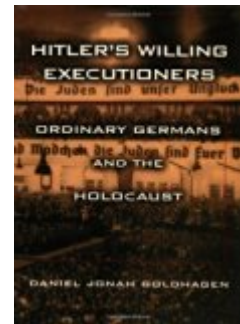


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Daniel Jonah Goldhagen. *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996. x + 622 pp. \$17.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-679-77268-2; \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-679-44695-8.

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Not since “The War of the German Historians” (*Historikerstreit*) in the mid-1980s has the field of Holocaust studies been agitated by the kind of invective that currently surrounds the so-called Goldhagen Controversy. Touched off by the publication of a massive scholarly treatise that purports to “radically transform our understanding of the Holocaust and of Germany during the Nazi Period,” the controversy has thus far generated more heat than light (some of the most emotional contributions to the debate have come from those who have “not yet finished reading” the book!). In this manner, *Hitler's Willing Executioners* has been reviewed extensively in both professional journals and the public press. This review, however, is directed toward helping teachers decide on the potential usefulness of Goldhagen's book in the high school classroom and not toward contributing to the aforementioned invective.

Those already well versed in the history of the Holocaust will find few revelations of interest to high school students in Goldhagen's book. Those new to the field of Holocaust studies will probably find Goldhagen's provocative interpretation bewildering or confusing rather than enlightening. My own reaction as a teacher well grounded in both modern German history and Holocaust studies was a mixture of disappointment and frustration. I was disappointed that I came away with so little that I could use in my classroom, and I was frustrated by having had to invest so much time and energy to extract those few valuable insights from among the mass of detail, distortions, and exaggerated claims of originality.

Goldhagen's publisher claims that his “profoundly disturbing book will revolutionize Holocaust studies.”

That claim rests to a large extent on Goldhagen's insistence that hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of “ordinary Germans” were “willing,” often enthusiastic, participants in the murder of six million Jews. The author rejects previous interpretations, which allegedly “assumed” that the wholesale slaughter of European Jewry was carried out by a small number of fanatical Nazi leaders and their henchmen in the SS who carefully concealed their deeds from the German public. He insists that the overwhelming majority of Germans were imbued with a virulent, “eliminationist” anti-Semitism and that they knew about and approved of the Final Solution.

The gap between the claims made by Goldhagen's publisher (“the most important book ever published on the Holocaust”) and what his study has actually accomplished strikes me as considerable. It is true that Goldhagen, in following a trail blazed by Christopher Browning and others, has placed unprecedented emphasis on the importance of understanding the motives and actions of the perpetrators. He has also called attention to the need for more detailed investigation of the nature and extent of popular anti-Semitism in Weimar and Nazi Germany. These accomplishments, however, and his addition of a large amount of excellent detail to our knowledge of Reserve Police Battalions, the inner workings of work camps, and the death marches, hardly constitute a revolution in our understanding. At most, Goldhagen's findings establish that thousands (not millions) of ordinary Germans were cognizant of—and a significant percentage of those who were aware, participated in one way or another in—the Final Solution.

Presenting a brief summary of Goldhagen's thesis to a class full of high school students certainly promises

to heighten interest in studying the perpetrators of the Holocaust and their motives. To achieve that goal, however, a teacher might be better advised to reference several scholarly reviews such as those by Gordon Craig in the *New York Review Of Books* (April 18, 1996) and Volker Berghahn in the *New York Times Book Review* (April 14, 1996) than to try to plow through more than 450 pages of Goldhagen's often turgid prose. At best, instructors who assign all or part of Christopher Browning's more readable, more sharply focused study of Reserve Police Battalion 101, *Ordinary Men*, might wish to refer students to Part III of *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, "Police Battalions: Ordinary Germans, Willing Killers," for additional evidence and a strikingly different interpretation. I must admit that Goldhagen's recitation of the repeated atrocities committed by members of various Reserve Police Battalions was sufficiently unnerving to suggest the need to re-examine Browning's explanation and evidence. His chapters 13 and 14, however, which focus on the death marches, although drawing praise from a number of reviewers, prove to be less convincing, in part because much of his evidence is drawn from the events surrounding a single march (see especially, pp. 330-63). By calling attention to the death marches as an area worthy of further study, especially as a potential source of insight into the mentality of the perpetrators, Goldhagen has certainly pointed to a productive avenue for future research. Whether it would be realistic to expect a high school student to be able to engage in such research, of course, is an entirely different matter.

Leaving aside the numerous challenges scholars have issued to specific portions of Goldhagen's interpretation, I find that *Hitler's Willing Executioners* suffers from two pervasive, fundamental flaws. First, the author repeatedly (sometimes arrogantly) "assumes" what he should be trying to prove. This is exemplified by Goldhagen's assertions that it is up to his critics to prove that most Germans were *not* anti-Semitic. "Virtually no evidence exists," he writes, "to contradict the notion that the intense and ubiquitous public declaration of antisemitism [in Nazi propaganda] was mirrored in people's private beliefs" (p. 30). Assuming that most Germans were strongly anti-Semitic even before Hitler came to power,

Goldhagen insists that, in the absence of evidence to the contrary, he is entitled to conclude that they remained anti-Semitic. "The absence of evidence that change occurred in Germany's cognitive model about Jews should be seen to suggest strongly that these models and the elaborate beliefs dependent upon them were reproduced and continued to exist" (p. 46), he asserts illogically and without supporting evidence.

The second fundamental flaw in Goldhagen's study is his tunnel vision, his leaving out of account the broader context in which Nazi racial policies operated. The Holocaust, he mistakenly assumes, is almost exclusively the story of how Germans killed Jews. The Holocaust, he writes, was "the defining feature of German society during its Nazi period." "No analysis of German society," he continues, "no understanding or characterization of it, can be made without placing the persecution and extermination of the Jews at its center" (p. 8). As many of his critics have pointed out, such exclusive focus on Germans and Jews ignores the fact that the search for *Lebensraum* involved, under cover of war, the displacement and slaughter of millions of Poles, Russians, and other Slavic peoples as well as Jews. Similarly, Goldhagen's failure to explore the extent to which significant numbers of Ukrainians, Latvians, and Lithuanians participated in the wholesale slaughter of East European Jews further undermines his credibility.

In sum, *Hitler's Willing Executioners* can serve as a resource to which high school teachers might wish to refer students interested in doing research on Reserve Police Battalions, work camps, or death marches. Its chapters on Police Battalions, especially chapter 7 on Police Battalion 101, provide an interesting and potentially enlightening counterpoint to Christopher Browning's *Ordinary Men*. Beyond that, however, it is the rare high school student (or teacher) who will benefit from reading Goldhagen's weighty tome from cover to cover.

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