

*Gedr.: German Politics and Society, 4/1999.*

## **Academic and Public Discourses on the Holocaust: The Goldhagen Debate in Germany**

Ulrich Herbert, [**Historisches Seminar**], Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg

Over two years after the appearance of *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, very little can be heard about the so-called Goldhagen Debate in Germany: no more scholarly reviews, at most a few echoes here and there. Over two hundred thousand copies of the book were sold, and it was certainly read almost as many times. But it does not appear in the syllabi of university courses on the Holocaust, except perhaps in those that cover historiographical debates. In the German edition of Saul Friedländer's new book, *Nazi Germany and the Jews*, Daniel Goldhagen does not rate a mention, except for a three line footnote on page 420 in which his theory is described as „unconvincing on the basis of the materials presented as part of the study.“ Goldhagen's book, one can confidently predict, will not play a role in future Holocaust research.

At the same time, however, after its publication in Germany *Hitler's Willing Executioners* monopolized public discussion, and the Holocaust and Goldhagen became virtually synonymous. Thousands of people attended the public debates during Goldhagen's whirlwind tour of Germany in September 1996, which *Die Zeit* described as a „real triumph.“ A follow-up collection of letters to the author, *Briefe an Goldhagen*, received a publication run about which historians can only dream. And an intellectually most modest volume, *Goldhagen und die deutsche Linke*, sold seven thousand copies.

In examining this dichotomy, I pose the following questions: what reactions did Goldhagen's book provoke among German academics on the one hand, and within the general public on the other? How can one explain the differences, and what do they mean? What can we learn through this debate about historical consciousness in Germany today? Does the Goldhagen Debate offer us a way out of the „commemoration dilemma“? I will not discuss the scholarly merits of the book, which I have reviewed on other occasions. Here I consider it primarily as a „processor“ and as an object of an interesting cultural-historical development.

Before answering these questions, three matters need to be clarified. First, most, if not all, US historians of the Holocaust sharply criticized the book, while interested non-historians, whether journalists or lay readers, were mostly positive, even effusive, in their praise. The same division was observable, irrespective of the nationality of the contributor, in the transatlantic discussion over the Internet. . These facts mean that we need to question the assumption that the reaction to *Hitler's Willing Executioners* and its author in the Federal Republic reveals a specifically German treatment of these issues.

Second, the belief that the Goldhagen Debate affords an unmediated or „unfiltered“ access to German historical consciousness, and that it can serve as an indicator of „the Germans“ attitudes toward National Socialism and the Holocaust is highly dubious. Debates about the German past are conducted by particular political constellations and on well-established battlefronts, and „the Germans“ simply do not exist as a homogeneous entity. Furthermore, no historical debate in the Federal Republic was as influenced by the media. Not some unified „public consciousness,“ but a politically differentiated and prefigured public sphere can be observed in action in this controversy. Only when this background is taken into account does

German historical consciousness become available as an object of enquiry, and then as the product of a political process, rather than as a pure, „innocent“ form.

Third, the Goldhagen Debate cannot be considered in a vacuum. It is part of a decades-long public and scholarly discussion about the Nazi dictatorship, and this is an important factor in the course, form, and results of the debate about *Hitler's Willing Executioners*. Accordingly, I will first discuss the historical-political and historiographical backgrounds of the debate before turning to the reaction of journalists, historians, and the public.

### **The Historical-Political Context**

The confrontation with the Nazi past was not commenced voluntarily by East and West Germans in 1945; its direction and form were forced upon them by the respective occupation authorities whose denazification measures met with widespread resistance and apologetic reactions over the subsequent decade. Two elements of the West German response stand out: the rejection of „victor's justice“ and the accusation of „collective guilt.“ Whereas the former asserted that war crimes were the invention of the conquerors that Germans were helpless to counter, the latter represented the hated view of the Allies that not only the identifiable perpetrators but all Germans were responsible for the crimes, irrespective of their personal culpability. As Germans quickly confined „the guilty“ to Hitler and his satraps, who were of course already dead, every attempt to widen the circle of responsibility was stonewalled with this extremely popular slogan, which soon evolved into a sort of historical-political legitimization of West German society: since collective guilt did not exist, and Hitler and the leading Nazis were gone, everyone else was innocent.

At the same time, the experience of most Germans and the educational campaigns of the Allies led to a stigmatization, when not damnation, of National Socialism. This did not mean that the ideological and political residues of the dictatorship were rendered harmless, but they were no longer identified as specifically Nazi. This stigmatization ushered in an abstraction and derealization of the Nazi past that robbed it of its concreteness, so that one could speak out with pathos against the former regime without having to mention specific occasions and real people. This process and the concomitant silence about the complicity of many Germans constituted that „certain stillness in the 1950s,“ about which philosopher Hermann Lübbe has written and which was overshadowed by the cold war. The abstraction and derealization of the past also had a distancing effect, placing time between events and individuals. This meant that victims, perpetrators, and the majority who had been neither one nor the other had to deal with their pasts on their own. No open discussion took place in which individual experiences could be integrated with public reflections on Nazism, genocide, and war into a single perspective or even a larger meaning. In this way, individual experiences remained in a „raw“ state, nurtured in private milieus of idealization, self-justification, and resentment.

There were, however, also positive developments in addition to the negative continuities. Above all, Germans increasingly began to accept the new democracy, which possessed the undeniable advantage that, in comparison with the preceding forty years, it functioned smoothly enough and saw an heretofore unknown economic upswing. This was the reason, Lübbe argued in the early 1980s, for the gradual stabilization of the West German democracy: the past remained untouched for a decade so that slowly but surely the population could detach itself from the consensus with the Nazi state and evolve into the bearers of the Federal Republic -- quiet opportunism as the foundation of democracy. There is much to be said for this view, but the costs of what is inadequately captured by the well-known phrase of the „repression of the past“ were extraordinarily high and long-lasting. The fact that the majority

of the perpetrators -- the murderers in the concentration camps and the SS *Einsatzgruppen*, as well as elites in the bureaucracy, economy, military, and universities -- escaped almost unscathed represented such a fundamental moral violation, especially from the viewpoint of the millions of victims, that serious consequences for the society, its inner structure, as well as its reputation abroad, had to follow.

In the early 1960s these consequences became discernible in Germany. Through the 1961 trial in Jerusalem of the *Judenreferent* in the SS *Reichssicherheitshauptamt*, Adolf Eichmann, , and the prosecution two years later in Frankfurt of the leadership of Auschwitz by the new, central, Nazi-hunting agency in Ludwigsburg, the extent of the crimes and their implication to so many Germans became increasingly apparent, especially for the younger generation. Henceforth began a process of intensifying debate about this past, which reached its first peak during the student revolt in 1967/68, and which continues in principle to the present day, often with a severity and passion that surprises outsiders. The extent and fervor of the debate may appear exaggerated, perhaps manic, even if this decades-long preoccupation with the Nazi past is little noticed in many European countries and the United States. Paradoxically, however, it may be taken as evidence for the continuity, rather than for the critique, of nationalistic traditions.

This debate is not and has never been free of distortions. That the Nazi past is often invoked as a universal source of legitimization for the pursuit of individual interests is as well-known as the trivialization that results from the ignorant and morally dubious posture of judging the past, displaying of one's own „emotional shock“ (*Betroffenheit*), and calling for „resistance“ against whatever one happens to oppose. On the whole, however, these are marginal phenomena. More important is the fact that this long, painful, and, as a rule, serious debate about the causes and consequences of the Third Reich gradually produced a highly developed sensibility in ever-larger segments of the West German public sphere about the Nazi past and contemporary manifestations of nationalism and racism. It has strongly influenced the personal and collective self-understanding of West Germans. The battlefronts in this debate were generational and political. Put simply, a young left wing and an old right wing opposed one another for decades. Personal opinions on this issue, rather than on foreign or economic policies, defined one's general political position.

The meaning of the Historians' Debate of 1986 has become clearer with increasing distance. Ernst Nolte's attempt to explain and render comprehensible the murder of the Jews as a putative survival measure of the German bourgeoisie, acting on behalf of the European bourgeoisie, erected precisely those old bastions that had eroded away over the years. This debate had two aspects. First, historical-political positions began to be articulated in circles around Nolte that one thought were confined to the dark corner of neo-Nazism. This fact led West German leftists and liberals to believe that potentially radical-right and pro-Nazi tendencies remained widespread among the old German elites. Second, positions similar to Nolte's were discredited in the Historians' Debate. Even those publications that had given him a platform over the years, such as the *Frankfurt Allgemeine Zeitung*, eventually distanced themselves from him.

The suspicious attitude of the left-liberal public sphere was confirmed and intensified after unification in 1989, especially in the wake of the increasing number of violent attacks on foreigners in both parts of Germany. Margaret Thatcher's slogan of the „Fourth Reich“ found an echo here, and the fear that Germany would return to the traditions of continental imperial aggression, albeit of a tempered form, spread in Germany and among many European neighbors, where unique coalitions of left and right are held together by anti-German

sentiment. That the Germans are a people apart, who, despite their democratic masquerade, are latently aggressive, racist, and nationalistic, and that these are „ingrained“ attributes (as a leftist journalist, citing Paul de Lagarde, put it) are common opinions in Germany and abroad.

A third dimension of the Historians' Debate has been seldom mentioned. Nolte's argument, and especially the reply of Saul Friedländer and Dan Diner, led to a paradigm shift in German historical research. Young historians now placed antisemitism, the persecution of the Jews, and the Holocaust at the center of their empirical research programs. This had not been the case before.

### The Historiographical Context

Many excellent works about the Nazi regime and its crimes appeared in the early decades of the FRG, especially in the 1960s. The mass murder of the Jews did not stand in the center of investigation, however, and this pattern did not change until the middle of the 1980s. Scholarly research and public debate concentrated on the causes of the Nazi „seizure of power,“ which preceded the war and genocide by many years. This reflected the parlous state of knowledge about the origins and course of the mass murder. The deficits of this program soon became apparent. Many early studies originated in the context of proceedings by West German justice against suspected war criminals. The lawyers' search for clear-cut crimes and identifiable perpetrators, for orders and their expedition, and for individually measurable guilt and responsibility led the consulting historians to concentrate on the often-difficult task of reconstructing decision-making processes and highlighting contradictions within the political leadership of the Nazi regime. As a result, important, problematic aspects were overlooked, namely the perspectives of victims, especially non-German victims such as Jews living in Wehrmacht-occupied territories, the populations of eastern Europe, and groups not even recognized as victims by the public and historians ( „gypsies“ and Soviet prisoners of war). In this way, the political and ideological connection was not made between the persecution and murder of the different groups and victims of the Nazi regime.

Second, research maintained a certain distance to the events themselves. The thousands of liquidation expeditions, massacres, shootings, and gassings that were carried out by German soldiers and administrators all over the cities and villages of eastern Europe did not appear as events with individual pre-histories and identifiable victims and perpetrators. For this reason, the mass murders developed the character of a unified, centrally controlled, but also abstract and humanly incomprehensible process.

Finally, it became evident that the fate of the Jews was a marginal issue even in standard works on German occupation policy in Europe, as if the Holocaust had been unrelated to this policy. This neglect meant that the role played by civil and military occupation authorities in the initiation and implementation of the Final Solution was ignored, as were the roles of industry, the army, and university academics. Consequently, no one probed the relationship between the German occupation administration in western and eastern Europe, the various conceptions of a „new ordering“ of Europe, the attendant pursuit of different goals, and the extermination policy against the Jews for decades.

In the decade after the early 1970s, the interest of historians and the public in the empirical study of the Nazi's mass crimes actually decreased. While this decrease occurred elsewhere, it had particular long-term effects for research in Germany. With the eruption of the student revolt, the concrete discussion about the Nazi regime and its mass crimes was replaced by a strongly politicized „fascism debate,“ through which the reconstructable reality of the Nazi

past became overshadowed by an increasingly abstract and synthetic concept of „fascism.“ Its most prominent feature was no longer the genocide of the Jews and mass crimes of the Nazi regime but rather, in its widespread trivial form, the union of monopoly capitalism and the dictatorship against the German working class and its representatives.

The serious scholarly controversy about whether the Nazi regime had been fascist or totalitarian bore little fruit, since the concept of fascism obscured perhaps the most important element of the National Socialist movement before 1933 and its dictatorship until 1938/39. German occupation policies in Europe, and the policy of „ethnic cleansing“ in virtually all of Europe, especially the mass murder of the Jews, could not be captured by a term that originated in and reflected the circumstances of Italy under Mussolini. The left (and not just in Germany) was conceptionally helpless regarding the Nazi genocide, to which it could only develop a moral-emotional rather than an analytical relationship.

This constellation changed in the early 1980s with the beginning of the well-known debate between „intentionalists“ and „structuralists.“ The genocide of the Jews now stood at the center of scholarly attention, if not in empirical research. Structuralists' ideas at once sharpened and broadened the focus on the causes and consequences of Nazi genocide policies. However, these ideas were not free of dogma. . The meaning of racist and especially antisemitic ideology for the thinking and behavior of large population groups and for Nazi elites was not a part of this approach. The initiation of the process of mass murder proceeded automatically without the involvement of people or, above all, perpetrators. Remarkably, structuralist theory did not lead to an intensification of empirical research. On the contrary, it became bogged down in a war of interpretations on the basis of the same, thin state of empirical knowledge, with both sides convinced that they were well-informed and that the real problem was their political classification and secular interpretation. Attention to the mass murder itself, to the direct perpetrators and their victims was viewed as unworthy of scholarly treatment and even as „voyeuristic“ (as Hans Mommsen characterized it). Such convictions, which reflect a widespread view in the public that remains influential, can be seen as the continuing reluctance to confront and discuss the events directly and „unprotected.“ For this reason, the focus on the interpretation of the Holocaust and their applications has a strong apologetic effect, which could be seen even in the Historians' Debate.

As a reaction to the criticism of the sterile, intentionalist-functionalist discussion and the apriorities of the Historians' Debate, new approaches developed in the mid- to late-1980s whose focus included an empirical study of the Holocaust. The results of this research (with which mostly young historians such as Götz Aly, Dieter Pohl, Thomas Sandkühler, Michael Zimmermann, and Christian Gerlach agree) include the following: (1) the number of direct perpetrators is much higher than previously believed; (2) the proportion of the population that approved of the policies of the regime was considerably greater than hitherto assumed; (3) , most importantly, the members of the German occupation authorities in eastern Europe and also parts of the population supported anti-Jewish policies. .

These findings, however, which have circulated since the late 1980s, were confined to more or less scholarly circles. Unaware of these developments, most journalists in Germany and elsewhere did not feel the need to inform themselves further about the Holocaust and subscribed to a consensus in which Nazism represents evil itself. A rigorous moralism joined hands with widespread ignorance, so that the events became less interesting than controversial debates about them that promised news and novelty.

### **The Reactions in the Press**

Goldhagen's book appeared in the United States in March 1996. The US debate that immediately developed, especially after the *New York Times* published five pieces on the subject in the space of a few days, turned *Hitler's Willing Executioners* into an event that no journalist could afford to ignore. An important element of these articles was an underlying tone implying that the German reaction to the book would be *the* decisive test for its dealing with the Holocaust. There could be no doubt, wrote A.M. Rosenthal, that the mass murder of Jews was not carried out by a few mad Nazis, but rather by hundreds of thousands of willing and able Germans who were driven by an eliminatory antisemitism and backed by virtually all fifty million Germans. Doubts about this were no more than „a mask for approval or cowardice.“

The terms of the debate thus were determined from the outset. Those German reactions that made their way across the Atlantic to the United States would be assessed according to this criterion: as an expression of a basic posture regarding the Holocaust, rather than in relation to the veracity of the book's arguments. Critical remarks of Goldhagen's book, by definition, would reveal the expected reluctance of Germans to face their past rather than say anything about the weaknesses of his case. This was an intellectual trap that German newspaper editors could only escape at the cost of their intellectual or moral reputation.

This starting point shaped the entire debate and prompted the executive editors of *Die Zeit* to reproduce the US-initiated „Goldhagen Debate“ in Germany (a decision made without the input of the paper's historical editor, Volker Ullrich). The German debate began compliments of Volker Ullrich's front page article in *Die Zeit* on April 12, 1996, „Hitler's Willing Murder-Comrades. A Book Provokes a new Historians' Dispute: were all Germans Guilty after all?“ There we find nearly all aspects of the American argumentation, for example, the pregnant line: „How his provocative and disturbing book is received -- by that measure, much will be gauged about the historical consciousness of this republic.“

The pattern of interpretation was prefigured by these catch phrases, and since virtually no one had read the book, which was not available in German until September 1996, it remained the only basis of discussion for a long time. In the first place, the „collective guilt“ thesis reappeared („were all Germans guilty after all?“), surely one of the oldest of the German defensive mechanisms and denial discourses. For moderate and right-wing segments of the public and academia, Goldhagen's book was seen as an incarnation of the same collective guilt theory that had been utilized for over half a century by the Allies, Americans (and/or the Jews) to cast all Germans as perpetrators. Protagonists of this view were, above all, Frank Ebbingshaus in *Die Welt*, Rudolf Augstein in *Der Spiegel*, and, – in a somewhat tempered form, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. Whereas in the latter newspaper, Frank Schirrmacher wrote that Goldhagen's book reaches for the „arsenal of remedial and self-accusatory literature of the early 1950s,“ *Die Welt* wrote that it was „the resurrection of a scholarly corpse that had apparently long turned to dust: the theory of the collective guilt of all Germans for the extermination of the European Jews during the Second World War.“ And in *Der Spiegel* one could read: „A people must repent -- the Nazi theory of the collective guilt of the Jews was temporarily turned around against the Germans by the victors in 1945. US scholar Goldhagen has revived it.“

The second catch phrase in Ullrich's introductory article was „Historians' Debate,“ which was connected with the expectation, imported from the United States, that the discussion about Goldhagen's thesis would reveal the state of German historical consciousness, irrespective of the plausibility of the book's arguments. Just as the concept of „collective guilt“ provoked an automatic response from the center-right, so did that of the Historians' Debate in center-left

circles, since it stood for the attempt of Nolte and some of his co-disputants to portray the murder of the Jews as a reprehensible but basically understandable reaction to the murderous intention of the Bolsheviks towards the European bourgeoisie. The divisions that emerged during the Historians' Debate were thus superimposed on the anticipated Goldhagen Debate. Goldhagen was assigned the role of Jürgen Habermas, Saul Friedländer, and the critical German public sphere, and his critics were assigned that of Nolte, irrespective of political views. . This interpretation became prominent above all on Goldhagen's lecture trip through Germany in the fall of 1996, when the predominantly young, leftist and left-liberal public passionately supported the young American political scientist.

This was a decided paradox because Goldhagen's critics were without exception historians from the left-liberal camp, many of whom had conducted long and intensive research on the Nazi regime and the Holocaust. This transfer of categories from the original Historians' Dispute was no doubt assisted by the professorial-patriarchal tone with which Hans Mommsen and Eberhard Jäckel expressed their criticisms. But it also exposed an element of anti-intellectual prejudice among sections of the public and journalists.

By virtue of this starting point--which was initiated by *Die Zeit*, imbued with the tenor of the *New York Times* articles, and cemented by the *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, *Der Spiegel*, and *Die Welt*--the debate's course was already determined. On the one side was the „bold idea,“ „provocative and disturbing,“ that would challenge the Germans. On the other was the repudiation of this provocation by German conservatives and national liberals, who saw in it a reversion to the 1950s. That the book itself and criticism of it do not correspond at all to this prescribed scenario has taken some time and effort to realize.

### **The Reaction of Historians**

The above-named terms also influenced the debate's second phase, which was conducted mostly by German historians. The common view is that their reaction, like that of historians elsewhere, was an expression of intellectual rivalry and anger at Goldhagen's perceived arrogance and hubristic claims. Yet, this is unsatisfactory. True, Goldhagen was treated in the same manner as he had treated his colleagues. But German historians were no different than their Israeli, English, or American counterparts. Indeed, critiques by Moshe Zimmermann, Yehuda Bauer, Omer Bartov, and Raul Hilberg were, if anything, sharper and harder-hitting than that of the Germans. So far, all Holocaust historians in Israel, the United States, Germany, and England have criticized *Hitler's Willing Executioners* as evidentially inadequate and methodologically simplistic. Notwithstanding different nuances between these communities of historians, they have made three basic points. In the first place, apart from insufficient methodological rigor, they pointed out that Goldhagen removed the Holocaust from its connection with the German war effort and brutal extermination policy, especially toward Russian POWs and other ethnic and social groups. Second, they criticized Goldhagen's portrayal of the genocide of European Jewry as the culmination and discharge of an ancient, pent-up German obsession and as a contextless, singular, and manichean conflict that stood in no direct relation to other events at the time. Third, Goldhagen's attempt to depict his case studies as symptomatic of the eliminationist antisemitic syndrome was rejected as unconvincing because he could not demonstrate the representative or characteristic nature of the German behavior. It is not possible to discern a difference between German and non-German historians in the scholarly criticism of Goldhagen.

Two other dimensions of the debate were remarkable. First, in Germany only liberal and left-liberal historians were prepared to commit their ideas to print or to speak at the public

discussions. Nothing was heard from the dominant center-conservative „establishment,“ neither from the official representatives of the Historians' Association, nor from specialists such as Klaus Hildebrand, von Hehl, and Recker. This can be understood as a reaction to the public defeat during the Historians' Debate, so that a „golden silence“ was the safe option during the Goldhagen Debate, from which one could only emerge a loser. That the conservative leadership of the association tried to avoid, even if unsuccessfully, a discussion about Goldhagen at the annual convention in 1996 is an expression of this attitude, as is Lothar Gall's successful threat of legal action to prevent a debate about the subject after a public lecture by Saul Friedländer at the University of Frankfurt. This official silence was balanced somewhat by the compensatingly louder reaction to the controversial travelling exhibition on the war crimes of the *Wehrmacht*. One of the reasons may be that its organizers were not Jewish, so that it was possible to express hefty criticism without risking accusations of antisemitism, which was another fear in the Goldhagen discussion.

Second, only a few of those historians who participated in the public debate noted that Goldhagen had touched on a central issue with extraordinary consequences amid his polemical, deterministic, and speculative statements. To this extent, Jäckel's dictum, „simply a bad book,“ misses the point: it is bad, but not simply bad. For it posed just those questions that were repressed, barely discussed, and insufficiently researched for such a long time--namely, what was the role of the Germans – („ordinary Germans“) in the Nazi persecution of the Jews? And what significance did the wider population's attitude have in their murders?

Goldhagen has performed an enduring service in raising these issues because they move beyond political-structural analyses and philosophical platitudes to the historical and moral core of the genocide of the Jews, and to the victims' perspective. That Hitler, the Nazi party, its functionaries and thugs were rabid antisemites was well-known even before 1933. One could only expect the worst from them. But there were many scenarios that German Jews did not regard as possible. For example: the suppression of Jews was accompanied by myriad forms of denigration, humiliation, ridicule, and open hatred, and precisely from those Germans who were neither in the SS nor any other political organization; members of the regular army, and almost universally the occupation police forces, participated in mass executions; and the occupation administration in 1941, to give one example, could easily enlist the German employees of the local credit union to work for understaffed police units to clear the ghettos of Poland. . The disgust and horror generated by these facts remains deeply embedded in the collective consciousness of survivors. Goldhagen explains this behavior by invoking a decades-long, even centuries-long collective obsession to „eliminate“ the Jews. The Germans voted for Hitler, he suggests, so that their burning desire would be finally fulfilled. This answer is very suggestive and obviously unconvincing. But even if it is wrong and far too simple, the question it seeks to answer is still correct, indeed urgent.

The reaction of most German historians to this dimension of *Hitler's Willing Executioners* betrays a certain helplessness. The spread of antisemitism in Germany since the 1920s and the beginning of the anti-Jewish persecution remains uncharted territory. There is no German research at all on these topics. The same applies to the role of the German occupation authorities in eastern Europe for the initiation and implementation of the Holocaust. The question about the motives and forms of participation of Germans in the Holocaust has not been seriously posed by German historians. Not one German historian has investigated or thematized the fact, well-documented by German prosecuting attorneys in the 1960s and 1970s, that a significant number, and probably a majority, of the „direct perpetrators“ committed their crimes with inner approval, indeed enthusiasm.



The contrary view, represented most prominently by Hans Mommsen in his many articles and appearances, highlighted the obvious problems with Goldhagen's case. But Mommsen's alternative reduced the entire phenomenon solely to a process of the regime's policy development, ignoring the ideological conditioning of the protagonists, and the active or passive support of the genocidal policy in the population. Mommsen, it soon became clear, was trying to save the structuralist theory he had been propounding for twenty years, a rear-guard action that lent him a conventional and professorial air. In contrast, the praise that Goldhagen received from other German historians had less substance because he did not reveal new information about death marches, work camps, and slave labor. But to focus attention on the motivation of the perpetrators and their support in German society as a whole -- this is an important advance, at least for German historiography.

### **The Reactions in the Public**

The common view in the United States and in Germany that „the public“ stood behind Goldhagen during his tour in September 1996 needs to be put into perspective. It was hardly surprising that these podium discussions were well-attended in light of the massive media attention that his book received. But this is not unique. Günter Walraff's now justifiably half-forgotten *Ganz Unten* created a similar stir in the mid-1980s. The public in these podium discussions was, as far as I can tell, relatively but not very young. Most were between twenty-five and forty-five, and represented the center left (somewhat more centrist in Munich, and a little more left in Berlin and Hamburg).

A number of reasons account for the widespread approval of Goldhagen among the public. First, the public consists primarily of left liberals who have a long tradition of debating the Nazi past and whose reaction was prefigured by the political constellations of the Goldhagen Debate and its apparent parallel with the Historians' Debate. The issue for this segment of the population was to save the radical truth from its suppression at the hands of the media (or sections of it) and university historians--an act of political correctness made possible by decades-long, historical-political confrontations. Second, in this context, the adage that „the enemy of my enemy must be my friend,“ won adherents. Goldhagen must have said something right, so the thinking went, because the reaction of „the Germans“ was so shrill. This motive was voiced, strangely enough, by Jürgen Habermas, whose speech at the award ceremony for the curious „Democracy Prize“ to Goldhagen did not praise the book as much as its provocative effect. Finally, the trap set by Rosenthal in the *New York Times*, into which many Germans fell, had the effect of motivating many other Germans to show the world that they had learned their lessons and that there was no evidence of „approval or cowardice.“ The sideward glance at the „foreign“ reaction to the German discussion, especially to the United States and Israel, may evince a certain dependency or immaturity on the part of the German public, but this is surely better than if Germans took no notice of reactions in New York and Tel Aviv. Most Germans who took an interest in the subject and who do not belong to the political right sympathized with Goldhagen, because he was young and Jewish, and because his friendly manner implicitly suggested: if you are not on my side in the debate about „ordinary Germans,“ then you are one of them.

Other factors that explain the positive reaction in segments of the German public relate to the book itself, a fact that became apparent in the confrontation with German critics. Goldhagen described the murders so extensively and in such detail that he created an aura of radical transgression. In comparison, intellectual objections to his conclusions appeared pedantic and nitpicky. Traditional Holocaust researchers had examined the origins and effects of the genocide, but not with this level of detail, whether out of piety or to avoid charges of

sensationalism. Moreover, academic research had become increasingly preoccupied with theoretical and interpretive debates about the events, and for this reason alone was unable to match the acclamatory power of Goldhagen's rhetoric and graphic presentation.

Goldhagen also gave an easily understandable answer to the question about the causes of the genocide. The monumentality of the crime was complemented by a similarly monumental and simple explanation: the Holocaust had been the national project of the Germans. Yet this interpretation seems to have been a gesture for the victims because, in view of the crime's enormity and its consequences for virtually every European Jewish family, the desire for a clear and identifiable motive, and a similarly definable and appropriately large group of perpetrators, is unavoidable. That abstract structures of power are somehow responsible for the murder of one's parents or siblings is, in contrast, a virtually incommunicable and unbearable explanation. Unlike the increasingly complex accounts of academic research, which can analyze events more adequately and with greater plausibility but cannot offer a politically-transferable answer with which identification is possible, Goldhagen's approach allows the possibility of identifying with the victims. Germans who were uncomfortable as descendents of the perpetrators could also find solace in this identification. To put it bluntly, *Hitler's Willing Executioners* fulfills an understandable desire on the part of younger Germans: by agreeing with his book, they can stand on the side of the accusers rather than on that of the accused.

## Conclusion

How, then, can one explain the difference between the reactions of historians and those of the public in Germany to Goldhagen's book? The answer is that the book was located in two discursive fields. The historians regarded the book as a scholarly work and criticized it as such, while the predominantly left-liberal public viewed it as another chapter in the story of the country's „coming to terms with the past“ and assumed the customary role of critic of the Germans. To this extent, the structure of the debate in Germany did not differ significantly from that in the United States.

And yet, the book's effect was to accelerate learning processes in each field. The readiness of the public has grown substantially to confront the mass murder of the Jews not as a metaphor but as an empirical event, with a concrete time, place, and perpetrators. The loosening of the debate from rigid notions of political structures represents real progress because it allows the enormity of the murders to be confronted immediately without the protecting distance of predefined patterns of interpretation or even the compulsion to draw universal moral conclusions. That the elites or wild Nazis were not solely responsible for the Holocaust is one side of this recognition. The other is that the victims did not die in an anonymous and basically „unreal“ process but were brutally murdered. Thanks to the Goldhagen Debate, the memory of the genocide of the Jews in Germany has lost the protected and distanced security of global interpretations.

This effect has been observed in the field of historical scholarship. The interest of young historians and students in the history of the Holocaust has grown strongly, and the old interpretive wars appear strangely antiquated. A series of new studies has appeared, and others will appear shortly, that will substantially change and expand our knowledge not only of the murders themselves, but also of the political processes that allowed them to happen and, above all, of the perpetrators and their relationship to the surrounding German society.

Pieces written during the debate in 1997 are now appearing in learned journals: A.D. Moses, „Structure and Agency in the Holocaust: Daniel J. Goldhagen and his Critics,“ *History and Theory*, 37 (1998), 194-219; Russel A. Berman, „An Imagined Community: Germany according to Goldhagen,“ *The German Quarterly*, 71 (Winter 1998), 63-67; Marina Cattaruzza, „A Discussion of D.J. Goldhagen's *Hitler's Willing Executioners*,“ *Storia della Storiografia*, 33 (1998), 97-107; Michael Pinto-Duschinsky, „Wehler on *Hitler's Willing Executioners*: A Comment,“ *German History*, 16 (1998), 398-411; Ruth Bettina Birn and Volker Rieß, „Das Goldhagen-Phänomen oder: 50 Jahre danach,“ *Geschichte in Wissenschaft und Unterricht*, 49 (February 1998).

Saul Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews. The Years of Persecution, 1933-39* (London, 1997).

Michael Schneider, „The 'Goldhagen-Debatte': Ein Historikerstreit in der Mediengesellschaft,“ *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte*, 37 (1997), 67-83.

Daniel J. Goldhagen, ed., *Briefe an Goldhagen* (Berlin, 1997).

Ulrike Becker, *Goldhagen und die deutsche Linke oder die Gegenwart des Holocaust* (Berlin, 1997).

Ulrich Herbert, „Aus der Mitte der Gesellschaft,“ *Die Zeit* (June 14, 1996), also collected in Julius H. Schoeps, ed., *Ein Volk von Mördern? Die Dokumentation zur Goldhagen-Kontroverse um die Rolle der Deutschen im Holocaust*, (Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe, 1996). Some of the reviews collected in this book are translated in Robert R. Shandley, ed., *Unwilling Germans* (Minneapolis, MN, 1998).

Franklin H. Littell, ed., *Hyping the Holocaust: Scholars Answer Goldhagen* (East Rockaway, NY, 1997).

This discussion was conducted on the Internet listserv, *II-German*. See: [www.h-net.msu.edu/~german](http://www.h-net.msu.edu/~german)

Hermann Lübke, „Die Nationalsozialismus im deutschen Nachkriegsbewußtsein,“ *Historische Zeitschrift*, 236, (1983), 579-99.

Jürgen Habermas, „On how Postwar Germany has Faced its Recent Past,“ *Common Knowledge*, 5 (Fall 1996), 6.

Wilfried Loth and Bern-A. Rusinek, eds., *Verwandlungspolitik. NS-Eliten in der westdeutschen Nachkriegsgesellschaft* (Frankfurt and New York, 1998); Hartmut Berghoff, „Die bundesdeutsche Gesellschaft und ihre nationalsozialistische Vergangenheit in den Fünfziger Jahren,“ *Geschichte in Wissenschaft und Unterricht*, 49 (February 1998), 96-114; Ulrich Herbert, *Best: Biographische Studien über Radikalismus, Weltanschauung und Vernunft, 1903-1989* (Bonn, 1996).

Ulrich Herbert, „Zweierlei Bewältigung,“ in Herbert, *Arbeit, Volksturm, Weltanschauung. Über Fremde und Deutsche im 20. Jahrhundert* (Frankfurt, 1995), 193-212.

Rudolf Vierhaus, „Über den Umgang mit der Geschichte. Bemerkungen zur politische Kultur in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland,“ in Niedersächsische Landeszentrale für politische Kultur, ed., *Von der Verdrängung zur Bagetellisierung? Aspekte des sogenannten Historikerstreits* (Hannover: Niedersächsische Landeszentrale für politische Kultur, 1988), 9-20.

Robert G. Moeller, „War Stories: the Search for a Usable Past in the Federal Republic of Germany,“ *American Historical Review*, 101 (October 1996), 1008-48; Hans-Walter Schmuhl, „Der Geschichtsphilosoph vor dem Massengrab,“ *Tel Aviver Jahrbuch für deutsche Geschichte*, 19 (1990), 519-60.

There is an analysis in Anson G. Rabinbach, „Toward a Marxist Theory of Fascism and National Socialism,“ *New German Critique*, 3 (Fall 1974), 127-53.

Dieter Pohl, *Von der „Judenpolitik“ zum Judenmord. Der Diskrikt Lublin des Generalgouvernements, 1939-1944* (Frankfurt: Lang, 1993); idem., *Nationalistische Judenverfolgung in Ostgalizien 1941-1944. Organisation und Durchführung eines staatlichen Massenverbrechens* (Munich, 1996); idem., „Großraumplanung und NS-Völkermord,“ *Historisches Jahrbuch*, 114 (1994), 175-82; Götz Aly and Susanne Heim, *Vordenker der Vernichtung. Auschwitz und die deutschen Pläne für eine neue europäische Ordnung* (Hamburg, 1991); Götz Aly, „Endlösung“: *Völkerverschiebung und Mord an den europäischen Juden* (Frankfurt, 1995); Thomas Sandkühler, „Endlösung“ in Galizien. *Der Judenmord in Ostpolen und die Rettungsaktionen der Berhold Beitz* (Bonn, 1996); Christian Gerlach, *Krieg, Ernährung, Völkermord. Forschungen zur deutschen Vernichtungspolitik im Zweiten Weltkrieg* (Hamburg,

1998). Recent work by these and other authors is collected in Ulrich Herbert, ed., *Nationalsozialistische Vernichtungspolitik, 1933-1945. Neue Forschungen und Kontroversen* (Frankfurt, 1998).

For example see an article by Goldhagen himself: „The Peoples' Holocaust,“ *New York Times* (March 17, 1996).

Thomas Disch goes so far as to equate the rejection of Goldhagen's argument with the denial of the Holocaust itself. See his review of *Hitler's Willing Executioners* in *The Nation* (May 6, 1996).

For example, Reinhard Rürup, „Viel Lärm über Nichts? D.J. Goldhagens 'radikale Revision' der Holocaustforschung,“ *Neue Politische Literatur*, 3 (1996), pp. 357-63; Hans Mommsen, „Die dünne Patina der Zivilisation,“ *Die Zeit* (August 30, 1996); Hans-Ulrich Wehler, „The Goldhagen Controversy: Agonizing Problems, Scholarly Failure, and the Political Dimension,“ *German History*, 15 (1997), 80-91.

Josef Joffe, „Goldhagen in Germany,“ *New York Review of Books* (November 28, 1996), 18-21.

See their reviews in Schoeps, ed., *Ein Volk von Mördern?*

A.D. Moses regards this view as the embodiment of the „particularism narrative“ in Holocaust historiography, which is characterized by a „deep structure“ of narrative and analytical possibilities between concrete agents and their intentions on the one hand (Germans and Jews, for example), and general processes common to all modern societies on the other (the „universalism narrative“). See Moses, (see note 1), 198ff.

**See now: Dirk Walter: Antisemitische Kriminalität und Gewalt. Judenfeindschaft in der Weimarer Republik, Bonn (Dietz) 1999.**

Jürgen Habermas, „Über den öffentlichen Gebrauch der Historie. Warum ein 'Demokratiepreis' für Daniel Goldhagen,“ *Blätter für deutsche und internationale Politik*, 4 (April 1997), 408-16, and in *Die Zeit* (March 14, 1997), 13f. See also Ulrich Raulff, „Der lange Schrecken. Goldhagen, Habermas, Reemtsma: Ein Preis, drei Reden,“ *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (March 12, 1997), 37.

Moses (see note 1), 200.

Joffe (see note 20), 21.