

Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust

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One of the most emotionally charged debates has long been over responsibility for the Holocaust, which cost so many lives. The question involves not only who made the key decisions instituting the policy of extermination, but who carried out that policy, who supported it, who knew, and who should have known. One of the most controversial and wide-read books addressing these issues is the recently published *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*, by Harvard scholar Daniel J. Goldhagen. Here he points to the role of antisemitic beliefs held by "ordinary" Germans in ultimately causing the slaughter of the Jews.

CONSIDER: How Goldhagen's views differ from those of Fischer (in the previous selection) and other historians; how Goldhagen's argument might be supported or attacked; why these views might be so controversial.

This revision calls for us to acknowledge what has for so long been generally denied or obscured by academic and non-academic interpreters alike: Germans' antisemitic beliefs about Jews were the central causal agent of the Holocaust. They were the central causal agent not only of Hitler's decision to annihilate European Jewry (which is accepted by many) but also of the perpetrators' willingness to kill and to brutalize Jews. The conclusion of this book is that antisemitism moved many thousands of "ordinary" Germans—and would have moved millions more, had they been appropriately positioned—to slaughter Jews. Not economic hardship, not the coercive means of a totalitarian state, not social psychological pressure, not invariable psychological propensities, but ideas about Jews that were pervasive in Germany, and

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had been for decades, induced ordinary Germans to kill unarmed, defenseless Jewish men, women, and children by the thousands, systematically and without pity. . . . [T]he perpetrators, "ordinary Germans," were animated by antisemitism, by a particular type of antisemitism that led them to conclude that the Jews *ought to die*. The perpetrators' beliefs, their particular brand of antisemitism, though obviously not the sole source, was, I maintain, a most significant and indispensable source of the perpetrators' actions and must be at the center of any explanation of them. Simply put, the perpetrators, having consulted their own convictions and morality and having judged the mass annihilation of Jews to be right, did not want to say "no." . . .

This, it must be emphasized, is not a monocausal account of the perpetration of the Holocaust. Many factors were necessary for Hitler and others to have conceived the genocidal program, for them to have risen to the position from which they could implement it, for its undertaking to have become a realistic possibility, and for it then to have been carried out. Most of these elements are well understood. This book has focused on one of a number of the causes of the Holocaust, the least well-understood one, namely the crucial motivational element which moved the German men and women, without whom it would and could not have occurred, to devote their bodies, souls, and ingenuity to the enterprise. With regard to the *motivational* cause of the Holocaust, for the vast majority of perpetrators, a monocausal explanation does suffice.

When focusing on only the motivational cause of the Holocaust, the following can be said. The claim here is that this virulent brand of German racial antisemitism was in *this historical instance* causally sufficient to provide not only the Nazi leadership in its decision making but also the perpetrators with the requisite motivation to participate willingly in the extermination of the Jews.