

**The “Willing Executioners”/
“Ordinary Men” Debate**

Daniel J. Goldhagen
Christopher R. Browning
Leon Wieseltier
Introduction by Michael Berenbaum

Selections from the Symposium
April 8, 1996

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Third printing, December 2001

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The United States Holocaust Research Institute is the scholarly division of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Founded in December 1993, its mission is to serve as an international resource for the development of research on the Holocaust and related issues, including those of contemporary significance.

The Institute consists of eight departments—Academic Programs (including Academic Publications), Library, Archive, Photo Archive, Music, and the Benjamin and Vladka Meed Registry of Jewish Holocaust Survivors. It will soon be the home of the Miles Lerman Center for the Study of Jewish Resistance.

The Institute fosters research in Holocaust and Genocide Studies, broadly defined. Fields of inquiry include, but are not limited to:

- historiography and documentation of the Holocaust;
- ethics and the Holocaust;
- comparative genocide studies; and
- the impact of the Holocaust on contemporary society and culture.

The Institute welcomes a variety of approaches by scholars in history, political science, philosophy, religion, sociology, literature, psychology, and other disciplines. It especially encourages scholarly work that utilizes the extraordinarily rich archival materials that the Museum has collected in Eastern Europe, Germany, and the former U.S.S.R. The Institute's collections cover a wide range of subjects pertaining to the Holocaust, its origins, and its aftermath.

Introduction

On April 8th, 1996, the United States Holocaust Research Institute hosted an evening of dialogue to examine the issues raised by Daniel Goldhagen's deliberately provocative book, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*, in which the author seeks to challenge the canons of Holocaust scholarship and to directly confront its acknowledged masters.

Assembled were seven distinguished and acclaimed scholars in the field of Holocaust studies from diverse disciplines and perspectives. They do not always agree with each other nor were they bidden to agree with Professor Goldhagen.

But they were men of distinction, who have devoted their career to this material, who have read the same records, examined the same documents, pondered the same questions, and confronted the same darkness.

We are proud that two of the seven, Konrad Kweit and Christopher Browning, are J.B. and Maurice C. Shapiro Senior Scholars-in-Residence at the Research Institute. By their work and their presence they enhance the scholarly qualities of our programs—and their presentations on that evening were only one such example. We are equally honored that two other participants, Lawrence Langer and Yehuda Bauer, have accepted the nomination of the Academic Committee of the United States Holocaust Memorial Council and will serve as Shapiro Senior Scholar-in-Residence for the fall of 1996 and the spring of 1998 respectively. We are proud of their accomplishment as scholars and of their willingness to spend extended time at the Research Institute. Professor Richard Breitman is the fiercely independent editor of the journal *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, which we proudly publish. Dr. Hans-Heinrich Wilhelm was our guest; I trust that he too shall become a friend.

The discussion was intense, at times even harsh and bitter. We were surprised by its vehemence, and at occasional breaches of civility. We have received requests again and again for this material. This "occasional paper" is an immediate way to respond to those requests.

It was tempting to try to include all of the insightful and highly motivated presentations, rebuttals, panel moderator comments, and exchanges with the audience that took place during this four-hour-long seminar. But that has proven impractical within the "occasional paper" format. Accordingly, and with absolutely no slight intended toward those whose observations are not included here, we decided to limit the following published comments to the main addresses presented by those three of its principals, Daniel Goldhagen, Christopher Browning and Leon Wieseltier, whose remarks have been most requested both by attendees and by those who were not able to attend.

Truth be told, our decision to sponsor this conference has met with some controversy within the scholarly community and the Museum family. So be it. Important events should spur controversy—not

controversy for its own sake, but to use a rabbinic dictum, *machloket le'shem shamaim*, controversy for the sake of heaven, for the sake of truth.

The Talmud tells us that in a debate for the sake of heaven, both sides are sustained. The reference is deliberate, for what we engaged in that night is commentary on the Testament from *that* world to our world.

After reading *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, we understood both what it attempted to prove and the importance of its provocative argument. We also knew immediately *who* as well as *what* Professor Goldhagen was seeking to confront and felt that the true estimation of his contribution should not be made by amateurs, but by professionals who have weighed the same evidence, and who read footnotes and not only the body of the text—scholars who set out on the same journey.

Three generations of scholars from three continents made presentations.

Senior men, yet young and vital, who have reached almost three score and ten and whose scholarly careers are marked by significant accomplishments. These men lived through the Holocaust as adolescents. Their efforts were pioneering and for many years they worked in an intellectual wilderness. We heard from distinguished scholars in mid-career, born after the Holocaust and who came to intellectual maturity often before the Holocaust had entered the mainstream of American scholarly thought and whose choice to study this Event was, at the time, bold and risky. Would they have students to teach? Would anyone be interested in reading their publications? And we examined the work of a young scholar beginning his career, whose Ph.D. dissertation and first major publication seeks to overturn a field.

The Research Institute could have waited six months or a year to critically examine Professor Goldhagen's work, but we see it as our task not to respond to responses, but to provide a forum in which a response will be framed, not to comment on intellectual discourse in the field, but to help shape that discourse. We seek to remain on the cutting edge of academic debate.

We also seek to reverse what has been an unfortunate trend in this field of study. Four decades ago when Professor Raul Hilberg completed his path-breaking study of the Holocaust, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, he could not find a publisher—and once published, the author was shunned; barred even from the use of the archive and library of another research institute. His name could not be pronounced. He was relegated to footnotes even by scholars who depended on his insights to advance their own.

When Professor Richard Rubenstein wrote *After Auschwitz* thirty years ago, he was silenced by his colleagues in a sort of bureaucratic excommunication. When Hannah Arendt and Bruno Bettelheim raised the issue of Jewish leadership and Jewish behavior during the Holocaust, people spoke about them and at them, but not *with* them and *to* them.

The civility and the power of the discourse in this then young field was weakened, not strengthened by the lack of intellectual confrontation and serious engagement.

Nearly three years ago at the opening conference of the Research Institute, Professor Goldhagen, then an even younger scholar, confronted Professor Browning on his widely and justly praised book *Ordinary Men* by asking whether Browning could speak of “ordinary men or ordinary Germans.” The intellectual engagement was civil and appropriate, and Professor Browning’s work was strengthened by it—not weakened. Time has passed and now it was Professor Browning who commented on Professor Goldhagen’s completed work—directly, forcefully and civilly.

Most important, for the purposes of this conference, the question of the perpetrator is indisputably one of the most central to understanding the Holocaust.

Questions!

Sometimes the questions are even more important than the answers—tentative or otherwise—that we may offer. Who were the perpetrators? What were their motivations? Did they kill with venom or with reserve and technological precision? What of the psychology of the ordinary German and not just the leaders? What enabled them to perform their task day in and day out? Did German killers perform their task differently, more venomously than Latvians, Lithuanians, Ukrainians, or Dutch policemen and Luxembourgers who joined into the killing process? The discussion included here has shed light on these questions.

Where not fully answered, the questions are only deepened—and that is a lot.

What of antisemitism?

My colleagues Dr. Sybil Milton and the Ruth Meltzer Fellow for 1996, Professor Henry Friedlander, have argued that antisemitism was one form of Nazi racism, that any theory of the genocidal process must consider the fact that the Germans sought to kill the mentally retarded and physically handicapped or emotionally disturbed, and indeed that there was a “a final solution to the Gypsy problem” implemented by the Germans. Was antisemitism central to the enterprise of National Socialism? Of course, but how deeply was it embedded into German culture and shared by ordinary Germans? What of its evolution from religious antisemitism and political antisemitism into the racialized form it took under Nazism? Was it one of many core beliefs of National Socialism or *the* core belief? This, too, is an absolutely central issue to Holocaust scholarship and was open to discussion during the seminar.

Michael Berenbaum, Director

United States Holocaust Research Institute

Presentation on *Hitler's Willing Executioners*

Daniel J. Goldhagen

I imagine that few, if any, of you believe that those who recently brutalized and slaughtered others in the former Yugoslavia did not want to do what they did. I imagine that few, if any, of you believe that the Hutus who slaughtered Tutsis in Rwanda, that the Turks who killed Armenians, or that the Khmer Rouge who decimated the Cambodian people thought that what they were doing was wrong. The only genocide about which people routinely assert that the killers did not hold the death of the victims to be desirable and just is the Holocaust. This is odd, especially in light of all the evidence that demonstrates the German perpetrators to have been like the perpetrators of other mass slaughters, evidence provided often by the killers themselves. I am maintaining what seems to me to be the unremarkable, indeed the commonsensical position that the German killers of Jews were like the perpetrators of other mass slaughters. What the perpetrators of the Holocaust did was, in important ways, different—just as the Holocaust differs from other mass slaughters and genocides—but in their willingness to kill, the perpetrators of the Holocaust were like other mass killers. This should not be so hard to accept.

Today I want to make three arguments. The first is about the character and nature of antisemitism in German society.

In the nineteenth and early twentieth century, prior to the Nazis' ascent to power, a virulent form of antisemitism became the cultural norm in German, which the vast majority of the German people accepted. This antisemitism called for the elimination of the Jews and Jewish power from Germany—for rendering the Jews powerless. Hitler and the Nazis' eliminationist, indeed exterminationist, antisemitism was but a variation on the pre-existing dominant cultural theme.

The second argument is about the perpetrators. The German perpetrators, namely those who themselves killed Jews or helped to kill them, willingly did so because they shared a Hitlerian view of Jews, and therefore believed the extermination to be just and necessary.

The antisemitism that was part of the common culture of Germany and which made the utterly radical persecution—the eliminationist measures—of the 1930s popular in Germany, was the same antisemitism that led the perpetrators to consent to killing Jews. When the first two propositions are brought together, they inexorably lead to a third proposition about the nature of German society.

Because the vast majority of Germans shared the same antisemitism that moved the perpetrators and because the perpetrators were themselves representative of German society and therefore indicate what other Germans would have done in the same position, the only conclusion that we can draw, indeed the conclusion

that we must draw, is that the vast majority—not all, but the vast majority—of ordinary Germans during the Nazi period were prepared to kill Jews.

Before elaborating upon these propositions in what will necessarily be a schematic manner, let me first tell you that my conclusions about the perpetrators are drawn from postwar legal investigations conducted in the Federal Republic of Germany. The investigators interrogated tens of thousands of former killers, and also took testimonies from survivors and bystanders, as well as from the memoir literature.

So let me turn to antisemitism. We have a single term for a wide span of phenomena that range from the garden variety American antisemitism consisting of the mild stereotypes we all know—Jews are stingy, they're clannish—to Hitlerian antisemitism, in which it is seen by human history as explicable in terms of the Jews, that the evil of the world emanates at least to a great extent from them. Heinrich Himmler called the Jews the primary matter of everything negative. So we have one term for this wide range of phenomena, and we have to distinguish among kinds of antisemitism. German antisemitism as it developed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and then as it existed during the Nazi period, was not the garden variety antisemitism. It held the Jews to be a great danger and it was eliminationist.

Now, the development of eliminationist antisemitism is historically explicable. I am not talking about German national character or any kind of eternal unchanging German beliefs or qualities: merely that for peculiar historical reasons, a brand of virulent antisemitism became part of German culture. (This antisemitism, I should add, has dissipated after the war because of the changed historical and political context.) For fifty years now, Germany has been a solid democracy, teaching its new generations new beliefs and values. With re-education and generational replacement, Germany, in many respects and particularly with regard to Jews, has remade itself. Germany is the great success story of the post-war era. So the growth and then the decline of antisemitism in Germany is to be explained historically and culturally. It has nothing to do with some immutable German national character.

Over the course of the nineteenth century, antisemitism in Germany had the following *central features*. I focus here on these central features (and not on the exceptional divergences from the norm), because the central features were the ones that would shape the history of twentieth-century Germany:

a) From the beginning of the nineteenth century, antisemitism was ubiquitous in Germany. It was its “common sense.” b) The preoccupation with Jews had an obsessive quality. c) Jews came to be identified with and symbolic of anything and everything that was deemed awry in German society. d) The central image of the Jews held them to be malevolent and powerful—a principal, if not *the* principal source of the ills that beset Germany, and therefore dangerous to the welfare of Germans. This was different from the medieval Christian view, which deemed the Jews to be evil and the source of great harm, but in which the Jews always remained somewhat peripheral. Modern German antisemites, unlike their medieval forebears—for whom the devil was the principal source of evil—could say that there would be no peace on earth until the Jews were destroyed.

This cultural model in the second half of the nineteenth century coalesced around the concept of “race.” This meant that the Jews’ malevolence was unalterable. The concept of race became ever more prominent in the nineteenth century as the way to explain the source of the Jews’ unchanging foreignness and of their enormously dangerous character.

Johannes Nordmann, a popular, influential pamphleteering antisemite, expressed this putative physiological barrier to the Jews’ assumption of Christianity during the height of one antisemitic wave in 1881 in unmistakable terms: the conversion to Christianity could no more transform the Jews into Germans than the skin of blacks could be turned white.

This brand of antisemitism was unusually violent in its imagery and it tended towards violence. Its logic was to promote the “elimination” of Jews by whatever means necessary and possible, given the prevailing political and ethical constraints. Of twenty-eight prominent antisemitic writers from 1861 to 1895 who proposed solutions to the so-called “Jewish Problem,” nineteen called for the *physical extermination of the Jews*. During this pre-genocidal era of European civilization—when consciousness of the mass human slaughter of the first and second world wars, let alone of genocide as an instrument of national policy did not exist—fully two-thirds of these prominent antisemites took their beliefs to their extreme logical consequences and uttered, indeed, called for a genocidal response.

The eliminationist mind-set tended towards an exterminationist one. And it did so already in the nineteenth century prior to the political birth of Hitler. Indeed, Wilhelm von Dohm—the greatest German friend of the Jews at the end of the eighteenth century; he urged their emancipation—already recognized that the antisemites’ characterization of Jews logically implied, as he put it, that “one must wipe the Jews from the face of the earth.”

Now, there are two important points here. The cognitive model of Nazi antisemitism had taken shape well before the Nazis came to power. As one nineteenth century liberal friend of the Jews opined, “The Jew appears as a distortion, a shadow, the dark side of human nature.” And as a progressive churchman declaimed in 1831: “One will want to be just towards the Jews, only when they are no more.”

This model, throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, was also extremely widespread in all social classes and sectors of German society, and not just confined to some stratum of intellectual antisemites, having been deeply embedded in German cultural and political life and conversation, as well as integrated into the moral structure of society. As a historian of German antisemitism, Werner Jochmann, writes, “A wealth of examples shows how, in the [18]90s antisemitism infiltrated in this way into *every last* citizens’ association, penetrating folk clubs and cultural societies [my emphasis].” At the end of the Weimar Republic, the correlation of forces has been summed up as follows: “For antisemitism hundreds of thousands were ready to ascend the barricades, to fight brawls in public halls, to demonstrate in the streets. Against antisemitism, hardly a hand stirred. And so far as slogans were in those days raised against Hitler, they put forward other things, but not the revulsion against antisemitism.”

During the Nazi period, eliminationist antisemitism became the official public ideology, which further sustained and inflamed the existing anti-Jewish sentiments among the German people. The fundamentals of the antisemitic cultural model, which had been in place for at least fifty years, consisted of the following elements: Jews were different from Germans. By the end of the nineteenth century, the differences were conceived to reside in their biology, conceptualized as “race,” and therefore unchangeable. The Jews were by nature evil and they were extremely powerful, acting as corporate group to injure other peoples, particularly the Germans. The Jews were responsible for much of the harm that befell Germany and Germans. The Jews would continue to harm Germany. For Germany to be secure and prosperous, the Jews and their influence had to be eliminated.

As a cultural axiom, this antisemitic model was to be found throughout German society during the Nazi period. The judiciary was antisemitic. The medical profession was antisemitic. The civil service was antisemitic. Universities, the incubators of the future elite, were rife with antisemitism. The churches were antisemitic. Shortly after Hitler came to power, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote to a friend of the ubiquitous antisemitism in the Protestant churches. He declared that regarding Jews, “The most sensible people have lost their heads and their entire Bible.” The Protestant Sunday papers, with a circulation of 1.8 million and a readership many times that number, were rife with virulent eliminationist antisemitism even before the Nazis came to power. The conclusion of one study of them is that they focused a great deal on Jews and almost uniformly preached that the Jews were “the natural enemies of the Christian national tradition.” Ino Arndt, the author of the study, writes that these papers must have blunted in millions of their readers, “the human and finally also the Christian feelings” for the Jews. Antisemitism was also widespread among workers, as one Social Democratic report from Saxony in January 1936 recorded: “Antisemitism has no doubt taken root in wide circles of the population.... The general antisemitic psychosis affects even thoughtful people, our comrades as well.”

No institutionally supported counter image of Jews in Germany existed, and there had been none for a long time before the Nazis came to power. How were ordinary Germans supposed to have developed any other view of Jews?

These views of Jews—summarized by the most frequently intoned antisemitic phrase during the Nazi period, “The Jews are our misfortune”—were the common sense of the society. It was mother’s milk. Melita Maschmann, a former member of the girls’ division of the Hitler youth, conveyed this in a post-war confessional memoir. She wrote,

Those Jews were and remained something mysteriously menacing and anonymous. They were not the sum of all Jewish individuals...they were an evil power, something with the attributes of a spook. One could not see it, but it was there, an active force for evil. As children we had been told fairy stories which sought to make us believe in witches and wizards. Now we were too grown up to take this witchcraft seriously, but we still went on believing in the “wicked Jews.” They had never appeared to us in bodily form, but it was our daily experience that

adults believed in them. After all, we could not check to see if the earth was round rather than flat, or to be more precise, it was not a proposition we thought it necessary to check. The grownups “knew” it and one took over this knowledge without mistrust. They also “knew” that the Jews were wicked. The wickedness was directed against the prosperity, unity, and prestige of the German nation, which we had learned to love from an early age. The antisemitism of my parents was part of their outlook [and her own and all those whom she knew] which was taken for granted.

Support for the persecution of the Jews in the 1930s, which was nothing less than a concerted effort to eliminate them from German society, was extremely widespread. These measures—which included ceaseless, vicious, verbal attacks; physical attacks on Jews; the stripping of Jews of their citizenship; the removal of them from one profession after the next; the placing upon them of all manner of social restrictions—were utterly radical and open for all Germans to see. In the 1930s the German people watched the Jews being systemically assaulted as no minority had been in Europe for centuries, and watched them turned into a leprous community. Not only was this verbal, physical, legal, and social assault generally greeted with favor in Germany, but many ordinary Germans on their own contributed to the enactment and furtherance of these eliminationist measures, which were nothing less than one way to fulfill the eliminationist antisemitic ideology.

Eliminationist antisemitism tended towards an exterminationist solution. We see that in the nineteenth century—the pre-genocidal age—that racial, eliminationist antisemites already routinely called for the extermination of the Jews. Hitler himself expressed this logic from his earliest days in a speech that has been surprisingly generally neglected by those who have debated whether or not Hitler’s decision to implement an extermination solution derived from his ideological ideals and intentions. The speech was delivered in Munich on August 13, 1920. It was called “Why Are We Antisemites?” In the middle of that speech, the still politically obscure Hitler suddenly digressed to the subject of the death sentence and why it ought to be applied to the Jews. Healthy elements of a nation, he declared, know that “criminals guilty of crimes against the nation, i.e., parasites on the national community,” [that is, the Jews] cannot be tolerated, that under certain circumstances they must be punished only with death, since the imprisonment lacks the quality of irrevocableness. “The heaviest bolt is not heavy enough and the securest prison is not secure enough that *a few million* could not in the end open it. Only one bolt cannot be opened—and *that is death* [my emphasis].” That is why in Hitler’s mind only an exterminationist solution is a “final solution.” Such was the logic of German eliminationist antisemitism. When the time was ripe for acting on his pre-existing ideal and Hitler gave the order to implement the exterminationist variant of the eliminationist ideology, Germans understood why it was logical, even necessary to take the step. Whatever some people’s disquietude with such a racial measure, it was compatible with their underlying beliefs, even if it took Hitler and the Nazi state to make the leap to extermination and to organize it.

I have four questions about antisemitism. How broad was it in German society? A number of scholars of antisemitism have discussed different periods of nineteenth- and twentieth-century German

history. Among these are Rainer Erb and Werner Bergman, Werner Jochmann, David Bankier, and Ian Kershaw—who said, “to be an antisemite in Hitler’s Germany was so commonplace as to go practically unnoticed.” Many scholars have agreed that antisemitism was extremely widespread in German society.

The second question is, what kind of antisemitism was it? It was broad, but what kind? There is no doubt that there was an enormous amount of Nazi-like antisemitism, which was based upon on the underlying model that I have described. But how widespread was it? Obviously this can be debated. I think that it was an axiom or near axiom of society.

The third question is, when, how and why did it develop? I argue that it developed in the nineteenth century, that it became a cultural norm, and therefore the new generations of Germans imbibed it as part of their world view.

And how did it inform action? It informed the definition of the problem, namely that a so-called Jewish problem existed for which the Jews were the source. And the problem was deemed to be acute. It informed thinking about the nature of the solution. It informed what people were willing to do when given the lead by the state.

Any treatment of the Holocaust must address these questions directly and explicitly for it to be adequate. Everyone must answer these questions. I have given you my answers.

Let me turn now to the perpetrators. In the book I looked at four institutions of killing. The “camp” (which is often called concentration camp), police battalions, work camps, and death marches. My method was to look at one or two cases in depth to give the detail that is necessary to understand how these institutions functioned and their members operated. I also tried to look at each of the institutions more broadly, and at other cases to show that the features discussed in detail in the case studies are to be found in general in the given institution of killing. So there is much material supporting the conclusions I am about to discuss, which I cannot, in these brief remarks, present here.

One must say it is quite clear that many of the perpetrators of the Holocaust were ordinary Germans. Many were not particularly Nazified by the standards of society, not being in the SS or even in the Nazi Party. Many were haphazardly selected. There was little attempt in many of the institutions to screen them for ideological fitness. They took whomever they could get. Many of the perpetrators, at least in the police battalions, were older. They were not particularly martial. They were more independent-minded men, having had some life experience.

Christopher Browning was, of course, the first one to focus people’s attention on these features of the Holocaust in his book *Ordinary Men*, and it is a feature of the Holocaust that I also emphasize in mine. It is not just that perpetrators were ordinary Germans, but that there were also vast numbers of them, and this has to be focused upon. The number of Germans who took part in the extermination of the Jews is far greater than many realize. Although a definitive estimate is difficult to make, the number was greater than 100,000 and probably far greater. A few figures will provide some sense of the vastness of the system of

destruction. Over 10,000 German camps of various sizes and kinds existed for incarcerating and destroying Jews and non-Jews. These camps required an enormous staff. Of course they were of all different sizes. There was an enormous place such as Auschwitz, and then there were small camps that housed just a few dozen prisoners. So they are not all the same.

The German justice center in charge of investigating Nazi crimes has catalogued over 333,000 people, not all of whom were German, who served in concentration camps, ghettos, execution commandos and other institutions that were used to kill Jews and others. The Nazi authorities, apparently acting on the assumption that any able-bodied German would consent to kill Jews, assigned to the task virtually anyone who was available. This assumption was also borne out. The Nazi leadership understood the German people.

The perpetrators were not coerced to kill. Never in the history of the Holocaust was a German ever killed, sent to concentration camp, jailed, or punished in any serious way for refusing to kill Jews. It never happened. Moreover, in many units officers announced to their men that they did not have to kill, and in at least nine police battalions the men had been informed that they did not have to kill. There is similar evidence for the some of the *Einsatzkommandos*. There is also evidence that Himmler himself issue orders allowing those who were not up to the killing to be excused from it.

What needs to be explained is that ordinary Germans killed, even those who knew that they did not have to. But that is not all. What also needs to be explained is the killers' *initiative*, their *zeal*, and their *cruelty*—and that all of these were to be found among the ordinary Germans who were the perpetrators of the Holocaust.

They killed under orders. Those who had the opportunity not to kill show us that it was not coercion that moved them. They showed zeal in their killing, volunteering for killing operations. As one man from Police Battalion 101 relates, "I must first and foremost state categorically that whenever the superior requested them, there were enough volunteers for execution squads. This was the case also in Józefów," which was their first killing operation. "I must add that, in fact, so many volunteered that some had to be left behind."

On the Helmbrechts death march, which began in the last month of the war, all of the killing was essentially voluntary. On the second day of the march, one of Himmler's adjutants came upon the marchers and the guards, assembled them, and announced to them that they were no longer supposed to kill Jews or to treat them badly. In fact, he ordered the guards to treat them well, to divest themselves of their clubs, which the guards carried, and to treat the prisoners well for the rest of the war. Yet, in the three weeks of marching, during which they tortured the victims terribly, the German guards, half of whom were women, killed 275 of the 580 Jewish women on the march. But they killed none of the approximately 600 non-Jewish women prisoners who set out on the march. The killings were done against superior orders.

The killers searched to find every hidden Jew, and they searched with enormous devotion. You can read the memoir literature, even the testimony of the killers themselves, who described the ways in which they cleared ghettos and hunted for Jews in the countryside. Their entire manner was that of devoted killers.

In situations where Germans had intimate contact with the victims there was almost universal cruelty. So they were not just zealous, but they were cruel. This was also the case in work camps, where Jews were supposed to be working in an economically productive way. One former guard of one of the Lublin “work” camps that I discuss in the book summarizes life in the camp definitively by saying “*Schlägereien waren im Lager an der Tagesordnung*”—“beating was the camp’s invariable daily fare.” On the previously mentioned Helmbrecht death march, the head woman guard acknowledged that all the German women guards, who were ordinary Germans, beat the prisoners with their rods. They did so for no reason of utility, but merely because they hated the Jewish women prisoners. This cruelty must be explained as much as the killing itself.

We must recognize that killers were not automatons, but people who made choices about whether to kill and how to treat the Jewish victims. The choices they made included exhibiting pride in their deeds. They routinely took photographs of their killing operations, as keepsakes which they shared among their comrades. Often their photos were taken against the orders of superiors who forbade it. As one member of Police Battalion 101 testified, “[The] photographs were laid out hanging on the wall and anyone, as he pleased, could order copies of them. I too acquired these photographs through such an order, even though I had not always participated in the events that the photographs depict.” Like hunters on safari, these executioners ordered mementos of their exploits against the Jewish “beasts.” And the photographs that the men took often show them as engaged, even joyous masters, degraders, and executioners of Jews. One of the reasons we have so many photos of the Holocaust is because the Germans took them to commemorate their deeds.

Not coercion, not obedience to authority, not bureaucratic myopia, not peer pressure, not personal profit or career advantage—none of these, but instead, the perpetrators’ antisemitism explains the various features of the Holocaust that must be accounted for. Any explanation that cannot account for these features must be rejected. The perpetrators’ antisemitism explains their willingness to carry out orders, the initiative they took, both in killing and in brutalizing Jews, as well as their general brutality. It explains the perpetrators’ zeal and why this far-flung operation proceeded so smoothly, for the belief in the necessity and the justice of the genocide provided the energy and the devotion that such operations require. It explains why Germans at every level of the various institutions of killing showed so little consideration for ameliorating the suffering of Jews, which could have been done so easily by those who saw the killing as unstoppable, but who wanted to spare the victims unnecessary anguish and pain. It explains why so few of the perpetrators availed themselves of opportunities to avoid killing. Imagine the gruesomeness of shooting someone, perhaps a child, from a few feet away and how much anyone who does not approve of the killing

would want to get out of it. It explains why so many people who were not great supporters of the Nazi regime and why even opponents of Nazism contributed to the extermination of the Jews, for Germans' beliefs about the Jews could be distinct from their evaluation of Nazism. Because eliminationist antisemitism was a German cultural cognitive model that predated Nazi political power, a committed anti-Nazi could be a committed, passionate racial antisemite. Killing the Jews was for many a deed done not for Nazism, but for Germany.

We should stop caricaturing Germans. They were thinking beings, not automatons. Germans had views about whether slaughtering Jews was a good or a bad thing. As for other people, Germans' beliefs informed their willingness to act. If ordered to, they would not have killed the Danish people, or all those who lived in Munich. They would not have gleefully tortured any target group, just as German medical personnel did not torture those whom they slaughtered in the so-called Euthanasia program. Therefore, their conception of the victim was crucial for their willingness to act and for the manner in which they did act. This can be illustrated by an account of one Jewish memoirist, Oskar Pinkus. The power of eliminationist antisemitism, once given free reign autonomously to shape the Germans' actions, to induce Germans voluntarily on their own initiative to act barbarously towards Jews, was such that Germans who were not even formally engaged in the persecution and extermination of the Jews routinely assaulted Jews physically, not to mention, verbally. Pinkus describes a paradigmatic occurrence. Young soldiers, veterans of the western front, arrived in Łódź, a town of 8,000 people in the Lublin region of Poland. The initially acted courteously. Then they learned that the vast majority of the town's denizens were Jews, "and immediately they were transformed. Their *Sie* turned to *du*; they made us polish their boots and clubbed us for not tipping our hats promptly." Nothing had changed. The Germans beheld people who looked exactly as they had before, people who acted no differently. Yet everything had changed, for the Germans had gained knowledge of the identity of these people and, like their countrymen all over eastern Europe, immediately became transformed, using the demeaning "*du*" form of address, instead of the normal, respectful "*Sie*," exacting symbolic obeisance, and beating the innocent people. This, by the way, took place in 1940, before the formal program of extermination had begun. These ordinary Germans' conception of the victims was absolutely determinative of their actions, of their voluntary and cruel actions.

All social psychological explanations deny the humanity of the perpetrators and the victims. I maintain that any explanation that fails to acknowledge the actors' capacity to know and to judge, namely to understand and to have views about the significance and the morality of their actions, that fails to hold the actors' beliefs and values as central, that fails to emphasize the autonomous motivating force of Nazi ideology, particularly its central component of antisemitism, cannot possibly succeed in telling us much about why the perpetrators acted as they did. Any explanation that ignores either the particular nature of the perpetrators' actions—the systematic, large-scale killing and brutalizing of human beings, of men, women and children—or which ignores the identity of the victims, is inadequate for a host of reasons. All

explanations that adopt these positions, as do the explanations rejected here, suffer a mirrored, double failure of recognition of the human aspect of the Holocaust: first, the humanity of the perpetrators, namely their capacity to judge and to choose to act inhumanely, and second, the humanity of the victims, that what the perpetrators did, they did to these people with their specific identities, and not to animals or things.

The form of all the conventional theories (coercion, obedience to authority, peer pressure, bureaucratic myopia, careerism)—each one of which is also ahistorical, meaning that the prior history of the country is deemed irrelevant—the form of all the conventional theories is that any person—German, Danish, American, Chinese, from this century or from any other—could be put in the same situation and would do the same things to any arbitrarily designated victim group.

But this is decidedly not the case, as Otto Ohlendorf, the former commander of *Einsatzgruppe D*, which slaughtered under his command tens of thousands of Jews in the Soviet Union, indicated after the war in a letter smuggled out of prison to his wife: “When confronted with demons at work, engaged in a struggle against us, what else could we have done?” For Ohlendorf and the other perpetrators, genocide was the sensible and necessary option. Given their bedrock belief in the vast malevolent power of the Jews, Ohlendorf, speaking for all of them, asks, “What else could we have done?”

The killers commonly believed that the Jewish people is evil to the core and dangerous in the extreme, and therefore had to be eliminated. As a member of one police battalion explains, “It did not at all occur to me that these orders could be unjust. I was then of the conviction that the Jews were not innocent but guilty. I believed the propaganda that all Jews were criminals and subhumans and that they were the cause of Germany’s decline after the First World War. The thought that one should disobey or evade the order to participate in the extermination of the Jews did not therefore enter my mind at all.” As yet another genocidal executioner, speaking for all his brethren, states, “The Jew was not acknowledged by us to be a human being.” With these words, he reveals the mainspring of the Holocaust and of the willing participation of ordinary Germans in the ceaseless brutalizing and systematic killing of the Jews.

Any explanation of the perpetrator’s actions must answer the following questions. What did they think of their victims? What did they think about the slaughter? How did their beliefs inform their actions? Again, I have given you my answers.

Now briefly I’ll turn to German society and some more general reflections. In the 1890s, 1910s and 1930s, the evidence suggests that eliminationist antisemitism was a cultural norm, that it was extremely widespread in German society. In the 1930s, this led the vast majority of the German people not only not to be repulsed by the radical eliminationist persecution of the Jews, but to understand, accept, and even, for many, to lend a hand in it. The same beliefs, the same model of Jews, that underlay this support, also underlay the exterminationist variant of the eliminationist intent and policies, which suggests that extermination was indeed compatible with the beliefs of all those in Germany who shared the dominant image of Jews. Turning to the genocide itself, we see that ordinary Germans, nurtured in this antisemitic

culture, brutalized and killed Jews willingly, even zealously. And they did so because of their antisemitism. They therefore show us what the other ordinary German antisemites were capable of doing, had they too found themselves in institutions of killing. One of the elementary rules of inference, which allows us to make correct generalizations, is that when one has a representative sample, then not only may one generalize to the larger population, but one, in fact, must make that generalization. Public opinion polling is based on this principle. The representative, ordinary Germans who were the killers, indicated the lethal, easily activated potential that was inherent in German antisemitism. But I want to make two points clear. The first is that antisemitism, even virulent, eliminationist antisemitism, can issue in a variety of outcomes, depending on a host of other factors. And, second, for it to issue in systematic, widespread, sustained, and violent persecution, it must be activated by the state.

German eliminationist antisemitism was multi-potential. The pre-existing genocidal potential that inhered in Germans' eliminationist antisemitism, and therefore in Germans themselves, can be seen from a public lecture given on June 1, 1933, by the leading Protestant theologian and biblical scholar, Gerhard Kittel, entitled "*Die Judenfrage*" ("The Jewish Problem"), which was subsequently published. In it, he etches clearly the fundamentals of the German cultural cognitive model of Jews that had developed in the nineteenth century and that had not come to power with the Nazis. The Jews, he states as a well-known matter of common sense, are a racially constituted, alien body within Germany. Emancipation and assimilation rather than having rendered the Jews more fit for German society, allowed the Jews to infect the German people with their blood and spirit, with calamitous consequences. What might be the solution to the "Jewish Problem?" Kittel considers four. He rejects Zionism, the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine, as impractical. He rejects assimilation, because assimilation itself is a great evil that, by constitution, promotes the pollution of the racial stock. Most significantly, he explicitly considers extermination as a possible solution: "One can try to exterminate (*auszurotten*) the Jews (pogroms)." Having not yet been able to conceive of a state organized systematic extermination, Kittel considers an exterminationist solution in the light of the model of the pogrom, which leads him to reject extermination as impractical, as a policy that has not and could not work. Kittel therefore settles on the eliminationist solution of "guest status" (*Fremdlingenschaft*), namely the separation of Jews from their host peoples. That this eminent theologian would publicly contemplate the extermination of the Jews already in June 1933, almost in passing, without any great elaboration or justification, and as a normal, easily discussed option when trying to fashion a solution to the "Jewish Problem," reveals the lethality of the regnant eliminationist antisemitism, and how ordinary its discussion must have seemed to ordinary Germans in the Germany of the early 1930s.

Kittel, with his ruminations, indicates the logic or the thought process that eliminationist antisemites went through when trying to figure out which was the most appropriate eliminationist solution.

Activation of antisemitism depends on the political context. I am not saying that antisemitism, or even this kind of virulent eliminationist antisemitism, alone produced the Holocaust. It needed to be

activated by the state. The Nazis were the most committed antisemites in human history. They came to power and decided to turn private fantasy into the core of state policy. There was much antisemitism in other European countries, even Nazi-like antisemitism, and this is why the Germans easily found so many willing helpers elsewhere. But it was only in Germany that Hitler came to power and only Germany that could have undertaken a total final solution the “Jewish Problem.” For the Holocaust to occur, the Nazi state had to mobilize people and organize a genocide, and the people had to prepare to be mobilized, namely they had to be antisemites; both were necessary. And when Hitler’s decision was taken, antisemitism was easily activated for slaughter.

Any explanation of the Holocaust must also be able to account for its distinctive features vis-à-vis other genocides, which includes the comprehensiveness of the killing (every Jewish man, woman, and child had to be killed), the geographic scope of the killing, the unusual degree of cruelty, and the figmental nature of the enemy. To pick up on this last point, most genocides and mass slaughters occur within the context of some real, objective conflict over territory, power, or wealth, but there was no such objective conflict between Germans and the Jews of Germany, or the Jews of the rest of Europe. The enemy was a figment of the Germans’ imagination. To the Jews, it seemed as if the world was insane. One Jewish survivor recalls his own thoughts of October 1942 when ensconced in a hideout in Hrubieszow, a city southeast of Lublin, as the killing and hunting proceeded around him, “I was struck repeatedly by how incredible it all was—total strangers remorselessly hunting down people who had done nothing whatever to hurt them. The world was mad.” But the perpetrators and all other Germans who shared their views did not see the world as mad. In their figmental construction of the world, “remorselessly hunting down people who had done nothing whatever to hurt them” was a sensible act, a redemptive act, an act necessary to preserve the German people.

It was demonological, eliminationist antisemitism that explains this (the killing of a figmental enemy) and other singular features of the Holocaust, that produced the drive of the enormous number of ordinary Germans who so remorselessly, zealously, and willingly hunted down, rounded up, tortured, and killed Jewish men, women, and children by the tens of thousands. In the words of one former German police official who served in the Cracow region, those serving with him, “were, with a few exceptions, quite happy to take part in the shootings of Jews. They had a ball!”, their killing was motivated by “great hatred against the Jews; it was revenge.” This demonological, eliminationist antisemitism that put the Jews forward, in Melita Maschmann’s words, as “an active force for evil whose wickedness was directed against the prosperity, unity, and prestige of the German nation,” was in her apt phrase, “a part of their (her parents’) outlook which was taken for granted.” This antisemitism moved not just the perpetrators, those representative, ordinary Germans, but also made the vast majority of Germans, not just those who by chance ended up in killing institutions, but the vast majority of Germans, fit to be Hitler’s willing executioners.

After the war, one perpetrator described his awakening from this antisemitic trance. The truth came to him suddenly, like an epiphany. “These were not subhumans, enemies of our people. It was not ‘the Jews are our misfortune.’ It was all a base lie. We ourselves were our misfortune.”

Daniel Goldhagen's Willing Executioners

Christopher R. Browning

In the spring of 1990 a conference was held on the campus of UCLA that was devoted to the issue of “probing the limits of representation” in writing Holocaust history. At that time I noted in my discussion of the problematic sources used in writing a history of Reserve Police Battalion 101 that “different historians reading the same set of interrogations would not produce or agree upon an identical set of ‘facts’—beyond an elementary minimum—out of which a narrative of events...could be created.” I also identified the particular questions that shaped the construction of my narrative and concluded: “If other kinds of questions had been asked, other aspects of the testimony would have seemed more important and been selected instead; a different story would have been told.”¹ I must confess that at the time I wrote these words, I did not imagine that a confirming example of an alternative history would be forthcoming either so quickly or so starkly in the form of Daniel Goldhagen's *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Final Solution*.

On two issues we do not in fact disagree, namely the extensive participation of numerous ordinary Germans in the mass murder of Jews and the high degree of voluntarism they exhibited. These conclusions are not original with Daniel Goldhagen, the inflated claims of much recent promotional literature to the contrary notwithstanding. We do disagree, however, in our explanations of the motivation behind the participation and voluntarism of these Germans. What is at the crux of this divergence?

In acknowledging how little we know as yet about the motivations of non-German collaborators, especially the East European *Schutzmannen*, Daniel Goldhagen calls for a study of the “combination of cognitive and situational factors” that brought such perpetrators to contribute to the Holocaust.² This is a suggestion I would support. But Goldhagen does not employ such a combined approach for studying German perpetrators of the Holocaust. He writes emphatically, “with regard to the motivational cause of the Holocaust, for the vast majority of the perpetrators, a monocausal explanation does suffice.”³ The “one explanation” that is “adequate” is “a demonological antisemitism” that “was the common structure of the perpetrators' cognition and of German society in general.”⁴ Because Hitler and the Germans were “of one mind”⁵ about the Jews, he had merely to “unshackle” or “unleash” their “pre-existing, pent-up”⁶ antisemitism to perpetrate the Holocaust.

According to Daniel Goldhagen, therefore, one question historians like myself should not pose and need not answer is how ordinary Germans overcame reluctance and inhibition to become professional killers. There was no reluctance, aside from sheer squeamishness at the sight of too much blood and gore, because ordinary Germans “wanted to be genocidal executioners.”⁷ Given the chance, the vast majority killed with “gusto”;⁸ they had “fun”;⁹ they enjoyed themselves; they “killed for pleasure.”¹⁰ They did so

“equipped with little more than the cultural notions current in Germany.”¹¹

I have taken the wrong track and posed the wrong question, Goldhagen writes, because of at least two factors: 1) I have not been sufficiently rigorous in excluding mendacious, self-serving, and exculpatory postwar perpetrator testimony;¹² and 2) I have naively studied these events through my own non-German cognitive lens rather than—like the anthropologist—discovering the very different cognitive world of the Germans that was so saturated with antisemitism as to make it part of the “common sense” of the day.¹³

One way to test our differing views is to look at the rare testimony of Jewish survivors who worked among German reserve policemen over an extended period of time. Three comments can be made about such witnesses: 1) They were in a position to know the ambience and dynamics of such units; 2) they had no motive similar to that of the German police to distort and falsify their testimony; and 3) they should have been quite sensitive rather than blind to the pervasiveness and intensity of the policemen’s antisemitism.

Allow me to share a letter I received following the publication of *Ordinary Men*.

Your book deeply affected me, because I personally experienced the German *Schutzpolizei*, the good and the bad. As a 15 year old Jewish boy, I was sent by the Judenrat as a punishment to my father to do maintenance work in the headquarters of the German police. The town then called Auschwitz had no running water. I carried the water and polished their boots until March 1941 when the whole Jewish population had to leave. The whole police company came from the town of Waldenburg in Silesia. I came across men that in my opinion could not hurt a fly. Walter Stark, Max Maetzig, Walter Kraus, Joseph Grund, Polizeimeister Sebranke, his deputy Orlet, and so on. Two of them were willing to make out false papers and send me as a Pole to work in Germany, apparently knowing what was coming. ...As I mentioned before this whole company came from the town of Waldenburg. As faith wants it, in October 1944, I was taken to the KZ [Concentration Camp] Waldenburg. In January 1945 we were taken to dig so-called Panzergraben [anti-tank ditches] on the outskirts of town in the direction of Breslau. One evening going back to the camp a child was playing on the sidewalk. I recognized him as Horst Maetzig, who[m] I met with his parents in Auschwitz. His father Max Maetzig was one of the policemen. Of course, you know we were guarded by SS. I could not help it as we lined up with the boy, I exclaimed Horst. He took a look and ran away. The next day he was standing there with his mother Elisabeth, and [she] just nodded with her head. I appreciated that now very much. For the next two months, she and her boy stood there, it was a tremendous boost for my morale. I will never forget it.

I wonder what happened to this police company, if they wound up to do what you describe in your book. Maybe you can find out for me, I would be grateful.¹⁴

I do not in fact know what this company of middle-aged policemen from Silesia did subsequently. If they were called upon to kill Jews, my guess is that, just as in other such units, most of the policemen would have done so, and some probably would have behaved with gratuitous and unspeakable cruelty. But I doubt that most would have killed willingly and enthusiastically, motivated by the lethal and demonological antisemitism uniformly attributed to such ordinary Germans by Goldhagen.

We do know, however, what a group of middle-aged reserve police stationed in the Belorussian town of Mir did when called upon to kill Jews. In the winter of 1941-42, shortly after their arrival, these

German police led Belorussian *Schutzmännen* into the surrounding countryside to murder scattered Jewish communities—“clearing the flatlands” as the German documents put it. In August 1942 they helped liquidate the Jewish ghetto in Mir. And through the following autumn they engaged in the infamous “Jew hunts,” tracking down and killing Jews who had escaped the earlier massacres. What distinguishes this police station then is neither its personnel—randomly-conscripted middle-aged reservists—nor its actions—systematically killing Jews—but the fact that a Jewish survivor, Oswald Rufeisen, passing as a Pole, worked inside the station as an interpreter for eight months. How has he described the ambience and dynamics of the *Gendarmerie* outpost in Mir? Nechama Tec, in her book *In the Lion’s Den*,¹⁵ reports that, according to Rufeisen, there was:

a visible difference in the Germans’ participation in anti-Jewish and anti-partisan moves. A selected few Germans, three out of thirteen, consistently abstained from becoming a part of all anti-Jewish expeditions.... No one seemed to bother them. No one talked about their absences. It was as if they had a right to abstain.

Among these middle-aged gendarmes too old to be of interest to the army, Rufeisen noted the presence of enthusiastic and sadistic killers, including the second in command, Karl Schultz, who was described as “a beast in the form of a man.” “Not all the gendarmes, however, were as enthusiastic about murdering Jews as Schultz,” Tec notes. Concerning the policemen’s attitude toward killing Jews, she quotes Rufeisen directly:

It was clear that there were differences in their outlooks. I think that the whole business of anti-Jewish moves, the business of Jewish extermination they considered unclean. The operations against the partisans were not in the same category. For them a confrontation with partisans was a battle, a military move. But a move against the Jews was something they might have experienced as ‘dirty.’ I have the impression that they felt that it would be better not to discuss this matter.

In short, Rufeisen’s testimony about the Mir *Gendarmerie* outpost—neither tainted by a credulous acceptance of postwar German mendacity nor blind to the cognitive world of pre-1945 Germans—does not confirm the image of men uniformly possessed of a “lethal, hallucinatory view of the Jews” who viewed their killing of Jews as “a redemptive act.”¹⁶

To maintain his image of uniformity and totality, Goldhagen is particularly keen to discredit the estimate I hazarded in *Ordinary Men* that some 10-20% of the reserve policemen refused or evaded and became “non-shooters.” It is an estimate, he says, that has no evidentiary base.¹⁷ I would note in this regard that even in his own account of the Helmbrechts death march, he refers to a minority among the older guards who according to a Jewish witness “were for the most part good-natured and did not beat or otherwise torment us.”¹⁸ And according to Rufeisen, 3 of 13 German reserve police in Mir, i.e. 23%, did not take part in the killing of Jews. This would suggest that my estimate is not so wildly improbable after all.

The number of non-shooters may not have been large, but the issue is important. The existence of a small minority of non-shooters suggests the existence of an even larger group of accommodators drawn from

the indifferent majority of German society, who did not share the regime's ideological priorities but despite initial reluctance and lack of enthusiasm became killers. This approach is in line with the interpretations advanced by such diverse historians of German public opinion as Ian Kershaw, Otto Dov Kulka, and David Bankier. To quote Bankier, who in no way downplays the breadth of antisemitism in the German population: "Ordinary Germans knew how to distinguish between acceptable discrimination...and the unacceptable horror of genocide.... The more the news of the mass murder filtered through, the less the public wanted to be involved in the Final Solution of the Jewish question."¹⁹ If such a group of "indifferent" Germans not only provided the autonomy for the regime to implement genocidal policies but also many of the killers, then the focus of explanation would shift from Goldhagen's single cognitive model producing a uniform group of willing killers, to the combination of ideological and situational factors that allowed a popular, ideologically driven, dictatorial regime and its hardcore followers to mobilize and harness the rest of society to its purposes. In such an approach, antisemitism would certainly not be absent but it would also not be sufficient.

Allow me to turn to a second issue, namely the comparative treatment of Jewish and non-Jewish victims. Goldhagen repeatedly—and for the most part I think correctly—makes the point that Jews were systematically treated worse than other terribly abused victims of the Nazis. He attributes this difference not so much to Hitler's priorities and the regime's policies but rather once again to the pervasive lethal antisemitism of ordinary Germans. They could not, he implies, have acted similarly toward other victims.

As one example, Goldhagen notes that when Reserve Police Battalion 101 carried out its first reprisal shooting against Poles in the village of Talcyn in September 1942, Major Trapp wept. At the same time, he notes, the policemen were ruthlessly deporting or killing on the spot the entire Jewish population in the region. Reluctant to kill Poles, they simultaneously "slaked their Jewish blood-lust."²⁰ But Goldhagen is comparing "apples and oranges." Trapp wept before and while he carried out the initial massacre of Jews at Jozefow as well. More telling, however, is the behavior of the middle-aged reserve police in a subsequent reprisal action against Poles, which Goldhagen does not mention. In January 1943 a group of reserve police were about to visit the cinema when they received word that a German policeman had been shot by Polish assailants. The men hurried to the village of Niezdow to carry out a reprisal, only to discover that in anticipation of the German reaction all but the most elderly inhabitants had fled. Even though word came in the middle of the action that the German policeman had only been wounded and not killed, the Germans shot all twelve to fifteen elderly Poles—mostly women—and burned down the village before returning to the cinema.²¹

Can one be as confident as Goldhagen that these men would not have systematically killed Polish men, women, and children, if that had been the policy of the regime? Goldhagen does not ignore that fact that millions of Russian POWs perished in German camps, that Slavic populations were routinely subjected to selective massacres, and that "Gypsies" and the German mentally and physically handicapped were

systematically murdered. Each of these mass killings, he notes, had its own ideological basis.²² Yet the Wehrmacht massacres of Italian POWs (just days earlier German allies) in 1943²³ and villagers in central Italy in the summer of 1944²⁴ as well as the killing of Greek men, women, and children in the village of Komeno²⁵ would indicate that neither a singular brand of German antisemitism nor even long-held German views about Slavic inferiority or “eugenics” were an essential motivation for Germans to carry out wartime massacres, if such were legitimized by the regime.

A third issue concerns non-German perpetrators and the importance of situational factors. Goldhagen argues: “Because each of the conventional explanations explicitly or implicitly posits universal human traits, the conventional explanations should hold true for any people who might find themselves in the perpetrators’ shoes. But this is obviously and demonstrably false.”²⁶ The notion that ordinary Danes or Italians could have acted as Germans, he says, “strains credulity beyond the breaking point.”²⁷

Allow me to examine one example of cross-cultural comparison that suggests otherwise. In addition to the middle-aged reservists from north Germany, Reserve Police Battalion 101 included a contingent of young men from Luxembourg, which had been annexed to the Third Reich in 1940. The presence of the Luxembourgers in Reserve Police Battalion 101 offers the historian the unusual opportunity for a “controlled experiment” to measure the impact of the same situational factors upon men of differing cultural and national background.

The problem is the scarcity of testimony. Only one German witness described the participation of the Luxembourgers in the battalion’s activities in any detail.²⁸ According to this witness, the Luxembourgers belonged to Lt. Buchmann’s platoon in first company. On the night before the initial massacre at Jozefow, Lt. Buchmann was the sole officer who said he could not order his men to shoot unarmed women and children and asked for a different assignment. He was put in charge of taking the work Jews to Lublin, and according to the witness, the Luxembourgers under his command provided the guard. Hence they did not participate in the massacre.

Thereafter Lt. Buchmann continued to refuse participation in any Jewish action. However, those in his platoon, including the Luxembourgers, were not exempted. According to the witness, the company captain took considerable care in the selection of personnel for assignments. “In general the older men remained behind,” he noted. In contrast, “*the Luxembourgers were in fact present at every action* (italics mine). With these people it was a matter of career police officials from the state of Luxembourg, who were all young men in their twenties.” According to this testimony, it would appear that the Luxembourgers became the shock-troops of first company simply because of their younger age and greater police experience and training, the absence of singular German antisemitism notwithstanding.

None of the Luxembourgers of Reserve Police Battalion 101 was interrogated by the German investigators. However, two of them, Jean Heinen and Roger Wietor, wrote brief accounts of their wartime service with the German police that were published in Luxembourg in 1986.²⁹ According to this testimony

the Luxembourgers in question were not career police but pre-war volunteers in Luxembourg's army—the so-called “Luxembourg Voluntary Company.” Fifteen of these Luxembourgers, all between the ages of 20 and 24, were sent to Hamburg in early June 1942. One fell ill there, but fourteen departed with Reserve Police Battalion 101 on June 21 for the Lublin district.

Two aspects of the accounts of Heinen and Wietor stand out. First, they portrayed themselves as victims of both German conscription and the horrors of war. Secondly, both men portrayed the actions of the Luxembourgers as consistently non-supportive of the German cause. The local population in Poland could easily distinguish the Luxembourgers from the Germans because the “latter, exclusively reservists, were twice our age.”³⁰ Thus the Luxembourgers were contacted by the Polish resistance, and Wietor claims to have provided them both information about impending searches and arrests as well as captured guns and ammunition, at great risk to himself.³¹ Heinen claimed that on several occasions Luxembourgers assigned to machine gun duty did not shoot in action and feigned stoppages, since machine gun crews would immediately draw concentrated enemy fire and suffer excessive casualties.³² Beginning in June 1944, five Luxembourgers successfully deserted and two others were killed trying to go over to the Russians.³³

Most notable, given what we now know about the battalion's mission in Poland, is that neither account mentions even the presence of Jews, much less the battalion's participation in their mass murder. At most, there is a slight hint behind several comments of Heinen. He notes that though the battalion was engaged in numerous actions, the Luxembourgers did not suffer their first casualty until mid-1943.³⁴ Thus the early actions could not have involved serious antipartisan combat. A tacit consensus for silence among themselves emerged in the postwar period, he concludes. “When we meet one another by accident now, we no longer speak of our tour of duty in Poland, or at most of the great amount of vodka that helped us through many difficult times.”³⁵

In my opinion, one can make a very strong argument from the silence of the German and Luxembourg testimony. The Luxembourgers detailed every aspect of dissident behavior that they could. If they had been among the non-shooters in anti-Jewish actions, would they not have claimed this to their credit in postwar accounts? Many German witnesses could still remember the non-shooters in the battalion twenty years later, yet the Luxembourgers attracted no comment whatsoever in this regard. Did the Luxembourgers stir no memories and cause no comment by German witnesses in the 1960's precisely because they were behaving like most of their German comrades in 1942?

To my mind the basic questions still remains: how and why could ordinary men like the *Schutzpolizei* in Auschwitz—men who “could not hurt a fly”—and the Gendarmes in Mir—who considered Jewish actions “dirty”—and the Luxembourgers in Reserve Police Battalion 101 become Holocaust killers? I do not think the answer is that they “wanted to be genocidal killers” because they were “of one mind” with Adolf Hitler about Jews. Demonological German antisemitism is in fact not a sufficient explanation.

I would now like to turn from particular issues and examples to a broader approach, examining how

Daniel Goldhagen has gone about constructing his history of Germans and the Holocaust. His background chapters on pre-Holocaust German antisemitism are an example of what I would call “key hole” history; he views events through a single narrow vantage point that blocks out context and perspective. Goldhagen’s imperial Germany is one in which conservatives and Volkish nationalists form the vast majority, a tiny liberal elite is fighting a Kulturkampf against Jews rather than Catholics, and Socialists are invisible. Rather than a society beleaguered by social and ideological divisions, it is unified in its antisemitic consensus, albeit temporarily distracted by the ‘false consciousness’ of a growing concern for foreign policy issues on the eve of World War I.³⁶ The key hole approach inexorably leads Goldhagen to the conclusion that antisemitism “more or less governed the ideational life of civil society” in pre-Nazi Germany.³⁷ Blocked from the pogroms for which they yearned by the restraints imposed by the Imperial and Weimar governments, the Germans “elected”³⁸ Hitler to power, for the “centrality of antisemitism in the Party’s worldview, program, and rhetoric...mirrored the sentiments of German culture.”³⁹ The Holocaust represented the congruence of Hitler and ordinary Germans; ultimately, the camp system, the cutting edge of the Nazi revolution, exposed “not just Nazism’s but also Germany’s true face.”⁴⁰

Let me make clear what is not at issue here. Many historians would agree that in 19th-century Germany Jewish emancipation was more strongly opposed, and antisemitism more widely visible in German culture and politics than in western Europe. Many historians would agree that this was an element of the illiberal political culture that was in turn a constituent part of a German *Sonderweg*. And many historians would agree that German antisemitism helped shape the political climate in which National Socialism came to power. But Daniel Goldhagen is arguing for a viewpoint far beyond this. Virulent, lethal antisemitism is the veritable leitmotiv not only of Hitler’s ideology but of 150 years of German history.

Daniel Goldhagen’s “key hole” view of German history is not of course incidental to what follows. Only a history of modern Germany constructed in this manner makes plausible his subsequent interpretation. But one should wonder, I think, that if Goldhagen has viewed modern German history through the key hole, might he not also have viewed the voluminous postwar testimony that he consulted in the same manner? In fact, he leaves the reader in no doubt.

In the appendix on methodology at the end of the book, Goldhagen frankly admits that he rigorously excluded any uncorroborated perpetrator testimony that he deemed self-exculpatory. Goldhagen argues that to do otherwise would be the equivalent of writing “a history of criminality in America by relying on the statements of criminals as given to police, prosecutors, and before courts.”⁴¹ This is but one of many instances in the book in which Goldhagen argues from the basis of a false dichotomy, painting any position but his own as an opposite and obviously untenable extreme.⁴² In doing so, Goldhagen effectively ignores the possibility that an historian might judiciously accept some self-exonerating testimony that is uncorroborated in the particular instance but corroborated by other testimony as having occurred on occasion. Goldhagen’s approach likewise excludes the historian from selective use of unusually detailed and

vivid testimony that has a “feel” of plausibility about it, especially in comparison to the formulaic and transparently dishonest testimony so often encountered.

Allow me a dramatic example. One reserve policeman, interrogated in November 1964, claimed to remember only several minor deportation actions. “It may sound unbelievable but it is true,” he insisted in a typical example of perpetrator denial.⁴³ Two days later the same man reappeared uninvited and recalled in painful detail his experience in the forest outside Jozefow.

The shooting of the men was so repugnant to me that I missed the fourth man. It was simply no longer possible for me to aim accurately. I suddenly felt nauseous and ran away from the shooting site. I have expressed myself incorrectly just now. It was not that I could no longer aim accurately, rather that the fourth time I intentionally missed. I then ran into the woods, vomited, and sat down against a tree. To make sure that no one was nearby, I called loudly into the woods, because I wanted to be alone. Today I can say that my nerves were totally finished. I think that I remained alone in the woods for some two or three hours.

He then went on to explain his unusual return to the office of the investigators. “I showed up here again today, to be rid of what I just said.... The reason for my return was to unburden my conscience.”⁴⁴

This is a kind of testimony Goldhagen’s methodology excludes, and the result is a kind of “methodological determinism.” Screening out much that could give some texture and differentiation to a portrayal of the German killers, he is left almost solely with those admissions that confirm both the hypothesis with which he began his research⁴⁵ and his unremitting portrayal of German uniformity. Given his methodology, he could scarcely have come to any other conclusion.⁴⁶

Indeed, it is this uniform portrayal of Germans—undifferentiated, unchanging, possessed by a single, monolithic cognitive outlook—that is at the heart of Goldhagen’s interpretation. When combined with his intentionally vivid descriptions of horrific events of murder and torture,⁴⁷ the cumulative emotional effect is overpowering. Not once as I read the 600 pages, did it ever occur to me to ask the question of the perpetrators: “What would I have done in their place?” It is, of course, exactly their place or situation that Goldhagen considers irrelevant; it is only their alleged beliefs on the one hand and their terrible actions on the other that matter, and both are totally alien. Daniel Goldhagen’s “ordinary Germans”—uniform and alien—are in effect dehumanized, his own disclaimer that “Germans should not be caricatured” notwithstanding.⁴⁸

In addition to dehumanizing the perpetrators, Goldhagen repeatedly defines the historical situations he analyses one-dimensionally, that is as test cases solely of the perpetrators’ antisemitic convictions torn from any situational and comparative context. For example, Mark Mazower has studied the Wehrmacht massacre of Greek men, women, and children in the village of Komeno.⁴⁹ Like Goldhagen, he concluded that for most of the perpetrators, killing women and children was much more difficult than killing men. But Goldhagen immediately moves past the age and gender issues to focus on ethnicity and forces the conclusion that because the perpetrators mentioned women and children specifically, then they had no problem with

killing Jews in general.⁵⁰ This in turn, of course, is invoked to support his general thesis of wide approval of the extermination. Taking a testimony about a policeman's difficulty in shooting Jewish women and children and turning it into a scholastic argument for broad German approval of the Final Solution is symptomatic of the single-issue, agenda-driven approach of the book.

The impact of Goldhagen's one-dimensional analysis is especially crucial in his dismissive attitude toward the issue of conformity and peer pressure. If the men fear being seen as cowards but not as "Jew-lovers," Goldhagen argues, this "can only mean" that there is "an essentially unquestioned consensus on the justice of the extermination" within the unit. "If indeed Germans had disapproved of the mass slaughter, then peer pressure would not have induced people to kill against their will."⁵¹ But that presupposes that what is of sole interest to Goldhagen, namely a test case of antisemitism due to the Jewish identity of the victims, was also central to the policemen of Reserve Police Battalion 101. Were the perpetrators primarily concerned about the fate, much less the identity, of their victims, or about the looming test of their individual abilities to carry out the first difficult task assigned to the battalion in occupied territory during war? When a policeman whom Goldhagen cites as particularly honest was asked why he did not take up Trapp's offer, he answered: "I was of the opinion that I could master the situation, and that without me the Jews were not going to escape their situation anyway."⁵² It was he, not the victims, who was the center of his concern. Goldhagen is right that the ethnic identity of the victims should not be ignored, but this does not justify ignoring all factors but the victims' identity.⁵³

One of the obvious situational factors that Goldhagen ignores consistently is the dictatorship itself. He pronounces the regime both dictatorial and consensual, but analyzes German behavior as if there was no dictatorship and all expression was spontaneous and free. One of the hallmarks of modern dictatorship is the epidemic of hypocrisy in virtually all public discourse and corruption of sincerity in public behavior that it engenders. In a dictatorship that strived to produce and orchestrate visible popular acclamation, silence did not mean support. The manipulative ritual, pageantry, and propaganda—such as "Jews not wanted here" signs at the edge of town—that aimed at creating the image of uniform German attitudes, should not, I think, be taken as evidence for the spontaneous expression of a pervasive antisemitism.⁵⁴ The ubiquitous bickering about prices and shortages and other minor dissatisfactions, even the successful protest against the removal of crucifixes from classrooms, ought not be taken as evidence that anything could be freely said, as Goldhagen implies.⁵⁵ Repression was real. Bishop Galen, by virtue of his visibility and status, barely survived his condemnation of euthanasia. But students of the White Rose, who passed out leaflets condemning the mass murders of the regime, were arrested, tortured, and beheaded. Members of the killing units could individually abstain from shooting, but those who encouraged others not to shoot were courtmartialed for defeatism and subversion of morale.⁵⁶ The Third Reich was not a benign dictatorship, and there were lines that could not be crossed.

Goldhagen places emphasis on the horrendous and pervasive cruelty of the German perpetrators,

arguing that “the quantity and quality of personalized brutality and cruelty that the Germans perpetrated upon Jews was also distinctive” and “unprecedented”; indeed, it “stood out” in the “long annals of human barbarism.”⁵⁷ This singular German cruelty is again seen by Goldhagen as evidence of a singular, malevolent German antisemitism. I am not particularly comfortable in engaging in a competitive discussion of comparative cruelty, but since the issue has been put on the table, I would note that few historians familiar with the crimes of non-German collaborators, such as those that the Croatian Ustasha committed against both Jews and Serbs, would find German cruelty distinctive and unprecedented. Indeed, what state-sanctioned mass murder has not unleashed unimaginable cruelties, including those committed under the Khmer Rouge by Cambodians and during the Cultural Revolution by Chinese against their neighbors and countrymen that did not require a singular, centuries-old demonological cognitive model? Goldhagen’s constant invocation of cruelty does not, I think, strengthen his case for an exclusive motivation of singular German antisemitism. The ubiquitous cruelty that accompanies mass murder points instead to the need for adding a wider perspective. Indeed, if ordinary Serbs, Croats, Hutus, Turks, Cambodians, and Chinese can be the perpetrators of mass murder and genocide, implemented with terrible cruelty, then we do indeed need to look at those universal aspects of human nature that transcend the cognition and culture of ordinary Germans.

Such an approach, no doubt, does lead to the “disjointed” and “strained patchwork” explanations that Daniel Goldhagen finds so wanting in comparison to his “single explanatory tract.”⁵⁸ Like a latter-day Copernicus, he sees himself sweeping away the outmoded equants and epicycles of a superseded Ptolemaic system and replacing it with an explanation that is seductively attractive because of its simplicity. But history is not a natural science. In this regard I would note the words of a man far more eloquent than I.

We also tend to simplify history; but the pattern within which events are ordered is not always identifiable in a single, unequivocal fashion, and therefore different historians may understand and construe history in ways that are incompatible with one another. Nevertheless, perhaps for reasons that go back to our origins as social animals, the need to divide the field into “we” and “they” is so strong that this pattern, this bipartition—friend/enemy—prevails over all others. Popular history...is influenced by this Manichean tendency, which shuns half-tints and complexities; it is prone to reduce the river of human occurrences to conflicts, and conflicts to duals—we and they.... The desire for simplification is justified, but the same does not always apply to simplification itself, which is a working hypothesis, useful as long as it is recognized as such and not mistaken for reality. The greater part of historical and natural phenomena are not simple, nor simple in the way we would like.⁵⁹

These are, of course, the words of Primo Levi, taken from his essay “The Gray Zone.” It is precisely the “gray zone”—that murky world of mixed motives, conflicting emotions and priorities, reluctant choices, and self-serving opportunism and accommodation wedded to self-deception and denial, a world that is all too human and all too universal—that is absent from Daniel Goldhagen’s Manichean tale.

Endnotes

- 1.. Christopher R. Browning, "German Memory, Judicial Interrogation, and Historical Reconstruction: Writing Perpetrator History from Postwar Testimony," in Saul Friedländer, ed. *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the "Final Solution,"* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 30-31.
- 2.. Daniel Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Final Solution* (New York: Knopf, 1996), p. 409.
- 3.. Goldhagen, *Willing Executioners*, p. 416.
- 4.. Ibid., p. 392.
- 5.. Ibid., p. 399.
- 6.. Ibid., p. 443.
- 7.. Ibid., p. 279.
- 8.. Ibid., p. 241.
- 9.. Ibid., p. 231.
- 10.. Ibid., p. 451.
- 11.. Ibid., p. 185.
- 12.. Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, "The Evil of Banality," *The New Republic* (July 13 and 20, 1992): pp. 49-52.
- 13.. Goldhagen, *Willing Executioners*, pp. 27, 32-33. For Goldhagen, historians must rid themselves of the notion that Germans in the Third Reich were "more or less like us" (p. 27), that "their sensibilities had remotely approximated our own" (p. 269). Instead scholars should approach them as they would the Aztecs, who believed human sacrifice was necessary to cause the sun to rise (p. 28).
- 14.. Personal letter of J. Henneberg to the author, Nov. 21, 1995.
- 15.. Nechama Tec, *In the Lion's Den* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 102-104.
- 16.. Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, "The Evil of Banality," *The New Republic* (July 13 and 20, 1992), pp. 49-52.
- 17.. Goldhagen, *Willing Executioners*, p. 551, footnote 54.
- 18.. Ibid., p. 360.
- 19.. David Bankier, *The Germans and the Final Solution: Public Opinion under Nazism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 151-52. Goldhagen's attempt to dismiss the notion of "indifference" (pp. 439-

441) I find quite unpersuasive. For instance, in discussing a report that described German reactions to a deportation as “*teilnahmslos*,” he objects to Kershaw’s translation as “indifferent” and proposes “unsympathetic” instead (p. 592, note 46). None of this discussion of the subtleties of translation prevents him from concluding something far more sweeping, namely: “The deportations...were, with some exceptions, greatly popular among the populace” (pp. 104-5).

20.. Goldhagen *Willing Executioners*, pp. 240-41.

21.. Testimony of Bruno P., *Staatsanwaltschaft Hamburg*, 141 Js 1957/62 (hereafter cited as HW), 1925-26. This is a witness that Goldhagen in other matters considers trustworthy.

22.. Goldhagen, *Willing Executioners*, p. 410.

23.. Menachem Shelah, “*Die Ermordung italienischer Kriegsgefangener durch die Wehrmacht--September-November 1943*,” in Hannes Heer and Klaus Naumann, eds. *Vernichtungskrieg: Verbrechen der Wehrmacht 1941-1944* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 1994), pp. 191-207.

24.. Michael Geyer, “*Es muss daher mit schnellen und drakonischen Massnahmen durchgegriffen werden*,” in *ibid.*, pp. 208-238.

25.. Mark Mazower, “Military Violence and National Socialist Values: The Wehrmacht in Greece 1941-1944,” *Past and Present* 134 (February 1992): pp. 129-158.

26.. Goldhagen, *Willing Executioners*, p. 389.

27.. *Ibid.*, p. 408.

28.. Testimony of Heinrich E., HW, 2167, 2169, 2172, 3351.

29.. L. Jacoby and R. Trauffer, eds., *Freiwellegekompanie 1940-1945* (Luxembourg: St. Paul, 1986), vol. II, pp. 207-21. I am very grateful to Dr. Paul Dostert, Luxembourg representative on the International Committee for the History of the Second World War, for providing me with this material.

30.. *Ibid.*, p. 209 (Heinen testimony).

31.. *Ibid.*, p. 221 (Wietor testimony).

32.. *Ibid.*, p. 212 (Heinen testimony).

33.. *Ibid.*, pp. 212-17 (Heinen testimony).

34.. *Ibid.*, p. 209 (Heinen testimony).

35.. *Ibid.*, p. 219 (Heinen testimony).

36.. In regard to the issue of ideological division versus consensus, I would also note Robert Melson’s conclusion that modern genocide is a product of war (often civil war) and revolution. Genocidal regimes are also revolutionary regimes trying to remake the national identity and impose a new ideological consensus.

Such a situation is anything but indicative of a pre-existing ideological consensus. Robert Melson, *Revolution and Genocide: On the Origins of the Armenian Genocide and the Holocaust* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

37.. Goldhagen, *Willing Executioners*, p. 106.

38.. Ibid., p. 419.

39.. Ibid., p. 82.

40.. Ibid., p. 460.

41.. Ibid., p. 463.

42.. Sometimes Goldhagen's false dichotomies are relatively harmless, such as when he argues for the constancy of Hitler's eliminationist antisemitism by posing the absurd opposite: "He never seriously considered or proposed that Germans could live together in harmonious peace with Jews" (p. 134). Elsewhere the implications of the false dichotomy argument are more serious. The reserve policemen must have approved of the mass murder, he argues, because they were not motivated by "solidarity with the Jews" (p. 549, note 41). They must have had genocidal beliefs because: "The Nazi leadership, like other genocidal elites, never applied...the vast amount of coercion that it would have needed to move tens of thousands of non-antisemitic Germans to kill millions of Jews" (pp. 418-19).

43.. Testimony of Franz K., HW, 2474-80.

44.. Testimony of Franz K., HW, 2482-87.

45.. Goldhagen, *Willing Executioners*, p. 463.

46.. Goldhagen is selective in his treatment of the evidence in other ways as well. Testimony about incidents that do not fit his thesis of uniform voluntarism and eagerness are deemed "murky" and "sketchy." Ibid., pp. 204, 535 (note 4), and 541 (note 74).

47.. Ibid., p. 22.

48.. Ibid., p. 382. Goldhagen's claim that it is not his but others' interpretations that deny the humanity of the perpetrators, I find unpersuasive (p. 392). Goldhagen's dehumanization of the Germans is crucial for understanding how he constructs the history of killing units like Reserve Police Battalion 101. In other instances, Goldhagen is not insensitive to the importance of situational pressures. About German Jews, he writes: "The pressure on Jews of substantial cultural attainments to renounce their Judaism, a pressure that came from the wider German milieu, was so great that, during the middle part of the nineteenth century, two-thirds of culturally prominent Jews are estimated to have converted to Christianity" (p. 61). This was not a matter of forced conversion in terms of dire threat. Yet clearly, bending to such pressures in no way implies that these German Jews "wanted" to convert, that they did so "willingly" and "enthusiastically," much less that their actions could only be interpreted as reflecting a strong embrace of Christian convictions. In this case Goldhagen is perfectly capable of understanding that framing the decision of mid-nineteenth-century Jews to convert solely in terms of religious belief would be absurd. Here Goldhagen has no difficulty understanding that people do not choose the choices from which they choose, that choice does not always

reflect willingness and approval, that belief and action are not always commensurate. Here he is capable of empathy with the subjects, of placing himself in their situation, of feeling their frustrations and aspirations.

49.. Mark Mazower, "Military Violence and National Socialist Values: The Wehrmacht in Greece 1941-1944," *Past and Present* 134 (February 1992): pp. 129-158.

50.. Goldhagen, *Willing Executioners*, p. 541, note 69. Another example of Goldhagen's imposing a one-issue, non-comparative analysis on events is his treatment of Trapp's speech at Jozefow. Trapp--the weeping major--becomes a latter-day Goebbels calculatingly activating the men's ingrained antisemitic notion of threatening world Jewry by referring to the Allied bombing of German women and children (pp. 404-5). Yet the same incitement of German troops by referring to the Allied bombing of German women and children is made in Wehrmacht exhortations for drastic reprisals against Italian civilians. Geyer, p. 231. A comparative perspective makes clear that the Allied bombing of civilians in Germany was used to justify German slaughter of unarmed civilians, regardless of the identity of the victim.

51.. *Ibid.*, pp. 251, 383-4.

52.. Testimony of Erwin G., HW, 1640.

53.. Goldhagen writes that "crimes of obedience...depend upon the existence of a propitious social and political context, in which the actors deem the authority to issue commands legitimate and the commands themselves not to be a gross transgression of sacred values and the overarching moral order" (*Ibid.*, p. 383). But his one-dimensional analysis, focused solely on antisemitism, prevents him from seeing the legitimacy of the Nazi regime stemming from other than an antisemitic consensus, and from seeing the common values of the men deriving from commonly accepted obligations of loyalty to one's unit and country in wartime.

54.. *Ibid.*, pp. 92-93.

55.. *Ibid.*, pp. 116, 430.

56.. Testimony of Willy Schmidt, LG Hanover testimony.

57.. *Ibid.*, pp. 386, 414.

58.. *Ibid.*, pp. 391 and 582, note 42.

59.. Primo Levi, "The Gray Zone," *The Drowned and the Saved* (New York: Vintage, 1989), pp. 36-37.

Final Comments

Leon Wieseltier

I am not a professional historian of the Holocaust. From my distance, I am not sure that it is humanly possible any longer to master the subject; or humanly possible. Certainly, I cannot master it, and I am not referring only to its details. I admire those who study it with equanimity, whose historical attitude has not been broken by this historical turpitude; detachment in the face of such a subject is a genuine accomplishment of human inwardness. But for me the Holocaust is fire and ice. The more I live with the events of 1939-1945, the less I understand them. I need an explanation, and all I find are explanations. I have concluded that the search for an explanation is futile. There are only explanations, and alone or together they do not retire the mystery.

I do not use the word “mystery” lightly; it is, generally, a cheap word, a spiritualization of lazy minds. In one sense, of course, what happened between 1939 and 1945 is clear: a people called the Jews was almost destroyed by a people called the Germans, with the assistance of other peoples whose names are known to you all. And so, as we like to say, we have clarity. But when we have clarity, what is it, really, that we have? I would suggest that the clarity that we possess about the Holocaust only exposes the limits of clarity, its contentlessness. It is possible to have perfect clarity on a perfect mystery.

Perhaps the most startling aspect of Daniel Goldhagen’s book, for me, is its confidence. I am not referring to his immodesty before the literature, which is a matter for professional historians to sort out. I have in mind, instead, his immodesty before the subject. Goldhagen has sought, and found, what he calls “the one explanation.” In an appendix to his book, he states properly and explicitly that his book “makes no pretense of providing a comprehensive history of the Holocaust.” But it is useless to deny that his objective is a large one, that he believes that he has brought light to darkness, that what we did not understand before his book we will understand after his book.

The book is an extraordinary mixture of social science and shock. All the talk of “micro, meso, and macro,” of “role templates” and “cognitive models” and “the social construction of knowledge”—all the equipment of theory, and its dream of mastery—suddenly disappears when Goldhagen gets to his materials, to the stuff of the killings. In his descriptions of the work of the police battalions one hears not only the voice of a social scientist presenting the empirical basis of his findings, but also the voice of a man for whom it is a matter of honor not to permit his own revulsion to slip away. Goldhagen will be criticized for his anger; but sometimes anger is proof of a proper apprehension. One of the achievements of Goldhagen’s book will be a refreshment of our shock.

About some of his claims, I think, he is right. After Goldhagen, the causal relation between ideas and genocide will be impossible to deny. His book is a significant study in the responsibility of culture. It is a permanent embarrassment to materialist theories of the Shoah. Goldhagen has returned moral agency to a place of prominence in the consideration of genocide. In the Holocaust, after all, structures did not murder structures. People murdered people. Goldhagen has recovered what you might call the artisanal quality of genocide. It takes many thousands of people to kill many thousands of people, and for the deeds to be done these many thousands will have to make each other's acquaintance. The victims will see and hear the killers and the killers will see and hear the victims. Massacres are motivated by abstractions, but massacres are not abstract. The stains they leave are not only metaphorical.

For reasons that I will explain in a moment, I would like to believe the very worst about Germany and the Germans, which is what Daniel Goldhagen believes. He writes that "the study of Germans and their antisemitism before and during their Nazi period must be approached as an anthropologist would a previously unencountered preliterate people and their beliefs, leaving behind especially the preconception that Germans were in every ideational realm just like our ideal notion of ourselves." My problem with such a view, in fact, is that it is *not* the very worst that one can believe about the Germans. Germany, after all, was *not* a preliterate society. Germany was not Rwanda. It would be unfair to hold Rwanda to the standards of Kant. And it would be unfair *not* to hold Germany to the standards of Kant.

Goldhagen is right about the pervasiveness—the pervasiveness to the point of the constitutiveness—of antisemitism in Germany. He understands the danger of explaining prejudice by reference to the object of prejudice. If you wish to understand racism, study whites, not blacks. If you wish to understand misogyny, study men, not women. If you wish to understand antisemitism, study non-Jews, not Jews. And yet the point about antisemitism in Germany, it seems to me, is not that it constituted a culture, but that it conquered a culture. You might describe the cultural history of Germany from the end of the late eighteenth century to the middle of the twentieth century as a struggle between philosophical rationality and anthropological rationality, between the coherence of reason and the coherence of unreason. About the outcome of that struggle, Goldhagen is ringingly right—except that he sees no struggle. He sees liberalism absent, where I see liberalism rejected. And its rejection is more damning than its absence.

It may be that the Germans were not "in every ideational realm...just like ourselves." But they were in *some* ideational realms just like ourselves. And it is surely false to suggest that they were in *no* ideational realm like ourselves. Such a suggestion is also morally ironic. It has the consequence of vitiating the very moral agency in whose name it is made. For moral agency is universal or it is meaningless. The force of our difference from the perpetrators of the Holocaust is owed precisely to our similarities with them; as is our anger, and our shame. If the Germans were not "like us"—and if, by the words "like us," we mean the ability to tell good from evil—then on what basis, precisely, do we condemn them? If the Germans were in no way like us, it would have been enough only to crush them. And indeed, they could not have been

crushed unless they could also have been condemned. The Nazi hated the Jew because he believed that the Jew was not human. But we hate the Nazi because we believe the Nazi *is* human, and has betrayed his humanity. On what grounds can such monsters be fought, if not on universalist grounds?

My reason for wishing to think the very worst of the perpetrators of the Holocaust appears on page 273 of Daniel Goldhagen's book. Near the end of a long table of police battalion actions against Jews, there appears the following information. Under "Police Battalion," the words "Battalion I." Under "Location," the word Drogobych. Under "Date," the year 1943. Under "Number of Victims," the number 1000.

The dead of Drogobych included my family. The actions took place in July 1943, in a ravine outside of Drogobych called Bronica. I was raised on the memory of the events of that summer's day; and until well into high school I thought that the definition of the word "ravine" was "a rural place where people are murdered." And so, as I say, I would like to believe that the people who killed my family had nothing in common with them, were in no respect like them. I would like also to believe that they did not kill my family casually, or thoughtlessly, or for petty reasons of psychology or sociology; that they were killing in the name of an idea, and that their idea had an opposite, which was the idea for which my family died; that they killed my family because they were Jews.

And obviously this was the case: the non-Jews of Drogobych were not taken to Bronica and shot. Daniel Goldhagen's account of the motivation of the killers preserves the deep historical (and meta-historical) truth of what happened. But he promotes every killing into an expression of philosophy. And I am not sure that this is how evil proceeds in the human world. Daniel Goldhagen has produced the most devastating response to Hannah Arendt that I have seen. He believes that where there is evil, there is no banality. But you do not have to believe in the banality of evil to believe that evil has a use for banality, too.

There is an important distinction between ideology and intentionality. Indeed, in his discussion of antisemitism, Goldhagen stumbles upon this distinction. He quotes Ian Kershaw that "to be antisemitic in Hitler's Germany was so commonplace as to go practically unnoticed." And he himself continues: "Notions fundamental to the dominant worldview and operation of a society, precisely because they are absolutely taken for granted, often are not expressed in a manner commensurate with their prominence and significance or, when uttered, seen as worthy by others to be noted and recorded."

Goldhagen makes this point to establish the reality of what he calls "latent antisemitism," which is a slippery, somewhat unempirical, and possibly essentializing notion. What he does establish, quite correctly, is that in Nazi Germany antisemitism was so deep and ubiquitous that it was banal. We might even say that a public philosophy is banal precisely to the extent that it is public. The public philosophy of Nazi Germany was what made the Holocaust possible; but it did so not only by attaining the status of conviction, but also by attaining the status of cliché, ritual, unacknowledged norm. It became what Goldhagen nicely calls "Nazi common sense."

I do not mean to suggest that the killers in the police battalions were immune to, or altogether unmoved by antisemitism. Yet I find it hard to accept that these repugnant individuals were all leading examined lives. (*These* unexamined lives were certainly not worth living.) This is not a quibble. What is at stake in this discussion is not only the proper interpretation of the Holocaust, but the proper expectation of this foul world. And it does not make things better, that some of the killers may have killed for something less than conviction. It makes things worse.

Goldhagen has written a dark book; but I wonder whether reality is not even darker than he thinks. From the Holocaust I take away a terrifying lesson about the resourcefulness of evil. Evil advances thoughtfully and thoughtlessly; meaningfully and meaninglessly; alone and in company; by design and by circumstance; sober and drunk; with compunction and without. It kindles to national boundaries, but it will not be confined by national characters. It is found and it is taught. It is monocausal and multicausal. It will not be pinned down long, in theory or in practice. It will not be exhausted by any of its expressions. It is itself evidence of that aspect of human life from which it has most to fear, which is the aspect of universalism.

About the Contributors

Daniel J. Goldhagen is the author of *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*. At the time of this presentation he was Assistant Professor of Government and Social Studies at Harvard University.

Christopher R. Browning, Frank Porter Graham Professor of History at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, is the author of *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*. At the time of this presentation he was Professor of History at Pacific Lutheran University, and J.B. and Maurice C. Shapiro Senior Scholar-in-Residence at the United States Holocaust Research Institute.

Leon Wieseltier is Literary Editor of *The New Republic*.

Michael Berenbaum, formerly Director of the United States Holocaust Research Institute, is now President of The Berenbaum Group.

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