



# BLOODLANDS

EUROPE BETWEEN HITLER AND STALIN

TIMOTHY SNYDER

'AN ORIGINAL, WONDERFUL AND HORRIFYING BOOK...THIS BEAUTIFULLY WRITTEN AND SUPERBLY RESEARCHED WORK IS UNDOUBTEDLY ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT TO EMERGE FOR A LONG TIME'  
ANTONY BEEVOR



VINTAGE

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## About the Book

In the middle of Europe, in the middle of the twentieth century, the Nazi and Soviet regimes murdered fourteen million people in the bloodlands between Berlin and Moscow. In a twelve-year-period, in these killing fields - today's Ukraine, Belarus, Poland, Western Russia and the eastern Baltic coast - an average of more than one million citizens were slaughtered every year, as a result of deliberate policies unrelated to combat.

In his revelatory book Timothy Snyder offers a groundbreaking investigation into the motives and methods of Stalin and Hitler and, using scholarly literature and primary sources, pays special attention to the testimony of the victims, including the letters home, the notes flung from trains, the diaries on corpses. The result is a brilliantly researched, profoundly humane, authoritative and original book that forces us to re-examine the greatest tragedy in European history and re-think our past.

# Bloodlands

*Europe Between Hitler and Stalin*

TIMOTHY SNYDER



THE BODLEY HEAD  
LONDON

your golden hair Margarete  
your ashen hair Shulamit  
Paul Celan  
"Death Fugue"

Everything flows, everything changes.  
You can't board the same prison train twice.  
Vasily Grossman  
*Everything Flows*

A stranger drowned on the Black Sea alone  
With no one to hear his prayers for forgiveness.  
"Storm on the Black Sea"  
Ukrainian traditional song

Whole cities disappear. In nature's stead  
Only a white shield to counter nonexistence.  
Tomas Venclova  
"The Shield of Achilles"



## PREFACE: EUROPE

“Now we will live!” This is what the hungry boy liked to say, as he walked along the quiet roadside, or through the empty fields. But the food that he saw was only in his imagination. The wheat had all been taken away, in a heartless campaign of requisitions that began Europe’s era of mass killing. It was 1933, and Joseph Stalin was deliberately starving Soviet Ukraine. The boy died, as did more than three million other people. “I will meet her,” said a young Soviet man of his wife, “under the ground.” He was right; he was shot after she was, and they were buried among the seven hundred thousand victims of Stalin’s Great Terror of 1937 and 1938. “They asked for my wedding ring, which I. ...” The Polish officer broke off his diary just before he was executed by the Soviet secret police in 1940. He was one of about two hundred thousand Polish citizens shot by the Soviets or the Germans at the beginning of the Second World War, while Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union jointly occupied his country. Late in 1941, an eleven-year-old Russian girl in Leningrad finished her own humble diary: “Only Tania is left.” Adolf Hitler had betrayed Stalin, her city was under siege by the Germans, and her family were among the four million Soviet citizens the Germans starved to death. The following summer, a twelve-year-old Jewish girl in Belarus wrote a last letter to her father: “I am saying good-bye to you before I die. I am so afraid of this death because they throw small children into the mass graves alive.” She was among the more than five million Jews gassed or shot by the Germans.

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In the middle of Europe in the middle of the twentieth century, the Nazi and Soviet regimes murdered some fourteen million people. The place where all of the victims died, the bloodlands, extends from central Poland to western Russia, through Ukraine, Belarus, and the Baltic States. During the consolidation of National Socialism and Stalinism (1933-1938), the joint German-Soviet occupation of Poland (1939-1941), and then the German-Soviet war (1941-1945), mass violence of a sort never before seen in history was visited upon this region. The victims were chiefly Jews, Belarusians, Ukrainians, Poles, Russians, and Balts, the peoples native to these lands. The fourteen million were murdered over the course of only twelve years, between 1933 and 1945, while both Hitler and Stalin were in power. Though their homelands became battlefields midway through this period, these people were all victims of murderous policy rather than casualties of war. The Second World War was the most lethal conflict in history, and about half of the soldiers who perished on all of its battlefields all the world over died here, in this same region, in the bloodlands. Yet not a single one of the fourteen million murdered was a soldier on active duty. Most were women, children, and the aged; none were bearing weapons; many had been stripped of their possessions, including their clothes.

Auschwitz is the most familiar killing site of the bloodlands. Today Auschwitz stands for the Holocaust, and the Holocaust for the evil of a century. Yet the people registered as laborers at Auschwitz had a chance of surviving: thanks to the memoirs and novels written by survivors, its name is known. Far more Jews, most of them Polish Jews, were gassed in other German death factories where almost everyone died, and whose names are less often recalled: Treblinka, Chełmno, Sobibór, Bełżec. Still



more Jews, Polish or Soviet or Baltic Jews, were shot over ditches and pits. Most of these Jews died near where they had lived, in occupied Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Soviet Ukraine, and Soviet Belarus. The Germans brought Jews from elsewhere to the bloodlands to be killed. Jews arrived by train to Auschwitz from Hungary, Czechoslovakia, France, the Netherlands, Greece, Belgium, Yugoslavia, Italy, and Norway. German Jews were deported to the cities of the bloodlands, to Łódź or Kaunas or Minsk or Warsaw, before being shot or gassed. The people who lived on the block where I am writing now, in the ninth district of Vienna, were deported to Auschwitz, Sobibór, Treblinka, and Riga: all in the bloodlands.

The German mass murder of Jews took place in occupied Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, and the Soviet Union, not in Germany itself. Hitler was an anti-Semitic politician in a country with a small Jewish community. Jews were *fewer than one percent* of the German population when Hitler became chancellor in 1933, and *about one quarter of one percent* by the beginning of the Second World War. During the first six years of Hitler's rule, German Jews were allowed (in humiliating and impoverishing circumstances) to emigrate. Most of the German Jews who saw Hitler win elections in 1933 died of natural causes. The murder of 165,000 German Jews was a ghastly crime in and of itself, but only a very small part of the tragedy of European Jews: fewer than three percent of the deaths of the Holocaust. Only when Nazi Germany invaded Poland in 1939 and the Soviet Union in 1941 did Hitler's visions of the elimination of Jews from Europe intersect with the two most significant populations of European Jews. His ambition to eliminate the Jews of Europe could be realized only in the parts of Europe where Jews lived.



The Holocaust overshadows German plans that envisioned even more killing. Hitler wanted not only to eradicate the Jews; he wanted also to destroy Poland and the Soviet Union as states, exterminate their ruling classes, and kill tens of millions of Slavs (Russians, Ukrainians, Belarusians, Poles). If the German war against the USSR had gone as planned, thirty million civilians would have been starved in its first winter, and tens of millions more expelled, killed, assimilated, or enslaved thereafter. Though these plans were never realized, they supplied the moral premises of German occupation policy in the East. The Germans murdered about as many non-Jews as Jews during the war, chiefly by starving Soviet prisoners of war (more than three million) and residents of besieged cities (more than a million) or by shooting civilians in “reprisals” (the better part of a million, chiefly Belarusians and Poles).

The Soviet Union defeated Nazi Germany on the eastern front in the Second World War, thereby earning Stalin the gratitude of millions and a crucial part in the establishment of the postwar order in Europe. Yet Stalin’s own record of mass murder was almost as imposing as Hitler’s. Indeed, in times of peace it was far worse. In the name of defending

and modernizing the Soviet Union, Stalin oversaw the starvation of millions and the shooting of three quarters of a million people in the 1930s. Stalin killed his own citizens no less efficiently than Hitler killed the citizens of other countries. Of the fourteen million people deliberately murdered in the bloodlands between 1933 and 1945, a third belong in the Soviet account.

This is a history of political mass murder. The fourteen million were all victims of a Soviet or Nazi killing policy, often of an interaction between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany, but never casualties of the war between them. A quarter of them were killed before the Second World War even began. A further two hundred thousand died between 1939 and 1941, while Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union were remaking Europe as *allies*. The deaths of the fourteen million were sometimes projected in economic plans, or hastened by economic considerations, but were not caused by economic necessity in any strict sense. 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. In both cases, more than three million people died. The hundreds of thousands of Soviet peasants and workers shot during the Great Terror in 1937 and 1938 were victims of express directives of Stalin, just as the millions of Jews shot and gassed between 1941 and 1945 were victims of an explicit policy of Hitler.

War did alter the balance of killing. In the 1930s, the Soviet Union was the only state in Europe carrying out policies of mass killing. Before the Second World War, 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. German policies of mass killing came to rival Soviet ones between 1939 and

1941, after Stalin allowed Hitler to begin a war. The Wehrmacht and the Red Army both attacked Poland in September 1939, German and Soviet diplomats signed a Treaty on Borders and Friendship, and German and Soviet forces occupied the country together for nearly two years. After the Germans expanded their empire to the west in 1940 by invading Norway, Denmark, the Low Countries, and France, the Soviets occupied and annexed Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, and northeastern Romania. Both regimes shot educated Polish citizens in the tens of thousands and deported them in the hundreds of thousands. For Stalin, such mass repression was the continuation of old policies on new lands; for Hitler, it was a breakthrough.

The very worst of the killing began when Hitler betrayed Stalin and German forces crossed into the recently enlarged Soviet Union in June 1941. Although the Second World War began in September 1939 with the joint German-Soviet invasion of Poland, the tremendous majority of its killing followed that second eastern invasion. In Soviet Ukraine, Soviet Belarus, and the Leningrad district, lands where the Stalinist regime had starved and shot some four million people in the previous eight years, German forces managed to starve and shoot even more in half the time. Right after the invasion began, the Wehrmacht began to starve its Soviet prisoners, and special task forces called Einsatzgruppen began to shoot political enemies and Jews. Along with the German Order Police, the Waffen-SS, and the Wehrmacht, and with the participation of local auxiliary police and militias, the Einsatzgruppen began that summer to eliminate Jewish communities as such.

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The bloodlands were where most of Europe's Jews lived, where Hitler and Stalin's imperial plans overlapped, where the Wehrmacht and the Red Army fought, and where the

Soviet NKVD and the German SS concentrated their forces. Most killing sites were in the bloodlands: in the political geography of the 1930s and early 1940s, this meant Poland, the Baltic States, Soviet Belarus, Soviet Ukraine, and the western fringe of Soviet Russia. Stalin's crimes are often associated with Russia, and Hitler's with Germany. But the deadliest part of the Soviet Union was its non-Russian periphery, and Nazis generally killed beyond Germany. The horror of the twentieth century is thought to be located in the camps. But the concentration camps are not where most of the victims of National Socialism and Stalinism died. These misunderstandings regarding the sites and methods of mass killing prevent us from perceiving the horror of the twentieth century.



Germany was the site of concentration camps liberated by the Americans and the British in 1945; Russian Siberia

was of course the site of much of the Gulag, made known in the West by Alexander Solzhenitsyn. The images of these camps, in photographs or in prose, only suggest the history of German and Soviet violence. About a million people died because they were sentenced to labor in German concentration camps—as distinct from the German gas chambers and the German killing fields and the German starvation zones, where *ten million* people died. Over a million lives were shortened by exhaustion and disease in the Soviet Gulag between 1933 and 1945—as distinct from the Soviet killing fields and the Soviet hunger regions, where some *six million* people died, about *four million* of them in the bloodlands. Ninety percent of those who entered the Gulag left it alive. Most of the people who entered German concentration camps (as opposed to the German gas chambers, death pits, and prisoner-of-war camps) also survived. The fate of concentration camp inmates, horrible though it was, is distinct from that of those many millions who were gassed, shot, or starved.

The distinction between concentration camps and killing sites cannot be made perfectly: people were executed and people were starved in camps. Yet there is a difference between a camp sentence and a death sentence, between labor and gas, between slavery and bullets. The tremendous majority of the mortal victims of both the German and the Soviet regimes never saw a concentration camp. Auschwitz was two things at once, a labor camp and a death facility, and the fate of non-Jews seized for labor and Jews selected for labor was very different from the fate of Jews selected for the gas chambers. Auschwitz thus belongs to two histories, related but distinct. Auschwitz-as-labor-camp is more representative of the experience of the large number of people who endured German (or Soviet) policies of concentration, whereas Auschwitz-as-death-facility is more typical of the fates of those who were deliberately killed. Most of the Jews who arrived at

Auschwitz were simply gassed; they, like almost all of the fourteen million killed in the bloodlands, never spent time in a concentration camp.

The German and Soviet concentration camps surround the bloodlands, from both east and west, blurring the black with their shades of grey. At the end of the Second World War, American and British forces liberated German concentration camps such as Belsen and Dachau, but the western Allies liberated *none* of the important death facilities. The Germans carried out all of their major killing policies on lands subsequently occupied by the Soviets. The Red Army liberated Auschwitz, and it liberated the sites of Treblinka, Sobibór, Bełżec, Chełmno, and Majdanek as well. American and British forces reached *none* of the bloodlands and saw *none* of the major killing sites. It is not just that American and British forces saw none of the places where the Soviets killed, leaving the crimes of Stalinism to be documented after the end of the Cold War and the opening of the archives. It is that they never saw the places where the *Germans* killed, meaning that understanding of Hitler's crimes has taken just as long. The photographs and films of German concentration camps were the closest that most westerners ever came to perceiving the mass killing. Horrible though these images were, they were only hints at the history of the bloodlands. They are not the whole story; sadly, they are not even an introduction.

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Mass killing in Europe is usually associated with the Holocaust, and the Holocaust with rapid industrial killing. The image is too simple and clean. At the German and Soviet killing sites, the methods of murder were rather primitive. 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. Europeans

deliberately starved Europeans in horrific numbers in the middle of the twentieth century. The two largest mass killing actions after the Holocaust—Stalin’s directed famines of the early 1930s and Hitler’s starvation of Soviet prisoners of war in the early 1940s—involved this method of killing. Starvation was foremost not only in reality but in imagination. In a Hunger Plan, the Nazi regime projected the death by starvation of tens of millions of Slavs and Jews in the winter of 1941-1942.

After starvation came shooting, and then gassing. In Stalin’s Great Terror of 1937-1938, nearly seven hundred thousand Soviet citizens were shot. The two hundred thousand or so Poles killed by the Germans and the Soviets during their joint occupation of Poland were shot. The more than three hundred thousand Belarusians and the comparable number of Poles executed in German “reprisals” were shot. The Jews killed in the Holocaust were about as likely to be shot as to be gassed.

For that matter, there was little especially modern about the gassing. The million or so Jews asphyxiated at Auschwitz were killed by hydrogen cyanide, a compound isolated in the eighteenth century. The 1.6 million or so Jews killed at Treblinka, Chełmno, Bełżec, and Sobibór were asphyxiated by carbon monoxide, which even the ancient Greeks knew was lethal. In the 1940s hydrogen cyanide was used as a pesticide; carbon monoxide was produced by internal combustion engines. The Soviets and the Germans relied upon technologies that were hardly novel even in the 1930s and 1940s: internal combustion, railways, firearms, pesticides, barbed wire.

No matter which technology was used, the killing was personal. People who starved were observed, often from watchtowers, by those who denied them food. People who were shot were seen through the sights of rifles at very close range, or held by two men while a third placed a pistol at the base of the skull. People who were asphyxiated



were rounded up, put on trains, and then rushed into the gas chambers. They lost their possessions and then their clothes and then, if they were women, their hair. Each one of them died a different death, since each one of them had lived a different life.

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The sheer numbers of the victims can blunt our sense of the individuality of each one. "I'd like to call you all by name," wrote the Russian poet Anna Akhmatova in her *Requiem*, "but the list has been removed and there is nowhere else to look." Thanks to the hard work of historians, we have some of the lists; thanks to the opening of the archives in eastern Europe, we have places to look. We have a surprising number of the voices of the victims: the recollections (for example) of one young Jewish woman who dug herself from the Nazi death pit at Babi Yar, in Kiev; or of another who managed the same at Ponary, near Vilnius. We have the memoirs of some of the few dozen survivors of Treblinka. We have an archive of the Warsaw ghetto, painstakingly assembled, buried and then (for the most part) found. We have the diaries kept by the Polish officers shot by the Soviet NKVD in 1940 at Katyn, unearthed along with their bodies. We have notes thrown from the buses taking Poles to death pits during the German killing actions of that same year. We have the words scratched on the wall of the synagogue in Kovel; and those left on the wall of the Gestapo prison in Warsaw. We have the recollections of Ukrainians who survived the Soviet famine of 1933, those of Soviet prisoners of war who survived the German starvation campaign of 1941, and those of Leningraders who survived the starvation siege of 1941-1944.



We have some of the records of the perpetrators, taken from the Germans because they lost the war, or found in Russian or Ukrainian or Belarusian or Polish or Baltic archives after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. We have reports and letters from German policemen and soldiers who shot Jews, and of the German anti-partisan units who shot Belarusian and Polish civilians. We have the petitions sent by the communist party activists before they enforced famine in Ukraine in 1932-1933. We have the death quotas for peasants and national minorities sent down from Moscow to regional NKVD offices in 1937 and 1938, and the replies asking that these quotas be increased. We have the interrogation protocols of the Soviet citizens who were then sentenced and killed. We have German death counts of Jews shot over pits and gassed at death facilities. We have Soviet death counts for the shooting actions of the Great Terror and at Katyn. We

have good overall estimates of the numbers of killings of Jews at the major killing sites, based upon tabulations of German records and communications, survivor testimonies, and Soviet documents. We can make reasonable estimates of the number of famine deaths in the Soviet Union, not all of which were recorded. We have Stalin's letters to his closest comrades, Hitler's table talk, Himmler's datebook, and much else. Insofar as a book like this one is possible at all, it is thanks to the achievements of other historians, to their use of such sources and countless others. Although certain discussions in this book draw from my own archival work, the tremendous debt to colleagues and earlier generations of historians will be evident in its pages and the notes.

Throughout, the work will recall the voices of the victims themselves, and those of their friends and families. It will cite the perpetrators as well, those who killed and those who ordered the killing. It will also call as witnesses a small group of European writers: Anna Akhmatova, Hannah Arendt, Józef Czapski, Günter Grass, Vasily Grossman, Gareth Jones, Arthur Koestler, George Orwell, and Alexander Weissberg. (It will also follow the career of two diplomats: the American Russia specialist George Kennan, who found himself in Moscow at crucial moments; and the Japanese spy Chiune Sugihara, who took part in the policies that Stalin saw as justifying mass terror, and then saved Jews from Hitler's Holocaust.) Some of these writers recorded one policy of mass killing; others, two or even more. Some of them provided lucid analyses, others jarring comparisons, others unforgettable images. What they have in common is a sustained attempt to view Europe between Hitler and Stalin, often in disregard of the taboos of their day.

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In a comparison of the Soviet and Nazi regimes, the political theorist Hannah Arendt wrote in 1951 that factuality itself “depends for its continued existence upon the existence of the nontotalitarian world.” The American diplomat George Kennan made the same point in simpler words in Moscow in 1944: “here men determine what is true and what is false.”

Is truth nothing more than a convention of power, or can truthful historical accounts resist the gravity of politics? Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union sought to master history itself. The Soviet Union was a Marxist state, whose leaders proclaimed themselves to be scientists of history. National Socialism was an apocalyptic vision of total transformation, to be realized by men who believed that will and race could slough off the burden of the past. The twelve years of Nazi and the seventy-four years of Soviet power certainly weigh heavily on our ability to evaluate the world. Many people believe that the crimes of the Nazi regime were so great as to stand outside history. This is a troubling echo of Hitler’s own belief that will triumphs over facts. Others maintain that the crimes of Stalin, though horrible, were justified by the need to create or defend a modern state. This recalls Stalin’s view that history has only one course, which he understood, and which legitimates his policies in retrospect.

Without a history built and defended upon an entirely different foundation, we will find that Hitler and Stalin continue to define their own works for us. What might that basis be? Although this study involves military, political, economic, social, cultural, and intellectual history, its three fundamental methods are simple: insistence that no past event is beyond historical understanding or beyond the reach of historical inquiry; reflection upon the possibility of alternative choices and acceptance of the irreducible reality of choice in human affairs; and orderly chronological attention to all of the Stalinist and Nazi policies that killed

large numbers of civilians and prisoners of war. Its form arises not from the political geography of empires but from the human geography of victims. The bloodlands were no political territory, real or imagined; they are simply where Europe's most murderous regimes did their most murderous work.

For decades, national history—Jewish, Polish, Ukrainian, Belarusian, Russian, Lithuanian, Estonian, Latvian—has resisted the Nazi and Soviet conceptualizations of the atrocities. The history of the bloodlands has been preserved, often intelligently and courageously, by dividing the European past into national parts, and then by keeping these parts from touching one another. Yet attention to any single persecuted group, no matter how well executed as history, will fail as an account of what happened in Europe between 1933 and 1945. Perfect knowledge of the Ukrainian past will not produce the causes of the famine. Following the history of Poland is not the best way to understand why so many Poles were killed in the Great Terror. No amount of knowledge of Belarusian history can make sense of the prisoner-of-war camps and the anti-partisan campaigns that killed so many Belarusians. A description of Jewish life can include the Holocaust, but not explain it. Often what happened to one group is intelligible only in light of what had happened to another. But that is just the beginning of the connections. The Nazi and Soviet regimes, too, have to be understood in light of how their leaders strove to master these lands, and saw these groups and their relationships to one another.

Today there is widespread agreement that the mass killing of the twentieth century is of the greatest moral significance for the twenty-first. How striking, then, that there is no history of the bloodlands. Mass killing separated Jewish history from European history, and east European history from west European history. Murder did not make the nations, but it still conditions their intellectual

separation, decades after the end of National Socialism and Stalinism. This study brings the Nazi and Soviet regimes together, and Jewish and European history together, and the national histories together. It describes the victims, and the perpetrators. It discusses the ideologies and the plans, and the systems and the societies. This is a history of the people killed by the policies of distant leaders. The victims' homelands lay between Berlin and Moscow; they became the bloodlands after the rise of Hitler and Stalin.

## INTRODUCTION

# HITLER AND STALIN

The origins of the Nazi and the Soviet regimes, and of their encounter in the bloodlands, lie in the First World War of 1914–1918. The war broke the old land empires of Europe, while inspiring dreams of new ones. It replaced the dynastic principle of rule by emperors with the fragile idea of popular sovereignty. It showed that millions of men would obey orders to fight and die, for causes abstract and distant, in the name of homelands that were already ceasing to be or only coming into being. New states were created from virtually nothing, and large groups of civilians were moved or eliminated by the application of simple techniques. More than a million Armenians were killed by Ottoman authorities. Germans and Jews were deported by the Russian Empire. Bulgarians, Greeks, and Turks were exchanged among national states after the war. Just as important, the war shattered an integrated global economy. 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.

The essence of the First World War was the armed conflict between, on the one side, the German Empire, the Habsburg monarchy, the Ottoman Empire, and Bulgaria (“the Central Powers”) and, on the other side, France, the Russian Empire, Great Britain, Italy, Serbia, and the United

States (“the Entente Powers”). The victory of the Entente Powers in 1918 brought an end to three European land empires: the Habsburg, German, and Ottoman. By the terms of the postwar settlements of Versailles, St. Germain, Sèvres, and Trianon, multinational domains were replaced by national states, and monarchies by democratic republics. The European great powers that were not destroyed by the war, Britain and especially France, were substantially weakened. Among the victors, the illusion after 1918 was that life might somehow return to its course before the war. Among the revolutionaries who hoped to lead the defeated, the dream was that the bloodshed could legitimate further radical transformations, which could impart meaning to the war and undo its damage.



The most important political vision was that of communist utopia. At war’s end, it had been seventy years since Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels had penned their most famous lines: “Workers of the World Unite!” Marxism



had inspired generations of revolutionaries with a summons to political and moral transformation: an end of capitalism and the conflict that private property was thought to bring, and its replacement by a socialism that would liberate the working masses and restore to all of humanity an unspoiled soul. For Marxists, historical progress followed from a struggle between rising and falling classes, groups made and remade by changes in the modes of economic production. Each dominant political order was challenged by new social groups formed by new economic techniques. The modern class struggle was between those who owned factories and those who worked in them. Accordingly, Marx and Engels anticipated that revolutions would begin in the more advanced industrial countries with large working classes, such as Germany and Great Britain.

By disrupting the capitalist order and weakening the great empires, the First World War brought an obvious opportunity to revolutionaries. Most Marxists, however, had by then grown accustomed to working within national political systems, and chose to support their governments in time of war. Not so Vladimir Lenin, a subject of the Russian Empire and the leader of the Bolsheviks. His voluntarist understanding of Marxism, the belief that history could be pushed onto the proper track, led him to see the war as his great chance. For a voluntarist such as Lenin, assenting to the verdict of history gave Marxists a license to issue it themselves. Marx did not see history as fixed in advance but as the work of individuals aware of its principles. Lenin hailed from largely peasant country, which lacked, from a Marxist perspective, the economic conditions for revolution. Once again, he had a revolutionary theory to justify his revolutionary impulse. He believed that colonial empires had granted the capitalist system an extended lease on life, but that a war among

empires would bring a general revolution. The Russian Empire crumbled first, and Lenin made his move.

The suffering soldiers and impoverished peasants of the Russian Empire were in revolt in early 1917. After a popular uprising had brought down the Russian monarchy that February, a new liberal regime sought to win the war by one more military offensive against its enemies, the German Empire and the Habsburg monarchy. At this point Lenin became the secret weapon of Germany. The Germans dispatched Lenin from Swiss exile to the Russian capital Petrograd that April, to make a revolution that would take Russia from the war. With the help of his charismatic ally Leon Trotsky and his disciplined Bolsheviks, Lenin achieved a coup d'état with some popular support in November. In early 1918, Lenin's new government signed a peace treaty with Germany that left Belarus, Ukraine, the Baltics, and Poland under German control. Thanks in part to Lenin, Germany won the war on the eastern front, and had a brief taste of eastern empire.

Lenin's peace came at the price of German colonial rule of what had been the west of the Russian Empire. But surely, reasoned the Bolsheviks, the German Empire would soon collapse along with the rest of the oppressive capitalist system, and Russian and other revolutionaries could spread their new order westward, to these terrains and beyond. The war, Lenin and Trotsky argued, would bring inevitable German defeat on the western front and then a workers' revolution within Germany itself. Lenin and Trotsky justified their own Russian revolution to themselves and other Marxists by their expectation of imminent proletarian revolt in the more industrial lands of central and western Europe. In late 1918 and in 1919, it seemed as if Lenin just might be right. The Germans were indeed defeated by the French, British, and Americans on the western front in autumn 1918, and so had to withdraw—undefeated—from their new eastern empire. German

revolutionaries began scattered attempts to take power. The Bolsheviks picked up the spoils in Ukraine and Belarus.

The collapse of the old Russian Empire and the defeat of the old German Empire created a power vacuum in eastern Europe, which the Bolsheviks, try as they might, could not fill. While Lenin and Trotsky deployed their new Red Army in civil wars in Russia and Ukraine, five lands around the Baltic Sea—Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland—became independent republics. After these losses of territory, the Russia of the Bolsheviks was less westerly than the Russia of the tsars. Of these new independent states, Poland was more populous than the rest combined, and strategically by far the most important. More than any of the other new states that came into being at war's end, Poland changed the balance of power in eastern Europe. It was not large enough to be a great power, but it was large enough to be a problem for any great power with plans of expansion. It separated Russia from Germany, for the first time in more than a century. Poland's very existence created a buffer to both Russian and German power, and was much resented in Moscow and Berlin.



Poland's ideology was its independence. There had been no Polish state since the late eighteenth century, when the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth had been partitioned out of existence by its imperial neighbors. Polish politics had continued under imperial rule throughout the nineteenth century, and the idea of a Polish nation had, if anything, consolidated. The declaration of Polish independence in November 1918 was only possible because all three of the partitioning powers—the German, Habsburg, and Russian Empires—disappeared after war and revolution. This great historical conjuncture was exploited by a Polish revolutionary, Józef Piłsudski. A socialist in his youth, Piłsudski had become a pragmatist capable of cooperating with one empire against the others. When all of the empires collapsed, he and his followers, already organized into military legions during the war, were in the best position to declare and defend a Polish state. Piłsudski's great political rival, the nationalist Roman Dmowski, made

Poland's case to the victorious powers in Paris. The new Poland was founded as a democratic republic. Endorsed by the victorious Entente Powers, Warsaw could count on a more or less favorable boundary with Germany, to the west. But the question of Poland's eastern border was open. Because the Entente had won no war on the eastern front, it had no terms to impose in eastern Europe.

In 1919 and 1920, the Poles and the Bolsheviks fought a war for the borderlands between Poland and Russia that was decisive for the European order. The Red Army had moved into Ukraine and Belarus as the Germans had withdrawn, but these gains were not acknowledged by the Polish leadership. Piłsudski saw these lands between as independent political subjects whose history was linked to that of Poland, and whose leaders should wish to restore some version of the old Commonwealth in Belarus and Lithuania. He hoped that Polish armies, supported by Ukrainian allies, could help create an independent Ukrainian state. Once the Bolsheviks had brought Ukraine under control in 1919, and halted a Polish offensive there in spring 1920, Lenin and Trotsky thought that they would bring their own revolution to Poland, using the bayonet to inspire workers to fulfill their historical role. After Poland's fall, German comrades, assisted by the new Red Army, would bring to bear Germany's vast resources to save the Russian revolution. But the Soviet forces on their way to Berlin were halted by the Polish Army at Warsaw in August 1920.

Piłsudski led a counterattack that drove the Red Army back into Belarus and Ukraine. Stalin, a political officer with the Red Army in Ukraine, was among the defeated. His own misjudgments there prevented the proper coordination of Bolshevik forces, leaving the Red Army vulnerable to Piłsudski's maneuver. The Polish military victory did not mean the destruction of Bolshevik power: Polish troops were too exhausted to march on Moscow, and

Polish society too divided to support such an adventure. In the end, territories inhabited by Belarusians and Ukrainians were divided between Bolshevik Russia and Poland. Poland was thus established as a multinational state, its population perhaps two-thirds Polish reckoned by language, but including some five million Ukrainians, three million Jews, one million Belarusians, and somewhere between half a million and a million Germans. Poland was constitutionally a state “for the Polish nation,” but it held the largest population of Jews in Europe and the second-largest (after Bolshevik Russia) population of Ukrainians and Belarusians. It shared all three of its large national minorities—the Jews, the Ukrainians, and the Belarusians—with its eastern neighbor.

As east European borders were being decided on the battlefields of Ukraine, Belarus, and Poland, the victors in the First World War were dictating terms in central and western Europe. While Poland and the Bolsheviks were fighting on what had been the eastern front of the First World War, defeated Germany sought to present a pacific face to the victors. Germany declared itself a republic, the better to negotiate terms with the French, British, and Americans. Its major Marxist party, the Social Democrats, rejected the Bolshevik example and made no revolution in Germany. Most German social democrats had been loyal to the German Empire during the war, and now saw the declaration of a German republic as progress. But these moderating choices helped Germany little. The postwar settlements were dictated rather than discussed; in violation of long European tradition, the defeated were denied a place at the table at the Paris peace talks. The German government had no choice but to sign the Treaty of Versailles of June 1919, but few German politicians felt bound to defend its terms.

Because the treaty was drafted by moralizing victors, it could easily be attacked as hypocritical. While fighting a