

# Hitler's Willing Executioners

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Daniel Jonah Goldhagen

Interviewed by Maurice Wohlgeernter

**W**OHLGELERNTER: What initially arrested my curiosity about *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, was, among other things, my own abiding interest in Holocaust literature. Doctoral dissertations like this one, however expertly revised for publication, rarely capture the wide attention of critics and columnists across America and Europe: A first printing of 40,000 copies of the German edition, for example, despite some negative criticism, sold out in less than a week. As I read every word of this book, I could hardly keep myself from harking back to what Primo Levi, the late Italian novelist, poet, critic, chemist, and survivor of Auschwitz, wrote in his moving memoir *The Drowned and the Saved*, published posthumously some eight years ago: that there exists a serial order of cultural patterns, particularly in Germany, all of which herald, in various literary and social forms, the "myth of the Superman to whom everything is permitted in recognition of his dogmatic and congenital superiority," including killings of every tortuous kind, even, and especially, by scores of millions of ordinary Germans—as this work so ably documents. Levi called it *Deutschtum*. Or, in Paul Celan's words: "Death is a master from Germany."

Professor Daniel Goldhagen, of the Government and Social Studies Department of Harvard University and an associate at Harvard's Center for European Studies, is the author of a profound, powerful, deeply moving, and convincing study entitled *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, the subject of our discussion.

I just want to remark that you have won me over immediately for something you might least expect me to

say, namely that you dedicated this book to your father and your teacher, Professor Erich Goldhagen. That says as much about you as the entire brilliant book that you published. Is your father still teaching or is he retired?

GOLDHAGEN: He just retired.

WOHLGELERNTER: Were you both teaching at the same time at Harvard?

GOLDHAGEN: That is correct.

WOHLGELERNTER: Harvard has a history of father and son, teaching together, particularly in the history department. The only ones I ever recall hearing about, of course, were Arthur Schlesinger, Sr., and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.

GOLDHAGEN: Right.

WOHLGELERNTER: I believe your father and you were the next two on the faculty. Professor Goldhagen, under whom did you work when you wrote this dissertation?

GOLDHAGEN: I am actually a political scientist, not a historian. And the people on my dissertation committee were Stanley Hoffmann, Sidney Verba, and Peter Hall, all distinguished political scientists.

WOHLGELERNTER: To understand your book, one must immediately consider the title, *Hitler's Willing Executioners*. The emphasis must rest, I believe, on the word

“willing.” Would you be kind enough to summarize in a couple of sentences the thesis of your book?

GOLDHAGEN: In this book, I have tried to return the focus of our attention and understanding of the Holocaust back to the people who were the actual killers of European Jewry. Much of the literature of the Holocaust is devoted to the discussion of structures and institutions and the leadership and pays very little attention to the people who deported Jews to their death, who manned the camps, who shot Jews. And, obviously, we cannot explain or understand the Holocaust until we explain why these people did what they did. So this is the focus of the book.

WOHLGELERNTER: Because of the book's length, I would like to concentrate on a number of important areas of your argument and then move into the second part, dealing with the various excuses made for Germany's behavior, after the Holocaust. The three areas of your concentration, as I understand it, are, first, the actions of what the Germans called the *Ordnungspolizei*, or the police battalions; second, the work camps; and, finally, the death marches. I would like you to explain each one, although I note that you concentrate more on the first and the third, that is, on the police battalions and the death marches rather than on the work camps, and all because, I suspect, so many books and so many memoirs have already been published about the work camps. In any event, would you be kind enough to discuss the *Ordnungspolizei*, or the police battalions?

GOLDHAGEN: There were many different institutions of killing, and as you mention, I have written about three of them. And one on which I have concentrated were the “order police,” the *Ordnungspolizei*, one branch of which was the police battalions. Now these were men who were drafted into these units in 1939, 1940, and 1941, because Germany had conquered the European continent and they needed, obviously, an enlarged police force to control that conquered territory. These men, in many of the police battalions, were ordinary Germans, in every sense of what it meant to be an ordinary German. They came from all walks of life, all social backgrounds, all professions, different religious affiliations, and so on. And they were drafted into these units not because they were fit by dint of ideology or any other criterion to be genocidal killers but merely because they happened not yet to be in any military institution. When the Germans needed to kill the Jews of a particular region, they often used these police bat-

talions, filled with ordinary Germans, for that task. And I should emphasize that many of these men were not in the SS; in one police battalion I studied, for example, 96 percent of the men were not in the SS, and the vast majority were not in the Nazi party either. So they were really not the Nazi supermen that the killers have typically been portrayed to be. The police battalions show us that ordinary Germans killed Jews, and they also reveal that, among other institutions, there were a vast number of Germans who participated in the slaughter of the Jews, many more than is commonly thought. The minimum estimate that I give is 100,000 Germans, and the number may be far, far higher than that. It was a vast enterprise filled with ordinary Germans. The police battalions are interesting for many reasons. Many of the men in these battalions knew that they did not have to kill Jews. Their commanders, in fact, told them that they did not have to. And we know that this is so because the men themselves have testified to this fact after the war. They have told us that their commanders told them that they did not have to kill, and when the offer was made, only a few of them accepted the opportunity to exempt themselves from the killing of Jews; the vast majority, on the other hand, seeing that nothing actually happened to those who opted out and were given other duties, nevertheless, chose to kill Jews. So we have to emphasize the volunteerism of the killers. They essentially chose to kill Jews.

WOHLGELERNTER: In fact, in one place, I think, you mention the fact that Heinrich Himmler actually sent a memo, or a fiat, that they should not kill. Especially at the very end of the war when they were negotiating with the American forces, around April or May of 1945; nevertheless, despite that particular directive, they went ahead and killed voluntarily.

GOLDHAGEN: Yes. Himmler, who was actually the head of the SS and was also in charge of the extermination of the Jews, issued orders allowing men to exempt themselves from the killing. And in the history of the Holocaust, never was a single German perpetrator ever killed, sent to a concentration camp, jailed, or punished in any serious way for refusing to kill Jews. This is a historical fact. So the police battalions pose a question for us: Why would ordinary Germans—a large number of ordinary Germans—who knew they didn't have to kill Jews, choose to kill Jews and choose to deport them to their deaths?

WOHLGELERNTER: And that, it seems clear, is the major thrust of the work.

GOLDHAGEN: So this is just one of the things, one of the central questions posed by the police battalions. But in addition to not having opted out of the killing, these men did many other things, which I detail in the chapters, that indicate their attitude toward the killing. They often hunted Jews down in the countryside, which they referred to among themselves as the “Jew-hunt,” a hunt for which they gladly volunteered. The commanding officer would ask, “Who would like to go on a Jew-hunt today?”, and men would volunteer for it. “Jew-hunt” is obviously a term of approval. They were hunting the Jewish beast. They did many other things that tell us a great deal about their attitude toward what they were doing. They even took photographs of what they were doing.

WOHLGELERNTER: And they sent them home as souvenirs.

GOLDHAGEN: They sent them home some of the time. One of the reasons that we have so many photographs of the Holocaust is because the Germans took photos. And they took them, obviously, not to indict themselves but, rather, to memorialize their deeds. In one police battalion, the photographs were hung in the headquarters, and anyone could order copies of them.

WOHLGELERNTER: One of the things that upset me terribly when I read your book, is that these units brought—I could not believe this at first—their wives and children to observe the killings. This was a picnic for them.

GOLDHAGEN: A common feature of the Holocaust—it does not mean it happened in the majority of cases—but a common feature of the Holocaust was for wives and girlfriends to be in the killing fields with their men and, sometimes, even to go on killing operations. These men were obviously not ashamed of what they were doing. They clearly were not trying to hide what they were doing. They often celebrated with photographs, with talk, with boasting, with, indeed, formal celebrations, sometimes, after those killing operations. And so the question remains: Why did they do it? And the answer is really quite clear: They shared Hitler’s image of Jews; they believed that Jews were essentially not human beings but devils in human form who had to be destroyed. We always have to remember, when we think about why these people would not opt *out* of the killing when they were given the opportunity that they were shooting men, women, and children at point blank range. If they really had not believed what they were doing was right, the psychological and emotional pressure and the moral pressure for them to remove

themselves from the killing would have been overwhelming.

WOHLGELERNTER: Let’s move on to the work camps. Your comments?

GOLDHAGEN: The work camps reveal a great deal about the power of anti-Semitism. Let me just say one thing before I go on.

About the killers themselves: Much of the book is based upon their own testimony. Tens of thousands of former killers were interrogated about their activities by the Federal Republic of Germany after the war; a few thousand were put on trial, and these testimonies were used to build up a portrait of the killers, to investigate their actions and to explain them. Much of the book, as I indicate, is told in their own words. One man, from one police battalion, speaking for himself and the others to explain the mainspring of the Holocaust, said, and this is a direct quotation, “The Jew was not considered by us to be a human being.”

WOHLGELERNTER: You often mention that they used the term “extermination,” as if these victims were insects, as if these were rats or vermin.

GOLDHAGEN: Yes. They often talked about Jews in those terms. These were the metaphors used to discuss Jews. The work camps reveal a great deal about the power of anti-Semitism.

WOHLGELERNTER: You use a term, you mention it often, namely, “cognitive eliminationist anti-Semitism.” We know about anti-Semitism, but I would like you to define that specific term as you understand it and examine it in your work.

GOLDHAGEN: That kind of anti-Semitism existed in Germany well before Hitler came to power. It is part of the argument of the book that this anti-Semitism was part of German culture and was shared by many people, by the majority of Germans, even before the Nazis came to power. It was based upon a model of Jews that held them to be different from Germans; that held that their differences resided in their biology, which was conceptualized in terms of “race,” and that therefore their nature could not be changed. The Jews were deemed to be evil and powerful, to have done great harm to Germany, and to be malevolent. Therefore, the belief existed in Germany that until Jews and Jewish power were eliminated from German society, Germany could not be secure and prosper. And so you have, historically, many

different kinds of proposals, even in the nineteenth century, for the elimination of Jews, in one way or another.

WOHLGELERNTER: In the chapter of your book on the historical background of anti-Semitism in Germany, you argue that this anti-Semitism grew not out of some emptiness or out of a vacuum but, rather, from a powerful anti-Semitism that raged previously in Germany, even if only in the books and the articles written about Jews up to the time of Hitler's famous speech in 1920. Am I correct there?

GOLDHAGEN: That is absolutely correct. What is often put forward, that somehow Hitler brainwashed the Germans and indoctrinated them and essentially moved them against Jews, against their will, is simply nonsense. For he came into power in a country that was already deeply infected with anti-Semitism, where so many people shared his essential image of Jews, and that is why he could so easily activate the anti-Semitism and mobilize people quickly behind the persecutions of the Jews in the 1930s.

WOHLGELERNTER: Let us move on now, to the third part of your major concentration, and that is the death marches, or as you call them, "The Deadly Way."

GOLDHAGEN: When the Allies were closing in on the concentration camps, the Germans emptied the camps, forcing Jews, and non-Jewish prisoners as well, to trudge through the countryside: first back from eastern Europe, back from Poland to Germany, and then within Germany itself, during the last couple of months of the war. These death marches are also very revealing about the motivation of the perpetrators. Germany was about to be defeated and the Nazi world was collapsing around them, and the Germans guarding the Jews—some were non-Jews, but I focus on the Jews—marched them around, usually aimlessly, with no destination, essentially marching the Jews to death, literally to the last day of the war. So the question is, why would these people do this? Why would they continue to kill Jews when they were actually defeated? They *were* defeated. The whole world was about to change, you would think the Germans would perhaps try to find some alibi for themselves by treating Jews decently at this point. Now the death march that I write most about issued from the Helmbrechts Camp, which was in the southeastern part of Germany.

WOHLGELERNTER: They were going towards Czechoslovakia.

GOLDHAGEN: They were heading southward, in the last couple of months of the war. On this march there were approximately 600 Jewish women and 600 non-Jewish women; the guards were composed of German men and German women. Half the guards on this march were actually women. On the second day of the march, they received an order, the direct order from Himmler alluded to earlier, from one of his adjutants, who came across them: They were not supposed to kill Jews any more. They were to treat them well, they were to divest themselves of the rods that they carried, and they were not to kill any more Jews. Despite receiving a direct order from Himmler to stop killing Jews, these Germans continued to march and kill them. They denied them food, and even when food was offered to them by the local populace, they forbade them that food; they marched them around, they clubbed them, they shot them. These guards' rage against Jews was so great—they were such anti-Semites—that they disobeyed orders not to kill and continued to kill Jewish women. They killed people who were obviously no threat to them, who were in such a weakened and injured state that the American doctor who tended to them when they were liberated wrote that until he had seen these people he would never have believed that people in such a condition could be alive.

WOHLGELERNTER: Many froze to death. They had no shoes.

GOLDHAGEN: They were walking through the countryside with no shoes in freezing weather, with little clothing and little food. Not only did the Germans choose to kill Jews, they also chose to brutalize them and to torture them. And we have the guards' own testimony on these points. But their murderousness was not diffuse—they did not just kill anybody under their control. Not a single non-Jewish prisoner was killed during this march, and in fact, seven days into the march, the non-Jewish prisoners were left behind in another camp; they were let go, essentially. This shows us that the guards were not just brutal people who killed anybody or sadistic people who were just expressing their sadism on any given target; they hated Jews in particular. They enjoyed what they did, and the testimony is overwhelming on this point. What is also significant is that half the guards were women; and if anything, the women guards were crueler than the men were.

WOHLGELERNTER: That was one of the incredible things in your excellent discussion, or description, of the marches, and the analysis of it. The women were so tortuous.

GOLDHAGEN: Because they believed that the Jews had done such great harm to Germany, they also believed that Jews were responsible for the bombing of Germany, if you can believe something as silly as that. They were in a rage toward the Jews, specifically, and they tortured them and beat them on this march literally until a few days before the end of the war.

WOHLGELERNTER: Proving once again that it was all *willing*.

GOLDHAGEN: It *was* willing. When people think of any other mass slaughter or genocide, whether it was the recent slaughter of Tutsis by Hutus in Rwanda, or what has happened in the former Yugoslavia, people naturally assume that the killers believed that what they were doing was right. The only genocide or mass slaughter that I know of where people routinely say that the perpetrators did not want to do what they did, that they did not believe it was right, is the Holocaust. I am merely saying—I think I am taking a very commonsensical position, which is, of course, based on an enormous amount of evidence—that the German perpetrators, in this sense, were like the other perpetrators of other mass slaughters: They believed that what they were doing was correct. People kill and torture other people because they hate them. This should not be a very difficult thing to accept about the German perpetrators, but until now, by and large, this has been denied.

WOHLGELERNTER: Before the book was published, Germany generally, and the publishers there, did not want to touch the book, until one publisher had the courage to do it. Now Germany is up in arms. One of the questions I wanted to ask you, now that you have received national and international acclaim, is this: In your opinion, does this come to them as a shock, or do they want to do what Helmut Kohl wanted to do at Bitburg—the German word for it is, I think, *schlussstrich*—make a line at the bottom of an invoice or bill, and say, “That’s it; we won’t talk about this any more.” Then along comes Professor Goldhagen and unearths the fact that these were ordinary, everyday Germans who were not members of the party, who joined in, who killed, in order to satisfy their terrible sadism, and their terrible “eliminationist anti-Semitism.” Why do you think the Germans are so upset?

GOLDHAGEN: Well, first let me say that, in Germany, there is a lot of misinformation about this book. In fact, there were a number of German publishers who wanted to publish it. We had no problem finding a pub-

lisher. I should also say that there is a national debate about the book. There are some in Germany who are saying this is a very important book, and, in fact, a major weekly newspaper in Germany—*Der Zeit*—has been running a series. It has introduced the book to the German public with a front-page article saying that this is a very significant book that will start a new national debate. It concluded the article by saying, and this is a paraphrase, “How we react to this book will tell us a great deal about the historical consciousness of this Republic.” Other newspapers, too, have been praising the book and saying that it is important, but there are many in Germany who have been attacking it, dismissing it out of hand, not by providing any argument or evidence, really, but simply by denouncing the book and me, in various ways. This part of the debate is disheartening. But I want to emphasize that not everyone in Germany is doing this. I am actually confident that when I finally reply to the critics, which I will do when the book appears this August, and when I go to Germany in September to discuss the book—I am going on tour in Germany, and there will be panel discussions with other scholars, all open to the public—when we have a more reasonable discussion, I am sure that many Germans will look at the book and its arguments carefully and will make the most open and honest confrontation with the past that they can. Things will turn out well in Germany despite what has been a vitriolic attack on the book, and often upon me, in terms that are highly un scholarly, to use a euphemism.

WOHLGELERNTER: Would you discuss the excuses used by and about Germans after the Holocaust to explain their willful killings? What fascinated me, among everything else in the book, is the fact that you finally obliterate the arguments of those still defending the Germans. I am going to mention only a few. The first argument of the defense is always that the perpetrators operated under extreme coercion. Your comment.

GOLDHAGEN: This I have already commented on. They knew they did not have to kill, that is simple. And the more one investigates the lives in those units, the more one sees that many of them were rather lax institutions. They had kindly commanders, they were not under this kind of coercion, and as we know, many of them knew they did not have to kill. They have told us so.

WOHLGELERNTER: Second. The Germans are ineluctably prone to obey orders and are unwavering servants of authority and subject to the moral and psychological imperatives to obey. Your comment.

**GOLDHAGEN:** This is a caricature of Germans. It is a cliché. It is a stereotype that has to be dispensed with. The same Germans who were supposedly slavishly following orders under Hitler had rebelled against the authority of the previous Weimar Republic, fighting to destroy it. Germans follow orders they deem to be legitimate, from a state that they deem to be legitimate; they dissent against regimes and orders that they do not like, often protesting.

**WOHLGELERNTER:** You proved that with your comments on Weimar and the protest against the Weimar Republic.

**GOLDHAGEN:** And also Nazi Germany. There was a great deal of dissent and protest that we know about. So this idea of blind German obedience is simply nonsense.

**WOHLGELERNTER:** The third defense of the Germans: that they were induced to kill and carry out mass murder because of social-psychological pressures, engendered by their peers and other situational factors.

**GOLDHAGEN:** This has been put forth by some able people, but in fact I see no evidentiary basis for this claim. The men themselves, in their testimony, never agree to that. Those who assert this have essentially derived this from their own notions of social psychology. For that matter, for someone to be pressured into doing something, by peer pressure, everyone else has to want to do it. Peer pressure can, of course, operate on isolated individuals, or small groups, but it depends upon the majority wanting to do it. So the peer pressure argument contradicts itself. If the majority of the people hadn't wanted to kill Jews, then there would have been peer pressure not to do it.

**WOHLGELERNTER:** The fourth argument of defense states that the perpetrators, like all petty bureaucrats, pursued self-interest in total disregard of other considerations.

**GOLDHAGEN:** That also is false. It is just things that people say, but there is no evidentiary foundation for it. First of all, the whole notion that these people were bureaucrats is wrong. The people who were in these police battalions were ordinary guys, who were drafted into the unit, and after the war they were just going to go back to their civilian lives. They had no careers to make. And they were not furthering their interests in any way. Of course, we always have to remember, these people were shooting other people—it is not the same sort of act as a bureaucrat enforcing a tax policy that he may not like. We are talking here about cold-blooded killing.

**WOHLGELERNTER:** In one place, you point out that one night some musicians were playing a concert and there was a sudden request for those who wanted to go on a “Jew-hunt.” These musicians, who were simple entertainers, decided willingly to go. So there was really no peer pressure there. They just wanted to kill Jews.

**GOLDHAGEN:** In fact, they had no responsibility for the killing of Jews. They found out about the killing operation, and they begged to be allowed to kill Jews.

### **Postscript by Goldhagen**

My trip to Germany went well. It included six panel discussions with other scholars. Large audiences (2,400 in Munich, for example) attended them, and two were broadcast on national television. The book has become the number one best-seller in Germany. What took many observers by surprise was not only the German public's intense interest in the book but also that so many in Germany clearly approve of the discussion that it has produced and even of its arguments. At each of the panel discussions, the audiences were overwhelmingly on my side and not on that of my critics. They listened to the respective arguments and the quality of evidence adduced and made their own judgments. They indicated their approval with their frequent applause. It was also striking how many of my interlocutors accepted so many of my conclusions and also how much even my critics had to concede. Some of them noticeably changed their evaluations and tone, retreating from the untenable and misleading declarations that they had made earlier. By the end, the German media was declaring my trip and also my book to be a huge success. The liberal weekly newspaper *Die Zeit* and the conservative newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* each used the same phrase to describe my twelve days in Germany: “a triumphal procession.” Even though I had thought that the book would be well received in Germany once people were exposed to its arguments, I did not imagine that it would turn out as it has. All of this says a great deal that is positive about contemporary Germany. For Germans to confront this horrific part of their past is enormously unpleasant. That so many are willing to do so is yet another indication of how transformed the Germany of today is compared to 1933 or 1945. In this sense, Germany is the great cultural and political success story of the postwar period.

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