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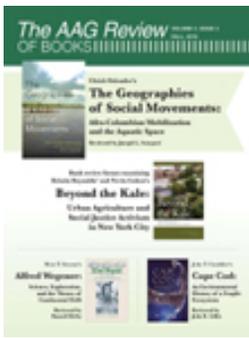
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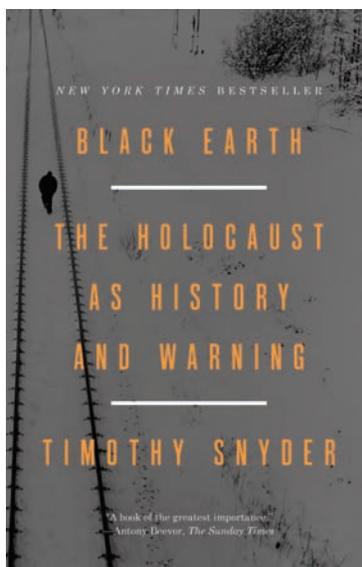


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Black Earth: The Holocaust as History and Warning

Timothy Snyder. New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2015. xxxiii and 462 pp., maps, photos, diagrams, illustration, notes, bibliography, index. \$45.00 cloth (ISBN 978-1-101-90345-2).

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Black Earth by historian Timothy Snyder is vast in scope and objective. Snyder attempts to reassess the Holocaust from multiple perspectives while positioning it in a broader social, political, and ecological context. The book is richly geographic in focus and delivery. Although it has several positive qualities, the book overall is hampered by a lack of consistent focus and attention to detail.

Snyder is best known for his previous work *Bloodlands* (Snyder 2010) that details the killing fields space between the German and Soviet spheres of orbit that became the central zone of genocide during the twentieth century. In *Black Earth*, Snyder situates this geographic shatter belt in the larger history of World War II and the Holocaust. The book attempts to connect a large set of expanded histories of World War II that has emerged since the collapse of communist governments in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union and the resulting opening of heretofore-closed archival information and data. The bulk of the book is focused on the actions of the German and Soviet governments and armies and their decapitation of state institutions in lands that they occupied during the war.

The basic structure of the book's argument is that the most significant factor leading to the killing of Jewish

populations during the Holocaust was the collapse of the political institutions. In fact, lands Snyder defines as “double occupied” is where the loss of Jewish lives was most devastating. Specifically, these are the lands that the Soviet army occupied from 1939 to 1941 and that the German army in turn occupied from 1941 to 1944 before eventually being repulsed by the Soviets as they drove west to Berlin. Much of this area had a similar geography to the Pale of Settlement—the zone of the western Tsarist Russia identified as land for Jewish habitation. As a result this highly contested border region was also the greatest Jewish population center in the world at the eve of the war.

In some ways, *Black Earth* seems like several books in one. One book focuses on Hitler's thought process and ambitions that were embedded in his struggle and the larger setting of Nazi ideology. This component of book focuses on the sweep of global imperialism with Hitler's understanding of ecological crisis and population density, colonialism, and his pursuit of the rich agricultural lands of Ukraine—the Black Earth region. According to Snyder, Hitler looked to the United States as an example of a country that achieved its capacity to expand and develop a land-based empire via struggle and elimination of what was seen as an inferior race—the Native Americans. From Hitler's perspective, the inferior race to Germany's east was not the Jews, but the Slavs. The Slavs he saw as a people to be colonized and eventually removed from the land. According to this vision, just as the Mississippi River Valley became the center of U.S. riches and productivity so should the Volga River Valley of Soviet Ukraine have become that for Germany. In comparison to the Slavs of the region, the Jews on the other hand were seen by Hitler as aberrant to nature or unnatural,

and not subhuman like the Slavs but unhuman. As such, Jews needed to be removed so that fall of man could be undone and that the planet could be healed. “A people that is rid of its Jews,” said Hitler, “returns spontaneously to the natural order” (p. 8). It is in this context that Hitler began to imagine how Germany could achieve its living space or *Lebensraum*, and protect itself from impending food shortages and crises. The pursuit of ecological and agricultural space for Germany became a driving focus of Hitler’s war in the east.

The majority of the middle part of the book turns to the war and how the occupation of the borderlands fostered the depth and intensity of the Holocaust, and although many Holocaust studies focus on Auschwitz, the majority of the killing took place further east and often through different means than gas chambers. Snyder’s basic position is that with the collapse of institutions of the state (including services and civil society), the conditions for killing by Germans, Russians, Ukrainians, and Poles, and others was fostered. It was in a vacuum of statelessness that the Jews of the region were persecuted, ghettoized, brutalized, and eventually killed, first on a haphazard basis, then by ever more organized methods of execution, including being shot at the edge of open pits, poisoned by carbon monoxide from automobile exhausts piped into enclosures, and eventually in the death camps. Death camps like Belzec, Sobibor, and Treblinka built in this “double occupied” zone were specifically designed to be mass extermination facilities. At these three camps alone, approximately 1.6 million individuals were killed during a period from 1942 to 1943.

The last quarter of the book presents a set of case studies and elaborations on the relative role of the presence or absence of state institutions and the caveats and conditions where this pattern did not always fit—for example, the role of “gray saviors” who helped Jews through various means and for various purposes. In the final chapter, Snyder directs this history into the present and the future. He presents a brief outline of current and potential future food crises and how the groundwork for a return to the fears and hatred of the 1930s and 1940s could re-emerge. He presents the Holocaust as not only history, but as warning.

Perhaps the most significant strength of Snyder’s work is also the source of the most significant critique of the book. Snyder creates a grand narrative that in many ways attempts to shift the historiography of the Holocaust toward political science and represents a benchmark of the histories written since the rush of new archival information and data first became available in the early 1990s.

That said, this reviewer also feels that this narrative is never fully completed and is not brought forward to a point of satisfaction. Nothing feels convincingly or completely argued. To take in this broad sweep of topics and issues, it feels that the author is forced to take shortcuts.

As scholarship, the analysis in the book can be very frustrating because the author provides rich discussions on experiences and events and then draws conclusions that seem to be jumps in logic, and does not provide a clear line of sight back to the historical work presented. The chapters have a cadence of paragraph after paragraph of events, actors, and settings for which just spinets are presented, often without depth of details. The passages are then often closed with short analytic sections that are designed to guide the reader how to understand the larger setting of context and drivers. Often the link between the narrative and the analysis seems to be disassociated. The fact that Snyder rarely makes direct links between specific parts of the history and the source material is particularly challenging. The book, of course, is richly referenced and shows an integration of works in many different languages, but the line of sight from references to statements in the book is largely not present. This limits the value of the book as a research tool.

Another critique is that much of what is presented in the volume is not particularly new. Individual topics in the book have been relatively well developed in the scholarly literature. The academic community focused on Holocaust and genocide studies, World War II, and related topics, including European and Russian studies, will find much that is familiar and known in the book. Beginning scholars, students, and educated lay persons, however, will surely find the book useful as an entry to the larger sets of literature that are touched on. In some ways, the book might remind readers of other successful and highly influential books such as those by Diamond (1997, 2005), which present integrative reviews that are designed to engage a range of readers and perhaps most important, nonacademic readers.

This work will be of significant interest to geographers for a variety of reasons, especially as the work within geography on Holocaust-related issues continues to expand (see, e.g., Giaccaria and Minca 2016). For those studying World War II, the geopolitics highlighted within the text illustrates the highly complex boundary switches that took place during the war itself. Political geographers will find the analysis of the role of the state and state institutions as a foreshadowing of the societal collapse and genocide of interest. Political ecologists and cultural ecologists will gain knowledge about the ecological

dimensions of Nazism, generally, and Hitler's vision more specifically, and the connections between that and Lebensraum. The linkages between U.S. continental imperialism, late nineteenth-century German colonialism, the Wehrmacht's and the Einsatzgruppen's actions in World War II also have a range of geographic implications.

Those studying environmental stresses and crises and the emerging food–water–energy nexus and climate change disasters will find grounds for fresh ideas in Snyder's final chapter. This final chapter has been heavily critiqued in academic and nonacademic circles as overly simplistic. Accepted as is, the chapter reminds us of the fundamental question and debate as to whether the Holocaust was a completely unique act in history or do the conditions and possibilities of other massive genocides still lurk among the nations of the world. I do believe that Snyder missed

an opportunity to link his work not only to the environmental crises of today, but to the collapse of the political state in many post–Arab Spring countries and the associated rise of international terror organizations such as the Islamic State. This narrative is still unfolding.

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