



Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust

By Daniel Jonah Goldhagen

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This groundbreaking international bestseller lays to rest many myths about the Holocaust: that Germans were ignorant of the mass destruction of Jews, that the killers were all SS men, and that those who slaughtered Jews did so reluctantly. **Hitler's Willing Executioners** provides conclusive evidence that the extermination of European Jewry engaged the energies and enthusiasm of tens of thousands of ordinary Germans. Goldhagen reconstructs the climate of "eliminationist anti-Semitism" that made Hitler's pursuit of his genocidal goals possible and the radical persecution of the Jews during the 1930s popular. Drawing on a wealth of unused archival materials, principally the testimony of the killers themselves, Goldhagen takes us into the killing fields where Germans voluntarily hunted Jews like animals, tortured them wantonly, and then posed cheerfully for snapshots with their victims. From mobile killing units, to the camps, to the death marches, Goldhagen shows how ordinary Germans, nurtured in a society where Jews were seen as unalterable evil and dangerous, willingly followed their beliefs to their logical conclusion.

"**Hitler's Willing Executioner's** is an original, indeed brilliant contribution to the...literature on the Holocaust."--New York Review of Books

"The most important book ever published about the Holocaust...Eloquently written, meticulously documented, impassioned...A model of moral and scholarly integrity."--Philadelphia Inquirer

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

In a work that is as authoritative as it is explosive, Goldhagen forces us to revisit and reconsider our understanding of the Holocaust and its perpetrators, demanding a fundamental revision in our thinking of the years between 1933-1945. Drawing principally on materials either unexplored or neglected by previous scholars, Goldhagen marshals new, disquieting primary evidence that explains why, when Hitler conceived of the "final solution" he was able to enlist vast numbers of willing Germans to carry it out. A book sure to provoke new discussion and intense debate.

From Publishers Weekly

Goldhagen's gripping and shocking landmark study transforms our understanding of the Holocaust. Refuting the widespread notion that those who carried out the genocide of Jews were primarily SS men or Nazi party members, he demonstrates that the perpetrators—those who staffed and oversaw the concentration camps, slave labor camps, genocidal army units, police battalions, ghettos, death marches—were, for the most part, ordinary German men and women: merchants, civil servants, academics, farmers, students, managers, skilled and unskilled workers. Rejecting the conventional view that the killers were slavishly carrying out orders under coercion, Goldhagen, assistant professor of government at Harvard, uses hitherto untapped primary sources, including the testimonies of the perpetrators themselves, to show that they killed Jews willingly, approvingly, even zealously. Hitler's genocidal program of a "Final Solution" found ready accomplices in these ordinary Germans who, as Goldhagen persuasively argues, had absorbed a virulent, "eliminationist" anti-Semitism, prevalent as far back as the 18th century, which demonized the Jews and called for their expulsion or physical annihilation. Furthermore, his research reveals that a large proportion of the killers were told by their commanders that they could disobey orders to kill, without fear of retribution—yet they slaughtered Jews anyway. By his careful estimate, hundreds of thousands of Germans were directly involved in the mass murder, and millions more knew of the ongoing genocide. Among the 30 photographs are snapshots taken by the murderers of themselves and their victims.

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From Library Journal

Though scholarly, this work, originally a Ph.D. thesis, promises to have a wide influence. Goldhagen (government, Harvard) endeavors to show that the common apologia for the Germans—that Hitler "brainwashed" them—is nonsense and that most Germans gave their active assent to genocide. An ordinary German commander, for example, might feel himself bound by a strict code of conduct yet not be at all averse to murdering Jews. The book ends with a detailed notes section and an appendix that explains the correct methodology for studying the Nazi period. Like Raul Hilberg's great *Destruction of the European Jews*, Goldhagen's work is a landmark in Holocaust studies. It does not supersede any of the standard histories of the Holocaust by Hilberg, Dawidowicz, Levin, Gilbert, and others simply because its primary aim is not to describe events but to explore and explain motivation. In so doing it provides a fuller understanding of the Holocaust. The work will be the subject of an international symposium held at the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., on April 8. Highly recommended for most libraries.

- Paul Kaplan, *Lake Villa District Lib., Ill.*

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Users Review

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