

Hitler and Stalin on the moral balance of History

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1. Introduction: Who was the most evil?

My friend Aristidis always has a counter-argument up his sleeve even for ideas he agrees with, in principle! A few days ago, during a conversation on historic matters, I made a remark about Hitler's crimes, in particular, the Holocaust. "Right", said Aristidis, "but don't forget that Stalin killed many more!"

For a moral evaluation of the two biggest criminals of the twentieth century, I'm not sure how much it matters which one wins the contest with regard to the number of murders. And, speaking of murders, I don't refer to those killed on the battlefields but to civilians, especially the victims of racist, national or ethnic cleansing. Until relatively recently, the dominant opinion was in accord with that of Aristidis; that is, "Stalin killed many more". A prominent American historian, however, came to dispute this view.

Timothy D. Snyder (b. 1969) is a Professor of History at Yale University, specializing in the History of Central and Eastern Europe as well as in matters related to the Holocaust. His fluency in eleven (!) European languages allowed him to study original archive sources located in countries of the former eastern block, which (sources) began to be openly available in the decade of the 90s, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. His best-known book "*Bloodlands*" [1] is based on the information he collected.

We found a synopsis of his research in his interesting article "*Hitler vs. Stalin: Who was worse?*" [2]. In this article we see the overturn of two popular myths:

1. The myth of the “less evil Stalin”, compared to Hitler who was responsible for the racist crime of the Holocaust. As Snyder concludes, the corresponding crimes of Stalin don’t differ much from the moral point of view, since the underlying goal was mass cleansing of civilian populations on the basis of national or ethnic criteria.

2. The myth of the “less murderous Hitler” since, allegedly, Stalin killed “over 20 million people”. Access to former Soviet archives has made it possible to count the victims of Stalin’s national or ethnic policy with relative accuracy. Snyder’s research has clearly demonstrated that the number of victims is definitely smaller compared to Hitler’s crimes of the same nature.

Below we summarize the main conclusions of this research.

2. Famine and terror under Stalin before the war

Many compare Stalin’s *Gulag* [3] to the Nazi concentration camps. The truth is, however, that, as Snyder mentions, the majority of those who entered the Gulag left alive. The total number of people who died in the Gulag is estimated to be between 2 and 3 million (a number comparable, of course, to the death toll in Nazi concentration camps). On the other hand, the number of victims of Stalin’s “*Great Terror*” (see below) does not exceed 1 million or even less.

The greatest human loss of the Stalinist period occurred in the famine of 1930-33, where more than 5 million people died from starvation. From these, the 3.3 million inhabitants of the Soviet Ukraine that perished in 1932 and 1933 were victims of a premeditated Stalinist policy with purely ethnic motivation. Specifically, Stalin requisitioned Ukrainian grain although it was certain that such an action would kill millions. Then, accusing the Ukrainians for the failure of his own policy, he ordered a series of measures (such as the sealing of the Ukrainian border) that were bound to cause yet more mass death.

In 1937 Stalin began the policy of the so-called Great Terror, which predominantly targeted Soviet citizens of Polish and Ukrainian origins. In the operation of 1937-38 against the *Kulak* [4] some 387,000 people were executed. The remaining “enemies” killed by this policy (about 247,000) belonged to national minorities related to countries bordering the Soviet Union. In particular, in the “*Polish Operation*” that began in 1937, some 111,000 people were accused of “espionage” for Poland and

were executed. Overall, the number of victims of the Great Terror comes close to (but does not reach) 1 million.

3. Unarmed victims of war

Up to the beginning of the Second World War the Stalinist regime had absolute superiority in murdering civilians, compared to the Nazi regime. Nazi Germany began murdering on equal scale only after the 1939 Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact and the joint German–Soviet invasion of Poland in September of that year. From 1939 to 1941, some 200,000 Polish civilians lost their lives, the two regimes being equally responsible for these deaths. Among the victims were members of the elite of the Polish society killed by the Soviets in the Katyn Massacres of 1940.

The Nazis' policy of starvation caused 4.2 million deaths in the Soviet Union. Among the victims were 3.1 million Soviet prisoners of war, as well as 1 million civilians during the siege of Leningrad. (Snyder does not examine the question of victims of famine in areas outside of the Soviet Union.)

In reprisals for actions of resistance, the Germans killed about 700,000 civilians (mostly Poles and Belarusians) in mass executions. (Again, Snyder confines this part of his study to the areas of Poland and the Soviet Union.)

Of course, the greatest German mass crime was by far the Holocaust, in which 5.7 to 6 million Jews perished. To the victims of this racist atrocity one must add more than 100,000 Roma.

Overall, the Germans murdered about 11 million civilians. This number could exceed 12 million if one includes deaths from various causes (such as hunger or diseases) in concentration camps. The corresponding figures for the Soviets in the Stalinist period (both before and after the war) are 6 to 9 million. As is obvious, the victims of Stalin's murderous fury don't even approach the alleged number of 20 million!

Let us note here that Snyder does not count battlefield casualties or civilians who lost their lives during bombardments or other actions of war. His study confines itself to the victims of mass murder through executions, starvation policies or imprisonments in concentration camps.

4. Attempting an “intent trial”

Beyond the number of victims there is also the question of intent. With regard to the Germans, things are rather clear: Germany bears the main responsibility for the war and the killings of civilians that she committed are mostly due to imperialistic arrogance and a racist sense of superiority.

As for the Soviets, most civilian killings took place in times of peace and were related, more or less, to Stalin’s vision of modernization of the state. With regard to the famine of 1930-33 (the victims of which were mostly Ukrainians and – to a lesser extent – Poles) Stalin attempted to eliminate by means of starvation those resisting the process of collectivism in the Soviet Union. In Ukraine, in particular, he wanted to rid himself of the class of rich landowners (the Kulak) in order that the state might gain full control of agriculture and invest the riches of the countryside into the development of modern industry.

In the Great Terror of 1937-38, which also mostly targeted Poles and Ukrainians, the choice of the victims was again made on the basis of ethnic considerations. Specifically, Stalin regarded the Soviet citizens of Polish origin, residing in the western part of the country, as potential agents of Poland. On the other hand, he feared that any Ukrainian Kulak who had survived the famine of 1932-33 would be a potential threat to the Soviet regime in the event of a future conflict.

After the joint German–Soviet invasion of Poland (1939) both the Germans and the Russians consciously tried to eliminate the political and intellectual elite of that country. This was still the era of the “bad Stalin”. The “good Stalin” would be “born” two years later, after the invasion of the Soviet Union by his former ally, Hitler...

5. Epilog: Who misinformed Aristidis?

Beyond the non-availability of archival sources during the Cold War, why was our previous assessment of the murderous record of Stalin so erroneous? (The moral dimension of this record is still huge, of course!) How did the 6 to 9 million become “*more than 20 million*” according to the benevolent belief of my friend Aristidis? Above all, for many years this historic miscalculation has offered a false “moral advantage” to the other horrible monster of world history: Adolf Hitler!

Snyder provides a convincing answer to this question also. His argument can be summarized as follows: The aforementioned misinformation was (at least to some extent) intentional and can be related to the expediencies of the Cold War. Soon after the Second World War, the victorious powers, with the exception of the Soviet Union, allied within NATO with their former enemy, the Federal Republic of Germany. The new enemy was now a former ally: the Soviet Union! Such an interchange of roles in the friend-enemy dipole required some degree of moral and historic “flexibility” which would allow for an arbitrary (given the absence of official sources) exaggeration of the crimes previously committed by the other (i.e., the Soviet) side.

The ultimate moral question is, of course, whether absolute numbers have any real meaning when one speaks of mass murder. I leave this to the reader to decide for her/himself. As Snyder remarks [2], when it comes to death the difference between zero and one is infinity! All the more so, I would add, if we are dealing with a carnage of innocent people, victims of the most inhuman war in history and of two tyrannical regimes of unique murderous savagery. Regimes that, amazingly, even today count admirers here in Greece as well as elsewhere...

Notes and references

[1] Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* (Basic Books, 2010).

[2] Timothy Snyder, *Hitler vs. Stalin: Who was worse?* (The New York Review of Books, <http://www.nybooks.com/blogs/nyrblog/2011/jan/27/hitler-vs-stalin-who-was-worse/>).

[3] *Gulag*: Government agency that administered the main Soviet forced labor camp systems during the Stalin era, from the 1930s until the 1950s. The term is also sometimes used to describe the camps themselves.

[4] *Kulak*: A class of relatively wealthy farmers in Tsarist Russia and, later, in the Soviet Union. By extension, in the Stalinist period, those who resisted handing over their grain to the central government in accordance with the soviet plan of collectivism (1928-1940).

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