
Two Schools of Thought on the Holocaust: Snyder v Bauman

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Abstract: This article describes two approaches to the Holocaust, identified with the names of Zygmunt Bauman and Timothy Snyder. In this dyad, Bauman stands for the culturalist, sociological approach focussed on identifying the social conditions in which otherness is produced and tracing the significance of modernity and bureaucracy for the Shoah. In contrast, Snyder puts aside the notion that anti-Semitism and modern statehood played a crucial part in the Holocaust. The author also identifies contemporary adherents of the two interpretations in Poland.

Keywords: Shoah; Zygmunt Bauman; Timothy Snyder; Auschwitz; Modernity

Bauman's way

The main subject of *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Bauman, 2000) is the unreason that lies at the very heart of rational civilisation, or, more precisely, of modernity (cf. Beilharz, 2000; Best, 2020). Bauman offers a concise statement of the problem that had been troubling numerous scholars of the Holocaust for decades: "The Holocaust was born and executed in our modern rational society, at the high stage of our civilization and at the peak of human cultural achievement, and for this reason it is a problem of that society, civilization, and culture" (Bauman, 2000, p. x). In his now-classic interpretation, the Holocaust was not merely another wartime atrocity or one more example of human monstrosity, bloody conflict, and carnage, but a window onto modern civilisation – one that demands answers to crucial questions and exposes its duplicity. The path Bauman follows is perfectly familiar to readers of works by Adorno and Horkheimer, particularly *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (written in 1944 and published in 1947; Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002) – as Marek Siemek calls it, "a cult classic of the New Left and alternative social movements and the bible of Western counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s" (Siemek, 1994, p. 284). Yet, it was also – maybe even primarily – a diagnosis of a crisis of modernity, or perhaps, of modernity as crisis, an all-encompassing critique levelled at patterns of culture and thought for their contribution to violence and fascism, conducted from within the said culture. Horkheimer and Adorno made the gesture before Bauman, calling for a questioning of the unstated assumptions and unintended, uncontrolled, and monstrous effects of civilisation and institutionalisation. With them begins an inquisition into the Enlightenment's sense of reason that defined the modern way of life, but which also promoted instrumental rationality and the category of pow-

er that would permeate both science and technology, as well as forms of social and national life.¹ Adorno and Horkheimer wrote their work as the Holocaust was taking place, but they could not address it in its entirety, seeing it from a distance. Yet, the chapter “Elements of Anti-Semitism” exposes an obvious through-line between the authoritarian, instrumental, violent reason and the Holocaust. Among Bauman’s sources of inspiration, one might also name the category of authoritarian personality as defined by Adorno (Adorno et al., 1969), or, a personality shaped by the systematic transfer of responsibility onto a hierarchical structure and suppression of all moral intuitions as irrelevant to the rational order of goals and tasks identified by modern governments.

These similarities are nonetheless often hidden under the surface; in *Modernity and the Holocaust*, Bauman refers directly to the Frankfurt School once, in a marginal note found in the chapter on “The Ethics of Obedience.”² No direct quotation is to be found, though, the only mention involving a negative appraisal of *The Authoritarian Personality* as an excessively psychological interpretation of the Holocaust that explained fascism by recourse to individual authoritarian proclivities. In Bauman’s view, the Frankfurt School:

carefully eschewed the exploration of all supra- or extra-individual factors that could produce authoritarian personalities; nor did they care about the possibility that such factors may induce authoritarian behaviour in people otherwise devoid of authoritarian personality. To Adorno and his colleagues, Nazism was cruel because Nazis were cruel; and the Nazis were cruel because cruel people tended to become Nazis. (Bauman, 2000, p. 153)

What escaped Bauman’s attention was that the authoritarian personality was not just psychological, but also social. Primarily, though, he overlooked *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* and its social and culturalist³ aspect, even as he clearly belonged to the critical current that abandoned the near-universal understanding of the Holocaust as an eruption of mindless barbarism. As had the Frankfurt School before him, Bauman highlighted the rationality of the Holocaust, rooted as it was in the instrumental reason that provided the groundwork for Western civilisation and science, in the ethic of subordination to institutions, to the state, to one’s superiors, but also to the authoritarian personality. It was these concepts that inspired the aforementioned inquiry into authoritarianism, the relationships between various institutions and the contours of the social personality that produced exclusion, and consequently the Holocaust, endowing the latter with its peculiarly modern profile.

Bauman consistently stressed this impact of modernity⁴ when addressing the exceptional nature of the Holocaust: “Modern Holocaust is unique in a double sense. It is unique among other historic cases of genocide because it is modern. And it stands unique against the quotidianity of modern society because it brings together some

1 I leave aside the question of similarities and differences between the Frankfurt School and Martin Heidegger, whose works seem pertinent in this context.

2 In a reading of Milgram.

3 Concerning the study of culture as a whole, with particular focus on its patterns and social role.

4 On the bonds between nationalism and modernity, see: Billig (1995).

ordinary factors of modernity which normally are kept apart” (Bauman, 2000, p. 94). However, what is exceptional must not at all be anomalous, unreasonable, a transgression against the established order: “The implication that the perpetrators of the Holocaust were a wound or a malady of our civilization – rather than its horrifying, yet legitimate product – results not only in the moral comfort of self-exculpation, but also in the dire threat of moral and political disarmament” (Bauman, 2000, p. xii).

The unprecedented concentration of practices and apparatuses of violence, removed from emotional judgement and subjected to the rules of pure rationality (a defining feature of the Shoah), could only ever be achieved in a modern state and through its bureaucratic structures.⁵ Together with instrumental reason, bureaucracy and apparatuses of the state enabled the understanding and implementation of the Holocaust as a purely technical task:

in the last resort ... the choice of physical extermination as the right means to the task of *Entfernung* was a product of routine bureaucratic procedures: means-ends calculus, budget balancing, universal rule application. To make the point sharper still – the choice was an effect of the earnest effort to find rational solutions to successive “problems,” as they arose in the changing circumstances. ... [I]t was the spirit of instrumental rationality, and its modern, bureaucratic form of institutionalization, which had made the Holocaust-style solutions not only possible, but eminently “reasonable”. (Bauman, 2000, pp. 17–18)

The features of modern civilisations, particularly the social division of labour, the separation between management and execution, and the abandonment of global evaluation may seem innocent enough, but it is precisely these features that made the Shoah what it became. Bauman points to “the hierarchical and functional divisions of labour ... Use of violence is most efficient and cost-effective when the means are subjected to solely instrumental-rational criteria, and thus dissociated from moral evaluation of the ends” (Bauman, 2000, p. 98).

The tendency toward objectification that typifies modernity leads to the dehumanisation of the objects of actions and transforms traditional racism into the new social engineering geared towards the rational organisation of elements and removal of those considered evil or undesirable from the social space:

To the initiators and the managers of modern genocide, society is a subject of planning and conscious design. ... This is a gardener’s vision, projected upon a world-size screen. ... Modern culture is a garden culture. It defines itself as the design for an ideal life and a perfect arrangement of human conditions. ... Modern genocide, like modern culture in general, is a gardener’s job. It is just one of the many chores that people who treat society as a garden need to undertake. If garden design defines its weeds, there are weeds wherever there is a garden. And weeds are to be exterminated. Weeding out is a creative, not a destructive activity. It does not differ in kind from other activities which combine in the construction and sustenance of the perfect garden. (Bauman, 2000, pp. 91–92)

5 “The light shed by the Holocaust on our knowledge of bureaucratic rationality is at its most dazzling once we realize the extent to which the very idea of the *Endlösung* was an outcome of the bureaucratic culture” (Bauman, 2000, p. 15).

Removal, de-weeding, and mass murder is bureaucratically organised, displaced, delegated to specific services and representatives, and finally implemented in the same way as one implements a production plan. Bauman describes cruelty not as an individual feature, but an aspect of the authoritarian structure of social institutions:

while cruelty correlates but poorly with the personal characteristics of its perpetrators, it correlates very strongly indeed with the relationship of authority and subordination, with our normal, daily encountered, structure of power and obedience Inside the bureaucratic system of authority, language of morality acquires a new vocabulary. It is filled with concepts like loyalty, duty, discipline – all pointing to superiors as the supreme object of moral concern and, simultaneously, the top moral authority. (Bauman, 2000, pp. 153–154, 160)

Bauman analyses the phenomenon of the social production of the moral blindness generated by the justification of violence, methodical organisation of all activities as consistent or inconsistent with a predetermined schedule, and the dehumanisation of the victims.

Thus, the author reads the Holocaust as a mass murder committed on an industrial scale, in a modern way, displaced and removed from the view of the German people. He ascribes an equal significance to the transfer or delegation of responsibility to structures of power, superiors, the machinery of the state. In Bauman's view, the shape of the Holocaust as modern, mass fabrication of death was determined by modern civilisation and its patterns of culture, particularly the form of social organisation and bureaucracy represented by the state. Without the state, the Shoah would not have been conceivable (cf. Barańska, 2016).

The other protagonist of this essay, Timothy Snyder, pursues an entirely different thesis: that it was the institutions of the state that safeguarded against the Holocaust, or, at least, increased the chances of survival for its victims, and that the Holocaust could only be achieved precisely because of the crisis of the state. In other words, the Shoah only happened because there was no state to prevent it once those state institutions had been dismantled.

Snyder's way: Hitler the anarchist

Books by Timothy Snyder – *Black Earth: The Holocaust as History and Warning* (Snyder, 2015) as much as *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* (Snyder, 2010) – earned particular recognition and a special place among scholars in the humanities in Poland and beyond, though they also inspired vociferous polemics.⁶ The author's ambitious

6 Each of Snyder's books became an event in the world of the humanities and elsewhere; reviews appeared in trade journals and news dailies. For some examples, see: Żbikowski (2011, pp. 583–594); Holzer et al. (2011); Czernecki (2015a, pp. 32–33, 2015b, pp. 86–90); Eisler (2016, pp. 22–23); Krzemiński (2015, pp. 68–70); Leociak (2015, pp. 22–23); Muchowski (2016, pp. 58–62); Nowicka (2015, pp. 20–23); Stasiński (2015, p. 11). The

goal was the revision of an entire paradigm: the image of the Holocaust, of its origins, and of its character. Already in the prologue to *Black Earth*, he stresses:

Our intuitions fail us. We rightly associate the Holocaust with Nazi ideology, but forget that many of the killers were not Nazis or even Germans. ... We think of concentration camps, though few of the murdered Jews ever saw one. We fault the state, though murder was possible only where state institutions were destroyed. We blame science, and so endorse an important element of Hitler's worldview. We fault nations, indulging in simplifications used by the Nazis themselves. (Snyder, 2015, p. xiv)

According to Snyder, it was not science, nationalism, or the state that brought the Shoah to fruition, and interpretations that ascribe a crucial role to those elements follow a dangerous path staked out by the Nazis themselves in their harangues against the degenerate modernist culture and the corrupt liberal state. Thus, from the very beginning, Snyder is engaged in a covert polemic against the Frankfurt School, critical theory, and the more contemporaneous ideas of Zygmunt Bauman. While identifying the destruction of states as the cause of the Holocaust, the author also posits an earlier starting date. In his view, the Holocaust began with the German assault on the Soviet Union in *Unternehmen Barbarossa*, that is, already in 1941; whereas the Wannsee Conference held in 1942 is considered by others to be the more usual symbolic moment of its inception.⁷

Snyder asserts that nationalism and anti-Semitism were not the cause of the Shoah, instead ascribing the decisive role to murderous anarchy and ecological panic of the kind that still poses a threat to the world today: "The history of the Holocaust is not over. Its precedent is eternal, and its lessons have not yet been learned" (Snyder, 2015, p. xiv). To ward off charges of one-sidedness, Snyder postulates a search for nuance and complex motivations: "Such a reckoning must also be human, chronicling the attempt to survive as well as the attempt to murder, describing Jews as they sought to live as well as those few non-Jews who sought to help them, accepting the innate and irreducible complexity of individuals and encounters" (Snyder, 2015, p. xv). One might note, by the way, that this "irreducible complexity of individuals and encounters" can only lead to fairly bland conclusions of the order of "it's complicated" and "one can never tell", none of which serve to advance an in-depth understanding of accounts and events.

What the author focusses on are questions of statehood and the anarchic nature of Hitler's actions aimed toward the destruction of neighbouring states (Czechoslovakia,

recognition earned by Snyder is also betokened by the prestigious awards he received, including the Kazimierz Moczarski Award in History (2012), the title of *Gazeta Wyborcza's* "Man of the Year" (2016), and the Foundation for Polish Science (FNP) Prize (2018). However, the broader response to Snyder's books is not unambiguously positive. Cf. Joanna Tokarska-Bakir's summary of a debate of Western scholars on the earlier book (Tokarska-Bakir, 2012a). See also: Michman (2012, pp. 440–445); Evans (2010, 2015); Katz (2010); Bartov (2011).

7 The debate over the starting date can be represented unfairly as a purely academic matter. However, even when taken as shorthand or a symbolic reference, these dates define how the Holocaust is interpreted and which of its features are given prominence.

Austria, Poland,⁸ etc.), whose sovereign status (among other features) would have allowed them to prevent the extermination of their Jewish citizens, regardless of the endemic anti-Semitism in each of the countries in question. For Snyder, the state could even be said to serve a moral role; in his conclusion, he writes that “[w]hen none of the moral illumination of institutions was present, kindness was all that remained” (Snyder, 2015, p. 320).

Snyder stresses that death came soonest to those who lost their citizenship and the protection of the law – a statement that does not seem particularly controversial so long as one remembers that stateless persons were not at all the majority of the victims. Characteristically, the author relies on the examples of Czechoslovakia, Austria, and Poland, disregarding the cases of Lithuania or Romania, whose governments engaged wholeheartedly in the Holocaust, including (or perhaps, especially) against their own citizens. The conviction that European states would have defended their citizens in spite of anti-Semitism thus appears to be not merely dubious or lacking in solid foundations, but even a historical falsification; yet, the author entirely ignores this question.

Snyder downplays interpretations that stress the role of anti-Semitism – which he prefers to label a “sentiment” (Snyder, 2015, p. 149) in spite of all scientific reflection on the matter.⁹ In his view, anti-Semitism did not directly inform any mass-scale actions; a genocide required more than that. Thus, it could not have been a necessary condition for the Shoah. To justify his position, Snyder brings up examples of societies which, though anti-Semitic, resisted the genocide of their own citizens at the level of state institutions. And yet, it is an only partial truth: the image has to be expanded to account for the fact that some societies did not oppose the Holocaust, while those that defended their own citizens often deported Jews without citizen status, including those who had lived in the given country for decades or were even born in it (as had been the case with the society and government of France).

Snyder stresses that Hitler’s views or actions should not be seen as expressions of nationalism since “race,” not nation, was his basic category; thus, the Holocaust is not a part of the history of state nationalisms, but of racisms. One may well treat this claim not only as a theoretical proposition – given that racism often affects citizens of the same state – but also as yet another attempt to deflect accusations against states defined around nations, the dominant form of statehood in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Applying Snyder’s rhetoric, albeit with a hint of irony, one might observe that the author himself tends to follow Nazi manipulation in this regard, seeing as the Nazis denied to the Jews what they thought to be the noble title of a nation. This gesture served to dehumanise the victims, thus ensuring the success of the entire

8 Nevertheless, the destruction of the Polish state in 1939 does not lead Snyder to date the Holocaust to that year.

9 This downplaying had been noted already in the previous book; cf. Michman (2012).

process of the Shoah. However, it seems dubious as a theoretical solution to the problem of anti-Semitism or nationalism in a proper historical context.

The author points out the characteristic changes and shifts instituted by Hitler: “the party-state [after Lenin’s example],¹⁰ the entrepreneurship of violence, the export of anarchy, the hybridization of institutions, the production of statelessness, the globalization of German Jews, and the redefinition of war” (Snyder, 2015, p. 37). Snyder describes Hitler as a “warmongering biological anarchist” (Snyder, 2015, p. 52).¹¹ This, too, is a notion designed to draw the reader away from the idea that the nation-state (including its nationalist variant) and its structures and mechanisms, in tandem with modern power-wielding, could have led to the Shoah. On the contrary, for Snyder, it was the state that defended against the Holocaust, which in itself was the product of anarchy.

Snyder the polemicist

Another obvious, though not necessarily overt target for Snyder’s polemic in *Black Earth* are the books of Jan Tomasz Gross, especially *Neighbors* (Gross, 2001), a study concerned primarily with the pogroms enacted by Polish people immediately after the German invasion of the Soviet Union. Snyder disputes not merely specific aspects of Gross’ argument, but his very central thesis, that the pre-war and wartime anti-Semitism played a major part in the mechanism of the Holocaust itself and that local communities took an active part in murdering Jews. Snyder has repeatedly stressed that Jews would not have been murdered were it not for the war and Hitler’s policies and that the pogroms were inspired by Germans, who incidentally voiced dismay at the narrowness of their scope. In his view, tales of local pogroms were simply an echo of German propaganda, intent on maintaining the illusion that these events were “locally spontaneous” (Snyder, 2015, p. 149). In this context, Snyder seems to overlook specific descriptions, accounts, and studies of the events at Jedwabne, and not exclusively there (cf. Bikont, 2015; Machcewicz & Persak, 2002). His own claims, however, rest on fairly weak foundations, restricted to indirect sources, such as German instructions, or his own deduction, without any reference to documents relating to the specific events. In Chapter 6, he writes:

The instructions conveyed to the Einsatzgruppen commanders were to create the appearance of local spontaneity, which, of course, suggests that the reality was absent. ... For that

10 In this sense, the groundwork for the Holocaust was laid by the October Revolution.

11 As much as the author firmly stresses the revolutionary nature of the claims presented in his book, one cannot avoid feeling that a part of it is just old interpretations clothed in new terms: Darwinism is replaced by ecology, but the latter also relates to the image of competing “races” engaged in a struggle over resources and supposedly limited space and slaughtering one another to prove one’s superiority and achieve supremacy – a well-trodden model for describing the ideas and actions of Hitler.

matter, Germans were present at every single pogrom. Certainly there was abundant local antisemitism in eastern Europe. ... Yet the relationship between sentiment and killing is not straightforward. Age-old antisemitism cannot explain why pogroms began precisely in summer 1941. ... In occupied Poland, the Holocaust began more than two years after the German invasion and was largely isolated from the local population. In the occupied Soviet Union, the killing of Jews took place in the open air, in front of the population, with the help of young male Soviet citizens. (Snyder, 2015, pp. 149–150)

These statements are rather hard to accept; the dating of the onset of the Holocaust itself seems dubious (a matter to which I shall return later). The claim about the “isolation from the local population” raises even more doubts – especially since it is qualified with the vague “largely,” rendering the entire statement nebulous, to put it mildly. In addition, Snyder discredits Auschwitz as a symbol of the Holocaust. In spite of common belief, he claims that the Shoah did not take place inside concentration camps, at least not for the major part.

As works by Jan Grabowski (cf. Grabowski, 2004, 2011, 2013), the Polish Center for Holocaust Research (e.g. Grabowski & Engelking, 2011, 2018; Grabowski & Libionka, 2014), and research conducted within the Institute of Literary Research (cf. e.g. Hopfinger & Żukowski, 2021) and the Institute of Slavic Studies (Tokarska-Bakir, 2008, 2012b; Zawadzka, 2012, 2021) of the Polish Academy of Sciences indicate, the claim that the “local population” – in this case, the Poles – was actually isolated from the Holocaust is wholly unacceptable. In view of the fact that both contemporary documents and historical research confirm trade with Jews inside and outside of the ghetto on a considerable scale, as well as extensive looting, denunciation, and murder, Snyder’s assertions appear to be nothing but wishful thinking. For the Jews, their Polish neighbours were a major factor when taking the decision to move to the ghetto or to stay on the “Aryan side” – which does not correspond with the image of two mutually isolated communities. Also of note are the Poles who denied familiarity with their Jewish neighbours, friends, and family, as well as the crowds that surrounded the ghetto at the time of its liquidation and formation alike; or the extortionists, always on the lookout for their victims in that crowd.

The isolation thesis is indefensible; in turn, the use of the phrase “young male Soviet citizens” in reference to pogroms and shootings in the occupied Soviet Union seems questionable. Does this category include the brothers Laudański – anti-Semites and national-democrats, murderers who were indeed, albeit briefly, Soviet citizens, and who of their own free will burned their own Jewish neighbours in a barn? Would that not amount to twisting the facts to confirm our conviction that pre-war anti-Semitism did not matter and the brief period of state (non)belonging was fundamental in its stead? Snyder repeatedly discounts the possibility that the Holocaust was driven by Central European anti-Semitism, describing the notion as a “trap of ethnicization and collective responsibility” (Snyder, 2015, p. 150). Furthermore, he puts this notion – one espoused by notable luminaries of science and philosophy who, like Bauman, seem

highly unlikely to have yielded (consciously or not) to the rhetoric of the Nazis – together with the products of Nazi and Soviet propaganda. In Snyder's view, to take anti-Semitism for a key aspect of the social backdrop of the Holocaust would mean to engage in "the abolition of political thought and the lifting of individual agency" (Snyder, 2015, p. 150).

The stakes of the game the author engages in here are thus the avoidance or dismissal of the category of group responsibility, one that he himself construes as absent of exceptions, universal, and total. As he formulates the opposition of individual guilt and group responsibility, Snyder shifts the discussion toward the responsibility of the individual or of the state. By rejecting the absurdity of blaming masses of people in a total and universal way, he essentially degrades social analyses of group behaviour as a ridiculous attempt to place the blame on everyone without exceptions (Snyder, 2015, p. 150).

This is by no means the only reductive aspect of Snyder's work. The most sorely missed element in his reflections is cultural context, or, an analysis of the framework of institutional agency, of the social and anthropological imaginary, of repetitive behaviours and recognisable cultural codes that largely define the actions of social groups and make it possible to understand the mass, non-individual aspect of certain phenomena.¹² In *Black Earth*, the author limits his perspective to political history, even though the object of his study extends far beyond the realm of purely political and state affairs. Anti-Semitism is one telling example of that. As already mentioned, Snyder sees it as something obvious, without any causal influence, and unworthy of further consideration. In his view, anti-Semitism in pre-war Poland was primarily a political phenomenon birthed from a struggle in the field of politics – the heirs of Piłsudski seeking to hold in check the national democrats with their pogroms, resulting in the creation of "Ozone" (OZN, Camp of National Unity) and in the anti-Jewish policies of the state during the latter 1930s, essentially advocating for the emigration of all Jews and facilitating their efforts to create their own state. It is a drastically limiting perspective; it allows the author to see an indefinite popular anti-Semitism, but not to consider it with any degree of interest. Without the cultural and social context, Snyder cannot observe the anti-Semitic undercurrent of pre-war Catholicism or the social and political might of nationalism as a force that shaped the social imaginary, aspirations, and actions of various classes and strata – not just the peasantry, but also intelligentsia,¹³ workers, burghers, and landowners; the social imaginary that enabled the exclusion of the Jews and their extermination in the favourable conditions of the Holocaust.

12 This absence of cultural and gender awareness also accounts for a reprehensible style of writing on the experiences of Jewish women subjected to sexual abuse; cf. Chapter 12, where he writes of "sophistication of young life" and "unwanted sexual attention."

13 For more on this, see: Chmielewska (2018).

All those who were rubbed the wrong way by the works of Gross, as well as those invested in defending the public image of Poland, could finally breathe a sigh of relief: Snyder's study soothed their nerves by claiming that pogroms had been provoked, Polish anti-Semitism was entirely irrelevant and bereft of any vengeful or exterminationist components,¹⁴ and all talk of group guilt was out of order since there are only individuals with their complex motivations, actions, and personal responsibilities.¹⁵ What was lost in all this nuancing and relativising was the basic image of the past and its essential contours unearthed by the aforementioned studies into the Holocaust.

The book ends on a firm note, a passage on the Righteous Among the Nations including their profiles and an inquiry into their motivations, humanitarian impulses, respect for human life, experiences of loss, and sensibilities. However, the highly worthwhile effort of highlighting the merits and exceptional virtue of those individuals is not followed by any remark about how their actions were not symptomatic, but went against the expectations of the societies they lived in and the rules and norms they abided by, and how they were often met with distaste, ostracism, and even condemnation or repressions from "their own".

There are also doubts concerning the understanding of basic categories used by the author, such as "state". How should one understand the claim that a state does not exist when the given population is encompassed by a political organisation, with police, the judiciary, a working civil and criminal code, health services, etc.? If a state does not guarantee its citizens political rights, equality, or even security, does that mean it is no longer a state? Snyder has put himself in a bind here, for Germany simultaneously is a state throughout the war – in spite of failing to provide security for its citizens, including even safeguarding their right to life – and is not one. Within this framework, France vacillates between occupied territory and state-like entity depending on the context, as does Austria. One might well ask oneself the question, whether a country under a state of exception (since the Third Reich was certainly no liberal democracy) is still a state? Contemporary social and political philosophers (such as Giorgio Agamben) tend to stress that a state of exception, which implies the power of breaking and suspending established laws and an unlimited rule over life, serves only to reinforce the power of the state and does not constitute a proof of its failure. If the state is conceived solely as an independent liberal-democratic entity, these contradictions are irresolvable. I would even venture to say that, in reference to Poland during wartime, one could well harbour doubts and pose questions whether it did not, in fact, constitute a kind of a state entity. If one takes into account, for example, the active institutions of the state – the courts and the police, the criminal laws, the civil code, and governments in and out of the country with recognition abroad and engaged in their own internal and for-

14 The charge that the author represents something akin to a "Pro-Polish tendency" is also raised in the aforementioned article by Omer Bartov (2011).

15 All of these assertions seem dubious, at best.

eign policies, as well as the underground army – the answer may not at all be unambiguous.

Much as in *Bloodlands* (cf. Kozłowski, 2012, pp. 1–6), the author finds a symmetry between Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany: exporting revolution, destroying neighbouring states, harbouring global ambitions. One senses that, in Snyder's view, it was the actions of the Soviets that set the stage for the Shoah, given that it followed the annexation and deconstruction of the Polish state in 1939; it was in their territory that the Holocaust began, involving "young male Soviet citizens". "In 1939, the Soviets had defeated, destroyed, and discredited traditional authorities, both secular and religious. They had presided over a moment of score settling and chaos in which many new scores were created that might be settled in the next moment of violent transition" (Snyder, 2015, p. 130). The description clearly suggests that the first move was with the Soviets, who destroyed religion and traditional morality, thus giving the people the justification for murder and looting. It is, however, an inescapable fact that plundering, robbery, murder, and violence took place equally as often elsewhere, and in no case were they propelled or inspired by the weakening of Catholicism or morality in its traditional guise. The robbers and murderers of the Jews did not abandon their Catholic identity nor transgress against the norms of their own community, and yet they only rarely – if ever – faced scorn in their temples.

Let us return, though, to the central issue, namely the account of the Shoah. Snyder abolishes the paradigm of Auschwitz, heretofore the symbol of the Holocaust, as an unjustified metonymy, based on the claim that most Jews did not die in camps.¹⁶ Still, the main reason for the lack of justification in the eyes of the author is the fact that it fosters an understanding of the Holocaust as death on an industrial scale, planned and organised like any other technological process in a modern society.¹⁷ The dispute is thus not about numbers, but about the basic image that will tarnish or absolve modernity. The understanding of war as the collapse of norms, institutions, and authorities goes against interpretations for which Zygmunt Bauman might serve as a spiritual father, which look for causes of the events of the Holocaust and afterwards in the very same institutions and authorities. Snyder is not alone in his views; he rather seems to represent a highly vocal, perhaps dominant tendency in previous and current historical writing, which often invokes categories of trauma and cultural collapse – the widely discussed study by Marcin Zaremba, *Entangled in Fear: Everyday Terror in Poland, 1944–1947* (Zaremba, 2022), focussing on the immediate post-war period, being another example. This fairly commonsensical concept (for things as horrible as these to happen, people

16 The majority argument is not as compelling as it seems. Of course, the only available data are estimates, but the number of persons shot and gassed in Soviet Union territory under German occupation is estimated at about 1.3 million – less than the number of victims of the concentration camps ("Dokumentowanie liczby ofiar Holokaustu," n.d.).

17 One of the reasons why Auschwitz became a symbol for the Holocaust is the fact that the material infrastructure of this modern "death factory" survives – including crematoriums and remnants of gas chambers. Cf. Kucia (2005).

had to stop being themselves, succumb to immense pressure, and their moral patterns and norms must have disintegrated) was met with much enthusiasm, establishing the book as a classic, if not the pre-eminent description of social violence – and yet, it seems to offer a somewhat too unambiguous and not quite truthful portrayal of the past, while obscuring many entirely unobvious mechanisms that critical theory had helped uncover. It vacillates between two banalities: the first being that everyone can do evil in certain conditions and nobody is eternally free from guilt; and the second, that since everyone had been bathed in the evil, so the virtue of the heroes shines all the brighter, elevating them to stars against the bleak sky of badness as an object lesson in eternal humanism.

Supplement: Contemporary Polish schools

Bauman and Snyder can be identified as the progenitors of two currents of interpretation of the Holocaust. One stresses the systemic and systematic nature of the genocide, its indelible ties to modernity, the tropes of culturally-determined responses, European anti-Semitism, the figure of the other, social discrimination, and most of all, organised state bureaucracy. Auschwitz acts as its symbol as an instance of systematised, industrialised mass murder. The other current points instead toward the “chaotic” death of mass shootings. It focusses on the separation between local communities and Jewish victims, a crisis of culture and civilisation, their peculiar descent into anarchy, and the collapse of values as conditions of the Holocaust. From this perspective, the state is the final bulwark against the Holocaust, while anti-Semitism, though significant, is neither sufficient nor essential for it.

These broad-strokes distinctions and directions are also reflected among Polish scholars of the Holocaust, though obviously, in no case is there an implementation of any predefined “programme” nor full replication of the assumptions of either of the authors discussed here, Bauman or Snyder. Research that might be symbolically termed “Baumanian” focusses on the social and cultural aspects of the Holocaust and the production of the other, on cultural codes and social and legal devices that enabled the Holocaust or at least provided a cause for it. Aside from aforementioned scholars including Barbara Engelking, Jan Grabowski, Irena Gross, Joanna Tokarska-Bakir, and Anna Zawadzka, one should also note the works by Elżbieta Janicka (2018a, pp. 131–147, 2018b, pp. 521–542), Tomasz Żukowski (2018, 2021), as well as so many others it would be impossible to name them all here. I count myself among the members of this “Bauman school”.

Snyder’s “allies” rarely share his views in their entirety. Few of them express belief in the state as a source of individual security. I also number among this “Snyder group”

those scholars who rarely reference Snyder directly and whose works may have preceded his, so the Snyder imprint should be seen as purely metaphorical, indicating a particular vein of research. One exponent of this current is the aforementioned *Entangled in Fear* by Marcin Zaremba, but it is far from an isolated example; another name on the list would be Michael Steinlauf (1996, 1997), whose studies marginalise violence in local relations as irrelevant to the Holocaust itself.

Farther yet, but still within Snyder's orbit are studies exploring "non-industrial" and "non-modern" murder and the hidden/visible memory and topography of memory that it involves, the "non-places of memory." This brand of research is associated with Kraków's Research Center for Memory Cultures; of note within this entity are Roma Sendyka (2021), Aleksandra Szczepan (2018, pp. 309–323), and Kinga Siewior (Szczepan & Siewior, 2021), though their programme extends far beyond the limits of Snyder's paradigm, challenging his views on both the state, anti-Semitism, and the cultural aspects of the Shoah, but also sharing the belief that it is the individual, "hidden" deaths in Eastern Europe that deserve the most consideration and representation.

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Dwie szkoły myślenia o Holokauście: Snyder kontra Bauman

Abstrakt: Tekst opisuje dwa sposoby interpretacji Zagłady, które sygnowane są nazwiskami Zygmunta Baumana i Timothy'ego Snydera. Bauman symbolizuje podejście kulturalistyczne i społeczne, poszukujące społecznych warunków produkcji inności, nowoczesnych i biurokratycznych rysów Szoah. Snyder przeciwnie, oddala argument antysemityzmu i nowoczesnego państwa jako ważnych czynników Zagłady. Autorka wskazuje na współczesne kontynuacje obu linii interpretacyjnych w Polsce.

Wyrażenia kluczowe: Szoah; Zygmunt Bauman; Timothy Snyder; Auschwitz; nowoczesność



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