

4

The worst of both worlds: Captain Witold Pilecki between Hitler and Stalin¹

In the late 1960s, during one of my first visits to Warsaw, I found myself travelling by public transport along Rakowiecka Street in the southern suburb of Mokotów with a young Polish woman named Sonia, who had been deputed by kind friends to look after their exotic and no doubt naïve visitor. At a certain moment she pointed discreetly at the forbidding walls of a building we were passing and whispered, with a tremor of dread in her voice, that it was a jail. Then, even more nervously, she explained to me that there were political prisoners inside. She sought my confirmation that there were such prisons in Australia too. I said there were not, which she obviously found incredible. By that time, there were far fewer political prisoners in Mokotów prison than there had once been. But, during the Stalinist period of Poland's postwar history, many wartime anti-Nazi resistance fighters were held there for extended periods of brutalisation and torture, and multiple executions were not uncommon.

Sonia was probably acutely aware of that period, and perhaps apprehensive that it might return and take an anti-Semitic turn. The politics of the ruling Polish United Workers' Party (PZPR) certainly

¹ First published as a book review of Witold Pilecki's *The Auschwitz Volunteer: Beyond Bravery* (Aquila Polonica, 2012) in *Inside Story*, 3 Oct. 2013, insidestory.org.au/the-man-who-volunteered-for-auschwitz.

seemed to be tilting in that direction. For historical reasons, Jews had been prominent in the Polish communist regime of the Stalinist era, including within its brutal security police. A hardline, anti-Semitic faction within the regime was seeking to exploit that fact in its bid to seize power and, in 1968, it launched an internationally conspicuous hate campaign against Poland's surviving Jews.

By that time, the notorious Jewish communists of the Stalinist-era security establishment had been removed from office and, in some cases, punished, and the manoeuvre did not succeed. But its failure came only after a major crackdown on the opposition-minded intelligentsia, which also contained many Jews, had pushed half of Poland's surviving Jewry, including Sonia, into emigration.

It is unlikely that Sonia would have heard of the name, much less the exploits, of one of Mokotów's prisoners, the Polish cavalry captain Witold Pilecki, who was held and tortured there for nearly a year before being executed on 25 May 1948. For many decades following his judicial murder, Pilecki was an unperson, his heroic career unknown to the younger generation of his compatriots.

Pilecki features as one of the six most outstanding resistance fighters of World War II in the British historian Michael R.D. Foot's book *Six Faces of Courage* (1978). But because of the Western squint on the history of the war, Pilecki is not well known among Anglo-Saxon readers either. And that means any introduction of the remarkable book, *The Auschwitz Volunteer*, to English-language readers must also introduce its equally remarkable author.

Witold Pilecki was born in 1901 into a family that had been forcibly resettled to Tsarist Russia because of his grandfather Józef Pilecki's involvement in the Polish uprising of 1863, for which Józef had spent seven years in Siberian exile. As a boy, Witold moved with his family to the ethnically Polish (and Jewish) city of Wilno, now Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania. He joined the secret Polish scout movement, which led naturally to his teenage involvement in the Polish independence struggle during the latter stages of World War I, including the underground resistance to invading Bolshevik forces near Wilno. (Despite presenting themselves as the liberators of the Tsarist 'prison of the peoples', the Bolsheviks were in fact doing their best to restore the Russian empire, in a new 'proletarian' guise.)

Following Poland's re-emergence as an independent state, Pilecki joined the newly formed national Polish army and took an active part in the Polish–Bolshevik war of 1919–20, notably in the defence of Warsaw in 1920. Still in his teens, he was twice decorated. After the war, he returned to civilian life, working to restore his family estate while remaining active both as a reserve officer and through charitable work, for which he was again decorated. By all accounts a devoted husband and father, he also engaged in musical and artistic pursuits, including painting and writing poetry. He was later to pen a poem in Mokotów Prison to his torturer-in-chief, the notorious Colonel Józef Róžański.

In 1939, Pilecki was mobilised as a platoon commander in the Polish cavalry. Contrary to the hardy myth, his poorly equipped unit did not undertake quixotic charges on horseback against the advancing Germans, but it did succeed in destroying seven tanks and three aircraft. The Polish armed forces received no help from their Western allies and were soon outgunned by the enemy. Retreating to the south-east, Pilecki and his men were overrun by Soviet forces entering Poland to claim their share of the spoils of the secret clauses of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact, which carved up Eastern Europe between Germany and the Soviet Union.

Discouraged by Poland's isolation and the unequal struggle on two fronts, and feeling abandoned by the high command and political leadership who had retreated across the south-eastern border, many Polish armed units also headed west via the same circuitous route, but Pilecki's unit remained. Its last battles were fought as a partisan force.

In November 1939, Pilecki helped found a pioneering resistance group called the Secret Polish Army, which became one of the building blocks of the Home Army (*Armia Krajowa*, or AK), the biggest armed resistance formation in German-occupied Europe for much of the war. Pilecki's Secret Polish Army derived from the prewar nationalist right, which had numbered extreme nationalists and anti-Semites among its members. But Pilecki's simple personal and military code of God, Honour, Fatherland (*Bóg, Honor, Ojczyzna*), did not lead him in that direction. Under his leadership, the Secret Polish Army quickly accumulated thousands of followers.

Hitler's occupation regime quickly began implementing its plan to decapitate the Polish intelligentsia, Polish culture and Polish education; to re-Aryanise any putative Germans; to seize children with promising Germanic traits for adoption by Germans; and generally to reduce the nation to a leaderless mass of slave labourers to be worked to death or deported to make *Lebensraum* for German settlers. Large groups of Poles were being arbitrarily seized and despatched to the Auschwitz concentration camp in the south-western Polish region of Silesia, which, with its mixed Polish-German population, had been annexed directly to the Third Reich.

The fragmentary but alarming reports about Auschwitz that reached the underground led Pilecki to propose to his superiors that he allow himself to be incarcerated in Auschwitz to organise a resistance movement there and send back intelligence. Pilecki seems to have been the only person who ever volunteered to become an Auschwitz prisoner. After his commanders agreed to the plan, he inserted himself in a German mass round-up in Warsaw. Along with some 1,800 other people seized in the round-up, he was transported to Auschwitz, where he was to spend two years and eight months in Auschwitz I, the *Stammlager*, or main camp, in the complex.

Auschwitz was not yet the mass-murder facility it was later to become, nor had adequate reports of the vicious conditions there filtered through to Warsaw. Even for someone as hardened to resistance as Pilecki, arriving at the camp after a nightmarish journey without food or water was nonetheless a severe shock. Brutally extracted from their freight trucks under blinding lights, beaten, kicked and rifle-butted by SS men and herded by snarling dogs into lines, the new arrivals were then marched into the camp. In his report, Pilecki described the scene as follows:

On the way, one of us was told to run to a post at the side of the road; he was followed by a burst of automatic weapons fire and mown down. Ten men were then dragged out of the ranks at random and shot with pistols as 'collective responsibility' for the 'escape' which the SS themselves had staged. All eleven of them were then dragged along by leg straps. The dogs were teased with the bloody corpses and set on them. All this to the accompaniment of laughter and joking.

We approached a gate in a wire fence over which could be seen the sign 'Arbeit macht frei' ['Work makes you free']. It was only later that we learned to understand it properly.

Beyond the gate they were set upon by a horde of *kapos* (prisoner trusties) in the pyjama-like garb that was later to become so familiar throughout the world. Demanding in German to know what the newcomers had done in their former life, the *kapos* beat to death any who acknowledged they were educated professionals. The amplified voice of the Auschwitz deputy commandant, Fritz Seidler, could be heard promising the newcomers that they would be allowed to live no more than six weeks; any who did would be regarded as having stolen food, and for that they would be sent to a penal company where they could be quite certain they wouldn't survive long.

Pilecki himself endured two beatings, losing some teeth and only just managing to suppress groans of pain that might well have led to worse. Such was his introduction to Auschwitz.

The daily routine of the camp proved to be very like that welcome. Prisoners were systematically starved and deprived of sleep, sanitary facilities were grotesquely inadequate, and the daily labour was backbreaking. Unless they found a niche away from the everyday grind, prisoners would indeed die soon enough, even if they weren't killed for some alleged infringement of discipline or 'hygiene'. The day was made longer by repeated parades and rollcalls, and anyone failing to appear because of hunger, fatigue or disease was likely to be routed out and murdered on the spot to encourage the others to better behaviour.

Although some of the *kapos* and some of the German civilians employed at the camp showed some residual signs of human decency, most did not. The *kapos* were often the worst of all. Two ethnically Polish early arrivals at Auschwitz had ascended to the most senior *kapo* positions and were loathed and feared even more than the SS. Pilecki refers to the two contemptuously as 'ex-Poles'.

Pilecki's report describes the conditions in the camp in grim detail, with a keen eye for camp sociology, poignant scenes and brutal patterns of behaviour, and at times with black humour. Some of the time, things got worse; at others, they eased slightly. But throughout his lengthy stay, the remorseless attrition continued. Because the prisoners were

given consecutive numbers based on the time of their arrival in Auschwitz (Pilecki was 4859), it became possible to determine attrition rates by counting the numbers who had survived from any group of one hundred. After two years, each group of Pilecki's approximate vintage had been reduced to fewer than 10.

This was genocide, slow-motion genocide compared to the hideous mass-murder regimes instituted for Europe's Jews in the adjoining Auschwitz–Birkenau camp and elsewhere, but genocide nonetheless. And camp SS officials frequently reminded the prisoners that the purpose was to finish them all off in the end. Historians estimate that at Auschwitz alone, some 80,000–90,000 ethnic Poles perished, and over a million Jews.

Pilecki survived through a combination of physical fitness, resilience, exceptional resourcefulness, coolness under pressure and good luck. At one point he was allocated a skilled labourer's job by a junior camp official who was desperate to perform a private task for a superior. Despite not having the necessary skills, he inserted himself plausibly into the role. From there, one tradesman's job led to another and he escaped the worst of the barbarous camp conditions.

These jobs gave him the contacts, the relative freedom of movement and, above all, the longevity to build up his organisations of intelligence agents and soldiers-in-waiting. Through the networks they created, they were sometimes able to help themselves and others – or even save prisoners from impending disaster or exposure – and also to conduct guerrilla warfare against the worst of the camp administrators. (An example of the latter involved collusion with sympathisers on the staff of the prison hospital – itself typically a staging post to death or execution – to infect their hated tormentors with the typhus-carrying lice that were endemic in the prisoner population.)

Pilecki began organising this elaborate resistance structure very soon after his arrival, basing it on groups of five, no members of which, apart from himself, had a comprehensive sense of the extent or membership of the organisation as a whole. Though by no means the most senior military prisoner in the camp, his natural authority and remarkable flair for organisation enabled him to unify all the existing underground cells and groups in the camp under his leadership. The resulting Union

of Military Organisation included activists from various points on the political spectrum of pre-war Poland who, in normal circumstances, would not have been prepared to shake hands with one another.

By recruiting collaborators from among inmates who had become camp functionaries of one sort or another, Pilecki's organisation was able to mitigate some of the worst features of camp life. It also gathered information about the crimes of the occupation regime and transmitted reports to the underground leadership via the occasional prisoners who were released from the camp (often thanks to large bribes offered to German officialdom in Warsaw or Cracow) or the very small minority who managed to escape.

Neither release nor escape were viable options for any of the Jews being caught up in the mass shipments to Auschwitz and other death camps. Pilecki's report describes how some time before Hitler's 'final solution' began to be implemented, Jews among the prisoners in Auschwitz I were forced to write letters to relatives throughout Europe describing the circumstances there as very favourable. Conditions were even eased for a time to facilitate this operation. The purpose, he later concluded, was to deceive the many thousands of Jews still to arrive at Auschwitz into believing that they were simply being resettled, and thereby to avoid mass panic or desperate rebellions as they were prepared for the gas chambers.

Pilecki's central objective was to ready an underground fighting force to rise up and overpower the camp administration in the event of an Allied or AK attack on Auschwitz. Sadly, this worthy and understandable ambition proved to be unrealistic. Despite the information provided by the Union of Military Organisation to the underground leadership, and through them to the Allies, about the mass torture, starvation, widespread murder and hideous conditions prevailing in Auschwitz, the Allies never undertook significant action to disable, much less liberate, the camp. And the AK was never strong enough to mount such an operation successfully on its own.

Even when the Germans began mass gassings at Auschwitz, initially and 'experimentally', of Soviet POWs, then increasingly of Jews – all of which Pilecki reported – there was a marked reluctance in Allied

circles to believe the reports. As with the news of the Holocaust conveyed to the Allies by the legendary Polish courier, Jan Karski, they tended to be dismissed as exaggerated or inaccurate.

After more than two-and-a-half years in Auschwitz, Pilecki began to detect signs that the organisation could be in danger and that his own role could be exposed. If Pilecki, with his overarching knowledge of the underground structure in Auschwitz, had succumbed to extreme methods of interrogation the results for all his colleagues would have been disastrous. With two comrades, he therefore meticulously planned and staged a successful getaway, surviving gunfire from guards in hot pursuit and an encounter with an armed German patrol a little further along the way. For many readers, the gripping description of this adventure in Pilecki's report, extending over 50 pages, will on its own be worth the price of the book.

Over 800 inmates tried to escape from Auschwitz but only 144 succeeded. The failed escapees were invariably executed and, typically, the Germans inflicted collective capital punishment on at least 10 others, who may not have been involved in any way. Pilecki's organisation adopted a policy of discouraging escapes for that reason. At the time Pilecki and his companions decided to escape, however, while conditions in the adjoining Auschwitz–Birkenau death camp were even more hideous, the administration had become milder in Auschwitz I, and a successful escape a short time before had brought no collective punishment.

Having shaken off his pursuers, Pilecki made his way stealthily towards Warsaw. During the journey, by a bizarre coincidence, he met the real owner of the identity he and his underground colleagues had pilfered to forge the documents he had used for the round-up. The false identity helped to protect his underground colleagues and to save him from being blackmailed by threats to his family. The real owner of his *nom de guerre* was startled to meet him, but bore him no ill will and indeed invited him to rest and recuperate before continuing his journey.

Back in Warsaw he immediately resumed his underground activities in AK headquarters, where he was promoted from lieutenant to captain and deployed in the AK Sabotage Command. In his new post, he resumed his efforts to convince his superiors of the need to launch the

attack on Auschwitz that he believed could have enabled the Union of Military Organisation to liberate the camp from within. He also prepared a report on Auschwitz, called the 'W Report' (later 'Witold's Report'), to be transmitted to the Allies, which formed the basis of the longer 1945 version that Jarek Garliński has now translated. The report was a key source of intelligence for the Allies on Auschwitz, but, regrettably, like others of its kind, it did not stir them into action.

On 1 August 1944, the AK leadership took its fateful decision to unleash the Warsaw Uprising against the German occupation of the capital. In nine weeks of fighting, over 200,000 Poles – men, women and children, civilians, underground soldiers, and medical orderlies alike – were killed. Hitler gave explicit instructions that the city should be razed to the ground in punishment for its outrageous impertinence. Despite his status as an officer, Pilecki volunteered for action as a foot soldier in the uprising. With casualties mounting rapidly, however, he accepted an officer's command, and led some particularly noteworthy acts of armed resistance against the vastly superior firepower of the enemy.

One in particular, in which his unit repeatedly took and retook a strategic building on the main east–west thoroughfare through the city, caused great frustration to the German side. Reviewing the episode, the eminent British historian Norman Davies comments that so long as Pilecki 'threatened this one vital pressure point, the German command was made to feel insecure. One is tempted to suggest that a single company could have won the Rising a fortnight's reprieve.'²

Time was perceived as vital by the uprising's leaders, who were calculating that the Allies would come to their assistance. But Moscow, having used its propaganda broadcasts to Poland to call for the insurgents to rise up, halted its advance on the other side of the Vistula River when they did so, and waited for Hitler to crush the insurrection. With it, Stalin calculated, the powerful national underground movement, which he wanted to replace with his proxy Polish forces, would also be crushed. Stalin even refused to allow the Western Allies to make use of airstrips under Soviet control to the east of the city in their attempts to deliver vital supplies to the insurgents.

2 Norman Davies, *Rising '44: The battle for Warsaw* (New York: Macmillan, 2003), p. 323.

(Flight distances were too great for aircraft to deliver supplies to Warsaw without landing somewhere nearby and refuelling for the return journey to Allied airfields.)

When the leaders of the uprising finally surrendered, Pilecki was taken prisoner and spent several months in German POW camps. On being released in July 1945, he joined the main unit of the Polish armed forces in the west, General Władysław Anders's Second Polish Corps. He soon accepted a mission from Anders to return to Poland under yet another false identity to gather intelligence on the progressive communisation of Poland by the Soviet Army, the Soviet NKVD secret police, and their Polish equivalents. These Polish forces and nascent political structures had been recruited from deportees and exiles in the Soviet Union who had not chosen, or had not had the chance, to join Anders in his evacuation of Polish forces and their families from the Soviet Union to the West. By that time, they had been thoroughly immersed in Stalin's methods by their Soviet masters and fully subordinated to them.

Back in his homeland in October 1945, Pilecki again set about forming a resistance intelligence network. Early in 1946, the government-in-exile in London, deflated by a complete lack of support from the Allies, who had supposedly guaranteed their sovereignty and declared war against Germany in their defence, decided further resistance to Sovietisation of Poland was pointless. They ordered all the partisans still resisting the new occupiers to abandon the struggle, conserve their remaining strength and return to a civilian existence in Poland or seek to escape to the West in readiness for some future reckoning. Pilecki ignored this directive, and also warnings that the Moscow-controlled Polish police apparatus was closing in on him. He also declined to respond to an amnesty offered by the regime in 1947.

He was arrested in May 1947 and spent 10 months in detention while a show trial was prepared against him and a number of others accused of being members of his group. Like all political prisoners in the emerging Stalinist Polish state, he was treated with great brutality, and is known to have been subjected to 'interrogations' by some of the most notorious sadists in the Polish security police. In a final whispered aside to his wife and a family friend at his trial, he told them that in comparison with the communists' torture methods, 'Auschwitz had been kids' play' (*igraszka*).

The trial of Pilecki and others from 'Witold's Group' began on 3 March 1948. Pilecki argued that his spying activities had been carried out on behalf of the Polish army in the West, of which he continued to regard himself as an officer bound by his oath of allegiance to God, Honour, Fatherland. Regime propaganda about the group on trial included the brazenly mendacious theme that they had collaborated with the Nazi occupation.

Pilecki was sentenced to death on 15 March 1948. At the show trial or in separate closed hearings, eight of his colleagues were also sentenced to death for spying against their own country, for which most of them had fought in shocking conditions throughout the German occupation. Two of the nine under sentence of death had their sentences commuted to life imprisonment. Thirteen others were sentenced to jail terms of from three to 15 years. The prosecutor and the president of the court that tried Pilecki had been members of the AK but, when the Soviets and their Polish allies arrived in the country making mass arrests among AK officers, they decided instead to forge careers in the new occupation regime.

Pilecki's wife and others made efforts to have his death sentence commuted, but Poland's communist President Bolesław Bierut declined to exercise his right to do so. Pilecki's supporters had hopes of intervention by the prewar Socialist leader Józef Cyrankiewicz, who had been active in the AK and also survived imprisonment in Auschwitz. Cyrankiewicz, too, had decided to collaborate with the new regime, and ultimately led the rump of his Socialist party into a 1948 merger with the communists to form the Polish United Workers' Party, which dominated communist Poland till 1990. As a reward, he was made Prime Minister of Poland (under communism an important but certainly not the top job) from 1947 to 1952 and again from 1954 to 1970. His alleged achievements as a resistance leader in Auschwitz were much trumpeted by Cyrankiewicz himself and the regime.

But when people begged him to do something to save the life of the doyen of all Polish Auschwitz survivors, he conspicuously declined to do so.³ Indeed, quite the reverse, he gave evidence against him. It has been plausibly argued that Cyrankiewicz saw Pilecki as someone who

3 Andrzej M. Kobos, 'Witold Pilecki w piekle XX wieku', www.zwoje-scrolls.com/zwoje09/text02p.htm.

could undermine his new propaganda persona as an Auschwitz hero and, for that reason, wanted him out of the way. Pilecki is reported to have told a fellow prisoner, Father Czajkowski, that 'if Cyrankiewicz finds out I'm in here, I'll be killed for certain'.

Another source recalled that Pilecki had told her in 1946 he had heard Cyrankiewicz was preparing a speech glorifying his own role at Auschwitz. Pilecki told her he had written to Cyrankiewicz saying, 'I have a document in my possession regarding your time in Auschwitz. If you dare to speak about your role in the Auschwitz resistance, I will make that document public.' The speech was never given.

Cyrankiewicz played a more creditable role in the case of the legendary courier Jan Karski, but it seems likely that he engaged in dishonourable behaviour in Auschwitz, about which Pilecki had been reliably informed. It was characteristic of Pilecki that he did not hesitate to make an enemy of such a highly placed opportunist as Cyrankiewicz, and accepted the consequences. After Pilecki's death, the legend of Cyrankiewicz's doughty deeds in Auschwitz would remain unchallenged until he, too, was dead.

It was also characteristic of the communist *modus operandi* in Poland that they 'captured' and made use of prominent figures who had compromised themselves in some way. Two prewar Polish officers (Zygmunt Berling and Michał Rola-Żymierski) who were recruited to leading positions in Stalin's Polish communist army had been removed from the Polish army for embezzlement before the war.

On 25 May 1948, in Mokotów prison on Rakowiecka Street in Warsaw, Witold Pilecki, the only man known to have volunteered to be incarcerated in Auschwitz in the service of his country, and one of the few who risked immediate death to escape from it again, was executed as a traitor to his homeland with a shot to the back of the head, in the best NKVD tradition, by one Piotr Śmietański. This was a rewarding occupation for Śmietański, who was literally paid by the shattered head, and was kept busy.

From a window in his cell, an imprisoned priest, Jan Stępień, caught one of the last glimpses of Pilecki as he was being led to his death:

I'll never forget that scene. There were two condemned men. Witold Pilecki was the first to appear. His mouth was bound with a white bandage. Two guards led him by the arms. His feet were barely touching the ground. I don't know if he was still conscious. He gave the impression of someone who had fainted. And then came the gunfire.

As with hundreds of other such executions, a jail functionary took the remains of the victim under cover of darkness and dug them into the ground near Warsaw's historic and atmospheric Powązki Cemetery. The terrain in question, known in police code as 'The Meadow', was at the time the location of a rubbish tip. Pilecki's final resting place was not known to his family for many decades, and is still not known exactly. He was not 'rehabilitated' until after the fall of communism in 1990, and only in 2012 was it possible for serious efforts to be undertaken to locate his remains.

Pilecki's manuscript was written as a military report to his superiors, not as a work of history, literature or journalism. It is direct and informal in style, with relatively little care taken to manicure the prose or mould paragraphs. The author had always been far too busy to find time to polish or contemplate publishing it.

As translator, Jarek Garliński has been at pains to retain the informal spontaneity of the original, including Pilecki's frequent use of German terms for camp institutions and the threatening language of the SS and the *kapos*. The son of the distinguished Polish émigré historian Józef Garliński, and himself deeply knowledgeable about the subject matter, Jarek Garliński also provides the reader with extensive and valuable aids to understanding the details of the text. Readers who find some of this detail (the numbers of the various Auschwitz blocks, and their previous designations, for example) superfluous to their requirements can easily bypass it.

The content is fascinating at a number of levels, whether in relation to Pilecki, camp life or the Third Reich in general. Parts of the book can also be read as a factional adventure story in the style of English classics like Eric Williams's *The Wooden Horse* (1949), but one with far greater depth and historical significance than most in that genre. For the outstanding American historian of Eastern Europe, Timothy Snyder, it is a document comparable with the works of Primo Levi and Tadeusz Borowski.

When supplemented by a sketch of Pilecki's life before and after Auschwitz and a description of the fate of his homeland at the hands of both its enemies and its allies, the book conjures up the full tragedy and bitterness of Poland's wartime struggle. As Norman Davies says in his introduction, 'Only when one grasps the true horror of his fate can one comprehend what the Second World War in Europe was really about'.⁴

It should not be said (though it sometimes is) that Pilecki's or Poland's struggle was entirely in vain. But it is understandable that some of the loyal rank and file who lived to tell the tale turned into sharp critics of their former leaders for allowing so much Polish blood to be shed in what was, they argued in retrospect, a futile cause. One can only conjecture as to whether hints of similar thoughts passed through Pilecki's mind in the last days before he was led away to be shot by a group of his fellow Poles. (He would probably have called them all 'ex-Poles', just as his compatriots took to contemptuously calling collaborators with the new regime 'acting Poles'.)

Inevitably, this account of Pilecki's life also raises again the old debate about which of the two great tyrannies of the era, Nazism and Stalinism, was the worse. Some participants in the debate, apparently trying to preserve the memory of Stalinism as an errant but nonetheless defensible part of the Marxist legacy, denounce any comparison as immoral. Those who opposed the introduction of communism into Eastern Europe, they sometimes argue, were fascists, anti-Semites, Hitler's pawns and so on, implying that they all got what they deserved. Most on the left take a more judicious view and, indeed, it was often writers from the left (Isaac Deutscher, George Orwell and others) who brought Stalin's crimes to Western attention.

Survivors' views of the two tyrants tend, for obvious reasons, to depend on personal experience. For some Ukrainians, for example, Hitler represented the hope, however illusory that proved to be, for a national life, even independence, and for deliverance from mass, deliberate starvation. They greeted his invasion naïvely with the traditional bread and salt of welcome. For Jews, by contrast, and for urgently compelling reasons, Stalin and Soviet communism represented deliverance from mass genocide and perhaps the promise

4 Pilecki, *The Auschwitz Volunteer: Beyond Bravery*, p. xiii.

of a better life. The inhabitants of Snyder's 'bloodlands',⁵ notably the Poles and the Baltic peoples, typically experienced not one but three successive hideous invasions. Academic objectivity and exquisite moral judgement can be difficult for anyone with such life experiences.

'All the indications are that Soviet instruments of repression consumed more human beings than their Nazi counterparts', Norman Davies asserts confidently in his introduction to *The Auschwitz Volunteer*. Stalin's era and system lasted much longer than Hitler's so, on some interpretations of the statistical record Davies is probably right. Most contemporary historians of the period incline to the view that the Soviet statistics made available since Mikhail Gorbachev's perestroika point to a rather lower death rate under Stalinist rule than had previously been assumed. But the statistics may be imperfect – it was Stalin, after all, who suppressed the results of the 1937 Soviet census. Be that as it may, for most people there is something uniquely horrible about the death camps and industrialised mass murder of Nazi Germany, with which even the Gulag does not compare.

Snyder has weighed the pros and cons and come to the conclusion that, while initially Stalinism was worse, Nazism overtook it in brutality and became clearly the more evil of the two.⁶ What might Pilecki have thought of it after mature reflection in exile in the history department of an American university?

5 Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin* (New York: Basic Books, 2010).

6 Timothy Snyder, 'Hitler vs. Stalin: Who was worse?', *New York Review of Books Blog*, 27 Jan. 2011, www.nybooks.com/blogs/nyrblog/2011/jan/27/hitler-vs-stalin-who-was-worse/.

This text is taken from *A Difficult Neighbourhood: Essays on Russia and East-Central Europe since World War II*, by John Besemeres, published 2016 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.