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Grappling With Holodomor


Thoughts On Timothy Snyder's *The Bloodlands*

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JANUARY 3, 2014

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A few days ago, I listened to a chapter in Timothy Snyder's *The Bloodlands* on famine in Ukraine during the 1930s. The famine was man-made--the result of Stalin making war against his own citizens in Ukraine. I listened (I have the book in MP3 format) to about 90 percent of the chapter before I just had to cut it off. I generally have a strong stomach when it come to reading about evil, but this was too much:

Survival was a moral as well as a physical struggle. A woman doctor wrote to a friend in June 1933 that she had not yet become a cannibal, but was “not sure that I shall not be one by the time my letter reaches you.” The good people died first. Those who refused to steal or to prostitute themselves died. Those who gave food to others died. Those who refused to eat corpses died. Those who refused to kill their fellow man died. Parents who resisted cannibalism died before their children did

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That people were starving to death in Ukraine, and that this was a political act, not an act of God, was hidden from the world. And then sometimes the world just looked away:

Throughout the following summer and autumn, Ukrainian newspapers in Poland covered the famine, and Ukrainian politicians in Poland organized marches and protests. The leader of the Ukrainian feminist organization tried to organize an international boycott of Soviet goods by appealing to the women of the world. Several attempts were made to reach Franklin D. Roosevelt, the president of the United States.⁹⁶ None of this made any difference.

The laws of the international market ensured that the grain taken from Soviet Ukraine would feed others. Roosevelt, preoccupied above all by the position of the American worker during the Great Depression, wished to establish diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union. The telegrams from Ukrainian activists reached him in autumn 1933, just as his personal initiative in US-Soviet relations was bearing fruit. The United States extended diplomatic recognition to the Soviet Union in November 1933.

In August of 1933, French politician Édouard Herriot came to Kiev to see the socialist spirit. Instead he got a show. Food--meant for display not consumption--was put in the shops. Party activist were brought in to make it seem as though the town were bustling. The healthiest of the starving children were trotted out and coached to give pre-approved answers. Herriot was then chauffeured on to Moscow where supped on caviar. He would later praise Soviet actions for honoring both "the socialist spirit" and the "Ukrainian national feeling."

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Somewhere between 3.5 and 8 million people died during the famine. The classic

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