Timothy Snyder: Germany's Historical Responsibility for Ukraine

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On 20th June 2017 Timothy D. Snyder held this lecture at an expert talk at the German Bundestag on German historical responsibility for Ukraine organised by the political group of Alliance 90/The Greens. The expert talk was also attended by Ukrainian Ambassador Andrij Melnyk, Hanna Hopko, Speaker of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Ukrainian parliament, Ukrainian essayist Jurko Prokhasko, the Kyiv born writer Katya Patrovskaya, the historian Wlfried Jilge, Katrin Göring-Eckardt, speaker of the Green political group at the Bundestag, Marieluise Beck, Speaker on Eastern European Affairs, and Manuel Sarrazin, Speaker on EU-Affairs of the green political group at the Bundestag. A video of the whole expert is avialable via this link [2].

See the Video of the lecture of Timothy Snyder on Germany's historical responsibility for Ukraine:

Transcript

Timothy D. Snyder

German?s Historical Responsibility for Ukraine

Sehr geehrte Damen und Herren,

I'm going to speak in English. I'm going to speak English, because this is a subject on which I want to make sure to speak very precisely.

There was a famous interview - I?m speaking of Hannah Arendt - where Hannah Arendt was asked: ?Was bleibt?? And she said: ?Es bleibt die Muttersprache.? And in a certain way I had that feeling these last six months. I've never spoken so much English in my live as in the last six months. Because so many of the themes of Hannah Arendt and so many of the things that I think I've learned about history from Russians, from Ukrainians, from Poles and others, so many of these lessons so many of these themes are now relevant to my homeland, to the United States of America.

So when we ask: ?Why historical responsibility or why German historical responsibility?? I want to begin from that point of view. I want to begin from an universal point of view. I'm not coming to you as an American saying we've understood our past. And therefore everything is going well in our country.

On the contrary, I think it is very important for all of us, whether things are going well or things are going badly, whether Americans or Germans or Russians, to be humble about of various weaknesses in dealing with our past. And above all, to be realistic, to be sensitive, to be concerned about our failures to deal with our own national past can have surprisingly great and immediately and painful consequences for the present and for the future.

So when we ask, as the (Ukrainian ? note editor) Ambassador did quite rightly, why should we be discussing historical responsibility just now, why when Russia has invaded and occupied a part of Ukraine, why when Brexit negotiations has just begun, why when a whole series of elections between populists and others is being carried out across Europe, why when the constitutional system of the United States of America is under threat from within, why in this moment should we talk about historical responsibility?

My answer is that, it is precisely for those reasons that one must talk about historical responsibility. There are many causes of the problems within the European Union, there are many causes of the crisis of democracy and the rule of law in the United States. But one of them is precisely the inability to deal with certain aspects of history.

So, what I say, I'm not coming to you from the position that Americans have figured this out. On the contrary, let me begin talking about Germany by talking about the United States. Why do we have the government we have now? In some significant measure it is because we Americans have failed to take historical responsibility for certain important parts of our history.

How can we have a President of the United States in 2017 who is irresponsible on racial issues? How can we have an Attorney General in 2017 who is a white supremacist? Because we have failed to deal with important questions of our own past.

Not just the history of the Second World War. It might not come clear from this distance how radically the current president and administration is revising the American attitude towards the Second World War. But, when our foreign policy is labeled ?America first? we are referring to an isolationist and very often white supremacist movement which was meant to keep America from entering the war against fascism.

When we commemorate the Holocaust without mentioning that the Holocaust involved Jews, when a presidential spokesman says that Hitler only killed his own people, we're in a very different mental and moral world than we were just a few months ago.

But, it's not just that. We also have a presidential administration where the President wonders

aloud why we?ve fought the Civil War. Why was after all, that there had been a conflict in America about slavery. Now, I'm not just mentioning this because as Marie Beck alluded to I take every opportunity now to involve myself in the domestic politics of my own country. But rather, because this question of slavery precisely, this question of what a colony is like, what an empire is like leads us directly to the blind spot, what I take to be the blind spot in German historical memory.

As you will all know, the American Frontier Empire was built largely by slave labor. As we don't always remember, it was precisely that model of frontier colonialism of a frontier empire build by slave labor that was admired by Adolf Hitler.

When Adolf Hitler spoke about the United States it was generally, before the war at least, with admiration. And it was a question for Hitler who will the racial inferiors be, who will the slaves be in the German eastern empire? And the answer that he gave, both in ?Mein Kampf? and in the second book and in practice in the invasion of 1941, the answer was ?the Ukrainians?.

The Ukrainians. The Ukrainians were to be at the center of the project of colonization and enslavement. The Ukrainians were to be treated as *Afrikaner* or as *Neger*. This word was very often used, as those of you who read German documents from the war will know. By analogy with the United States the idea was to create a slavery driven exterminatory colonial regime in Eastern Europe with the center was going to be Ukraine.

You have been told many times what results from this. So let me just briefly summarize. The point of the Second World War from Hitler?s point of view, the purpose of the Second World War from Hitler's point of view was the conquest of Ukraine. It is therefore senseless to commemorate, to remember any part of the Second World War without beginning from Ukraine. Any commemoration of the Second World War that involves the Nazi purposes, the ideological, economic, political purposes of the Nazi regime, must begin precisely from Ukraine.

Now this is not only a matter of theory. This is a matter of practice. German policies, the policies that we remember, all of them focused precisely on Ukraine. The hunger plan with notion that tens of millions, *zig Millionen*, people are going to starve in the winter of 1941, *Generalplan Ost* with its idea that millions more people will be forcibly transported or killed in the five, ten or fifteen years to follow, but also the final solution, Hitler's idea of the elimination of Jews, all of these policies hung together in theory and practice in the idea of an invasion of the Soviet Union, the major goal of which would be the conquest of Ukraine.

The result of this ideology, the result of all of this, the result of this ideology of this war was that some three and a half million inhabitants of Soviet Ukraine, three and a half million inhabitants of Soviet Ukraine ? civilians ? were victims of German killing policies between 1941 and 1945. In addition to that three and a half million about three million Ukrainians, inhabitants of Soviet Ukraine, died as soldiers in Red Army or died indirectly as a consequence of the war.

Now these numbers are numbers for inhabitants of Soviet Ukraine alone. Of course, the numbers are greater when it includes the entire Soviet Union. But, it's worth being specific here about the difference of Ukraine and the rest of the Soviet Union. For two reasons, the first is Ukraine was the major war aim. Ukraine was the center of Hitler's ideological colonialism. But beyond that, in practice, in practice all of Soviet Ukraine was occupied for most of the war which is why for Ukrainians today war is something that happens here as it

supposed to elsewhere.

Hitler never planned to conquer any more than ten per cent of Soviet Russia. And in practice German armies never occupied more than five per cent of Soviet Russia and that for a relatively brief period of time.

Now, Russians suffered in the Second World War in a way that is unthinkable to west Europeans, in a way that is unthinkable even for Germans. But nevertheless, when we think about the Soviet Union, the place of the Soviet Ukraine is very special even by comparison to Soviet Russia. In absolute numbers, more inhabitants of Soviet Ukraine die in the Second World War than inhabitants of Soviet Russia ? in absolute terms ? and these are calculations of Russian historians ? in absolute terms. Which means in relative terms, in proportional terms Ukraine was far, far, far more risked than Soviet Russia during the war.

In other words, it is very important as Marieluise Beck precisely and correctly formulated to think of the German *Vernichtungskrieg* against the Soviet Union. But on the center of this *Vernichtungskrieg* precisely is Soviet Ukraine.

So if we want talk about German historical responsibility for Russia ? very good. But that discussion must begin with Ukraine. Ukraine is on the way to Russia. And the greatest malicious intention and the greatest destructive practice of the German war was precisely in Ukraine. Therefore, if it is going to be serious about German responsibility for the East, the Ukraine must be in the first sentence.

This also goes for the longest and most earnest and I think the most important discussion having to do with German responsibility in the East, and that is German responsibility for the mass murder of the Jews of Europe. That is another discussion which makes no sense without mention of Ukraine. As I was walking to this parliament building, I passed on the street the famous picture of Willy Brandt. Willy Brand before the monument to the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. Willy Brand kneeling famously before the monument for the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. This is an important turning point in the history of German self-recognition of German responsibility. But I ask you to think back not to Willy Brandt in Warsaw 1970 but to think of Jürgen Stroop in Warsaw in 1943. Jürgen Stroop, the German police commander who put down the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, who issued the orders for his men to go with flame-throwers from basement to basement to murder the Jews of Warsaw who were still alive. When Jürgen Stroop was asked ?Why did you do this??, ?Why did you kill the Jews who were still alive in Warsaw Ghetto?? his answer was ?*Die ukrainische Kornkammer.*? Milk and Honey from *der Ukraine*. Even in 1943, Jürgen Stroop was thinking as he?s killing Jews in Warsaw of Ukraine. He's thinking of the German colonial war in Ukraine.

The Holocaust is integrally, inorganically connected to the *Vernichtungskrieg*, to the war in 1941. And it is inorganically and integrally to the attempt to conquer Ukraine. This is true in three ways. The first is, Ukraine is the cause of the war. Had Hitler not had the colonial idea to fight a war in Eastern Europe to control Ukraine, had there not had been that plan, there could not have been the Holocaust. Because it is that plan that brings German power into Eastern Europe where the Jews lived.

Secondly, the actual war in Ukraine brings the *Wehrmacht*, brings the *SS*, brings German police to the places where Jews could be killed.

Which is the third point: the methods. It became clear to Germans in 1941, that something like

a Holocaust could be perpetrated, because of massacres in places like Kamyanets Podilskyi or more notoriously, Babi Yar on the edge of Kiev. It was there that the first time not only in the history of the war but for the first time in the history of humanity tens of thousands of people were killed by bullets in a continuous large scale massacre. It was events like this on the territory of Ukraine precisely that made it clear that something like a Holocaust could happen.

What is this mean? It means that for every German who takes seriously the idea of responsibility for the holocaust must also take seriously the history of German occupation of Ukraine. Or, to put it a different way, taking seriously the history of the German occupation of Ukraine is one way to take seriously the history of the Holocaust.

How do we evaluate the question of German responsibility? What about the Ukrainians themselves? Shouldn't Ukrainians themselves being carrying out discussions about what happened in occupied Ukraine during the Second Word War? Isn't Ukrainian nationalism also a theme that should be discussed? Of course, it is. I made my entire career writing about Ukrainian nationalism. That's why I could be introduced as a professor at the Yale University. Because I wrote about Ukrainian nationalism. Because I wrote about Ukrainian nationalists and the ethnic cleansing of Poles in 1943. Because I published the first article in a western language about the role of the Ukrainian police in Holocaust and how that lead to the ethnic cleansing of Poles in 1943.

The Ukrainian nationalism is a real historical tendency and it ought to be studied judiciously, as some members of the audience here have done better and more recently than I. But, if we are speaking not in Kiev but in Berlin if we are speaking of German historical responsibility we have to recognize that Ukrainian nationalism is one consequence of the German war in Eastern Europe. Ukrainian nationalism was a relatively minor force in inter-war-Poland. It was paid by the German *Abwehr* as many of you will know. Ukrainian nationalists in polish prisons were released precisely because Germany invaded Poland in 1939. When Germany and Soviet Union jointly invaded Poland in 1939 destroying the polish state this also destroyed the legal political parties including the legal Ukrainian parties which up until that point were much more important than Ukrainian nationalists.

So as I say, if we're in Kiev then we must discuss the role of Ukrainian nationalists in the Holocaust and in collaboration. When I was in Kiev in September to commemorate the 75th anniversary of Babi Yar, that was the point precisely I made. But if we're in Germany, it's very important that Ukrainian nationalism been seen as part of German responsibility. It's not something that can block German responsibility. It's not an excuse to avoid German responsibility. Ukrainian nationalism was part of German occupation policy. And when you occupy a country you have to take responsibility for the tactics and policies of occupation that you chose. Ukrainian nationalism must not be a reason for Germans not to think of their responsibility. It is in fact one more reason to think *of* German responsibility.

I've probably spoken long enough on that theme. It is very important that we speak about Ukraine. We are not only speaking about nationalists yes or no. Nationalists are a relatively small part of Ukrainian history. They are a relatively small part of the Ukraine present.

When we think about the German occupation of Ukraine we have to remember some very simple banal points that are often escape out attention. Like for example, there is no particular correlation between nationality and collaboration. Russians collaborated, Crimean Tatars collaborated, Belarusians collaborated. Everyone collaborated. There is no, as far as we can

tell, correlation between ethnicity and collaboration with the partial exception of the *Volksdeutsch*, of course. But in general there is no correlation between ethnicity and collaboration.

Something else to remember: the majority, probably the vast majority of the people who collaborated with the German occupation were not politically motivated. They were collaborating with the occupation that was there and an occupation that is a German historical responsibility. Something that is never said, because it is inconvenient for precisely every one, is that more Ukrainian communists collaborated with the Germans than did Ukrainian nationalists. This doesn't make sense and so no-one says it, but it is precisely the case. Vastly more members of the communist party collaborated with the German occupation than did Ukrainian nationalists. And for that matter very many of that people who collaborated with the German occupation had collaborated with soviet policies in the 1930ies.

These points although they are very basic and they are completely obvious, when you think about them, are typical of Ukrainian history. They are typical for the fact that Ukraine was ruled first as part of Soviet Union and then under an incredibly bloody and devastating German occupation.

When we think about the way that occupation ended we often overlook certain basic points, like this: far, far more Ukrainians died fighting against the *Wehrmacht* than fighting on the side of the *Wehrmacht*. Incomparably more Ukrainians were fighting against the *Wehrmacht* than on the side of the *Wehrmacht*. Which is not something that one can say about any country that is considered being an ally. It's not something that one can say for example about France, which is why there is no official French history of the Second World War and why there will never be an official French history of the Second World War even under Macron. There are some things Macron cannot do and one of them will be this. He will not write the official history of the Second World War in France. Because more French soldiers fought on the axis side than on the allied side.

More Ukrainians died on the allied side than French. More Ukrainians fought and died on the allied side than British. More Ukrainians fought and died on the allied side than Americans. More Ukrainians fought and died on the allied side than French, British and Americans put together ? put together.

Why do we not see this? Why do Germans not always see this? Because we forget that Ukrainians were fighting in the Red Army. We confuse the Red Army with the Russian Army, which it most definitively was not. The Red Army was the army of the Soviet Union in which Ukrainians because of the geography of the war were substantially over-represented.

When we thing about the way occupation ended, we also have to remember where Ukrainians were most of the time. That Ukrainians suffered in the German occupation ? again roughly 3.5 million civilians, mostly children and women killed, and again, roughly 3 million Ukrainians who died in the uniform of the Red Army fighting against the *Wehrmacht*.

Where does this leave Germany? And why is this more complicated than it might otherwise seem to be? As an historian I know that the history of Ukraine is unfamiliar and it can seem complicated. But this is not the only problem. Part of the problem as I suggested when I mentioned my own country at the beginning has to do with habits of mind, habits of mind related to colonization, habits of mind related to wars of aggression, habits of mind related to the attempt to enslave another people. The attempt to enslave another people cannot be

innocent even for the generations to come. The attempt to enslave another people, a neighboring people will leave its mark if not directly confronted.

And to make matters worse, we're of course not in an environment in Europe today where these discussions can be always take place dispassionately. We are in a very precise moment where German attempts to discuss German responsibility are always already, always simultaneously parts of a discussions carried out form elsewhere about responsibility.

So we ask, why all these basic points are not remembered? Why is it not always remembered that Ukraine was the center of Hitler's ideology? Why is it not always remembered that Ukraine was the center of German war planning? Why is it not always remembered that Ukrainians were intended slaves of Germany? Why is it not always remembered that Ukrainians were understood racially by Nazi ideology? Why is it not always remembered that if you want to understand the holocaust we have to start with Ukraine? Why is it not always remembered that about 6.5 million inhabitants of Soviet Ukraine died as a result of German occupation?

There are lots of reasons. But one of them is the mental temptations left over by colonization. The tendency to overlook a people, which was not regarded as a people. All the of the language about Ukraine as a failed state, or Ukrainians not as a real nation, or Ukrainians divided by culture, *in der deutschen Sprache*, that?s not innocent. That is not innocent. That is an inheritance of an attempt to colonize a people not regarded as a people. Judgments about Ukraine, where Ukraine is held to other standards, the application of terms like, there is not being a Ukrainian nation, or there is not being a Ukrainian state, if those things are said in German without a direct confrontation with the German attempt to enslave Ukrainians ? those words are not innocent. Those words have to be reflected historically in Germany.

There is a particular Problem with all of this, which I'm going to mention last and that I mention briefly, which is that temptations for Germans to avoid responsibility ? which is always a great temptation ? is encouraged by precisely Russian foreign policy. It is Russian foreign policy to divide the history of Soviet Union into two parts. There is the good part which is the Russian part. And there is the bad part which is the Ukrainian part. I can sum this up: liberation ? Russian, collaboration ? Ukrainian. That is the line that they follow very consistently and in this country (Germany ? note, editor) to create a fact. Because Russian foreign policy regards the German sense of responsibility as a resource, precisely as a resource to be manipulated.

The great temptation here is that German, which has done so much and which in many ways is so exemplary in its treatment of a the past, will fail in this centrally important area of Ukraine in part because of the temptation that Russia offers. It is so easy to confuse *Sowjetunion* with *Russland*. It happens all the time. But it is not innocent. Russian diplomats do it. But no German should do it. No German should confuse *Sowjetunion* with *Russland*. That's simply should not ever happen.

The way that Russia handles its memory policy is to export irresponsibility. It's to tempt other countries into the same attitude towards Ukraine that it has itself. And this is particular evident in this concept of Ukrainian nationalists. Which is a real historical phenomenon. But it's vastly, vastly inflated in a discourse between Russians and Germans. Ukrainian nationalists, Ukrainian nationalism was the reason given or one of the reasons given for the Great Famine in 1932 and 1933. Ukrainian nationalism was one of the reasons given for the terror in 1937 and 1938. Ukrainian nationalism was one of the reasons given by Stalin for the mass deportations of inhabitants of Soviet Ukraine after the Second World War. And Ukrainian

nationalism was the reason given for the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014. There is a common genealogy here and a temptation precisely for Germans. Because if the war was all about nationalism than why would Germans oppose it? If Ukrainian government was nationalists than why should Germany do anything to stop Russia?

The danger is here that you (Germans ? note, editor) enter into a kind of Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of the mind where Germans agree with Russians that the evils that came from Berlin and from Moscow to Ukraine are going to be blamed on Ukrainians. It?s so easy. It?s so comfortable. It?s so tempting to say: Haven?t we Germans apologized enough? Aren?t we the model for anyone else? It?s such a tempting trap to fall into.

But I can say, and I can say this from experience, experience as an American, if you get the history of colonization and slavery wrong it can come back. And your history with Ukraine is precisely the history of colonization and slavery. And if the remnants of German nationalism which are still with you on the left and on the right meet up with the dominance of Russian nationalism, official Russian nationalism, if you find common ground there, if the common ground that you find is, it?s all the fault of Ukraine, why should we apologize, why should you remember, this is a danger for Germany as a democracy precisely.

It's up to Ukrainians ? and this is work I do much more often ? it's up to Ukrainians to take responsibility for Ukrainian collaboration, for Ukrainian participation in German occupation. It's also up to Ukrainians to figure out the Ukrainian role in Stalin's policy of terror, rather than claiming that those were simply Russian policies. Because they weren't. They were Soviet policies in which Ukrainians also played a role. That is historical work for Ukrainians to do.

When I was in Ukraine last in September talking about Babi Yar, when I was standing in front millions of Ukrainian television viewers trying to talk about these things in Ukrainian, the point that I tried to make was, you don't remember Babi Yar for the Jews, you remember Babi Yar for yourselves, you remember Holocaust because it is part of building up a responsible society and hopefully in future of functioning democracy in Ukraine. That holds for them. But it also holds for me. And it holds for you. It holds for all of us.

The point of remembering German responsibility for the six and a half million deaths caused by the German war against the Soviet Union ? those deaths in Ukraine ? , is not to help Ukraine. Ukrainians are aware of these crimes. Ukrainians live, the children, grandchildren, great grandchildren of that generation, they live with the legacy of these crimes already. The point is not to help Ukraine. The point is to help Germany ? Germany as a democracy particular in this historical moment as we face Brexit, as we face election after election with populists, as we face declining and decreasingly democratic United States of America. Precisely at this moment Germany cannot effort to get major issues of its history wrong. Precisely at this moment German sense of responsibility has to be completed.

Perhaps up until now this was just a matter for Germans. Perhaps at the time of *Historikerstreit* in the 1980ies the history of the Holocaust was only a matter for Germans. It has to be done for Germans. But the consequences are international. Getting the history of Ukraine wrong in 2013 and 2014 had European consequences. Getting the history of Ukraine wrong now when Germany is the leading democracy in the West will have international consequences.

That's where I leave you. Thank you very much.

Kategorie:
Dossier [3]
English [4]
Videos [5]
Reden [6]
Thema:
Ukraine [7]

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[3] https://marieluisebeck.de/kategorien/dossier
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[7] https://marieluisebeck.de/themen/ukraine