

# A Neglected History of the Holocaust's Perpetrators

*Daniel Jonah Goldhagen's "Hitler's Willing Executioners"*

By David Golding

In his award-winning book *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*, Daniel Jonah Goldhagen endeavors to introduce a new history to Holocaust Studies. His work tells the story of the perpetrators themselves, a group Goldhagen considers "the most important" for their responsibility in the slaughter of European Jews (5). He asserts that previous studies have generally neglected a thorough analysis of the perpetrators and have often portrayed the acts of the Holocaust in passive terms. For instance, stating that "five hundred Jews were killed in this city in 1944" removes the actors responsible for doing the killing and leaves out the details of what actually happened. Goldhagen consistently and conscientiously employs the active voice and pulls in individual perpetrators into the narrative in an effort to tell a lost story.

The benefits of graphically retelling Holocaust exterminations extends into the public psyche: "Surprisingly, the vast literature on the Holocaust contains little on the people who were its executors.... As a consequence of this general lack of knowledge, all kinds of misunderstandings and myths about the perpetrators abound" (5). Hitler rightfully became the point-man for all Holocaust atrocities—no one doubts his role in masterminding the intense antisemitic rhetoric of the Nazi Party—but a by-product of placing so much blame on the Führer has been that the real story of who systematically made

the Holocaust possible has been altogether assumed and many times neglected.

Goldhagen's thesis is simple: ordinary Germans were every bit as responsible for the Holocaust as were the Nazi institutions that financed and concocted it. What is more difficult to tell is to what degree Goldhagen blames these Germans in comparison to the regime's leadership. Nevertheless, he does not apologize for claiming that ordinary Germans fueled the Holocaust. In fact, to say otherwise is to undermine the real horror to which Jews were subjugated at the hands of their fellow Germans. "I eschew the clinical approach," writes Goldhagen when discussing his methodology, "and try to convey the horror, the gruesomeness, of the events *for the perpetrators*." Terribly sickening things were done to the Jews, their blood, bone, and brains often smirching the faces of the perpetrators in such assaults. Goldhagen writes:

Such scenes—not the antiseptic descriptions that mere reportage of a killing operation presents—constituted the reality for many perpetrators. For us to comprehend the perpetrators' phenomenological world, we should describe for ourselves every gruesome image that they beheld, and every cry of anguish and pain that they heard. (22)

Sufficient space to effectively portray all such atrocities is unavailable for a one-volume book, but Goldhagen does include plenty of evidence to show the ordinary German's (at times unprovoked) participation in the Holocaust.

Where his thesis makes its strongest case is in breaking apart the moral dilemma most of us assume was extant in the moment Germans were ordered to kill Jews. Picture the German police officer or infantryman in the act of killing a defenseless Jew in a concentration camp setting. It goes without saying that one generally thinks of the killer as being ordered to perform the act at the peril of his own life; had he refused, certainly his superior officer would have tortured or killed him as a consequence. The bulk of Goldhagen's evidence suggests that this moral dilemma rarely existed, even in settings where the most basic ranks of society were involved in the killings.

Goldhagen divides his argument and evidence into three parts—(1) demonstrating that Germans by and large had an antisemitic and eliminationist mindset and how their institutions bred ordinary folk to

categorically despise Jews; (2) examining who the willing executioners were and telling of their work of annihilation; (3) explaining the eliminationist antisemitism with this new evidence. This structure overall effectively backs up his thesis and helps the reader move through large blocks of history and case studies. A previous and thorough understanding of the greater Nazi political history will be necessary for most readers, however, since Goldhagen does little to provide a general context for the major players and institutions involved in the narrative. For instance, an awareness of the SA and SS and the subtleties between the two would help the reader better accept some of Goldhagen's strongest arguments that these institutions, while terribly revenous in their hunt for Jews, imposed little punishment on ordinary Germans who resisted their orders to exterminate. Without such a background, I fear many readers will simply read into Goldhagen's prose throughout the whole book a bias against Germans which to the informed reader will not likely appear too polemical.

The magnitude of the operation to exterminate all Jewry in the world was best illustrated in raw figures, which Goldhagen amply provided. The ratio of one guard to ten prisoners shows that no small number of perpetrators were involved; in fact, comparing the accepted number of around six million Jews killed during the Holocaust to this ratio reveals that the number of ordinary Germans murdering Jews was considerable, to say the least (167–69). Other figures also support Goldhagen's argument, though at times it appears that he purposefully gives little explanation to substantiate the estimates—a possible trap for some of his conclusions given the probability that in some cases the adverse could also be true (i.e., lurking variables could potentially rule out that a high number of perpetrators in one case may not have been infantrymen, etc.).

Goldhagen's most thorough source for illustrating his claims is the Police Battalions of Germany. As early as the Middle Ages, Europeans were prone to indict Jews for social ills and a tradition of antagonism persisted into post-World War I Germany which affected their social policies (127). The Police Battalions served as an important source because they were largely comprised of average Germans who were aligned with this antisemitic heritage. Once the greater institutions permitted the persecution of Jews and went so far as to encourage their extermination, these battalions rallied to the cause and were

responsible for some of the most heinous crimes of the Holocaust. Case after case, Goldhagen demonstrates that the vast majority of these battalion members called for “death to the Jews” (93). Even if one were to be skeptical of such bold assertions at the beginning of the book, these detailed and stinging indictments leave little room for doubt *that* ordinary Germans were deeply involved in the Holocaust. However, Goldhagen does not undertake to explain comprehensively the scores of hypotheses for *why* they felt what they did. He maintains that such cases can lead to only one conclusion, yet he does allude to the fact that other hypotheses exist. Unfortunately, without extensive knowledge in Holocaust Studies, the reader may be required to become familiar with more material to aptly scrutinize the strength of his conclusions.

In my estimation the greatest service of *Hitler’s Willing Executioners* is its bringing to light moments in the historical record which get glossed over or are presumptuously assigned to the man Hitler and not the true perpetrators. Some of these criminals have probably remained in our midst—indeed, many reminisced of these very cases years after the fact only to minimize their own personal involvement. Exposing these atrocities in their true colors is necessary for society to see to it that such horrific deeds are never repeated. Furthermore, a better understanding of the origins of genocide can only assist in more effectively contextualizing other histories related to Nazi Germany and the Holocaust.