

## Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust

How and why did ordinary German men become killers during the Holocaust? Historian Christopher Browning and Political Scientist Daniel Goldhagen offer widely contrasting views on the matter. Browning contends that German perpetrators were obedient individuals who succumbed to peer pressure, but Goldhagen discounts this notion. Goldhagen asserts that Germans desperately wanted to kill Jews and did not have to be coerced into the act of killing. Before one can understand the complexity of this debate, it is necessary to recap the relationship between Jews and Germans from 1933 through the onset of the Holocaust.

The Nazis inherited a country whose confidence was shattered after suffering through a humiliating peace treaty, hyperinflation, and massive unemployment. In order to rebuild this confidence, the Nazis focused their attention on the establishment of a *Volksgemeinschaft* (people's community) that excluded Jews and other domestic enemies. Within two months of the Nazi takeover in Germany, the Nazis put their 1920 party platform into action. Their hostility towards the Jews began with a short-lived boycott of Jewish businesses that was immediately followed by the Law for the Restoration of the Professional Civil Service. This law proclaimed that only Aryans could hold German civil service positions. All Jewish civil servants were subsequently fired (Engel, p. 32). With this act, the first step was taken to forge German unity and to ensure

that “no Jew...may be a member of the nation” (Nazi Party Platform, cited in McDonough, p. 104). This unbearable position led some Jews, including Fritz Rosenfelder, to commit suicide (Rosenfelder Suicide Note, cited in Engel, p. 93). As a way to cope with this ordeal, other Jews, like Eva G. Reichmann, the Director of the Central Association of German Citizens of the Jewish Faith, pondered the benefits for Jews of retreating from their assimilated ways and celebrating their Jewish heritage more (Return to Judaism, cited in Engel, pp. 93-94).

By 1935, anti-Semitic hostility further increased with the passage of the Nuremberg Laws. These laws included the Reich Citizenship Law and the Law for the Protection of German Blood and Honor. The Reich Citizenship Law defined who constituted a German and who constituted a Jew, while the Law for the Protection of German Blood and Honor banned intermarriages between Aryans and Jews (Spielvogel, pp. 273-75). German law now considered Jews to be non-citizens and labeled them as outsiders of the country. In accordance with the 1920 Nazi Program, “anyone who is not a citizen of the state may live in Germany only as a guest and must be regarded as being subject to foreign laws” (Nazi Party Platform, cited in McDonough, p. 104). The Nuremberg Laws indoctrinated the belief into Germans that Jews were really “parasite[s]” who threatened Germany’s well-being (Hitler’s Early Speech, cited in Engel, p. 89).

Conditions for the Jews improved with the onset of the 1936 Berlin Summer Olympic Games, but this improvement did not last long. Two years later with Hitler's war plans imminent, Jews were forced to carry special identification tags with them that revealed their ethnicity. With this distinction, the image of a Jew as an outsider became more prevalent to the Aryan nation (Spielvogel, p. 275). While Nazi citizens tolerated and even supported this anti-Semitism, they did not condone violence towards the Jewish outcasts or to their property. Germans were repulsed by the November 1938 *Kristallnacht* pogroms' attacks against Jewish business and synagogues. The revelation of the T-4 Euthanasia program in the fall of 1941 equally disgusted them (Spielvogel, p. 185). If ordinary Germans did not condone violence towards Jews or other undesirables, then what transformed them into killers during the Holocaust?

Historian Christopher Browning contends that the killers' motivating factors, included obedience to authority, wartime brutalization, the routinization of killing, peer pressure, situational obligation, ideological indoctrination, and racism. To begin with, Browning establishes the case that Germans naturally obey authority figures and their orders. Major Trapp, told his men in Reserve Police Battalion 101 that the order to kill Jews came from the very top of the government, implying that the order came from the popular Nazi Fuhrer, Adolph Hitler (Browning, cited in Niewyk, p. 76). With these directives in place and justified by the Reich's claims of an international Jewish conspiracy that

threatened Germans, the majority of Germans were prepared to fight for their perceived survival. Browning uses Social Psychologist Stanley Milgram's laboratory experiments on how peer pressure affects human behavior to further explain the tendency of Germans to conform to authority. According to Milgram, "Socialization through family, school, and military service, as well as a whole array of rewards and punishments within society generally, reinforces and internalizes a tendency toward obedience" (Browning, cited in Niewyk, p. 76).

Furthermore, Nazi citizens were indoctrinated to accept anti-Semitism. With the pre-established image of the Jew as a societal outcast combined with the brutality of war, ordinary Germans found the strength to transform themselves into killers of defenseless victims. For many, the killing of Jews became less gruesome with increased complicity. Browning refers to this as the routinization of killing. To demonstrate his point, Browning describes the mental hardships experienced during Battalion 101's first killing assignment. At first, the men refused to speak about the massacre, but as time went on and as they participated in more killing projects, "they became increasingly efficient and calloused executioners" (Browning, cited in Niewyk, p. 80). However, this was not universally the case as the number of people who no longer wanted to kill also increased with every assignment. For this reason, the transformation of the killing process from a personalized one into one with less personal responsibility with the

introduction of the death camps and the gas chambers made killing easier and more efficient (Browning, cited in Niewyk, p. 85).

Ordinary Germans also participated in the Holocaust because they did not want to let their peers down or to be looked down upon by their fellow Battalion members. Browning explains, “Those who did not shoot risked isolation, rejection, and ostracism – a very uncomfortable prospect within the framework of a tight-knit unit stationed abroad among a hostile population, so that the individual had virtually nowhere else to turn for support and social contact” (Browning, cited in Niewyk, p. 87). Under these conditions, he maintains that Germans had a situational obligation to kill Jews. Additionally, he asserts that “to break ranks and step out, to adopt overly nonconformist behavior, was simply beyond most of the men. It was easier for them to shoot” (Browning, cited in Niewyk, p. 87).

However, the men of Reserve Police Battalion 101 were not forced to kill Jews. Battalion leader Major Trapp gave his men the option to be excused from the brutal task, but only one in five men took him up on the offer. Some police officers who participated in the first round of killing refused to continue, but the majority of these middle-aged ordinary men from working-class origins persisted with their instructed killing operation (Browning, cited in Niewyk, pp. 77, 80-81). Based on Milgram’s research, Browning concludes that peer pressure had the greatest influence in transforming ordinary Germans into killers. When they were

not observed, naïve participants in Milgram's study inflicted minimal pain to their victims. On the contrary, when collaborators in his study consistently increased the electric shock interval, the naïve subject accepted it and did not object (Browning, cited in Niewyk, p. 85). While this was a revealing study on human behavior and conformity to peer pressure, Browning realizes that the small sample of participants involved in the study was too small to make conclusions about all of the perpetrators in the Holocaust. He explains, "The behavior of any human being is, of course, a very complex phenomenon, and the historian who attempts to 'explain' it is indulging in a certain arrogance. When nearly 500 men are involved, to undertake any general explanation of their collective behavior is even more hazardous" (Browning, cited in Niewyk, p. 90). Even though Browning wrote his study before Goldhagen, Browning's disclaimer for his own work dually serves as a challenge to Goldhagen's assertion.

Contrary to Browning's views, Political Scientist Daniel Goldhagen believes that ordinary Germans did not have to be convinced to kill. Goldhagen asserts that "'ordinary Germans,' were animated...by a particular *type* of anti-Semitism that led them to conclude that the Jews *ought to die*" (Goldhagen, cited in Niewyk, p. 92). Browning detests this universal application of guilt, calling it an arrogant assumption. Nevertheless, Goldhagen claims that decades of anti-Semitic behavior among ordinary Germans prepared them for the task and the desire to kill Jews. To demonstrate his point, Goldhagen discusses the callous

and brutal manner in which Germans chose to kill Jews. In one scene involving Police Battalion 309, 100 to 150 men heinously packed Jews into a synagogue and then set it on fire (Goldhagen, cited in Niewyk, p. 94). Goldhagen's point is that Germans were ordered to kill Jews, but the manner in which they executed the order was not explicit. For this reason, he believes that Germans could have been more merciful in the killing process. For instance, when Police Battalion 101 rounded-up Jews for transport to another location, he reasons that the Germans could easily have given them water to make them more comfortable before their death (Goldhagen, cited in Niewyk, p. 95).

In response to Browning's work, Goldhagen discounts the notion of German obedience to the state. He explains that "the very people, Germans, who supposedly were slavishly devoted to the cult of the state and to obedience for obedience's sake, were the same people, Germans, who battled in the streets of Weimar in defiance of existing state authority and often in order to overthrow it" (Goldhagen, cited in Niewyk, p. 98). As such, he also dismisses Social Psychologist Stanley Milgram's conclusions on Germans' innate obedience to authority. In further disagreement with Browning, Goldhagen downplays the significance of peer pressure. Goldhagen faults Browning and other historians who treat Germans as robotic agents of the state. He explains that most historians "do not conceive of the actors as human agents, as people with wills, but as

beings moved solely by external forces or by transhistorical and invariant psychological propensities” (Goldhagen, cited in Niewyk, p. 91).

Like Browning, Goldhagen emphasizes that Germans were not forced to kill. Taking this claim a step further than Browning, Goldhagen maintains that if the majority of Germans abhorred killing, then collectively they could have prevented it. He denies that the Nazi indoctrination of ordinary Germans resulted in their decision to kill Jews, reasoning that anti-Semitism had long been a part of German culture. Instead, he proclaims that ordinary Germans killed Jews because it brought them pleasure. According to Goldhagen, “German political culture had evolved to the point where an enormous number of ordinary, representative Germans became – and most of the rest of their fellow Germans were fit to be – Hitler’s willing executioners” (Goldhagen, cited in Niewyk, p. 103).

Adding to the debate between Browning and Goldhagen, historian Omer Bartov focuses on the image of the Jew as an elusive enemy within Nazi Germany. Bartov explains that this image was established and fostered during the turmoil of the Weimar years that preceded the Nazi rise to power. At this time, the right wing in the country perceived the Jews to be the main beneficiaries of the new Weimar democracy and the fall of Imperial Germany. Increased Jewish presence in the arts, academe, the media, and politics justified this position (Bartov, p. 778). Once in power, the Nazis harbored the idea that Jews held too high of a place within German society and that they were the source of all of



Germany's troubles. Bartov claims that "the tendency to perceive the Jews as somehow related to all of the evils that beset [post-World War I] Germany greatly facilitated the Nazi party's anti-Semitic propaganda and the popular appeal of the Third Reich's subsequent anti-Jewish policies" (Bartov, p. 783). However, Bartov maintains that anti-Semitism was only one of many factors that united the diverse groups of followers within the Nazi party. Other factors included "economic anxiety and hardship, fear of revolution, a longing for national unity and greatness" (Bartov, p. 783). Therefore, German anti-Semitism cannot be solely blamed for the Holocaust

Germans' fear of revolution, especially a Communist revolution, further implicated Jews when Hitler deceptively linked them to the Bolsheviks in the Soviet Union. This perceived threat to their nation made ordinary Germans increasingly fearful of Jews, especially after the June 1941 German invasion of the Soviet Union. Consequently, bureaucrats, soldiers, and policemen were prepared to fight for the defense of their nation. Bartov argues that the complexity of this cooperation "tells us a great deal about the crucial role played by the fabricated image of the elusive enemy in preparing German society to take the path to inhumanity and barbarism" (Bartov, p. 785). The image of the Jew as an elusive enemy allowed ordinary Germans to kill defenseless Jews of any age or gender without any qualms about it.

Historian Oded Heilbronner also does not perceive of a link from the anti-Semitism in existence during the Weimar Republic to the execution of the Holocaust. The Jewish problem that preoccupied the minds of Nazi leaders was not the main focal point of early adherents to the party. Nevertheless, Heilbronner acknowledges that the Nazis rose to power because of Weimar's many problems, and he adds that Weimar's problems desensitized Germans to discrimination against the Jews. He claims that the turmoil in Weimar Germany resulted in a "profound radicalization and politicalization of [German] society" (Heilbronner, p. 575-76).

Still, that does not establish a link to the Holocaust. More than anti-Semitism, the wide-range of early Nazi supporters yearned for security and they supported the Nazi's pledge to restore German greatness. Historian Jackson Spielvogel, explains that "the Nazis presented a compelling image of a strong, virile, dynamic new Germany that was above parties, above classes" (Spielvogel, p. 75). Nazi rhetoric made them very popular with a large segment of the German population. According to Heilbronner, Nazi leaders manipulated this popular support for their own self-interest of discriminating against the Jews (Heilbronner, p. 576). Through Nazi indoctrination and the German's "loss of humanity" during the Weimar years, he claims that "ordinary men without any strong ideological convictions...were able to give and execute with great cruelty orders

of extermination contrary to the education and outlook they had received from their parents” (Heilbrunner, p. 576).

Historian Nikolaus Wachsmann also believes that “there is no direct line from pre-1933 German popular anti-Semitism to the extermination of the Jews” (Wachsmann, p. 487). Disabled individuals were persecuted during the Weimar period, but not Jews. Consequently, Wachsmann rejects Goldhagen’s thesis that Germans desperately wanted to kill Jews. Historians Albert S. Lindermann, Klaus P. Fischer, and Michael Burleigh share Wachsmann’s view on the matter. Lindermann calls Goldhagen “ignorant,” while Fischer barely says anything at all. Fischer reserves a lowly footnote to describe Goldhagen’s contributions. Burleigh is angrier with Goldhagen, believing that his work has no merit and he blames “media hype” for Goldhagen’s popularity (Wachsmann, p. 479).

While he disagrees with Goldhagen’s thesis, Fischer does acknowledge that the ability to carry out the Final Solution was in place long before the Nazis came to power. In true Browning fashion, Fischer explains that German obedience to Imperial German authority prepared them to blindly support the Nazi state and its policies. However, ordinary Germans were not specifically ready to kill Jews (Fischer, cited in Wachsmann, pp. 484-85). Lindermann echoes this sentiment, additionally pointing out that German anti-Semitism was similar to that, which existed in other European countries (Lindermann, cited in Wachsmann, p. 485).

Overall, scholars reject Goldhagen's thesis that Germans desperately wanted to kill Jews. To begin with, his claim does not address the German outrage after the *Kristallnacht* pogrom's attacks against the Jews. In addition, he does not explain why Germans were outraged after the revelation of the T-4 euthanasia program. If Germans desperately wanted to kill, then why did they abhor this criminal activity? Anti-Semitism may have played a role in the killing, but it alone does not explain why ordinary Germans became killers as Goldhagen maintains it does. In comparison to the anti-Semitism in other European countries, historian Albert S. Lindermann explains that German anti-Semitism was not unique. That is why historians Lindermann, Wachsmann, Heilbrunner, Bartov, and Browning do not see a link between Weimar anti-Semitism and the Holocaust. Heilbrunner and Bartov add that most early Nazis were not overly concerned with the Jewish problem. They had other more pressing issues to deal with. At the same time, while these problems did not translate into a desire to kill Jews, Heilbrunner claims that they desensitized Germans to the plight of Jews.

With all of the scholars in this essay, except for Goldhagen, rejecting a connection between Weimar's problems and the Holocaust, it is now possible to move on to the question of whether Germans were forced to kill Jews. In the only agreement between the two scholars, Browning and Goldhagen assert that Germans were not forced to kill and that no punishment was administered for refusal to comply with the orders to kill. However, Browning explains that those

who refused to kill were harassed by their peers. He claims that “only the very exceptional remained indifferent to taunts of ‘weakling’ from their comrades and could live with the fact that they were considered to be ‘no man’” (Browning, cited in Niewyk, p. 88). Indifferent to this view, Goldhagen believes that Germans were not robots and that they could have said no if they wanted to. This leads to the next question of why ordinary Germans became killers.

Browning maintains that Germans became killers because of their tendency to obey authority, because of Nazi indoctrination that propagandized about a Jewish world conspiracy, the brutality of war, the routinization of killing, peer pressure, situational obligations, and racism. Goldhagen dismisses all of these factors, except for racism. He believes that German anti-Semitism prepared ordinary Germans to be “Hitler’s Willing Executioners.” To elaborate, Goldhagen asserts that the German rebellion against Weimar authority proves that Germans were not obedient people. This claim has some merit, but dismisses the unique circumstances and the feelings of personal loss attributed to the Weimar government. As Heilbrunner explains, this suffering desensitized ordinary Germans to the suffering of others. Like Browning, historians Fischer and Lindermann also consider the Germans to be obedient to authority. In addition to their loss of their humanity, Heilbrunner believes that indoctrination played a major role in the transformation of ordinary Germans into killers. Bartov shares Heilbrunner’s feelings on the power of indoctrination. According to Bartov, the

perception of the Jews as an elusive enemy, especially when the Nazis linked them to the Bolsheviks, made Germans feel that they were fighting for their survival.

Since the reader now understands the arguments about why ordinary Germans became killers, the reasons can now be established as to why some Germans chose not to kill. Browning explains that some Germans claimed that they were too weak to kill. This can probably be attributed to a heightened sense of morality. If this is true, then it adds credence to Goldhagen's idea that the Battalion members were not robots and that they were capable of saying no to killing. Had Germans not wanted to kill, Goldhagen adds, collectively they could have abstained from the task. This point is well taken, but does not supersede the notion of obedience, peer pressure, indoctrination, or other factors raised by Browning and the other historians. While the routinization of killing made subsequent killings easier for most Germans, this was not universally true. With increased participation in killing, came a greater number of Germans who could no longer continue the task.

Still, none of these questions explain why Germans were so brutal in the killing process. Browning maintains that pressure from one's peers resulted in the brutal treatment of Jews. To justify his belief, Browning refers to Milgram's scientific experiment; specifically, he refers to the influence that two collaborators in the project had on one naïve subject who accepted the two men's increased

electric shocks to the victim. Goldhagen dismisses Milgram and the power of peer pressure, insisting that the torture of Jews brought pleasure to Germans. He claims that Germans could have offered water to the victims they were transporting to their death. Unfortunately, Goldhagen did not elaborate on how it would make sense for people who want to kill Jews to be humane to them.

Finally, on the nature of human behavior, Browning contends that motives cannot be universally applied. He believes that applying one trait to all Germans is very arrogant. Goldhagen partakes in this arrogance in his claim that all Germans desperately wanted to kill Jews. He also tends to generalize in many instances. For example, he explains that 100 to 150 men forced Jews into a synagogue that they set ablaze. First of all, this fails to consider the reality that this many men are not needed to set a building on fire. Additionally, some men could have sat back, while others pushed in front of them and participated in the killing. Still, others could simply have gone through the motions because of peer pressure or other such factors. Overall, German complicity or refusal to partake in the Holocaust was the result of numerous factors. Consequently, most historians discredit Goldhagen's thesis, although, Wachsmann contends that Goldhagen's work was still influential in one aspect. He explains that Goldhagen "directed attention away from the structures of Nazi extermination, for so long the focus of many historians, to the actual perpetrators of genocide and their motives" (Wachsmann, p. 479).

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