

not allow yourself to be overwhelmed. In *The Last Judgment* people are thoughtful but not immobilized. They make their choices and move ahead.

Hélión's message isn't for the faint-hearted or the easily intimidated, and it's precisely his independent subversive spirit that's held the attention of renege artists in New York from the '30s right down to the present. This is not the place to present the complicated history of his American impact, but it would be untrue to the inveterate optimism that Hélión inspired in others if I did not give at least one recent case in point. Only a few weeks before this show opened at Salander-O'Reilly, Barbara Goodstein had an exhibition of her recent painterly relief sculptures at the Bowery Gallery in which the near-abstract calligraphy of her landscapes and cityscapes presented a logical extension of the decisive brushwork in Hélión's later canvases. Goodstein has taken Hélión's strokes of paint, which suggest the broad outlines of an object, and reimagined them in dabs and slaps of modeling paste that are in fact precisely plotted acts of suppression—a refusal of detail so elegant that it feels celebratory. In the past Goodstein has done some variations on Hélión's themes, and looking at her triumphantly self-assured new work, in which she occasionally includes found objects such as

bits of broken colored glass and rusty metal, it's possible to feel that she is quite literally moving forward from *The Last Judgment of Things*. What really count are the deep structural affinities, the sense that what's abstract and what's real are both aspects of the same still-unfolding pattern.

The Last Judgment is full of patterns and tools and machines: there's a key, an easel, the dressmaker's mannequins, a sewing machine, eyeglasses, a record player, an LP record, a pair of drumsticks, some musical instruments. You could say that it's a how-to manual for artists—and a celebration of creativity, of putting things together. The shoe fits, the broken things can be mended, a young painter gets a bargain on an easel that he'll take home so that he can paint his first masterpiece. And then there's that mysterious spiral staircase, with its tight, corkscrew curve. Once you've taken in the bits of clothing casually deposited on the steps, you know that you've been left to imagine what's going on upstairs. This is a painting that gets the mind working overtime. The colors are bright and taut and changeable; they seem to fly along, with some of the gravity-defying speed of ships' sails caught by the wind. Hélión is telling us that the possibilities are wide open and the sky is the limit. •

concerned (at least at the time: he changed his opinion later), the German penchant for authoritarianism, obedience and brutality was already a long-established fact by the time Hitler came to power; it was this special path of German history that explained the horrors of the Third Reich. This notion of a special path was elaborated upon and greatly expanded in numerous studies by German scholars in the 1960s and 1970s, and it became known as the *Sonderweg* theory. Hans-Ulrich Wehler, one of the most prominent proponents of this theory, claimed that Germany had taken a different turn in the latter part of the nineteenth century, and thereby developed unique and pernicious traits which made it increasingly different from more "normal" Western societies such as Britain and France. It was this abnormality of German history, reflected in its political, social and economic structure, that was at the root of Nazism's "seizure of power."

While many German historians spent the better part of two decades debating and finally rejecting the *Sonderweg* theory, other scholars, mainly Marxist ones, proposed that the Holocaust was merely an aspect of European fascism, which was itself seen as one of the death throes of capitalism. Still others, among whom Hannah Arendt stands out most prominently, asserted that genocide was inherent to what they called the totalitarian state, which was most perfectly represented by Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Soviet Union. Conversely, many Jewish historians, such as Shmuel Ettinger and Shmuel Almog, argued that the Holocaust must be traced back to the Christian-European tradition of anti-Semitism. Acknowledging the transformation of traditional religious and socioeconomic anti-Jewish sentiments into political and racial anti-Semitism in the late nineteenth century, such scholars of Jewish history nevertheless argued that no structural interpretation of Nazism and the Holocaust was plausible without admitting the central role of a pernicious anti-Jewish imagery, theology and demagoguery, dating back to the Middle Ages and greatly enhanced by the pseudo-scientific discourse of social-Darwinism and eugenics in the modern era.

Over the years, many other theories and interpretations have been proposed. The so-called "intentionalist" school, best represented by Lucy Dawidowicz and Gerald Fleming, placed Hitler and his maniacal anti-Semitism at the center of the debate, arguing that the intention to murder all the Jews of Europe had always been on the future Führer's mind, at least

Ordinary Monsters

BY OMER BARTOV

Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust by Daniel Jonah Goldhagen

(Knopf, 619 pp., \$30)

Even before the Nazi murder machine ground to a halt under the pressure of the greatest military alliance ever assembled, scholars, intellectuals and thinking people throughout the world began applying themselves to the crucial question: How was "the nation of Goethe and Schiller" transformed into a barbarous, genocidal dictatorship, and what was at the root of the Third Reich's attempt to annihilate the Jews? Since 1945, the constant preoccupation with this central event of the twentieth century has produced a virtual flood of explanations, interpretations and theories, historical monographs and biographies, psychological analyses and

personal memoirs, works of fiction and documentaries. If this immense intellectual effort has until now failed to yield a wholly satisfactory answer, it has not been for lack of trying. The difficulty can be traced back to the horror and the complexity and the magnitude of the event itself. The Holocaust is not ineffable and unexplainable. But no single explanation or representation seems to encompass the phenomenon as a whole.

The attempts to explain Nazism and the Holocaust have followed very different paths. In 1945, the British historian A.J.P. Taylor published a book titled *The Course of German History*, in which he traced the roots of Nazism all the way back to Luther. As far as Taylor was

as early as 1920, and that the actual timing of the "Final Solution" was merely a matter of waiting for the most appropriate circumstances, rather than the result of any evolution in Hitler's thinking or the nature of his regime. Conversely, the "functionalist" school, whose best-known proponents were Martin Broszat and Hans Mommsen, insisted on the centrality of structural factors, arguing that, while the Nazis pursued an obviously anti-Semitic policy, they reached the decision to commit mass murder only at the end of a long period of indecision and after failed plans of expulsion, under circumstances of total war and logistical havoc. And they did so in a process of "cumulative radicalization" which characterized a regime whose most typical feature was its "polycratic" structure, whereby competing bureaucratic agencies vied for the attention of the Führer by offering ever more extreme solutions to insoluble problems.

In recent years there has been a tremendous surge of interest in the Holocaust, expressed in numerous films, novels, museums and, not least, works of scholarship. Much of the new scholarship on Nazism and the Holocaust has been of remarkable quality, making use of newly discovered documents and new methodologies. New interpretations, based on extensive archival research, of the origins and course of Nazi Germany's eugenic, racial, demographic and genocidal policies, by such scholars as Michael Burleigh and Ian Kershaw in Britain, Christopher Browning and Gordon Horwitz in the United States, and Götz Aly and Hannes Heer in Germany, have made it necessary to revise our understanding of the Holocaust and its perpetrators. Similarly, works on the memory and representation of the event, its impact on the survivors, and its use and abuse by states and various political interests, written by such scholars as Lawrence Langer, Berel Lang, James Young and Saul Friedländer, have greatly deepened our knowledge of the victims, the bystanders and the role of commemoration in the post-Auschwitz era.

Hitler's *Willing Executioners* is a big and ambitious work. It is big in every respect: its physical size, its historical reach, the magnitude of the audience that it seeks to attract, the volume of scholarship that it dismisses, the intensity and the scale of its condemnation and, not least, its sense of its own importance. Daniel Jonah Goldhagen makes big claims, disdaining qualifications and subtleties, often making sweeping generalizations so as not to allow any culprits to get away. The writing is passionate, often angry. The book is almost

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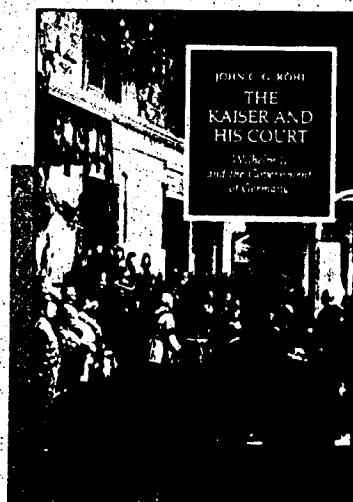
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obsessively repetitive, hammering the same point over and over again.

Goldhagen's book takes up some very important issues. In some of its parts, it makes a useful contribution and provides a necessary correction to the existing literature. But precisely because it is so replete with wrath, accusations, finger-pointing, insinuations and self-righteousness, it does a disservice to the considerable work invested in researching and writing it and to the issues it seeks to introduce into the debate. This is history in black and white, and it will please those impatient with careful argument and the weighing of evidence. As for scholars who have spent a lifetime of research and writing on Nazism and the Holocaust, I am afraid that its dismissive attitude toward their work will make it exceedingly difficult for them to sympathize with its more important arguments.

Goldhagen makes a powerful case for a version of one of the oldest, most traditional, and in recent years largely discredited interpretations of the Holocaust. He should be praised for his courage in doing so. Paradoxically, he also claims to present a wholly new interpretation of the event, which will supersede anything that has been written so far. This bewildering claim for originality is based on his insistence that he is the very first scholar ever to have written on the perpetrators; that he can thereby, and for the very first time, conclusively demonstrate that the vast majority of the German population were murderers, actually or potentially; and that, in contradiction to an alleged scholarly consensus, he can finally prove that the main moving engine, the principal motivation, the factor that explains all facets of the Holocaust, was European anti-Semitism in general, and its specific German variety in particular.

There is nothing original in claiming that anti-Semitism was at the core of the Holocaust. Moreover, quite apart from the voluminous scholarship that has advanced this assertion over the years, this has always been the "common sense" view in much of Europe, the United States and Israel. Not surprisingly, it has always been the opinion of traditional Jews and remains the single most influential interpretation of what orthodox Jews (and a considerable number of secular Hebrew-speakers) call the *churban*, or the Destruction. Associating the Holocaust with the destruction of the Temple (*churban' beit ha'mikdash*), and linking both to the eternal hatred of the Gentiles for the Jews (and to the Jews' sins against God), is crucial to the interpretation of the Nazi genocide by a community which would otherwise have

to confront the question of God's tolerance of, if not direct complicity in, the near-total destruction of His people.

This being said, however, it is not necessary to claim originality of interpretation in order to stress once more the importance of anti-Semitism, in its traditional and modern, racist forms, as an arguably crucial and (in recent mainstream scholarship) somewhat under-emphasized condition of the Holocaust. Still, anti-Semitism as such is not a sufficient condition for explaining the specific nature of the Nazi-attempted genocide of the Jews. That many Germans were imbued with anti-Semitic ideas and images, especially after years of exposure to Nazi propaganda and indoctrination, may seem obvious, but it needs reiterating in view of several influential interpretations of Nazism and the Holocaust which have generally downplayed this factor. In this sense, Goldhagen is quite right to bring back the old argument on the demonization of the Jews as playing a significant role in their barbarous treatment by individual Germans, as well as in legitimizing their persecution and ultimate mass murder for much of the German population.

Unfortunately, Goldhagen does not give due credit to the many studies that have probed the political radicalization and ideological indoctrination of several important sectors of German society, such as the youth, the army, the veterans of the First World War and the *Freikorps* paramilitary units of the 1920s, that is, those elements of society in the interwar years which provided the bulk of Hitler's perpetrators. By referring to other studies which have similarly stressed the importance of ideological motivation and the mobilization of prejudice by the Nazi regime, not least among the soldiers of the *Wehrmacht*, Goldhagen might have had to surrender his claim of originality, but his book would have gained a great deal in subtlety of argument.

Since his ambition is to rewrite the history of the Holocaust, Goldhagen devotes the first part (about 100 pages) to a survey of European and German anti-Semitism before Hitler's "seizure of power." These chapters do not add much to our knowledge of anti-Semitism, nor do they do much justice to the subject. Reading them, one might believe that the historical process of Jewish emancipation and assimilation into European culture never took place; that the great cultural surge within Jewish communities throughout Europe, and particularly in Germany, in the nineteenth century and the early part of the twentieth century, is a myth and that the Holocaust was already on the minds of the majority of

Europeans, or at least Germans, since 1848 at the very latest. If we are to accept Goldhagen's version, German Jews were either blind or downright stupid, since the writing was on the wall for 100 years and their whole existence was founded on an illusion. This view of the past also confronts us with serious problems about the present, since what Goldhagen calls "eliminationist anti-Semitism," the forerunner of its exterminationist version, appears to have totally vanished from Germany after 1945.

To say that this is the first study of the perpetrators is, to use the term that Goldhagen applies to most of the historical interpretations that he criticizes in his book, simply false. Indeed, as with his chapters on anti-Semitism, Goldhagen himself refers to several studies which have devoted a great deal of work to the perpetrators on all levels of the Nazi murder regime. An important book published only last year in Germany, Götz Aly's *Endlösung*, makes precisely the same claim, though Aly's interpretation of the Holocaust is almost exactly the opposite of Goldhagen's, presenting as it does a rather sophisticated and complex version of the functionalist thesis, based on a mass of hitherto unknown documents. Whether we accept Aly's or Goldhagen's interpretations (and both of them are problematic and far too polarized), neither is justified in his claim of originality.

Yet Goldhagen's dilemma is greater than Aly's, since the latter has identified one group of perpetrators about whom relatively little was known until he turned his attention to them, namely, the middle-ranking Nazi bureaucrats who were involved in planning the massive resettlement of ethnic Germans (*Volksdeutsche*) in western Poland who simultaneously organized the expulsion, concentration and finally murder of the Jews from those same areas, along with large numbers of non-Jewish Poles (who were, however, not slated for extermination). Goldhagen, by contrast, is concerned with a type of perpetrator about whom one of the foremost historians of the Holocaust, Christopher Browning, has already published an important study. It is no coincidence, in fact, that Browning's book is called *Ordinary Men* and Goldhagen's is called *Ordinary Germans*.

On the most basic level, Goldhagen's book is a reply to, and an attempt to refute, Browning's thesis, using to a large extent the same documentation but drawing different conclusions from it. (Goldhagen reviewed Browning's book in these pages.) There is nothing unusual in two scholars reaching different conclusions from the same sources. What is disturbing

is not only that Goldhagen asserts repeatedly the originality of his sources, but that at the same time he makes unwarranted and unfair attacks on Browning, insinuating that for some reason or another Browning had not used certain documents which did not sustain his thesis, documents which, had they been cited, irrefutably show Goldhagen's view to be the only possible one. Goldhagen launches not merely a debate over interpretation, but also an attack on the scholarly integrity of another historian, made in countless notes throughout the text and hinting at some unspoken fault, some illicit sympathy.

And what is the debate all about? Browning has investigated the police battalions used by the Nazi regime to perpetrate mass killing on Jewish communities in Poland between 1941 and 1943. His research concentrated especially on the Hamburg Reserve Police Battalion 101, which was composed of relatively elderly men who had been exposed only to a minimal degree of Nazi indoctrination and showed no signs of being enthusiastic supporters of Hitler. This was not a unit normally associated with the death-squads or *Einsatzgruppen* of the SS and the SD. At least at the beginning of its murder activities, moreover, the men were given the option not to take an active part in the killing. And yet they became mass murderers. Browning's explanation of this phenomenon is that these "ordinary men" became acclimatized to mass killing during the first few murder operations and ended up (with few exceptions) viewing them as part of a job, distasteful as it might have been to some of them, which they had to carry out. In Browning's account, it was not beliefs but circumstances which made ordinary men into killers.

Goldhagen has also studied Police Battalion 101, along with some other units for which there apparently exists less documentation. Employing the same evidence regarding the manpower composition of this unit, he claims that these perpetrators, precisely because they were spared massive indoctrination owing to their age, are the best illustration of the fact that they were not ordinary men but ordinary Germans. That is, that they were representative of German society, which had internalized "eliminationist" and therefore potentially exterminationist anti-Semitism long before Hitler came to power. Goldhagen stresses that its members could avoid participation in the killing, and so they killed, in his view, not because of their circumstances but because of their hatred of Jews. Most of them not only enjoyed

killing, as Goldhagen shows, they also tortured their victims horribly before finally murdering them.

It is quite possible, of course, to stake out a third position, one which stresses a crucial factor neglected both by Browning's circumstantial interpretation and by Goldhagen's essentialist view, namely the powerful impact of ideology and indoctrination on the perpetrators. I agree with Goldhagen that it is more than likely that many of these killers were motivated by anti-Semitic sentiments and truly believed that it was necessary to kill Jews. Yet to say that they represented all Germans in the Third Reich, and, even more radically, that they were representative of widespread German sentiments even before Hitler's regime, is a judgment that is impossible to prove and is too farfetched to be of any analytical or historical value. I have myself disagreed with Browning's diminishment of ideological motivation among the perpetrators (and have stressed its importance in my own work on German soldiers); yet as his meticulous research demonstrates (and as my own work on the brutalization of soldiers also indicates), one cannot dismiss the reality of acclimatization to murder by repeated involvement in it.

Goldhagen does not present sufficient evidence to refute this claim, and his

argument that we cannot believe the perpetrators' assertions about their initial reluctance to kill in testimonies given twenty years later is highly problematic for the simple reason that his own study is based almost exclusively on those same testimonies. There is a great deal of evidence to show that a dehumanized view of Jews (and Russians, Bolsheviks, Gypsies, Poles and others) did play an important role in motivating Hitler's murderers. But Goldhagen's own evidence suggests (along with much more documentation that he does not cite) that this view was internalized largely during the Third Reich. Even if the perpetrators on whom Goldhagen has chosen to focus were in their late 30s, they had nevertheless spent many years under Hitler's rule and were exposed to massive propaganda, before they set out to kill the Jews (as Robert Gellately has shown in his work on the Gestapo). To be sure, Nazi ideology was most successful where it made use of existing prejudices; anti-Semitism, as well as fear of Slavs and Bolsheviks, was widespread before 1933, though how widespread is difficult to gauge, and whether it differed from such sentiments, say, in Poland, is doubtful. But it was only in the Third Reich that these sentiments were given the sanction of the regime and could be provided with the impetus of a

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Easter Morning Aubade

She tried to clench the first dawnlight *inside her skull*.
Tried to feel it slather in there and make a form.
Felt the meadows the light held inside its flowing coat,
sewn into there, silkiest lining—the seams, the property-lines perfect—
and pulled them in, and lay them down along the floor of it.
There was a green hill with a thin white road, that she lay in.
There was a speckling, as where cypress have been struck, in rows,
to indicate approach, and then a temporary house—she drove those in
and lay them flat in there. She heard the word *temporary*. She felt her eyes,
their tiny weights, and how there was, in fact, no glancing *out*.
Outside, further away,
the soldiers slept. Sun was beginning to graze their fingertips—
and a lance protruding, and an elbow where it rammed itself in sleep—
light pouring down the difference,
yet without waking them,
though waking up their forms.
Behind them, still misty now, the two dimensional, like a thin god, rose—
nothing could keep it—it had no feet on the ground—
a thing round which nothing could swirl,
the hooks of light unable to find hold upon its garment,
so that it could not be pulled into the furrows of the skull,
in over the roof tile she now brought in,
and the shields the sleepers let glide,
or the birch trees touched black at every branch on one side,
or the wire-mesh through which the *white* of five chickens hives...
The intervals grow deep.
One of the soldiers rubs his face,
streamings-of-thought starting to glide all over him,
sticky frantics from the network clotting all round,
thickenings, varyings,
in which the possibility of shapeliness begins to rave,
brightening most at those edges where the skull feels itself to be
inside of something which it cannot see—
as where the lips can be felt, for instance—
and the wide light along those lips,
and the 800 mph rotational spin of the earth leaning in on them,
the interweaving of dust with nonparticulate matter, with love, with the small stone falling
from the hand of the child leaning over the bridge down there,
up past the soldier's right shoulder, but small, because far away,
and the stone's lip as it curls the surface round it for an instant,
and the displacement of galactic matter round the orbit of the sun—is that right?—
the child's face as the light of *effect* gathers upon it
and the stone sinks,
the thin liplike suction of the waters closing over it,
and how to his mind it is taken in, swallowed,
how he turns to see if it will reappear on the other side or will be carried away,
and how *forever* comes to mind, bells starting to ring in the morninglight,
and how he goes back to the place where the stone disappeared and stares for a while,
me watching to see what will dawn on his face,
bells from three churches now across the valley, almost in synch but then there is time,
and how as he stares I can see
that the place of the disappearance has disappeared,
it cannot be recovered, his eyes darting over the moving waters,
and how a life cannot be lived therefore, as there is no place,
in which the possibility of shapeliness begins to rave,
and the soldiers awakening, of course, to the blazing *not-there*,
and the 30,000 mph of the sun's going
rubbing its disappearance now all over this,
and the hand going back into the dirt at one's feet, fingers feeling around
for another perfect stone, wanting to see it once again, that opening.

JORIE GRAHAM

sophisticated propaganda machine wielded by a modern state.

Moreover, it would have been useful to contextualize the case of the police battalions by reference to regular army soldiers who massacred vast numbers of non-Jewish Russians, along with Poles, Serbs, Greeks, Italians, and so forth. This is important precisely because of Goldhagen's insistence on the disproportionate attention paid to the death camps in Holocaust scholarship and the need to focus more closely on murder units such as the police battalions that he has studied (a problematic assertion to which I will return). The soldiers carried out their "tasks" efficiently and often willingly. At the same time, as Mark Mazower has shown, there were also complaints about the demoralizing effects of massacring, especially the massacring of women and children.

This does not mean that the troops were not motivated by powerful prejudices, reinforced by years of ideological indoctrination and brutalization by image and deed. It does mean, however, that anti-Semitism is not sufficient as a single factor in explaining the conduct of individual German soldiers, policemen, SS or SD men, or anyone involved in murder during that period. It is much more convincing to argue that such actions were the result of a cluster of conditions, some ideological and some existential, some reality and others rooted in a distorted perception of it. No single element can explain this terrible phenomenon. We wish that it could, on the assumption that by doing away with that element we could eliminate

the possibility of such brutality altogether. But much that has happened since the end of the Holocaust demonstrates that massacres and genocides can find many reasons to occur.

In order to further substantiate his case that "ordinary" Germans were imbued with a blind hatred of Jews and were therefore all potential torturers and murderers simply waiting for the opportunity to vent their wild passions on the victims, Goldhagen devotes several chapters to the labor camps and the death marches during the last months and weeks of the Nazi regime. Dismissing a whole body of literature on the relationship between Nazi demographic policies, forced labor and extermination as "false," he proceeds to demonstrate that labor camps were only one more example of the Germans' desire to humiliate, to torture and to kill Jews. He provides some horrifying and hitherto unknown information on a number of labor camps and makes a strong case for the barbarity of the guards. And he provides disturbing and (to my knowledge) previously unpublished information on some specific death marches at the end of the war, mostly culled from testimonies by perpetrators given in the 1960s, and shows that even when left to their own devices, even when ordered by Himmler himself (for his own selfish reasons) no longer to mistreat Jews, the guards of these senseless marches behaved in the most atrocious manner.

And yet it is not at all clear that these cases actually sustain Goldhagen's thesis. His repeated question—why did the Nazis treat the Jews so terribly?—sounds strangely naive and out of place. The men and the women about whom he writes were involved in a genocidal undertaking, unprecedented in its ferocity and its scale. They were obviously under the influence of a good measure of Nazi ideology, exposure to endless barbarities, and circumstances which brought out in them the most base instincts, while facing victims who had been reduced to a condition in which they appeared to resemble precisely the kind of *Untermenschen* that Nazi propaganda had always claimed them to be. Moreover, there are serious contradictions within Goldhagen's account. While arguing that these brutal killers were merely "ordinary Germans," he presents not a few killers who were either ethnic Germans, that is, men and women who had been raised and educated far from the culture he claims to have been imbued with a unique brand of "eliminationist anti-Semitism," or non-Germans, Ukrainians, Lithuanians, and so forth. To be sure, these perpetrators were

probably at least as anti-Semitic as the Germans. But then what are we to do with Goldhagen's argument about the specificity of German anti-Semitism?

Even more problematic, perhaps, is the fact that, in his zeal to show the inhumanity of all Germans, Goldhagen notes that the guards of the death marches refused to allow the starving Jews to eat food thrown to them by the inhabitants of the towns through which they passed. He does not remark upon the rather obvious fact that the people who threw that food to the Jews were also "ordinary" Germans. Such acts of kindness were probably rare occurrences, though Goldhagen cites a surprisingly high number of such cases; but they do indicate that some Germans, even as late as 1945, recognized Jewish victims to be human beings.

The most troubling aspect of Goldhagen's book is its contention that "ordinary" Germans belonged to a wholly extraordinary people, a people unlike any other, which had been that way for the better part of a century. He cites the *Sonderweg* thesis approvingly as still further proof of his thesis, but in fact his argument differs greatly from the German original: the proponents of the "special path" had stressed structural factors, while he rejects those out of hand and emphasizes the mental makeup of the German psyche, an argument entirely foreign to the body of scholarship to which he refers. Goldhagen's view of Germany cannot be sustained by evidence, and like all essentialist views it does not require evidence; it is inimical to strictly historical analysis. People may well act as they do because of what they are; but tautology rarely makes for good history.

And what are the implications of such a notion that there exists a nation of ingrained murderers? How useful is this assumption for explaining an historical phenomenon? To what extent is this a bizarre inversion of the Nazi view of the Jews as an insidious, inherently evil nation? At one point Goldhagen himself seems to recognize the danger in his argument. He remarks in a footnote that the Germans since 1945 are different, having somehow gone through a rapid process of democratization and denazification which transformed them almost overnight into normal (ordinary?) men and women. But this is only a footnote. We are left with the thesis that the Germans were normally monsters, and that the only role of the Nazi regime was to furnish them with the opportunity to act on their evil desires. This is not a new idea. It was, quite naturally, entertained by many of their victims. But as an historical explanation of a specific event it is useless, and not really historical at all.

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Edited by Mary R. Lefkowitz and Guy MacLean Rogers

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In this sense, although Goldhagen has attempted to combine a long-term context for his thesis with what he claims to be a "thick" description of the perpetrators' actions, his book is in fact an entirely decontextualized interpretation of the Holocaust. It fails to confront the central question of the Nazi genocide, with which those very scholars he dismisses so nonchalantly have tried (with varying degrees of success) to grapple for so long—namely, what was it that made the Holocaust a wholly unprecedented event in human history and an event which was part and parcel of the specific historical conditions from which it evolved? For genocides are anything but a new phenomenon. Brutality, mass killings, torture, sadism, and everything that Goldhagen is at pains to describe in gory detail are as old as humanity itself. And as new: it suffices to recall the recent butcheries in Rwanda and Bosnia to see that these particular aspects of the Holocaust are anything but unique. What was—and remains—unprecedented about the Holocaust is a wholly different matter, which Goldhagen avoids treating: the industrial killing of millions of human beings in factories of death, ordered by a modern state, organized by a conscientious bureaucracy, and supported by a law-abiding, patriotic, "civilized" society.

Never before, or after, has a state decided to devote so many of its technological, organizational and intellectual resources to the sole purpose of murdering every single member of a certain category of people in a process that combined the knowledge acquired in mass industrial production with the experience of waging total war. This was a novel phenomenon: striving to produce corpses with the same methods employed to produce goods. In this case, however, destruction was the goal of production, not its opposite.

In circumstances of mass murder, sadism flourishes; but sadism is not unique to the Holocaust. Anti-Semitism is a pernicious phenomenon with long historical roots, but the question remains as to how it was employed in creating and legitimating death camps rather than expressed in savage pogroms. We need to probe much deeper into the culture that produced genocide in the heart of European civilization. What was it that induced Nobel Prize-winning scientists, internationally respected legal scholars, physicians known throughout the world for their research into the human body and their desire to ameliorate the lot of humanity, to become not merely opportunistic accomplices, but in many ways the initiators and promoters of this attempt to subject

the human race to a vast surgical operation by means of mass extermination of whole categories of human beings? What was there (or is there) in our culture that made the concept of transforming humanity by means of eugenic and racial cleansing seem so practical and rational? And how was all this related to the immense advances in science over the preceding century, the widespread disenchantment with some aspects of modernity, and, not least, the mass slaughter of Europeans on the battlefields of the Great War in 1914-18?

These are all critical questions that Goldhagen fails to treat, and so his book cannot claim by any stretch of the imagination to be a new interpretation of the Holocaust. It is a useful study of some aspects of the genocide of the Jews, aspects which have many common features with other genocides throughout history. Indeed, by focusing on these events, Goldhagen undermines his own claim regarding the uniqueness of the Holocaust, for his book completely misses precisely those aspects of the genocide which have made it stand out as unprecedented even

in the bloodiest century humanity has seen; and by doing so it fails to demonstrate any understanding for the profound and continuing relevance of the industrial killing perfected by the Nazis for our own societies.

Goldhagen believes that he has cut straight through the tortuous and often contradictory arguments of a vast amount of scholarship and given us the clear, simple, strangely comforting answer for which we had all been longing. He is wrong. By eschewing subtlety and nuance, and by mistaking passion for an impatience with complexity, Goldhagen is actually appealing to a public that wants to hear what it already believes. By doing so, he obscures the fact that the Holocaust was too murky and too horrible to be reduced to simplistic interpretations that rob it of its pertinence to our own time.

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All Noisy on the Western Front

By LAVINIA GREENLAW

The Ghost Road by Pat Barker

(Dutton, 276 pp., \$21.95)

The authenticity of history is useful to writers of fiction. It can be challenged or invoked; and its scale can be adjusted to amplify or to diminish human drama, either way providing props, backdrops and special effects at comparatively little imaginative cost. The dangers are obvious: fiction is authenticated by its evidence of research—details of the real place, people, technology. Anecdotes and arcane practices impress us primarily because they are "real."

The First World War has been extensively treated in fiction. Some of the most influential novels of this century were written in its aftermath, several by those who had fought: *All Quiet On The Western Front*, *The Good Soldier Schweik*, *A Farewell to Arms*. (Even Hemingway saw a month's action before getting blown up.) A sense of disintegration and the unimaginable characterized the contemporary artistic response. The struggle to find adequate language resulted in its

renewal through being broken open or pared right down.

In the 1990s, however, there can be no such struggle when writing about the First World War, no such sense of renewal. We have enjoyed decades of retrospective consensus: known good and evil, agreed right and wrong. Yet we are seeing a strange revival of interest among novelists in the subject. This may be a matter of timing, of opportunism: the war represents both a lost world and the beginnings of the place in which we now live; ancient enough to be history and recent enough to be inherited.

When writers now turn to the First World War, they must find some way of disturbing dust that is thickly settled. Otherwise they make costume drama, something too integrated and too imaginable. The British novelist Pat Barker has chosen to write a trilogy on the war. Her concerns are not those of drama and history, but of psychology and society. Still, these three novels do not