

At University of Michigan forum

Historians criticize Goldhagen book

Martin McLaughlin
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At a forum held at the University of Michigan on November 8 an international panel of historians concurred that the bestselling book by Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, was a travesty of historiography.

Goldhagen's 1996 volume, published by Random House, became a bestseller in the United States and Germany with its claims the Holocaust was the outcome of the German national character. Goldhagen argued that anti-Semitism was universal in Germany and that Hitler's slaughter of the Jews was only the logical conclusion of the prejudices of "ordinary Germans."

The panel discussion, sponsored by the Center for European Studies, attracted a standing-room-only audience at the Michigan League, an indication of growing interest in a serious discussion of the major historical issues of the 20th century.

The forum brought together five university professors to discuss the impact of *Hitler's Willing Executioners* on public opinion in the United States, Germany, France and Austria. The speakers dealt with the content of the book only in passing—making clear their scorn for its method and argument—while concentrating their remarks on the political and cultural significance of the book's reception by popular audiences.

Omer Bartov of Rutgers University noted that Goldhagen's thesis that all Germans were guilty of the Holocaust is based on a study of those Germans who served as policemen during World War II, a much narrower cross section of the population than the *Wehrmacht*, the German Army, which enlisted more than ten million men.

Laura Downs of the University of Michigan described Goldhagen's argument as a version of identity politics, in which anti-Semitism is presented as the essence of Germanity, and all explanations of a structural character—rooting the rise of Nazism in the social

structure of Germany, including its economic structure—were rejected.

Atina Grossman of Cooper-Union and Columbia University said she had been appalled by the positive response of her German friends to the book. She referred to Goldhagen's "breathtakingly ill-informed comments on the history of anti-Semitism in Germany."

Marketing techniques

Grossman credited Goldhagen with clever marketing tactics and handling of the media, especially in Germany. She suggested, however, that it was not just Madison Avenue techniques, but rather the content of the book which explained its runaway popular success. The book is a combination of simpleminded argument and pornographic violence, she said, both of them appealing to the worst instincts in the public.

As the child of German Jews who survived the Holocaust, Grossman said she was particularly disturbed by the book's depiction of Nazi Germany as "relatively benign—for Germans," as well as its claim that the Allied occupation of Germany had produced a permanent democratization and ended anti-Semitism as a significant danger.

There was a sinister side to the enthusiastic reception of the book in Germany, she said, given its insistence that anti-Semitism is an essential part of the German character. Grossman said the widespread discussion of this thesis had the effect of legitimizing the open expression of anti-Semitic sentiments, which she found were being voiced more frequently in German academic circles than before.

Another scathing critique of Goldhagen came from Pieter Judson of Swarthmore College, who examined the impact of the book in Austria, where the right-wing

populist movement of Georg Haider has emerged as the second-largest party, based on virulent nationalism and a thinly veiled appeal to anti-Semitism.

When Goldhagen was interviewed on Austrian radio, he refused to make any distinction between German and Austrian anti-Semitism. He appeared genuinely ignorant of the specific historical roots of anti-Semitism in Austria, where the Catholic Church sponsored a right-wing anti-Semitic party at the end of the 19th century as a means of competing with the Social Democrats. It was in this political milieu that the Austrian-born Adolf Hitler grew up.

Judson explained that Goldhagen's arguments led him to advance positions similar to those of the neo-fascist Haider: that Austrians are Germans, pure and simple, and that anti-Semitism in Austria is no longer a danger.

The final speaker, Professor Geoff Eley of the University of Michigan, one of the organizers of the forum, summed up professional opinion on *Hitler's Willing Executioners* as "a very bad book, not just on the Third Reich, but on German history as a whole."

He said the issue posed by the book's publishing success was the gulf between scholarly works and what passes for history in the broader public. He expressed regret that in Germany the book had been embraced by figures such as Jürgen Habermas, despite misgivings, because they believed it might serve to dampen the wave of German nationalism which followed the 1990 reunification.

In the discussion which followed, one historian identified himself as Goldhagen's senior thesis adviser from his undergraduate days. He described the author as quite intelligent, saying that he knew enough to know what good history is. The clear implication was that Goldhagen was not merely mistaken in his views, but was deliberately distorting history in an attempt to stir up a public reaction.

Struggle against anti-Semitism

A representative of the Socialist Equality Party spoke in the discussion, noting that Goldhagen failed to give any account, not only of the history of anti-Semitism, but of the struggle against anti-Semitism, particularly that led by the socialist working class movement.

"This is a book about the history of Germany in which the names of Marx and Engels, Bebel and Liebknecht, do

not appear," he said. "But it is impossible to understand how Nazism came to power and carried out the Holocaust if one does not understand that the first victims of the concentration camps were the Socialists and Communists."

The speaker pointed out that Goldhagen's book effectively legitimizes the ideology of Nazism, by declaring that the essence of being a German is to be a homicidal anti-Semite, and by suggesting that Hitler's regime was established with overwhelming popular support, not by dictatorial methods.

The SEP speaker concluded by cautioning against a pragmatic approach to the book's popular success—the hope that a false book could nonetheless have a positive impact on political consciousness, especially in Germany. The success of the book was an indication of the present low level of political understanding and historical knowledge in both America and Germany, he said, something which historians had an obligation to combat.

Many students and teachers continued the discussion after the forum and at a literature table set up by the Socialist Equality Party, and at least a dozen bought copies of the pamphlet *Anti-Semitism, Fascism and the Holocaust*. This pamphlet contains the text of a lecture given by SEP National Secretary David North at Michigan State University last April, in which North analyzed Goldhagen's falsification of history and explained the central role of the working class in the struggle against anti-Semitism and fascism.

See also:

Fascism & the Holocaust: A critical review of Daniel Goldhagen's *Hitler's Willing Executioners*

A lecture by David North

[17 April 1997]

Why did the Holocaust take place?

[David Walsh reviews the lecture]

[2 June 1997]



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