



AN INTERVIEW WITH TIMOTHY SNYDER

This October will mark the 100th anniversary of Russia's historic Bolshevik Revolution. A hallmark of twentieth-century history, the October Revolution ushered in one of history's most brutal and emblematic totalitarian regimes. Yet nearly thirty years since the fall of the Soviet Union, themes and questions surrounding the nature of modern authoritarianism seem as relevant today as they have ever been. In light of the uncertain state of American politics, Yale Historical Review Associate Editor Mark Gustaferrero, SM '20, sat down with renowned Cold War and Eastern European History Professor Timothy Snyder to talk about his work and what lessons we can draw from twentieth century totalitarianism to inform our response to modern politics in the United States and abroad.

Interview by Associate Editor Mark Gustaferrero, SM '18

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Yale Historical Review: Let's start with your education and your youth. What drove your interest, at that age, in the history of Eastern Europe and the Holocaust? How does a boy from southwestern Ohio get from there to becoming one of the preeminent scholars of Eastern European history?

Timothy Snyder: Well, at that age, you don't know what you are going to be when you are, say, 47. It's a fiction to think that everything is present in young life and somehow unpacks itself over time. I think the things that one understands least well about oneself are one's distant past, so I'm not going to venture too far down that road. I will speak, however, about the obvious turning points in my educational career.

One of the junctures that was clearly important was being able to studying on the East Coast in the late 1980s, at Brown, where I was lucky enough to have a few professors who were teaching Eastern European history. Thomas Simons, who was visiting Brown at that time, and Mary Gluck, from Hungary, were large influences. It's important to recognize that I was studying Eastern European history at a time that communism was coming to an end. There was therefore this constant feeling that things, particularly in that Eastern Europe, were opening for the first time in a long time.

Another one of the important junctures was the opportunity to study at Oxford. At Oxford, I began not thinking that I was going to be a professional historian. I was thinking at the time that I was going to be a diplomat or a journalist, and simply that history was the best preparation for those careers. The early 90s at Oxford were a time that I could travel around and make friends and learn languages, and none of that led me feel immediately that I was really going to be a historian. I turned out to be a historian, but at the time, I was much more interested simply in the relationship between present and past. Still, the main goal at the time was how to learn languages, and the learning of the languages fundamentally changed me. Not only was it a change in that it was a lot of time spent doing really nothing else, but the learning of these languages changed me as other cultures started to come alive to me the way that my own was already alive. When you learn languages, you start reading novels and watching films and making friendships in other languages – that changes you. It gives you another point of view. You start to use tools from that culture to understand your own culture. That point in my life was very important.

The third critical time was in the mid 90s, when I was working on books and my languages and I didn't have one specific job. And precisely because I wasn't constrained by a traditional career, I got to have my "down-and-out-in-Eastern-Europe" period, which meant my language skills and friendships got stronger. In my travels, the territories like Kiev and Minsk that I write about in my books really came alive to me, and I think that had a lot to do with what people refer to as the "spatial turn" in my work. I don't really write about memories that much, or familiar narratives, but rather places and the things happen-

ing on those places. These travels influenced that style of analysis. By the time I came back to Yale, these were things that had already happened.

YHR: I want to talk a little bit more about your knowledge of European languages. You said in an interview with *The Economist* that, “if you don’t know Russian, you don’t really know what you’re missing.” Could you elaborate on that?

TS: Russian is not at all my best language. But, with the writing of *Bloodlands*, the crucial thing was all the work that Russian historians had done, and I tried to stress that. *Bloodlands* is actually a very Russian book. The title is a citation, or rather slight deformation, of Akhmatova. The most important thinker in the background was Vasily Grossman. Much of the work which allowed me to write the chapter on the Polish Terror was done by the Russian historians, people collecting documents and writing short analytical essays. If it weren’t for the Russians, I wouldn’t have been able to make the Polish Terror make sense. And that little chapter on the Polish terror was, I think, especially significant, since it was the first serious treatment of the issue even in Poland. So I think that’s what I meant, when I spoke about the importance of learning Russian in my work.

YHR: Many of your books have been translated into other languages. *Bloodlands* has now been translated into over thirty. Do you ever read your works in other languages, and how, if at all, do you think their ideas change as a result of their translations?

TS: That’s a deceptively hard question. In general, I would rather read other things when I read in foreign languages, like poetry or novels (which I really like to do). Reading my own stuff in a foreign language is usually not a particular pleasure. When I can, I check the translations for the languages I know best—I proofread French, German, etc. However, if I spent two or three weeks proofing all the different versions of my books in all of the languages I know, that would take up almost a year’s worth of time. But to the heart of your question – do the ideas change? Of course the ideas change. If you imagine a language to be constellation of stars, and there are 60,000 stars (like there are 60,000 words you might use in English), you can of course arrange them in certain ways. However, you cannot invent, say, certain French words in English. The same stars simply don’t appear in every constellation. You can arrange English words in certain ways, of course, but, for example, the fact that Russian makes contractions of certain words changes its sounds and will always make it fundamentally different from anything you can express in English. The Russian word for "KGB" just sounds different that "KGB," no matter what you choose to do with it. Essentially, the idea is that there are some things that you can’t translate, and so the ideas must change. I think though, when I do read my own work in other languages, I

am too obsessed with whether it is correct that I can't really reflect on the expression of the ideas in the different languages.

There are deep difficulties about all of this. For people who are bilingual, when they read in a different language, they become that slightly different person and their thoughts have those slightly different meanings. So, when I comment on an idea in French, it is almost like commenting on the French language because the idea must now conform to the linguistic properties of the language it is being thought in. For example, "révolution" has a different meaning in French than "revolution" does in English, because it has a different set of connections to the French revolution. It just simply means something different. I admit it is very vexing, all of this.

I want to close by saying that translators are indeed co-artists, and co-creators of books. When I win prizes for a translation of a book, I give half of the money to the translator, and I think all translators should get half. Because if the translation is good enough to win a prize, that means that that translator worked really hard.

YHR: You are on the Committee on Conscience of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. According to its website, the mandate of the committee is to "alert the national conscience...to halt acts of genocide or related crimes against humanity." What has your experience been like on this committee?

TS: So, to start, the committee really just involves going to annual meetings and listening to others speak about pressing issues. Mainly, though, my experience has been extremely positive. I think understanding the Holocaust means drawing partial lessons from it. You can choose to remember it, and one should, but if you go too far with your memory concept you must accept that every memory is specific and every memory is context-bound. Therefore, if you privilege the idea of memory, you might just end up essentially looking at something powerful, but ultimately transparent. The idea of the Committee on Conscience, is that one can learn and recognize other risks from the Holocaust. It's not a matter of thinking that the Holocaust will repeat itself, which of course it won't literally. It's rather a matter of trying to be progressive in a certain way. It's trying to figure out how risky Nigeria or Sudan is right now, based on what we have learned. The other thing that is refreshing about being on the committee is that I'm one of only a couple of scholars on the committee. Most of them are journalists or businessmen or politicians, and most of them are also from other countries. Every time I get out of purely scholarly circles, I realize that there are others who are thinking about the same ideas, even though it is not specifically their job to do so. That's very heartening.

YHR: Do you see your writing as a means of alerting or awakening the national con-

science? Of halting crimes against humanity?

TS: Not primarily. The only way to answer that question is to talk about what it means to be a historian. What it means to be a historian is to try to understand a past event, following historical methods, self-correcting all the time. What it certainly doesn't mean is being concerned about the present, going back to the past, finding the passages in the past that resemble the present, and then being more concerned about the present. That's not history, although a lot of people do that all the time. Insofar as I have things to say about the present, it is because I have understood certain things about the past, not perfectly but as well as I could. Sometimes it takes a factual form – I can correct misperceptions. If people think the Holocaust was about Germany purging German Jews, then it's easy for me to say that 97% of the Jews in the Holocaust were not German and most of the killing happened beyond Germany. History can also involve saying, "I think I see some patterns here that political scientists and journalists cannot see in the present." But I have to be primarily a historian, or else I have zero value. If I can comment on the present, it's only because I am a historian. Let me be clear – it's not that I worry about the terrible character of the present and then use history to write about the terrible state of the present. It's only that, spending most of my mental energy in the past to begin with, I can surface every now and then and say something about the present.

YHR: **And you have said something about the present. One of your Facebook posts which went viral and was picked up by the Huffington Post, In These Times, and several other sources under the title "20 Lessons from the 20th Century on How to Survive in Trump's America," has several great lines. Among them are, "believe in truth. To abandon facts is to abandon freedom" and "notice the signs of hate...do not look away and do not get used to them." To what extent do you see parallels between the Trump administration, with its use of alternative facts and its policies on religious minorities, and the authoritarian regimes of the 20th century?**

TS: Well, the trap to avoid is to say that it's exactly the same. Of course it is not exactly the same. The problem is that, what people tend to do, and Americans in particular, in response to such an argument, is say, "well, it's not exactly the same." Americans don't like history and they don't like thinking about history – Americans don't think history matters to us, though it might matter to other people. Americans think "we are exceptional." That's where Americans start. So if you bring the "it's the same" historical argument, Americans will respond by saying "well it's not like us in every respect, and therefore it's not interesting," which is easy and lazy. Essentially, the basic reaction for an American is to say, well, Trump doesn't wear a hat like Mussolini and the boots of Hitler. The basic reaction for an

American is to say, well these policies don't look like that movie I saw about the Holocaust, and therefore it's not the same thing. As such, with Americans, you have to make a whole case in defense of history before you can make an argument about similarity. You have to say that history teaches us that certain patterns sometimes cohere, and that certain phenomena are much less likely to occur. It's not that I know for certain anything about the present, but history informs us.

To get to the heart of your question, when I look at the Muslim ban, as a historian, I don't think "oh here is some surprising thing which has never happened before." I think, this is the beginning of a certain type of politics where one puts a face on globalization, and thereby distracts people from domestic reforms which they really need. This is a type of politics where one feeds energy toward discrimination against a particular minority group, which happens to be small and pretty well assimilated, like the Jews in Germany in 1933. And when you succeed with that, then you draw people into a world in which the main focus is not about dealing with objective problems, but rather identifying prospective enemies. Then, most importantly, everybody becomes part of it. For example, if someone from Yemen isn't allowed to come to Yale, that opens up a spot for an American to come here. If Muslim scientists aren't allowed to work in Silicon Valley, then other scientists will. Over time, all these people who fill these roles become, sometimes inadvertently and sometimes not, part of this process. The point is that they are eventually implicated, and eventually they are in. When I look at the Muslim ban, I don't focus on its details. I look at it as a form of politics that I have seen before. It's the ability to recognize what is happening against the whole backdrop of things that have been done in the past that is important. If you think only about the day-to-day, then the only thing you can do is to say "let's wait for tomorrow." But the time you get to tomorrow, the policy has already worked and has changed you and the whole population, and then it becomes normal. The only way to shake that normalization is to put your mind somewhere other than the present, and then perform the intellectual, moral act of looking at whether you really want society to be changed in this way. History allows us to do all of these things.

YHR: You spoke a little bit already about Americans' perception of history. I want to point out that you close your introduction to *Bloodlands* with the following line: "During the year that both Stalin and Hitler were in power, more people were killed in Ukraine than anywhere else... in the world." Why do you think that this probably comes as a shock to most readers (including myself), and especially Americans? Is this a result of a failure in our education on Europe, World War II, and the Holocaust?

TS: Well, there are a lot of reasons why this comes as a shock. The conceptual answer is that the victim groups that rise to our consciousness, in what we call memory, have only

a very tenuous relationship with the victim groups of history. And we have to make that distinction – things that are memorialized are generally memorialized for some reason, but they are also memorialized in a way that misleads us even about the group being memorialized. Further, and more importantly, the memorialization of one group often hinders us from asking the same questions about other groups. Memorialization has its own history, and that history is only tenuously connected to the history of suffering or death. To take an example, the second biggest victim group of the Germans after the Jews were Soviet POWs during the war. Nobody knows that though, because the Soviets didn't want to commemorate them, they were not a national group, and so they have no memorial today. In fact, they might never be memorialized, even though 3 million of them died and that is a much larger figure than the totals for the many other groups we do remember.

With Ukrainians specifically, as you refer to in your question, there is quite a bit more going on. First, people are instructed to think that what they remember overlaps with history, but these are generally two really different things. Second, a problem arises from the fact that, as Americans, we come at history from the perspective of the West. Thus, in thinking about this time period, we think of the greatest casualties as being on the beaches of Normandy, or in the advance of Western armies through Germany. Luckily, the one crime which has surfaced over time has been the Holocaust, but even with this knowledge Americans committed an error by associating the Holocaust with only the parts of the war we had something to do with. As such, Americans think of only the camps in Germany that Americans liberated as being part of the Holocaust (though most Americans also hold the incorrect belief that we, rather than the Soviets, liberated Auschwitz). Overall, though, we assume that since we liberated camps, that the Holocaust must have happened in camps. This is misleading. On top of that is the problem of the Iron Curtain which descended over Eastern Europe following the war. The Iron Curtain meant that the memoirs of suffering that we remember, such as those of Anne Frank, come from the West as opposed to the East, where the much greater suffering actually was. As such, suffering in the East became harder to remember for 45 years. Then, in addition to that is the fact that Ukraine was not, and to some extent is still not, seen as a unit by that many people. And if a people isn't seen as a unit, then it is hard for us to associate it with targeted suffering.

Another key phenomenon at play here is colonialism. We tend to think of atrocity in terms of gas or bullets, but in reality, when one is imposing colonial domination, starvation proves really a much more useful tactic. That is the Ukrainian story, or at least the story of the three million people who starved to death there in 1932-33. We have this implicit, racist colonial view that starvation, though it could happen easily in Bangladesh or Africa, could never happen in Europe in the middle of the 20th century or that it could be a matter of European policy. As such, the three million Ukrainians who died of starvation and the majority of the three million Soviet POWs who died of the same do not fit well into our tableau, since we think of ourselves as being Western, civilized, and advanced. Because

of this fact, we want even our atrocities to be civilized and advanced, and great death to be mechanized and modern. For this reason, we have great trouble processing the image of a prisoner surrounded by barbed wire just slowly dying, or the peasant who cannot leave his village starving to death. These images do not fit with our mental picture of what Europe is like.

YHR: To build off the images of suffering you just presented, let's talk about the extraordinarily heavy material you deal with in your primary source exploration. I remember specifically, and I don't think I'll ever forget, an image you write about in *Bloodlands* in which a Ukrainian orphan is being devoured alive by his fellow orphans during the famines, and out of hunger and desperation he begins to try to eat himself as well. How do you deal with depressingly morbid images such as these in your daily research?

TS: There should be some answer of therapy that makes it all fine, but there really isn't. It's just as hard for me as it is for anyone else. I don't do this research because I'm not sensitive to those sources—I am very sensitive to them. The only thing I can say is that, when I wrote about these subjects, I was sure that I was doing the right thing and that this study was important. I was sure that those primary sources coming from the victims, or close to them, were important. If I write a book about a Habsburg archduke, that's a fine thing to do, but it doesn't give me the same feeling that I am doing something important. When I was writing *Bloodlands* and *Black Earth*, I was thinking that these were the subjects that one should be writing about. That's my only perspective to add on the subject.

YHR: In your lectures, you concern yourself quite a bit with the idea of “contingency” and “conjuncture.” Essentially, you advance the idea that many historical scenarios arise out of luck and bad luck, and though we have a tendency to see events as pre-ordained, that's not necessarily ever the case. Does this idea bother you as a historian, specifically the fact that it renders you unable to say a given specific historical event was necessarily the product of the influences leading up to it? Most people, myself included, like to think history had to happen a specific way, at the very minimum because it is easier to think of it that way.

TS: No, not at all. Isaiah Berlin has this really interesting essay about history as a science, and one of his claims is that historians are pretty good at ruling scenarios out, but not at determining exactly which ones could occur. As a thought experiment, imagine that I was researching the year 1904 in the Russian Empire, and I somehow knew absolutely everything about the 1904 political, economic, and social climate in that region. Even with that

knowledge, at most I would be able to possibly hypothesize that there would be an outbreak of some sort of rebellion in 1905. Could I predict, knowing everything that I know, that there would be a shooting in St. Petersburg that would commence the revolution, or that there would be a revolution in specific Polish cities? No, probably not. So, this notion that things are predetermined, at least at the epistemic level, cannot be right. Even if you knew everything you could possibly know about a historical time period, you could not precisely predict what would happen next (or even what happened in the past before that point). It might be true in some deep physical sense, although I think that it's not, that things are pre-determined, but at least they are not pre-determined in a way that we could ever possibly understand. If that's true, that means that no historical actors were working in a world that was completely pre-determined to them. Essentially, I'm accepting that someday, with a deep understanding of quantum mechanics, we could have a deterministic universe, in principle, but asserting that no historical actor could have ever functioned that way. Lenin never said, in the midst of the chaos in Petrograd, that revolution would be inevitable even without his efforts. To the contrary, Lenin correctly thought that without his efforts there would be no revolution, and therefore thought that he had to seize the reigns of history himself. History happens as individuals recognize historical possibility, not historical necessity. If they thought in terms of historical necessity, they wouldn't have done anything since they would have thought the outcomes would have come about anyway. There are things that Lenin could not have done at his time in Russia, and historians are here to tell us what those things are. Where history becomes an art is in recognizing what opportunities these significant individuals saw, from their points of view, in their time periods, and how that propelled change.

YHR: I'll close with a question concerning your career at Yale. How did you decide to teach at Yale? What do you love (or not love) about teaching here?

TS: No one (or very few people) choose to come to Yale. I was in Europe in the 90s, and it was certainly good luck that there was a job opening in 2001 and that I got it. Afterwards, it seems normal and natural that I teach at Yale, but if things had gone slightly differently in the Yale historical department in 2001 then I would not be here today. I was very lucky. At the time, I was just a kid who had written a dissertation about an unknown Polish sociologist, and I applied to everything. Yale just happened to be the job that I got, and when I got here I wrote some more literature, got tenure, and decided to stay.

What do I love here? In all seriousness, I do love the students. The gratifying thing about the students is that, though they do not know very much, they learn very fast. After

a semester as a teacher, you can look and see just how much of this obscure subject your students have learned, and that is very gratifying. Truly, though, I have the good fortune of teaching students, most of whom do the work and want to learn things, and this aids my job tremendously. Teaching is hugely gratifying. I look out now and my former students are scattered around the world as journalists or politicians, and in these jobs the fact that they have a solid background about Eastern Europe matters. If people in my class are going to go on in life to travel to Ukraine to write about the current war, as some of them indeed have, it's really good that they have some sort of background about what Ukraine is and where it comes from. Now I am old enough, since I have been teaching here for 16 years, that many of my students have had real careers and done significant things that have been affected by my classes.

From the research point of view, the attractive thing about Yale is really the library. I am always wishing I could spend more time there. People come here from Eastern Europe to use our resources in their languages, and that's astounding. If you had to pick the thing at Yale that seems most impossible, it would be the Yale library. That there is this collection of books and knowledge that physically exists is extraordinary.