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“Hitler’s Willing Executioners” and “Ordinary Germans”

Some Comments on Goldhagen’s Ideas¹

Much has been said about Daniel Jonah Goldhagen and his efforts to revise the history of Germany in general, and the history of the Shoah in particular.² Yet, the debate surrounding “Hitler’s willing executioners” and “ordinary Germans” perpetrating the murder of the Jews and celebrating the “Final Solution of the Jewish Question” still drags on. It is a debate centered more on Goldhagen’s reception than on historical events. Once the dust of the public response had settled, the debates about the debate became a central focus. This shift encouraged both literate and illiterate commentators to raise their voices despite their lack of expertise in the subject. At any rate, the Goldhagen affair had begun long before the book was published. The manuscript was sent to several publishing companies and historians paving the way for lucrative international marketing campaigns. Early critical comments and suggestions to correct or modify his approach and interpretations went unheard.

Launched at the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington DC in April 1996³ and enthusiastically received by a large audience, *Hitler’s Willing Executioners* caused a sensation. It attracted more publicity and public interest than any other work on the Shoah. Within the extensive media coverage reviews occupied a prominent position. All in all, they must have passed the one thousand mark. Television and radio talk shows, symposia and conference sessions, as well as cyber communication sparked further discussion. The mandatory Goldhagen readers and special issues of journals followed suit accompanied by an endless stream of articles.⁴ In August 1996, commentators already pointed at the Goldhagen

¹ This article is a revised version of a paper which I presented at the book launch of Goldhagen’s *Hitler’s Willing Executioners* staged at the US Holocaust Memorial Museum on April 6, 1996, and later, on October 15, 1997, at the Central European University, Budapest. Parts of these presentations have been translated into Hebrew and published in *Gesher. Journal of Jewish Affairs* 133 (1996/1997), under the title ‘Goldhagen, the Germans, and the Holocaust’, pp. 7–39. I wish to thank Professor Richard Breitman, American University, Washington DC, and Richard Tidyman, Centre for Comparative Genocide Studies, Macquarie University, Sydney, for having given me advice and support in producing this article

² D. J. Goldhagen, *Hitler’s Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York, 1996). German edition: *Hitlers willige Vollstrecker: Ganz gewöhnliche Deutsche und der Holocaust* (Berlin, 1996).

³ See ‘The Willing Executioners/Ordinary Debate Men Debate’, *Selections from the Symposium*, publ. by the US Holocaust Research Institute (Washington DC, 1996), containing the papers presented by D. J. Goldhagen, C. R. Browning, L. Wieseltier and M. Berenbaum. The contributions by Y. Bauer, H. H. Wilhelm and myself were not selected for publication.

⁴ Jürgen Matthäus, senior research fellow at the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington DC, was the first historian reviewing the book in Germany, in *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft* 4/1996, pp. 366–68, see also his article ‘betr. Goldhagen, Finkelstein und Augstein’, *Konkret* 10/1997, pp. 30–32. To cite only a few other relevant publications, *Ein Volk von Mördern? Die Dokumentation zur Goldhagen-Kontroverse um die Rolle der Deutschen im Holocaust*, ed. J. H. Schoeps (Hamburg, 1996); *Hyping the Holocaust: Scholars Answer Goldhagen*, ed. F. H. Littell (East Rockaway, NY, 1997); R. Rürup, “Viel Lärm um nichts?” D. J. Goldhagens radikale Revision der Holocaust Forschung’, *NPL* 4 (1996), pp. 357–63; M. Ash, ‘American and German Perspectives on the Goldhagen Debate. History, Identity, and the Media’, *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 11 (1997), pp. 396–411; I. Deák, ‘Holocaust Views: The Goldhagen Controversy in Retrospect’, *Central European History* 30 (1997), pp. 295–307; R. Tidyman, ‘Ordinary Killers’, *International Network on Holocaust and Genocide* 11/3 (1996), pp. 17–18; H. U. Wehler, ‘The Goldhagen Controversy: Agonising Problems, Scholarly Failure and the Political Dimension’, *German History* 15 (1997), pp. 80–91; R. B. Birn, ‘Revising the Holocaust’, *The Historical Journal* 40/1 (1997), pp. 195–215; N. G. Finkelstein and R. B. Birn, *Eine Nation auf dem Prüfstand: Die Goldhagen These und die historische Wahrheit* (Hildesheim, 1998); A. D. Moses, ‘Structure and Agency in the Holocaust: Daniel Goldhagen and his Critics’, *History and Theory* 37/2 (1998), pp. 194–219;

“phenomenon”. His rise in bestseller lists was spectacular, especially in the United States and in Germany.

More than 500,000 copies were sold in the United States. Released in August 1996 the German edition reached a circulation of 200,000 at the end of the year. In 1997 the tenth edition appeared. It did not take long before Goldhagen was awarded with the prestigious Democracy Prize. No less than Jürgen Habermas, Germany’s foremost social philosopher, delivered the *Laudatio* in a ceremony attended by more than 2,000 people.⁵ In the Netherlands, too, the book caused some furore: 33,000 copies were sold. Less successful was the sale in Italy: only 35,000 books found a buyer. The French edition published in January 1997 fell also somewhat short of the publisher’s expectations: less than 40 000 copies were sold.⁶ In late 1997 the book was finally launched in Israel finding only little attention because, as Moshe Zimmermann maintained, it merely restated Zionist commonplaces.⁷

On the academic level, *Hitler’s Willing Executioners* has set the tone for future research,⁸ despite the verdict handed down by scholars, a verdict characterized largely by criticism, rejection, anger and, in some cases, envy. However, Goldhagen’s perception and description has only provided new impulses for the *Täter-Forschung*, the research on perpetrators, and for the examination of the behavior of the *Zuschauer*, the bystanders. No efforts have been made to integrate the third of the equation—the *Opfer*, the victims. What he has done, and in most graphic and occasionally voyeuristic fashion, is that the Jews are portrayed in a traditional, long superseded fashion, namely as sole and passive victims blindly submitting to their fate and being led to their deaths “like lambs to the slaughter”. The reception of Goldhagen also revealed the fact that the immense Shoah literature had not reached a wider audience, moreover, that research had become totally fragmented and preoccupied with detail. The gap between *Geschichtswissenschaft*, that is, history as scholarly discipline, and *Geschichtsbewußtsein*, that is, history as perceived by the general public, has even become wider.

Goldhagen addresses fundamental questions of the Shoah which, in my view, are much more relevant than those constantly discussed in debates on dates and orders of the Nazi decision making process of the “Final Solution”. He presents ideas which are provocative, sweeping and, above all, easily accessible. In the United States, the Netherlands and some other countries it helps to confirm the image already held by those who have always believed the cliché of the “ugly” or “evil” German. Among Jews, especially survivors of the Shoah, it revitalizes sentiments long suppressed. After Auschwitz many Jews preferred to avoid all contact with Germans but were told and had to accept that not all Germans could be held

Geschichtswissenschaft und Öffentlichkeit. Der Streit um Daniel J. Goldhagen, ed. J. Heil and R. Erb (Frankfurt/M., 1998); L. Rensmann, ‘Holocaust Memory and Mass Media in Contemporary Germany: Reflections on the Goldhagen Debate’, *Patterns of Prejudice* 33 (1999), pp. 59–76.

⁵ J. Habermas, ‘Über den öffentlichen Gebrauch der Historie. Warum ein “Demokratiepreis” für Daniel Goldhagen?’ *Blätter für deutsche und internationale Politik* 42 (1997), pp. 408–16; see also U. Jensen, ‘Ein Ritterschlag zum Lehrmeister? Die Apotheose des Daniel J. Goldhagen in der *Laudatio* von Jürgen Habermas’, in *Geschichtswissenschaft und Öffentlichkeit*, ed. J. Heil and R. Erb, pp. 148–63.

⁶ See J. Wetzel, ‘Die Goldhagen-Rezeption in den Niederlanden, in Frankreich und Italien’, in *Geschichtswissenschaft und Öffentlichkeit*, ed. J. Heil and R. Erb, pp. 218–34.

⁷ See A. D. Moses, ‘Structure and Agency in the Holocaust’, p. 126.

⁸ The best historiographical account is provided by D. Pohl, ‘Die Holocaust-Forschung und Goldhagen Thesen’, *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 45/1 (1997), pp. 1–48; see also J. Matthäus, ‘What About the Ordinary Men? The German Order Police and the Holocaust in the Occupied Soviet Union’, *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 10/1 (1996), pp. 134–50; A comprehensive and excellent account has been presented by K.-M. Mallmann, ‘Vom Fußvolk der “Endlösung”. Ordnungspolizei, Ostkrieg und Judenmord’, in *Tel Aviv Jahrbuch für deutsche Geschichte* XXVI (1997), pp. 355–91; E. B. Westermann, “Ordinary Men” or “Ideological Soldiers?” Police Battalion 310 in Russia, 1942’, *German Studies Review* 21 (1998), pp. 41–68; *Nationalsozialistische Vernichtungspolitik. Neuere Forschungen und Kontroversen*, ed. U. Herbert (Frankfurt/M., 1998).

accountable for the murder of six million Jews. In Germany itself Goldhagen hit a raw nerve, confronting the Germans with the message, presented in an almost missionary fashion, that the extermination of the Jews was considered by the entire nation to be just and was perpetrated by ordinary people willingly and even with great zeal.

Goldhagen claims that his book is based on new sources. In fact, only a modest collection of archival documents provides his evidence: a dozen files from the record group *Order Police* kept at the German Federal Archives, supplemented by a few Nuremberg documents. Goldhagen did not use captured German documents from the archives of the former Soviet bloc made available in recent years. The main body of his source material is comprised of German postwar trial material about *Reserve Police Battalion 101* kept at the Ludwigsburg-based *Zentrale Stelle*, the Central Office of the Land Judicial Authorities for the Investigations of National Socialist Crimes. This judicial material was first discovered and evaluated by the American historian Christopher R. Browning, though with different conclusions. Browning found the trial records six weeks before Goldhagen arrived in Ludwigsburg. Both continued research on the same small police battalion, gradually engaging each other in an academic dispute. Browning published his ground breaking study entitled *Ordinary Men* in 1992,⁹ Goldhagen needed another four years to complete his book. It was a revised version of his dissertation in the field of political science at Harvard University. Some critics, such as Yehuda Bauer and Hans-Ulrich Wehler, pointed at the collapse of academic control mechanism, attacking scholars for not only having passed the doctoral thesis but even awarded it a prestigious prize.¹⁰ At any rate, Goldhagen was eager to present his revised dissertation not only as an “anti-Browning” book but as an authoritative book on modern German history and as the definitive work on the Shoah. In the first third of the book he develops a bleak and monochromatic picture of German society and culture dominated by “eliminationist anti-Semitism” since the early nineteenth century. It is this special brand of German anti-Semitism that constitutes the cornerstone of his study. Unfortunately, his picture on modern German history is derived from a narrow range of secondary sources.

Goldhagen claims that his approach and findings are new. In fact, similar ideas had already been presented half a century earlier. They manifested themselves in concepts of ‘collective guilt’ and ‘demonization’, ‘authoritarian personality’ and German *Sonderweg* which all assigned a decisive role to anti-Semitism. The significance or centrality of the hatred of Jews as ideological driving force of the process of the persecution and destruction of the Jews, that is as a precondition for mass murder, has remained almost undisputed for decades. Previous research has also shown that “ordinary men” from many walks of life carried out their assigned killing duties in the most efficient manner and with a high degree of self-satisfaction.¹¹

⁹ C. R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York, 1992). German edition: *Ganz normale Männer. Das Reserve-Polizeibattalion 101 und die “Endlösung” in Polen* (Reinbek, 1993); see also *Der Weg zur “Endlösung”. Entscheidungen und Täter* (Bonn, 1998); and ‘Daniel Goldhagen’s Willing Executioners’, *History and Memory* 8 (1996), pp. 88–108, ‘Ordinary Germans or Ordinary Men? A Reply to the Critics’, in *The Holocaust and History. The Known, The Unknown, the Disputed, and the Reexamined*, ed. M. Berenbaum and A. J. Peck (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1998), pp. 252–65, as well as D. J. Goldhagen, ‘The Evil of Banality’, *New Republic*, July 13 and 20, 1992, pp. 49–52; ‘Motives, Causes and Alibis’, *New Republic*, December 23, (1996), pp. 37–45, and ‘Ordinary Men or Ordinary Germans?’, *The Holocaust and History*, ed. M. Berenbaum and A. J. Peck, pp. 301–07.

¹⁰ Y. Bauer, paper presented at the USHMM Symposium; H.-U. Wehler, ‘The Goldhagen Controversy’.

¹¹ The classical standard work is still R. Hilberg, *Die Vernichtung der europäischen Juden. Die Geschichte des Holocaust*, 3 Bde. (Frankfurt/M., 1990); see also *Täter, Opfer, Zuschauer. Die Vernichtung der Juden, 1933–1945* (Frankfurt/M., 1996). Other relevant studies are: R. J. Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors* (New York, 1978); Y. Bauer, *A History of the Holocaust* (New York, London, Toronto and Sydney, 1982); M. R. Marrus, *The Holocaust in History* (Hanover and London, 1987); “Schöne Zeiten”. *Judenmord aus der Sicht der Täter und Gaffer* (Frankfurt/M., 1988); R. Breitman, *The Architect of Genocide. Heinrich Himmler and the Final Solution*,

Goldhagen demonstrates a remarkable, one could even say cavalier tendency, to ignore, to reject and to criticize any material which does not fit into his model of description and interpretation. His methodological approach indicates this. He admits to having discounted “*all self-exculpating testimony that finds no corroboration from other sources*”.¹² The German-Canadian historian Ruth Bettina Birn has—in collaboration with Volker Rieß—checked his archival sources from Ludwigsburg.¹³ Their findings confirm the arbitrary nature of his selection and evaluation of records. In an attempt to silence Ruth Bettina Birn, if not to undermine the professional and economic existence of one of his most profound critics, Goldhagen and his lawyer moved swiftly and threatened defamation action. It remains to be seen whether or when a British court will hand down a verdict on a matter of historical truth.

Goldhagen claims to have finally discovered the key to a full understanding and explanation of the Shoah, a claim which, to my knowledge, no other historian has made so far. Raul Hilberg, the ‘doyen’ of Holocaust research, was quick to discount this claim out of hand. In an ‘open’ letter sent to me on the eve of the book launch at the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, he declared: “The book is advertised as something that will change our thinking. It can do nothing of the sort. To me it is worthless, all the hype by the publisher notwithstanding”.¹⁴

Goldhagen does present something new. He ties together mass murders carried out by police battalions, atrocities committed by guards in work camps, and arbitrary killings and abuse by guards accompanying Jews during death marches close to the end of the war. These diverse aspects of the Shoah all provided perpetrators with choices—to obey or not to obey orders, to follow zealously or to go through the motions, to kill to the end or to give up a lost cause. There were situations where not all behavior was coerced, hence “Hitler’s willing executioners”.

If “ordinary Germans”, as part of “an assenting genocidal community”,¹⁵ accepted the extermination of Jews as a “national project” and even applauded the slaughter, the national-collective liability requires the incorporation of women. For the first time, as far as I know, Goldhagen has established a kind of gender equation of genocidal killers, an equation which does not quite correspond with historical reality. Some 500,000 males were recruited for mass shootings, gassings and other forms of killing. Fewer than 5,000 females might have been called on to act as guards, torturers and, occasionally, as killers. Some 3,500 women, largely recruited from the ranks of the BDM (League of German Girls) served as so-called *SS-Aufseherinnen*, female SS-supervisors, in concentration camps during the Second World War.¹⁶

Goldhagen proceeds according to the motto ‘once an anti-Semite always an anti-Semite’ regardless of historical period, social or political group, and of the different forms anti-Jewish sentiment might take. Seen from this perspective the preparation for and the

ed. E. Klee, W. Dreßen and V. Rieß (New York, 1991); H. Safrian, *Die Eichmann-Männer* (Vienna/Zurich, 1993); W. Sofsky, *Die Ordnung des Terrors. Das Konzentrationslager* (Frankfurt/M., 1993); *Vernichtungskrieg. Die Verbrechen der Wehrmacht, 1941–1944*, ed. H. Heer and K. Neumann (Hamburg, 1995); H. Friedlander, *The Origins of Nazi Genocide. From Euthanasia to the Final Solution* (Chapel Hill, 1996); O. Bartov, *Murder in our Midst. The Holocaust, Industrial Killing, and Representation* (New York, Oxford, 1996).

¹² D. J. Goldhagen, *Hitler’s Willing Executioners*, p. 467.

¹³ Apart from the contributions mentioned in footnote 3, see also R. B. Birn and V. Rieß, ‘Nachlesen. Goldhagen und seine Quellen’, in *Geschichtswissenschaft und Öffentlichkeit*, ed. J. Heil and R. Erb, pp. 38–62; as well as D. J. Goldhagen, ‘The Fictions of Ruth Bettina Birn’, *German Politics and Society* 15 (1997), pp. 119–65.

¹⁴ Letter by Raul Hilberg, dated 2.4.1996, publ. in *International Network on Holocaust and Genocide* 11/5 (1997), p. 14.

¹⁵ D. J. Goldhagen, *Hitler’s Willing Executioners*, p. 406.

¹⁶ See D. P. Brown, *The Beautiful Beast. The Life and Crimes of SS-Aufseherin Irma Grese* (Ventura, Cal., 1996); see also G. Schwarz, ‘Verdrängte Täterinnen. Frauen im SS-Apparat der SS (1939–1945)’, in *Verdeckte Spuren nationalsozialistischer Verbrechen*, ed. Th. Wobbe (Frankfurt/M., 1992), pp. 197–223.

implementation of the “Final Solution” are presented as a simple task. The deterministic, monocausal line of explanation allows the construction of a continuity without deviation or contradictions, that inevitably led to Auschwitz. Thus, the Shoah is explained as a logical consequence of German history. Or as Johannes Heil has put it, “the uniqueness of the Shoah is replaced by the uniqueness of the perpetrators.”¹⁷

The process by which “ordinary Germans” came to commit murder was, in my view, more complicated. Virtually none of the perpetrators knew prior to their recruitment that they would be asked to kill Jews. However, they soon became used to the routine. The gradual process of what I term *Erziehung zum Mord*, ‘rehearsing for murder’,¹⁸ was facilitated by exercises that aimed at strengthening group bonds and ensure conformity to Nazi ideology, particularly anti-Semitism. In all police and SS units special emphasis was placed on ideological indoctrination by means of regular political instruction. Within this training program there was a comprehensive exposure to anti-Semitic literature, incendiary speeches and anti-Jewish films often screened on the eve of *Judenaktionen*. Part of the process of ‘rehearsing for murder’ was the use of euphemism which disguised the reality of the killing. Orders were given sanctioning the murder. The first killing orders issued after the attack against the Soviet Union in June 1941 targeted male Jews of draft age for immediate liquidation. In July the women followed. From mid-August children considered as “useless eaters” were included as a final, “logical” step. Although there were variations according to time and place, this sequence within the killing operations can be regarded as a basic pattern. This strategy was not only chosen because it denied the victims any chance of resistance and survival but also because it was the best method to familiarize the perpetrators with the praxis of liquidation. These strategies did not go unrewarded. After the first experiences with killing “ordinary men” displayed sentiments and modes of behavior which excluded any feeling of sympathy for the victims and were symptomatic for the destruction of all moral and human values. It was these reactions, this process of brutalization and dehumanization that helps to explain the ability and willingness to commit mass murder repeatedly.

There was yet another strategy employed to make it easier for the genocidal killers to fulfill their mission. From the outset, the architects of the “Final Solution” were concerned about the well-being of the executioners. Clear instructions were given to ensure that members of executions commandos came to no harm. At all killing sites coveted schnapps and cigarette rations were distributed. Within the framework of *seelische Betreuung*, “pastoral care”, social get-togethers in the evenings, as well as excursions and other forms of entertainment took place in order to wipe out the impressions of the day. A ‘festive’ atmosphere surrounded the killings, and Goldhagen depicts the horrors of this. Noisy and jovial dinner parties enjoyed particular popularity. Celebrated in local inns, often pre-booked and prepaid by Jewish money, they rapidly developed into *Saufabende*, drunken excess.

Heinrich Himmler, the *Reichsführer SS*, spoke repeatedly of the “heaviest task” the SS had ever to perform and, of the *Anständigkeit*, “the decency”, that had been preserved of it. Indeed, it is this monstrous linking of murder and morality, of criminal behavior and this particular brand of Nazi ethics which is at the core of the perpetrators’ mentality. Hannah Arendt spoke of the “banality of evil”, others of the “normality of crime”. Almost all “ordinary men” developed the ability to make a smooth transition back into their day-to-day existence and lead “normal lives” after they had been protagonists in brutalities and mass

¹⁷ J. Heil, ‘Die Einzigartigkeit der Täter. Anmerkungen zu Daniel Goldhagens “Hitler’s Willing Executioners”’, in *Jahrbuch für Anti-Semitismusforschung* 6, ed. W. Benz (1996), p. 8.

¹⁸ The following sections are largely based on K. Kwiet, ‘Rehearsing for Murder: The Beginning of the Final Solution in Lithuania in June 1941’, *Holocaust and Genocid Studies* 12/1 (1998), pp. 3–26, and ‘Auftakt zum Holocaust. Ein Polizeibatallion im Osteinsatz’, in *Der Nationalsozialismus. Studien zur Ideologie und Herrschaft*, ed. W. Benz et al. (Frankfurt/M., 1993), pp. 191–208; as well as ‘Erziehung zum Mord’, *Festschrift für Reinhard Rürup* (forthcoming in 1999).

murder. Expressed differently, with few exceptions, the perpetrators were spared the long lasting symptoms of trauma that were and remain the legacy of the surviving victims.

The responses of perpetrators to the killing varied. Three main groups can be distinguished. The first group included those men who displayed particular zeal and brutality, who were proud of their achievements as killers and the honors and rewards they had brought with them. In killing squads they quickly became known as *Dauerschützen*, or permanent shooters. Alongside them were those who let no opportunity pass to give vent to their Jew-hatred and sadistic inclinations. These genocidal killers stand at the center of Goldhagen's description. In the second group, the largest, were those who experienced a feeling of discomfort or uneasiness at the task they had been set. They needed more time to become accustomed to acts of murder. Goldhagen classifies these perpetrators too as "willing executioners". He also mentions the third and smallest group which included the *Drückeberger* and *Verweigerer*, those who made efforts to have themselves relieved of killing duties or who objected to a killing order. Not one who protested against the murder of the Jews or disobeyed a killing order was ever sentenced to death by the special SS- and Police Courts. As a rule, such persons were replaced or demoted, transferred or dismissed. Conversely, SS and policemen, military personnel and civilians, Germans and non-Germans who killed Jews independently, that is, without being authorized or instructed to do so, risked trial and punishment not for their act of murder but for infringement of SS jurisdiction.

Neither Goldhagen nor Browning has the answer to the question which specific factors determined the different and varying responses of perpetrators to the killing. I assume that the reconstruction of the individual's life story and the analysis of the concrete situation might provide us with some clues. Goldhagen accepts only anti-Semitism as a motive, rejecting all other motives, including situational factors stressed by Browning—war situation, blind obedience, group pressure or career advancement.

Goldhagen's fixation on anti-Semitism absolves him of the obligation to offer an explanation for other killing operations. No light is shed on the motives of "Hitler's willing executioners" in murdering handicapped people within the so-called "Euthanasia Program", in liquidating 2,7 million Soviet prisoners of war, in exterminating Sinti and Romas or in killing hundreds of thousands of other people, classified as *Volks- und Reichsfeinde*, enemies of the "German People and Nation". The emphasis on German responsibility and German *Sonderweg* allows Goldhagen to push aside the willingness of genocidal killers of other nationalities who, recruited from the vast army of indigenous collaborators, were often commissioned with the task of carrying out the 'dirty work', such as the murder of women and children, and who, in many cases, surpassed their German masters in their cruelty and spontaneous brutality.

As far as the German population is concerned,¹⁹ Goldhagen's model allows virtually no room for differentiation. He is concerned solely with the specifically German predisposition to hatred and the murder of the Jews and not with the displayed spectrum of responses. Here too three basic patterns can be distinguished: solidarity, indifference and hatred. Goldhagen focuses on the last only. Indifference is absorbed into his definition of anti-Semitism. Solidarity is mentioned in passing only.

The exclusion of the Jews from German society and their expulsion took place in full public.²⁰ It did not trigger any spontaneous and massive protest. On the contrary, the absence

¹⁹ D. Bankier, *Die öffentliche Meinung im Hitler-Staat. Die 'Endlösung' und die Deutschen*. Eine Berichtigung (Berlin, 1995).

²⁰ *Die Juden in Deutschland. Leben unter nationalsozialistischer Herrschaft 1933–1945*, ed. W. Benz (Munich, 1993); S. Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews*, Vol. 1: *The Years of Persecution, 1933–1939* (New York, 1997), as well as M. A. Kaplan, *Between Dignity and Despair. Jewish Life in Nazi Germany* (New York/Oxford, 1998).

of any resistance was a decisive factor enabling the Nazi regime to gradually implement the program of the “Final Solution”. Nevertheless, there is evidence of individual acts of solidarity manifest in gestures of compassion and regret, consternation and indignation. The strongest form of public protest found its expression in a late, spectacular demonstration. In February 1943 in Berlin a group of German women succeeded in securing the release of their Jewish husbands who had been arrested as forced laborers in the course of the *Fabrik-Aktion*.²¹ They were living in a “privileged mixed marriage”, a status still protecting them from deportation and murder. The successful outcome of this late protest gives rise to the possibility that similar actions at an earlier stage might have redirected the destructive, escalating course of the Nazi *Judenpolitik*.

There were Germans in all circles, even occasionally moderate anti-Semites, who made efforts to save the Jews. Some 20,000 to 25,000 found the courage and resourcefulness after 1941 to offer resistance by providing Jews with refuge and so securing their survival underground. Some 10,000 Jews went into hiding, less than 5,000 survived. The number of Germans who gave vent to their Jew-hatred was much higher. Their aggression manifested itself in a series of assaults and attacks, as well as in widespread denunciations.

Most Germans did not take offence when, in fall 1941, the Jews were stigmatized with the yellow star, then rounded up in front of their eyes and deported to the East. Their departure was even welcomed by many with a feeling of relief. The process of exclusion and expulsion had left behind a *minorité fatale*. Goldhagen prefers the notion of “social dead”, who had come to be regarded by society as a burden which could be shed in the course of the “Final Solution”. There is, however, no historical evidence to suggest that the systematic slaughter of six million Jews met, as Goldhagen maintains, with general understanding, far less with widespread applause. Most Germans preferred to respond to the murder of Jews with silence and denial.

Indifference, silence and denial—the dominant behavioral patterns—resulted not only from the firmly entrenched hatred of the Jews but also, and Daniel Goldhagen’s father once placed special emphasis on this,²² from the role which anti-Semitism played as an instrument of power. When the National Socialists seized power in 1933, anti-Semitism and racism became doctrines of the state, doctrines of a new dictatorship. The direct terror imposed upon the Jews and the other enemies had an indirect, deterrent effect upon the population as a whole. “Ordinary Germans” could recognize what happened to those for whom there was no place anymore in society. In addition, Nazi propaganda and indoctrination provided the population with the satisfaction of belonging the *Volksgemeinschaft*, the national community. To the bitter end the vast majority of Germans identified with the Nazi regime and their beloved *Führer*. Finally, and this is for me the decisive explanatory factor, long before the program of the “Final Solution” was put into reality, most Germans found it difficult to respect and tolerate a separate Jewish existence in their midst. From the beginning, especially during the early never-ending debates on Jewish emancipation, the demand was made that Jews give up their “outdated” traditions and “annoying” traits. I leave it for debate as to whether this call for total assimilation was motivated by “eliminationist anti-Semitism”.

There is a great deal of evidence to suggest that details of the program of the “Final Solution” filtered through, reaching wide sections of the population. But it should also be pointed out that those who disseminated the news or rumors of gassing and shooting were, if caught, punished by the Gestapo and judiciary on the grounds of *Heimtücke* [seditious

²¹ N. Stoltzfus, *Resistance of the Heart: Inter-marriage and the Rosenstrasse Protest in Germany* (New York, 1996), as well as ‘Protest and Silence: Resistance Histories in Post-War Germany: the Missing Case of Inter-married Germans’, in *Resisting the Holocaust*, ed. R. Rohrich (Oxford/New York, 1998), pp. 151–78.

²² E. Goldhagen, ‘Weltanschauung und Endlösung. Zum Antisemitismus der nationalsozialistischen Führungsschicht’, *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 24 (1976), pp. 379–405.

behavior] or *Greuelhetze* [vile agitation]. Numerous cases have been recorded.²³ Goldhagen's assumption that the Nazi regime attempted only half-heartedly to keep "ordinary Germans" in a state of ignorance about the extermination of Jews is untenable.

From the outset, "Hitler's willing executioners" were duty-bound to keep silence. They had to sign declarations of silence and were constantly reminded of them. The historical evidence clearly illustrates that the taking of photographs and the participation of unauthorized persons at killing sites, both central themes in Goldhagen's argumentation, were officially forbidden. The directives were repeatedly ignored and had to be reinforced. Photos and films taken were confiscated and sent to the SS-Reich Security Main Office (RSHA) in Berlin. What Goldhagen presents as an everyday occurrence during the killing operations was in fact an exception rather than the rule. He maintains, without providing any evidence, that "one of the reasons we have so many photos of the Holocaust is because the Germans took them to commemorate their deeds".²⁴ In fact, only a few photos can be found in archives or court records. The secrecy imposed suggests that the architects of the "Final Solution" were aware that the killing operations abandoned all legal and moral codes. The secrecy also provided an effective mechanism enabling executioners to commit murder, while at the same time permitting "ordinary Germans" to maintain silence and deny the heinous crimes committed. Within this context even the trials conducted against those who spread the news or rumors of organized mass murder proved to be a stabilizing factor for the Nazi regime, since they made the smoke-screen of secrecy even more impenetrable: "*Das haben wir nicht gewußt!*" ["We did not know about it!"]. That was the widespread claim within the German population both before and after 1945. It was, as Wolfgang Benz has put it, "the greatest lie of an entire generation".²⁵

The murder of the Jews, unprecedented in history, did not put an end to the hatred of Jews either in Germany or elsewhere. Goldhagen mentions the postwar development only in passing. According to him "re-education" and "generational replacement" brought about the transformation of the "evil" Germans into "good" liberal democrats who have finally adopted his model of orientation: America's democracy. "They are like us", as he expressed it in an interview,²⁶ with a smile and a shrug of his shoulder. In his *Laudatio*, Jürgen Habermas praised Goldhagen for "for having given public consciousness new significant impulses due to his vividness and moral force of his presentation and having created a greater awareness of the background and limits of German *Normalisierung*, "normalization".²⁷ Linked to the demand for the "normalization" is, more than half a century after the collapse of the Third Reich, the call for the *Historisierung*, the "historicizing" of national socialism and its crimes. Whatever one understands by these terms, it is indisputable that hatred of Jews and the murder of the Jews cannot be consigned to the past. In Germany, in the wake of the unification and the upsurge of xenophobic sentiments, anti-Semitism is on the rise again.²⁸ A new stereotype has emerged. Jews are held accountable for having survived Auschwitz. They are regarded as *Störenfriede*, "troublemakers", because due to their continuing existence they serve as reminders of a horrific crime which many Germans cannot deny or conceal any

²³ B. Dörner, 'Justiz und Judenmord. Zur Unterdrückung von Äußerungen über den Genozid an den europäischen Juden durch die deutsche Justiz', in *Jahrbuch für Anti-Semitismusforschung* 4, ed. W. Benz (1995), pp. 226–53.

²⁴ Goldhagen, *Selections from the Symposium*, p. 14.

²⁵ W. Benz, *Der Holocaust* (Munich, 1995), p. 117.

²⁶ D. Smith, 'Challenging a View of the Holocaust', *The New York Times*, January 4, 1996.

²⁷ J. Habermas, 'Über den öffentlichen Gebrauch der Historie', pp. 408–16.

²⁸ See *Antisemitismus in Deutschland. Zur Aktualität eines Vorurteils*, ed. W. Benz (Munich, 1995); W. Bergmann and R. Erb, 'Anti-Semitismus in Deutschland 1945–1996', in W. Benz and W. Bergmann, *Vorurteil und Völkermord. Entwicklungslinien des Anti-Semitismus* (Freiburg, Basel and Vienna, 1997), pp. 397–434; W. Bergmann, 'Xenophobia and Anti-Semitism after the Unification of Germany', *Patterns of Prejudice* 28/1 (1994), pp. 67–80.

longer but which they simply wish to forget. Jews are also blamed for thwarting the quest for national identity because of their duty-bound insistence to keep alive the memory of the Shoah, that is, the German murder of the Jews, an event which cannot be so easily reconciled with national tradition and identity. What many Germans had long thought privately, has now been brought out in public. In fall 1998, on the occasion of the awarding of the prestigious prize of the German Book Trade, the prominent literary celebrity Martin Walser launched his attack on the Jews and on what he describes as the permanent over-representation of the Shoah. He triggered a new and heated debate which, after the Goldhagen saga, again reveals how difficult it still is for Germans to come to terms with their past and their present-day Jewish citizens.

There is yet another continuity, unbroken by the Shoah and one which has become an essential feature of the twentieth century. War and war crimes, ethnic cleansings and genocidal campaigns have continued unabated since 1945. As a rule, they have gone unpunished. Neither the Nuremberg Military Tribunal, international statutes and conventions, threats of punishment or sanctions nor extensive media coverage, let alone academic discourse on the subject, has acted as a deterrent to ongoing killing and destruction. The chief perpetrators have always pointed to precedents set at other times and at other locations, if not to justify their action, at least to demonstrate their feasibility and effectiveness. Undoubtedly, 'revolutionary' breakthroughs in politics and law, both at national and international levels, have been achieved. They can clearly be seen in the changes of legislation in many countries and, above all, in the setting up of UN War Crimes tribunals. Nevertheless, military campaigns, fundamental breaches of human rights and ethnic cleansing have become familiar strategies by regimes to secure their power, to control and "to purify" their population by pinpointing their enemies and by treating them accordingly. As in the past, aggressive nationalism, hate and racism are serving as ideological driving forces. They encourage and justify policies of exclusion and expulsion and, once the process of *rehearsing for murder* is completed, total extermination, the politics of genocide.

If one follows Goldhagen's logic, there is hardly any need to examine the historical processes, social structures and political aspirations of regimes which have in the past or are still engaged in ethnic cleansings and genocidal campaigns. All crimes against humanity—whether committed in Cambodia or Indonesia, in Rwanda or Burundi, in the former Yugoslavia, Turkey or elsewhere—can, if this logic is followed, be assigned to national or ethnic, racial or genetic predisposition. The search for such "traits" or characteristics to explain the motivating force for hatred and murder indicates a feeling of helplessness. It contains also a perspective which, in my view, is more than frightening.