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Author(s): Raul Hilberg

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# The Goldhagen Phenomenon

## Raul Hilberg

*Raul Hilberg's "The Goldhagen Phenomenon" was written in response to a request by Claude Lanzmann, and published in Les Temps Modernes ("Le Phénomène Goldhagen," trans. Marie-France de Paloméra, no. 592 [Feb.–Mar. 1997]: 1–10). Although occasioned by the claims in Daniel Goldhagen's Hitler's Willing Executioners, Hilberg's discussion of the content and reception of this book raises some of the central historiographical issues concerning the study of the Holocaust. Moreover, by focussing on the appropriateness and inappropriateness of various forms of explanation, Hilberg articulates once more in this context the epistemological stakes that lie behind the Goldhagen debate.*

—Arnold I. Davidson

Daniel Goldhagen's book, based on his doctoral dissertation in political science, was first published in the early spring of 1996. The English-language title, *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, states in large print what we have always known: Not only were these men shooters; they were willing. In the subtitle, *Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*, Goldhagen repeats another fact that has already been recognized: Most executioners in shooting operations were not specially selected for their task; they were simple German policemen who had patrolled ordinary German streets. Goldhagen's use, however, of the phrase "ordinary Germans" also has a special meaning with a purposeful edge. It was calculated as an attack on a senior scholar, Christopher Browning, who had previously authored a work

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titled *Ordinary Men*.<sup>1</sup> In Goldhagen's study, the centerpiece is the German Reserve Police Battalion 101, which was made up of personnel from the Hamburg area and which massacred Jews in Poland. Browning had written his book about that particular battalion.

It is Browning who had made a discovery and who had recognized its significance. On the day when the battalion was first confronted with the task of killing Jews, its commander, Major Wilhelm Trapp, had made a speech to his men and had given them the choice of not firing their rifles at the victims. Some of the men stepped out; the others were ready to shoot. This scene is a revelation because it shakes to its foundation the long-held supposition that orders were indispensable.

Why then did Goldhagen write another book about the same event? There was something he wanted to add. To Goldhagen the shooters were not only willing but eager and brutal. Since it is possible to characterize the entire Holocaust as an act of brutality, one must ask what he had in mind when he used that word with specific reference to the action of the battalion and what evidence he cites for what he has to say. Here is the passage in his own language about the manner of the shooting:

they chose to walk into a hospital, a house of healing, and to shoot the sick, who must have been cowering, begging, and screaming for mercy. They killed babies. None of the Germans has seen fit to recount details of such killings. In all probability, a killer either shot a baby in its mother's arms, and perhaps the mother for good measure, or, as was sometimes the habit during these years, held it at arm's length by the leg, shooting it with a pistol. Perhaps the mother looked on in horror. The tiny corpse was then dropped like so much trash and left to rot.<sup>2</sup>

That is not quite all. Goldhagen wanted to describe what these men were thinking in the course of such actions. Since they were street policemen, and most of them had not even joined the Nazi party, he does not assume that they were specially indoctrinated. He is certain, however, that they must have hated the Jews to act as they did and that this hatred

1. See Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York, 1992).

2. Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York, 1996), pp. 215–16.

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**Raul Hilberg** is professor emeritus at the University of Vermont, where he held the John G. McCullough chair of political science. He is the author of *The Destruction of the European Jews* (1961; rev. ed. 1985), *Sonderzüge nach Auschwitz* (1981), and *Perpetrators, Victims, and Bystanders: The Jewish Catastrophe, 1933–1945* (1992).

must have been so “ubiquitous” and “profound” in German society that they absorbed it as a matter of course. The origin of the hatred, he goes on to say, had to be anti-Semitism, but since that ideology was not confined to Germans, the German brand had to be a special product, which contained a “genocidal potential.” He labels that brand as “eliminationist.” Only such a pervasive belief system, he declares, could have generated a “culture of cruelty” vis-à-vis the Jews.

Anti-Semitism was widespread in Europe during the late nineteenth century and in the years before the outbreak of World War I. The anti-Semites proclaimed their beliefs in speeches, pamphlets, and political programs. In some countries, this movement resulted in discrimination against the Jews, and in Russia it was dangerous enough to bring about pogroms, which the Tsarist Minister of the Interior, Count Nikolai Pavlovich Ignatyev, likened to the verdict of a “people’s court.”

German anti-Semitism, on the other hand, was not only weaker than the eastern European variety, but by 1914 it began to decline. Although the Nazis revived it in their propagandistic literature, it never became altogether respectable or truly prevalent. In his heavy book, Goldhagen does not discuss the many organizations that made up the Gestalt known as Nazi Germany. The bureaucratic apparatus was led by lawyers, engineers, accountants, and other professionals. These functionaries were modern men with clear eyesight and a necessary understanding of complexity. The railways, which transported the Jews to their deaths, or the finance offices, which confiscated their property, or the nearly two hundred private firms that were involved in the construction of Auschwitz, were not staffed by pure anti-Semites, and neither were the urban police forces. For his insistence that virtually all of Germany was virulently anti-Semitic, Goldhagen marshals such evidence as graffiti with rhymed words and a lecture by a leader of the German Christian Church. He also cites *Mein Kampf*, but not the paragraph in which Hitler writes that his own father had regarded anti-Semitism as a sign of backwardness. Nor does Goldhagen note that the young Heinrich Himmler once described a German novel as “polemical” and “full of anti-Semitic lectures.”

Goldhagen overstates the extent and depth of German anti-Semitism. At the same time he underplays two factors that greatly weaken his basic thesis. One is that not all the shooters were Germans, the other, that not all the victims were Jews.

The killers included ethnic Germans, who were drawn from a population that had lived outside Germany. An ethnic German *Kommando*, recruited in villages of the Berezovka-Mostovoye region of the western Ukraine, shot more than 30,000 Jews in that area. Moreover, men of ethnic German background were not only shooters but by 1944 they constituted more than a third of the guard force in Auschwitz. Goldhagen does not even mention them. The “executioners” were also Romanians, Croats, Ukrainians, Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians in significant

numbers. The Romanian and Croat formations implemented policies of their own governments. The great Odessa massacre of October 1941 was Romanian, and it was Romanian Marshal Ion Antonescu who asked on 16 December 1941, "Are we waiting for a decision to be taken in Berlin?" just before 70,000 Jews were killed by his men in the Golta prefecture. Thousands of those Jews were burned alive. As to the Croats, there are photographs of what went on in that satellite state. Baltic auxiliaries were absolutely essential to the Germans, as in the case of Latvian street and harbor police who participated heavily in the massive shooting of Jews in Riga. Of the Lithuanian police battalions that were pressed into service, the second is of special interest. In October of that year, it was ordered to go from Kaunas to Byelorussia as a component of the German 11th Reserve Police Battalion. The mission was to kill Jews. Facing the victims, a young Lithuanian declared that he could not shoot men, women, and children, whereupon the company commander, Juozas Kristaponis, invited any of his men with similar objections to move to the side. Some did, most did not. Later, this unit was involved in more killing, and in Slutsk, there were occurrences that prompted a German police officer to call the Lithuanians "pigs."

It would be difficult to ascribe to all of these men, who had not been a part of German society, the kind of German anti-Semitism that in Goldhagen's view harbored an "exterminationist potential." It would be manifestly impossible to connect any anti-Semitism with the origination of killing operations directed at non-Jewish people. Such operations, however, did take place. Approximately a fourth of Germany's own mental patients were gassed. These individuals, selected in asylums, were in no sense regarded as a threat to the German nation. Subsequently, personnel and techniques were literally transferred from the euthanasia stations in Germany to camps in Poland, so that the Jews died, albeit on a much larger scale, like those institutionalized Germans. This sequence was reversed in the case of the Gypsies and Jews when, notwithstanding the very different Nazi conceptions of the two groups, Gypsies were going to be treated like Jews. Thus thousands of Gypsies were shipped to the Lodz and Warsaw ghettos. They were shot at the same time or somewhat later than the Jews in Serbia, Latvia, and Crimea, among other places, and they were gassed in the same chambers that snuffed out the lives of Jews in Kulmhof, Treblinka, and Auschwitz.

What, then, is left to be taken seriously in Goldhagen's book? The perpetrators have been studied for more than fifty years. Valuable works have been written about them in several languages. Given that visible progress, why does *this* book, so lacking in factual content and logical rigor, demand so much attention?

Goldhagen's American publisher, Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., asserted on the dust jacket of the volume that the work "demands a fundamental

revision of our thinking about the years 1933–1945.” Book review editors and foreign publishers were told by Knopf that the book was not to be overlooked. Shortly after its publication, highly laudatory discussions appeared in daily American and British newspapers. The reviewers, mainly journalists and novelists, greeted the book as a milestone and showered it with praise in words like these: “overthrows decades of conventional wisdom by eminent scholars,” “the only plausible explanation,” “a monumental achievement,” “masterly,” “a tremendous contribution.” Soon *Hitler’s Willing Executioners* took its place in the middle of the *New York Times* weekly bestseller list of the fifteen most popular nonfiction works in the nation. Goldhagen remained on that list for two months.

The publisher also arranged with the director of the Research Institute of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum for a colloquium devoted to Goldhagen’s work. The gathering was attended by reporters and televised by a network watched by intellectuals. Of the four academic commentators, two were senior fellows in residence at the institute at the time: Christopher Browning, whom Goldhagen had attacked, and Konrad Kwiet, a researcher from Australia whose knowledge of archival resources in the field of Holocaust studies is unsurpassed. Since both were expected to speak against Goldhagen, two discussants were brought in who were thought to be sympathetic with the author: Hans-Heinrich Wilhelm, from Berlin, who had written a monograph about Einsatzgruppe A, a battalion-sized unit of the Security Police in the northern sector of the occupied USSR where it shot more than 200,000 Jews, and Yehuda Bauer, who for many years had been the principal Holocaust scholar at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.<sup>3</sup> Wilhelm’s and Bauer’s reactions were completely negative, and Bauer went so far as to question the judgment of those Harvard University professors who had accepted Goldhagen’s doctoral dissertation in the first place.

The colloquium was a precursor of other academic responses to follow. Knowledgeable specialists like Henry Friedlander, who had written an illuminating book about the men of the euthanasia program, or Peter Hayes, author of the definitive history of the IG Farben company who went on to study the prewar acquisitions of Jewish enterprises, exposed Goldhagen’s work as flimsy.<sup>4</sup> So did experts in Germany. By the end of 1996, it was clear that in sharp distinction from lay readers, much of the academic world had wiped Goldhagen off the map.

In attempting to comprehend Goldhagen’s popularity in the commercial market, one should not, of course, lose sight of the imprimatur

3. See Hans-Heinrich Wilhelm, *Die Einsatzgruppe A der Sicherheitspolizei und des SD 1941–42* (Frankfurt am Main, 1996).

4. See Henry Friedlander, *The Origins of Nazi Genocide: From Euthanasia to the Final Solution* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1995), and Peter Hayes, *Industry and Ideology: IG Farben in the Nazi Era* (Cambridge, 1987).

accorded to him by Harvard University or the intensive promotional campaign by Knopf. This backing, however, could not have ignited any enthusiasm without something that the public could take from the pages of the book itself.

What Goldhagen promised his readers was first and foremost an explanation of the Holocaust. He addressed himself heedlessly to the disturbing question of “why” and, avoiding any caveats, chose one and only one answer. He repeated it in chapters and footnotes to the point of exhaustion. Boldly exclaiming that he was the only one who had found the solution, he told everyone that the matter was now settled.

Of course, for specialists who had preoccupied themselves with the problem, his “explanation” settled nothing at all. It did, however, appeal to a large number of book buyers, who cannot do research but who have wanted an explanatory statement for a long time, one that appears to be sufficient, and for that reason satisfying as well. It was not factual evidence that convinced them, for he had none, but a simple chain, the links of which they had already heard before: Germans—anti-Semitism—hatred—brutality. It was not even any originality in this formulation that carried them along, but its familiar ring. To make it even more familiar, Goldhagen mentioned these words often in his six hundred pages, and added others like “unspeakable,” “murderous,” “horrific,” “demonological,” “vitriolic,” and “gruesome.” The adjectives are accusatory; they are taken from the domain of politics and not political science, but with them Goldhagen broke a dam of reticence in a public that had wanted to say them but had not said them aloud about the German people of the Nazi era.

Not surprisingly, the first reaction to Goldhagen’s treatise in Germany was outrage. Even before the translation appeared in print, the German press was filled with reviews condemning the book. The German weekly *Der Spiegel* assembled an entire team of writers to answer him. In all these discussions, which did not differ much from one another, Goldhagen’s thesis was called a “provocation” replete with vocabulary of the 1950s and allusions to collective guilt, or a “demonization” of the Germans in the genre of “pulp fiction” disguised as sociology. He was called a “hangman,” or one of the “little historians” writing about the “little Hitlers.” But only six months later, Josef Joffe, a columnist for a German newspaper and an associate at a Harvard University institute, wrote a long essay in *The New York Review of Books* advertised as “Goldhagen Conquers Germany.” By then, Joffe reported, Goldhagen had filled a hall in Munich, with 2,500 seats sold for \$10 apiece, and more than 130,000 copies of his book in German translation had been shipped to stores.<sup>5</sup> What had happened in that short time?

Ordinarily, negative judgments that are almost unanimous should

5. See Josef Joffe, “Goldhagen in Germany,” *New York Review of Books*, p. 18.

not elevate sales. When the historian Eberhard Jäckel, writing in *Die Zeit*, characterized the book as “simply bad” (*einfach schlecht*), that judgment alone should have had a depressing effect.<sup>6</sup> Nor is this a case of aroused curiosity or seeing for oneself, if only because the German critics had said without dissent that Goldhagen did not uncover new facts or offer new insights. One cannot, therefore, escape the conclusion that something in this book served ordinary Germans in the concluding decade of this century.

Germany had long suppressed the Holocaust in most of its particulars and implications. To the extent that it was viewed at all, it was seen as a deed mainly of fanatical Nazis or SS-men. A son could not ask his father: what have you done? Only after the older generation had passed from the scene did sons and daughters, grandsons and granddaughters, begin to ask questions in earnest. It was almost a matter of genealogy now, of self-examination and identity. At times, these younger people suspected the worst. The fewest of them could obtain the precise information they sought, but if they resented or rejected their forebears, they could clutch Daniel Goldhagen's book precisely because it is so strident in tone. At the very least, they could use it as a confirmation of their feelings and wave it with its seven hundred pages in the German language through the air.

Goldhagen has left us with an image of a medieval-like incubus, a demon latent in the German mind, which had been waiting for an opportunity to strike out. We are asked to believe that when it emerged, it took on the configuration of a super-pogrom in the hands of shooters and guards. In this depiction, the Holocaust becomes orgiastic, and its principal attributes are the degradation and torment of the victims. All else, including the gas chambers in which two and a half million Jews died unobserved by the perpetrators, is secondary, a mere “backdrop” of the slaughter under the open sky. Goldhagen does not preoccupy himself with the countless laws, decrees, and decisions that the perpetrators fashioned, or the obstacles with which they constantly struggled. He does not observe the routines, those everyday ingredients of the whole development. They do not concern him. He does not delve into administrative structure or the bureaucratic pulsations that coursed through this machine, which grew in potency as the process reached the height of its enormity. Instead, he shrank the Holocaust, replacing its intricate apparatus with rifles, whips, and fists.

Dismayed, specialists on both sides of the Atlantic asked themselves and each other privately whether Goldhagen's book was a transitory event or a lasting addition to the literature. They know, however, that sheer momentum will guarantee the presence of the volume on the shelves of bookstores in hardcovers or paperback for years to come. They realize

6. Eberhard Jäckel, “Einfach ein schlechtes Buch,” *Die Zeit*, 31 May 1997, p. 4.

that the growth of knowledge is slow and painful, and that it takes time, often decades, before detailed information is absorbed by a community of historians, let alone the wider public. In the meantime, Goldhagen will be quoted by ignorant generalists who are not even aware of the progress made with the opening of archives and the opportunities now beckoning to interested researchers. Thus the cloud that Goldhagen created will hover over the academic landscape. It will not soon disperse.