From the Great War to the Bloodlands: Rethinking Europe’s History

On November 10, 2014, Timothy Snyder, the Bird White Housum Professor of History at Yale University, gave a lecture entitled “From the Great War to the Bloodlands: Rethinking Europe’s History.” Over the past few years, Snyder’s book *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* (Basic Books, 2010) has attracted much attention, positive as well as negative, for his treatment of the mass killings that occurred in parts of Eastern Europe in the 1930s and 1940s. In this lecture, Snyder presented his theory about modern political violence, in which he sought to explain why so many Europeans, both soldiers and civilians, died in extremely violent wars and genocide during the twentieth century. To explain his theory of violence simply, Snyder utilized a comparative approach that explored contrasting concepts such as colonization and decolonization, integration and disintegration, expansion and oppression, and nationalism and empire.

Professor Snyder began by discussing how the forces of colonization and decolonization interacted in Europe and contributed to the causes of both World Wars. He asserted that the Great War was a prolonged, natural result of decolonization within Europe itself. He explained the different types of European empires that existed before the outbreak of the Great War in 1914 – land empires or maritime empires. He described how each of the land empires (Romanov, Hohenzollern, Ottoman, and Habsburg) broke apart during or after the Great War, while the maritime empires (Great Britain, France, and the United States) emerged victorious and helped create the post-World War I boundaries of Europe. The idea of national self-determination had also won the war, and the empires that had crumbled were divided into numerous sovereign nation-states, such as Czechoslovakia, Poland, Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania.

Snyder explained that these fragile new nations of the Interwar Period, which were mostly located in Eastern Europe, the region he has designated the “bloodlands,” needed protection to develop and remain autonomous nation-states, but the existing maritime empires failed to defend them from outside colonizing forces. In the 1930s, the Great Depression distracted the U.S., England, and France, which meant that no powerful nations were watching out for these smaller, more fragile states. Snyder asserted that this failure contributed greatly to the chaos of the Interwar Period and led directly to the Second World War. Without the victors of the Great War to protect the new sovereign nations’ borders, both Germany and the Soviet Union expanded and colonized these fragile nations. This seizure of the “bloodlands” by outside powers with assertive ideologies and objectives meant that the people who lived in Eastern Europe became susceptible to their new rulers’ desires, even when those desires included mass killings of parts of the local population.

Emily Lipira is a M.A. student in Russian, East European, and Eurasian Studies, with a primary focus on Russian history and Russian language. Her research interests include modernity, identity, and culture in early twentieth-century Russia in the decades around the 1917 revolutions. She received a B.A. in history from Northwest Missouri State University in 2008 and a M.A. in Modern European History from Saint Louis University in 2010.