

Answering the Führer's Call to Genocidal Action: Willing Executioners or Extraordinary Circumstances?



How do historians explain the Nazi perpetration of the Holocaust?

Can men be molded into killers by a totalitarian state? Does killing noncombatants come naturally to civilized men? Is the Holocaust simply a German phenomenon, or are certain factors present in the Holocaust that could have worked to fashion killers in any culture or time period? These are not questions that are easily answered, but they are questions that historians have argued in what is known as the *Historikerstreit* (“historians’ struggle”), which has turned into an ideological and political struggle over the last several decades. The main ideas are described below.

On the eastern front, a picture was taken of the men of an unidentified German unit as they crowded around several Jewish men who waited upon their knees. Below these Jewish men, the bodies of their neighbors, friends, men, women and children alike lay motionless in a mass grave they had dug for themselves. The German soldiers in the front of the unit raised their guns, their stony faces emotionless and prepared to carry out the special task to which they had been assigned. A number of loud cracks and clouds of smoke enveloped the air as the bodies of these Jews fell listlessly into their grave. The actions of these ordinary German men in their active participation of the Holocaust beg the question: How could civilized Germans, who were not sadistic killers, become methodical and professional executioners? Historiography of the Holocaust has become increasingly heated in its



explanations of the motivations behind these actions.

One of the most controversial arguments has been that Germans had internalized a deeply rooted, cultural-cognitive model of the Jews as a demonic force; therefore perpetrators of the Holocaust actively answered Hitler's call to genocidal action because they zealously desired the implication of the Final Solution. However, recent historiography has demonstrated the faultiness of this argument. German anti-Semitism provided a cultural-cognitive model that inspired some perpetrators of the Holocaust to become “willing executioners”; however, the primary motivations for perpetrators of the Holocaust often had more to do with the nature of the Nazi dictatorship and the effects of wartime

Willing Executioners

In *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, Daniel Johan Goldhagen said that a discourse about the Jews had developed over the latter part of the 19th century. Goldhagen described this discourse as “namely a discussion structured by a stable framework with widely accepted reference points, images, and explicit elaborations.” This movement toward an ideological foundation led inexorably toward the belief that a “Jewish Problem” (*Judenfrage*) existed within Germany. This *Judenfrage* expressed the belief that the Jews were inherently different from non-Jewish Germans, and therefore a problem existed. This problem was unchangeable, however, because it dealt with issues of “race.” Any reference to this “Jewish Problem,” whether in conversation, public speech, or a written text, would automatically bring to mind a perceived need to remove this problem from German society.

As Hitler and the Nazis assumed control Hitler transformed the dominant cultural cognitive model of the *Judenfrage* into a solution to the problem: Eliminationist Antisemitism. Hitler's Eliminationist Antisemitism sought to turn rhetoric into reality, something which became all the more possible following the outbreak of war. Goldhagen argued that this ideal was not simply shared by Hitler and the Nazis, but the vast majority of Germans: “Hitler and the Nazis were obviously the driving force behind the persecution and eventual slaughter of Jewry, yet the German people's own prior anti-Semitism created the *necessary enabling condition* for the eliminationist program to unfold, of which they, with sadly few exceptions approved in principle, if not wholeheartedly.” The Nazis established three methods of institutionalized killing that facilitated German participation in genocidal action: police battalions, “work” camps, and death marches. “Every perpetrator,” said Goldhagen, “contributed to the program of extermination . . . and very few opted out of such duties in the institutions which are known to have given them the choice. In institutions where intimate contact existed between Germans and Jews, namely where the opportunity to be brutal existed, German cruelty was nearly universal.”

Goldhagen's “willing executioner” thesis primarily emphasized the idea that the Nazis did not create genocidal motivations in the Germans, nor did they force the Germans to participate. Instead, Hitler and the Nazis created a cognitive moral revolution, in which they activated German desires to rid themselves of the nefarious presence of *der Jude*, and dissolved any moral or governmental constraints that had previously prevented Germans' inherent desire for the “removal” of world Jewry. Goldhagen argued that the German cultural cognition of Jews was of a demonological nature, and as such, Germans easily became “assenting mass executioners, men and women who, true to their own eliminationist antisemitic beliefs, faithful to their cultural antisemitic credo, considered the slaughter to be just.”

Working Towards the Führer

While this explanation does elucidate some of the cultural effects upon perpetrators' willingness to answer the Führer's call to action, it does not fully explain the nature of the Nazi dictatorship upon Germans' participation in the Holocaust. Ian Kershaw's “Working Towards the Führer” thesis asked the question, what explains the radicalization of the Third Reich, and what was Hitler's role in this? Kershaw suggested that the radicalization of the German populace had less to do with Hitler's abilities as dictator, and more to do with the zealous fervor of his followers who acted as the political vanguard of the “charismatic” leadership regime he had created. Hitler's “charismatic claim” to put Germany back on its cultural “mission” to achieve “national rebirth” through racial purity and racial empire was vague enough to mesh with previously held nationalistic views. The traumas of the interwar years made the message all the more appealing, and utopian visions began to take greater shape as practical

policy once most forms of resistance within the government and military had been removed. Therefore, Hitler's destruction of "rational" governmental constraints facilitated the radicalization of Germany to seek whatever the Führer's charismatic leadership dictated.

"The function of Hitler's 'charismatic' Führer position," said Kershaw, "could be said to have been threefold: that of unifier, of activator, and of enabler in the Third Reich." Hitler first began his dictatorship by unifying the warring factions of Germany under the auspices of Nazism and the Führer principle. Next, Hitler enabled the utopian visions of nationalism and racial purity that had been dormant amongst the populace, and activated those "pent-up energies and unfulfilled social expectations" to be carried out in his name. Thus, Hitler's authority acted also as an enabler of inhumane and radical actions, which were performed within the "vague ideological remit of furthering the aims of the Führer." Hitler did not involve himself in the actual application and method of



the Final Solution, but simply set the policy goal – for instance, to have a completely German, racially pure Poland within ten years – and he let his satraps on the spot compete for favor by meeting his vague and lofty commands. Therefore, as enabler, Hitler gave license to individual initiative – the most brutal executor of his will would be the most successful in gaining his favor – and "there was never any shortage of willing helpers, far from being confined to party activists, ready to 'work towards the Führer' to put the mandate into operation."

Nazism as Enabler

Although the Führer's role in the Holocaust is perfectly clear, the extent to which Germans wanted to participate in his genocidal program remains arguable. The "willing executioner" thesis emphasized that German anti-Semitism was both virulent and pervasive, and a cultural-cognitive model already existed, which the Nazis simply activated in order to facilitate Germans' inherently murderous intentions for the Jews. Leon A. Jick asserted that anti-Semitism, stretched from its medieval roots up to the start of the Hitler dictatorship, was undeniably present in German culture and society; however, not more so than any other nation at that time. Jick argued that the evidence did not support the idea that German anti-Semitism was pervasive upon the Nazi assumption of power, but instead that the Nazis had to provoke it. For instance, in politics as early as 1885 the Social Democratic party had dropped its anti-Semitic platform, and contrary to Goldhagen's argument, the evidence indicated that German anti-Semitism had not become increasingly volatile as a mass movement in the pre-Hitler years. Jick also stated that after the rise of Hitler in 1933, there was not a single spontaneous outbreak against Jews in Germany, but instead the rioting, looting, and social stigmatization of Jews only occurred when professional Nazi hooligans had prompted the actions. Jick stated, "Ideology in general and anti-Semitism in particular played an important enabling role in both Nazi Germany aspirations and in their implementation, but ideology was not determinative." Nazi ideology towards the Jews was not the driving force behind the perpetrators' actions in the Holocaust. Instead, the Nazis' biggest goals were the pursuit of living space and global conquest; racist ideology simply acted as a "rationale for oppression and conquest" and as "the fuel for fury."

The “Gray Zone”

C. Fred Alford also suggested that the “willing executioner” thesis leaves little room for an explanation of what Primo Levi called the “Gray Zone” of understanding of the mixed motives between perpetrator and victim in the Holocaust. Goldhagen’s thesis suggested that the conventional arguments can be simplified down to the basic understanding that Germans hated Jews and wanted to kill them, which explains their ability to create and fully participate in their creation and utilization of a “universe of death and torture”. Alford suggested, however, that this argument “assumes that once we know that Germans wanted to kill Jews, we know all we need to know, all anyone could know about the Holocaust.” Alford argued in a review of Goldhagen that a fuller explanation was needed, namely, that terror was transmuted into rationality during the Holocaust. Alford suggested that German society simply went “crazy”, not in the sense that individuals may go crazy, but in the sense that German society created a seemingly rational goal that was in fact insane. Germans used rationality and ideals of progress to assume that images of doom and dread in the modern world could be removed through the purgative elimination of a scapegoat. Alford suggested that Goldhagen’s thesis oversimplified this problem, and what was needed was “an explanation adequate to the phenomenon, [because] the most striking thing about the Holocaust is the way it joins extreme sadism and cruelty with the institutions of modernity.”



If German society in the Nazi dictatorship can be said to have gone “crazy”, then a fundamental question remains: how internalized was virulent anti-Semitism, and to what extent did this ideology provoke violent perpetration of the Holocaust? While Goldhagen emphasized that German ruthlessness was indicative of the prevailing internalization of the cultural-cognitive model, Jick asserted that Nazi ruthlessness was indicative of the Nazi obsession with a relentless pursuit of total domination. Alex Hinton argued that the motivations behind perpetrators of the Holocaust cannot be seen so simplistically as to group all Germans into willing executioners of the Holocaust:

“The Holocaust was not a syllogism; it was the outcome of complex, individually and situationally variable human behaviours.” While Goldhagen created a picture of Germans as fanatical anti-Semitic automatons, Hinton argued that humans do not simply accept cultural models without question or individual interpretation, because “[c]ultural knowledge is differentially internalized.”

The extent to which German perpetrators of the Holocaust sought to separate themselves from their actions also provided an indication of the non-radical nature of individual internalization. Hinton argued that German behavior in the Holocaust was demonstrative of psychological dissonance. Perpetrators of the Holocaust faced strong moral injunctions, and in an effort to relieve the psychological pressure of extraordinary circumstances, they employed dehumanizing efforts (like virulent anti-Semitism) in order to separate themselves from their victims. Gavriel D. Rosenfeld also argued that while Nazi forces did employ mass executions via shootings, death marches, and overt brutality, the majority of Jews were executed through the use of gas chambers. The gas chambers were unique, not only because they mechanized the murderous process, but they also worked to relieve the psychological tension involved in the murdering of innocents. The very fact that German perpetrators “needed” this psychological relief suggests that willingness to participate in genocide was not so widespread.

Ordinary Men -- Extraordinary Circumstances

However, Geoffrey P. Megargee revealed that the war of annihilation against world Jewry was not waged only from gas chambers. The driving ideology behind Operation Barbarossa was one of *Lebensraum*, and the planning of the invasion reveals this. In his March 27 order, von Brauchitsch told his senior commanders that the troops “have to realize that this struggle is being waged by one race against the another, and [they must] proceed with the necessary harshness.” Immediately following the sweeping victories of the Wehrmacht in the field of battle, the *Einsatzgruppen* unleashed their dogmatic fury through their “special actions” against the populace. In October 1941, two weeks after the mass executions of Jews and just a few months after the beginning of Barbarossa, General von Reichenau issued orders to the effect that, “In the east the soldier is not only a fighter according to the rules of warfare, but also the carrier of an inexorable racial and the avenger of all the bestialities that were inflicted upon the German and related races.” Orders such as these reveal that the premeditated intentions of Operation Barbarossa did not only imply military objectives, but decidedly ideological intentions as well.

In *Ordinary Men*, Christopher R. Browning’s study illustrated through the experiences of the men of Reserve Police Battalion 101 that these ordinary Germans on in military units on the eastern front had been placed into an extraordinarily difficult time and place, in which a Nazi world view and Nazi amorality dominated their decision making processes. In such circumstances, they easily succumbed to the pressures of wartime ethics, the pressures of groupthink, and the ideological justification of the times. The severity of wartime mentality played a critical role in the easing of the Battalion members’ psychological tension in these tasks. Normally, war crimes are preceded by brutality directed against the soldiers who would then perpetrate their crimes in vengeance. The crimes perpetrated by Police Battalion 101 can be categorized as carrying out “atrocities by policy”, in which the men, although they had not experienced enough brutality to prompt brutally retributive behaviors on the populace, had felt that their orders and the government’s blessing had been given for their actions. The wartime atmosphere also encouraged distancing from and dehumanization of the enemy. As Browning noted, “War and racial stereotyping were two mutually reinforcing factors in this distancing.” Ideals of “loyalty, duty, discipline”, and the requisite performance of each, created a moral imperative that allowed perpetrators to overcome any identification with their victims.

The men of Police Battalion 101 also felt the burdens of conformity. Following the Józefów Massacre, the officers no longer offered the opportunity to avoid the actions about to take place, which thereby removed the “burden of choice” and the guilty feelings of possible avoidability. Instead, unwritten “ground rules” had emerged in the Police Battalion, which indicated that for large operations, volunteers would be requested, or a group of shooters would be chosen from a group of men who were known by their dispositions and previous actions to be willing to participate. Browning said that many of the culprits felt a “natural tendency to conform to the behavior of one’s comrades”, and that “refusing to shoot constituted refusing one’s share of an unpleasant collective obligation.”



Ideologically, the men often felt justified for their actions. For nearly the last decade, the men had been immersed in the racial ideology of the Nazis; thus, participation in the Nazi program of elimination of a pervasive evil gave many of the men the feeling that their admittedly nefarious means had a justified and desirable end. While it may be doubtful that the propaganda in the SS pamphlets and indoctrination sessions would have turned these middle-aged, free thinking men into efficient killers, it is also doubtful that they were totally immune to what Lieutenant Drucker called “the influence of the times”.

While Goldhagen’s thesis created a uniform participatory ethic amongst ordinary Germans in the Holocaust, Browning’s interpretation suggested that such an argument was reflective of a simplistic “Manichean” history, which swept aside all gray zones in favor of a black and white simplification of inherent ideological motivations for violence. The majority of Germans were not sadistic murderers intent on eliminating world Jewry, but they were like the men of Police Battalion 101: ordinary men placed into extraordinarily difficult moral situations in which individual motivations were conflicting, self-serving, and self-deceiving, or a world that Browning described as “all too human and all too universal”.

A black and white separation of perpetrator from victim does not clarify the importance of external factors that existed within the Nazi dictatorship that provoked participation. Over the course of nearly a decade before the Holocaust, ordinary Germans had been immersed in a deluge of anti-Semitic propaganda, had been prompted by brown-shirted hooligans to participate in anti-Semitic spectacles and violent acts, and had felt the authoritative weight of the Nazi dictatorship, which beckoned participation in a solution to the *Judenfrage*. While some Germans may have seen Jews as a demonic force that needed to be eliminated, the claim that *all* Germans at least passively agreed to such an argument is spurious. The historical record indicates that German participation in the Holocaust had much to do with a cultural cognitive model that created pervasively negative images of Jews, but the dystopia of amorality created by the Nazi dictatorship in a time of war created extraordinary circumstances in which ordinary Germans participated in the Holocaust.

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