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Hitler's Willing Executioners by Daniel J. Goldhagen

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REVIEW ESSAY

ON PERPETRATORS OF THE HOLOCAUST
AND THE PUBLIC DISCOURSE

DANIEL J. GOLDHAGEN, *Hitler's Willing Executioners*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996; Random House, 1997. Pp. 634.

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Hitler's Willing Executioners by Daniel J. Goldhagen, has created a very vigorous reaction from many sources. Its central argument is that the execution of the Nazi plan to annihilate the Jews was due to a certain type of murderous antisemitism, which had so penetrated the German people that the vast majority of Germans became willing and enthusiastic followers from amongst whom it was very easy to recruit the actual executioners. Goldhagen tries to prove his thesis about the willingness of ordinary Germans to commit the most horrendous crimes—as against some who say that it was the work mainly of the SS and other elite groups—by concentrating on three case studies: the battalions of the Order Police who were engaged on the mass killing operations in Eastern Europe; the slave labor camps; and the death marches at the end of the war. In all three cases he analyzes the participation of ordinary Germans, who did not have special schooling in antisemitism, and who were interchangeable with any other Germans chosen at random. He concludes that this willingness, indeed enthusiasm, for murder, humiliation of the victim, and endless sadism, was something special to German society. He tries to explain why this should have been so, and he argues that there was a continuity of what he calls “eliminationist antisemitism” from the end of the 18th century down to the rise of Nazism, of which there were several types. Firstly there was a very moderate and liberal perspective, as with the German progressives who thought that the Jews were a foreign element in Germany, but could be assimilated and become German through the adoption of German culture and, mainly, Christianity. This was elimination of the Jews by assimilating and converting them. The second type was the more radical antisemitism of a nationalistic kind that wanted, basically, to restore the situation of the Jews in Germany to what it had been before the granting of equal rights in 1869–71. Goldhagen also mentions the even more radical form of antisemitism that wanted to expel the Jews, in the manner of medieval potentates in Western and Central Europe. The murderous Nazi type is the last he describes. The pervasiveness of these types of antisemitism in German society explains, he

says, the willingness of ordinary Germans to murder Jews. However, Goldhagen adds, in a little footnote (for which he must have thanked Providence a thousand times afterwards), that with the defeat of Nazi Germany, the German people have abandoned this ideology, to a large extent, and have joined (or rejoined?) the family of civilized nations. It is important to state at the outset, that the main positive importance of Goldhagen's book lies in the fact that, because of its great commercial success, it has managed to redirect the attention of both the general public and the historians to the main issue: that the chief motive of the perpetration of the Holocaust was radical, racist antisemitism.

Goldhagen considers his analysis unique, in that no one has done this before him, and that all the other explications are based on errors.

The book is the result of a Ph.D. thesis, and this becomes very clear when one reads it. The source materials he uses are, with insignificant exceptions, in English and German; possibly Goldhagen has no linguistic access to other languages. His secondary literature is that which deals with the perpetrators, and though far from exhaustive, it is fairly comprehensive. One of the paradoxes of the book is that the Jewish victims almost do not exist in it, except as passive sufferers, though it is in the name of the victims, as it were, that the book is written. In this, Goldhagen follows the traditional path of most German and American historians, who present the Jews as passive objects rather than as active subjects before, after and even during the Holocaust. The main primary sources were culled from the central judiciary investigative administration in Ludwigsburg. There is almost no use of oral testimony beyond the postwar testimonies of the perpetrators.

The thesis is not new, of course. In Germany itself, immediately after the war, the idea of a special German historical development (the 'Sonderweg' theory) was the then current explanation for what had happened. Friedrich Meinecke, an eminent historian, who held antisemitic views himself, thought that it had been Prussian militarism that had brought upon Germany the enthusiasm for the Hitler regime. The debates that have been taking place (in Germany and elsewhere) regarding the Nazi period, have brought forth, among others, a whole school of functionalists (Hans Mommsen, Goetz Aly, and many others), who tried to show that large parts of the German population embraced the Nazi utopia, although the scholars do not agree on the reasons why this occurred. They do not believe that ideology was the central issue, but they agree that it was part of the background that made the "Final Solution" possible. They showed, in many volumes, that the vast majority of the German population supported the Nazi regime in whatever that regime did. They all tried to show that it was a specific German development that led to the catastrophe. To say, as Goldhagen says, that he is the first to have discovered that there was a specific German background to the Holocaust seems rather odd.

Others have claimed that the main motive for the Holocaust was indeed ideology, although modernism, or bureaucracy were important additional factors. Even Ernst Nolte, the ultranationalist, almost revisionist German historian, said that “Auschwitz was contained in the principles of the Nazi racist theory like the seed in the fruit” (Auschwitz steckt in den Prinzipien der nationalsozialistischen Rassenlehre so wie die Frucht im Keim). This is almost literally the same as when Goldhagen says that genocide was “immanent in the conversation of German society” (449). In Israel, Otto D. Kulka, Israel Gutman, and myself, among others, have been arguing for a position not dissimilar from that of Goldhagen: the primacy of ideology, the centrality of radical antisemitism, and the special development in Germany that made the rise of Nazism a unique event in human history. Goldhagen seems to be unaware of all this. His claim to be the first writer who recognized the centrality of murderous antisemitism, is not credible. Of course, only after a great deal of criticism was levelled against him, did he recognize the validity of including ‘functionalist’ factors—bureaucracy, economic, social and political motivations—as additional players in the history of the Holocaust. None of the other historians who saw and see antisemitism as the central motive denied the importance of the other elements.

Goldhagen deals with three cases to prove his point: police battalions, work camps, and death marches. On the police battalions, he tries to pick differences and disagreements with Christopher R. Browning’s book *Ordinary Men*, arguing that these policemen were ordinary *Germans*, which not only implies a German “Sonderweg,” but also that non-Germans would not, by and large, commit such crimes with such enthusiasm, voluntarism, and verve; Browning argues that the reasons why these policemen murdered in the way they did cannot be explained by a specific German character. Goldhagen clearly errs: the so-called “Hiwis” (*Hilfswillige*), local inhabitants in the East who volunteered to serve in special police units set up by the Germans, the Romanian soldiers in Bessarabia and Transnistria, and others, showed no less brutality and murderousness than did the Germans. Indeed, on some occasions the Germans even complained about the senseless brutality of Romanian soldiers and policemen. Romanian units murdered about 260,000 Jews in a relatively short period—quite apart from the murders committed in those regions by Otto Ohlendorf’s German Einsatzgruppe “D.” And they murdered with gusto, initiative, and personal commitment. Jean Ancel, the Israeli historian, published twelve volumes of Romanian documents concerning these events, and the radical, murderous antisemitism that preceded them. If Romanians did the same and believed the same as the most radical Nazi antisemites, we also have “ordinary Romanians.”

They were not the only ones. Lithuanians, Latvians, and Estonians could also, with no great difficulty, be recruited on an individual basis to do the most horrible murders, no less so than the German policemen. Do we not,

then, have ordinary Latvians, too? In his March 17, 1996 *New York Times* op-ed article, Goldhagen finally and completely contradicts everything he said in his book. He compares the enthusiasm that the German killers showed in their actions with similar attitudes of others: "Few people believe that the Serbs who butchered and brutalized Moslems in Bosnia were forced to do so. Few believe that the Hutus who slaughtered Tutsis in Rwanda, the Turks who killed Armenians and the Khmer Rouge who decimated the Cambodian people thought that they were doing wrong." Clearly, then, we have ordinary Khmer, Serbs, Turks and Hutus. We also had ordinary Americans who murdered Indians in the second half of the 19th century, ordinary Spaniards who annihilated the Caribbean Indians, and so on, endlessly. This is Goldhagen against Goldhagen: they were ordinary men after all, by his own criteria, not ordinary Germans.

His second case study concerns so-called "work" camps; he shows that economic, rational considerations took a back seat compared with murder for the sake of murder. Again, this is hardly new. In addition, Goldhagen here, unwittingly perhaps, strengthens the (false) argument that the brutalities were committed largely by the SS, because this section of the book deals with "work" camps under the aegis of SS commanders. What Goldhagen tries to prove, namely that the whole of German society was involved, cannot be shown on the basis of his examples from the work camps. More than that, it cannot even be shown from his analysis of the police battalions, since these were part of the SS machinery as well. Yet he is right in that German society in the early 1940s was indeed a murderous society, and he could have shown that by analyzing the Wehrmacht, the German Army, as Hannes Heer and others have done in Germany, but he did not do that. On the work camps that were *not* under SS command, a new book published after Goldhagen's went to press (Felicja Karay, *Death Comes in Yellow* [Amsterdam, 1996]) on the Skarzysko-Kamienna slave labor camp (the largest in Poland), reaches the same conclusions, generally speaking, as Goldhagen, but on much more persuasive grounds.

On the death marches, Goldhagen concentrates on really only one example—an excellent one, one must say, presented with great skill—which he found amply documented in the judiciary material in Germany, and which shows, again, how ordinary Germans easily became murderers, even during the last weeks of the war, because of their overwhelming agreement with the idea that the Jews were not really human and should be destroyed. One might argue that Goldhagen should not have based himself only, or almost only, on this one example. Parallel researches, of which he may not be aware (such as that of Daniel Blatman at Yad Vashem), are reaching the same conclusions (he also quotes me as having reached similar conclusions) on the basis of contemporary documentary material, not only on postwar testimonies of perpetrators. Again, one has to note that the Jews exist there only as passive victims.

In all three cases Goldhagen essentially writes about a murderous *consensus*. However, not only does he not use that term, by and large, but his attempt at explaining how that consensus came into being is very problematic.

Here one has to mention, first of all, his superficial analysis of “eliminationist antisemitism.” From the victims’ perspective, but not from that alone, the differences between the types of “eliminationist antisemitism” he mentions are crucial. In one case we talk about an attitude that would try to integrate the Jews into society; in the second, to turn the clock back on Jewish emancipation, but leave the Jews as “guests” (which is actually the language used in the Nazi platform) with some, though not equal, rights in Germany; in the third, antisemitism would want to see the Jews emigrate to countries where presumably they would be received with greater friendliness than in Germany. Only the fourth type of antisemitism he mentions was murderous. But Goldhagen seems to assume that all these types of “eliminationist antisemitism” are basically the same, or that one grows naturally out of the other. This is simply not so. Here we can see the basic error in Goldhagen’s approach that denies absolutely any comparison with other cultures. Had he examined other European countries, he would have found pretty much the same kinds of antisemitism that he found in Germany, and in these other countries the less radical forms of antisemitism did not necessarily lead to the more radical forms. French antisemitism around the turn of the century was no less radical than the German variety, and its hold over very large parts of the French people was no less than that in Germany. In fact, in 1912, German opponents of antisemitism, the Social Democrats and the Progressive Liberals, had almost captured the majority in the German parliament (Reichstag). During World War I, German soldiers liberated East European Jews from Tsarist oppression and were viewed by the Jews, rightly, as liberators. During the 1920s, Germany was a mecca of liberalism and enlightenment for masses of East European Jews who flocked there to find asylum in a society that promised cultural, economic and political opportunities. Goldhagen’s book has absolutely no European context, and therefore no explanation for the phenomena he describes. From the potential victims’ perspective there is, one need hardly mention it, a vast difference between the different antisemitic positions—that Jews may integrate on condition that they give up their particularity, that Jews be allowed to stay in the country, but without civic rights, that Jews should emigrate, and that Jews should be murdered. Goldhagen puts all these positions into one pot, thus making hash out of any sociological or historical analysis.

But then, Goldhagen does not even deal with the German development in any rational way. The Nazi policy of emigration and even of forced emigration (1933–40) was indeed approved, it appears, by the vast majority of Germans at the time, but it is very hard to prove, or even to argue, that a policy of mass murder would have been acceptable at that point. As I have recently tried to prove, Hitler initiated and pursued a policy, in 1938–39, of

reaching an agreement with the Western Powers either to deport the Jews to Africa, or settle them in the domains of the Western Powers. The famous January 30, 1939 speech, in which he threatened the Jews with annihilation in case another world war were to erupt, is quoted by Goldhagen without its context: the appeal to the Western Powers to take the Jews of Germany and settle them elsewhere, which occupied the better part of Hitler's remarks on the Jews on that occasion. While, therefore, that speech could legitimately be viewed as a kind of socio-psychological preparation for a future murder policy, the very necessity for this preparation does not favor the interpretation that at that point most Germans were willing executioners—yet.

It is perfectly clear that there was no necessary development from less radical antisemitism to more radical antisemitism. In Goldhagen's model, if it can be called that—namely, that almost all Germans were imbued with murderous antisemitism from previous generations—there is no explanation why the most radical type of murderous attitudes to Jews dominated from the end of the 1930s onward. Why did the Holocaust not happen when Germany was at the peak of its strength, under Bismarck?

Goldhagen is able to describe the straight progression of murderous antisemitism from the early 19th century to Hitler only because he completely ignores German history. The Nazi party did not come to power as a result of a democratic vote: the last free elections of the Weimar Republic were held in November 1932, and the Nazis lost two million votes and 34 seats in the Reichstag, going down from 230 to 196; the Social Democrats and the Communists together had 221 seats, and some two million more votes than the Nazis. Not even Goldhagen claims that these two parties were antisemitic, though they were not pro-Jewish in any sense, considering the Jews just as a part of German society. The Nazis came to power six weeks after they had lost these elections, precisely *because* they lost them; the conservative camarilla around the senile president, Hindenburg, no longer saw them as a major threat, and as they themselves did not have the necessary public support, they believed it would now be safe to ask Hitler to become chancellor, in a cabinet that would have only three Nazis, and in which all the others would be good reactionary conservatives. Hitler attained power by *constitutional* but not *democratic* means, since he was nominated by the president, but not in accordance with the popular vote. There is no doubt, however, that in the late 1930s, the vast majority of the German people supported the Nazi regime. How and why this happened, and how the mass of the anti-Nazi voters had by 1938–39 become fertile ground for recruitment for a genocidal project, cannot be explained by the obviously erroneous idea that *before* 1933 murderous antisemitism had become all-pervasive; it simply had not.

Clearly, even supporters of middle class parties such as the Catholic Zentrum, whose strength did not diminish even after January 1933, can be classified as “only” moderate antisemites, who did not even wish to fight Jewish emancipation; the radical, racist, murderous type was not prevalent

there at all. The crucial question is how to explain the fact that over one half of German voters voted for non-radical non-antisemitic parties in November 1932, but in 1941–45 formed part of a general murderous consensus. Goldhagen does not ask the question, and when one does not ask a question there is little chance of finding an answer.

Goldhagen can defend himself against the charge that he advocates a kind of anti-German racism by pointing to his statement, in the footnote mentioned above, that postwar Germany freed itself from the clutches of the ideology that led to the Holocaust. But, of course, that makes his whole explanation even more implausible, for if eliminationist antisemitism was so deeply ingrained in the Germans, and had been so for some one hundred fifty years, how did the defeat of Nazi Germany suddenly turn the Germans into something quite different?

Much of this criticism should be addressed not to Goldhagen, but to his Harvard tutors. A sloppy argument in the Ph.D. thesis can be corrected by a young scholar if he or she has a good tutor. The comparative method is the method of historical scholarship par excellence, and the neglect to use it is inexcusable, and obviously the fault of the tutor. Alternatively, Goldhagen could have explained that his contribution is more limited, and invited other scholars to do the comparative work taking into account his empirical findings. Again, the tutor could have advised him to do that.

As I hinted above, my own predilection is actually closer to Goldhagen's interpretation than it is to Browning's. I also think that there is something unique, or unprecedented, not in any putative German national character, but in the Nazi regime. I believe, based on my own research, that the Nazi movement succeeded in wrapping the German population in an enthusiasm for the Nazi utopia within an amazingly short time. It is true, they used the inclination of many, probably a majority, of people to dislike Jews with varying amounts of intensity, but in a different way from that argued by Goldhagen. An argument could be presented, I think, for a model that recognizes the fact that a genocidal elite was placed in power, not because of its genocidal program, but because of a host of economic, social and political reasons and circumstances. The crucial element was the success of the Nazis in capturing the intellectual classes, who identified with the utopia, but not necessarily with the radical antisemitism of the "true believers," the ruling elite. The prevalence of less than murderous antisemitism prevented any action against the genocidal plan. Led by an intelligentsia that was prepared to do anything to support the regime, it was then easy to recruit the willing executioners, who did not need to receive special schooling in anti-semitic theory.

One last remark is in order here. Hans-Georg Gadamer, the great contemporary German philosopher, said that the core of hermeneutics is to consider the possibility that the other may be right, after all. No such doubts trouble Goldhagen. There is an amazing lack of humility in his attack on all

and sundry, and his claim to have discovered the wheel. One is reminded of Arno J. Mayer's *Why Did The Heavens Not Darken* (New York, 1988). As in the case before us, Mayer's book was a great success, made the *New York Times Book Review*, *Newsweek* and *Time*, and is all but forgotten today. It had methodological and substantive problems that made his thesis irredeemable. Goldhagen wrote an interesting, occasionally excellent, analysis of three case studies that strengthen the already existing view that by the outbreak of World War II the vast majority of Germans had identified with the regime and its antisemitic policies to such an extent that it was easy to recruit the murderers. The remainder of his book is badly argued and basically ahistorical. The media hype, the vast controversy which seems to grow since the book's publication, augurs ill for the career of a young and gifted historian, who has shown considerable capabilities in extensive sections of his book. It is quite clear that the main reason for the success of the book is its simplistic solution to a complicated historical phenomenon. People love black-and-white solutions. Why did the Germans murder the Jews? Well, because Germans had been violent antisemites for well over a century. People sighed with relief when they read the argument; we always knew that all Germans were bad. We are not like that at all, are we?

One can only hope that Goldhagen will overcome the disadvantage of having published half-baked research, albeit studded with brilliant passages and observations.