



Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust

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This groundbreaking international bestseller lays to rest many myths about the Holocaust: that Germans were ignorant of the mass destruction of Jews, that the killers were all SS men, and that those who slaughtered Jews did so reluctantly. *Hitler's Willing Executioners* provides conclusive evidence that the extermination of European Jewry engaged the energies and enthusiasm of tens of thousands of ordinary Germans.

Goldhagen reconstructs the climate of "eliminationist anti-Semitism" that made Hitler's pursuit of his genocidal goals possible and the radical persecution of the Jews during the 1930s popular. Drawing on a wealth of unused archival material, principally the testimony of the killers themselves, Goldhagen takes us into the killing fields where Germans voluntarily hunted Jews like animals, tortured them wantonly, and then posed cheerfully for snapshots with their victims. From mobile killing units to the camps to the death marches, Goldhagen shows how ordinary Germans, nurtured in a society where Jews were seen as unalterable evil and dangerous, willingly followed their beliefs to their logical conclusion.

"*Hitler's Willing Executioners* is an original, indeed brilliant contribution to the...literature on the Holocaust."--New York Review of Books

"The most important book ever published about the Holocaust...Eloquently written, meticulously documented, impassioned...A model of moral and scholarly integrity."--Philadelphia Inquirer

Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust Details

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From Reader Review Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust for online ebook

Mike says

This book makes a powerful argument. Its main thesis is that the vast majority of Germans during and before WWII had antisemitic beliefs that were of such power and scope, that they led many ordinary Germans to perpetrate and support the destruction of the Jewish people.

He refutes competing claims such as that the Nazis forced them into killing. He provides many detailed accounts of police squads killing without orders, and sometimes against orders. He demonstrates that men in Police battalion 101 had opportunities to be transferred to non-killing assignments but chose not to. Even as the Germans were near defeat, many male and even female guards at prison camps continued to kill Jews to the very last moment. Himmler had actually commanded them not to do this so he could better negotiate with the Americans. They disobeyed the orders.

Goldhagen's findings are unsettling. It is frightening to believe that a lie can be so powerful as to delude an entire culture. Even the Christian church was largely deceived. However, is this really so hard to accept when we study the history of man? This book contradicts the Disney philosophy that "there is good in everyone, you just have to look deep inside to find it."

Hitler's Willing Executioners is not an easy read. It was Goldhagen's doctoral thesis and it reads like it. There is some repetition and terms used can sometimes be obscure. This is not a popular history. However, there were many times when I could not put it down. The argument breaks new ground and deserves the thorough treatment given to it.

Jill Hutchinson says

I don't feel qualified to review this book about the horrors of the Holocaust....not because I haven't read much about that unbelievable event but because the author puts forward a very controversial approach to the "why" of the slaughter of the Jews that is at odds with most history. The book has stirred violent debates among historians and readers alike and who is to say whether Mr. Goldhagen is correct. His research is impeccable and the arguments that he puts forth are convincing.

What he purports is that the German population as a whole was a willing participant in the Holocaust....not just the military but the *volk* whose anti-Semitism was ingrained in their culture. Jews were seen as the enemy and their extermination was seen as just. Long before the Nazis came to power the Jews were degraded, treated cruelly and often murdered. It appeared to make sense to the Germans that Hitler's Final Solution of genocide was acceptable and some actually saw it as a sport. Even near the end of the war when Himmler ordered the people to cease the killings, they continued.

This is a dense and very disturbing book and I am basing my rating on the fact that, besides being well written, the information presented gives the reader much to consider when thinking and studying about the Holocaust, Whether I agree or disagree with the author's conclusions is unimportant.

Tom Holme says

Terrible, terrible, terrible.

Provocative theory, but one which falls apart throughout his making the argument.

Lauren says

There's been so much written about this controversial book that I'm sure I don't have too many details to add that haven't been covered before ... so instead I'll gather some thoughts that have been mulling around in my mind in the week since I finished reading it.

First, I find this an important book in that it reminds us that this period in history – and the actions of the Germans - shouldn't be blithely discounted with the standard "it happened because of the economic climate of the time." As the mother of a high-schooler, I heard this as the primary lesson covered in their history class and it disturbed me greatly. As with most issues, I believe it's more complex than that.

Do I believe, especially after reviewing some of Mr. Goldhagen's examples, that the common German people were more culpable than we speak aloud? Sure. It's a disturbing thought. It should be. But before we jump on the condemnation bandwagon, I don't believe this is due to some genetic marker inherent only in Germans (and I say this not because I'm partially of German extraction). Nor do I believe that dire economic times alone are enough to trigger such extremely sadistic treatment.

I believe it was an historic "perfect storm" that included economics, bigotry and a charismatic leader, and possibly other things I can't think of at the moment.

Was there already an active bigotry against Jews throughout Germany? Sure. Throughout most of the world, in fact. Most Christian faiths at that time were disdainful of other Christian faiths, so it's no great leap to acknowledge that they were particularly intolerant of Jews or any other non-Christian faith.

And, as history has shown in instances such as Jim Jones' Jonestown massacre, a charismatic leader can persuade large numbers of people to do appalling things and feel righteous about doing them. This is particularly true of religions, which have a tradition of creating an elitism among believers by convincing them that they're superior to nonbelievers who may be lesser (even evil) human beings. Sometimes they even convince the believers that their souls are in jeopardy should they not eradicate nonbelievers. This didn't begin or end with the Germans of WWII.

I won't even start in on the very human condition that makes these events possible (although, should you doubt that, I suggest you revisit "The Lord of the Flies").

I don't disagree with those who state that Mr. Goldhagen is unable to be impartial with his research, or that the book is difficult to read. There were many times that I found the writing repetitive and pedantic.

But I also find it an important book to read because, as I look around our globe, the air is easily stirred and there are “perfect storms” gathering all around us. Even among us. We need constant reminders of what all of us are capable of doing given the right situation. For that reason, I’ve given the book high stars and recommend that it’s worth reading.

Basia says

Those of you who know me, know that I've never handed out a 1-star review before today. I was replying to my friend Mark when I remembered this embarrassment. Seriously, I blush when I recall that the author and I are of the same SPECIES.

He took relationships that were either nonexistent, or at best, spurious, and stretched them out into this “book.” It's awful. To suggest that there was something about the German people that somehow perfectly primed them for accepting with open arms Hitler, Nazis, torture, wide-scale murder and genocide, and the contention that the arians were meant to rule the world would be LAUGHABLE had not so many millions suffered and died as a result.

I read this in grad school. I remember wondering then as I still wonder today whether it was written to serve as a polemic. Terrible. Please. Don't waste your time.

Elaine says

This book really has pissed people off. Goldhagen takes a very different view of Germans, Nazi or not, who actively helped in brutalizing and murdering Jews. He claims they weren't forced to do it, but chose to. They were not automatons blindly following orders, rather their particular brand of Jew hatred made them willing exterminators of people who had no power.

He does acknowledge other victims of Nazism, but this book is about German anti-semitism and Jews. That is a long enough story. Many critics fault him for not discussing Gypsies and homosexuals, but who has? Probably the same despising of “the Other” that underlies Jew hatred also explains these victims. In any event, he never pretends to be discussing anything except Jew hatred. The history of it in Germany is well-known as is the form it took. Moreover, as he shows, none of the other groups targeted by the Nazis were treated with anything approaching the cruelty towards Jews from infancy on.

Now that I've finished, here is my final assessment:

When the German soldiers who were tried at Nuremberg after World War II said they weren't guilty because they were “following orders,” I and millions of others believed them. If that were true, then were they guilty? After all, even in America, soldiers had to follow orders.

Later, when the horrors that Stalin visited upon the Russians became known, I understood that was the result of a dictatorship. Since the American Press also called Hitler a dictator, I assumed that Germans, like Russians, had no say in what their government did. As an American, my cognitive model of a dictator was that of a totalitarian government, one in which people had no freedom of choice at all. Indeed, based I now

realize on the Stalinist model, I presumed that Germans who protested Hitler's policies would be imprisoned. Worse, I thought was that their families would be harmed. Just recently I said to a friend, not Jewish, who made a remark about the German people, "Well, Barnaby, I'd like to think I'd have helped out Jews, but if they would punish my family, I don't think I would have."

Most Americans thought that Stalin's rule and Hitler's were pretty much the same: blind obedience or else. However, Daniel Goldhagen shows convincingly that living under Hitler was quite different from living under Stalin, especially if you weren't Jewish. Hitler wasn't a dictator as Stalin was. He was voted into office by Germans, who were weary of the democracy that was forced on them after their defeat in 1918. The vote for Hitler was not a slim plurality and it was not a vote by lowlifes and thugs. Germans of all classes not only voted for Hitler, and, as Goldhagen argues, they agreed wholeheartedly with the need to exterminate all the Jews in the world. Goldhagen proves that this idea was rampant in Germany from the early 19th century on. When Nazi troops marched into Austria, the cultured Viennese cheered with glee and immediately dragged the assimilated Austrian Jews out in the streets and made them scrub sidewalks while wearing their finest dress-up clothes. Meanwhile the oh so cultured Aryans laughed and enjoyed the show. No, Hitler wasn't foisted on these people.

Moreover, Germans could and did protest Hitler's policies and get them changed. Goldhagen presents data from German records that prove this. Three examples suffice. One was Hitler's policy of killing mental defectives. The Churches and the people protested and the so-called euthanasia was stopped. Second, when husbands of Aryan women were rounded up for deportation to death camps, the women demonstrated in the streets, even confronting the Gestapo—and their husbands were released and spent the rest of the war in Germany in their homes with their wives. Third, when Poles were brought in as forced laborers, Germans were ordered not to fraternize with them as they were inferior Slavs. However, the Germans refused to obey, and, after a while, the restrictions were lifted.

The most compelling evidence that the author provides is that which shows how much both soldiers and citizens enjoyed what they were doing to Jews. He relies not only on eye witness accounts, but German records and even pictures that they took.

Goldhagen doesn't specifically mention Now Dwor, Poland, my grandfather's home town, but in researching my family history website, <http://elaineostrachchaika.com>, I came across a vivid account of what happened there at

<http://www.knecht.ca/history/nowydwor...> . If you click on it, you'll find what a source for hilarity the Jews provided the German soldiers with for five unbelievable, but apparently rollicking years for the cultured Aryans. What delights even the German officers thought up for amusement! These delights involved the most degrading, cruel, foul, and depraved tortures I have ever heard of. This site lends even more credence to Goldhagen's claims.

In sum, I found Hitler's Willing Executioners a solidly researched book, based upon the records that the Nazis themselves kept, as well as his careful research into German anti-Semitism.

Tim says

I didn't manage to finish this. I found it very repetitive and overly haranguing. Essentially, this book has one central premise. That Germany as a nation was murderously antisemitic long before the Nazis came to power,

dating back in fact to Martin Luther's hate-spewing speeches and beyond and that it's erroneous to single out the Nazis instead of making culpable the entire German population as being responsible for the Holocaust. That it's erroneous to believe the Nazis were capable of brainwashing an entire nation that wasn't already predisposed to embrace a hatred of Jews. The author does an admirable job in researching how "ordinary" Germans behaved during the war. This isn't the first book I've read on the subject and I have to say it's depressing how widespread racial hatred for the Jews was in Germany even among so called intelligent, sophisticated people. You might say Kristallnacht was like a litmus test for the Nazis to test the response of "ordinary" Germans to their Jewish policy. The vast majority stood by and laughed. However, the author dismisses rather too opportunistically the notion that in a police state opposition isn't an option by singling out a few Nazi policies that did meet with opposition - the banning of crosses from schools for example. That may be true but it can't be denied that the Nazis were masters at instilling terror. He focuses a lot on the police battalions, often middle aged men who didn't belong to the Nazi party but who had no problem murdering Jews, even women, children and the infirm elderly. However, I began to have a problem with the author singling out Germans for antisemitism. The truth is, there was a predisposition to treat Jews like parasites throughout Europe at that time. Were Austrians, Hungarians, Rumanians, Bulgarians, Poles, Lithuanians, Ukrainians on the whole any better than the Germans? It's difficult to think of more than a few European countries where the general population harboured a decent humane view of the Jews. So, yes the author makes some important points in helping us to understand the incomprehensible but he does tend to make the same point over and over again and with increasing vehemence, like a man bringing his fist down continually on his desk. Racial hatred is unfortunately a widespread virus that is always awaiting an opportunity to break out. It has no nationality. It can begin its hateful work anywhere. To single out Germans in this manner felt naïve and overly simplistic to me.

Jonathan says

This should, for many reasons, get only one star. It gets two for the occasional flashes of actual, legitimate historical scholarship and for some of the evidence he has dug up.

Nonetheless, it is a truly terrible work, made even more so by its persuasive and populist tone, and the large numbers of copies sold. It is an almost textbook example of the dangers of creating a thesis, and then selecting and interpreting evidence to fit that thesis. His conclusions are simply wrong, and not backed up by evidence. My Master's Thesis was on the Shoah and I have studied it at postgraduate level for some time and can confirm that this book is dismissed outright by all serious scholars of the period. I can do no more than urge everyone not to waste their time reading it.

A much better work on this topic is Browning's. Read that instead.

A much more thorough critique can be read here <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/review...>

or this

<https://www.cambridge.org/core/journa...>

amongst countless others. There is a substantial amount of academic criticism out there on this text, and any decision to read it should be taken with that in mind.

Kristina says

I suppose I take this book personally, given that my grandparents were German and in Germany during the Holocaust - they weren't Nazis (my very existence is proof of that), they were simply trying to survive, and I think there's a difference between that, and actively aiding genocide. I don't think that Goldhagen even allows for this. On the other hand, given what is going on in Iraq today, or in Darfur today, in Rwanda a few years ago, or Bosnia a decade ago, I think we are living proof of...something. How do you fight against this kind of madness when you are rendered powerless by the state, be it by fear, by law, or...? All the drama of the 60s and 70s have shown us that rebellion and protest make absolutely no difference in the end, so where does that leave us?

I very little hope that humanity is going to see this century through without destroying itself.

Tyler says

My rating is a split verdict: the author has an interesting yet poorly written argument; neither element should be decisive in convincing potential readers to take up the book or ignore it. Goldhagen steps into a niche not normally espoused.

It's a shame such a provocative theme got taken up by so limited a talent. The text is really just 483 pages, including three appendices, plus 130 pages of often important notes that readers will want to consult. Most of these notes should have been folded into the text, but okay. I used two bookmarks.

Both the author and his editor ought to be detained by the first English professor who catches them and given a stern lecture. The basic fault in the text is the failure to render an academic thesis in accessible prose. The less annoying fault is that such a loaded subject needs understatement, yet the author resorts to exclamation points and italics.

Now to the subject. Nobody wants to hold today's Germans collectively guilty of a crime and in turn victimize them, so discussing the role of Germans in the Holocaust has been tricky. Standard accounts explain the annihilation with little reference to the perpetrators. I often wondered why Jews were never put to work at a time when Germany had a labor shortage of several million and the outcome of the war hung in the balance. Something didn't add up.

This is the niche Goldhagen steps into. The author's claim is that the Holocaust was common knowledge to Germans, wildly popular and based on a hatred radically unlike that found in all other times and places. He argues with a persuasive methodology. He looks at three things: police battalions, work camps, and the death marches in the Spring of 1945. Why he chooses these comes clear in the reading. The study of these aspects of the extermination supports his thesis.

Many people reject this idea. The event is so horrific that people now simply can't bring themselves to think it could have enjoyed widespread support. But Goldhagen can be wrong only if his methodology is mistaken. So we might ask what his methods really prove about the actual source of anti-Semitism. What about the socialists? Socialism in Germany did not imply any sense of brotherhood with Jews, the author claims. Their

nationalist turn at the start of World War I seems to bear him out.

Communists, who did disavow anti-Semitism, garnered about a sixth of 1932 vote. But although Goldhagen may be mistaken in hinting that up to 95% of Germans were anti-Semitic, a figure closer to 85% scarcely disposes of the problem. Nor does a 1946 survey of German attitudes, in which up to 80% of Germans espoused anti-Semitic beliefs, even after seeing the consequences. How is that?

We forget the grip that race theory had on the West in the 19th and 20th centuries, and the impetus given it by an early misreading of Darwin. The milieu was made worse by the *volkisch* substratum of German culture in the century before Hitler. The historian George Mosse describes the transmogrification of race by the German writer Wilhelm Riehl:

Above all there was the Jew, who by his very nature was restless. Although the Jew belonged to a Volk, it occupied no specific territory and was consequently doomed to rootlessness. These elements of the population dominated the large cities, which they had erected, according to Riehl, in their own image to represent their particular landscape. However, this was an artificial domain, and in contrast to serene rootedness, everything it contained, including the inhabitants, was in continuous motion. The big city and the proletariat seemed to fuse into an ominous colossus which was endangering the realm of the Volk ...

This came decades before Nazism. The author argues that this view became received wisdom throughout German society. The sheer ferocity of the extermination stemmed from a terror of Jews, seen as an evil, diabolically clever race. But even this was not enough to bring on the Holocaust, which, Goldhagen tells us, required that two other rather unlikely events transpire as well. His argument for this confluence of three factors is his unique contribution to Holocaust studies.

The book's characterization of Germans matches Anthony Beevor's historical account, *The Fall of Berlin 1945*. The defeated Germans, Beevor notes, complained that Allied tactics had brought communism deep into Europe and America's entry into the war was gratuitous. Beevor cites these among several examples of what he calls "the fatal tendency to confuse cause and effect" by which Germans reasoned. The same pattern comes across in *Hitler's Willing Executioners*.

To pin responsibility on the German people as individuals has a sexy cachet in today's culture of total self-responsibility. The confluence of factors by which the author explains the Holocaust, however, does not involve the personal attitudes of Germans and actually throws into doubt the relevance of his methodology in establishing cause.

What the author ignores is the social aspect of the Holocaust, its status as the product of a particular socioeconomic structure. Goldhagen's quest to tag individuals for their actions deflects attention from the context in which fascism arose and neglects the fact that it came to power only over the dead bodies of thousands of Germans. The author takes dishonest advantage of the fact that the aforementioned communists, the main obstacle to anti-Semitism, were exterminated in the process that led to the Holocaust. No, dead men tell no tales; nor does Goldhagen speak for them.

The author notes Germany's formal disavowal of anti-Semitism. Compare Germany's accounting of its crimes with Japan's and one is impressed by how hard it is for any nation to admit to such a wrong. Better yet, compare it to the United States, which, 100 years after slavery, still nurtured dreams of ridding itself of blacks. Even Northern abolitionists before the Civil War were almost universally racist. The inferiority of blacks was taken as fact, a kind of *volkisch* Americana. All these ideas have their source in social systems that foster the notion that people are manifestly unequal -- and should be treated so.

The effort of Germans to redeem the past sets an example for people in all countries. We might even consider this the bookend to the Holocaust insofar as it, too, has been a particularly German project. People and cultures do change, and modern Germany, at least until recently, has shown us those conditions can change for the better. But the return of militarism in Germany and, with it, historical falsification by the likes of Jorg Barberowski at Humboldt University, throws attention once again not on individuals, but on the nature and function of German capitalism.

Matt says

Everyone knows it's hard to get published. There are a lot of authors and a lot of books, and it's difficult to stand out among the sea of words. It's a bit easier for memoirists, who can rely on shabby childhoods and drug addictions. For a historian, it's a bit trickier. One tactic is the micro-history: find yourself a historical footnote, and then elevate it to the turning point of mankind. For example, an ambitious historian could write about the hula-hoop, and how it brought about détente between America and the Soviet Union. (Don't steal my idea!)

There is another route you can take, a road less traveled. It's perilous, and might make it difficult for you to travel in the future, but it will get you noticed (and in publishing, there is no such thing as bad attention). What do you do? Simple. Make a shocking statement that insults at least 80 million people but that is at least half-defensible.

Daniel Jonah Goldhagen nails this principle in *Hitler's Willing Executioners*. It's why his presumably-turgid Harvard dissertation was repackaged into a best-selling book that most buyers probably found impossible to read.

Probably the most popular notion to come out of the Holocaust is Hannah Arendt's famous conception of the "banality of evil." The phrase, while it has a certain pseudo-intellectual ring, is shallow, clichéd, and specious. Moreover, it was derived from Arendt's observations of Adolf Eichmann, who was fighting for his life in a Jerusalem courtroom, and thereby willing to say anything. Still, there are certain aspects of the Holocaust that might qualify as banal. After all, it never would have occurred without lawyers, accountants and engineers (and IBM!), who managed to tabulate, round-up, and transport millions of Jews. Presumably, many of these people never saw the awful end result of their work.

Goldhagen doesn't believe in this H&R Block explanation of the Holocaust. He does not accept that it was somehow diffused enough that most perpetrators didn't know what they were doing, or to what ends. Of course, you probably already figured that out, after having read the title.

Suffice it to say, *Hitler's Willing Executioners* has a different way of explaining the Holocaust. First, Goldhagen broadens the typical indictment of "the Nazis" to include the whole of the German people. He does not lay blame simply with the tens of thousands of *einsatzgruppen* who shot Jews in Russia, or the camp guards who manned the wire at Auschwitz and Treblinka. Rather, he casts his net over virtually all Germans, from the SS officer delivering a *coup de grace* with his Luger to the German stationmaster who helped the trains run on time to the German inhabitant of Dachau, who lived within sight of a concentration

camp.

Secondly, Goldhagen posits that the Holocaust occurred because of Germany's unique brand of anti-Semitism (he terms this "eliminationist anti-Semitism").

It is this second point that provides the thrust of Goldhagen's book. There are dozens of explanations as to why the Holocaust occurred: the magnetic sway of Hitler; Germanic obedience to authority; various social and psychological pressures; the alleged exigencies of the war. Goldhagen finds these explanations unconvincing (as though any explanation could possibly suffice).

To Goldhagen, the justification for the Holocaust begins and ends with German anti-Semitism. He spends roughly the first half of the book, in terms of total pages, trying to explain the nature of this mindset. It is this portion of the book that will likely try the patience of most readers. As I mentioned above, *Hitler's Willing Executioners* began life as a PhD dissertation. If you've ever read a dissertation, you know that clarity is not the foremost concern; getting a PhD is. Goldhagen's writing, especially in these early sections, is quite frankly, awful. It is dry, turgid, overly technical, awkwardly phrased, and freighted with fancy Harvard words. (Goldhagen uses the word "phenomenological" so often it started to lose meaning for me).

A discussion about German anti-Semitism is not inherently complex. It's not, after all, particle physics or fractal geometry. Goldhagen, though, has a particular way of obfuscating the obvious, of hiding his meaning in a tangle of clauses. He uses entire paragraphs to extol meanings better accomplished with a single sentence. The denseness of his writing comes across as uncertainty, as though he's trying to hide the flaws in his arguments by making his arguments incomprehensible.

What you should get out of this section, when all is said and done, is the proposition that the anti-Semitic, eliminationist mindset of the Germans caused the Holocaust.

The next part of the book is devoted to proving this hypothesis. Goldhagen does this by way of three case studies: (1) the Police Battalions; (2) the "work" camps; and (3) the death marches. These sections are a bit more manageable in terms of ease of comprehension. I'm guessing that most of the changes in the dissertation-to-book transformation took place here. While Goldhagen avowedly eschews any type of narrative, he does pepper the proceedings with enough first-hand accounts to keep a reader at least mildly interested. (At the very least, it reminds you that humans were involved in the Holocaust. This is important to remember, because *Hitler's Willing Executioners* could have been written by a supercomputer).

Goldhagen does not set out (or make any attempt) to tell the story of the Holocaust. Instead, he enters the realm of social-science to try to prove a point. To do so, he relies heavily on the case study method, in which you do an in-depth study of a single group.

The first of these groups are the Police Battalions, specifically, Police Battalion 101. The men of these Battalions were involved in "actions" on the Eastern Front, in which they followed in the wake of the fast-advancing Wehrmacht, rounded up Jews, and shot them in the thousands.

Goldhagen spends a lot of time in this section critiquing the work of Christopher Browning, who wrote *Ordinary Men* about Police Battalion 101. Browning's thesis, which Goldhagen disputes, is that the Germans of Battalion 101 were not fanatical Nazis, but "ordinary" guys who were very obedient to authority (think Stanley Milgram's Yale experiments).

I didn't care for Goldhagen's attacks on Browning. First off, he comes across as a douche (I suppose this

really isn't a substantive criticism). Goldhagen seems just like your typical grad student: young and callow, piggybacking off another's hard work. It's hard to come up with an original idea, and quite easy to find flaws. Browning built a sandcastle; Goldhagen, wearing a blazer and turtleneck and walking his labradoodle, saw Browning's sandcastle and kicked it over.

More pertinently, Goldhagen's critique of Browning is logically and factually unpersuasive. Goldhagen wants so much to find empirical support for his arguments, but while he's talking empiricism, he's relying on anecdotes. For instance, Goldhagen makes a huge deal over the fact that a couple soldiers in Battalion 101 asked for, and were allowed, to avoid taking part in the shootings of Jews. Goldhagen points to this as proof that the Nazis didn't have to follow orders to shoot Jews. Of course, this never takes into account Browning's arguments regarding obedience, peer pressure, or the stages of violent brutalization. How does Goldhagen get around this? He dismisses Browning's arguments by writing *I dismiss these arguments*. Literally. He simply writes off Browning in favor of his own precious, monocausal idea: that age-old, all-pervading German anti-Semitism answers all Holocaust questions.

The sections on the "work" camps and the death marches are similar to the discussion about Police Battalion 101. In each, Goldhagen isolates a discrete group of Holocaust perpetrators and attempts to show that their actions were predicated upon eliminationist anti-Semitism. These sections share the same problems that I noted above. Simply put, Goldhagen can't prove his point to any degree of certainty. Unfortunately for the historian, the Nazis did not do exit interviews with the SS, the Police Battalions, or the camp guards. This leaves Goldhagen casting about for concrete conclusions based on flimsy bits of evidence such as social class, profession, and Nazi party affiliation.

In many ways, a book like this lives and dies based on the strength of its argument. After all, its incendiary revelations ("Everything you know is wrong!") is its *raison d'être*. And that's fair. If your book purports to be a landmark restructuring of the Holocaust story, you better be ready to back this up. On this level, I found the book to be an utter failure. I wasn't convinced by Goldhagen; I wasn't even moved.

I'm aware that actual scholars (as opposed to me) have criticized Goldhagen's research, or lack thereof. However, that doesn't matter to me, since I am not a leading authority of 19th century German anti-Semitism (I apologize if I've been giving off that misleading vibe). I don't know how accurately Goldhagen presents the reality of Germanic anti-Semitism. All I know is that there were dozens of times throughout the book when a thought-bubble formed over my head; inside that thought bubble was a question mark.

First and foremost, while Goldhagen goes to great lengths to show that anti-Semitism was a necessary condition to the Holocaust, he falls woefully short trying to prove it was sufficient. From a common sense standpoint, it makes no sense that an otherwise ordinary German could be convinced to kill, and kill brutally, simply because he or she holds anti-Semitic beliefs. There has to be a lot more: peer pressure; social pressure; professional pressure; psychological brutalization (that is, training in violence); obedience to authority; a belief in the ultimate goals. You also need a regime in which this action is not only tolerated, but demanded. In other words, you need the perverted genius of an Adolf Hitler, who, despite the book's title, never makes an appearance.

It may seem like a dodge, but the explanation for the Holocaust isn't any one thing; it's a combination of a lot of things. (And this combination of things is different for each person who participated). The only proof I have of this is that anti-Semitism goes back to the time of Jesus Christ's crucifixion, yet the Holocaust did not occur until the mid-20th century. If Goldhagen is right, and anti-Semitism is both necessary and sufficient for the Holocaust, then the Holocaust should have occurred much earlier. But it did not. Accordingly, there must have been a confluence (anti-Semitism plus Versailles plus the Depression plus

Hitler plus the failure of Weimar plus an authoritarian regime plus...well, you get the picture), rather than a sole cause. (Besides, many other genocides have occurred without the aid of anti-Semitism. The anti-Semitic mindset alone, at least to me, does not explain anything except that Germans hated Jews. Which I sort of figured out without Goldhagen's assistance).

Even if Goldhagen had convinced me of the worth of his assertions, it wouldn't have done a lot to improve my opinion of his book. This is due to a startling lack of readability. *Hitler's Willing Executioners* seems almost intentionally graceless and ponderous, as though the only way to write about the Holocaust is through cement-like prose. Goldhagen has taken as his subject one of the world's great tales of human suffering. What's more, he professes to know this. At one point, he emphasizes the brutality of the Holocaust, not in terms of numbers, but in terms of physical destruction: spattered blood, torn flesh, shattered bones. His writing, however, does not support his own declamations. In short, *Hitler's Willing Executioners* would have benefited greatly from an infusion of humanity.

Greta says

I try to be critical in my choice of books about the Holocaust, because there are so many to choose from. I also find it important that I think I can respect the author before I add his or her book on my must read shelf. I ask myself if I would like to have a conversation in person with that author. In this case, I don't think I would. I probably would get irritated by his generalizations.

My view is based on these reviews in particular :

<https://www.goodreads.com/review/show...>

<https://www.goodreads.com/review/show...>

But there are many other negative reviews.

Richard Fulgham says

Unreliable sources and much speculation in this obviously vengeful and hateful book. This author simply hates all Germans and claims they were all just like Hitler. Avoid this book, in my opinion.

+Chaz says

It always amazes me that people, who have constructed their own paradigms, and have worked vigorously at maintaining it, can ignore the mountain of evidence to the contrary. At most Goldhagen provides an explanation as to why people do the things they do regardless of their social or economic background. At worse Goldhagen brings to light one possibility in explaining how one, if not the most learned and advanced country in the world could fall from grace in a matter of a few years of Financial despair. At the same time it should be understood that it was the created genus of Hitler and his party in capturing with total control such a country in the first six months as Chancellor of Germany. Goldhagen has written an outstanding book that

to this reader explains not just the German question in which I am a descendent, but the overall question throughout history being, “What the hell were they thinking!”

Justin says

It's not that some of Goldhagen's ideas are wrong. He makes a valuable contribution by recognizing the history of anti-Semitism in Germany history prior to WWII and the Holocaust. However, this ideological goal blinds him to any other rational to the causes of the Holocaust. In his effort to prove the exceptional nature of German hatred and bigotry, he ignores the wealth of evidence from a variety of social scientists pointing out the general cruelty and inhumanity of humanity in general. In doing this Goldhagen makes breathtaking generalities and grossly misinterprets a lot of evidence that would help disprove his idea of German exceptionalism. Also, his focus on German crimes during the Holocaust blinds him to the genocide perpetrates in other European countries by other European nationals. The crimes of the French, Poles, Lithuanians, etc... are all forgotten in this book. While Goldhagen's outrage is natural, (especially given that he is the son of Holocaust survivors) his scholarship is poor and his methodological work is sloppy at best.
