64 Hitler's Willing Executioners

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First published in 1996, this book has not only become a bestseller in the United States, but its recent German edition of forty thousand copies sold out within a week. The book is dedicated to the author's father, a survivor of a Romanian ghetto; his father is now a professor at Harvard where the author is an associate professor. The book's foundation was Goldhagen's dissertation, an outgrowth of his obsession with the Holocaust.

His objective is "to explain why the Holocaust occurred, to explain how it could occur." Unlike other studies which focus on the Nazi Party and its leaders, this book zeroes in on the ordinary Germans who carried out the mass killings, whether they were police in battalions, guards in the camps, or guards on the death marches. Goldhagen sets the stage by placing anti-Semitism in a historical context, and studies German society under the Nazi regime and its institutions.

Goldhagen's ideas are backed by solid research, culled from historical documents and war testimony from the men themselves. It includes much information about the nature of nineteenth- and twentieth-century German anti-Semitism before the war and the evolution of what Goldhagen terms "elimination anti-Semitism" in Germany.

Excerpts from speeches by pastors and texts from children's books show that anti-Semitism was sanctioned at every level of society (from school to church to state). It was composed of actual Jewish characteristics along with fantastic ones, extending supernatural powers to Jews. These included, but were not limited to: Jews not only rejected Christ but also killed him; they were parasites instead of workers; they were the devil's children (as a children's book taught); they controlled government, and were

responsible for the loss of World War I, as even Protestant leaders claimed. Germans viewed Jews not as human beings but rather as members of a demonic race who destroyed all they touched; it was therefore imperative to abolish this evil race in order for Germany to live.

Goldhagen clearly demonstrates that Hitler didn't turn a nation into Jew-haters; hatred of Jews permeated their society long before his rise to power. What Hitler did, though, was channel the hatred into a systematic plan of annihilation. Many of the ordinary Germans who became killers in police battalions or as camp guards were not S.S. or even Nazi members—but their hatred for Jews was a "great equalizer."

In showing the progression of eliminationist anti-Semitism, from verbally assaulting Jews to their exclusion from society both socially and financially, Goldhagen allows us to see how Jews became socially dead beings. Physically removed by being placed in the ghetto, they were no longer seen as part of society. Laws fell into place with a German public eager to enact them, from wearing the mandatory yellow Star of David (which allowed Germans to readily identify, then taunt, all Jews, even children) to mandatory death sentences, such as the shoot-to-kill order—which required the immediate killing of any Jew found outside the ghetto.

The Protestant and Catholic churches were key players, helping the eliminationist cause. When the Nuremberg Laws of September 1935 went into effect, defining who was a Jew, local churches supplied genealogical records to aid the cause. (Even Jewish converts to Christianity were considered intrinsically evil, in spite of their intent.)

Goldhagen also studied Police Battalion 101, a unit of the Order Police comprised of ordinary, "decent" Germans who didn't make it into the army and had no formal training to kill. Contrary to the myth of naive youths blindly following orders, these men were primarily family men in their thirties and forties. Using quotes from the men's own testimony, we learn that their commander, Major Trapp, even gave them the option not to kill, without penalty, but the overwhelming majority eagerly accepted the role, performing the gruesome task with astounding cruelty. It was not uncommon for "brains, blood and bone" to explode on them during the killing.

In Poland, they barbarically massacred entire Jewish villages, including children and the elderly, one by one. Germans didn't merely want Jews to die: they had to suffer in doing so: whether Jews were locked in a synagogue and burned to death, or Jewish children were picked up by the hair and then shot in the head. Proud to rid the world of vermin, they often took pictures of their kill, and, even more astoundingly, some of the men even brought along family members to watch the murders! They celebrated their fine work afterwards.

Goldhagen looks at camp guards with equal care, and the concept of "work" in the camps. The camps were distinct creations of the Holocaust, totaling more than ten thousand in number. These women and men executed their orders with extreme passion, deriving great pleasure in the power they had over their victims.

Who were the Germans who became guards at these camps, and what made them willingly follow their orders with unimaginable cruelty? Contrary to logical assumptions, guards in the work camps did not utilize the workers' productivity to the best of their ability. Instead, they purposefully weakened them and killed them. Teasing and humiliating Jews were equally common, extending their suffering as long as possible, because Jews deserved not only to die but to suffer for having lived. Since the guards believed Jews were innately slothful, work was futile and often solely punitive; prisoners labored at useless tasks such as building a wall, only to tear it down the next day. Jews were constantly treated worse than other prisoners.

Why, in the death marches at the end of the war, despite Himmler's orders to stop killing the Jews, did the guards continue to do so? Comprehending German anti-Semitism is fundamental to understanding these war crimes, Goldhagen asserts, because it is what motivated ordinary people not only to kill but to do so with deep inner conviction and sadistic pleasure.

The section of the book entitled "Explaining the Perpetrators' Actions: Assessing the Competing Explanations" dispels the most common rationalizations for the Holocaust, instead supporting Goldhagen's theory that the majority of ordinary Germans were willing killers. They were not blindly following orders, as readily witnessed in their open opposition to the Weimar Republic, so "German's conditional regard for authority should be the tru-

ism." In Weimar, the day after Kristallnacht, close to one hundred thousand ordinary citizens gathered in an anti-Semitic rally—proof of widespread German approval.

That Germans committed crimes through peer pressure is also a faulty argument; if indeed there had been peer pressure, it would have "sustained their individual and collective resolve to avoid the killing." That people did this for their own self-interest (career and financial benefits) is also false; the men who constituted the police battalions, as well as others, "had no bureaucratic or career interests to advance by their involvement."

It is also true that the "tasks were so fragmented that they either did not comprehend the real significance of their actions or, if they did, that the alleged fragmentation then allowed them to displace responsibility of others," since many of the Germans were shooting Jews face-to-face. Most people clearly knew what was happening, Goldhagen writes.

He shows that individuals chose to participate in genocidal slaughters because they believed they were doing the right thing. As the filmmaker Jean Renoir said in his 1939 film, *Rules of the Game,* when playing the character Octave, "There's only one terrible thing in this world. That everyone has his reasons." Goldhagen makes a definitive case for understanding the reason that so many ordinary Germans became Hitler's willing executioners.