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The Shadow of the World War II Experience: Twentieth Century European Atrocities Before, During and After the Holocaust

John J. Kurowski

This past June I was watching NBC's coverage of the 70th anniversary of D-Day. Tom Brokaw poignantly commented that for most of the 80 and 90 year old veterans present, it was likely their last decade anniversary appearance. More importantly he also said that after having been at many of these decade appearances, he felt perhaps that this year, the 70th anniversary, caused us to want to know more about the war and the twentieth century than ever before.

Understanding the Holocaust and atrocities in Poland and eastern Europe has been an evolutionary process for me as with many people. My first experience was as a 20 year old undergraduate at the John Felice Rome Center on a study tour to Poland and the Soviet Union in 1974. I realized for the first time, that the City of Warsaw that I was enjoying had been completely destroyed in the war.

Fast forward to 2002 I had the good fortune of connecting with Marion Dobrowolski, a retired Polish partisan. Dobrowolski gave me a copy of the book *Forgotten Holocaust* by Richard Lukas, first published in 1986. There, for the first time, I began to learn things about the war and its atrocities that I had not fully understood. As discussed in this paper in more detail, I learned that although the "Holocaust" as we know it generally refers to the extermination of six million Jews in Europe during the war, there were similar atrocities imposed upon all of Poland. The watershed publication of "Bloodlands" by Yale professor Timothy Snyder in 2010 provided an even closer look at twentieth century atrocities demonstrating that what was imposed upon the Poles was unfortunately only a small portion of a larger pattern of atrocities throughout Europe in the twentieth century.

ARMENIA

In the early 20th century, the Ottoman Empire began to decline rapidly. The empire's inability to move into and accept modern society combined with the vast amount of land that it had lost in Africa and Europe over the last two centuries hindered its growth and prosperity compared to other countries. Its changing government repudiated a plural society and adopted an aggressive policy that included the expulsion and oppression of the Armenian, Greek and other non-Turkish elements. But none fared worse than the Armenians.

Because the Armenians were the Christian minority, they lived as second-class citizens. When some Armenians expressed interest in becoming involved in their government, the Turks quickly grew wary of their motives. The Armenians formed political groups in search of governmental reform for their people. The Turks had never shared any power with a minority group, and this new uprising pushed the Turks over the top.

By 1913, a new group, the Committee of Union and Progress(CUP) had staged a coup and assumed control of the country's government. It promptly executed a stated policy to prevent the Ottoman state from additional integration with the Armenians. A year later, in 1914, World War I erupted and the CUP saw a chance to exterminate the Armenians.

At first, the CUP passed more laws that were malicious towards the Armenian population; including a law that gave the military the right to deport anyone they “sensed” to be a security threat.¹ Soon after, their actions became more physical and direct. Towns were methodically and systematically destroyed.

Their principal method of eradication was through deportation. The Turks gathered up men, women and children and proceeded to force many of them to walk hundreds of miles to the Syrian Desert in enormous death marches.

Along with mass deportations came mass killings. Armenians consider April 24, 1915 as being the beginning of these. On this day, several hundred Armenian scholars were brought together, arrested and then executed. In order to carry out large numbers of killings, the government assembled recently freed convicts to form gangs of butchers. Multiple massacres were carried out by sword along the routes of deportation. Those who were not killed were sent to concentration camps assembled across the Syrian Desert where they would perform obligatory labor and eventually die of exhaustion and starvation.

The Ottoman army denied all deportees food and water to accelerate death. Along with these torturous events, many women and orphaned children were kidnapped and sold as slaves to Turkish and Muslim families.

Approximately 1.5 million Armenians died at the hands of the Ottoman and Turkish army. More than half of the Armenian population died, and over 3,000 years of heritage were all but lost.

Even with the vast amount of evidence from photos and eyewitness accounts, the Turkish government still denies today that the Armenian genocide occurred. This decades-long ignorance toward the death of over half of the Armenian population has left lingering bitterness between the Turkish and Armenian people. Now, almost 100 years later, the Turkish government is finally making some steps toward peace with the Armenian people. In 2009, the Armenian and Turkish governments signed an accord that provided among other things that the two countries are to reopen their shared border and establish diplomatic ties. Despite some continuing efforts at reconciliation that has yet to occur and their common border remains closed.

RUSSIA AND THE UKRAINE

When Lenin came to power after the Russian Revolution, he quickly moved to consolidate his power and end Russia’s involvement in World War I. He issued a series of decrees that gave land to peasants, control of factories to workers and instituted the eight hour work day. He won support from enough people to govern as these decrees satisfied the life-long wishes of many people oppressed by centuries of Czarist rule.

By the same token the early Bolsheviks also feared another revolution as they consolidated their power. After Lenin died in 1924 it was five years before Joseph Stalin fully emerged as the dictatorial

¹Kifner, John. "Armenian Genocide of 1915: An Overview." *NY Times*. N.p., 2007. Web. 5 Aug. 2014. <<http://www.nytimes.com/ref/topics/armeniangenocide.html>>.

leader of the Soviet Union. Stalin moved deliberately to eliminate any internal threats to the Soviet Union.

First, Stalin targeted Ukrainian leaders and intellectuals. He arrested over 5,000 of the most influential people in the Ukraine and later murdered or deported them to prison camps² to ensure the Ukrainian citizens remained leaderless.

After removing the leaders, Stalin moved on to the more prosperous farmers. After the revolution of 1917, going forward through the 1920's, Soviet leaders permitted many peasant farmers to prosper. Ultimately, many of these farmers were seen as threats to communist principles. In an attempt to control them, Stalin introduced agricultural collectivization to the Soviet Union, a program that forced these farmers to give up their land, livestock, and equipment for the use of the country. In order to put this policy into effect, he began forcing farmers to leave their own farms and work for state-owned, collective farms by the beginning of the 1930's.

From the outset, despite the arrests, confiscations of property, and death threats, these farmers would not give up their means of living, and therefore refused to give in and succumb to Stalin's wishes. He responded to this defiance by trying to portray the prosperous farmers, also called kulaks, as a hazard to society and imposing incredibly high grain quotas upon them. By doing this it attempted to change the farmers' image and instill fear in other citizens. This conspiracy also backfired as the rest of society continued to identify with the kulaks. Eventually, Stalin's policy finally assigned the Ukraine the unattainable goal of 38% of the entire Soviet Union's grain harvest.³ When the Ukraine could not make its quota, Stalin used it as an excuse to take severe measures to punish the kulaks.

Poor farmers and kulaks had their land and possessions taken from them. In 1931, Stalin also imposed a new grain tax that was so high many families could not afford to feed their children. Stalin was methodically limiting access to food in order to purposely starve his citizens. Anyone who resisted or was found stealing food was killed or sent to camps in Siberia. Literally one half million individuals in the Ukraine were dragged from their homes, packed into freight trains, and shipped to remote, uninhabited areas where they were left, often without food or shelter.⁴ Some families tried to hide their possessions or food from the authorities, and those who were caught were immediately killed. In order to further entrap the Ukrainian citizens, Stalin closed the borders of the Ukraine and created an "internal system of passports" inhibiting the peasants from fleeing.⁵ Any aid that was sent to the peasants, such as food and water shipments, was denied at the border. No one could enter, and no one could leave. Ukraine became the world's largest concentration camp.⁶

²"Ukraine Famine." *United Human Rights Council*. N.p., n.d. Web. 06 Aug. 2014.

http://www.unitedhumanrights.org/genocide/ukraine_famine.htm.

³Mischenko, Katya. "Key Figures in the Ukrainian Genocide of 1932-1933." *Ukrainian Genocide Famine Foundatin*. N.p., 2008. Web. 06 Aug. 2014. <<http://www.ukrainiengenocide.org/dkeyfigures.html>>.

⁴"Holodomor Facts and History." Holodomor. Connecticut Holodomor Committee, n.d. Web. 06 Aug. 2014.

⁵ *United Human Rights Council*, 2

⁶ Mischenko, Katya, 4

During the famine, approximately 25,000 Ukrainians were dying every day.⁷ No one was safe from the effects of Stalin's policies. People were so desperate for food, some even turned to cannibalism. "Meanwhile, nearby Soviet-controlled granaries were said to be bursting at the seams from huge stocks of 'reserve' grain, which had not yet been shipped out of the Ukraine."⁸ The stocked food was protected by barbed wire-enclosed areas and armed soldiers who immediately killed anyone who tried to steal food.

Through imposing new agricultural policies, deporting and murdering citizens, and confiscating their livelihood, Stalin managed to cause the death of approximately 3.3 million of his citizens in 1932 and 1933 alone.

By 1934, Stalin decided his goals had been met and allowed food dispersal to resume, and slowly the famine decreased.

The terror and killing was not confined to the forced famine of 1932-1933. By the late 1930's Stalin turned his attention to national minorities. One communist party leader suggested: "People belonging to national minorities "should be forced to their knees and shot like mad dogs."⁹ In 1937 and 1938, a quarter of a million Soviet citizens were shot on essentially ethnic grounds.

As Timothy Snyder put it in *Bloodlands*, "The Soviet Five-Year Plans were supposed to move the Soviet Union toward a flowering of national cultures under socialism. In fact, the Soviet Union in the late 1930s was a land of unequalled national persecutions. Even as the Popular Front presented the Soviet Union as the homeland of toleration, Stalin ordered the mass killing of several Soviet nationalities."¹⁰

The Poles became the primary national minority target in the second half of the 1930s. Over six hundred thousand Soviet Poles were murdered, mostly shot in the late 1930's.¹¹ This included the murders of tens of thousands of Polish officers at Katyn and Smolensk as discussed by Professor Balcerzak. The Polish national minority in the Soviet Union, like the kulaks, took the blame for the failures of collectivization and was killed for other reasons invented by Stalin.

GERMAN ATROCITIES DURING WORLD WAR II.

With his rise to power in 1932 Hitler undertook a hate and killing campaign that targeted the Jews. More than 5.4 million Jews were killed under German occupation, some by bullets but most by gas. This included virtually the entire Jewish population of three million in Poland.

Early in the war younger members of the Jewish population were instantly killed, A million Jews were killed in the areas east of the current eastern border of Poland in the second half of 1941, the first six months of the German occupation in Russia. Another million were killed in 1942 in this area. But other Jews, particularly in Poland proper and Germany were first put to work in what we now know as "concentration camps" as their labor was needed and early in the war there was uncertainty about the

⁷ *United Human Rights Council*, 2

⁸ "Stalin's Forced Famine 1932-33." *The History Place - Genocide in the 20th Century*. N.p., n.d. Web. 06 Aug. 2014. <<http://www.historyplace.com/worldhistory/genocide/stalin.htm>>.

⁹ Snyder, Timothy. *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin*. New York: Basic, 2010. Print

¹⁰ Snyder, Timothy, 221

¹¹ Snyder, Timothy, 221-222

“Final Solution.” Ultimately another 1.3 million Jews were gassed at four camps in what was known as Operation Reinhard in 1942. The balance of the killing occurred in the Warsaw ghetto, other camps and approximately 1 million killings of mostly non-Polish European Jews at Auschwitz in 1943 and 1944.¹²

Next to the Jews, Hitler hated the Poles the most. Ten days before the 1939 invasion, Hitler authorized killing “without pity or mercy all men, women and children of Polish descent or language. Only in this way can we obtain the living space we need.” After six years of war, Poland proportionately lost the highest percentage of its population of any country in the war. Over six million died, twenty-two percent of its pre-war population.¹³

So, we know that when Germany invaded Poland its goals were not the acquisition of territory or military in anyway. As Timothy Snyder has said, millions of people who were not soldiers, died at the hands of the Nazis. These were civilians that were “victims of murderous policy rather than casualties of war.”¹⁴ This policy began with elimination of young people and the “elite”. Beginning in November, 1939 the Nazis arrested some 200 academics at the Jagiellonian University in Krakow who were sent to camps. 6000 members of the Polish intelligentsia were murdered in 1940 as part of what the Nazis called the “extraordinary pacification program.” By the end of the war, Poland lost 45 percent of its physicians, 57 percent of its attorneys, more than 15 percent of its teachers, 40 percent of its professors, 30 percent of its technicians and 18 percent of its clergy.¹⁵

Unlike most of the Jews, who died in gas chambers, most Poles who died in the war were victims of mass or individual executions, or they were starved or worked to death.¹⁶ Seven hundred thousand civilians were shot by the Germans in “reprisals” chiefly in Warsaw and what is now Belarus in 1941–1944.¹⁷

Once Germany invaded Russia in June, 1941, its atrocities were now directed against the Russians. The wages of this war produced two hundred thousand Polish citizens (mostly Poles) shot by German and Soviet forces in occupied Poland in 1939–1941 and 4.2 million Soviet citizens (largely Russians, Belarusians, and Ukrainians) starved by the German occupiers from 1941–1944.

THE FORMER YUGOSLAVIA IN THE 90’S

In 1989, Slobodan Milosevic was elected President of the Republic of Serbia and later as the president of Yugoslavia. Some political parties in Croatia and Serbia wanted to ‘ethnically cleanse’ the Serbian territory of any Bosniak or Croat population. Serbian nationalists had a deep hatred towards the Muslim Bosniaks that dated back to the Ottoman Empire in the 1500s. They sought revenge for when the Ottoman Empire forced the Muslim religion upon them.¹⁸

¹²Snyder, Timothy, 519-520

¹³ Lukas, Richard C., and Norman Davies. *The Forgotten Holocaust: The Poles under German Occupation*. New York: Hippocrene, 1990. Print. 1-9.

¹⁴ Snyder, Timothy, 44-45

¹⁵ Lukas, 9

¹⁶ Lukas, 38

¹⁷ Snyder, Timothy, 810-811

¹⁸Matson, Chelsea. "Bosnian Genocide." *World Without Genocide*. William Mitchell College of Law, 3 July 2013. Web. 07 Aug. 2014. 3. <<http://worldwithoutgenocide.org/genocides-and-conflicts/bosnian-genocide>>.

In 1991, Croatia and Slovenia both declared their independence from the Yugoslav Republic, initiating two conflicts with the army of the Republic. Slovenia did not have much trouble with the Serbs due to their very low Serbian population. However, in Croatia, there were a higher percentage of Serbian citizens, and years of violence ensued. Tens of thousands of people were killed. However, the worst of the fighting had not even begun.

Bosnia-Herzegovina was located south of Croatia and had substantial minority populations. Forty-three percent were Bosnian Muslims (or Bosniaks), who were harshly discriminated against by the Serbian Orthodox followers. The Bosniaks supported the idea of independence, causing the Serbs to be threatened and to begin to fight. In March of 1992, the Bosnians chose to secede without the Serbs. Instantly following their secession, the Bosniaks were attacked by the Bosnian Serbs. Bosniak leaders were arrested and executed. Acts of violence against the Bosniaks continued for the next three years.¹⁹

The Serbs attacked every location possible, trying to purge the cities of the Bosniak citizens. In early May 1992, two days after the United States and the European Community recognized Bosnia's independence, Bosnian Serb forces attacked Bosnia's capital, Sarajevo. They moved on to other Bosniak-dominated towns in eastern Bosnia, forcibly banishing Bosniak civilians from the region.²⁰ Soldiers also beat, tortured, raped, and killed the Bosniak men, women, and children. Over 380 concentration camps were generated across Bosnia, and those who were not killed were sent there to work and live in merciless conditions.²¹ By 1994, the Bosnian Serb forces had taken over virtually three-quarters of the country.

Many of the Muslim territories were named safe areas by the United Nations. However, the Serbs completely ignored these declarations, and in July 1995, they committed the largest massacre in Europe since World War II.²² Srebrenica, a town in eastern Bosnia-Herzegovina, was the setting for one of the worst atrocities. Serbian forces gathered up approximately 23,000 women, children, and elderly people to be expelled to Muslim-controlled regions.²³ Nearly 8,000 men and boys were slaughtered on the spot or marched to mass killing fields. Thousands of bodies were buried in mass graves.

After this massacre, Bosniaks forces joined the Croatians to push Serbian forces out of the occupied regions in Bosnia. Later in December 1995, a peace agreement was signed to end the war in Bosnia and place 60,000 NATO troops in the area.²⁴

CONCLUSION

Stalin was the pioneer of national mass murder in the twentieth century, with the Ukrainians and the Poles chief among his victims. Hitler followed with a policy of extermination of all Jews followed closely by extermination of all Poles. As the war expanded and Germany and Russia went after each other, each of them committed further atrocities. Hitler starved 4 million Russians into submission with

¹⁹ Matson, Chelsea, 3

²⁰"Bosnian Genocide." *History.com*. A&E Television Networks, n.d. Web. 06 Aug. 2014. 2. <<http://www.history.com/topics/bosnian-genocide>>.

²¹ Matson, Chelsea, 4

²²"Genocide in Bosnia." *Holocaust Museum Houston*. N.p., n.d. Web. 05 Aug. 2014. 3. <https://www.hmh.org/la_Genocide_Bosnia.shtml>.

²³ Holocaust Museum Houston, 3

²⁴ Matson, Chelsea, 4

his ill-fated invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941. Stalin killed thousands of Poles and other nationals, including 20,000 Polish military officers at Katyn. Snyder concluded the tally to be some fourteen million between 1932-1945. Virtually all of those killed did not wear a military uniform but were civilians killed as the result of the murderous policies of these two monstrous dictators.

These tragedies were surrounded by smaller, yet equally alarming genocides in Armenia early in the century and more recently, Bosnia.

The specter of Karski raises the questions: Were they avoidable? What lessons do we learn?

The Armenians, totally decimated and shaken by the mass Turkish atrocities could do little to respond until well into the twentieth century and 100 years later they are still seeking accountability from the Turks.

The five million Ukrainians living abroad in the early 1930's, mostly in Poland, took time to process what had subtly occurred to their people at the hands of the Soviets. Although they eventually stood up, Russia had no external enemies at that time to pressure it, the Polish army had suffered from budget cuts and there was no moral authority to which to bring this calamity. Telegrams came to Roosevelt in 1933 but by then the focus of American foreign policy with Russia was one of reconciliation as it sought and achieved diplomatic relations then for the first time since the revolution.²⁵

Little could be done to slow down the Russians in World War II principally because they became our allies. Illustrative of how limited our ability was to hold the Russians accountable is that for years it was able to blame the Katyn massacre on the Germans including at the Nuremberg trials..

Perhaps the most shocking sequel to Nazi evil is the research of the Holocaust Memorial Museum of the past decade. Undertaking the grim task of documenting all the ghettos, slave labor sites, concentration camps and killing factories that the Nazis set up throughout Europe they found some 42,500 sites all over Europe. One researcher, Dr. Martin Dean was quoted as saying that despite the denials of many German citizens, many more than came forward must have known of the widespread existence of the Nazi camps.²⁶

The concerted efforts to destroy Polish culture and life, sadly was only secondary to the extermination of all Jews (3 million of which were Polish).

*The author is grateful to Jennifer Kusmer of Bellarmine University for her able research and editing assistance.

²⁵ Snyder, Timothy,

²⁶ Lichtblau, Eric. "The Holocaust Just Got More Shocking." *New York Times*. N.p., 1 Mar. 2013. Web. 5 Sept. 2014. <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/03/sunday-review/the-holocaust-just-got-more-shocking.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0>.

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