

Goldhagen's willing faithful

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"It is a sensible book, really", the bookseller's assistant said to me when he wrapped up Daniel Jonah Goldhagen's *Hitler's Willing Executioners. Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York, 1996) for me. Whether sensible or not, I ask myself how many readers did indeed read the bulky tome - 622 pages - from cover to cover. I found it monotonous and depressing reading, on the one hand because of the endless accounts of cruelties committed against Jews, often in great detail and sometimes not without a touch of sadism, on the other because of the constantly accusing tone. Goldhagen is writing as if he were a determined counsel for the prosecution who continues his indictment relentlessly and mercilessly; his piercing finger is pointing at the accused time and again. It is not a normal procedure since there is no counsel for the defendant. The one who sits in the dock is not Adolf Hitler, not the NSDAP or the SS, but the German people. The author found many willing faithful who judged his book 'really sensible', although his pen is sometimes running away with him. I suppose that Goldhagen and his faithful readers are sharing a hidden agenda, namely an anti-German resentment which causes one to easily believe nasty things of 'the Germans'. The author literally has no good word to spare for the Germans; in my fatherland, the Netherlands, many people still have an unfavourable opinion of them. It is only a short while ago that I heard somebody say 'those old Nazis' are still running the show in Germany; how old 'those old Nazis' must have become since 1945 escaped this person.

In this country and also in Germany itself Goldhagen seems to have stated that he has not meant to involve the whole German people in his act of indictment. But in his book he nowhere says so in as many words. It is true that he also does not say that the whole German people was a party to the Holocaust. However, I feel that the reader of his book can gain no other impression that this is what he really means. Right at the start he quotes a statement by a police officer who sees no problem in killing Jews; his comment is that this letter presents typical aspects of the way the Holocaust was executed by 'the Germans' (p. 4, I am referring to the American text). The executioners were 'Germans first, and only after that SS-man, police man, or camp personnel' (p. 9). The author is out to explain why 'the Germans' so readily accepted the tenets of Nazi anti-semitism and supported the anti-Jewish policy of the Nazis (p. 47). A paragraph on p. 132 begins with an exposition of the anti-Jewish intentions of the Nazis which Nazis noiselessly become 'the Germans' only a few lines further on. The number of Germans who were involved in the extermination ran into the millions, although not all of them were actual killers (p. 167). 'The Germans' wanted for the Jews 'nothing but their suffering and their deaths' (p. 169). Does Goldhagen and do all those who find his argument 'really sensible' realize that in this way all Germans are declared to be murderers? This is no slip of the pen. The author suggests that the murderous convictions and the ferocious actions of the police battalions in the east "might also apply to their countrymen", to 'the Germans', that is (p. 205).

There is more of this outrageous sort. The behaviour of the policemen of whom the majority were not party members or SS-men "provide(s) insight into the likely

conduct of other ordinary Germans, had they too been asked to become genocidal killers” (p. 208). This means that every German of the Nazi period would have been ready to take part in the killings. This is a horrible form of anti-German racism. Heydrich knew, writes Goldhagen, that “when it came to the Jews, the German people served as his police force and they were a more effective force in policing the Jews than the Gestapo” (p. 447). He even goes so far as to believe the arch-liar Goebbels on his word when he hears him saying that “all Germans are at present against the Jews” (p. 448). Il prend son bien où il le trouve.

Contradicting is not tolerated. With incredible arrogance all explanations of the anti-Jewish policy are declared invalid en bloc (pp. 11-13); at the end this is forcefully repeated once again : “They are obviously and demonstrably false” (p. 389). It is a curious thing that Goldhagen seems to never have heard of the ‘Historikerstreit’ about the question whether or not the Holocaust was a unique phenomenon. For him it has to be unique, in this sense that it was specifically German. “The Holocaust was the defining aspect of Nazism, but not only of Nazism. It was also the defining feature of German society during its Nazi period ... No analysis of German society ... can be made without placing the persecution and extermination of the Jews at its center” (p. 8). The Holocaust was, in consequence, not only something uniquely German, it was also the *raison d’être* of German society in these years.

The innocent reader can have no other impression than that anti-semitism, and certainly in this extreme, existed only in Germany and had been at home there since a very long time, even since Luther. Goldhagen says as hard as nails that the Germans were completely different from ‘us’. We should not think that they were, like ‘we’, ‘rational, sober children of the Enlightenment’ (pp. 27 and 45). On no account ! “Why not approach Germany as an anthropologist would the world of a people about whom little is known ?” (p. 28). Have we to do then with primitive savages ? Obviously we have, for this people produced the Holocaust, “a radical break with everything known in human history” (ib.). In view of this it is only natural that Goldhagen resolutely rejects any comparison with other countries (p. 77). All the same, I am bold enough to put some questions. Did the Dreyfus affair, with its accompanying wave of virulent anti-semitism, take place in Germany ? Were there pogroms in Germany before 1938 ? Or have we to turn rather to Poland and Russia for these ? Were the Netherlands, a country always proud of its high moral status, really immaculate in this respect ? Did not Leyden State University count a philosopher called Bolland among its staff whom nobody prevented from ventilating his anti-semitic opinions ? One might point to the countless Jews who played such a significant role in German public life, in politics, in the arts, in the sciences and scholarship. Everyone knows these great names. Bernt Engelmann, in his book ‘Deutschland ohne Juden’ (Goldmann Sachbuch, 1979), sums up the losses.

Every now and then the author stops in order to contradict himself. Having argued that the whole German society was anti-semitic to the core, he states suddenly on p. 47 that the dates for such an analysis are failing, especially when it comes to German society as a whole : “The proper data simply do not exist”. Having argued how mad ‘the Germans’ were with the Jews, he says that large regions of the country were virtually without Jews (p. 63). He says on p. 75 that we do not know how many

Germans saw 'a mortal threat' for Germany in the Jews, respectively in 1900, 1920, 1933, or 1941. OK, but this is exactly what we should want to know. Anti-semitic parties were not scoring well in the elections before 1933; he says so himself (p. 76). The Germans enthusiastically applauded violent actions against the Jews, in particular after the *Kristallnacht*; they even wanted far more than Hitler found desirable at that moment (p. 70). But "many abhorred the licentious violence in their midst" (p. 101). One should not think that the Germans pitied the Jews. What they feared was that they would have to work overtime in order to repair the damage done to national property (pp. 101/102). A fine instance of tendentious history writing! It is obviously absolutely impossible that a German would be honestly indignant about what happened. The Germans found that the anti-Jewish policy was right in itself, but now things had taken a wrong turn for a moment (p. 102). A Gestapo report from August 1935 says that "by far the greater part of the population ... does not understand the senseless individual acts of violence and terror (i.e. against the Jews)" (p. 121). When other authors too mention such objections among the populations, Goldhagen, who admits that there were objections indeed, waves them away as being 'episodic'; the protests were not directed against the programme as such but only against some of its specific forms (p. 102). 'The Germans' simply have to hang!

A curious omission is that nothing is said of Hitler's 'Werdegang'. The Führer makes his entry on p. 85 and is then at once the complete anti-semitic. The author obviously assumes that he, together with all other Germans, imbibed his anti-semitism with the mother's milk. However, it can be argued that Hitler, during the first thirty years of his life, did not show himself interested in the 'Judenfrage' and did not express himself in an anti-semitic manner. The family environment from which he came was not anti-semitic, on the contrary. The day on which Hitler converted to anti-semitism can be exactly determined, namely the 16th of September 1919. He chose this course for opportunistic reasons, in order to get the then still DAP in his power with a more radical programme than that of its founder Drexler. But because he used to believe in his own phantasies, he soon was in earnest. There were more of such unexpected and sudden 'conversions'. In her book 'Das Zerstörende in der Politik. Eine Psychologie der politischen Grundeinstellung' (Heidelberg, 1958), Wanda von Baeyer-Katta mentions the case of a German housewife who became a member of the NSDAP; at the same moment she became a virulent anti-semitic. Her husband said she had the 'Judenkoller'; she did not know any Jews and had never expressed herself against them.

Another omission is that Goldhagen fails to see that Jews were not Hitler's only victims. Goldhagen writes extensively about the labour camps, those KZ's that were not extermination camps but camps where Jews were worked to death. I am by no means refuting the facts that he mentions here and in other places. But it is also a fact that many non-Jews, among whom were many persons I have known personally, lost their lives in the camps. Many critics mentioned the Gypsies, the homosexuals, Jehova's Witnesses, Russian POW's, and others. What amazes me is that even those critics do not mention the countless political prisoners from many European countries, who never returned.

Goldhagen's main thesis is that the anti-Jewish horrors were perpetrated by ordinary Germans and that they did this voluntarily. His own argument, however, shows that this cannot be wholly correct. The men of the police batallions did not take service with the police in order to murder Jews; many of them were reservists who were recruited for these unities without them being told what they would have to do. By no means all police batallions became stationed in the east. Not all batallions there were assigned to take part in the executions. Not all police men were willing to do this. Some did indeed do their bloody work wholeheartedly, but others had considerable problems with it. In the Ukraine Wehrmacht unities were initially assigned for the executions, but when this led to nervous breakdowns and psychological crises, the ill-famed Einsatzgruppen took over.

But even from their side objections arose. One of their commanders, Otto Ohlendorf, thought that this task would brutalize his men in such a degree that they would become unable to function on ordinary society (p. 149). To remedy this, Lithuanians, Latvians, and Ukrainians were recruited to do the dirty work in order to spare the German police men. The psychological pressure, exerted by the mass-murders, became too heavy for the officers and men who were directly involved. Then the unexpected conclusion follows that the gas chambers were not installed to do away with the victims at a greater speed; no, they were installed because Himmler wished to make the work 'less burdensome to the executioners' (p. 156). It also had the advantage that there would be fewer 'unwanted onlookers' (p. 157).

Wanda von Baeyer described an event in the life of an ordinary German that shows how joyfully and dedicatedly the horrible task was fulfilled. A recruited Bavarian farmer came home on leave. He was nervous and was unable to sleep. In bed his wife succeeded in getting out of him what was the trouble: he had taken part in an execution. His platoon had assenbled a group of Jews who had to be killed. When they sat drinking (all the killers needed immense quantities of alcool), an exceptionally beautiful Jewish girl dashed in, stark naked. "All of you may have me", she said, "if only you let go the others". They took her, all of them. They then killed all their victims, the girl herself as the last one.

Having heard this, the woman screamed: "Get out of my bed! And out of my house!". She ordered him to go to a monastery in the vicinity. He had to stay there for about ten days and put himself under the guidance of a monk. He must do severe penance, then make his confession, and reconcile himself with God. Only then he might return to her. He did not go. A few days he hung around the farm aimlessly and then went back to his unit. Some weeks later news came that he had fallen.

Goldhagen makes himself guilty of a number of inadmissible generalizations. He thinks that the Germans were enthusiastic for Nazism to the last man. He mentions the number of party members, *nine million* (his italics). But many of them adhered for opportunistic reasons, because they thought that they had to do so, in order to get a job or to keep their jobs. Hitler did not love these members; perhaps one in every hundred Germans would make a good nazi, he said; a party of a few hundred thousand members would be much better. He also did not love the German people as such. He called it a 'Hühnervolk', obstinate and unmanageable; Germany itself was a 'Sauland'. Since the Germans had lost his war, they had better disappear from the

surface of the earth; in consequence, he ordered the destruction of the whole German infrastructure.

The NSDAP never acquired a majority before 1933. In the last elections that were really free, November 1932, the party lost two million votes and came no further than 33.1 %. The following elections, those of March 1933, were no longer free, because the parties of the left had been forbidden already. But in spite of much intimidation the percentage of the NSDAP did not rise higher than 43.9 %. It should equally be mentioned that KZ's have been instituted way back in 1933 and were populated by German opponents of the regime before 1939/1940.

Another generalization, accompanied with extrapolations, is that 'all' Germans were anti-semites. Anti-semitic sentiments, says the author, were 'the central causing agent' of the violent treatment of the Jews (p. 9). The majority "subscribed to the underlying Nazi model of Jews" (p. 87). The result was that the 'eliminationist' mentality so easily changed into an 'exterminationist' programme (p. 71). In other words, all those Germans who felt that the Jews had to climb down and be not so prominent in society, all those Germans obviously agreed with the plan to exterminate them. It is absolutely inadmissible of Goldhagen to contend that those Protestant church leaders who advocated 'severest measures' against the Jews also approved of the mass murder (p. 112).

In 1947 I became acquainted with a Jewish German, a Berliner. How had he managed to survive the persecution? I asked him. He had gone into hiding, he answered. Where, in a hut in the woods? No, here in Berlin. There had always been a family that was ready to take him, three years long, even in the period of the heaviest bombardments. Every few weeks he had changed his address, because of the chance of discovery becoming too great. This means that this man had enjoyed the help of a great number of Germans who had been willing to accept the consequences of hiding a Jew.

The Germans never protested, says Goldhagen. They protested against the euthanasia programme of 1940/1941 (which was more properly called 'der Gnadentod'), with success, because this programme was countermanded. What he does not say and what he probably does not know, that the programme was restarted later, namely in 1943, now under the cloak of evacuation because of the air raids. No mourning-cards were sent to the families; none of those taking part might utter only a single word about it, while the spreading of rumours would be heavily punished. Hitler, who permitted nobody to thwart his plans, now knew what to do with regard to the Holocaust.

Goldhagen says repeatedly that knowledge of the murder of the Jews was widespread; the gassing of the Jews was an open secret (p. 244). However, Hitler and his complices acted in the deepest secrecy. Never was anything communicated about it, in whichever form. If Goldhagen says that the participants in the Wannseekonferenz were told that the Jews would be killed, this is not true (p. 322). Kaltenbrunner and Heydrich who were in the chair there were not so unwise that they would disclose the plans; the word 'Endlösung' was used indeed, but what it meant remained anybody's guess. All orders were given orally, even those to the police battalions. Officially no one knew anything, not even Hitler. In the files of the SS which have been preserved

and which went through my hands from the first to the last document in 1947/1948 (in the Berlin Document Centre in Berlin-Zehlendorf), it is nowhere explained what 'Endlösung' signified. Had I not known beforehand what it meant, the files would not have informed me.

Only a very small numbers of persons was completely informed, that is, of the plans to exterminate all Jews. Hitler, the 'Urheber', Goering, Goebbels, Himmler, Heydrich, Kaltenbrunner, Eichmann, perhaps two hundred persons in all. To quote a few instances of persons who were never informed: Von Ribbentrop, the Foreign Minister, or any of the other ministers, Eva Braun (with whom Hitler never spoke about politics), Rudolf Höss, the infamous commander of Auschwitz who only knew what he had to do there, but not more. Of course, there were rumours. Von Ribbentrop, for instance, heard people whispering about it; he was greatly upset, when he realized what was going on. But we shall never know how many Germans really knew what was happening. One thing is certain: they never were told anything at all. I leave it to Goldhagen to explain how this squares with his contention that he Germans so wholeheartedly supported Hitler in his murderous plans.

Regarding myself, in that fateful period I was ready to believe everything about 'the Germans' that was bad. But I am absolutely certain that on April 11, 1943, I did not know what was going on in the east. And very probably I did not know it on April 11, 1944 either, although by then millions of Jews had died already. In the underground paper I have published I have not mentioned the Holocaust, for the simple reason that I knew nothing about it. The 'wir haben es nicht gewußt' must have been literally true for many Germans.

Finally this. It is another inadmissible extrapolation of Goldhagen to declare everyone guilty of murder who had, in whichever way, something to do with the Holocaust. In a great number of functions the Germans contributed to the genocide, he says, for instance, the railway personnel (p. 167). If this would be correct, the Dutch police man who arrested a Jew was guilty of murder. That won't do. These people did not know what would be the fate of the Jews. A train driver who brought a train with Jews to the Dutch assembly camp in Westerbork, did not know what their final destination was. All these things only express Goldhagen's fanatical wish to declare guilty as many Germans as possible. I feel sad that he succeeded in this with so many people.