

BLOODLANDS

EUROPE BETWEEN HITLER AND STALIN

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CONCLUSION

HUMANITY

Each of the living bore a name. The boy who imagined he saw wheat in the fields was Józef Sobolewski. He starved to death, along with his mother and five of his brothers and sisters, in 1933 in a famished Ukraine. The one brother who survived was shot in 1937, in Stalin's Great Terror. Only his sister Hanna remained to recall him and his hope. Stanisław Wyganowski was the young man who foresaw that he would meet his arrested wife, Maria, "under the ground." They were both shot by the NKVD in Leningrad in 1937. The Polish officer who wrote of his wedding ring was Adam Solski. The diary was found on his body when his remains were disinterred at Katyn, where he was shot in 1940. The wedding ring he probably hid; his executioners probably found it. The eleven-year-old Russian girl who kept a simple diary in besieged and starving Leningrad in 1941 was Tania Savicheva. One of her sisters escaped across the frozen surface of Lake Ladoga; Tania and the rest of her family died. The twelve-year-old Jewish girl who wrote to her father in Belarus in 1942 of the death pits was Junita Vishniatskaia. Her mother, who wrote alongside her, was named Zlata. They were both killed. "Farewell forever" was the last line of Junita's letter. "I kiss you, I kiss you."

Each of the dead became a number. Between them, the Nazi and Stalinist regimes murdered more than fourteen million people in the bloodlands. The killing began with a political famine that Stalin directed at Soviet Ukraine, which claimed more than three million lives. It continued with Stalin's Great Terror of 1937 and 1938, in which some seven hundred thousand people were shot, most

of them peasants or members of national minorities. The Soviets and the Germans then cooperated in the destruction of Poland and of its educated classes, killing some two hundred thousand people between 1939 and 1941. After Hitler betrayed Stalin and ordered the invasion of the Soviet Union, the Germans starved the Soviet prisoners of war and the inhabitants of besieged Leningrad, taking the lives of more than four million people. In the occupied Soviet Union, occupied Poland, and the occupied Baltic States, the Germans shot and gassed some 5.4 million Jews. The Germans and the Soviets provoked one another to ever greater crimes, as in the partisan wars for Belarus and Warsaw, where the Germans killed about half a million civilians.

These atrocities shared a place, and they shared a time: the bloodlands between 1933 and 1945. To describe their course has been to introduce to European history its central event. Without an account of all of the major killing policies in their common European historical setting, comparisons between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union must be inadequate. Now that this history of the bloodlands is complete, the comparison remains.

The Nazi and the Stalinist systems must be compared, not so much to understand the one or the other but to understand our times and ourselves. Hannah Arendt made this case in 1951, uniting the two regimes under the rubric of "totalitarianism." Russian literature of the nineteenth century offered her the idea of the "superfluous man." The pioneering Holocaust historian Raul Hilberg later showed her how the bureaucratic state could eradicate such people in the twentieth century. Arendt provided the enduring portrait of the modern superfluous man, made to feel so by the crush of mass society, then made so by totalitarian regimes capable of placing death within a story of progress and joy. It is Arendt's portrayal of the killing epoch that has endured: of people (victims and perpetrators alike) slowly losing their humanity, first in the anonymity of mass society, then in a concentration camp. This is a powerful image, and it must be corrected before a historical comparison of Nazi and Soviet killing can begin.¹

The killing sites that most closely fit such a framework were the German prisoner-of-war camps. They were the only type of facility (German or Soviet) where the purpose of concentrating human beings was to kill them. Soviet prisoners of war, crushed together in the tens of thousands and denied food and medical care, died quickly and in great numbers: some three million perished,

most of them in a few months. Yet this major example of killing by concentration had little to do with Arendt's concept of modern society. Her analysis directs our attention to Berlin and Moscow, as the capitals of distinct states that exemplify the totalitarian system, each of them acting upon their own citizens. Yet the Soviet prisoners of war died as a result of the *interaction* of the two systems. Arendt's account of totalitarianism centers on the dehumanization *within* modern mass industrial society, not on the historical overlap *between* German and Soviet aspirations and power. The crucial moment for these soldiers was their capture, when they passed from the control of their Soviet superior officers and the NKVD to that of the Wehrmacht and the SS. Their fate cannot be understood as progressive alienation within one modern society; it was a consequence of the belligerent encounter of two, of the criminal policies of Germany on the territory of the Soviet Union.

Elsewhere, concentration was not usually a step in a killing process but rather a method for correcting minds and extracting labor from bodies. With the important exception of the German prisoner-of-war camps, neither the Germans nor the Soviets intentionally killed by concentration. Camps were more often the alternative than the prelude to execution. During the Great Terror in the Soviet Union, two verdicts were possible: death or the Gulag. The first meant a bullet in the nape of the neck. The second meant hard labor in a faraway place, in a dark mine or a freezing forest or on the open steppe; but it also usually meant life. Under German rule, the concentration camps and the death factories operated under different principles. A sentence to the concentration camp Belsen was one thing, a transport to the death factory Belzec something else. The first meant hunger and labor, but also the likelihood of survival; the second meant immediate and certain death by asphyxiation. This, ironically, is why people remember Belsen and forget Belzec.

Nor did extermination policies arise from concentration policies. The Soviet concentration camp system was an integral part of a political economy that was meant to endure. The Gulag existed before, during, and after the famines of the early 1930s, and before, during, and after the shooting operations of the late 1930s. It reached its largest size in the early 1950s, after the Soviets had ceased to kill their own citizens in large numbers—in part for that very reason. The Germans began the mass killing of Jews in summer 1941 in the occupied Soviet Union, by gunfire over pits, far from a concentration camp system that

had already been in operation for eight years. In a matter of a given few days in the second half of 1941, the Germans shot more Jews in the east than they had inmates in all of their concentration camps. The gas chambers were not developed for concentration camps, but for the medical killing facilities of the "euthanasia" program. Then came the mobile gas vans used to kill Jews in the Soviet east, then the parked gas van at Chelmino used to kill Polish Jews in lands annexed to Germany, then the permanent gassing facilities at Bełżec, Sobibór, and Treblinka in the General Government. The gas chambers allowed the policy pursued in the occupied Soviet Union, the mass killing of Jews, to be continued west of the Molotov-Ribbentrop line. The vast majority of Jews killed in the Holocaust never saw a concentration camp.²

The image of the German concentration camps as the worst element of National Socialism is an illusion, a dark mirage over an unknown desert. In the early months of 1945, as the German state collapsed, the chiefly non-Jewish prisoners in the SS concentration camp system were dying in large numbers. Their fate was much like that of Gulag prisoners in the Soviet Union between 1941 and 1943, when the Soviet system was stressed by the German invasion and occupation. Some of the starving victims were captured on film by the British and the Americans. These images led west Europeans and Americans toward erroneous conclusions about the German system. The concentration camps did kill hundreds of thousands of people at the end of the war, but they were not (in contrast to the death facilities) designed for immediate mass killing. Although some Jews were sentenced to concentration camps as political prisoners and others were dispatched to them as laborers, the concentration camps were not designed chiefly for Jews. Jews who were sent to concentration camps were among the Jews who survived. This is another reason the concentration camps are familiar: they were described by survivors, people who would have been worked to death eventually, but who were liberated at war's end. The German policy to kill all the Jews of Europe was implemented not in the concentration camps but over pits, in gas vans, and at the death facilities at Chelmino, Bełżec, Sobibór, Treblinka, Majdanek, and Auschwitz.³

As Arendt recognized, Auschwitz was an unusual combination of an industrial camp complex and a killing facility. It stands as a symbol of both concentration and extermination, which creates a certain confusion. The camp first held Poles, and then Soviet prisoners of war, and then Jews and Roma. Once

the death factory was added, some arriving Jews were selected for labor, worked until exhaustion, and then gassed. Thus chiefly at Auschwitz can an example be found of Arendt's image of progressive alienation ending with death. It is a rendering that harmonizes with the literature of Auschwitz written by its survivors: Tadeusz Borowski, or Primo Levi, or Elie Wiesel. But this sequence is exceptional. It does not capture the usual course of the Holocaust, even at Auschwitz. Most of the Jews who died at Auschwitz were gassed upon arrival, never having spent time inside a camp. The journey of Jews from the camp to the gas chambers was a minor part of the history of the Auschwitz complex, and is misleading as a guide to the Holocaust or to mass killing generally.

Auschwitz was indeed a major site of the Holocaust: about one in six murdered Jews perished there. But though the death factory at Auschwitz was the last killing facility to function, it was not the height of the technology of death: the most efficient shooting squads killed faster, the starvation sites killed faster, and Treblinka killed faster. Auschwitz was also not the main place where the two largest Jewish communities in Europe, the Polish and the Soviet, were exterminated. Most Soviet and Polish Jews under German occupation had already been murdered by the time Auschwitz became the major death factory. By the time the gas chamber and crematoria complexes at Birkenau came on line in spring 1943, more than three quarters of the Jews who would be killed in the Holocaust were already dead. For that matter, the tremendous majority of all of the people who would be deliberately killed by the Soviet and the Nazi regimes, well over ninety percent, had already been killed by the time those gas chambers at Birkenau began their deadly work. Auschwitz is the coda to the death fugue.

Perhaps, as Arendt argued, Nazi and Soviet mass murder was a sign of some deeper dysfunctionality of modern society. But before we draw such theoretical conclusions, about modernity or anything else, we must understand what actually happened, in the Holocaust and in the bloodlands generally. For the time being, Europe's epoch of mass killing is overtheorized and misunderstood.

Unlike Arendt, who was extraordinarily knowledgeable within the limits of the available documentation, we have little excuse for this disproportion of theory to knowledge. The numbers of the dead are now available to us, sometimes more precisely, sometimes less, but firmly enough to convey a sense of the destructiveness of each regime. In policies that were meant to kill civilians

or prisoners of war, Nazi Germany murdered about ten million people in the bloodlands (and perhaps eleven million people total), the Soviet Union under Stalin over four million in the bloodlands (and about six million total). If foreseeable deaths resulting from famine, ethnic cleansing, and long stays in camps are added, the Stalinist total rises to perhaps nine million and the Nazi to perhaps twelve. These larger numbers can never be precise, not least because millions of civilians who died as an indirect result of the Second World War were victims, in one way or another, of *both* systems.

The region most touched by both the Nazi and Stalinist regimes was the bloodlands: in today's terms, St. Petersburg and the western rim of the Russian Federation, most of Poland, the Baltic States, Belarus, and Ukraine. This is where the power and the malice of the Nazi and Soviet regimes overlapped and interacted. The bloodlands are important not only because most of the victims were its inhabitants but also because it was the center of the major policies that killed people from elsewhere. For example, the Germans killed about 5.4 million Jews. Of those, more than four million were natives of the bloodlands: Polish, Soviet, Lithuanian, and Latvian Jews. Most of the remainder were Jews from other east European countries. The largest group of Jewish victims from beyond the region, the Hungarian Jews, were killed in the bloodlands, at Auschwitz. If Romania and Czechoslovakia are also considered, then east European Jews account for nearly ninety percent of the victims of the Holocaust. The smaller Jewish populations of western and southern Europe were deported to the bloodlands to die.

Like the Jewish victims, the non-Jewish victims either were native to the bloodlands or were brought there to die. In their prisoner-of-war camps and in Leningrad and other cities, the Germans starved more than four million people to death. Most but not all of the victims of these deliberate starvation policies were natives of the bloodlands; perhaps a million were Soviet citizens from beyond the region, most of them Russians. The victims of Stalin's policies of mass murder lived across the length and breadth of the Soviet Union, the largest state in the history of the world. Even so, Stalin's blow fell hardest in the western Soviet borderlands, in the bloodlands. The Soviets starved more than five million people to death during collectivization, most of them in Soviet Ukraine. The Soviets recorded the killing of 681,691 people in the Great Terror of 1937-1938, of whom a disproportionate number were Soviet Poles and Soviet Ukrainian



peasants, two groups that inhabited the western Soviet Union, and thus the bloodlands. These numbers do not themselves constitute a comparison of the systems, but they are a point of departure, perhaps an obligatory one.⁴

In May 1941 Arendt escaped to the United States, where she applied her formidable German philosophical training to the question of the origins of the National Socialist and Soviet regimes. A few weeks after her departure, Germany invaded the Soviet Union. In her Europe, Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union had arisen separately, and then sealed an alliance.

The Europe of Vasily Grossman, the founder of a second tradition of comparison, was one in which the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany were at war. Grossman, a fiction writer who became a Soviet war correspondent, saw many of the important battles on the eastern front, and evidence of all of the major German (and Soviet) crimes. Like Arendt, he tried to understand the German mass murder of the Jews in the east in universal terms. For him this meant, at first, not a critique of modernity as such but a condemnation of fascism and Germany. Just as Arendt published her *Origins of Totalitarianism*, Grossman was liberated from this political framework by the personal experience of anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union. He then broke the taboos of a century, placing the crimes of the Nazi and Soviet regimes on the same pages, in the same scenes, in two novels whose reputations only grow with time. Grossman meant not to unify the two systems analytically within a single sociological scheme (such as Arendt's totalitarianism) but rather to relieve them of their own ideological accounts of themselves, and thereby lift the veil on their common inhumanity.

In *Life and Fate* (completed in 1959, published abroad in 1980), Grossman has one of the heroes, a sort of holy fool, recall the German shootings of Jews in Belarus and the cannibalism in Soviet Ukraine in the same breath. In *Everything Flows* (incomplete at Grossman's death in 1964, published abroad in 1970), he uses familiarity with scenes of German concentration camps to introduce the famine in Ukraine: "As for the children—did you see the newspaper photographs of children from the German camps? They looked just the same: heads heavy as cannonballs; thin little necks, like the necks of storks; and on their arms and legs you could see every little bone. Every single little bone moving under their skin, and the joints between them." Grossman returns to this Nazi-Soviet comparison, over and over, not to arouse controversy but to create a convention.⁵

As one of Grossman's characters exclaims, the key to both National Socialism and Stalinism was their ability to deprive groups of human beings of their right to be regarded as human. Thus the only answer was to proclaim, again and again, that this was simply not true. The Jews and the kulaks "are people. They are human beings. I can see now that we are all human beings." This is literature working against what Arendt called the fictitious world of totalitarianism. People can be killed in large numbers, she maintained, because leaders such as Stalin and Hitler can imagine a world without kulaks, or without Jews, and then make the real world conform, if only imperfectly, to their visions. The dying loses its moral weight, not so much because it is hidden but because it is permeated with the story that brought it about. The dead, too, lose their human character; they are helplessly reincarnated as actors in a drama of progress, even when, or perhaps especially when, that story is resisted by an ideological foe. Grossman extracted the victims from the cacophony of a century and made their voices audible within the unending polemic.

From Arendt and Grossman together, then, come two simple ideas. First, a legitimate comparison of Nazi Germany and the Stalinist Soviet Union must not only explain the crimes but also embrace the humanity of all concerned by them, including the victims, perpetrators, bystanders, and leaders. Second, a legitimate comparison must begin with life rather than death. Death is not a solution, but only a subject. It must be a source of disquiet, never of satisfaction. It must not, above all, supply the rounding rhetorical flourish that brings a story to a defined end. Since life gives meaning to death, rather than the other way around, the important question is not: what political, intellectual, literary, or psychological closure can be drawn from the fact of mass killing? Closure is a false harmony, a siren song masquerading as a swan song.

The important question is: how could (how can) so many human lives be brought to a violent end?

In both the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany, utopias were advanced, compromised by reality, and then implemented as mass murder: in autumn 1932 by Stalin, and autumn 1941 by Hitler. Stalin's utopia was to collectivize the Soviet Union in nine to twelve weeks; Hitler's was to conquer the Soviet Union in the same span of time. Each of these seems, in retrospect, to be horrendously

impractical. Yet each of them was implemented, under the cover of a big lie, even after failure was obvious. Dead human beings provided retrospective arguments for the rectitude of policy. Hitler and Stalin thus shared a certain politics of tyranny: they brought about catastrophes, blamed the enemy of their choice, and then used the death of millions to make the case that their policies were necessary or desirable. Each of them had a transformative utopia, a group to be blamed when its realization proved impossible, and then a policy of mass murder that could be proclaimed as a kind of ersatz victory.

In both collectivization and the Final Solution, mass sacrifice was needed to protect a leader from the unthinkability of error. After collectivization brought resistance and hunger to Soviet Ukraine, Stalin blamed kulaks and Ukrainians and Poles. After the Wehrmacht was halted at Moscow and the Americans entered the Second World War, Hitler blamed Jews. Just as kulaks and Ukrainians and Poles had taken the blame for slowing the construction of the Soviet system, Jews took the blame for preventing its destruction. Stalin had chosen collectivization, Hitler had chosen war: but it was more convenient, for them and their comrades, to shift the responsibility for the associated catastrophe elsewhere. Stalin's interpretation was used to justify the starvation of Ukraine and then the mass shootings of kulaks and members of national minorities; Hitler's interpretation was used to justify the shooting and gassing of all Jews. After collectivization starved millions to death, this was adduced by Stalin to be evidence of a victorious class struggle. As the Jews were shot and then gassed, Hitler presented this, in ever clearer terms, as a war aim in and of itself. When the war was lost, Hitler called the mass murder of the Jews his victory.

Stalin had the capacity to reformulate utopias. Stalinism itself was a retreat: from the impulse toward European revolution that had inspired the Bolsheviks in 1917, to the defense of the Soviet Union after that revolution did not take place. When the Red Army failed to spread communism to Europe in 1920, Stalin had a fallback plan: socialism would be made in one country, the Soviet Union. When his Five-Year Plan to build socialism brought disaster, he presided over the starvation of millions. But he explained the events as part of the policy, and reaped the benefits as the fearsome father of the nation and the dominant figure in the politburo. After turning the NKVD against the kulaks and the national minorities in 1937–1938, he explained that this was necessary for the security of the homeland of socialism. After the retreat of the Red Army in 1941, and indeed after its victory in 1945, he appealed to Russian nationalism. When

the Cold War began, he blamed Jews (and others, of course) for the vulnerabilities of the Soviet Union.

Hitler, too, could revise utopia. The tens of millions of dead envisioned by the Hunger Plan and Generalplan Ost became the millions of dead of the starvation policies and of deportations. Insofar as the war forced a major change in his thinking, it was in the nature of what the Nazis called the Final Solution. Rather than wait until the war was won to "resolve" the Jewish "problem," Hitler endorsed a policy of extermination during the war itself. The killing of Jews was escalated in the Soviet Union in July 1941 after a month of war without decisive results, and then escalated again when Moscow did not fall in December 1941. The policy of killing certain Jews was initially grounded in the rhetoric of military necessity, and had some connection to political and economic planning. But its escalation after the military situation changed, and after those plans were discarded or suspended, reveals that the elimination of Jews was for Hitler an end in itself.

The final version of the Final Solution was not designed, as were Stalin's improvisations, to protect the leader or his system. It was not a step in a logical plan so much as an element in an aesthetic vision. The original justifications for the killing of Jews gave way to the anti-Semitic incantation, always present, of a cosmic Jewish plot, the struggle against which was the very definition of German virtue. For Stalin, the political struggle always had political meaning. His achievement in that respect was nearly the opposite of Hitler's: whereas Hitler transformed a republic into a revolutionary colonial empire, Stalin translated the poetics of revolutionary Marxism into durable workaday politics. Stalin's class conflict could always be expressed in public as the Soviet line; the chain that bound Soviet citizens and foreign communists to his person was a logical one. For Hitler struggle itself was the good, and a struggle that destroyed the Jews was to be welcomed. If the Germans were defeated, then that was their fault.

Stalin was able to realize his fictitious world, but to restrain himself when necessary. With the help of able associates such as Heinrich Himmler and Reinhard Heydrich, Hitler moved from one fictitious world to another, and brought much of the German people with him.

Only an unabashed acceptance of the similarities between the Nazi and Soviet systems permits an understanding of their differences. Both ideologies opposed liberalism and democracy. In both political systems, the significance of the word

party was inverted: rather than being a group among others competing for power according to accepted rules, it became the group that determined the rules. Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union were both one-party states. In both the Nazi and Soviet polities the party played a leading role in matters of ideology and social discipline. Its political logic demanded exclusion of outsiders, and its economic elite believed that certain groups were superfluous or harmful. In both administrations, economic planners assumed that more people existed in the countryside than was really necessary. Stalinist collectivization would remove superfluous peasants from the countryside and send them to the cities or the Gulag to work. If they starved, that was of little consequence. Hitlerian colonization projected the starvation and deportation of tens of millions of people.⁶

Both the Soviet and the Nazi political economies relied upon collectives that controlled social groups and extracted their resources. The collective farm, the instrument of Stalin's great transformation of the Soviet countryside from 1930, was used by German occupation authorities from 1941. In the occupied Polish, Lithuanian, Latvian, and Soviet cities the Germans added a new collective: the ghetto. The urban Jewish ghettos, although originally meant as resettlement points, became zones for the extraction of Jewish property and Jewish labor. Their nominal Jewish authorities of the Judenrat could usually be relied upon to raise "contributions" and organize labor brigades. Both the ghettos and the collective farms were administered by local people. Both the Nazi and the Soviet systems built large systems of concentration camps. Hitler would have used the Soviet camps for Jews and other ostensible enemies if he could have, but Germans never conquered enough of the Soviet Union to make that possible.

Although the instruments of local exploitation looked the same, and sometimes were the same, they served different visions of the future. In the National Socialist vision, inequality between groups was inherent and desirable. The inequalities found in the world, between a richer Germany and a poorer Soviet Union for example, were to be multiplied. The Soviet system, when it was expanded, brought to others the Soviet version of equality. There was no more dramatic plan than that, and that was dramatic enough. If the Soviet system encountered nomads, it forced them to settle. If it encountered peasants, it forced them to supply the state with food. If it encountered nations, it eliminated their upper classes: by co-optation, deportation, or murder. If it encountered contented societies, it required them to embrace the Soviet system as the best of all possible worlds. It was, in this special sense, inclusive. Whereas the Germans

excluded the majority of the inhabitants of their empire from equal membership in the state, the Soviets included almost everyone in their version of equality.

Stalin, no less than Hitler, spoke of liquidations and cleansings. Yet the Stalinist rationale for elimination always had to do with a defense of the Soviet state or the advance of socialism. In Stalinism mass murder could never be anything more than a successful defense of socialism, or an element in a story of progress toward socialism; it was never the political victory itself. Stalinism was a project of self-colonization, expanded when circumstances permitted. Nazi colonization, by contrast, was totally dependent upon the immediate and total conquest of a vast new eastern empire, which would have dwarfed prewar Germany in size. It assumed the destruction of tens of millions of civilians as a precondition of the enterprise. In practice, the Germans generally killed people who were not Germans, whereas the Soviets usually killed people who were Soviet citizens.

The Soviet system was most lethal when the Soviet Union was not at war. The Nazis, on the other hand, killed no more than a few thousand people before the war began. During the war of conquest, Germany killed millions of people faster than any state in history (to that point).⁷

At a great distance in time, we can choose to compare the Nazi and Soviet systems, or not. The hundreds of millions of Europeans who were touched by both regimes did not have this luxury.

The comparisons between leaders and systems began the moment that Hitler came to power. From 1933 through 1945 hundreds of millions of Europeans had to weigh what they knew about National Socialism and Stalinism as they made the decisions that would, all too often, determine their fate. This was true of unemployed German workers in early 1933, who had to decide whether they would vote for social democrats, communists, or Nazis. It was true, at the same moment, of starving Ukrainian peasants, some of whom hoped for a German invasion that might rescue them from their plight. It held for European politicians of the second half of the 1930s, who had to decide whether or not to enter Stalin's Popular Fronts. The dilemma was felt sharply in Warsaw in these years, as Polish diplomats sought to keep an equal distance between their powerful German and Soviet neighbors in the hope of avoiding war.

When both the Germans and the Soviets invaded Poland in 1939, Polish officers had to decide to whom they would surrender, and Polish Jews (and other Polish citizens besides) whether to flee to the other occupation zone. After

Germany invaded the Soviet Union in 1941, some Soviet prisoners of war weighed the risks of collaboration with the Germans against the likelihood of starving to death in prisoner-of-war camps. Belarusian youth had to decide whether to join the Soviet partisans or the German police—before they were press-ganged into one or the other. Jews in Minsk in 1942 had to choose between remaining in the ghetto or fleeing to the forest to seek Soviet partisans. Polish Home Army commanders in 1944 had to decide whether or not to try to liberate Warsaw from the Germans themselves, or to wait for the Soviets. Most survivors of the Ukrainian famine of 1933 later experienced German occupation; most survivors of the German starvation camps of 1941 returned to Stalin's Soviet Union; most survivors of the Holocaust who remained in Europe also experienced communism.

These Europeans, who inhabited the crucial part of Europe at the crucial time, were condemned to compare. We have the possibility, if we wish, to consider the two systems in isolation; people who lived under them experienced overlap and interaction. The Nazi and Soviet regimes were sometimes allies, as in the joint occupation of Poland. They sometimes held compatible goals as foes: as when Stalin chose not to aid the rebels in Warsaw in 1944, thereby allowing the Germans to kill people who would later have resisted communist rule. This is what François Furet called their "belligerent complicity." Often the Germans and the Soviets goaded each other into escalations that cost more lives than the policies of either state by itself would have. Partisan warfare was the supreme occasion for each leader to tempt the other into further brutality. From 1942, Stalin encouraged guerrilla actions in occupied Soviet Belarus, knowing that it would bring down massive reprisals against his own citizens. Hitler welcomed the opportunity to kill "anyone who even looks at us askance."⁸

During the Second World War, the bloodlands were subjected not to one invasion but to two or three, not to one occupation regime but to two or three. The mass murder of Jews began as the Germans crossed into lands that the Soviets had just annexed for themselves a matter of months before, from which they had deported tens of thousands of people just weeks before, and in which they had shot thousands of prisoners just days before. The German *Einsatzgruppen* were able to mobilize local anger over the murder of prisoners by the Soviet NKVD. The twenty thousand or so Jews who were killed in these orchestrated pogroms were only a very small part, fewer than one half of one percent,

of the victims of the Holocaust. But precisely the overlap between Soviet and German power allowed the Nazis to propagate their own description of Bolshevism as a Jewish plot.

Other episodes of mass murder were a result of this same accumulation of Nazi and Soviet rule. In occupied Belarus, Belarusians killed other Belarusians, some of them as policemen in the German service, some of them as Soviet partisans. In occupied Ukraine, policemen fled the German service to join nationalist partisan units. These people then killed tens of thousands of Poles and fellow Ukrainians in the name of a social and national revolution. This sort of accumulation could also affect, and indeed end, the lives of millions of people who were thousands of miles away from the bloodlands. Masses of Soviet citizens fled the bloodlands to the east, to the heartland of a Soviet state that was poorly equipped to support them. Death rates in the Gulag increased drastically during the war, as a result of food shortages and logistical problems associated with the German invasion. More than half a million people died as a result, victims of the war and of both regimes.

Even so, the impact of multiple continuous occupation was most dramatic in the lands that Hitler conceded to Stalin in the secret protocol to the nonaggression pact of 1939, then took from him in the first days of the invasion of 1941, then lost to him again in 1944. Before the Second World War, these lands were: independent Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and eastern Poland. Though these states were governed by authoritarian nationalist regimes, and popular nationalism was certainly on the rise, the number of people killed either by the state or in civil strife in the 1930s was no more than a few thousand in all of these countries taken together. Under Soviet rule between 1939 and 1941, hundreds of thousands of people from this zone were deported to Kazakhstan and Siberia and tens of thousands more shot. The region was the heartland of Jewish settlement in Europe, and its Jews were trapped when the Germans invaded the newly extended Soviet Union in 1941. Almost all of the Jews native to the region were killed. It was here that Ukrainian partisans ethnically cleansed Poles in 1943 before Soviet forces ethnically cleansed both Ukrainians and Poles from 1944 onward.

This zone, east of the Molotov-Ribbentrop line, was where the Holocaust began, *and* where the Soviets twice extended their boundaries to the west. In this special strip of territory within the bloodlands, most of the NKVD persecutions

of the 1940s took place, as did more than a quarter of the German killings of Jews, as did massive ethnic cleansing. Molotov-Ribbentrop Europe was a joint production of the Soviets and the Nazis.

The transformations envisioned by both Hitler and Stalin were economic, and the consequences of their economic policies were felt most painfully in the bloodlands. Though National Socialist and Stalinist ideologies were essentially different, Nazi and Soviet planners were preoccupied with certain basic economic problems, and Nazi and Soviet leaders inhabited and sought to alter the same world political economy. Ideology cannot function without economics, and economics in the time and place was very much a matter of the control of territory. Animal and human labor still moved ploughs and armies. Capital was less mobile then, and scarcer. Food was a natural resource, as were oil and minerals and precious metals. Globalization had been halted by the First World War, and free trade further hindered by the Great Depression.

From the Marxist point of view, peasant societies had no right to exist in the modern world. From the Nazi perspective, Slavic peasants (though not German farmers) were superfluous. German farmers would reclaim the fertile soil with their own sweat and the blood of others. These were ideological perspectives, of course: but like all ideologies they arose from, and spoke to, a certain understanding of economic interests. As theory became practice, Nazi colonization and Soviet self-colonization could function only when economic interests and ideological presuppositions seemed to confirm each other. Leaders, planners, and killers needed the sight of gold as well as the smell of ink. The mass killing policies of Hitler and Stalin exhibited three economic dimensions: (1) as elements of grand plans of political economic transformation; (2) as causes of the (upward and downward) modulation of mass killing policies; (3) and as plunder from below, during and after mass murder.

In Stalin's grand plan, the collectivization of agriculture was to transform the Soviet Union into an industrial power, more or less within its present boundaries. Collectivization brought famine, which Stalin consciously directed toward Ukrainians. It also contributed to the Great Terror, which was aimed first at alienated peasants who might side with an invading foreign power. Hitler's grand plan was more or less the reverse. He would begin with a terror abroad, destroying the people he saw as the leadership of the Soviet Union, and thus bringing down the regime. Then he would exploit collective farms to divert a grain sur-

plus to Germany. In the long run, he would create a vast frontier empire ruled by Germans, bereft of Jews, and scantily peopled by Slavs reduced to slavery. Hitler always wanted to rid Europe of Jews. But he would never have ruled, and could never have killed, the millions of Jews of Poland, the Soviet Union, and the Baltics had he not pursued this eastern colonial vision with military force.

When Hitler and Stalin had to decide who was to bear the consequences of shortages, planned or unplanned, they also revealed ideological priorities. For Stalin, profits from grain exports in 1933 were more important than the lives of millions of peasants. He decided that peasants would die, and he decided which peasants would die in the largest numbers: the inhabitants of Soviet Ukraine. The grain that could have saved their lives was shipped south by the trainload, before their eyes, to the ports of the Black Sea. The Wehrmacht found itself holding huge numbers of Soviet soldiers as prisoners in autumn 1941. Most of them would die of starvation or related diseases. Yet even in the Dulags and the Stalags, where general killing was the rule, certain priorities were visible: Jews were shot right away, Russians and Belarusians were more likely to be left to starve, and ethnic Germans (and then Ukrainians) were more likely to be recruited for labor.

A certain amount of adaptation to circumstances is even visible in German policy toward Jews. Eliminating the Jews of Europe was Hitler's intention all along, and killing them all was an explicit policy as of late 1941. Nevertheless, even a policy of total destruction could be adapted to the economic demands of the moment. In winter 1941, for example, the Jews of Minsk survived in order to sew winter coats and boots for the beleaguered Wehrmacht. This was obviously no humane gesture: Hitler had sent his army to war with no winter gear, and the need to keep them from freezing to death momentarily outweighed the imperative to kill Jews. Most of these Jewish laborers were later killed. In summer 1942 food supply seemed more pressing than labor supply, which became an argument for the acceleration of the policy of gassing the Jews of occupied Poland. From 1943 onward, labor seemed more important than food, and some of the surviving Jews were kept alive longer, worked to death rather than shot or gassed.

Mass killing allowed plunder and social advancement. This bound the people who profited to the regime, and sometimes to its ideology. The deportation of richer peasants in the Soviet Union in 1930 allowed for the theft of their belongings, as did the deportation of Polish elites ten years later. The Great Terror allowed younger cadres in the party to make careers after their superiors were

shot or deported. The Holocaust allowed non-Jews to take Jewish apartments and houses. Of course, the regimes themselves stole. Poles and other east Europeans who took from Jews had very often lost their own property to Germans. The Polish officers at Katyn had to surrender their watches and wedding rings before they were shot. German children wore the socks of Jewish children shot in Minsk. German men the watches of Jewish men shot at Babi Yar. German women the fur coats of Jewish women shot at Maly Trastianets.

Tsvetan Todorov has claimed that "given the goals that they set for themselves, the choices of Stalin and Hitler were, alas, rational." This was not always true, but it was often true. Rationality in the sense he meant, which is also the narrow sense used in economics, concerns only whether one chooses the correct means to achieve an end. It has nothing to do with the end itself, with what leaders desired. Political goals must be judged separately by some ethical criterion. Discussions of rationality and irrationality cannot substitute for discussions of right and wrong. The Nazi (and Soviet) attention to economics does not morally attenuate the crimes of the regimes. If anything, it reveals the common indifference to individual human life that is as horrible as any other aspect of their rule. The modulation and the plunder are, if anything, even greater reasons for moral condemnation. Economic considerations do not displace an ideology of inhuman racism. Rather, they confirm and illustrate its power.⁹

In colonization, ideology interacts with economics; in administration, it interacts with opportunism and fear. In both the Nazi and the Soviet cases, periods of mass murder were also periods of enthusiastic, or at least uniform, administrative performance. The closest thing to resistance from within a bureaucratic apparatus took place at the beginning of the era of mass killing, in Soviet Ukraine, among Ukrainian party activists who tried to report on the famine. They were quickly silenced by the threat of expulsion from the party, arrest, and deportation. Some of those who dared to raise doubts then became fervent campaigners for starvation. During the Great Terror of 1937–1938 and the first wave of the murder of Jews in 1941, signals from above led to killing below, and often to requests for higher quotas. The NKVD was subject to purges at the very same time. In 1941 in the western Soviet Union, SS officers, like NKVD officers a few years earlier, competed among themselves to kill more people and thus to demonstrate their competence and loyalty. Human lives were reduced to the moment of pleasure of a subordinate reporting to a superior.

Of course, the SS and the NKVD were elites of a certain kind, specially selected and ideologically trained. When other sorts of cadres (policemen, soldiers, local collaborators) were used, something more than a simple signal from above was sometimes needed. Both Hitler and Stalin excelled at placing organizations within moral dilemmas in which mass killing seemed like the lesser evil. Ukrainian party members hesitated in 1932 to requisition grain, but realized that their own careers, and lives, depended upon targets being met. Not all Wehrmacht officers were inclined to starve out Soviet cities: but when they believed that the choice was between Soviet civilians and their own men, they made the decision that seemed self-evident. Among populations, the rhetoric of war, or more precisely of preemptive self-defense, was convincing, or at least convincing enough to forestall resistance.¹⁰

In the decades since Europe's era of mass killing came to an end, much of the responsibility has been placed at the feet of "collaborators." The classic example of collaboration is that of the Soviet citizens who served the Germans as policemen or guards during the Second World War, among whose duties was the killing of Jews. Almost none of these people collaborated for ideological reasons, and only a small minority had political motives of any discernible sort. To be sure, some collaborators were motivated by a political affiliation with an occupying regime: the nationalist Lithuanian refugees from Soviet occupation whom the Germans brought with them to Lithuania in 1941, for example. In eastern Europe, it is hard to find political collaboration with the Germans that is not related to a previous experience of Soviet rule. But even where politics or ideas did matter, ideological alignment was impossible: Nazis could not regard non-Germans as equals, and no self-respecting non-German nationalist accepted the Nazi claim to German racial superiority. There was often an overlap of ideology and interests between Nazis and local nationalists in destroying the Soviet Union and (less often) in killing Jews. Far more collaborators simply said the right things, or said nothing and did what they were told.

Local policemen serving the Germans in occupied Soviet Ukraine or Soviet Belarus had little or no power within the regimes themselves. They were not quite at the very bottom: the Jews were below them, of course, as were people who were not policemen. But they were low enough that their behavior requires less (not more) explanation than that of SS-men, party members, soldiers, and policemen. This sort of local cooperation is just as predictable as obedience to authority, if not more so. Germans who declined to shoot Jews suffered no serious

consequences. Locals who decided not to join the police or who elected to resign from its ranks, on the other hand, faced risks that the Germans themselves did not: starvation, deportation, and forced labor. A Soviet prisoner of war who accepted a German offer of collaboration might avoid starvation. A Soviet peasant who worked for the police knew that he would be able to stay at home to bring in his crops, and that his family would not go hungry. This was negative opportunism, the hope to avoid a still worse personal fate. Jewish policemen in the ghetto exemplified an extreme version of negative opportunism—even if, in the end, their choices saved no one, including themselves.

Within the Soviet system, the category of “collaborator” is harder to define. Unlike the Germans, the Soviets killed greater numbers of civilians during peacetime than during war, and did not usually occupy territory for long without either annexing it into the Soviet Union or granting it formal sovereignty. That said, within the Soviet Union certain policies were presented as “campaigns” and “wars.” In this atmosphere, for example, Ukrainian communist party activists were induced to starve their fellow citizens. Whether or not the requisition of food from the starving is called “collaboration,” it is a spectacular example of a regime generating cooperation in a policy of neighbors killing neighbors. Starvation is nasty, brutal, and long, and party activists and local officials had to watch and bring about the death of people they knew. Arendt regarded the collectivization famines as the inauguration of moral isolation, as people found themselves helpless before the powerful modern state. As Leszek Kołakowski understood, that was only half of the truth. The involvement of practically everyone in the famine, as collectors or as consumers of food, created a “new species of moral unity.”¹¹

If people had served regimes only by following their own prior ideological preferences, there would have been little collaboration. The majority of Nazi collaborators in the bloodlands had been educated in the Soviet Union. In the zone east of the Molotov-Ribbentrop line, where national independence yielded first to Soviet and only then to German rule, some people collaborated with the Germans because they had already collaborated with the Soviets. When Soviet occupation gave way to German occupation, people who had been Soviet militiamen became policemen in the service of the Germans. Local people who had collaborated with the Soviets in 1939–1941 knew that they could cleanse themselves in the eyes of the Nazis by killing Jews. Some Ukrainian nationalist partisans had earlier served both the Germans and the Soviets. In Belarus, simple

chance often determined which young men joined the Soviet partisans or the German police. Former Soviet soldiers, indoctrinated in communism, staffed the German death facilities. Holocaust perpetrators, indoctrinated in racism, joined the Soviet partisans.

Ideologies also tempt those who reject them. Ideology, when stripped by time or partisanship of its political and economic connections, becomes a moralizing form of explanation for mass killing, one that comfortably separates the people who explain from the people who kill. It is convenient to see the perpetrator just as someone who holds the wrong idea and is therefore different for that reason. It is reassuring to ignore the importance of economics and the complications of politics, factors that might in fact be common to historical perpetrators and those who later contemplate their actions. It is far more inviting, at least today in the West, to identify with the victims than to understand the historical setting that they shared with perpetrators and bystanders in the bloodlands. The identification with the victim affirms a radical separation from the perpetrator. The Treblinka guard who starts the engine or the NKVD officer who pulls the trigger is not me, he is the person who kills someone like myself. Yet it is unclear whether this identification with victims brings much knowledge, or whether this kind of alienation from the murderer is an ethical stance. It is not at all obvious that reducing history to morality plays makes anyone moral.

Unfortunately, claiming victim status does not itself bring sound ethical choices. Stalin and Hitler both claimed throughout their political careers to be victims. They persuaded millions of other people that they, too, were victims: of an international capitalist or Jewish conspiracy. During the German invasion of Poland, a German soldier believed that the death grimace of a Pole proved that Poles irrationally hated Germans. During the famine, a Ukrainian communist found himself beleaguered by the corpses of the starved at his doorstep. They both portrayed themselves as victims. No major war or act of mass killing in the twentieth century began without the aggressors or perpetrators first claiming innocence and victimhood. In the twenty-first century, we see a second wave of aggressive wars with victim claims, in which leaders not only present their peoples as victims but make explicit reference to the mass murders of the twentieth century. The human capacity for subjective victimhood is apparently limitless, and people who believe that they are victims can be motivated to perform

acts of great violence. The Austrian policeman shooting babies at Mahileu imagined what the Soviets would do to his children.

The victims were people; a true identification with them would involve grasping their lives rather than grasping at their deaths. By definition the victims are dead, and unable to defend themselves from the use that others make of their deaths. It is easy to sanctify policies or identities by the deaths of the victims. It is less appealing, but morally more urgent, to understand the actions of the perpetrators. The moral danger, after all, is never that one might become a victim but that one might be a perpetrator or a bystander. It is tempting to say that a Nazi murderer is beyond the pale of understanding. Outstanding politicians and intellectuals—for example, Edvard Beneš and Ilya Ehrenburg—yielded to this temptation during the war. The Czechoslovak president and the Soviet-Jewish writer were justifying revenge upon the Germans as such. People who called others subhuman were themselves subhuman. Yet to deny a human being his human character is to render ethics impossible.¹²

To yield to this temptation, to find other people to be inhuman, is to take a step toward, not away from, the Nazi position. To find other people incomprehensible is to abandon the search for understanding, and thus to abandon history.

To dismiss the Nazis or the Soviets as beyond human concern or historical understanding is to fall into their moral trap. The safer route is to realize that their motives for mass killing, however revolting to us, made sense to them. Heinrich Himmler said that it was good to see a hundred, or five hundred, or a thousand corpses lying side by side. What he meant was that to kill another person is a sacrifice of the purity of one's own soul, and that making this sacrifice elevated the killer to a higher moral level. This was an expression of a certain kind of devotion. It was an instance, albeit an extreme one, of a Nazi value that is not entirely alien to us: the sacrifice of the individual in the name of the community. Hermann Göring said that his conscience was named Adolf Hitler. For Germans who accepted Hitler as their Leader, faith was very important. The object of their faith could hardly have been more poorly chosen, but their capacity for faith is undeniable. It was Gandhi who noted that evil depends upon good, in the sense that those who come together to commit evil deeds must be devoted one to the other and believe in their cause. Devotion and faith did not make the Germans good, but they do make them human. Like everyone else, they had access to ethical thinking, even if their own was dreadfully misguided.¹³

Stalinism, too, was a moral as well as a political system, in which innocent and guilty were psychic as well as legal categories, and moral thinking was ubiquitous. A young Ukrainian communist party activist who took food from the starving was sure that he was contributing to the triumph of socialism: "I believed because I wanted to believe." His was a moral sensibility, if a mistaken one. When Margarete Buber-Neumann was in the Gulag, at Karaganda, a fellow prisoner told her that "you can't make an omelet without breaking a few eggs." Many Stalinists and their sympathizers explained the losses of the famines and the Great Terror as necessary to the construction of a just and secure Soviet state. The very scale of the death seemed to make the appeal of such a hope all the stronger.

Yet the romantic justification for mass murder, that present evil when properly described is future good, is simply wrong. Perhaps doing nothing at all would have been far better. Or perhaps a milder policy would better have achieved the desired ends. To believe that vast suffering must be associated with great progress is to accept a kind of hermetic masochism: the presence of pain is a sign of some immanent or emergent good. To advance this sort of reasoning oneself is hermetic sadism: if I caused pain, it was because there was a higher purpose, known to me. Because Stalin represented the politburo which represented the central committee which represented the party which represented the working class which represented history, he had a special claim to speak for what was historically necessary. Such a status allowed him to absolve himself of all responsibility, and to place the blame for his failings upon others.¹⁴

It cannot be denied that mass starvation brings political stability of a certain kind. The question must be: is that the sort of peace that is desired, or that should be desired? Mass murder does bind perpetrators to those who give them orders. Is that the right sort of political allegiance? Terror does consolidate a certain kind of regime. Is that kind of regime preferable? Killing civilians is in the interest of certain kinds of leaders. The question is not whether all this is historically true; the question is what is desirable. Are these leaders good leaders, and these regimes good regimes? If not, the question is: how can such policies be prevented?

Our contemporary culture of commemoration takes for granted that memory prevents murder. If people died in such large numbers, it is tempting to think, they must have died for something of transcendent value, which can be revealed,

developed, and preserved in the right sort of political remembrance. The transcendent then turns out to be the national. The millions of victims must have died so that the Soviet Union could win a Great Patriotic War, or America a good war. Europe had to learn its pacifist lesson, Poland had to have its legend of freedom, Ukraine had to have its heroes, Belarus had to prove its virtue, Jews had to fulfill a Zionist destiny. Yet all of these later rationalizations, though they convey important truths about national politics and national psychologies, have little to do with memory as such. The dead are remembered, but the dead do not remember. Someone else had the power, and someone else decided how they died. Later on, someone else still decides why. When meaning is drawn from killing, the risk is that more killing would bring more meaning.

Here, perhaps, is a purpose for history, somewhere between the record of death and its constant reinterpretation. Only a history of mass killing can unite the numbers and the memories. Without history, the memories become private, which today means national; and the numbers become public, which is to say an instrument in the international competition for martyrdom. Memory is mine and I have the right to do with it as I please; numbers are objective and you must accept my counts whether you like them or not. Such reasoning allows a nationalist to hug himself with one arm and strike his neighbor with the other. After the end of the Second World War, and then again after the end of communism, nationalists throughout the bloodlands (and beyond) have indulged in the quantitative exaggeration of victimhood, thereby claiming for themselves the mantle of innocence.

In the twenty-first century, Russian leaders associate their country with the more or less official numbers of Soviet victims of the Second World War: nine million military deaths, and fourteen to seventeen million civilian deaths. These figures are highly contested. Unlike most of the numbers presented in this book, they are demographic projections, rather than counts. But whether they are right or wrong, they are *Soviet* numbers, not Russian ones. Whatever the correct Soviet figures, *Russian* figures must be much, much lower. The high Soviet numbers include Ukraine, Belarus, and the Baltics. Particularly important are the lands that the Soviet Union occupied in 1939: eastern Poland, the Baltic States, northeastern Romania. People died there in horribly high proportions—and many of the victims were killed not by the German but by the Soviet invader. Most important of all for the high numbers are the Jews: not the Jews of Russia,

of whom only about sixty thousand died, but the Jews of Soviet Ukraine and Soviet Belarus (nearly a million) and those whose homeland was occupied by the Soviet Union before they were killed by the Germans (a further 1.6 million).

The Germans deliberately killed perhaps 3.2 million civilians and prisoners of war who were native to Soviet Russia: fewer in *absolute terms* than in Soviet Ukraine or in Poland, much smaller countries, each with about a fifth of Russia's population. Higher figures for Russian civilian losses, sometimes offered, would (if accurate) permit two plausible interpretations. First, more Soviet soldiers died than Soviet statistics indicate, and these people (presented as civilians in the higher numbers) were in fact soldiers. Alternatively, these people (presented as war losses in the higher numbers) were not killed directly by the Germans but died from famine, deprivation, and Soviet repression during the war. The second alternative suggests the possibility that more Russians died prematurely during the war in the lands controlled by Stalin than in the lands controlled by Hitler. This is very possibly true, although the blame for many of the deaths is shared.¹⁵

Consider the Gulag. Most of the Soviet concentration camps were located in Soviet Russia, far beyond the zone occupied by the Germans. Some four million Soviet citizens were in the Gulag when Germany invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941. Soviet authorities sentenced more than 2.5 million of their citizens to the Gulag during the war. The NKVD was at work everywhere that the Germans did not reach, including besieged and starving Leningrad. Between 1941 and 1943, the deaths of some 516,841 Gulag inmates were registered, and the figure might have been higher. These hundreds of thousands of additional deaths would presumably not have happened had the Germans not invaded the Soviet Union: but those people would not have been so vulnerable had they not been in the Gulag. People who died in Soviet concentration camps cannot simply be counted as victims of Germany, even if Hitler's war hastened their deaths.¹⁶

Other people, such as the inhabitants of Soviet Ukraine, suffered more under both Stalin and Hitler than did inhabitants of Soviet Russia. In the prewar Soviet Union, Russians were far less likely to be touched by Stalin's Great Terror (though many of them were) than the small national minorities, and far less likely to be threatened by famine (though many were) than Ukrainians or Kazakhs. In Soviet Ukraine, the whole population was under German occupation

for much of the war, and death rates were far higher than in Soviet Russia. The lands of today's Ukraine were at the center of both Stalinist and Nazi killing policies throughout the era of mass killing. Some 3.5 million people fell victim to Stalinist killing policies between 1933 and 1938, and then another 3.5 million to German killing policies between 1941 and 1944. Perhaps three million more inhabitants of Soviet Ukraine died in combat or as an indirect consequence of the war.

Even so, the independent Ukrainian state has sometimes displayed the politics of exaggeration. In Ukraine, which was a major site of both Stalin's famine of 1932-1933 and the Holocaust in 1941-1944, the number of Ukrainians killed in the former has been exaggerated to exceed the total number of Jews killed in the latter. Between 2005 and 2009, Ukrainian historians connected to state institutions repeated the figure of ten million deaths in the famine, without any attempt at demonstration. In early 2010, the official estimation of starvation deaths fell discretely to 3.94 million deaths. This laudable (and unusual) downward adjustment brought the official position close to the truth. (In a divided country, the succeeding president denied the specificity of the Ukrainian famine.)¹⁷

Belarus was the center of the Soviet-Nazi confrontation, and no country endured more hardship under German occupation. Proportionate wartime losses were greater than in Ukraine. Belarus, even more than Poland, suffered social decapitation: first the Soviet NKVD killed the intelligentsia as spies in 1937-1938, then Soviet partisans killed the schoolteachers as German collaborators in 1942-1943. The capital Minsk was all but depopulated by German bombing, the flight of refugees and the hungry, and the Holocaust; and then rebuilt after the war as an eminently Soviet metropolis. Yet even Belarus follows the general trend. Twenty percent of the prewar population of Belarusian territories was killed during the Second World War. Yet young people are taught, and seem to believe, that the figure was not one in five but one in three. A government that celebrates the Soviet legacy denies the lethality of Stalinism, placing all of the blame on Germans or more generally on the West.¹⁸

Exaggeration is not just a post-Soviet or post-communist phenomenon, as the case of Germany reveals. To be sure, the German reckoning with the Holocaust is exceptional and paradigmatic. That is not the problem. German commemoration of German mass murder of Jews is a singular example of unambiguous political, intellectual, and pedagogical responsibility for mass murder, and the

main source of hope that other societies might follow a similar course. German journalists and (some) historians, however, have exaggerated the number of Germans killed during wartime and postwar evacuation, flight, or deportation since the end of the Second World War. Figures of one and even two million deaths are still cited, with no demonstration.

As long ago as 1974, a report of West German archives placed the number of deaths of Germans who fled or were deported from Poland at about four hundred thousand; it was suppressed because the numbers were too low to serve the political purpose of documenting victimhood. This report also estimated deaths of Germans from Czechoslovakia at two hundred thousand. According to a joint report of Czech and German historians, this second figure is exaggerated by a factor of about ten. So the figure of four hundred thousand Germans killed leaving Poland (cited in an earlier chapter) is perhaps better regarded as a maximum than a minimum.

The fate of Germans who fled or were evacuated during the war was similar to that of the higher numbers of Soviet and Polish citizens who fled or were evacuated during the German advance and the German retreat. The experience of those Germans deported at war's end was comparable to that of the higher number of Soviet and Polish citizens who were deported during and after the war. The experience of the fleeing, evacuated, and deported Germans was not, however, comparable to that of the ten million Polish, Soviet, Lithuanian, and Latvian citizens, Jews and others, who were subject to deliberate German policies of mass murder. Ethnic cleansing and mass killing, though related in a number of ways, are not the same thing. Even at their worst, the horrors visited on Germans in flight or during deportation were not mass killing policies in the sense of the planned starvations, the Terror, or the Holocaust.¹⁹

Beyond Poland, the extent of Polish suffering is underappreciated. Even Polish historians rarely recall the Soviet Poles who were starved in Soviet Kazakhstan and Soviet Ukraine in the early 1930s, or the Soviet Poles shot in Stalin's Great Terror in the late 1930s. No one ever notes that Soviet Poles suffered more than any other European national minority in the 1930s. The striking fact that the Soviet NKVD made more arrests in occupied eastern Poland in 1940 than in the rest of the USSR is rarely recalled. About as many Poles were killed in the bombing of Warsaw in 1939 as Germans were killed in the bombing of Dresden in 1945. For Poles, that bombing was just the beginning of one of the bloodiest

occupations of the war, in which Germans killed millions of Polish citizens. More Poles were killed during the Warsaw Uprising alone than Japanese died in the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. A *non-Jewish* Pole in Warsaw alive in 1933 had about the same chances of living until 1945 as a Jew in Germany alive in 1933. Nearly as many *non-Jewish* Poles were murdered during the war as European Jews were gassed at Auschwitz. For that matter, more *non-Jewish* Poles died at Auschwitz than did Jews of any European country, with only two exceptions: Hungary and Poland itself.

The Polish literary critic Maria Janion said of Poland's accession to the European Union: "to Europe, yes, but with our dead." It is important to know as much as we can about those dead, including how many of them there were. Despite its tremendous losses, Poland, too, exemplifies the politics of inflated victimhood. Poles are taught that six million Poles and Jews were killed during the war. This number seems to have been generated in December 1946 by a leading Stalinist, Jakub Berman, for the domestic political purpose of creating an apparent balance between the Polish and Jewish dead. The estimate that he "corrected," 4.8 million, is probably closer to the truth. This is still of course a titanic figure. Poland probably lost about a million non-Jewish civilians to the Germans and about a hundred thousand more to the Soviets. Perhaps another million Poles died as a result of mistreatment and as casualties of war. These numbers are appallingly high. The fate of non-Jewish Poles was unimaginably difficult compared to that of people under German occupation in western Europe. Even so, a Jew in Poland was about fifteen times more likely to be deliberately killed during the war than a non-Jewish Pole.²⁰

Fourteen million people were deliberately murdered by two regimes over twelve years. This is a moment that we have scarcely begun to understand, let alone master. By repeating exaggerated numbers, Europeans release into their culture millions of ghosts of people who never lived. Unfortunately, such specters have power. What begins as competitive martyrology can end with martyrological imperialism. The wars for Yugoslavia of the 1990s began, in part, because Serbs believed that far larger numbers of their fellows had been killed in the Second World War than was the case. When history is removed, numbers go upward and memories go inward, to all of our peril.

Can the dead really belong to anyone? Of the more than four million Polish citizens murdered by the Germans, about three million were Jews. All of these

three million Jews are counted as Polish citizens, which they were. Many of them identified strongly with Poland; certain people who died as Jews did not even consider themselves as such. More than a million of these Jews are also counted as Soviet citizens, because they lived in the half of Poland annexed by the USSR at the beginning of the war. Most of these million lived on lands that now belong to independent Ukraine.

Does the Jewish girl who scratched a note to her mother on the wall of the Kovel synagogue belong to Polish, or Soviet, or Israeli, or Ukrainian history? She wrote in Polish; other Jews in that synagogue on that day wrote in Yiddish. What about Dina Pronicheva's Jewish mother, who urged her daughter in Russian to flee from Babi Yar, which is in Kiev, which is now the capital of independent Ukraine? Most Jews in Kovel and Kiev, as in much of eastern Europe, were neither Zionists nor Poles nor Ukrainians nor communists. Can they really be said to have died for Israel, Poland, Ukraine, or the Soviet Union? They were Jews, they were Polish or Soviet citizens, their neighbors were Ukrainians or Poles or Russians. They belong, in some measure, to the histories of four countries—insofar as the histories of these four countries are really distinct.

Victims left behind mourners. Killers left behind numbers. To join in a large number after death is to be dissolved into a stream of anonymity. To be enlisted posthumously into competing national memories, bolstered by the numbers of which your life has become a part, is to sacrifice individuality. It is to be abandoned by history, which begins from the assumption that each person is irreducible. With all of its complexity, history is what we all have, and can all share. So even when we have the numbers right, we have to take care. The right number is not enough.

Each record of death suggests, but cannot supply, a unique life. We must be able not only to reckon the number of deaths but to reckon with each victim as an individual. The one very large number that withstands scrutiny is that of the Holocaust, with its 5.7 million Jewish dead, 5.4 million of whom were killed by the Germans. But this number, like all of the others, must be seen not as 5.7 million, which is an abstraction few of us can grasp, but as 5.7 million *times one*. This does not mean some generic image of a Jew passing through some abstract notion of death 5.7 million times. It means countless individuals who nevertheless have to be counted, in the middle of life: Dobcia Kagan, the girl in the synagogue at Kovel, and everyone with her there, and all the individual human beings who were killed as Jews in Kovel, in Ukraine, in the East, in Europe.

Cultures of memory are organized by round numbers, intervals of ten; but somehow the remembrance of the dead is easier when the numbers are not round, when the final digit is not a zero. So within the Holocaust, it is perhaps easier to think of 780,863 different people at Treblinka: where the three at the end might be Tamara and Ita Willenberg, whose clothes clung together after they were gassed, and Ruth Dorfmann, who was able to cry with the man who cut her hair before she entered the gas chamber. Or it might be easier to imagine the one person at the end of the 33,761 Jews shot at Babi Yar: Dina Pronicheva's mother, let us say, although in fact every single Jew killed there could be that one, must be that one, is that one.

Within the history of mass killing in the bloodlands, recollection must include the one million (times one) Leningraders starved during the siege, 3.1 million (times one) distinct Soviet prisoners of war killed by the Germans in 1941-1944, or the 3.3 million (times one) distinct Ukrainian peasants starved by the Soviet regime in 1932-1933. These numbers will never be known with precision, but they hold individuals, too: peasant families making fearful choices, prisoners keeping each other warm in dugouts, children such as Tania Savicheva watching their families perish in Leningrad.

Each of the 681,692 people shot in Stalin's Great Terror of 1937-1938 had a different life story: the two at the end might be Maria Juriewicz and Stanisław Wyganowski, the wife and husband reunited "under the ground." Each of the 21,892 Polish prisoners of war shot by the NKVD in 1940 was in the midst of life. The two at the end might be Dobiesław Jakubowicz, the father who dreamed about his daughter, and Adam Soliski, the husband who wrote of his wedding ring on the day that the bullet entered his brain.

The Nazi and Soviet regimes turned people into numbers, some of which we can only estimate, some of which we can reconstruct with fair precision. It is for us as scholars to seek these numbers and to put them into perspective. It is for us as humanists to turn the numbers back into people. If we cannot do that, then Hitler and Stalin have shaped not only our world, but our humanity.

NUMBERS AND TERMS

Fourteen million is the approximate number of people killed by purposeful policies of mass murder implemented by Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union in the bloodlands. I define the bloodlands as territories subject to *both* German and Soviet police power and associated mass killing policies at some point between 1933 and 1945. They correspond closely to the places where the Germans killed Jews between 1941 and 1945. In the east, more or less of Soviet Russia might have been included; but the existing line allows the consideration of the main German killing sites of the war as well as the western Soviet lands disproportionately struck by earlier Soviet terror. Though I discuss the western lands of today's Poland, which belonged until 1945 to Germany, I do not include them in the bloodlands. This is to respect the difference between mass killing and ethnic cleansing. Hungary might arguably have been included, since it was occupied briefly by the Germans late in the war, after years as a German ally, and then occupied by the Soviets. After Polish and Soviet Jews, Hungarian Jews were the third-largest group of victims of the Holocaust. Romania, too, would have a kind of claim to belong to the bloodlands, since many of its Jews were killed and the country was occupied at the end of the war by the Soviet Union. Romania, however, was also a German ally rather than a victim of German aggression, and the murder of Romanian Jews was a Romanian rather than a German policy; this is a related but different history. Yugoslav citizens suffered many of the fates described here, including the Holocaust and mass reprisals; but the Jewish population of Yugoslavia was very small, and Yugoslavia was not occupied by the Soviet Union.

These matters of political geography are debatable on the margin; what is not is the existence of a zone in Europe where Soviet and German power overlapped and where the tremendous majority of the deliberate killing of both regimes took place. It is indisputable, to state the point differently, that the contiguous area from central Poland to western Russia where Germans killed Jews covers the regions where all of the other major German and Soviet policies of mass killing had already taken place or were concurrently taking place—if not completely, then in very significant part. The purposeful starvation of Ukraine took place within the zone of the Holocaust. The purposeful starvation of Soviet prisoners of war took place within the zone of the