

Converting Statistics

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Timothy Snyder (professor of history at Yale) has recently appeared frequently on progressive cable news. The reason for Snyder's recurring appearance of late is his remarkable book, *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century*, published in 2017. This study succinctly summarizes a life-time of work and research by Snyder on the authoritarian "strong men" who have brutally dominated Western international politics. While the book is itself readily accessible, the study behind it derives from research done a great deal earlier. Primary among that long work of research is Snyder's major book of 2010, *Bloodlands: Between Hitler and Stalin* (Basic Books, 2010). This book traces in spectacular detail the barbaric policies of Hitler and Stalin in the 1930s and '40s. The title, *Bloodlands*, refers to the territory of Ukraine and Poland, the land between Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Russia that became the contested arena for such brutality and barbarism, some of which served policy and some of which appears to have been simply mad, pointless violence.

Snyder traces the endless brutality by reporting on the huge number of murders committed by these two regimes, murders on a mass scale in an attempt to wipe out and erase large populations of vulnerable innocent citizens in these states in order to expand "homeland" territory for these two murdering regimes:

A new Hungarian fascist regime began in May to deport its Jews. About 437,000 Hungarian Jews arrived in Auschwitz in eight weeks. About 110,000 of them were selected for labor, many of whom survived; at the very least 327,000 of them were gassed. Over the course of the war, about 300,000 Polish Jews were shipped to Auschwitz of whom some 200,000 were killed. Taken together, Hungarian and Polish Jews account for the majority of the Jewish victims of Auschwitz (275).

The flight and deportation of the Germans, though not a policy of deliberate mass killing, constituted the major incident of postwar ethnic cleansing. In all of the civil conflict, flight, deportation, and resettlement provoked or caused by the return of the Red Army between 1943 and 1947, some 700,000 Germans died, as did at least 150,000 Poles and perhaps 250,000 Ukrainians. At a minimum, another 300,000 Soviet citizens died during or shortly after the Soviet deportations from the Caucasus, Crimea, Moldova, and the Baltic States. If the struggles of Lithuanian, Latvian, and Estonian nationalists against the reimposition of Soviet power are regarded as resistance to deportations, which in some measure they were, another hundred thousand or so people would have to be added to the total dead associated with ethnic cleansing (332).

Fourteen million, after all, is a very large number. It exceeds by more than ten million the number of people who died in all of the Soviet and German concentration camps (as opposed to the death facilities) taken together over the entire history of both the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany. If current standard estimates of military losses are correct, it exceeds by more than two million the number of German and Soviet soldiers, taken together, killed on the battle field in the Second World War (counting starved and executed prisoners of war as victims of a policy of mass murder rather than military casualties). It exceeds by more than thirteen million the number of Americans and British casualties taken together, of the Second World War. It also exceeds by more than thirteen million all of the American battle field losses in all of the foreign wars that the United States has ever fought. The count of fourteen million mortal victims of deliberate killing policies in the bloodlands is the sum of the following proximate figures, defended in the text and notes: 3.3 million Soviet citizens (mostly Ukrainians) deliberately starved by their own government in Soviet Ukraine in 1932-1933; three hundred thousand Soviet citizens (mostly Poles and Ukrainians) shot by their own government in the western USSR among the roughly seven hundred thousand victims of the Great Terror of 1937-1938; two hundred thousand Polish citizens (mostly Poles) shot by German and Soviet forces in occupied Poland in 1939-1941; 4.2 million Soviet citizens (largely Russians, Belarusians, and Ukrainians) starved by the German occupiers in 1941-1944; 5.4 million Jews (most of them Polish or Soviet citizens) gassed or shot by the Germans 1941-1944; and seven hundred thousand civilians (mostly Belarusians and Poles) shot by the Germans in "reprisals" chiefly in Belarus and Warsaw in 1941-1944 (411).

I have selected these pages from Snyder that report these numbers almost at random from his book. The numbers are representative of the massive specific data that Snyder has accumulated. The numbers show unmistakably the scale and intent of the blood spilling in these bloodlands that bespeak the unrestrained violence of the two regimes. Among other matters, this undeniable historical reality constitutes a powerful backdrop for the present conflict in Ukraine. The fierce memory of the bloodbath no doubt fuels and energizes the Ukraine defense of its land against yet another threat from Russia. For good reason such a vulnerable, wounded society has a very long and unforgiving memory!

In his summary statement Snyder reflects on the numbers:

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 (409).

Snyder follows Vasily Grossman in his judgment that,

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 is 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 (387).

In his pathos-filled conclusion, the numbers of deaths recur yet again. And then Snyder writes in his last paragraph:

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 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 (408).

The statement invites and requires a long anguished pause:

The regime: **turned people into numbers.**

The work of humanists (after the work of scholars):

Turn numbers back into people.

There Snyder's book ends. But clearly Snyder's concern for the recovery of humanity does not end there. His passionate concern lingers as a summons and a mandate for the work that now is to be done. Snyder does not reflect on how the reversal of "numbers to people" is to be accomplished. But he hints that it is the work of humanists through the force of reflective, critical literature. His own acute objective work suggests that the work is to remember with as much specificity as can be mustered, because the killing regimes dealt in wholesale violence without ever pausing to notice the particularity of human persons with specific lives and specific names.

Those of us who are active heirs to the Bible may also reflect on how the Holy People, reported in the Holy Book, at times dealt in big numbers and at times reduced the so-called *land of promise* to a *bloodland*. One may be struck, in the wake of Snyder's numbers, with the readiness for such numbers in ancient Israel:

They seized him and killed him at the fords of the Jordan. Forty-two thousand of the Ephraimites fell at that time (Judges 12:6).

Then on the seventh day the battle began; the Israelites killed one hundred thousand Aramean foot soldiers in one day. The rest fled into the city of Aphek; and the wall fell on twenty-seven thousand men that were left (I Kings 29:29-30).

The Arameans fled before Israel; and David killed seven thousand Aramean charioteers and forty-thousand foot soldiers, and also killed Shophach the commander of their army (I Chronicles 19:18).

So the Lord sent a pestilence on Israel; and seventy thousand persons fell in Israel (I Chronicles 21:14).

I have selected these verses almost at random. The numbers of course are not verifiable. They may indeed be only imaginary figures to enhance the several regimes that did the killing, including the regime of YHWH! But even if not historically reliable, they exhibit the readiness of Israel, in its God-chosenness, to act out its historical destiny in brutal ways. As with the bloody European regimes, there is here as well no effort to turn numbers back into people.

- So now we, in the wake of the *Bloodlands* of ancient Israel and of our own twenty-first century, have all of these numbers on our hands, and of course many other mass atrocities as well, including the mass atrocities of mass deaths from hunger.
- We have among us excessive numbers of Black persons systemically incarcerated.
- We have numbers of families and children who lack food.
- We have the numbers of those who suffer violence, both from unrestrained wildness and from official police work.
- We have the unbearable numbers of homeless people who are daily exposed to the violence of the street and of the weather.

In sum we have the numbers of those who are systemically, willfully, and by default assigned to vulnerability and violence by being excluded from the dominant regime of wealth and property.

That numerical reality leaves us, as it left Europe after the bloodlands, with countless, nameless numbers who are, by the mercy of God, to be turned back into persons. Such work means to resist the summarizing statistical propensity of the state and to exercise the actual practice of neighborhood. That is, *Gemeinschaft* as a refusal of the defining pressure of *Gesellschaft*.

The church is one such prominent and important venue in the community that has the hard, good work of turning numbers into persons. For the church, the sacramental focus of this work is the rite of Baptism, the naming ceremony of the church. Our several liturgic traditions exercise great freedom in the administration of baptism. In its simplest form baptism requires only *water* and a *reiteration of the Trinitarian name*. In fuller liturgical formulation it also includes the recital of *the creed* that narrates the life of the Trinity. And it poses *questions* for the candidate that sound rather like they have been filtered through the harrowing experience of the bloodlands:

Do you renounce Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God?

Do you renounce the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God?

Do you renounce all sinful desires that draw you from the love of God?

Do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as your Savior?

Do you put your whole trust in his grace and love?

Do you promise to follow and obey him as your Lord?

(*The Book of Common Prayer*, 302-303)

To hear these questions in the context of the bloodlands (here as in Europe) causes us to notice how dangerous an act Baptism is and how urgent is its intent and claim. The sacrament aims to refuse turning persons into numbers and insists that persons have durable names and abiding identities that are not subject to statistical reduction, not even by the state. The questions, moreover, name the “spiritual forces, evil powers, and sinful desires” that skew and distort the world of God-given personhood. As the newly named person is identified, the process finished with a *prayer* and a *benediction*, and Episcopalians add the lovely formula, “Sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ’s own forever.”

Setting the rite in the context of Snyder’s work might rescue it from the “bourgeoisie slumber” in which baptism often occurs among us. Of course baptism is not an act of magic. It has force and staying power if and when the community of faith actively sets out to offer, over time, the realities anticipated in the sacrament. As the community lives out those realities, it is engaged in a defiant counter-action against every effort to reduce persons—especially the weak, vulnerable, and disadvantaged persons—to a number.

If we are imaginative, we might even mobilize the sacrament (and its continuing remembering in the sacrament of the *Eucharist*) as a specific response to the great violence all around the world. What if, in our liturgical sacramental action, we were to evoke in our congregations the names lost to numbers? What if, as we say, “name this child,” or “name this adult,” we also asked for the name of a Ukrainian child now perished, or the name of a Russian soldier who unwillingly has been dispatched to war, or a grieving mother in a war-torn zone? Those names are available to us. It could be that the sacrament will not let us settle in our relatively safe place, but works to send us, as we are able, with the grace of God among those whose names have been lost and whose names may somehow be re-sounded in an act of defiant resistance. The act of *erasure* of a name is demonic and fearful, but when we do the work of baptism, it is not the final act. The final act is *reinstatement* of name and identity. The sacrament is an insistence that evil will not define the world. The world belongs to, is governed by, and is defined by the life-giving resolve of the creator God. We may well school our congregations in alertness to the urgency of defiant affirmation, a defiance that concerns not only European forms of evil that Snyder has so well articulated, but the force of the many “isms” that stalk our own landscape in menacing ways. The work of the sacrament is to insist that the world has a shape

and a future given beyond the force of fear, hate, greed, and death. The force of the sacrament is against very long odds. It has always been so!

This article first appeared in the blog, "Church Anew." We are grateful for the ability to share it in JP.

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