both by Germany and by the Soviet Union. This was not a coincidence or a random aspect of a war with a front moving between invaders and the invaded. For example, the role of Jews in the Soviet apparatus added to the intensity of the anti-Semitism in the local population which was then exploited by the Nazis when they invaded.

Both regimes have been called utopian. Snyder points out that they had different utopias. Stalin's regime killed millions in the name of an *industrial* utopia. The Nazis killed millions, and would have killed tens of millions more, in the name of an *agrarian* utopia.

10) The Holocaust

Snyder makes a number of telling points about the Holocaust: the Holocaust is often thought of as modern - using bureaucracy and modern technology to murder millions. But many of the victims died in very old-fashioned ways: starved, shot, beaten; the concentration camps westerners know from newsreels at the end of the war were not representative of the Holocaust: most victims never saw a concentration camp and many were killed within a few hours of arriving at a death camp or within a few days of German soldiers arriving in their village or town.

But the most disturbing implication of *Bloodlands* is that the Holocaust, far from the being the worst civilian atrocity of the Second World War, would have been dwarfed by Nazi plans to starve and kill tens of millions of non-Jews in east Europe and the Soviet Union, to make way for a new German empire in the East. We have not yet started to absorb the implications of this.

Some of these points are not original, but nevertheless urgently need making. Others are original or are making accessible new thinking that has not yet found a mainstream audience. They take on big issues of modern history and by shifting our focus or by making different kinds of connections, create an exciting new history. Our understanding of 20th century European history is changing and *Bloodlands* plays an important part in this new history.

You can view Timothy Snyder's interesting 80 minute discussion of his book on C-Span.

< <http://booktv.org/Watch/12075/Bloodlands+Europe+Between+Hitler+and+Stalin.aspx> >