

Goldhagen in Germany

Josef Joffe

When the translation of Daniel Goldhagen's *Hitler's Willing Executioners* was published in Germany in late August, the first printing immediately sold out; within the next few weeks, more than 130,000 copies of *Hitler's willige Vollstrecker* had been shipped to the bookstores. When the author himself appeared in Germany in September, his promotion tour turned into a "triumphal procession," as the weekly *Die Zeit* called it. Goldhagen traveled from Hamburg to Berlin, from there to Frankfurt, and then to Munich—with a small army of reporters and cameramen begging for yet another interview, coaxing him to take part in yet another talk show.

For ten days, it was virtually impossible to open a newspaper or turn on a TV set without confronting a flattering image of the youngish Harvard political scientist ("He looks like Tom Hanks"). Essentially, what he had told the Germans in 600 pages (700 in translation) is this: The Shoah could only have happened in Germany because you—in your Third Reich incarnation—were the way you were. You did it because you alone among the nations were driven by an "eliminationist anti-Semitism" which became complicit in annihilation when the time was ripe.

One might think that the grim verdict would have been enough to turn off the heirs of Hitler and drive them into a boycott, whether sullen or aggressive. The first public discussion in Hamburg attracted six hundred on-lookers; the last one, in Munich, forced the organizers to switch from a medium-sized theater to a symphony hall with 2,500 seats because tickets (\$10 apiece) had sold out within a couple of days. Yet when the book was first published in the US last spring, the reactions of both German press commentators and historians was so hostile that it was almost bizarre. The contrast between the experts' contempt in the spring and the public's unexpected eagerness to hear Goldhagen's case in the autumn deserves more attention than it has had so far.

1.

Hitler's Willing Executioners is an original, indeed, brilliant contribution to the mountain of literature on the Holocaust that has been produced over the last fifty years. Its chief merit is its shift in perspective. Whereas much of the previous writing on the subject concentrated on the victims or on the machinery of destruction, Goldhagen concentrates on the killers and their accomplices. Not on the "desk murderers" like Eichmann and Himmler, but on the "ordinary Germans" of the subtitle. He is mainly concerned not with elite SS men but with simple, lower-middle-class folks—the members of the *Ordnungspolizei* ("order police") who moved in behind the Wehrmacht, rounding up and slaughtering Jews with gusto. These were also the guards of the "death marches" who went on murdering their prisoners even though the war was already lost, even though Himmler, hoping to mollify the allies, in April 1945 had ordered a stop to the slaughter.

These case studies chill the blood. Why would ordinary people kill with enthusiasm, especially, as Goldhagen argues persuasively, when they did not have to? Why did they continue to kill even after Himmler told them to stop? Goldhagen's case studies deepen the mystery. The standard view of the Holocaust is that of a literally dehumanized murder machine—much like a modern car assembly line in which a relatively small number of inspectors

a similar verdict. There, too, we are confronted with "ordinary Germans"—petty officials, train engineers, policemen—who manned and maintained the machinery of death. But the evidence of the film is anecdotal, visual, while Goldhagen's is systematic and rigorous, with almost 200 pages of footnotes and masses of original research. As such, *Hitler's Willing Executioners* has already changed the terms of our understanding. And as

Daniel Goldhagen



and mechanics supervise an army of robots that carries out precision slaughter full time, twenty-four hours a day. We think of an industry of death, ordered by Hitler, designed by Himmler, and executed by Eichmann with the help of a conspiratorial band of SS fanatics—and far away from their own people, in occupied Eastern Europe.

It wasn't so, Goldhagen argues for 600 pages. Up to half a million Germans may have been involved—in the main, apparently normal people like you and me. How could they turn into willing executioners? How could they torture and humiliate their Jewish victims, when, as Goldhagen also shows, refusing to do so would have cost them little or nothing? This is the mystery he sets out to solve. His answer can be put briefly: they could do so because they were Germans, because German culture was pervaded with a peculiar "eliminationist" variant of anti-Semitism that imbued "ordinary Germans" with the conviction that mass murder would be right and just. Without that almost universal complicity, the Holocaust could not have happened.

We have to turn back to Claude Lanzmann's nine-hour film *Shoah* for

the furious debate around the world shows, future research will hardly be able to ignore Goldhagen's findings and conclusions.

2.

The German critics did not wait for the German edition. Hardly had the book come out in the US when more than a dozen pundits and historians pounced on *Hitler's Willing Executioners* as if in a feeding frenzy.¹ First of all, the assailants did not argue against the theory and the facts. Instead, the attack was relentlessly ad hominem, charging the author with malign intentions or insinuating that his origins (as the son of a Holocaust survivor) had led him to indict German culture as a whole. Another line was to pan the book as unoriginal, sen-

¹For a score of German reviews, including a few semi-positive ones, see Julius H. Schoeps, editor, *Ein Volk von Mördern? Dokumentation zur Goldhagen-Kontroverse um die Rolle der Deutschen im Holocaust* (Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe, 1996). Most subsequent citations are taken from this collection.

sationalist, and worthless. A third was to depict it, though obliquely, as an American-Jewish plot against present-day Germany, as an attempt to recycle the past guilt in order to stigmatize the Germans forever.

The relatively young German historian Norbert Frei, born in 1955, launched his attack by saying: "If you want to find an audience in the over-competitive media market of the Nineties, you need a bombastic shtick." As we read on, we learn that the "historical-empirical yield" of the book is meager, that a big chunk is based on "secondary literature," that it offers "few novelties" for those in the know. The message to the public is simple: the book is worthless, sensationalist drivel by a young Harvard punk out to make a name for himself.

Or take Frei's elder, Eberhard Jäckel, born in 1929, and one of the most respected scholars of the Holocaust in Germany. Jäckel said that Goldhagen's book was "poor," a "failure in toto"; it did not measure up "even to mediocre standards"; it was "riddled with errors"; it was "simply bad"; it represented a "relapse into the most primitive of stereotypes." Though frequently invited to do so, Jäckel refused to take part in any of the public panel discussions. During the German Historians' Congress in Munich in September, he declared that the book was "unter Niveau" (in effect, beneath notice), hence not worthy of debate. (The Congress did not put the Goldhagen book on its official program, but in response to criticism in the press, a special panel was hastily arranged.)

Jäckel's colleague Hans Mommsen criticized the book as falling short of the current "state of the art" in Holocaust research: Johannes Heil, an associate of the Berlin Center for Research on Anti-Semitism, thought that Goldhagen's theories were "naive" and not "worthy of a fight." The well-known columnist and politician Peter Glotz deplored the "artificial debates" over the book. Rudolf Augstein, the publisher of *Der Spiegel*, said that book was "pure nonsense."

One can imagine the resentment of scholars who have worked hard for decades on the history of the Third Reich without getting anything like the attention given to Goldhagen. But deeper forces than professional vanity also seemed at work. The message of the early reviews could be summed up as "Don't Read This Book." And this set a pattern: preemptive dismissal not very different from that by a Vatican cardinal in charge of the Index. Secular historians, of course, can't stamp one another's books *verboten*; they just call them "unoriginal" or "banal." Reviewing the reviews, the German historian Hans-Ulrich Wehler concluded: "With irritating speed and spectacular self-assurance, which often helps to conceal ignorance on matters of substance, a consensual defensive reaction [against the book] (*Abwehrkonsens*) has set in."

3.

It is true that Goldhagen's book is vul-

nerable in several respects.² How can an historian indict an entire culture? How do you prove that "eliminationist anti-Semitism" is the factor that explains most of what happened? What about the many other variables—the unique role of Hitler, the overwhelming impact of Nazi totalitarianism, etc.—previous scholars have used to construct multicausal explanations?

Goldhagen has argued beyond the bounds of simple logic. Reaching back to Martin Luther and his murderous tirades against the Jews, Goldhagen then moves forward again, describing a profoundly anti-Semitic German culture as the principal explanation of the Holocaust. As he travels across the centuries, he collapses a great many possible explanations of human history into one huge explanation that falls flat even when examined by an intelligent layman. If German culture was indeed the all-powerful, all-pervasive force that turned perfectly "ordinary Germans" into monsters, where is that force today? One might think that so potent and enduring a cultural tendency wouldn't just vanish from the face of the German earth.

Yet disappear it did after 1945, and for a reason. The political system had changed. Imposed under the guns of the victors, liberal democracy sank surprisingly strong roots in West Germany. Today, Germany is an ordinary member of the community of nations, with only a tiny right-wing party and with as much (or as little) racism as in France, Belgium, or Italy. If culture can be so deeply affected by changing conditions, anti-Semitism could not plausibly serve as the overwhelmingly influential cause of the Holocaust that Goldhagen would like it to be. If Truman and McCloy and Adenauer could prevail in Germany after 1945, there must be more to German history than Luther's poisonous seed.

How can something ("culture") be a prime and deeply rooted cause if it is so quickly overwhelmed by other factors? Goldhagen's premise crumbles even more when it is examined with respect to the history of anti-Semitism in other countries. Anti-Semitism in Russia, let alone its Austrian variant, was at times as "eliminationist" in some of its expressed forms as it was in Germany. Britain, which tolerated murderous pogroms in the Middle Ages, was *judenrein* for 400 years, and so was Spain after 1492. Yet the total physical extermination of the Holocaust was a strictly German project, and other factors beyond a nationally shared antipathy to the Jews must have been involved in it.

Goldhagen has also fallen into the oldest social-science trap of them all: the confusion of different levels of analysis. Having earlier reasoned forward from the attitudes of the Germans to their behavior—saying, in effect, "Only because of their anti-Semitism did ordinary Germans turn into mass murderers"—he then reasons backward from the conduct of the Germans to their culture in a grand circular argument.

²Three critical reviews in the US were by Clive James, "Blaming the Germans," *The New Yorker*, April 22, 1996; Omer Bartov, "Ordinary Monsters," *The New Republic*, April 29, 1996; and Robert Wistrich, "Helping Hitler," *Commentary*, July, 1996.

Exhibit A of this procedure is the story of the *Ordnungspolizei*, the "order police," which moved in behind the Wehrmacht as it swept east. These were not SS beasts, but a microcosm of the German lower and lower middle classes, including laborers, skilled workers, and petty officials (a point that Goldhagen supports with impressive statistics). And yet they killed with sadistic abandon, overflowing their "quotas," even bringing their vacationing wives to watch the butchery.

But what do these harrowing accounts prove? We cannot conclude from one level of analysis (of individuals) that people on another level (the group) are responsible for a crime—any more than we can say that the national "culture" determines the behavior of both. From the fact that "the killers were ordinary Germans" you cannot conclude that, on the whole, "ordinary Germans were killers."

Driven by prosecutorial passion, Goldhagen ignores that one cannot reason backward from the behavior of the members of a sample to the culture as a whole, even if their social traits match those of the rest. One of the oldest propositions of social analysis, established by the French social psychologist Gustave Le Bon, is that groups tend to obey their own rules. Groups in extreme situations act in extreme ways. Soldiers kill willingly when ordered to do so; but that does not prove that their class or their nation is inherently murderous. As to the "order police," how much responsibility for their actions should be at-

tributed to the Nazi system in which these "willing executioners" did their killing? What of the Nazi system of indoctrination and training? What of the express Nazi belief in, and advocacy of, physical terror, bereft of all civilizing restraints and values?

4.

If German reviewers had attacked the faulty logic and the overblown conclusions of the book, their reaction would have been no different from that in the US, Great Britain, or Israel. Yet the main accusation was that the book was "shoddy," "second-rate," "old hat"—in other words, not worth attention at all. This led the American political scientist Andrei Markovits to muse: "If you absolutely don't want to hear

Mary Through the Centuries

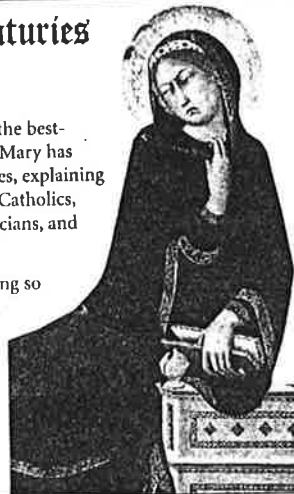
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something, you block it out by denying its value and originality."

What is it critics did not want to hear? In general, postwar (West) Germans have dealt admirably with what they call *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* ("coming to terms with the past")—certainly in contrast to Austria, Japan, or the defunct German Democratic Republic. The Japanese haven't even begun to ask how they became brutal aggressors; their apologies to East Asian neighbors usually refer to the "unfortunate incidents" of World War II. The Austrians took the most convenient way out by labeling themselves "first victims of fascism," conveniently forgetting that they had greeted the Anschluss with enthusiastic applause. The East Germans used a Communist variant of the Austrian strategy. Hitler and his gang were the "bad Germans" who had somehow captured the nation like so many hijackers from outer space. Yet the "Worker and Peasant State" was clean by definition, having vanquished bourgeois capitalism, the source of all evil, and dedicated itself to ever-vigilant "anti-fascism."

None of this could be said about the West Germans. Nazi criminals were hunted down and put on trial. Guilt was accepted, and billions in restitution were paid to survivors and heirs. Anti-Semitism and neo-Nazi parties were diligently opposed. Whereas the GDR slavishly followed Moscow's "anti-Zionist" line, the Federal Republic helped Israel with arms, money, and diplomatic support.

Subtly, perhaps subconsciously, however, the spirit of Barabas in Marlowe's *Jew of Malta* took hold of the official vocabulary: "But that was in another country..." And so the crimes had been committed not by Germans but in "the German name," by "them," that is, by "Hitler and his henchmen." The psychological mechanism was not one of repressing or projecting the past, as in Austria and East Germany. The West German tendency was rather to sterilize the past, to put a reassuring distance between the murderers and the masses, between Germany then and Germany now.

This was the situation in which Goldhagen's book came as a shock. The basic message of his case studies is simple, powerful, and frightening. Through strongly presented accounts of specific incidents he explodes the careful distinction between "bad Nazis" and "ordinary Germans." To today's Germans the book's message is that the executioners were only too "willing," and they included not only rigorously selected SS monsters but also your fathers and grandfathers.

Carefully circumscribed for decades, culpability was all of a sudden spread lavishly throughout yesterday's Germany. Little wonder that when he first wrote about Goldhagen last spring, Frank Schirrmacher, co-editor of the respected conservative *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, detected at the "core of this book" a rehash of the old "collective guilt thesis." Its purpose, he wrote, was to stigmatize Germany here and now, "to again position the Germans," as he delicately puts it, "on a *Sonderweg*"—or separate path of development—"all the way into the next century." Germany, he implied, was being unfairly accused of a patho-

logical exceptionalism, starting from the refusal to accept liberal democracy in the nineteenth century and continuing as the totalitarian disaster of the twentieth.

To top it all, there was Rudolf Augstein, who had founded *Der Spiegel* in his early twenties and made it into the most influential German magazine of the first postwar decades. Denouncing Goldhagen as an "executioner in the garb of a sociologist," he declared the "yield" of the book "equal to zero," and complained bitterly that the "debate about the singularity of Auschwitz cannot not be regurgitated year after year" because that was "done with." Goldhagen's indictment was driven "at best by ignorance, at worst by evil-mindedness."

5.

That was in April. Yet four months later, Goldhagen's book tour became more and more triumphal as it progressed from Hamburg to Berlin, from Frankfurt to Munich. Whatever barriers the self-appointed censors had tried to erect, they fell before the crowds that fought for tickets so they could hear for themselves. And at least some contemptuous critics of the spring were strangely transformed by the autumn—they now appeared as respectful, even deferential discussants, no doubt in response to audiences that were thoroughly sympathetic to Goldhagen. When he faced Goldhagen in a debate in Frankfurt, Norbert Frei, no longer the savage critic, gave Goldhagen a benign pat on the back: "The more removed the events in time, the more urgent the questions [the author had posed] become." Frank Schirrmacher, a member of the Munich panel, now praised the book as a "watershed."

"Why does this book do this?" asked the moderator of the Berlin panel. "Why are 600 people sitting here?" Did Goldhagen win them over with his appealing looks ("I want to adopt him," enthused a Munich matron)? Was it his courteous demeanor ("I am happy to be here with such eminent scholars") that contrasted so starkly with the strident tone of his book? Or his supple defense strategy that recalled Muhammad Ali's advice to float like a butterfly? "Daniel-in-the-lion's-den," as the press liked to call him, said again and again he was not alleging collective guilt but pointing to a historical background that had to be taken into account and to specific behavior by ordinary Germans, without whom, he wrote in *Die Zeit*, "there would have been no Holocaust," and this, he added, "could be said of no other national group." The problem, he said, was with his critics, who had simply misunderstood his message.

This new verdict, actually the old one of the late 1940s, was guaranteed to be provocative. For Goldhagen was not just presenting an old argument between new covers. As Dan Diner, a German-Jewish scholar, wrote in the fall issue of the *Frankfurter Jüdische Nachrichten*: "He describes the cruelties of the perpetrators in all their opulence." Michal Bodemann, a sociologist at the University of Toronto, went one worse in the Berlin *Tageszeitung*: "This is pornography," he wrote, because the book, written from the per-

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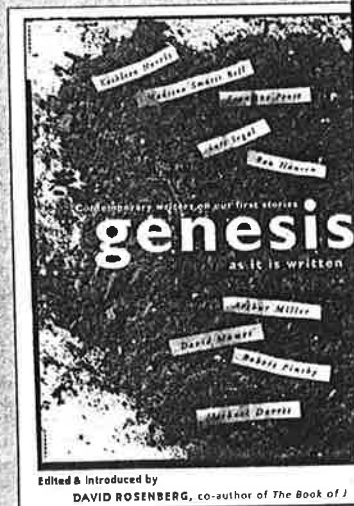
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spective of the killers, drives home the "pleasure derived from murder and torture" in a "voyeuristic narration."

The Holocaust as a Peeping Tom's paradise? As an obscene comparison this is hard to surpass. But there was no denying the perverse attraction of the book and its author as his caravan wound its way through Germany. Was it the discussions themselves that kept interest at a high pitch? Hardly. The critics were polite, and so was Goldhagen. The debate quickly turned into a stylized routine, much like a minuet in which the dancers bow and return to their original positions without ever touching. When there was a preponderance of historians on the panel, the audience would soon become lost in the fog of academic citations. "But on page 271, you said..."—"Yes, but I also wrote..." Or: "This is simply a mistranslation..."

There is, it seems to me, a different solution to the puzzle of Goldhagen's "willing listeners." His book dramatized an old insight that first emerged in 1978 when the *Holocaust* TV series was viewed throughout Germany. Put names and faces on the victims, bring the abstract horror of million-fold annihilation down to the flesh-and-blood experience of the Weiss family, and you unleash an emotional reaction, even a momentary catharsis, that libraries full of learned treatises could never produce. So it was with "the willing executioners" in Goldhagen's book. They, too, had names and faces; these were "ordinary" monsters, who had blotted out images of their own children back home as they led Jewish children off to the killing pits. People, perhaps, like you and me?

And then there is the moralizing voice of the treatise, in which Goldhagen interrupts his horrifying account with questions such as this one: "How could any person have looked upon these pitiable, sick Jewish women without feeling sympathy for them, without feeling horror at the abject physical condition into which they had been plunged?"

This approach, though supported by 200 pages of footnotes, was very far from that of the academic works that, according to his critics, made Goldhagen's book redundant when it was not oversimplified. Goldhagen's was a stark and enthralling narrative, much like the morality tales so beloved by children about wicked queens, wolves, and witches. Central to his book, as to these tales, is the sense that trembling and terror are necessary to the perception of a morally comprehensible universe. This is the evil that was done, this is who did it; here is why they did it and how they felt. The American historian Christopher Browning covered much the same ground as Goldhagen in *Ordinary Men*, a pathbreaking analysis of the police battalions that took part in killing in Poland.³ But Browning's is an academic treatise which has no explicitly moral voice; and its implicit message that practically anybody could have done it leaves the moral puzzle untouched and the reader as helpless as before.

³Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (Harper-Collins, 1992).

Perhaps in the reaction to Goldhagen's book we can trace the differing reactions of three generations. The people who are now grandparents came back from the war and hid in self-imposed silence. The Germans who were teen-agers at the end of the war made an unconscious reckoning for themselves, somewhat along these lines: "We were too young to be guilty, but we certainly paid the bill: we had to rebuild a destroyed country and suffer being stigmatized; the accounts are squared and closed."

Finally, there are those younger than forty. They did not hear the story from their parents and grandparents, and if they asked, they were not told. In reading Goldhagen's book, many felt, they could at last discover for themselves the evil their elders inflicted on the world; they could unearth the repressed knowledge that is the necessary step toward liberation and even redemption. And this is why they eagerly listened to the ghastly narrative that at least suggests an answer to the question of what Elie Wiesel calls the "unexplained" and "inexplicable" Holocaust.

But perhaps the most convincing reason for Goldhagen's favorable reception is the distance that separates today's Germans from the darkest of all pasts. Fifty-one years after Hitler the unbearable horror is two generations old. Auschwitz and the killing fields of Ponar have become part of history for all but a few of today's Germans, who can be sure that it was not they who herded the Jews of Bialystok into the local synagogue and, as Goldhagen recounts in unsparing detail, poured gasoline on the floor, then hurled incendiary grenades inside. Nor was it their parents who did it.

The ordinary monsters younger Germans may find in Goldhagen's mirror did their killing "in another country," as Barabas tells Friar Barnadine. Two generations are not enough to deaden the soul, but enough to numb the pain and the guilt. Also, in response to his critics, Goldhagen reiterated over and over again that his indictment of German culture did not extend to the postwar period, when democracy arose on tainted soil. And so it was safe to relive the dread and the terror; and that is one reason the Germans of 1996 yielded willingly to curiosity and fascination.

Among the critics who were not cowed by the sympathetic reaction of the lay audience was eighty-seven-year-old Marion Countess Dönhoff, the co-publisher of the liberal weekly *Die Zeit* (which printed a series of essays on Goldhagen and a 7,000-word reply by Goldhagen himself). Like the critics of last spring, she once more accused Goldhagen of having used a "questionable methodology" to buttress a "questionable theory," but she added a new warning. Would this book, she asked, not "revive the anti-Semitism that has remained more or less dormant?" This could be taken as a diagnosis of a perceived danger. Why worry about sleeping dogs unless one feels they are ready to bare their fangs at the success of a book? Reassuringly, the response of the German audience has proven the Countess wrong. Goldhagen has come and gone, and the dogs have hardly batted an eye. □

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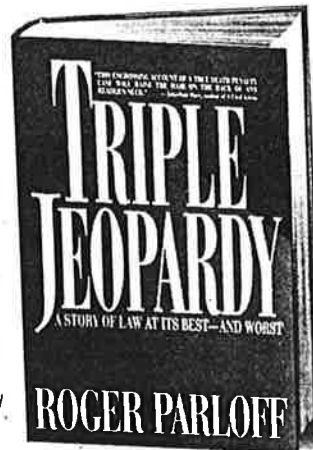
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