

---

REVIEW ESSAY

---

Bloody Germany  
*Berghahn's View of  
Twentieth-Century State Violence*

— ◆ —

HUNT TOOLEY

Volker Berghahn, a prolific and well-respected historian of the modern world, is Seth Low Professor of History at Columbia. His historical interests have revolved around the history of Germany in the past century and Europe as a whole in the era of the two world wars. Although the title of his 2006 book *Europe in the Era of the Two World Wars: From Militarism and Genocide to Civil Society 1900–1950* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press) might lead one to expect a survey of European history during a certain period, the book is in particular an investigation of the terrible violence of events in the first half of the twentieth century; hence, it is not a general history, but an extended essay on the crescendo of brutality in the Western world and the rapid subsidence of this violence by 1950. As an analysis of state brutality and mass trauma, Berghahn's book is therefore akin to the recent historical works of Mark Mazower (2000), Eric Weitz (2005), Benjamin Lieberman (2006), and others.

Any broad historical examination turns on the selection of evidence, the evaluation of cause and effect, and the placement of emphasis. This kind of contingency is normal for the historian, as indeed it is for most scholars. When the subject is as dark and perplexing as the history of brutality, the historian who seeks to explain it must rummage around in a uniquely vast and murky space, among even larger and more

---

Hunt Tooley is a professor of history at Austin College.

*The Independent Review*, v. XII, n. 4, Spring 2008, ISSN 1086–1653, Copyright © 2008, pp. 607–612.

confusing historical rubble heaps than usual. With “macrohistory” in this sense, the author’s ideology or prejudices are difficult, probably impossible, to suppress. Berghahn’s book is no exception to this tendency.

His analysis begins with a particular economic, or perhaps *industrial*, understanding of Europe at the turn of the twentieth century: the increasing adoption of mass-production methods and what we might put down as a combination of Taylorism and Fordism. Berghahn sees real progress in the standard of living and the modes of life in European societies where government intervention controlled the “vagaries of capitalistically organized markets” (p. 8) and where increased consumption, by the working “masses” in particular, led to a rising standard of living and had a “civilizing effect.” Berghahn unequivocally roots for the “civilizing” side, which he generally equates with an economically interventionist, centralized, parliamentary regime along the lines of the U.S. New Deal.

Yet he perceives that this trend toward civilization was opposed by the aggressive designs of elites and individuals with a violent, aggressive outlook. In particular, “[w]ith the introduction of universal military service millions of young men were recruited into a highly coercive institution devoted to the administration of violence in foreign and civil war” (p. 12). Berghahn finds in European “ethnonationalism” and colonialism the sources of this increasingly violent disposition. In an insightful discussion, he makes direct connections between German brutalities in Africa (against the Hereros, for example) and aggressive, social Darwinist modes of thought that produced the Schlieffen Plan and other indications of the increasing European propensity to resort to violence. By World War I, the evolution of European society had become a struggle between the forces of civilization and the forces of violence, both attempting to work through the state to achieve their objectives. He locates the forces for civilization within the peace movement, the democratic movements of European countries, and the European socialist parties.

His largely traditional account of World War I is designed to showcase the advances of the forces of violence over the forces of peace and civilization. He also focuses more on Germany than on the other belligerents, both in identifying the war’s instigators and in discussing its “totalization.” Yet he emphasizes the broad international extent of the dehumanization and brutalization that the war and its aftermath caused.

Berghahn’s account of the Weimar Republic, the rise of Nazism, and the Final Solution are understandably meaty. He has personally contributed a great deal to the historiography of these events. His earlier research on the economic nature of Weimar problems and, in particular, on the structure of international investment between 1924 and 1933 also bears on his story substantially.

Nearly the whole of chapter 4, “Violence Without Bounds, 1935–1945”—the book’s primal scene—is devoted to German violence: the rise of the Nazis, World War II, the brutal occupation regimes, the Holocaust. In these fifty pages (more than one-third of the text altogether), he tells this well-known story succinctly, emphasize-

ing the continuities of the German experience from Ludendorff and the military dictatorship in World War I to Ernst Jünger's brutalizing postwar literary works, the violence-laden years of the Depression and the Nazi accession to power, the structural processes that fostered the German quest for a "living space" empire, and the related mass killings of Jews and other *Untermenschen* in factory-like settings. Berghahn's spare and gripping account of these events incorporates much recent historical literature.

In his view, the Allies assisted in the shaping of a Europe devoted to peace and civilization at the war's end. Marshall Plan investment, Fordist mass-production plans, New Deal interventionism, and stronger centralized governments created a new socioeconomic Europe that Berghahn suggests is an Americanized version of the continent, particularly characteristic of postwar West Germany, which was less prone to commit violence and more prone to produce and consume peacefully.

One might have considered Germany's centrality in Berghahn's account to be one of the book's strengths if the volume had been appropriately titled to indicate that focus. As it stands, however, this concentration on Germany—in particular, the nearly exclusive treatment of Germany in the key chapter "Violence Without Bounds"—points up a significant problem in Berghahn's conceptualization of the topic. He states clearly that all of the totalitarian systems were linked to rising violence, but he describes almost exclusively the violence committed by Germans and their auxiliaries. He views the National Socialists as violent wielders of state power in the form of terror and murder. His treatment of the Soviets' mass violence is quite different.

Berghahn's Lenin, for example, sometimes carries out terror, but is always forced to do so in response to capitalist threats. This classic explanatory mode of Marxist historiography holds throughout the book. Berghahn gives much less attention to Soviet communism than to National Socialism in any case, but in those passages where he does deal with violence on the left, he tends to rationalize it: the Communists were forced to use violence in self-defense against foreign or domestic threats. We may contrast Hitler's "violence without bounds," which constitutes the whole of chapter 4, with Stalin's "experiment in violence," to which Berghahn devotes five pages.

In these few pages, the author writes that although the Stalinist regime was "no less bloody" than its German counterpart, "Stalin's policies of violence must be seen in a dialectical relationship with developments further [*sic*] to the west" (p. 76). Hence, the West's fear of communism led to bitter opposition, which, in Berghahn's view, forced Lenin and Stalin to carry out harsh measures. Later on, Stalin encountered even more opposition domestically. His program for financial independence ("socialism in one country") is, as Berghahn depicts it, simply another aspect of this "dialectic of violence" (pp. 77–80).

Berghahn's treatment of Stalinist violence produces the most lopsided justificatory spin in his account of the financing of Stalin's industrialization plans. Given "socialism in one country," he writes, "[t]here was henceforth only one source from which he [Stalin] could marshal the financial means for his plans. . . . Stalin aimed to

extract the resources from the wealthy *kulaks*. Since he did not expect these peasants to volunteer their assets, he decreed the forced collectivization of their properties. When the *kulaks* resisted, Stalin retaliated with great brutality” (p. 78). This passage is of course a reference to Stalin’s forced collectivization of farms in the Soviet Union and the engineered starvation of farmers in Ukraine, North Caucasus, Byelorussia, and other areas. Along with deporting perhaps 13 million human beings of all ages, the Soviet regime confiscated harvests and produced an artificial famine that killed—through starvation or related diseases such as typhus—approximately 6 million human beings from 1932 to 1937, with many more dying from the terror system in other ways, thousands of them simply shot during forced collectivization. Scholars of this episode have estimated that between 10 and 13 million Soviet citizens died as the result of forced collectivization, “dekulakization,” and the associated artificial famine. Perhaps Berghahn is speaking ironically when he refers to “wealthy *kulaks*,” but historians have known for a long time that the “wealthy” kulaks earned only half again or perhaps twice the average peasant income in 1929 or 1930; peasants were decreed to be kulaks because they owned two or three cows instead of one or because they had a metal roof on their farmhouse or because they employed a farmhand (Lewin 1966; Conquest 1986).

Berghahn’s description of this episode hardly suggests the extent of one of the largest mass murders in history, and a further detail of his description is troubling, indeed: “In desperation, the *kulaks* slaughtered their animals and destroyed their grain reserves. . . . Although it might be argued that the slaughter of so many draught animals benefited the mechanization of Russian agriculture and also opened professional opportunities to trained agronomists, technicians, and veterinarians, there is no denying that Stalin’s program amounted to a human and economic catastrophe about whose extent we are still incompletely informed” (p. 78). Thus, the author seems to say that we may safely blame the catastrophe on the victims themselves. His description of the famine contains not a single indication that the regime shot millions, deported millions, starved millions. As he presents the case, the kulaks simply destroyed all the grain (when, by the way, the most exaggerated Soviet estimate of kulak “control” over grain production was only one-third of total production) and hence starved themselves.

In this case as in others—and in consonance with recent scholars such as J. Arch Getty and Robert Thurston, who downplay Soviet violence as accidental or nonexistent—Berghahn is forced to ignore or to justify as self-defense nearly all violence on the left so as to make his dichotomy hold up: violence and rightwing dictatorship versus civilization, liberal or socialist regimes, and peace. In so doing, he ignores a raft of recent historical studies and the many contemporary sources on the violence carried out by collectivist regimes—Marxist regimes, in particular.<sup>1</sup> The post-Soviet world in

---

1. Among the more widely read studies, one must count Rummel 1994; Courtois et al. 1999; Pohl 1999; Williams 2002; and Macloughlin and McDermott 2004.

the 1990s gave historians a good, if incomplete, look into the Soviet archives, and other Communist states made available much documentation on dictatorship from the left that calls into question not only Berghahn's defense of leftist regimes, but also his assertion that the age of violence ended by 1950.

In a sense, Berghahn's depiction of violence by the left may be less related to recent research than to the "historians' debate" of the mid-1980s in Germany and among historians of Germany. This "*Historikerstreit*" began with assertions by historians Ernst Nolte, Michael Stürmer, and others that Soviet crimes were comparable to Nazi crimes and in many ways connected. In response, philosopher Jürgen Habermas, historian Fritz Fischer, and others derided these assertions as ways of falsifying the past and excusing German crimes, in particular the Holocaust. Indeed, the whole discussion of how Germans might "overcome their past" (*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*) emerged from this debate as a central issue in discussions of German history and society. Berghahn's work seems almost a belated entry in this acrimonious debate, and he clearly views the German state (including the Nazi state, but not excluding earlier German regimes) as being on the side of the "men of violence." As in the left's arguments in the *Historikerstreit*, which took place mostly in the editorial pages of German newspapers, Berghahn seems to pay much less attention to the violent regimes that carried out their violence in the name of communism. Although he admits that blood was spilled, he contrasts the left's violence favorably with the Nazis' terror, under the assumption that the two basic kinds of total-state terror regimes lie at opposite ends of the political spectrum.<sup>2</sup> Here, one might make reference to Nicholas Werth, one of the coauthors of *The Black Book of Communism* (Courtois et al. 1999), who considers the National Socialist Holocaust to have been quite different from Stalinist terror, but who nonetheless does not write off Stalinist terror as an accident or as simply a defensive response.<sup>3</sup>

In the end, Volker Berghahn offers us in this small book many important insights on imperialism, the aggressive twentieth-century European states, the influence of international finance and local economics on the dynamics of European history, and many other issues. Yet in view of his failure to offer full disclosure and a full critique of atrocities on the left, the book remains strangely incomplete on some fundamentally important subjects.

## References

- Applebaum, Anne, and Anatole Lieven. 2000. Was communism as bad as Nazism? *Prospect* 56 (October). Available at: [http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/article\\_details.php?id=3442](http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/article_details.php?id=3442).
- Conquest, Robert. 1986. *The Harvest of Sorrow: Soviet Collectivization and the Terror-Famine*. New York: Oxford University Press.

---

2. For a discussion of this proposition from its Marxist origins onward, see Gregor 2000.

3. See the lively debate in Applebaum and Lieven 2007.

- Courtois, Stéphane, et al. 1999. *The Black Book of Communism: Crimes, Terror, Repression*. Translated by Jonathan Murphy and Mark Kramer. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Gregor, A. James. 2000. *The Faces of Janus: Marxism and Fascism in the Twentieth Century*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press.
- Lewin, M. 1966. Who Was the Soviet Kulak? *Soviet Studies* 18, no. 2 (October): 189–212.
- Lieberman, Benjamin. 2006. *Terrible Fate: Ethnic Cleansing in the Making of Modern Europe*. New York: Ivan R. Dee.
- Macloughlin, Barry, and Kevin McDermott, eds. 2004. *Stalin's Terror: High Politics and Mass Repression in the Soviet Union*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Mazower, Mark. 2000. *Dark Continent: Europe's Twentieth Century*. New York: Vintage.
- Pohl, J. Otto. 1999. *Ethnic Cleansing in the USSR, 1937–1949*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood.
- Rummel, R. J. 1994. *Lethal Politics: Soviet Genocide and Mass Murder since 1917*. Edison, N.J.: Transaction.
- Weitz, Eric D. 2005. *A Century of Genocide: Utopias of Race and Nation*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
- Williams, Brian Glyn. 2002. The Hidden Ethnic Cleansing of Muslims in the Soviet Union: The Exile and Repatriation of the Crimean Tatars. *Journal of Contemporary History* 37, no. 3: 323–47.

# SUBSCRIBE NOW AND RECEIVE A FREE BOOK!



“*The Independent Review* does not accept pronouncements of government officials nor the conventional wisdom at face value.”

—**JOHN R. MACARTHUR**, Publisher, *Harper’s*

“*The Independent Review* is excellent.”

—**GARY BECKER**, Nobel Laureate in Economic Sciences

Subscribe to [The Independent Review](#) and receive a free book of your choice such as *Liberty in Peril: Democracy and Power in American History*, by Randall G. Holcombe.

Thought-provoking and educational, [The Independent Review](#) is blazing the way toward informed debate. This quarterly journal offers leading-edge insights on today’s most critical issues in economics, healthcare, education, the environment, energy, defense, law, history, political science, philosophy, and sociology.

Student? Educator? Journalist? Business or civic leader? Engaged citizen? This journal is for YOU!



Order today for more **FREE** book options

**SUBSCRIBE**

*The Independent Review* is now available digitally on mobile devices and tablets via the Apple/Android App Stores and Magzter. Subscriptions and single issues start at \$2.99. [Learn More.](#)

