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Killers of Conviction

Groups, Ideology, and Extraordinary Evil

> A group scarcely distinguishes between the subjective and the objective. It accepts as real the images evoked in its mind, though they most often have only a very distant relation with the observed fact. . . . Whoever can supply them with illusions is clearly their master; whoever attempts to destroy illusions is always their victim.
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> Gustav Le Bon, *The Crowd*

WHAT ABOUT THE MEN WHO perpetrated the slaughter at Sand Creek? Was it their membership in a collective, the Third Colorado Volunteer Cavalry Regiment, that best accounts for their active and willing participation in the atrocities? Or was it their membership in an even larger collective, the American culture, steeped in an extraordinary ideological hatred against Indians, which made them unusually fit to perpetrate extraordinary evil? This chapter will examine both of these possible explanations: the extraordinary nature of the collective and the influence of an extraordinary ideology.

The Extraordinary Nature of the Collective

One of the ways in which we explain extraordinary human evil is to focus on the means by which groups make that evil possible. Intuitively, many of us recognize that we are vulnerable to losing ourselves in a group. There seems to be something about the nature of the collective—a small band of marauders, an army battalion, a mob, a social or political organization, an office staff, a nation—that brings out our worst tendencies. A long line of scholarly interest in the collective has legitimized that intuition. In 1895, for example, French sociologist and journalist Gustav Le Bon wrote *La psychologie des foules,* which was published in English the following year under

the title *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*. The work became a best-seller, was available in nineteen languages a year after publication, and became enormously influential in the academic origins of crowd psychology.

Le Bon was an anguished French middle-class academic who lived in fear that the mob could seize society at any moment. Le Bon theorized that, in a crowd, the individual's psychology is subordinated to a collective mentality that radically transforms the individual's behavior. "By the mere fact that he forms part of an organized crowd," Le Bon wrote, "a man descends several rungs in the ladder of civilization. Isolated, he may be a cultivated individual: in a crowd, he is a barbarian—that is, a creature acting by instinct."[1]

For Le Bon, the collective is an unreasoning, primitive, fickle, dictatorial, intolerant, and stupid aggregate: "Whoever be the individuals that compose it, however like or unlike be their mode of life, their occupations, their character, or their intelligence, the fact that they have been transformed into a crowd puts them in possession of a sort of collective mind which makes them feel, think, and act in a manner quite different from that in which each individual of them would feel, think, and act were he in a state of isolation."[2] In short, the basic characteristic of crowds—and any group—is the fusion of individuals into a common spirit and feeling that blurs individual differences and lowers intellectual capacities.

Sigmund Freud endorsed Le Bon's controversial view that there is a regression inherent in group behavior and dynamics. As a matter of fact, Freud was so impressed with Le Bon's description of the irrationality of crowds that he devoted a sixth of his classic *Group Psychology and Analysis of the Ego* (1921) to quotations from the Frenchman's work. Freud accepted Le Bon's characterization of the group as credulous, lacking in self-criticism, impulsive, excitable, and suggestive. In a crowd, Freud agreed, individuals lose their own opinions and intellectual faculties, can no longer control their feelings and instincts, and begin to act in a way that surprises both themselves and those who know them.

Freud specifically listed among the characteristic traits of behaviors of persons in groups: (a) the dwindling of conscious individual personality, (b) the focusing of thoughts and feelings into a common direction, (c) the dominance of the emotions and the unconscious over reason and judgment, and (d) the tendency to immediately carry out intentions as they emerge. For Freud, the group is dominated almost exclusively by the unconscious. What we see in a group or crowd, in his view, is a case of temporary regression in which the ego begins to dissolve back into the id from which it came.

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Moreover, there also is a degradation of the superego (Freud's name for the individual's conscience and values) as it is externalized, or transferred, to the leader of the group. In other words, each member of the group identifies with the group leader to such an extent that the group begins to share a common superego. Violence in the group becomes possible, therefore, because the individual is no longer checked by his or her own superego but follows the conscience of the leader.

Reinhold Niebuhr, who taught for many years at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, was another vocal proponent of individual regression in groups. In his provocatively titled *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, first published in 1932, Niebuhr argued that there is a "basic difference between the morality of individuals and the morality of collectives, whether races, classes or nations."[3] What is this basic difference? In short, although individuals are capable of goodness and morality, groups are *inherently* selfish and uncaring. There is, Niebuhr argued, a clear distinction between the character of people acting in large social groups as opposed to their character as individual people. "The proportion of reason to impulse becomes increasingly negative," he writes, "when we proceed from the life of individuals to that of social groups, among whom a common mind and purpose is always more or less inchoate and transitory and who depend therefore upon a common impulse to bind them together."[4]

In Niebuhr's view, evil—our pride, pretension, insecurity—is a permanent part of human nature. This view, dubbed "Christian realism," was an update of the centuries-old Augustinian view of human nature after the fall from grace. For Niebuhr, however, this essential baseness of humanity is more massive and obvious in the life of the group than in that of the individual. He saw this as a simple fact about all collectives—they are more arrogant, hypocritical, self-centered, and more ruthless in the pursuit of their ends than the individual. As a result, an inevitable tension exists between individual and group morality. For Niebuhr, this is especially problematic because the claims of a collective far transcend those of the individual. In other words, for its very survival, the individuals involved in a collective are required to do things they would not do (and would not be morally justified in doing) as individuals. As a result, individual capacities for goodness, altruism, and morality are typically subverted to the brutal character of the group.

Moral Man and Immoral Society created a sensation in intellectual circles. Marking the beginning of the end of classical liberalism in American theology, Niebuhr attacked the premise that the steady advance of reason and

goodwill in the modern age was capable of eradicating social evils. Where individuals may be reached by reason and a call to justice, Niebuhr held that nations, corporations, labor unions, and other large social groups would be unmoved by such appeals. The collective, he argued, responded to, and could only be dislodged by, one thing—power.

If the evil of the collective is more intractable than the evil of the individual, then noncoercive social institutions are simply not possible. Coercion is necessary to maintain society, and violence is merely the ultimate form of coercion. For Niebuhr, the belief in the possibility of radical societal change by "reorganization of values" or by socializing the young was naively unrealistic.

In the decades following Niebuhr's book, Hitler would move the concept of an immoral society from the realm of the theoretical to the brutal reality of the Holocaust. The general public, hungering for an explanation, latched onto Niebuhr's thinking. No longer was Niebuhr the stark iconoclast who could be vilified as a traitor to progress or, even worse, a fundamentalist. Yes, the social group might curb single individuals with the potential for extraordinary evil. However, the awful reality made clear by Hitler's Nazi Germany was that social groups with the potential for extraordinary evil could run unrestrained and carry out that extraordinary evil.

The notion that the nature of the collective somehow exacerbates or unleashes our worst tendencies was resurrected in M. Scott Peck's 1983 best-seller *People of the Lie: The Hope for Healing Human Evil*. In his discussion of group evil, Peck describes the phenomenon of "group immaturity," or the notion that human groups behave at a level that is more primitive and immature than one might expect. In other words, individuals regress in group settings. Groups, he maintains, are generally less than the sum of their parts.

Framing his point in the context of the 1968 My Lai massacre in South Vietnam, Peck argues that groups allow for the fragmentation of conscience. Not only may individuals in a group forsake their conscience, but also the conscience of the group as a whole can become so fragmented and diluted as to be nonexistent. The fragmentation of conscience described by Peck results, in large part, from the role of specialization in groups. Specialization allows groups to function with far greater efficiency than individuals. It also, however, allows for the compartmentalization of responsibility that Peck has captured in his description of the fragmentation of conscience. In Peck's somber conclusion, "Any group will remain inevitably potentially conscienceless and evil until such time as each and every indi-

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Peck's choice of framing his discussion in the context of a military massacre is not accidental. The military represents one of our clearest examples of specialization and, as a result, is a real-life laboratory for investigating the fragmentation of conscience. Lt. Col. David Grossman, a professor of military science at Arkansas State University and author of *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society*, contends that it is group absolution that enables sane men and women to do what they do in combat. This notion that "the individual is not a killer, but the group is" echoes Peck's fragmentation of conscience. In addition, Grossman discusses how groups enable killing through developing in their members a sense of anonymity that contributes further to violence. He points out that this group anonymity can even facilitate a kind of atavistic killing hysteria that mimics similar behavior in the animal kingdom. He concludes that "groups can provide a diffusion of responsibility that will *enable individuals in mobs and soldiers in military units to commit acts that they would never dream of doing as individuals* [italics mine]."[6]

Does the Extraordinary Nature of the Collective Best Explain Extraordinary Evil?

Is there a psychological discontinuity between people acting as individuals and people acting as group members? Does membership in a larger collective, and the "mass ego frenzy" of group experience, lead us to do things we would not have done as individuals? Are all collectives inherently capable of such brutality?

The idea that the nature of the collective is immature, even brutal, is a highly pessimistic view. One critic of Niebuhr, Richard Gregg, went beyond the pessimism and maintained that the idea itself was unrealistic: "The statement that human collectives are less moral than the individuals that compose them is a highly doubtful generalization. . . . [It] is not valid. It disregards too much pertinent evidence. It does not square with the results of a wealth of patient and careful biological experiments and observations."[7] Gregg's caution about the broad generalization of the immorality of all human collectives is appropriate. All collectives are not all bad all of the time.

Neither are collectives inherently irrational and frenzied in their actions. Even the most seemingly feverish of groups—ethnic rioters—can-

not thoughtlessly be classified as irrational. Donald L. Horowitz, professor of law and political science at Duke University and author of *The Deadly Ethnic Riot*, maintains that there is an important instrumental rationality required to pull off any successful ethnic riot—even though rioters appear to be motivated solely by an emotional torrent. It is a passionate but highly patterned event. Rioters wait until police protection is weak; they choose moments of attack well; they strike against unarmed concentrations of a target group in border neighborhoods; they take great pains to ensure that lives of the attackers are very rarely risked.

On a positive level, we know that groups can develop values, institutions, and practices that promote humanitarian caring and connection. Groups are not inherently selfish and uncaring; they do not always behave at a level that is more primitive and immature than the individuals that comprise the group. Groups can, for instance, help people strengthen their resolve to stop drinking, lose weight, study harder, and expand their spiritual consciousness. Even Le Bon believed that the group's inability to reason meant that they could develop great altruism, something that reason inevitably suppresses but that is a very useful social virtue. At times, groups can even provide the security to *oppose* potentially destructive ideas and practices. Groups brought democracy to Czechoslovakia and Serbia and confronted oppressive governments in China and South Africa.

We also know, however, that groups can certainly develop characteristics that create a potential for extraordinary evil. Laboratory studies indicate that, in groups, we become more aroused, more stressed, and more error-prone on complex tasks. Groups tend to be more antagonistic, competitive, and mutually exploitive than individuals. As Niebuhr pointed out, moral constraints are less powerful in groups than in individuals. As both Peck and Grossman have argued, there is a diffusion of responsibility within groups that can make evildoing a relatively simple matter. In addition, groups have the power to suppress dissent and, thus, encourage the abandonment of the individual self. In so doing, groups provide a moral authority that can give individuals sufficient justification to perpetrate extraordinary evil. Many of these factors help explain how ordinary people come to commit extraordinary evil.

I do quarrel, though, with the idea that it is the *group* rather than the *individuals* in it that best explains extraordinary evil. Being in a group does undoubtedly influence individual behavior. Group dynamics can, to some extent, alter the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of individuals within a group. While group members may become capable of conduct of which

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they are incapable individually, I do not believe that being in a group *inevitably* predisposes us to commit acts of extraordinary evil that we "would never dream of doing as individuals." Being in a group *reveals* who individuals are just as much as, if not more than, being in a group alters who they are. In this way, groups can reflect some of the baser characteristics of the individuals within them as well as some of the more noble characteristics. The dynamics of a collective are best understood by the wills and ideologies of the individuals within it. Group processes, like individual processes, are dynamic, not static—changing, not changeless. In short, groups can produce action either heroic or barbaric.

We can gain some insight from group polarization research in social psychology. Decades of experimentation on group decision making show that group discussion typically *strengthens* the average inclination of the individual members in the group. In other words, group discussion tends to strengthen whatever is the initially dominant point of view, whether risky or cautious. It polarizes people's initial tendencies to the extreme. Groups do not *inevitably* make riskier decisions. They *do* inevitably make more extreme decisions. In short, the average of group members' opinions and behaviors becomes more extreme as a result of group interaction.

We can extend these findings beyond the experimental laboratory. In everyday situations, too, group interaction tends to intensify opinions and behaviors. A group, interacting in isolation from moderating influences, becomes progressively more extreme than the sum of its individual members. The result is often extreme acts—good or evil—that the individuals, apart from the group, would never have committed. In groups, not only do risk takers become riskier, but bigots also become despisers, and givers become more philanthropic.

Social psychologists Clark McCauley and Mary Segal analyzed terrorist organizations around the world and found that terrorism arises among people whose shared grievances bring them together. As they interact in isolation from moderating influences, they become progressively more extreme—both as a group and as individuals. The result is violent acts of extraordinary evil that the individuals, apart from the group, likely would never have committed—at least not to the same degree.[8] In this way, a group does become infinitely more dangerous than the same of its individual parts.

It bears repeating, however, that group interaction is a social amplifier that strengthens the preexisting signals of the individuals in the group—whether evil or good. Robert Zajonc, a social psychologist at Stanford, has

captured this phenomenon in his concept of *collective potentiation*. Collective potentiation "refers to the augmentation of particular individual actions and lowering of the threshold for these actions in a group, community, organization, or a nation."[9] Under conditions of collective potentiation, more members of a group engage in a specific action, and they do so sooner and more energetically. In other words, the group amplifies individual actions, for good or for evil, through such processes as imitation, definition, celebration, and the sharing of resources.

In summary, when our individual tendencies are negative, groups have the capacity to unleash our worst impulses. However, when our individual tendencies are positive, groups accentuate the best of what we are. Depending on which tendency a group is disinhibiting or magnifying, groups can be very, very bad or very, very good. In other words, it is *not* the nature of the collective that limits our possibility for cooperative, caring, nonviolent relations; it is the nature of the individuals that make up the collective. There *is* a psychological *continuity* between people acting as individuals and people acting as group members.

The Influence of an Extraordinary Ideology

Is there a "national character" that accounts for differences between nations and the people in them? Henry V. Dicks, a British psychiatrist appointed to take over the psychiatric care of Rudolf Hess after his flight to England, certainly thought so. He defined national character as "the broad, frequently recurring regularities of certain prominent behaviour traits and motivations of a given ethnic or cultural group."[10] On the basis of his evaluation of more than one thousand German prisoners of war, Dicks concluded that there was, indeed, a long-standing German national character that lay very close to the political attitudes of the Nazi Party.

To extend Dicks's conclusion, could it be possible that an extraordinary ideology provides the soil for an extraordinary national character that predisposes people in that culture to extraordinary evil? Was Franz Ziereis an inevitable product of an extraordinary German culture shaped from an extraordinary ideological hatred of the Jews? In March 1996, a book was released that raised this very question. Daniel Jonah Goldhagen's *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* stirred a renewed interest in the nature of the collective—specifically the collective of the German people.

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do the things they did to Jews in the Holocaust, Goldhagen—then an assistant professor of government and social studies at Harvard University—gave a simple and straightforward answer: because they wanted to. Why did they want to? Because they grew up in an extraordinary culture where an unusually virulent form of antisemitism was commonplace. They were heirs to what James M. Glass, professor of government and politics at the University of Maryland, has termed a *Kultur*-group—a group constituted by a set of common or shared beliefs. Most prevalent among these shared beliefs, according to Goldhagen, was a deep-rooted, pathological antisemitism that simply awaited the ascendancy of Hitler and the opportunity of war for its lethal expression.

Following this logic, Goldhagen maintains that ordinary Germans were not forced into performing executions. Rather, they were willing participants in the whole process. These Germans did not view their actions as criminal, nor did they shrink from opportunities to inflict suffering, humiliation, and death—openly, knowingly, and zealously—on their victims. Moreover, many of them were not part of an elite group like the SS. Most were ordinary Germans. Goldhagen posits a minimum figure of one hundred thousand, and says "it would not be surprising if the number turned out to be five hundred thousand or more," who willingly took part in the Final Solution.[11] They were, in his opinion, killers of conviction.

Goldhagen's Central Propositions

Goldhagen offers two central propositions to defend his thesis that an extraordinary culture shaped by an extraordinary ideology can mold ordinary people into extraordinary killers. The first is his concept of the ideology of *eliminationist antisemitism*. Goldhagen argues that from at least the early nineteenth century, over a century before the Nazis came to power, virtually all Germans had come to believe in an "eliminationist" variant of antisemitism. This distinctive and particular German antisemitism held that Jews were different from Germans; that these alleged differences resided in their biology (conceptualized as a race) and were therefore unalterable; that the Jews were evil and powerful, had done great harm to Germany, and would continue to do so. Thus, for Germany to be secure and prosperous, there had to be an elimination of Jewish influence or of Jews themselves from German society.

Moreover, this form of antisemitism was different from all other forms of antisemitism across the world. Goldhagen compares this distinctively

lethal German antisemitism with the monomania of Captain Ahab, who was possessed by the irrational passion to avenge himself against Moby-Dick. As with Ahab and the whale, so with Germans and the Jews. The German culture was distinctively possessed of a hallucinatory, lethal view of the Jews. In one critic's terms, Goldhagen depicts the Germans as basically "undifferentiated, unchanging, possessed by a single, monolithic cognitive outlook."[12] The Germans were like nobody else except the Germans. Goldhagen takes great pains to insist that his argument has nothing to do with some immutable German national character. Instead of German national character, he speaks of the character of German nationality. Regardless, his repetitive, even obsessive emphasis on the pervasiveness and depth of this lethal—and singularly German—antisemitism suggests otherwise.

Thus, when Hitler's *Mein Kampf* called for a solution to the Jewish problem, he was preaching to the converted. By the time Hitler came to power in 1933, the eliminationist antisemitism of Germany was already "pregnant with murder." Because virtually all Germans were of "one mind" about the Jews, Hitler had merely to "unshackle" and "unleash" their "preexisting, pent-up" antisemitism to perpetrate the Holocaust. It was not Hitler's willingness to murder the Jews that was crucial. It was the willingness of the German people. As Ron Rosenbaum summarizes, Hitler was more a *facilitator* of an irresistible compulsion rather than a charismatic instigator. The German people were the ventriloquists; Hitler was their dummy.[13]

According to Goldhagen, it was simple enough for the Nazi regime to tweak the eliminationist mind-set toward an exterminationist one. Average Germans, permeated with eliminationist antisemitism, had no moral scruples or reluctance to overcome when faced with the annihilation of the Jews. They were ready, and very willing, to perpetrate evil on Jews. Most would have participated directly in the killing if called on to do so. No process of brutalization was necessary. Hitler's "national project" simply gave the people the opportunity to do what they had wanted to do all along. The preexisting fever of antisemitism erupted into a mass crime of passion.

Summarily rejecting all previous interpretations, Goldhagen's second central proposition designated this *eliminationist antisemitism as the central motive*, or "causal agent," for the Holocaust. According to Goldhagen, this cause outweighs all others, and without it, the Holocaust would have been unthinkable. He writes:

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> Germans' anti-Semitic beliefs about Jews were the central causal agent of the Holocaust. . . . The conclusion of this book is that antisemitism moved many thousands of "ordinary" Germans—and would have moved millions more, had they been appropriately positioned—to slaughter Jews. Not economic hardship, not the coercive means of a totalitarian state, not social psychological pressure, not invariable psychological propensities, but ideas about Jews that were pervasive in Germany, and had been for decades, induced ordinary Germans to kill unarmed, defenseless Jewish men, women, and children by the thousands, systematically and without pity.[14]

In other words, fueled by this murderous antisemitism, Germans killed Jews because they wanted to kill Jews. They were not faceless cogs of an impersonal bureaucratic abstract system, but individuals acting according to their deep-rooted beliefs. They participated because they thought the Jews ought to die, that the annihilation of the Jews was socially desirable, and that the Jews were a particularly inferior form of subhumans. They simply thought they were doing the right thing. Moreover, the perpetrators engaged in cruelty with zest, enthusiasm, and willingness. Their cruelty, according to Goldhagen, was not a response to orders. They were cruel because of their own free will. They were not subject to forces that made them engage in actions they believed inwardly to be reprehensible. They were eager, even happy, to persecute and murder Jews.

In Goldhagen's view, it was an extraordinary culture driven by an extraordinary ideological hatred against Jews that had shaped an extraordinary people who could carry out such atrocities. No other motive—conformity to peer pressure, obedience to authority, blind acceptance of current political norms, careerism, personal profit, coercion, routinization, brutalization—was necessary. To put it simply, if the perpetrators were antisemites who believed that the extermination of Jews was right, then all the situational factors so commonly asserted to have motivated the killers are irrelevant. Everybody was antisemitic and antisemitism explains everything.

Was Eliminationist Antisemitism Pervasive before the Nazi Takeover?

There is no question that antisemitism, particularly of an "exclusionist" bent, was persistent in Germany prior to the Nazi takeover. There is also no question that, after the Nazi rise to power, the long-standing historical animosity of antisemitism took on a different slant—it became elimination-

ist, even exterminationist. But is Goldhagen correct in asserting that eliminationist antisemitism was a pre-Nazi phenomenon? If he is, it seems that there would not have been a Jew alive in Germany to persecute in 1933. Exactly how pervasive was eliminationist antisemitism *before* the Nazi takeover?

The vast majority of scholars maintain that, regardless of where one looks, it is hard to find widespread evidence that eliminationist antisemitism was the "culturally shared cognitive model" that Goldhagen maintains it to be in Germany since the early nineteenth century. In fact, for a very long time, Germany was thought to be a peculiarly hospitable and secure place for Jews. German Jews had received legal emancipation in the second half of the nineteenth century, well ahead of some other European nations. Civil rights for Jews remained on the books until the Nazis rewrote them. Jews undoubtedly had trouble exercising these rights at times, but this does not alter the fact that they were granted.

In addition, most scholars agree that Jews were influential out of proportion to their number. In 1933, about 525,000 people, or less than 1 percent of the German population, were registered as Jews. Despite their meager numbers, Jews were disproportionately active in the cultural, financial, and political life of Germany. As Marion A. Kaplan, professor of history at Queens College and the Graduate Center, City University of New York, writes: "They [Jews] enjoyed general acceptance, even acclaim, in the worlds of art and culture, participated in center and moderate left politics, and excelled in the professions of medicine and law. . . . [Jews created] new forms of German-Jewish culture in literature, music, fine arts, education, and scholarship."[15] Widespread feverish antisemitism and the achievements of the Jewish community in Germany stand in impossible contradiction.

A recent study by Arnd Kruger of the University of Göttingen offers additional support for the assertion that prior to 1933 exclusionist antisemitism did not represent the attitudes of the majority in Germany.[16] In his analysis of German Jewish sport from 1898 to 1938, Kruger maintains that exclusionist sentiments were neither weaker nor stronger in Germany than in other European countries at the turn of the century. As one example, Kruger discusses the German Turner organization. The German Turners (gymnasts) comprised a fiercely nationalistic sport movement that, at the turn of the century, had six times as many members as all other "sports" combined. In 1889, Austrian clubs—holding membership in the German Turner organization that comprised the Turners in Germany and Austria—began a move to exclude Jewish members. This resulted in a split within

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Eventually, the antisemitic clubs in the German Turners withdrew from the larger organization. The German Turner organization was willing to keep its "handful" of Jewish members, even if it was losing about 15 percent of its membership over the question of an Aryan paragraph. At the turn of the century, when Goldhagen maintains that there existed a rabid eliminationist antisemitism through Germany, exclusionist antisemitism was not even strong enough to sway the German Turners. The pragmatic maintenance of the organization fell second to the moral forces of liberalism, humanity, and sanity. As Kruger points out, this example is especially telling when one considers that athletes and athletic organizations tend to be more conservative in their politics and world outlook than society at large.

Furthermore, Goldhagen does not prove that pre-Nazi German antisemitism was more pervasive than elsewhere in Europe. Doing more comparative work in a larger European context certainly would have modified Goldhagen's extreme views about German antisemitism. The quantity of antisemitic expression in Russia, Romania, and Poland was at least as great as that found in Germany. In Russia, antisemitism was prevalent enough to bring about dozens of violent pogroms, which the Tsarist Minister of the Interior, Count Nikolai Pavlovich Ignatyev, likened to the verdict of a "people's court." Most scholars even contend that *French* antisemitism was far worse, far more virulent, deep-rooted, and bitter than Germany's, in the pre–World War I period.

In addition, Goldhagen's depiction of a pernicious pre-Nazi German antisemitism certainly does not square with most political analyses of the period. Antisemitism was not popular at the German polls before depression struck, nor was it decisive in winning voters over to the Nazi Party. Sociologist William Brustein of the University of Minnesota maintains that as early as 1924–1925, Nazi leaders had concluded that the issue of antisemitism held insufficient appeal for building a national political party attractive to all German classes. In its rise to power, Brustein argues, the Nazi Party increasingly relegated antisemitism to a role as backdrop to other more materialist appeals—particularly economic concerns.[17] In the election of 1930, which won the Nazis their entrée into the political system, political opportunism demanded that the Jewish issue be downplayed. For

Germans, as for most of us, their political affiliation was based on self-interest. And for most Germans, that self-interest was driven by economic, not antisemitic, motivations. Early joiners of the Nazi Party calculated that, of the many competing Weimar political parties, the Nazis offered them the best prospects for a better economic life.

Even given the appeal of the Nazi Party to some Germans, it remains true that the majority of Germans were not moved by the Nazi Party's potential to enrich their lives. In the last free election of the period, in November 1932, the Nazis received only 33 percent of the vote, while the communists and socialists—bitter enemies of each other as well as the Nazis—together garnered 37 percent. Clearly, before 1933, German society was torn with too many social, political, and ideological divisions to ensure a unified brand of eliminationist antisemitism that would find a ready collaborator in the Nazi Party.

As Brustein concludes: "Why has anti-Semitism received so much attention as a theme of the Nazi Party before 1933? The Nazi regime's subsequent systematic policy of liquidating the Jewish people has irrevocably shaped our understanding of Nazism. It is only natural that our view of the Nazis' rise to power is colored by recognition of their profound anti-Semitism. Yet as difficult as it may be for many of us to believe, Nazi anti-Semitism, though a driving force in the foundation of the Nazi Party, hardly explains the NSDAP's spectacular rise to power."[18] Unfortunately, Goldhagen's view of the Nazis' rise to power is overly prejudiced by his exclusive focus on eliminationist antisemitism.

Once in power, of course, the Nazis quickly abandoned their pre-1933 political strategy and pursued their hidden agenda of territorial expansion and racial persecution, including their virulent form of antisemitism. Even as the Nazis gained broad popular support and legitimacy, however, most Germans were drawn to antisemitism because they were drawn to Nazism, not the other way around. In other words, antisemitism was part of the baggage of Nazism.

Indeed, most scholars argue that the majority of ordinary Germans, rather than being eliminationist antisemites, remained simply passive, apathetic, and indifferent to the fate of Jews among them. As historian David Bankier writes, "Ordinary Germans knew how to distinguish between acceptable discrimination . . . and the unacceptable horror of genocide. . . . The more the news of the mass murder filtered through, the less the public wanted to be involved in the Final Solution of the Jewish question."[19] Historian Ian Kershaw likewise concludes, "The 'Jewish question' was of no

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more than minimal interest to the vast majority of Germans during the war years. . . . Popular opinion, largely indifferent and infused with a latent anti-Jewish feeling . . . provided the climate within which spiraling Nazi aggression towards the Jews could take place unchallenged. But it did not provoke the radicalization in the first place."[20] It is clear that, on the whole, most Germans did not share the fanatical antisemitism—and certainly not the genocidal commitment—of Adolf Hitler and the hardcore Nazis. It is just as clear, however, that their indifference, manifested in a national conspiracy of silence, provided the autonomy for the regime to implement genocidal policies.

It could be argued that this indifference also allowed many ordinary Germans to become part of the destruction process. Perhaps it was not the hateful, rabid, revengeful eliminationist antisemitism that spurred the atrocities. Rather, perhaps it was because the indifference to Jews—motivated, in part, by a "moderate antisemitism"—ran so deep that many ordinary Germans could kill them just as easily as not. So, rather than a deep, preceding ideological hatred, perhaps it was a *lack* of emotional connection that neutralized whatever aversion Germans might otherwise have felt for the Nazis and made such atrocities possible.

Another piece of evidence suggesting that eliminationist antisemitism was not as pervasive as maintained by Goldhagen comes from the secret diaries of Victor Klemperer collected from 1933 to 1945. Klemperer was the son of a Reform rabbi who converted to Protestantism when he was thirty-one years old. After a brief stint as a journalist, he was appointed professor of Romance languages at the Technical University of Dresden in 1920. In 1935, however, the Nuremberg laws on "German Blood and German Honor" defined Klemperer as "un-German." Despite his status as a decorated World War I veteran and his conversion to Protestantism, Klemperer was labeled as a foreigner and a Jew and subject to the anti-Jewish measures sweeping throughout his homeland. In 1935, he was forced by the Nazis to retire from his teaching position at Dresden. He survived twelve years of Nazi rule in Germany only because his wife, Eva Schlemmer, whom he married in 1906, was considered an "Aryan" by the regime.

Goldhagen's depiction of German society as more or less monolithically antisemitic is not confirmed by Klemperer's diary. Rather, his remarkable diary—nearly 1,700 printed pages—reveals a world in which most, but not all, Germans gradually turned their backs on the Jews. To be sure, the Nazi regime's open antisemitism is on display throughout the pages of the two-volume diary. The reaction of ordinary Germans, however,

is far different from the violent antisemitism alleged by Goldhagen. "The majority of the people is content," Klemperer records. "A small group accepts Hitler as the lesser evil, no one really wants to be rid of him, all see in him the liberator in foreign affairs, fear Russian conditions . . . believe, insofar as they are not honestly carried away, that it is inopportune . . . to be outraged at such details as the suppression of civil liberties, the persecution of the Jews, the falsification of all scholarly truths, the systematic destruction of all morality. And all are afraid for their livelihood, their life, all are such terrible cowards."[21] Though most found the means to accommodate themselves to the Nazi regime, they were not motivated by a vicious form of antisemitism. Rather, a mix of cowardice, apathy, and slavish obedience to authority motivated them.

Elsewhere Klemperer writes, "I often ask myself where all the wild anti-Semitism is. For my part I encounter much sympathy, people help me out, but fearfully of course."[22] After the introduction of the required yellow star of Jewish identification, Klemperer relates the following incident: "On the park way of the Lothringer Strasse as I came back from the cemetery on Sunday afternoon an old gentleman—white goatee, approximately seventy, retired higher ranking civil servant—came right across the path toward me, stretched out his hand to me, and said with a certain ceremoniality: 'I saw your star and I greet you, I condemn this ostracism of a race, and many others do so likewise.' I: 'That's very kind of you—but you're not allowed to talk with me; it can cost me my life and bring you into prison.'—Yes, but he wanted to, he had to tell me that."[23] Klemperer's perception of a largely indifferent—occasionally even sympathetic—German public contrasts starkly with Goldhagen's image of 80 million willing executioners. Klemperer's firsthand account compellingly demonstrates that not all ordinary Germans were fiercely committed to Nazism and antisemitism.

How does Goldhagen get around this, and other, evidence against his bold claim that eliminationist antisemitism permeated German society? Driven by prosecutorial passion, he pulls a sleight of hand by contending that the cognitive model was so overwhelming that Germans need not *express* antisemitism at all—they were just antisemites. Eliminationist antisemitism was the invisible engine that fueled the German system, from individual souls to state organization. The proof of it, according to Goldhagen, lay in its *absence* from political statements, letters, texts, or creeds. "Notions fundamental to the dominant worldview and operation of a society," he writes, "precisely because they are absolutely taken for granted, often are not expressed in a manner commensurate with their prominence

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In short, if you were a German in 1930 and were not *blatantly* antisemitic, it was only because your antisemitism ran so deep that it need not be expressed. Even if expressed, the others around you would not have noted it. You lived in a culture permeated by eliminationist antisemitism, and both its expression and its lack of expression testified to that fact.

Was Eliminationist Antisemitism the Central Motive for the Holocaust?

Even if we accept the spurious concept of a German culture marinated in eliminationist antisemitism, there remain several concerns about raising it as the central motive for the Holocaust. Goldhagen pays no attention, for instance, to the fact that not all the killers in the Holocaust were Germans. The killers included ethnic Germans who lived outside Germany, Romanians, Croats, Ukrainians, Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians in significant numbers. How do we ascribe to all these people, who had not been a part of German society, the kind of uniquely German eliminationist antisemitism that Goldhagen maintains to underlie their perpetration of extraordinary evil?

In addition, Goldhagen ignores the fact that German executioners were equally capable of killing millions of non-Jews targeted by the Nazi regime. As historian Christopher Browning points out, the European Jews were only one group of people that became victims of industrially organized killing during World War II. Beginning in 1939, systematic and large-scale mass murder was initiated against mental and physical defectives in Germany (regardless of religion) and Polish intelligentsia; more than 3 million Soviet prisoners of war died from hunger, exposure, disease, and outright execution; Gypsies were included in the genocidal assault; Slavic populations were routinely subjected to selective massacres. All told, the Nazi regime killed approximately 20 million unarmed persons. Yet Jews comprised only a third of the victims, and their mass murder occurred well into the sequence of killing.

Goldhagen does not offer a viable explanation for the victimization of these non-Jewish groups. Did the eliminationist antisemitism spill over to the murder of millions of non-Jewish victims? Is it to be understood as "eliminationist racism" or "eliminationist anti-Bolshevism?" If so, how is it different from "eliminationist antisemitism?" In short, it is not. It is part of

a totalistic ideology aimed at a complete reconstruction of Aryan society. In that ideology, hatred of Jews was a part of a hierarchy of hatreds and animosities. To be sure, Jews were selected for the most brutal treatment and were the only group specifically targeted for extermination. This fact cannot, however, be artificially separated from the larger context of which it was a part. Not antisemitism alone, but the much larger scope of Nazi racial ideology played a significant role in the mentality that led to the murder of 15 million victims. As Henry Friedlander, a survivor of Auschwitz and professor of Judaic studies at Brooklyn College of the City University of New York, writes: "One cannot explain any one of these Nazi killing operations without explaining the others. Together they represented Nazi genocide."[25]

More generally, *there are simply too many instances of such mass murders and genocides in history for us to accept a peculiarly German eliminationist antisemitism as the singular, monocausal motivating force*. Instead of probing how humans from a variety of backgrounds have, in a variety of situations, radically violated the norms of "civilized" society, Goldhagen directs all of our attention to trying to understand the radical German violation of the norms—as if German behavior were completely without parallel. He ignores, for instance, the records of the Austrians, Ukrainians, Balts, Croats, French, Hungarians, Romanians, Slovaks, and others that reveal just as much sadism and cruelty as any Germans. If these people perform the same duties and behave in the same way as their German counterparts, then the argument of "specifically German behavioral modes" fails. In addition, other recent historical atrocities—Stalin's terror, the Cultural Revolution in China, the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia—show that mass fealty can be whipped up by a totalitarian leader, operating in an atmosphere of state terror, without any particularly deep, preceding hatred for the victimized groups.

Unfortunately, Goldhagen dismisses as self-serving all German sources that indicate conscience on the part of some German perpetrators or even a gradual hardening of their callousness. He only accepts testimony that is self-condemning. Anything exculpatory or apologetic is dismissed. He also, far less forgivably, disregards the many Jewish sources that testify to the complexity and diversity of the perpetrators' motives. Browning reports two cases of Jewish witnesses (with no self-exculpatory motives) who make it clear that Germans in killing squads differed greatly in their antisemitic outlooks.[26] Survivor testimony is filled with those who recognize this complexity—what Primo Levi has termed the "gray zone"—and speak of

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Summary

It is tempting to demonize Goldhagen and his work in the same way that, many believe, he demonized the German population. However, he must be granted credit where credit is due. He succeeds admirably in bringing the focus of the investigation of extraordinary evil away from impersonal institutions and abstract structures back to the actors, back to the human beings who committed the crimes and to the populace from which these men and women came. Moreover, he emphasizes personal intent and responsibility in perpetrators.

In addition, he substantiates the important fact that many more Germans were *directly* involved in the killings than has previously been assumed. In so doing, he reminds us that roughly the same proportions of sadists and psychopaths, useful for genocide work, exist across cultures. However, this proportion is not high enough to successfully carry out a mass killing or genocide. You need, as Goldhagen correctly points out, thousands of other "willing executioners." (Unfortunately, he obscures this important point with his obsessive emphasis on the extraordinary nature of the German culture and its extraordinary ideology of eliminationist antisemitism.)

Despite these contributions, Goldhagen's two central propositions remain untenable. First, there is little evidence that the antisemitism of Germans was "eliminationist" aside from the outcome. Germans were not so fundamentally different that it is plausible to attribute to them a single cognitive outlook in stark contrast to the diversity found in the rest of the contemporaneous human community. We will not benefit from an approach that emphasizes uniformity among one particular culture and a sharp difference between "them" and other peoples. We need not invoke a "demono-

logical" hatred of others to explain the commission of extraordinary evil. The existence of widespread negative racial stereotyping in a society—in no way unique to Nazi Germany—can provide fanatical regimes not only the freedom of action to pursue genocide but also an ample supply of executioners.

His second central proposition, that eliminationist antisemitism was the central motive for the Holocaust, fares no better. The fixation on one overarching explanation—rather than many overlapping, reinforcing, perhaps partially competing explanations—is too simplistic. He runs a monocausal thesis into the ground. A singular crime need not be reduced to a singular cause.

Conclusion

What truths can we glean from the argument that the origin of extraordinary evil is in extraordinary groups? First, the extraordinary nature of a collective must be considered in any explanatory model of extraordinary human evil. We must accept the fact that group dynamics can, to some extent, alter the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of individuals within a group. As Israel Charny writes: "It is a human being who operates through the mechanisms of group behavior to do what he does to fellow human beings, but it is the mechanism of group experience that potentiates, legitimates, operationalizes, and narcotizes the emergence of man's various and often unsavory selves."[27]

We must also accept the fact, however, that being in a group does not inevitably lead us to commit acts of extraordinary evil that we "would never dream of doing as individuals." Being in a group *reveals* who individuals are just as much, if not more, than being in a group alters who they are. In this way, groups can reflect some of the baser characteristics of the individuals within them as well as some of the more noble. The dynamics of a collective are best understood by the wills and ideologies of the individuals within it. To divorce groups from the reality of the nature of the individuals within them is to misplace the blame for the commission of extraordinary evil.

Second, the influence of a culture and its corresponding ideologies must also be considered in any explanatory model of extraordinary human evil. Cultural characteristics are critically relevant in molding the identities of the perpetrators (see chapter 6) and matter in an important way in explaining extraordinary evil. Certainly, for instance, culture and ideology

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It is too easy, though, to say that *only* an extraordinary culture, like Germany, and *only* an allegedly extraordinary ideology, like eliminationist antisemitism, could produce a man like Franz Ziereis. We want to assume that mass killing and genocide are simply inherited from cultures and ideologies that preceded a regime's rise to power because then we can believe that extraordinary human evil is curable. Simply change the culture or ideology and you can change the mind-set that leads to something like the Holocaust. Admitting that culture or ideology may be simply the pretext by which we rationalize a more general wish to dominate and destroy is much more discomforting.

Moreover, by ascribing the crimes and their perpetrators to a particular culture or ideology, *their* behavior becomes "unfathomable" and outside of "our" world. Only the Germans could have behaved the way they did; nobody else could have. As a consequence, it cannot be repeated by someone else. Unfortunately, it has been, is being, and will be repeated by many other people. As a result, we must recognize that we are dealing not with "ordinary Germans" but rather with "ordinary people." As Browning writes, "If ordinary Serbs, Croats, Hutus, Turks, Cambodians and Chinese can be the perpetrators of mass murder and genocide, implemented with terrible cruelty, then we do indeed need to look at those universal aspects of human nature that transcend the cognition and culture of ordinary Germans."[28]