

## Hitler's Willing Executioners

DANIEL JONAH GOLDHAGEN



What motivated the perpetrators of the Holocaust to commit unspeakable crimes against the Jews? Most historians believe that the Nazis either blindly obeyed orders or adopted a different personality in order to kill Jews. Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, an associate professor of government at Harvard University, came to a much more controversial conclusion. He argues anti-Semitism had so permeated the German population by the 1940s that the perpetrators desperately wanted to kill the Jews. Goldhagen's critics seriously question his conclusions. If the Holocaust, as Goldhagen charges, was primarily motivated by "exterminationist antisemitism," why did the Nazis expend so much time and effort murdering non-Jews such as the Gypsies and members of other groups? Critics have also charged that he disregarded evidence contrary to his thesis, such as the role of non-German perpetrators of the Holocaust. Others charge that Goldhagen ignores the degree of Nazi control over the German population and how most feared punishment in the event that they aided the Jews in any way. Taking these criticisms into consideration, how tenable are Goldhagen's arguments?

Not only was German antisemitism in this historical instance a sufficient cause, but it was also a *necessary* cause for such broad German participation in the persecution and mass slaughter of Jews, *and* for Germans to have treated Jews in all the heartless, harsh, and cruel ways that they did. Had ordinary Germans not

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shared their leadership's eliminationist ideals, then they would have reacted to the ever-intensifying assault on their Jewish countrymen and brethren with at least as much opposition and non-cooperation as they did to their government's attacks on Christianity and to the so-called Euthanasia program. As has already been discussed, especially with regard to religious policies, the Nazis backed down when faced with serious, widespread popular opposition. Had the Nazis been faced with a German populace who saw Jews as ordinary human beings, and German Jews as their brothers and sisters, then it is hard to imagine that the Nazis would have proceeded, or would have been able to proceed, with the extermination of the Jews. If they somehow had been able to go forward, then the probability that the assault would have unfolded as it did, and that Germans would have killed so many Jews, is extremely low. The probability that it would have produced so much German cruelty and exterminatory zeal is zero. A German population roused against the elimination and extermination of the Jews most likely would have stayed the regime's hand.



The Nazi leadership, like other genocidal elites, never applied, and most likely would not have been willing to apply, the vast amount of coercion that it would have needed to move tens of thousands of non-antisemitic Germans to kill millions of Jews. The Nazis, knowing that ordinary Germans shared their convictions, had no need to do so.

The Holocaust was a *sui generis*<sup>1</sup> event that has a historically specific explanation. The explanation specifies the enabling conditions created by the long-incubating, pervasive, virulent, racist, eliminationist antisemitism of German culture, which was mobilized by a criminal regime beholden to an eliminationist, genocidal ideology, and which was given shape and energized by a leader, Hitler, who was adored by the vast majority of the German people, a leader who was known to be committed wholeheartedly to the unfolding, brutal eliminationist program. During the Nazi period, the eliminationist antisemitism provided the motivational source for the German leadership and for rank-and-file Germans to kill the Jews. It also was the motivational source of the other non-killing actions of the perpetrators that were integral to the Holocaust.



... Even if, for explanatory purposes, it is not essential to discuss German antisemitism comparatively, it is still worth stating that the antisemitism of no

<sup>1</sup> *Sui generis*: Being unique of its kind.—Eds.

Jewish, father  
killed in ghetto  
everywhere

other European country came close to combining *all* of the following features of German antisemitism (indeed, virtually every other country fell short on *each* dimension). No other country's antisemitism was at once so widespread as to have been a cultural axiom, was so firmly wedded to racism, had as its foundation such a pernicious image of Jews that deemed them to be a mortal threat to the *Volk*, and was so deadly in content, producing, even in the nineteenth century, such frequent and explicit calls for the extermination of the Jews, calls which expressed the logic of the racist eliminationist antisemitism that prevailed in Germany. The unmatched volume and the vitriolic and murderous substance of German antisemitic literature of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries alone indicate that German antisemitism was *sui generis*.



Indeed, the German's anti-Jewish policy evolved in a logical manner—always flowing from the eliminationist ideology—in consonance with the creation of new eliminationist opportunities, opportunities which Hitler was happy to exploit, promptly and eagerly, to their limits. . . .

*Not a functional decision*  
In no sense was Hitler's monumental, indeed world-historical, decision—driven as it was by his fervent hatred of Jews—to exterminate European Jewry an historical accident, as some have argued, that took place because other options were closed off to him or because of something as ephemeral as Hitler's moods. Killing was not undertaken by Hitler reluctantly. Killing, biological purgation, was for Hitler a natural, preferred method of solving problems. Indeed, killing was Hitler's reflex. He slaughtered those in his own movement whom he saw as a challenge. He killed his political enemies. He killed Germany's mentally ill. . . . Already in 1929, he publicly toyed with the idea of killing all German children born with physical defects, which he numbered in a murderously megalomaniacal moment of fantasy at 700,000 to 800,000 a year. Surely, death was the most fitting penalty for the Jews. A demonic nation deserves nothing less than death.

Indeed, it is hard to imagine Hitler and the German leadership having settled for any other “solution” once they attacked the Soviet Union. The argument that only circumstances of one sort or another *created* Hitler's and the Germans' *motive* to opt for a genocidal “solution” ignores, for no good reason, Hitler's oft-stated and self-understood intention to exterminate the Jews. This argument also implies, counterfactually, that had these putative motivation-engendering circumstances not been brought about—had Hitler's allegedly volatile moods not allegedly swung, had the Germans been able to “resettle” millions of Jews—then Hitler and the others would have survived the war.



The idea that death and death alone is the only fitting punishment for Jews was publicly articulated by Hitler at the beginning of his political career on August 13, 1920, in a speech entirely devoted to antisemitism, “Why Are We Antisemites?” In the middle of that speech, the still politically obscure Hitler suddenly digressed to the subject of the death sentence and why it ought to be applied to the Jews. Healthy elements of a nation, he declared, know that “criminals guilty of crimes against the nation, i.e., parasites on the national community,” cannot be tolerated, that under certain circumstances they must be punished only with death, since imprisonment lacks the quality of irrevocableness.



. . . Mere imprisonment would be a clement penalty for such world-historical criminals and one, moreover, fraught with danger, since the Jews could one day emerge from their prisons and resume their evil ways. Hitler's maniacal conception of the Jews, his consuming hatred of them, and his natural murderous propensity rendered him incapable of becoming reconciled permanently to any “solution of the Jewish Problem” save that of extinction.

The road to Auschwitz was not twisted. Conceived by Hitler's apocalyptically bent mind as an urgent, though future, project, its completion had to wait until conditions were right. The instant that they were, Hitler commissioned his architects, Himmler and Heydrich, to work from his vague blueprint in designing and engineering the road. They, in turn, easily enlisted ordinary Germans by the tens of thousands, who built and paved it with an immense dedication born of great hatred for the Jews whom they drove down that road. When the road's construction was completed, Hitler, the architects, and their willing helpers looked upon it not as an undesirable construction, but with satisfaction. In no sense did they regard it as a road chosen only because other, preferable venues had proven to be dead ends. They held it to be the best, safest, and speediest of all possible roads, the only one that led to a destination from which the satanic Jews are absolutely sure never to return. ★