

Presentation on Hitler's Willing Executioners
Daniel J. Goldhagen

I imagine that few, if any, of you believe that those who recently brutalized and slaughtered others in the former Yugoslavia did not want to do what they did. I imagine that few, if any, of you believe that the Hutus who slaughtered Tutsis in Rwanda, that the Turks who killed Armenians, or that the Khmer Rouge who decimated the Cambodian people thought that what they were doing was wrong. The only genocide about which people routinely assert that the killers did not hold the death of the victims to be desirable and just is the Holocaust. This is odd, especially in light of all the evidence that demonstrates the German perpetrators to have been like the perpetrators of other mass slaughters, evidence provided often by the killers themselves. I am maintaining what seems to me to be the unremarkable, indeed the commonsensical position that the German killers of Jews were like the perpetrators of other mass slaughters. What the perpetrators of the Holocaust did was, in important ways, different—just as the Holocaust differs from other mass slaughters and genocides—but in their willingness to kill, the perpetrators of the Holocaust were like other mass killers. This should not be so hard to accept.

...the Holocaust.

They killed under orders. Those who had the opportunity not to kill show us that it was not coercion that moved them. They showed zeal in their killing, volunteering for killing operations. As one man from Police Battalion 101 relates, "I must first and foremost state categorically that whenever the superior requested them, there were enough volunteers for execution squads. This was the case also in Josefov," which was their first killing operation. "I must add that, in fact, so many volunteered that some had to be left behind."

On the Helmhrechts death march, which began in the last month of the war, all of the killing was

whatever to hurt them" was a sensible act, a redemptive act, an act necessary to prevent

It was demonological, eliminationist antisemitism that explains this (the killing of a figmental enemy) and other singular features of the Holocaust, that produced the drive of the enormous number of ordinary Germans who so remorselessly, zealously, and willingly hunted down, rounded up, tortured, and killed Jewish men, women, and children by the tens of thousands. In the words of one former German police official who served in the Cracow region, those serving with him, "were, with a few exceptions, quite happy to take part in the shootings of Jews. They had a ball!", their killing was motivated by "great hatred against the Jews; it was revenge." This demonological, eliminationist antisemitism that put the Jews forward, in Melita Maschmann's words, as "an active force for evil whose wickedness was directed against the prosperity, unity, and prestige of the German nation," was in her apt phrase, "a part of their (her parents') outlook which was taken for granted." This antisemitism moved not just the perpetrators, those representative, ordinary Germans, but also made the vast majority of Germans, not just those who by chance ended up in killing institutions, but the vast majority of Germans, fit to be Hitler's willing executioners.

Daniel Goldhagen's Willing Executioners
Christopher R. Browning

hypothesis with which he began his research" and his unremitting portrayal of German unwillingness. Given his methodology, he could scarcely have come to any other conclusion.⁴⁶

Indeed, it is this uniform portrayal of Germans—undifferentiated, unchanging, possessed by a single, monolithic cognitive outlook—that is at the heart of Goldhagen's interpretation. When combined with his intentionally vivid descriptions of horrific events of murder and torture,⁴⁷ the cumulative emotional effect is overpowering. Not once as I read the 600 pages, did it ever occur to me to ask the question of the perpetrators: "What would I have done in their place?" It is, of course, exactly their place or situation that Goldhagen considers irrelevant; it is only their alleged beliefs on the one hand and their terrible actions on the other that matter, and both are totally alien. Daniel Goldhagen's "ordinary Germans"—uniform and alien—are in effect dehumanized, his own disclaimer that "Germans should not be caricatured" notwithstanding.⁴⁸

In addition to dehumanizing the perpetrators, Goldhagen repeatedly defines the historical situations

units could individually abstain from shooting, but those who were court-martialed for defeatism and subversion of morale.⁴⁹ The Third Reich was not a benign dictatorship, and there were lines that could not be crossed.

Goldhagen places emphasis on the horrendous and pervasive cruelty of the German perpetrators,

arguing that "the quantity and quality of personalized brutality and cruelty that the Germans perpetrated upon Jews was also distinctive" and "unprecedented"; indeed, it "stood out" in the "long annals of human barbarism."⁵⁷ This singular German cruelty is again seen by Goldhagen as evidence of a singular, malevolent German antisemitism. I am not particularly comfortable in engaging in a competitive discussion of comparative cruelty, but since the issue has been put on the table, I would note that few historians familiar with the crimes of non-German collaborators, such as those that the Croatian Ustasha committed against both Jews and Serbs, would find German cruelty distinctive and unprecedented. Indeed, what state-sanctioned mass murder has not unleashed unimaginable cruelties, including those committed under the Khmer Rouge by Cambodians and during the Cultural Revolution by Chinese against their neighbors and countrymen that did not require a singular, centuries-old demonological cognitive model? Goldhagen's constant invocation of cruelty does not, I think, strengthen his case for an exclusive motivation of singular German antisemitism. The ubiquitous cruelty that accompanies mass murder points instead to the need for adding a wider perspective. Indeed, if ordinary Serbs, Croats, Hutus, Turks, Cambodians, and Chinese can be the perpetrators of mass murder and genocide, implemented with terrible cruelty, then we do indeed need to look at those universal aspects of human nature that transcend the cognition and culture of ordinary Germans.

Such an approach, no doubt, does lead to the "disjointed" and "strained patchwork" explanations