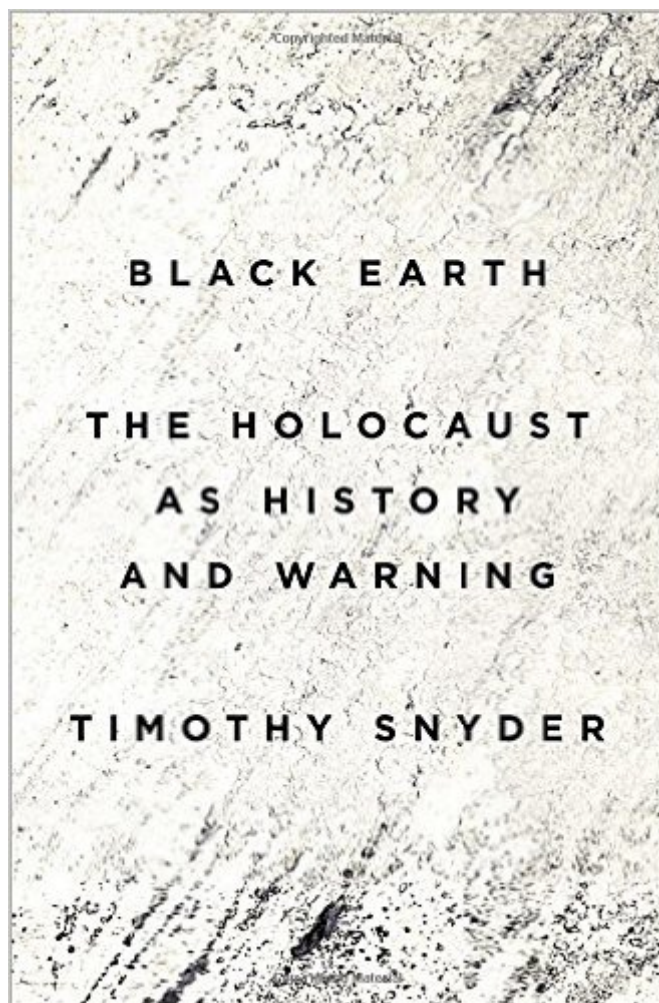


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# Black Earth: The Holocaust As History And Warning



## Synopsis

A brilliant, haunting, and profoundly original portrait of the defining tragedy of our time. In this epic history of extermination and survival, Timothy Snyder presents a new explanation of the great atrocity of the twentieth century, and reveals the risks that we face in the twenty-first. Based on new sources from eastern Europe and forgotten testimonies from Jewish survivors, *Black Earth* recounts the mass murder of the Jews as an event that is still close to us, more comprehensible than we would like to think, and thus all the more terrifying. The Holocaust began in a dark but accessible place, in Hitler's mind, with the thought that the elimination of Jews would restore balance to the planet and allow Germans to win the resources they desperately needed. Such a worldview could be realized only if Germany destroyed other states, so Hitler's aim was a colonial war in Europe itself. In the zones of statelessness, almost all Jews died. A few people, the righteous few, aided them, without support from institutions. Much of the new research in this book is devoted to understanding these extraordinary individuals. The almost insurmountable difficulties they faced only confirm the dangers of state destruction and ecological panic. These men and women should be emulated, but in similar circumstances few of us would do so. By overlooking the lessons of the Holocaust, Snyder concludes, we have misunderstood modernity and endangered the future. The early twenty-first century is coming to resemble the early twentieth, as growing preoccupations with food and water accompany ideological challenges to global order. Our world is closer to Hitler's than we like to admit, and saving it requires us to see the Holocaust as it was -- and ourselves as we are. Groundbreaking, authoritative, and utterly absorbing, *Black Earth* reveals a Holocaust that is not only history but warning.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Author Q&A: Timothy Snyder

1. What is new about BLACK EARTH? How is it different from other history books about the Holocaust? It is a global history, in that it starts from how Hitler sees the planet, and concludes with how we see our world. It takes the familiar story of Hitler's rise to power and asks: Why then did almost all of the Holocaust happen beyond the borders of prewar Germany? It takes seriously the lives and experiences of Jews and others beyond Germany, and explains how the destruction of their political communities led to the destruction of their lives.

2. The subtitle of the book calls the Holocaust not only a history but also a "warning." What do you mean by this? The Holocaust was unprecedented, but it is now a precedent. We know what people are capable of doing, but we might not understand why they would do it and under what conditions. My concern is that we have misunderstood the Holocaust, focusing on what is convenient for us and ignoring what I am convinced are some of the basic lessons: the risks of ecological panic, which was at the root of Hitler's ideology and appeal, and the politics of state destruction, which is what made the Holocaust happen. Few of us link the Holocaust to fears of scarcity and removal of states, but we should.

3. How many languages did you read in to research the book? German sources are important, but they also have their limits. No matter how critical we are with Nazi sources, we can't see what Nazis didn't see unless we use other sources as well. The political sections of the book draw on sources from throughout Europe, so that we have a sense of what the continent was like, for Jews and others, before its political order was destroyed. The sections about murder and rescue use the main languages of European Jews at the time, which means Yiddish, Polish, and Russian. We have a great deal of untapped material in these languages. The book is based mainly in German, Polish, Yiddish, and Russian sources, but there is a bit of Hebrew, French, and Ukrainian as well.

4. In what way, if any, is the story of the Holocaust personal to you? It is of course in some ways personal. But my own personal worry is this: that too much of what is written and published about the Holocaust is about memory and feeling, and not enough is about history and understanding. I spent years of my life with the testimonies and I treasure them. But here my purpose is to write a history of the Holocaust that not only does justice to experience but helps us to see how such an event can and did take place.

5. What are readers likely to find most surprising about the argument you present in BLACK EARTH? I try not to think too much about this, and just to get the argument right. In America it might be this: we think the problem with Germany was that it was an all-controlling state that persecuted its

citizens, whereas the Holocaust was in fact possible because Germany created special institutions that destroyed neighboring states and created zones of anarchy. 6. What are some of the common misconceptions about the Holocaust? That Hitler was a madman—“in certain ways he certainly was, but he was also a skilled tactician many of whose ideas were politically effective and some of whose ideas still resonate today. That the Holocaust happened chiefly in Germany—it happened entirely outside the borders of prewar Germany. That it concerned German Jews—97 percent of the victims were Jews from elsewhere. That it happened in concentration camps—Jews were in fact murdered over death pits (roughly half) and in special gassing facilities that were not in fact camps. That the perpetrators were all Nazis—many of the Germans who killed were not Nazis, and roughly half of the killers were not Germans. That it is somehow beyond politics—in fact it is incomprehensible without the special kind of politics that arose in zones of state destruction. That it cannot be understood—it can, and it must. 7. How does the concept of ‘statelessness’ figure into your understanding of the Holocaust, and why is that issue particularly relevant today? We think of the Holocaust as racial killing, but this falls short. Hitler did not see the Jews as a race, but as parahuman beings who had to be removed somehow from the planet. In practice the easiest way to do so was to kill them, usually in places near where they lived, in eastern Europe. The bulk of the Holocaust happened in occupied Poland and in the occupied Soviet Union, states that the Nazi leadership declared to be subject to destruction and illegitimate. Polish and Soviet Jews were thus treated as non-citizens, and almost all such people who fell under German control were killed. Interestingly, the Holocaust could proceed elsewhere in Europe only insofar as states were weakened or chose to deprive their Jewish citizens of citizenship. The Nazi aspiration to kill Jews was complete, but in practice it stopped at the passport. Only Jews who were separated from states were killed. 9. In a previous interview with Shelf Awareness, you said: “I sometimes think that in America things have gone so far that when we say ‘Nazi’ we are closing a discussion rather than opening it. I have no problem with the concept of evil, which figures in the book; but I am sure that we cannot protect ourselves from evil with labels.” What do you mean by this? Both the victims and the perpetrators of the Holocaust were human beings. To recognize the humanity of the victims is difficult in one way, since it requires from us that we see the mass murder of the Jews as an unbelievably vast accumulation of the murder of individual children, women, and men. To recognize the humanity of the perpetrators is difficult in another way, since it suggests that many of us could become killers in the right (or wrong) historical setting. In our own historical moment, we tend to focus on the victims and have a certain tendency to bracket off the perpetrators with the label

But at what point exactly does a human being become a Nazi? Or, more broadly, since most of the killers were not in fact Nazis, for what reasons do neighbors kill neighbors and strangers kill strangers? Answering those questions requires reconstructing the political world that Hitler imagined and that his regime in some measure created; it also requires seeing how not just thousands or tens of thousands but millions of people in some way or another co-created that world, either by becoming killers or by benefiting in some way from the killing.

10. Could something like the Holocaust really happen again? If so, which countries or leaders show the most disturbing warning signs? The Holocaust was exceptional in that it began from the idea that an entire people, the Jews, had no place on planet Earth, and it was exceptional because it involved an attempt to kill every Jew under German control. That said, in the decades since the end of the Second World War we have seen a whole series of events that resemble the Holocaust in some way. Even though we should and must recognize the ways in which the Holocaust was unprecedented, we can also acknowledge its importance by allowing it to help us to understand related events. Nazi power was special because it deliberately destroyed states. But in general, mass killing and ethnic cleansing take place where states are weak or collapsing or during civil wars. Nazi ideology was special because it began from the premise that Jews were using false universal ideas, ethical and scientific, to create an ecological crisis for Germans. But ecological crisis can return, fears of scarcity can motivate other developed societies, and other ideologies that translate ecological panic to aggression against groups can emerge. In the world today there are disturbing elements: a changing climate that is creating scarcity and the fear of scarcity; a growing China that is anxious about food and water; a Russia that denies the legitimacy of statehood in its neighborhood; a United States where citizens sometimes deny climate change and sometimes believe that destroying states will bring good outcomes; an Africa where mass killing already takes place with depressing regularity. These are all possible elements of some coming crisis; much depends on whether we choose to see them as such.

11. What do you hope readers will take away from BLACK EARTH? I would like for readers to understand the Holocaust not only in the depth of its horror but as a contemporary history, one not too distant from us, one that we not only can understand but should understand.

12. What can we "as ordinary citizens" do to prevent a future Holocaust? The whole second half of the book is about rescue, ending with the righteous few individuals who rescued Jews without any external motivation or support from outside institutions. Their lesson of virtue is one that we must absolutely remember and try to live by. More Jews would have survived had more non-Jews taken risks to save them. But we must also be realistic about ourselves and our limitations. In general, people during the Holocaust behaved better when political institutions

endured and worse when political institutions were destroyed. If we are serious about preventing events like the Holocaust, we must not only remember virtue, we must also work to preserve and improve structure. In our own historical moment, this requires, I think, that we relearn the lessons of the Holocaust itself, try to improve rather than simply critique the states that we have, and use the state to reduce the risks of the real ecological crises that can bring the politics of ecological panic. Prevention now is less emotionally resonant than rescue later. But I hope that readers of my book, even as they identify with the rescuers at the end, will understand that we should try very hard to avoid placing human beings in situations where almost all of us would fail the test.

Every time there's a new upcoming book on the Holocaust one is compelled to ask what could be different about it. While no amount of literature on this unspeakable tragedy can suffice to truly allow us to comprehend it, it's worth asking whether we can potentially learn new insights about it that could lead to understanding and wisdom. Fortunately historian Timothy Snyder's book answers this question with a resounding yes. Snyder has produced an original and nuanced interpretation of the Holocaust that goes beyond almost every single simplistic and overarching belief that we may harbor about it. It is a valuable addition even to the vast literature on the topic. The principal argument of Snyder's book is that the Holocaust was made possible by the obliteration of the identity of the state in various countries. While it wouldn't have been possible without Hitler's murderous racial beliefs, it would have been far more difficult to implement had not the right political conditions existed in the various countries which the Nazis conquered. Where the state retained its prewar political, bureaucratic and legal machinery far fewer Jews were killed; where it did not Jews saw almost complete obliteration of their communities. And it is this emphasis on the state as the enabler or disabler of the Holocaust that leads Snyder to see both disturbing complicity and hope in human nature. This is because the state is yours; it is not foreign. Your own state abandoning you is far damner than any kind of foreign invasion. The key role that the preservation or destruction of the state played in saving the lives of Jews is apparent in the fact that the vast majority of Jews - including German Jews - were killed by the Nazis in stateless zones. These zones were either actively created by them or already existed in Eastern European nations because of previous Soviet occupation. Where the Soviets had already caused destruction of the state the Nazis found a pliable population that was more willing to aid them in identifying, deporting and murdering Jews. This non-Jewish population was motivated in many cases by simple greed or a yearning to return to a more affluent way of life by encroaching on Jewish assets or Jewish property, and they could act out their unsavory desires

precisely because no state existed to intervene. The removal of the Jews removed competition and made it convenient for them to climb a social and economic ladder that was previously inaccessible to them. Resentment against the Soviet Union further fueled their complicity. That's the disturbing part – the fact that human nature can cause ordinary people to engage in misdeeds for very human and practical reasons. One of the outstanding features of Snyder's book is the set of comparisons that he uses to illustrate his principal hypothesis. For instance he compares Estonia to Denmark and makes a convincing case that it was only the latent anti-Semitism and the double occupation of the former by first the Soviets and then the Nazis leading to the destruction of the state that made it such fertile ground for the Holocaust. In contrast, Denmark's occupation was relatively peaceful and the state stayed intact, leading to life for almost all Danish Jews. Similarly Snyder points out various forms that the state took or failed to take in countries like Latvia, Poland, Greece, Italy, Ukraine and Hungary and shows us that the destruction of Jewry in these countries was remarkably proportional to the degree to which the state and its various manifestations survived. Poland of course is the outstanding and the most horrific example of the Holocaust and this is exactly where there was a complete destruction of the state, first through the cleansing of the Polish intelligentsia by the Soviet NKVD and then through the Nazi occupation. It was Poland's status as a truly stateless zone of occupation that allowed the Nazis to construct their infamous death camps there. It was in Poland that the large numbers of Jews from almost every other country were transported and murdered, precisely because this stateless environment could completely deprive them of citizenship, language, means and finally life. This discussion of statelessness also allows Snyder to demolish the myth of Auschwitz as somehow being the exemplary symbol of the Holocaust. First of all, the Holocaust was really initiated by the SS Einsatzgruppen death squads who fanned out into Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, killing millions by shooting them over pits. The case of the Einsatzgruppen also illustrates the power of the state; in places like France where the army (an instrument of the state) had a firm hold over the population, the death squads could do lesser damage than in areas where they were the first to enter. Auschwitz came later, but while the infamous camp was undeniably instrumental in the story of the Holocaust, as Snyder points out, the vast majority of Jews were actually killed outside Auschwitz in other stateless zones. As Snyder rightly asserts, the deification of Auschwitz as the overarching symbol of the Holocaust allows us to conveniently mark it apart as a special location where humanity somehow ceased to exist, making us forget the disturbing fact that the Holocaust was largely carried out outside that location by ordinary people who were more similar to us than we think. It is this similarity to people who we would like to conveniently think were very different from us

that leads Snyder to an epilogue in which he issues a warning: while the extermination of entire races may seem like a completely alien idea to us right now, the factors motivating Hitler and those who surrounded him – a craving for Lebensraum or living space, a simple desire for agricultural and industrial resources, belief in the perceived superiority or inferiority of people, an unshakable conviction that the currents of history must flow a certain way – are still very much among us. The motivating factors of political differences, pseudoscientific reasoning, resource scarcity, and religious strife that existed in 1935 still saddle the world in 2015. While we may continue to find it very hard to comprehend the Holocaust, a recognition of its history and its legacy can certainly help us understand. The last chapters of Snyder's book are what allow us to see hope in the midst of despair. They speak of the thousands of individuals of all creeds, nationalities, economic classes and moral sensibilities who sheltered and rescued Jews from all over Europe. These people's motivations were often as complex as human nature itself. Sometimes they were motivated by their religion, sometimes in spite of it. Sometimes simple greed played a role, and sometimes it seems to have been genuine altruism. Sometimes the driving force was childlessness (as when people adopted orphaned Jewish children), sometimes it was simple neighborliness. Sometimes the characteristics of the rescuers defied rationalization, as in the case of the German policeman who helped a Jewish family escape to America in 1938 and then later killed Jewish children in Ukraine in 1942. Interestingly the actions of these people also mirror the importance of the state; for instance it was diplomats who were successful in saving the largest numbers of Jews, often just as the countries in which they were operating were losing the last vestiges of state identity. In addition, and perhaps not surprisingly, there were stark differences in people's behavior depending on whether they were operating under conditions of lawfulness or lawlessness. The neat classification of rescuers into "good" and "bad" is as problematic as any other binary analysis of human nature, but what's crystal clear is that people saved other people even if their actions defied reason. That's the one take-home message from the book that should stay with us. Even in the middle of a world gone mad there existed pockets of sanity and humanity that defied comprehension. And while the ordinary facets of human nature and the state which Snyder documents hopefully allow us to understand and remember, it is the sometimes incomprehensible but very real actions of the righteous few that allow us to hope.

History, particularly as it is taught in our public schools, comes to us filtered down through the perspectives of those involved. Nations want to see themselves in the best light, and we, as



citizens, want to accept that what we're taught is the unbiased truth. The whole truth; not just the bits and pieces considered relevant by those in charge of textbooks and curriculum. Often only time and distance allows us to see clearly the entire picture, exactly as it played out, without distorting the view. Timothy Snyder gives us that gift here, and it's one we need to accept and acknowledge. This book is not an easy read. We can't expect it to be. The content is harsh, disturbing, and frightening. The facts are laid out for us here and we can't look away. We can't make excuses. Millions of innocent people were murdered, while nations stood by and allowed it, or even assisted. The content here is also complex. It's not a book you're likely to read quickly. This is one of those books that takes time to absorb. That being said, the author does a phenomenal job of putting it all together. The timeline is consistent and precise. We start well before WWII, back when the USSR was formed and forced starvation was taking place in the Ukraine. We see how this, along with other events, paved the way for Hitler's Holocaust. Nothing occurs in a vacuum, least of all international events of this magnitude. Hitler, as vicious as he was, did not act alone. Germany did not act alone. Somewhere, the spark turned into a flame. Along the way, others were complicit. Nowhere have I read such an intricate, detailed, terrifying account exposing the truth of WWII. This is a timely read. History does not repeat itself, exactly. We don't have a second Hitler on the rise. We aren't about to exterminate Jews. But when you read this account, the parallels between events then and events now are unmistakable. The author summarizes this in his closing, and it should scare everyone out of their stupor. Everyone needs to read this. Until we truly understand and acknowledge our past mistakes we are doomed to recreate them in countless, horrifying ways.

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