

## Why was Daniel Goldhagen's Book *Hitler's Willing Executioners* so popular in Germany?

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**Abstract:** Daniel Goldhagen's book 'Hitler's Willing Executioners' boasted impressive sales figures in Germany after its publication in 1996, despite the book concluding that the Germans were predisposed to commit the Holocaust based on a uniquely German eliminationist anti-semitism. This article addresses the reasons for the book's popularity in Germany. In particular it highlights the importance of historical memory on national identity, politics and society. It shows how the reaction to Goldhagen's book reflected many of the issues that concerned contemporary Germans.

**Keywords:** Daniel Goldhagen; Hitler's Willing Executioners; German society; Holocaust memory; national identity

Few Historical works have achieved greater success and have aroused more heated debate than Daniel Goldhagen's book *Hitler's Willing Executioners*. Goldhagen's thesis rests on the assertion that since the medieval period a specific form of eliminationist anti-Semitism had developed in Germany. For Goldhagen the German population were predisposed to eliminating the Jews, and that when Hitler came to Power in 1933 rather than tentatively leading the Germans to commit mass murder he effectively opened the floodgates. Goldhagen also greatly expanded the number of perpetrators, suggesting that hundreds of thousands were involved and that millions more would have willingly participated given the opportunity.<sup>1</sup> Despite the harsh rejection of the book by many German and non-German historians the German version of the book, published in August 1996, sold incredibly well. Eighty thousand copies of the German edition sold in the first month of the books release and by Goldhagen's tour in September three thousand copies a day were flying off the shelf.<sup>2</sup> The Goldhagen controversy shows the importance of the public discourse on historical memory in effecting national identity, politics and society. It is these issues that this investigation will address. It is worth noting that it was predominantly west Germans who engaged in such a strong way with the book and that the book was received differently in the former east. Although interesting this is not the focus of my research and any references to 'Germans' below will predominantly relate to 'west' Germans. This research has drawn on secondary sources, such as *Facing the Nazi Past* by Bill Niven and *Unwilling Germans?* edited by Robert Shandley, and articles published during the debate by Goldhagen and German

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<sup>1</sup> Goldhagen D., *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, (London, 2001), pp.3 - 25

<sup>2</sup> Grossmann A., 'The "Goldhagen effect": Memory, Repetition, and Responsibility in the New Germany' in Eley G. (ed.), *The "Goldhagen Effect" History, Memory, Nazism – Facing the German Past*, (Michigan, 2000), p.113

historians, commentators and journalists. These actors in the debate were key in formulating the public discourse on Holocaust memory. An analysis of these sources will establish the reasons why Goldhagen's book was so popular in Germany and its effect on Holocaust Memory. This essay identifies several key areas of the book's appeal in Germany. Firstly the context in which it was produced and the previous public discussions of the Holocaust. Secondly the effect of reunification on Holocaust memory, the need to readdress the Holocaust and to confront issues of German nationalism. Thirdly it will analyse the role of Holocaust memory in Germany's geopolitical situation, German national identity and on the notion of German collective guilt. Fourthly the appeal of the book itself, its arguments and their implications. Finally the essay will analyse the role of the media and the marketing campaign in the book's commercial success. Through addressing these themes the essay will provide a number of interlinking explanations for the book's success in Germany.

The history of the Federal Republic is strewn with what Anita Grossmann has termed 'Holocaust moments', these Holocaust moments represent attempts within Germany to normalize or confront their past by remembering, commemorating and working through the questions of guilt and responsibility.<sup>3</sup> Some of these Holocaust moments include the stage version of *The Diary of Anne Frank* in 1956, the discussions prompted by the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem in 1961, the nationwide screening of the television series *Holocaust* in 1979, the *Historikerstreit* in 1986 and finally events in the 1990s such as the film *Schindler's List* and the *Crimes of the Wehrmacht Exhibition*. In many ways the Goldhagen controversy is just one more episode of Holocaust confrontation that every German generation seemingly must pass through as a quasi rite of passage.<sup>4</sup> Germany's debates regarding the Holocaust are not solely formed within its borders, the influence of Americans and in particular American Jews in forming Holocaust memory in Germany is significant. The stage production of *The Diary of Anne Frank*, *Holocaust* TV series, *Schindler's List* and Goldhagen's book are all American imports and this is an important subtext in German Holocaust memory. The frequency of these so called 'Holocaust moments', whether created internally or externally, indicate how *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (coming to terms with the past) has earned the Federal Republic political legitimacy and has become a crucial and intrinsic part of German, specifically West German, civic identity since 1945. Heinrich August Winkler diagnosed this obsession with confronting the darkest period in German history as a form of 'negative nationalism'. Germans seem to possess a sense of pride in repenting and dealing with and their Nazi past.<sup>5</sup> In this respect it is not surprising that an American Jew's provocative book on Germany's Nazi era should have prompted such a huge response in Germany.

The reception of Goldhagen's theses can not be separated from the immediate context of historical debates in Germany at that time. As stated above the 1990s signified an explosion in *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* in Germany, *Schindler's List*, the *Crimes of the Wehrmacht* exhibition and the success of *Victor Klemperer's Diary* all prompted significant Holocaust discussion in Germany shortly before Goldhagen's book burst onto the scene. The themes that emerge in these representations of the Nazi era are very much connected to those within Goldhagen's work. *The Crimes of the Wehrmacht* exhibition was hugely controversial. It shattered the myth of 'the honourable German army' as it documented at

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., pp.89 - 90

<sup>4</sup> Shandley R. *Unwilling Germans? – The Goldhagen Debate*, (Minnesota, 1998), p.28

<sup>5</sup> Grossmann, 'Memory, repetition and responsibility' in *Goldhagen Effect*, pp.91 - 123

length the Wehrmacht's involvement in genocide.<sup>6</sup> This exhibition, like Goldhagen, greatly expanded the number of German perpetrators, which before had been confined to the Nazis and the SS. The combination of these two radically expanded assessments of the number of perpetrators had irrecoverably altered the collective memory of that period. The false image that World War Two and the Holocaust were events carried out by unidentifiable strangers in faraway places was shattered in the public imagination.<sup>7</sup>

Goldhagen is often regarded in connection with or even as a successor to *Schindler's List*. The film is concerned primarily with individual freedom and it tells the story of how one man's actions made a difference. Goldhagen's study on 'ordinary Germans' is also concerned with individual actions and responsibility, in their own ways both Goldhagen's book and the film have undermined the notion of a 'choiceless German' and both were immensely popular amongst younger Germans.<sup>8</sup> *The Klemperer Diary* offered an account of what German policies directed at Jews actually meant in everyday life. In this way Klemperer's diary and Goldhagen's study are both comparable and compatible. Although the comparisons can only go so far, Goldhagen's 'ordinary Germans' were always anti-Semitic, while Klemperer's account reveals the complexities of the Nazi society because he experienced both brutal anti-Semitism and acts of solidarity and kindness.<sup>9</sup> Goldhagen's book entered Germany at a time when the fear of confronting a study of the average German and the possibility of recognising him as one's own grandfather, grandmother, father, mother, aunt or uncle was replaced by the willingness to take the risk of such a recognition.<sup>10</sup> The reception of these other representations of the Holocaust showed that in the 1990s large numbers of Germans were prepared to question the complicity of the German population in the Holocaust. They were inclined to accept an enlargement in the numbers of those responsible, discredit the notion of a 'choiceless German' and understand the particulars of anti-Semitism in Nazi Germany. All of these issues Goldhagen tackles in his book and in a very direct way. In doing so he was providing the Germans with a history that they wanted to hear.

Why were the Germans of the 1990s so inclined to address the issues raised above? There is a generational element to the answer and a new generation of Germans increasingly detached from events in the Second World War were starting to confront issues of memory in a new way. But the answer lies mainly in discourses relating to the reunification of Germany. The reunification of Germany in 1990 marked an end point in German history, the Nazi legacy was finally overcome and the allies relinquished all sovereignty back to the Germans.<sup>11</sup> 1995 was a significant year for Holocaust memory in the newly reunified Germany, it was the year of the fiftieth anniversary of the War's end and for some the commemorative rituals in the new Germany represented the drawing of a line under the past. The enthusiastic reception of Goldhagen's book in Germany could represent the public's rejection of attempting to normalize or to move on from Germany's troubled

<sup>6</sup> Hamburg Institute for Social research (ed.): *Crimes of the Wehrmacht. Dimensions of a War of Annihilation* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2004), pp.3 - 33

<sup>7</sup> Shandley, *Unwilling Germans*, p.22

<sup>8</sup> Reemstma J.P. 'Turning Away From Denial: Hitler's Willing Executioners as a Counterforce to Historical Explanation' in Shandley (ed.) *Unwilling Germans? - The Goldhagen Debate*, p. 256 & Grossmann, 'Memory, repetition and responsibility' in *Goldhagen Effect*, p.108

<sup>9</sup> Reemstma, 'Turning Away From Denial' in *Unwilling Germans?*, pp. 257 – 258 & Niven W, *Facing the Nazi Past: United Germany and the Legacy of the Third Reich*, (Routledge, 2002), pp.138-139

<sup>10</sup> Reemstma, 'Turning Away From Denial' in *Unwilling Germans?*, pp.257 - 258

<sup>11</sup> Niven, *Facing Nazi Past*, p.1

past. This is definitely the interpretation of many historians and commentators in Germany and eventually they came to congratulate Goldhagen for restarting the Public Discussion about the Holocaust and its perpetrators.<sup>12</sup> The *Blätter für deutsche und internationale Politik* also acknowledged the role Goldhagen played in restarting the public debate and in attempting to find an appropriate way for Germans to deal with the criminal period of their past. For this the *Blätter* awarded him the Democracy Prize.<sup>13</sup> Goldhagen's popularity in Germany can partly be attributed to his direct and forceful confrontation with the Holocaust and its origins, in doing this he drove the change in the collective memory of the Holocaust.

The Goldhagen debate also prompted many historians and commentators to assess the book's implication on German nationalism and the country's future. Hans-Ulrich Wehler understood the political impact of the book and suggested that the international response to Goldhagen's theses indicated that the Germans should be under no illusions that their past is still very much alive and capable of coming back to haunt them.<sup>14</sup> Frank Schirrmacher, co-editor of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, wrote in an early review that if Goldhagen's theses is to be believed then Germany's progress into the twenty-first century is to be regarded with fear and scepticism.<sup>15</sup> Volker Ullrich in an article in *Die Zeit* newspaper draws a comparison between Goldhagen's book and Fritz Fischer's work *Germany's Aims in World War One*, which introduced the concept of Germany's violent nationalism and the notion of the dangerous German national Sonderweg (special path). Ullrich suggested that through Goldhagen's connection between German nationalism and eliminationist anti-Semitism that he was reawakening the Sonderweg theory.<sup>16</sup> These arguments reflected more on the political discourses and concerns in Germany at the time, rather than the specifics of Goldhagen's argument. Goldhagen consistently stated that post-war Germany had drastically changed and that his theory was not in any way a comment on modern Germans.<sup>17</sup> Many critics also become fixated on the issue of collective guilt. Rather than seeing that Goldhagen was asserting collectivity in German actions critics immediately accused him of trying to introduce notions of collective guilt, when in reality guilt rarely appears in his work.<sup>18</sup> This indicates that memory of the Holocaust in Germany is also inextricably linked to the issue of guilt. The fact that the debate turned to these issues, despite of the book's content, reveals the power of these themes in contemporary German politics and culture. Many Germans would have engaged with Goldhagen's work to investigate the implications on German guilt and national character that his book presented. These statements reveal how contemporary Germans were nervous about the implications of Holocaust memory on the future of the newly reunited Germany. In this respect the debate on Goldhagen's theses takes on a geopolitical role and many Germans were quick to

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.* p. 120 & Herbert U, 'The Right Question', in Shandley (ed.) *Unwilling Germans?*, pp.109 - 117

<sup>13</sup> Habermas J. 'Goldhagen and the Public Use of History: Why a Democracy Prize for Daniel Goldhagen?' in Shandley (ed.) *Unwilling Germans? - The Goldhagen Debate* (Minnesota, 1998), pp.263 - 275

<sup>14</sup> Wehler H-U. 'Like a Thorn in the Flesh' in Shandley (ed.) *Unwilling Germans? - The Goldhagen Debate* (Minnesota, 1998), p.103

<sup>15</sup> Schirrmacher F. 'Hitler's Code: Holocaust from Faustian Aspirations' in Shandley (ed.) *Unwilling Germans? - The Goldhagen Debate* (Minnesota, 1998)

<sup>16</sup> Ullrich V. 'Familiar Tones' in Shandley (ed.) *Unwilling Germans? - The Goldhagen Debate* (Minnesota, 1998), pp.117 - 118

<sup>17</sup> Goldhagen D. 'Failure of the critics' in Shandley (ed.) *Unwilling Germans? - The Goldhagen Debate* (Minnesota, 1998), p.143

<sup>18</sup> Shandley, *Unwilling Germans*, p.12

dismiss or discredit the potential implications within *Hitler's Willing Executioners* on modern Germany.

Goldhagen clearly felt the need to emphasise his position in the German edition of his book and devoted much of the foreword to distinguish present-day Germans from their Nazi counterparts.<sup>19</sup> In his reception speech of the *Blätter* Democracy Prize Goldhagen celebrated the fact that the Germans welcomed foreigners such as himself to write about the darkest moments in their History. He asserted that in embracing the views of outsiders German national history is highly self-critical and more accurate as a result. He suggested that because of this the Germans had learnt from their past in a way other countries had not. In his concluding statement Goldhagen said "it is really all the people in Germany, responsible for making the Federal Republic the democratic country that it has become, who deserve the prize."<sup>20</sup> Volker Ulrich had warned against "stylizing this event as a graduation test for our society."<sup>21</sup> But that is exactly what the Goldhagen debate became in Germany. Goldhagen managed to completely separate present-day Germans from their Nazi predecessors, although he did not attempt to suggest that anti-Semitism had completely disappeared from Germany. Goldhagen himself was stylizing his reception in Germany as a graduation test for Germany, he even went so far as to suggest that the German model for confronting their nation's past should be internationalized.<sup>22</sup> Goldhagen not only flattered the German people but in making these statements as an American Jew and the Son of a Holocaust survivor he was in effect legitimising Germany's status as a nation. The political appeal of Goldhagen's message undoubtedly accounts for a large amount of his popularity.

It would be impossible to assess the success of *Hitler's Willing Executioners* without analysing how the book itself appealed to the audience. The simplicity of Goldhagen's theses made his work accessible to a large number of readers.<sup>23</sup> The simplistic explanation that the Germans were predisposed to genocide of the Jews and that the Nazis merely unlocked these murderous tendencies appealed to many readers as it made it the origins of the Holocaust easy to understand. As Ruth Bettina Birn argued, Goldhagen's book served those who wish a simplistic explanation to very complex events.<sup>24</sup> Goldhagen also stands by the forceful tone in which he wrote his book. In his introduction he states his reasons for writing in the active instead of the passive voice when describing the crimes were to restore the perpetrators to the centre of our understanding. He also does not shy away from using the term 'German' to describe those who took part in the genocide, he said that calling them 'Germans' was simply calling them by what they were. Goldhagen's descriptions of the crimes committed during the Holocaust are extremely vivid and shocking.<sup>25</sup> Wippermann wrote that Goldhagen does not "recoil from describing fictitious scenes as well as real ones in order to arouse the desired effect on the reader."<sup>26</sup> Hans Mommsen criticised Goldhagen

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.17 – 18,

<sup>20</sup> Goldhagen D. 'Modell Bundesrepublik: National history, Democracy and Internationalization in Germany', in Shandley (ed.) *Unwilling Germans? - The Goldhagen Debate* (Minnesota, 1998), pp.275 - 285

<sup>21</sup> Ullrich V. 'A Triumphant Procession: Goldhagen and the Germans', in Shandley (ed.) *Unwilling Germans? The Goldhagen Debate* (Minnesota, 1998), p.201

<sup>22</sup> Niven, *Facing Nazi Past*, p.131

<sup>23</sup> Reemstma, 'Turning Away From Denial' in *Unwilling Germans?*, p.257

<sup>24</sup> Finkelstein N & Birn R, *A Nation on Trial: The Goldhagen thesis and historical truth*, (Henry Holt, 1998), p.148

<sup>25</sup> For an example see Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, p.218

<sup>26</sup> Wippermann W. 'The Jewish Hanging Judge? Goldhagen and the "Self-Confident Nation"' in Shandley (ed.) *Unwilling Germans? - The Goldhagen Debate* (Minnesota, 1998), p. 229

for his narrative style commenting that the portrayal of “sadistic and gruesome violence releases a certain voyeuristic moment that serious holocaust research has deliberately avoided.”<sup>27</sup> Norman Finkelstein is also critical and suggested that Goldhagen's work represents Holocaust Literature rather than Holocaust historical scholarship.<sup>28</sup> Whatever its value to historical method it is certain that it added to the appeal of the book. It made the book easy and stimulating to read but it also satisfied the morbid fascinations held by readers as it enabled them to experience the role of the perpetrator and to understand the extremely cruel nature of the Holocaust.

In asserting that the genocide came out of the heart of German society the book tackled a taboo which had developed in German society, that there was an unquestionable distinction between 'criminal Nazis' and 'ordinary Germans' and the book was popular as a result. Goldhagen's work also prompted the public to reconsider recent new right ideologues who tried to question Germany's war guilt or to emphasise good aspects of the Nazi regime.<sup>29</sup> A newspaper article in the *Tagezeitung* about Goldhagen's tour of Germany reveals what the average German reader wanted from the book. It reports that the audience wanted to understand what had brought normal people to murder men, women and children in cold blood and that whenever the discussion turned to this topic it would cause the greatest response. Interviews conducted after the event showed that many were troubled by the question of what they would have done in the same position, and that it was this issue that had stimulated their interest in the debate.<sup>30</sup> The book not only appealed to readers because of its simplistic explanation of events it also directly addressed the issues that the public demanded. It demonstrates that popular discourse of historical memory is very subjective and often reflects the desires of the population in the present rather than a desire for historical truth. As stated above Germans in the 1990s were predisposed to such a book because they wanted answers to a specific set of issues, such as German responsibility, nature of Nazi society and the actions of individuals.

Rarely has an historical analysis received such publicity as *Hitler's Willing Executioners*. The intensive marketing campaign by Goldhagen's publisher and the role of this publicity in raising interest can't be overlooked. Volker Ullrich's article in *Die Zeit* on 12<sup>th</sup> April 1996 titled *A Provocation to a new Historikerstreit* sparked the debate and by mid April every major newspaper in Germany had published a review.<sup>31</sup> The debate then slowly escalated with extensive coverage throughout the TV and media. This long drawn out process was essential to marketing the book as it continually broadened public awareness of the book. By the time the book was published in August the public discussion had been dragging on for a number of months. Goldhagen also refused to give any interview regarding the specifics of his book until he undertook a podium discussion tour of Germany and he urged the public to read his book before this tour so that they could judge the argument for themselves.<sup>32</sup> This was a clever marketing strategy, because he invited Germans to actively participate in the debate and also suggested that they had to read the book to understand the final outcome. The debate was also highly personalised, issues were raised about

<sup>27</sup> Mommsen H. 'The Thin Patina of Civilization: Anti-Semitism Was a Necessary, but by No Means a Sufficient Condition for the Holocaust' in Shandley (ed.) *Unwilling Germans?* (Minnesota, 1998), p. 195

<sup>28</sup> Finkelstein, *Nation on trial*, pp. 88 - 90

<sup>29</sup> Wippermann, 'Jewish Hanging Judge?' in *Unwilling Germans?*, p.257

<sup>30</sup> Semler C. 'Ein Provokateur auf Tour' *die Tagezeitung* 7/09/1996, p.16-17

<sup>31</sup> Shandley, *Unwilling Germans*, p.4

<sup>32</sup> Schmitt V. 'Die deutschen als "willige Mörder"' *Associated Press Worldstream – German* 4/08/1996

Goldhagen's upbringing and his relationship with his father who was a Holocaust survivor. The highly personalised nature of the debate can be seen in the podium discussion tour and the media unintentionally turned him into a martyr figure. The discussions seemed to take on the form of a tribunal where leading German historians did their utmost to discredit Goldhagen and the more he came under attack, the more the audience seemed to side with him.<sup>33</sup> Goldhagen's charisma also endeared him to the public and he did not embody the persona of the angry young man desperate to avenge his father that many in the German press had created for him. Goldhagen had a telegenic image, was passionate but respectful in defending his work and was very amiable in the public debates.<sup>34</sup> Volker Ullrich called Goldhagen's tour a 'triumphal procession', which would seem to be an accurate description of Goldhagen's reception in Germany.<sup>35</sup> Goldhagen's likeable image and the extensive marketing made a significant contribution to the commercial success of the book in Germany, but it would be wrong to attribute the success and impact of the book to commercialism alone.

This essay has demonstrated that there were many reasons why Daniel Goldhagen's book *Hitler's Willing Executioners* was so popular in Germany. The publication and subsequent controversy that surrounded the book must be seen in its wider context. The History of the Federal Republic is strewn with occasions when an event, publication or debate has prompted a public discussion on the Holocaust and its memory. The 1990s saw an increase in frequency of these 'Holocaust moments', the release of *Schindler's list*, the Wehrmacht Exhibition, Klemperer's Diary and Goldhagen's book all demonstrate similar trends in the public discourse and of Holocaust memory in Germany. Germans wanted to confront their past in a way that they had largely previously avoided but were now prepared to take the risk of recognising a family member as a perpetrator. In this respect Germans were prepared to accept an enlargement of the number of perpetrators, to discredit the notion of a 'choiceless German' and to understand the particulars of anti-Semitism in Nazi Germany. This change in the public discourse on the Holocaust can largely be attributed to the mood in Germany after the reunification. Tackling the nation's dark history forms a significant part of German national identity and any attempts, like those made in 1995, to normalize or move on from the past were thoroughly rejected by the German population. Interest was undoubtedly raised by the accusations that his work implied a collective guilt for the German nation and by the geopolitical discussions taking place on the implications Goldhagen's book held for the future of the newly united Germany. The debate was framed as a graduation test for German society and Goldhagen fed this image, as an American Jew and son of concentration camp survivor he effectively gave the German state legitimacy through praising how Germany engaged with its past and how that strengthened the German democracy. The book itself appealed to the general public, its simplistic explanation for the holocaust allowed the average reader to understand the origins of the genocide. The narrative style and vivid descriptions made the book engaging, enabled the reader to experience the role of the perpetrator and satisfied any morbid fascinations with the Holocaust. The role of the media, the long build up of the debate and the marketing strategy

<sup>33</sup> Niven, *Facing Nazi Past*, p.131 & Ullrich 'Triumphal Procession' in *Unwilling Germans?*, pp.197 – 202 & Deutsch, F., *The Holocaust, Historiography and the Media: an analysis of the Goldhagen Debate* (Sussex theses, 2002), p.22

<sup>34</sup> Ullrich 'Triumphal Procession' in *Unwilling Germans?* pp.197 – 202 & 'Zeitgeschichte; Kein Deutschen' *Focus Magazin* 22/07/1996, pp.78 - 80

<sup>35</sup> Ullrich 'Triumphal Procession' in *Unwilling Germans?* pp.197 - 201

of *Hitler's Willing Executioners* doubtlessly contributed to its commercial success. But good publicity alone is not sufficient to account for the book's success. In conclusion this essay suggests that the success of the book must be attributed to a combination of the factors listed above. Goldhagen and other events of Holocaust representation during the 1990s signified a major change in the public discourse of Holocaust memory, Germans were prepared to engage with the Holocaust in a much more open and self critical way. The success of the book is predominantly attributed to the issues it raised about German national identity and Germany's role within the world. The Goldhagen controversy clearly demonstrated the importance of Holocaust memory in German political and public discourses. The debate surrounding Goldhagen's book was not about representing the Holocaust in the most accurate way, but an expression of the fears, concerns and hopes of the newly reunited German nation.



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