



HITLER,
THE GERMANS,
AND THE
FINAL SOLUTION

stood as part of the development of a post-war modernized, technocratic, economically advanced, social welfare state. Indeed, as regards actual memory of what life was like under Hitler, oral history techniques had revealed the extent to which the Third Reich — particularly the peace-time years between 1933 and 1939 — were seen as 'normal years' sandwiched between economic misery and war, and years that had many positive sides to them.⁴⁵ 'Strength through Joy' works outings, Hitler Youth rambles, the building of the motorways, the clearing away of unemployment, and the promise of the 'people's car' outweighed in such memory the 'seamier' side of the Third Reich — concentration camps, pogroms, deportations, and the mass murder of designated 'racial inferiors'.

Certainly, the decade since unification has brought significant shifts in historical consciousness. But these have not taken the direction many commentators at the time — myself included — had predicted; rather, this historical consciousness has come to be dominated as never before by the shadow of the Holocaust. Far from receding with the passage of time, the unprecedented crimes against humanity which Hitler's regime perpetrated loom ever larger, more than 50 years since its destruction, in the way Germans view their own past.

This phenomenon has evident connections with generational change — only around one in ten Germans in today's population had any possibility of being involved in the crimes of the Third Reich. The 'Hitler Youth generation', teenagers as the Reich collapsed into ruin, are themselves now of pensionable age.⁴⁶ We are, therefore, fast approaching a time where living experience of the Third Reich will have died out. The generation of those who could engage in outright apologetics for their actions under Hitler is gone, or is at any rate rapidly disappearing. Today's young generation, uninhibited about asking the most penetrating questions about the Nazi past, are now openly probing the actions not of their fathers, but of their grandfathers.

In historical scholarship, too, the generational change has left its mark. Those who for many years have dominated scholarship on the darkest episodes in recent German history, roughly those who were just old enough to have been members of the Hitler Youth in the last years of the war and who have regarded their historical work as a part of their political task of ensuring a lasting legacy of social and liberal values in German society, are now of retirement age. Specialists in National Socialism belonging to a new generation, born in the 1950s and 1960s, have, inevitably, brought new perspectives to bear, feel less bound by the perspectives of their predecessors, want in some senses to break free of their hold, at any rate are prepared to ask questions that challenge the older generation. This is, of course, as it should be — a perfectly

caust could be seen as no worse than the Stalinist mass-murders, and as no more than a horrible by-product of the life-and-death struggle of totalitarian systems, in which major atrocities were committed by both sides.

Again, however, it should be emphasized that such changes of perspective, anticipated with concern by some, have not materialized. Moreover, the renewed interest in 'totalitarian' systems does not have only a negative side to it. Given the new research into the functioning of Soviet rule and the sophistication of research since the 1960s into the power structures and repressive apparatus of the Third Reich, the comparative analysis of 'Stalinism' and 'Hitlerism' need not be a retrograde step, and holds out the prospect of a deeper understanding of both systems and the societies upholding them.⁴³

Reflections

GENERATIONAL CHANGE AND THE 'GOLDHAGEN DEBATE'

What has happened in the past few years, as regards public sensitivities in present-day Germany towards the Third Reich, is at first sight somewhat surprising. The danger appeared evident that the 'revisionist' trends we have described, which first became visible in the 'change of direction' (*Tendenzwende*) of the early 1980s, came sharply into focus in the 'Historikerstreit' — the 'historians' dispute' — of 1986, and appeared to acquire renewed impetus following the unification of 1990, would gain ground and lead, within Germany, to a significant shift in perspective on the Third Reich. It looked probable that the end of the Cold War and the sudden accomplishment of German unification in 1990 would effect what Saul Friedländer called 'a transformation in historical consciousness'⁴⁴ and that this might well usher in what conservatives in Germany had long wanted: the drawing of the line under the Nazi past. A possible redefining of national identity, the 'historicization' (seen as 'normalization') of the Nazi era, and comparisons with what could be portrayed as the even greater horrors of Stalinism pointed in this direction. It seemed likely that there would be increasing impatience in the new Germany with an image of the Third Reich which placed heavy — at times near exclusive — emphasis upon German atrocities, war crimes, racial persecution, and genocide against the Jews, all symbolized by the name 'Auschwitz'. It seemed not unnatural that many Germans — two-thirds of whom were not even born when the Third Reich collapsed and could feel no personal responsibility for what took place under Hitler — would now want more than ever to shake off the burden of the past.

A changing historical consciousness, it was possible to imagine, might seek mainly to focus upon those elements of the Third Reich that could be under-

natural and desirable phenomenon. Each generation must write history if not exactly anew then at least to match its own demands of the past. Advances in historical scholarship are invariably made by pupils challenging the accepted wisdom of their teachers. In the case of such a troubled period as the Third Reich, however, where the moral dimension is so prominent, this can mean not simply revised interpretations or new accents in research, but the moral interrogation of an older generation of historians by a younger.⁴⁷

Meanwhile, there is seemingly no end to public exposure to the legacy of the Hitler era. The Nazi legacy of war and genocide remains part of present-day politics and moral consciousness in Germany. The burden of the Nazi past has not diminished, even for generations that could feel no personal sense of guilt for what happened. Countering the many who have indeed had 'enough of National Socialism'⁴⁸ and long for a line to be drawn under the horrors of the Hitler era, are those who are determined that every aspect of those horrors should be laid bare and that the evils concealed, suppressed, or passed over by the post-war generations should now finally come out into the open. German sensitivities were recently exposed, not for the first time, by something touching them from outside the German cultural sphere: in this instance, the publication in 1996 of a book by a young American political scientist Daniel Goldhagen, whose thesis, bluntly put, was that the Jews were murdered because the uniquely anti-semitic German people wanted them murdered. It amounted to the indictment of a nation.⁴⁹

Goldhagen's book created a sensation in Germany. The first printing of the German edition was a sell-out even before it became available in the bookshops. Thousands — most of whom at that point had not read Goldhagen's book and, in all probability, few if any scholarly analyses of Nazism and the 'Final Solution' for that matter — flocked to the debates where the American author confronted his German academic critics. Some of the debates were televised, with substantial viewing figures. Mass-media attention was extraordinary — not least for a book that had emerged from a doctoral dissertation. A 'Goldhagen industry' of reviews, articles, and even books about his book was spawned.⁵⁰

It happened to be in the country during part of Goldhagen's ten-day publicity tour of Germany and had the opportunity to watch one of the television debates. In the studio staging, the fresh-faced, neatly dressed, impeccably polite, telegenic assistant professor from Harvard was seated opposite a battery of stern-looking critics — some of them heavyweight German professors of daunting erudition. It looked as if Goldhagen was on trial, facing a bench of prosecutors determined on gaining a conviction. His fierce critics, on this occasion including Hans Mommsen (who emerged on numerous occasions as

Goldhagen's most tenacious antagonist) and Ignaz Bubis, head of the Jewish community in Germany, destroyed, I thought (as did my German friends watching at the same time), the basis of Goldhagen's argument in a barrage of well-founded attacks. Goldhagen, speaking in English to ensure that he avoided any linguistic *faux pas* on such a sensitive issue, offered what seemed to me to be only inadequate, bland responses. For such a combative, provocative, aggressively argued book, it amounted, in my view, to a weak defence in which Goldhagen often retreated to qualifications not on offer in the text, or to claims of misunderstanding by his critics.⁵¹ But, however little he was able to confound his detractors, it made no difference — the longer the debates continued, the greater, apparently, became public support for Goldhagen. This seemed to be especially the case among younger Germans.

This can be explained neither by the quality of Goldhagen's contribution to the historiographical debate, nor by the intellectual strength of his revised interpretation of the cause of the 'Final Solution'. Rather, apart from the remarkably successful marketing of the book as a wholly novel interpretation of the Holocaust by the original American publishing house, it has everything to do with the way in which the German trauma of the nation's involvement in the Holocaust has been highlighted once more. Goldhagen's book opened up once more, and in the most glaring fashion, the continuing troubled relationship of Germans with their own past,⁵² and stirred up overnight a heated debate in wide sections of the population about the complicity of ordinary Germans in the extermination of the Jews. The televising in Germany in 1979 of the American film *The Holocaust*, which personalized the tragedy of Europe's Jews in a drama revolving around fictional Nazi and Jewish families, did more than the countless academic studies already in print at the time to lay bare the psychological scars of a country that, for decades, had avoided confronting head-on the full horror of the murder of the Jews and the role of ordinary people, not just Nazi leaders, in those terrible events. 'A Nation is Stunned' was the subtitle of one of the books on the reception of the film that appeared at the time.⁵³ Almost 20 years later, *Schindler's List* doubtless stirred deep emotions in a younger generation. This was the climate in which Goldhagen's book was published.

Even so, it is an extreme rarity that a scholarship book rises overnight to the top of the bestseller lists and that an associate professor of an academic department at a university becomes an international celebrity. So, why did the book have such an impact? For one thing, there was the publicity machine: the Harvard PhD thesis, examining the role of the perpetrators in the killing units of the east through analysis of their testimony in post-war trials, was transformed by publishers' hype into what was marketed as the most original

interpretation of the Holocaust ever published, one that stood the entire historiography of five decades — massive in quantity, often excellent in quality, greatly varied and nuanced in interpretation — on its head. This publicity machine had already been operating at full capacity in the USA and in Great Britain for weeks before the German translation of Goldhagen's book was published.

I was invited on a number of occasions to write reviews for the press and to debate the book on television and radio. I declined all invitations. An early reading led me to the view later echoed by the leading German historian Eberhard Jäckel that it was 'simply a bad book'.⁵⁴ My view was that it contributed little or nothing to a deeper understanding of how the Holocaust came about. By then, it was already rocketing to a place on the non-fictional best-seller lists; I did, therefore, at this point consent to participate in a panel discussion of the book at the German Historical Institute in London. The four historians on the panel were united in their criticism. Few in the audience disagreed, but what was of interest was that the publicity machine had done its work. Of a packed house, it transpired that hardly anyone — other than the speakers — had read the book.

That was certainly the position in Germany, too, in the early stages of the 'Goldhagen phenomenon'. Even before the German edition had been published, *Der Spiegel* had devoted almost 30 pages, under the title 'A Nation of Demons?', to a discussion of the English-language version of Goldhagen's book. The front page of the magazine, under a photo-montage of eager hands reaching out to greet Hitler, framed by a background of the 'gate of death' of Auschwitz-Birkenau, was headed: 'New Controversy about Collective Guilt. The Germans: Hitler's Willing Accomplices in Murder?'⁵⁵ Also before any German version appeared, *Die Zeit*, in a largely positive review, had declared that Goldhagen's book would prompt a new 'historians' dispute'.⁵⁶ This turned out, however, to be a premature judgement. In the '*Historikerstreit*' of the 1980s, the fault lines on a number of issues of political, ideological, and moral significance were drawn *between* historians, reflected in their differing interpretations of the position of Nazism in German history (and, in particular, of the 'Final Solution'). In the Goldhagen case, most historians were broadly in unison in their fundamental criticism of what they saw as a seriously flawed book. Leading historians took issue with it, often in the most forthright terms.⁵⁷ But all this did was to stir interest in the volume. Copies were flown in from England; by the time the German version was ready to appear, members of the public were thirsting to get hold of it.

Clever publicity does not, however, explain everything. The peculiar reception of the book in Germany had other causes. One was the stark — but for

Germans awful — simplicity of Goldhagen's message. His book has a very clear, actually highly simplistic, answer to the question of why the Holocaust happened. In sharp contrast to the vast majority of works in the library of interpretative scholarly studies of the Holocaust, the answer for Goldhagen is straightforward: the German people had been unique in their commitment to an 'eliminationist anti-semitism' from the early nineteenth century onwards and, once given the opportunity under Hitler, they then eliminated the Jews. This certainly (something which may be welcomed) focuses attention again on the role played by anti-semitic ideology in the path to the 'Final Solution', in contrast to interpretations that have played down the significance of ideology in favour of emphasis on the complex structures of Nazi rule and 'functionalist' explanations of the emergence of genocide (though, in truth, no worthwhile work of scholarship had ignored anti-semitism as a significant element in explaining the Holocaust). But of notable importance in the reception of Goldhagen and his book was the startling simplicity of the interpretation compared with what seemed to be tortuous and complicated explanations offered by his critics. The difference was sharpened by Goldhagen's style of writing — the use of detailed descriptions, acting at times as surrogate eye-witness accounts of the most terrible cruelties — which, for all its repetitive use of sociological jargon in places, contrasted diametrically (in its often emotive narrative of the histories of ordinary perpetrators and their victims) with the more detached and abstract academic prose of most historians of Nazi anti-Jewish policy. It was hard not to be moved, gripped, appalled, shocked, horrified by the personalized stories, so vividly told, of the gratuitous cruelty inflicted on the victims by their tormenters and killers.

Even more important was the fact that Goldhagen, himself from a family that had suffered in the Holocaust, was now indicting as never before — leaving aside the understandable, but still misleading, generalizations that had often been expressed in the early post-war period and the implicit tenor of some strands of historical writing in Israel — the entire German people for their crimes against the Jews. He was adamant in his book that 'eliminationist anti-semitism' (feeding directly under Hitler into exterminatory anti-semitism) was an ideology shared by the German people as a whole, not just by a 'nazified' sector, and that the German people were unique in this. His treatment of the behaviour of the perpetrators, describing the cruelties towards the Jews of 'ordinary Germans', as he insisted on calling them, and not just of committed Nazis or members of the SS, drove the message home. No one in Germany with any sensitivity towards the past could ignore the allegation: the reason the Jews were murdered was that Germans were unlike any other people in being a nation of ideological anti-semites — a nation of Hitlers

in this regard, one might say — looking for the opportunity to 'eliminate' the Jews; when the opportunity came, they grasped it eagerly.

Could this be true? Just to pose the question meant having to come to grips with Goldhagen's claim. It was a powerful indictment resting on some emotively displayed evidence. Attempts by academics to counter it by more balanced and differentiated analyses could easily seem weak, unconvincing, detached, even apologetic, to mass audiences which, naturally enough, were for the most part little versed or interested in the nuances of scholarly debate. The more the experienced historians tried to combat the broad sweep of Goldhagen's grand accusation, the less effective — even if accurate — their criticisms appeared to be to a generation ready and prepared to think the worst of their grandfathers.

The trauma Goldhagen's book, once again in the most graphic terms, uncovered shows no sign of diminishing. If anything, the greater the distance from the terrible events of the 1930s and 1940s and the more memory is being replaced by memorial as the generation of the victims dies away,⁵⁸ the less the psychological scar on national consciousness appears to be fading.

But although it has been an extraordinary phenomenon in highlighting this trauma more than ever before, as an analysis of the 'Final Solution' Goldhagen's book will, in my view, occupy only a limited place in the unfolding, vast historiography of such a crucially important topic — probably at best as a challenge to historians to qualify or counter his 'broad-brush' generalizations.

Some of the criticism of the book has been savage — none more so than the ferocious onslaught on the bases of Goldhagen's arguments by the New York political scientist Norman Finkelstein, claiming that: 'Replete with gross misrepresentations of the secondary literature and internal contradictions, Goldhagen's book is worthless as scholarship', that his work 'adds nothing to our current understanding of the Nazi holocaust'.⁵⁹ This is, however, to go much too far, as even Hans Mommsen, one of Goldhagen's most vehement critics, accepts.⁶⁰ Whatever its deficiencies, Goldhagen's book poses important questions which, as the reactions to it have shown, still need answers — not least in the eyes of many younger Germans.

More damaging to Goldhagen was the review by Ruth Bettina Birn, now Chief Historian in the War Crimes Section of Canada's Department of Justice, who for a number of years worked at the *Zentrale Stelle der Landesjustizverwaltungen* (Central Office of State Justice Administration) in Ludwigsburg where Goldhagen carried out most of his research.⁶¹ Birn had extensive knowledge, therefore, of the materials that formed the core of Goldhagen's interpretation. Most of the criticism levelled at Goldhagen by historians of different nationalities and persuasions had targeted the earlier parts of his book which

provide, in establishing his central thesis, an overview — based largely on secondary sources — of the development of anti-semitism in Germany down to the eve of the Holocaust. Some historians had been more generous about Goldhagen's more detailed findings on the perpetrators and actions of the killing units in the later sections of his book, while remaining for the most part hostile to his overall interpretation.⁶² But Birn's review tackled Goldhagen's argument in the place where he had seemed most impervious to criticism: in his analysis of the trial material relating to the killers. In a sustained attack, levelled not only at the essence of Goldhagen's argument but also at his method, Birn accused the American author, among other things, of one-sided use of the trial evidence to uphold his own *a priori* generalizations. She systematically set out to undermine his use of sources and, therefore, to discredit him as a historian, and to deprive his book of all claim to validity as an interpretation of the Holocaust. 'As it stands,' Birn witheringly concluded, 'this book only caters to those who want simplistic answers to difficult questions, to those who seek the security of prejudices.'⁶³

Birn's hard-hitting review was, however, itself not free of weaknesses and errors, not least in the misleading way she couched some of Goldhagen's arguments, and Goldhagen was able to provide a lengthy, and heated, rebuttal — without, however, so far as I can see, countering some of the detailed points of criticism of his use of sources.⁶⁴

All in all, the debate about Goldhagen's book has led to some unusually bitter confrontations, of which the author's conflict with Birn (whom at one time he was threatening to sue) and his dismissive comments about Finkelstein (following the latter's unnecessarily aggressive review) are the most glaring manifestations. It often seemed in the debate that emotionality, from whatever motives, had overtaken rationality. Given the subject matter, that was understandable, but still regrettable. Advances in this most difficult, complex, and important of issues — comprehending better the genesis and perpetration of the Holocaust — will ultimately only come about through historical research detached from overheated emotion and bitter polemics. It is, therefore, all the more welcome to find perhaps the most valuable and most thorough critique of Goldhagen's work in a calm and rational analysis, far from aggressive in tone, and ready to see some merit in the book, by one of the outstanding younger historians of the Holocaust, Dieter Pohl.⁶⁵

The great virtue of Pohl's analysis is that it remains free of polemics, and confined to strictly scholarly parameters of analysis. Pohl subjects both Goldhagen's empirical research and his methodological approach to the most rigorous scrutiny in the context of international scholarship on the Holocaust, and finds the work gravely lacking on both counts. Pohl, whose knowledge of the

secondary literature and primary sources relating to the 'Final Solution' is highly impressive, and who has extensively researched in archives in eastern Europe which Goldhagen did not begin to tap, revealed inconsistencies and inadequacies in Goldhagen's empirical exploration wherever he looked. As regards Goldhagen's methodological approach, Pohl — as we have seen, by no means the hardest of Goldhagen's critics — speaks of a 'speculative style of questioning' and 'forms of argument in several places which touch the very limit of scholarly practice'.⁶⁶ Bearing in mind the major methodological problems Goldhagen faced, Pohl concludes, 'greater reserve in the way of arguing of the author would have been in place. But Goldhagen knows almost nothing but certainties'. Certainly, on the question of the motivation of the perpetrators, Pohl points out, the book has prompted new questions, and contributes some new detail to scholarly discussion. But overall: 'the book belongs . . . to those great simplifying attempts (*Entwürfe*) . . . that ought to be taken as a challenge'.⁶⁷ In the light of Pohl's penetrating analysis — there was no shortage of other far-reaching criticism — it may suffice here simply to outline some of what seem to me to be the flaws of the book.

A highly selective use of evidence is employed by Goldhagen to build up a picture of a people whose endemic anti-semitic mentality, deep seated since the Middle Ages, had by the nineteenth century turned into a uniquely German 'eliminationist' brand of anti-semitism, common to the whole of society. This *a priori* crude generalization is then deployed as the answer to all problems raised, only in order to be dismissed. Why, for example, was there no German opposition to the extermination of the Jews? Easy: the Germans were all eliminationist anti-semites. The demonization of the Germans provides, therefore, the 'answer' to all questions. Circularity of argument is the basis of the book. In reality, a mass of literature exists — some of it produced by Jewish historians — demonstrating a wide spectrum of attitudes towards the Jews both before the Nazis came to power and even during the Third Reich itself.⁶⁸

Goldhagen certainly has no difficulty in providing numerous instances of extreme — often gratuitous — cruelty towards Jews by Germans. Whether the members of the police battalions of the *Ordnungspolizei* can so readily be classed as 'ordinary Germans' is, however, open to doubt. The individuals in such units had not only, like the rest of the population, been subjected to years of relentless anti-semitic propaganda but, even if not members of the SS, belonged to an organization (the *Ordnungspolizei*) that was part of a repressive apparatus in which anti-semitism had certainly been internalized, part in fact of a wider police apparatus whose head was none other than Heinrich Himmler. How important, in any case, anti-semitism was as a motive in the killing units is something which, as Christopher Browning's work has shown,

needs to be established, not simply presumed, and could vary in intensity.⁶⁹ Only comparative analysis of the behaviour of the men in similar circumstances might indicate whether their hatred of Jews was paramount in their killing actions and cruelty towards their victims. There is some evidence to suggest that there was little difference, for instance, in the same setting between their treatment of Jews and of Soviet prisoners of war.⁷⁰

Goldhagen's assumption — for that is what it is — of the uniqueness of German anti-semitism, his key explanation for the Holocaust, is not tested, remarkably for a political scientist (whose dissertation, from which the book emanates, won a prize in the field of comparative politics), by any comparative analysis between Germans and others implicated in the killing. In particular, the extraordinary brutality of Lithuanian, Latvian, and Ukrainian participants in the mass killing operations is never dealt with in any systematic fashion, nor the reasons for their high level of barbarism related to the argument for alleged German uniqueness of 'eliminationist' (then exterminatory) anti-semitism. Also left unexplained is how this presumed unique anti-semitism, embedded in the German mentality for centuries, changed so dramatically, as Goldhagen claims, after the war to make the Germans 'normal'.

Goldhagen's book is unlikely to play any significant part in the important, and ever-deepening scholarly research on the Holocaust. But sometimes the 'great simplifiers' can serve a purpose outside the context of narrower historiographical debate. Scholarly research and popular historical consciousness are frequently out of step with each other, not just in Germany; it can sometimes happen that a book lacking scholarly distinction can nevertheless touch a raw nerve in a way that the findings of more profound academic research do not, and unleash a debate of some importance. This was the case with Goldhagen's book.

At any rate, the reception of the book in Germany demonstrated, yet again, how far removed we are from any 'historicization' of Nazism, from treating it dispassionately as a period of history much as any other. The Goldhagen affair highlights once more the point that, in dealing with the problem of explaining Nazism, historical-philosophical, political-ideological, and — above all — moral issues remain inescapable.

CHANGING PERSPECTIVES IN RESEARCH

It is possible to draw some encouragement from the onward path of recent research on the Nazi era, especially in Germany. It seems as if some significant trends of change can broadly be established.⁷¹

The debates that raged in the 1960s and 1970s about the nature of Nazism, whether as a form of fascism or manifestation of totalitarianism, have long