

## The Universe of Death and Torment

by Gotz Aly

Everything Daniel Jonah Goldhagen tells us is true - and yet it is only the tip of the iceberg. Goldhagen relates the story of the murder of the European Jews from the necessarily narrow perspective of those who did not sit behind desks, but took part directly. He inquires into their individual, social and cultural programming, into the significance of a specific, "eliminationist," and ultimately "exterminationist racial anti-Semitism." "No Germans, no Holocaust" is his succinct conclusion.

Three concise, well-researched sections form the empirical heart of the study, taking us into the "universe of death and torment." They provide examples of so-called "ghetto clearings" - that is, of the extermination of whole Jewish communities within a few hours - by units of the "order police," of despairing death in the camps established in order to exterminate arrested Jews through senseless labor tortures, and of the death marches of concentration camp inmates in the last months of the war. These forced marches took place on the verge of impending German defeat, were committed in plain sight of all, and claimed at least 250,000 lives.

Goldhagen bases his information mainly on thousands of interrogation records collected in Western Germany by concerned prosecutors and criminal justice officials between 1960 and 1970. Their efforts excited little public attention at the time, rarely leading to trials, and even less frequently to adequate judgments by criminal courts. At least, however, the investigators succeeded in documenting the well-nigh "endemic cruelty." Daniel Goldhagen, along with Hans-Heinrich Wilhelm, Ernst Klee, Dieter Pohl and Christopher Browning, brought these findings to light. It is true that such secondary sources are replete with omissions, shameless lies, and nonsensical rationalizations; nevertheless, overall they allow us, in a way perhaps otherwise impossible, to come close to knowing what actually happened - assuming one accepts the author's methodological maxim, "To discount all self-exculpatory testimony that finds no corroboration from other sources."

Page after page, he describes how "ordinary Germans" turned into murderers of Jews, spontaneously, without any special preparation or indoctrination. Normally, they were blue- or white-collar workers in the most varied fields; older heads of households formed a clear majority in police reserve units. Only a minority belonged to the Nazi party, and very few to the SS. They represented no specially created, carefully chosen elite of racial warriors; but they were average members of German society at the time. The same was true of the concentration camp guards. "They were thrown together by chance by place and time," by the employment office or a heart problem that made them unfit for military service. "Nothing indicates that any attempt was made to examine the fitness of these men for their future genocidal activities," is Goldhagen's well-founded conclusion. In Poland, a German doctor drew the anatomy of the human neck in the sand, marked the spot they were supposed to hit, and off they went. This study contradicts the still-common image, defined in part by Hannah Arendt, of the cold-blooded killing machine who simply carried out the instructions dictated to him by merely stamping, countersigning or turning on the gas. But recourse to the proverbial blind Prussian obedience is no explanation. Nor is the theory that the murder of the European Jews could only be achieved through a modern division of labor, because only such fragmentation was capable of overcoming the traditional

limits of conscience. Goldhagen rightly insists upon the complete freedom of each individual to decide and refuse. Not a single German who refused to kill a Jew was demoted, sent to concentration camp, assigned to a suicide mission or sentenced to death.

On the contrary: such orders commonly included an offer that "anyone who did not feel up to the upcoming task could come forward." Nevertheless, this occurred only in exceptional cases. Those who did opt out were neither taunted nor pressured, but treated with consideration. They were given different duties, often back home. There were always others willing to take over the murders--the "proven pragmatist" Himmler could be sure of that. Men were generally eager for the job, as, for example, on a November evening in 1942 in Lukow, Poland, when musicians and performers from the Berlin police department came to entertain Police Battalion 101: "They also learned of the forthcoming shooting," according to witnesses, "and offered, even pleaded emphatically for permission to participate in the execution of these Jews. This strange request was granted by the battalion."(page 395). This means that voluntary mass murder was seen as a social pastime and a thrill - without the necessity of orders.

The book shows concretely how good the perpetrators felt before, during and after their "operations"; how they humiliated, beat, and tortured defenseless people and then shot them in the back of the neck without the slightest hesitation; how the men posed before their living or dead victims, laughing into the camera - bloodthirsty, sadistic, lascivious. After they had done their day's work, they celebrated with a "death banquet" for the Jews, went to bed with their lovers, or wrote home faithfully that these snapshots and extermination anecdotes would someday be "extremely interesting to our children."

The guards who patrolled the walls of the Warsaw ghetto decorated their recreation rooms with an illuminated Star of David and a board on which they kept track of the number of Jews they killed. Goldhagen reminds us how German police officers, who in everyday life directed traffic and were supposed to act as "friends and helpers" (the slogan, still in use today, was crafted in Himmler's propaganda workshop), spent June 27, 1941 in Bialystok. First they murdered the patients in the Jewish hospital; then they drove at least 800 Jewish men, women and children into the city's main synagogue, locked them in, surrounded the building, set it on fire and shot anyone who tried to jump out the windows. "Let it burn, it's great fun," commented one member of the master race who took part. This on the sixth day of the eastern campaign, in a city taken without a fight, making the "progressive brutalization of war" obsolete as an explanatory argument.

The book publishes the name and the picture of the newly-married, pregnant officer's wife who watched a massacre with obvious enjoyment (p. 241-243); it describes German Red Cross nurses who did the same, as well as a scene from early 1945 in a city in Lower Saxony: "We asked for food. At first they thought we were German refugees. The SS man who accompanied us shouted, 'Don't give them anything to eat, they're Jews!' And so I got no food. German children began to throw stones at us."(p. 365).

The guards who, in April 1945, drove some 600 emaciated Jewish women through the Bohemian Forest gave the bread meant for the starving people to the hens instead; they hated, tormented and murdered to the very end - against Himmler's express orders which had been delivered by courier on the second day of the march. They admitted all these facts during later interrogations, showing as little remorse as, more

recently, SS Officer Priebke before a military court in Rome. His rigid self-righteousness is typical of an entire generation. They shared a basic assumption: "The Jew was not acknowledged by us to be a human being."

If this had continued, a Polish author wondered in 1973, "Who knows how many diaries and memoirs would have been published by now in Germany with titles like 'I was in the Political Department of Auschwitz Concentration Camp' or 'I Exterminated 600,000 Enemies of the Third Reich' or 'Buchenwald--Maidanek--Mauthausen--The Battle Stations of a Faithful SS Man.'" The beginnings of this could certainly be seen. In autumn of 1941, the propaganda ministry distributed a brochure entitled "German Soldiers See the Soviet Union." (2) It contained soldiers' letters home from the eastern front, cost 20 pfennigs, and was published in an edition of two million. In it, Private Heinrich Sachs wrote of the "end of this race": "A separate chapter is the fact of how the Jewish question is currently being solved with impressive thoroughness, to the enthusiastic applause of the local population . . ." Future Free Democratic party member Wolfgang Diewerge had censored out the "descriptions of atrocities with a sexual element." Goldhagen does not quote the authors who published such things long before him, just as he leaves out or dismisses some who have made observations similar to his. This may be the result of a certain monomania that is perhaps unavoidable when dealing with this subject, but it hardly diminishes the value of the book.

It is wrong of Ulrich Raulff to claim that Goldhagen has arranged the "aesthetic of a horror film," linking pornography with atrocity and accomplishing a "step into the horror business" (Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, August 16, 1996). This verbal tirade was logically followed by a call for "serious historiography." That is simply ridiculous. The book attempts to portray historical events that border on the describable, and as Martin Broszat remarked in 1979: "For the language and reflection of historicity, accustomed to the exalted ideas of history, mass executions and gas chambers are a 'stylistic inconsistency' of history." (3)

Goldhagen creates the necessary detachment with the help of frequently moralistic interjections and occasional sarcasm. For example, he speaks of a Jew who screamed with cold and was therefore shot: "The only kind of warmth a Jew could expect from this man was the cold grave. The crematorium was unavailable." To me, such slipups are understandable. In any case, I am grateful for his attempt to relate something that is difficult to relate. I know many of the details from the files and from scattered serious literature, and I could add countless details, but I rarely write about them; the documents render me speechless. One example is the following story of the P. family of Metgethen, Königsberg, which I removed from a finished manuscript in 1988. Hans P. headed a local SD branch in the small Yugoslavian town of Kragujewac. In March 1943, he ordered a raid on an inn in which Communist meetings were supposedly held, but found no indications of such meetings. Perhaps in anger over the miscalculation, or perhaps for other reasons, P. then shot the innkeeper and lied in his report that she had attempted to escape. A few days later, a young woman came to his office either to report a hidden weapon or to denounce her landlord, the reason was unclear. In any case, P. tortured the 22-year-old, raped her over several days and nights, and finally let her go. The Belgrade SS and Police Court found out about this arbitrary act, which was counterproductive even from the Nazi standpoint ("unnecessary emergence of resistance"). It convicted P. of murder and rape and sentenced him to ten years' imprisonment. "Dear Mama," wrote the prisoner to his wife, "You know what I did," and he continued, "Because of that stinking Serbian

wench, who would have been shot anyway in eight days, a German family is thrown into misfortune." Charlotte P. included the letter in a petition for a pardon that she sent to Himmler. He did not commute the sentence, but made it less severe; he also made sure the family, now indigent and deep in debt, was taken care of. But this only lessened their difficulty; the husband had not been pardoned, let alone rehabilitated. In this situation, Frau P. wrote to thank the Reichsführer and added a macabre request. She told him of her healthy son's development and her well-developed daughter. But about her youngest child, four-year-old Rudiger, she wrote, "He suffers from the effects of a severe cerebral infection. The doctors, especially Professor Bamberger at the university clinic, whom I visited at the recommendation of Gauleiter Erich Koch, are of the opinion that his illness is incurable. I hope, however, that I will be able to give my seriously-ill child significant relief one day." Nine days later Koch wrote to Himmler, "I spoke quite openly with Frau P. about the case. She would be grateful if the child could be brought to one of your clinics and freed from his suffering." Himmler responded immediately and passed the information to the department in Hitler's Chancellery responsible for murdering handicapped children. Rudiger P. became a victim of the so-called "children's euthanasia" program.

I came upon this abyss of German family history - sketched here as briefly as possible - during my research into the "euthanasia" murders. I filed it together with a copy of a decision by the Munich SS and Police Court against Max Taubner, an aircraft engineer. (4) While the story of the P. family remained in my memory, I had completely forgotten this old judgment, with the markings on it I myself had made. Until the Goldhagen debate led me to look through my files, that I could have sworn I'd never read anything of the sort. Although it involves completely different people and places, the content is exactly identical to a description in Hitler's Willing Executioners. The court had jurisdiction over Taubner because he had headed a SS workshop. The sentence was also ten years' imprisonment, for the following reasons: "The defendant is a fanatic enemy of the Jews. At the beginning of his assignment in the East, he resolved to take care of 20,000 Jews." With no orders, "on his own," Taubner and his people carried out two mass shootings in September and October of 1941, more or less as follows: "SS Unterscharführer Muller, who did not belong to the defendant's unit but had his permission to take part in the shootings, tore children from their mothers, held them in his left hand, shot them and threw them in the ditch." The court conceded that these cases involved "more or less systematized forms" of execution, but in the next town, there were "terrible excesses." "SS storm trooper Wustholz (one of the defendant's subordinates) told the Jews to beat each other to death; they were promised that the survivors would not be shot. The Jews did in fact beat each other, though not to death." So Taubner took part in the beatings, had individuals shot behind a house, had one hanged, others buried in the ruins of a wooden house that still others were forced to pull down. While taking a short break from the murders, Taubner (married, father of three children) "intoned the song 'you're crazy, my child!' on the harmonica." All of this he had photographed: "These are pictures that record the worst excesses; many are shameless and disgusting. The prints were developed at two photo stores in southern Germany, and the defendant showed them to his wife and friends."

The SS and Police Court saw this as a serious violation of the duty of secrecy and convicted this man, in 1943, for that and, in addition, for "excesses" that "violate discipline." In its decision, the court explained, The defendant is not convicted for the Jew operation as such. The Jews must be exterminated; none of the dead Jews is any

loss. The defendant should have told himself that the extermination of the Jews is the task of commandos created especially for the job, but it should be held in his favor that he may have thought he had the authority to participate in the extermination of Jewry. True hatred of Jews was the driving force behind the defendant's actions. However, he allowed himself to get carried away into cruelties unworthy of a German man and SS leader. It is not the German way to employ Bolshevik methods, even in the necessary extermination of the worst enemies of our people. The behavior of the defendant borders alarmingly on this. The defendant allowed his men to fall into such brutalization that they, under his leadership, behaved like a wild horde.

As I said earlier, I do not normally write about these things. Instead, I am interested in the processes of political opinion formation that led to the "Final Solution" - the planning centers, the organizers of resettlement. My research is fixated, like that of Hans Mommsen or Raul Hilberg, on the multifarious power structures of the Third Reich - things about which Goldhagen has only the barest knowledge. Subjectively, such an approach creates distance; it allows one, in studying the documents, to ignore or read highly selectively the things laid out in Hitler's Willing Executioners. This occurs - at least for me - not out of "seriousness," but out of self-protection. Certainly the cool, analytical eye of the forensic doctor, detached from emotion, contributes - sometimes decisively - to the solution of a crime, but at trial it is also necessary to speak of the maliciousness and vileness of the offenders and of their general and specific motivations.

Goldhagen believes he has found the "explanation and theory of the Holocaust." This is out of the question; he cannot accomplish this with such a consciously one-dimensional, extremely deterministic approach. While the old literature gave us Hitler the "intentionalist," pressing for genocide from the start, Goldhagen's book gives us "the Germans" as the great intentionalists. They were just waiting for war, he maintains, because it finally "provided the opportunity" (p. 376) for them to carry out what they anyway wanted: the extermination of the Jews. The author does not always really seem to believe this himself - for example, when he talks about how the terrorist camp system "transformed" the personnel's "mental and moral substance," (p.456), or when he somewhat absurdly writes, "The Germans wanted nothing from [the Jews] but their suffering and their deaths . . . and they endeavoured to sunder all social relations between Germans and Jews." (p. 169) Victor Klemperer provides a more exact description of the monstrous combination of government prescriptions and contradictory personal behavior, though even he quickly realized, "I become more and more convinced that Hitler really is the spokesman for almost all Germans."(5) Nevertheless, the book, if read with critical sympathy, adds to our knowledge. This is entirely true of the empirical sections, and to a certain extent also of the controversial central thesis. It poses questions not only about the hundreds of thousands of immediate participants in these deeds and the millions who knew about them, but also about the character of Nazism. It was a dictatorship, certainly, but one based on the consensus of the great majority, a consensus that was constantly renewed. Neither before nor after did such a high degree of harmony exist in Germany between the people and their leadership. And every historian in this field knows how much is glossed over, how much inaccuracy is often present, when issues of guilt and responsibility are obstinately addressed with concepts such as "Nazis" or "fascists," "the regime," or, quite contortedly, "the dignitaries of the Third Reich."

And one more thing. The greater the precision with which structurally-oriented research exposes the political motivations behind the transition from deportation plans to the practice of extermination, the clearer it becomes that this practice was at first experimental. The initiators remained skeptical for months as to their project could really be put into practice. Hitler abruptly stopped the "euthanasia" murders on August 24, 1941, because popular sentiment could be "inflamed" by it "in this critical phase of war" (Goebbels); (6)but the German leadership must, in the succeeding months, have been convinced that the barely hidden beginnings of the genocide of the Jews had no effect on the great majority of the German population, or even -as I suspect - that they had an integrational effect. This fatal certainty was the result of the first (positive) experiences with the murder commandos, the soldiers' letters, and the absence of even the slightest semi-public protest. Only as a result of this unconcealed, indirectly-clandestine agreement or shoulder-shrugging indifference did the certainty grow, in early 1942, that the "Final Solution of the Jewish Question" could be carried on and the test-phase ended. This well-grounded thesis stands in contrast to Daniel Goldhagen's hermetic super-intentionalism. But it brings a new intensity to the question of the responsibility shared by many German.

Translated by Belinda Cooper

### **Aly - Notes**

1 The article was written in September 1996, at the request of the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (Munich), as a review. In the end, the paper did not print the piece, as the chief editor intervened, claiming thematic "supersaturation"; I was, however, paid a fee. I believe this argument to be true and did not get the impression that the article was rejected because the argumentation is too pro-Goldhagen. On the other hand, what strikes me as remarkable about German reactions to *Hitler's Willing Executioners* is how little the--actually highly disturbing--empirical core was simply summed up and communicated to the public. Goldhagen's far-reaching conclusions are disputable, but not so the facts of the practice of murder. These deserve everybody's attention, particularly that of "functionalists," amongst whom I count myself.

2 Deutsche Soldaten sehen die Sowjetunion, Berlin 1941, zit. nach: *Biedermann und Schreibtischtäter. Materialien zur deutschen Täterbiographie* (=Beiträge zur

nationalsozialistischen Gesundheits und Sozialpolitik, Bd.4), (Berlin: Rotbuch, 1987), p. 8.

3 Martin Broszat: ``Holocaust' und Geschichtswissenschaft,' in *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 27 (1979), pp. 285-298, here p. 296.

4 Bundesarchiv, Aussenstelle Berlin-Lichterfelde, Bestände des ehemaligen Document Centers, Personalakte Max Taubner.

5 Victor Klemperer, *Ich will Zeugnis ablegen bis zum letzten. Tagebücher 1933-1941*, (Berlin: Aufbau Verlag, 1995), pp. 373, 379, 401.

6 Ralf Georg Reuth, ed., *Joseph Goebbels. Tagebücher 1924-1945*, (München: Piper, 1992), Bd. 4, p. 1652.

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