

**ABRAHAM BIDERMAN, DANIEL GOLDHAGEN,  
AND TELLING IT AS IT WAS**

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An interesting phenomenon for those of us who find ourselves still churning in the choppy backwash of the Demidenko affair is the concurrent appearance of two books which, presumably, have been nurtured quite independently: Abraham Biderman's Holocaust memoir, *The World of My Past* (1996)<sup>1</sup>, which won the 1996 Banjo prize for non-fiction and even more recently the new 1996 biennial National Biography Award; and Daniel Jonah Goldhagen's *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (1996)<sup>2</sup>, a book which has won the highest praise from luminaries like Jonathon Miller and Richard Bernstein and yet hardly raises a yawn from at least one of its recent Australian reviewers.

One might be excused for wondering exactly what is going on. Biderman's account of his experience of the Holocaust, every bit as important as Primo Levi's celebrated *If This is a Man*, was self-published before it won the Banjo and subsequently on this account, was taken up by Random. In Perth, at any rate, it might never have been written for all the publicity it has received, let alone its having won several prestigious awards. And Goldhagen's *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, despite its controversy, hardly seems controversial in Australia. On the contrary, a recent reviewer tells us that Goldhagen says nothing new, is making a mountain out of a molehill, and why doesn't the author acknowledge human bastardry in all of its multifarious manifestations instead of singling out the Germans.

Goldhagen's method in *Hitler's Willing Executioners* is to use evidence gained from access to the protocols of post-war interrogations of Germans who had taken an active part in the killing of Jews. It is on the basis of his interpretation of these documents that he bases his central argument that more than just the Nazis were involved in the killings, a view which is understandably provocative. Abraham Biderman's book is an account by the author of his survival of the Lodz ghetto and no less than four subsequent concentration camps including Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen. The central subject of my paper concerns the public response to these two books.

What I find particularly interesting about the general apathy and nit-picking surrounding these two books (aside, that is, from the generous

recognition granted Biderman by several award-giving panels) is the current social and political context in Australia in which they have appeared, a context let us say spanning the likes of Demidenko-Darville and Pauline Hanson, with David Irving biding his time in the wings. We seem to be occupying a confused and confusing space at the moment in which libertarianism and so-called freedom of speech have led to a widespread apathy concerning the dangers threatening to undermine libertarianism and freedom of speech, and where an aura of tweedy sophistication seems unaware of its own moral and ethical evasions on issues that really matter. If moral terms do arise, the discussion is more likely, as Peter Singer has recently observed, to be whether ethics is really subjective or objective than with anything having to do with how people live their lives. I agree with Singer<sup>3</sup> that it is time we established a non-partisan, non-religious, concept of ethics as the primary underpinning in all human affairs.

Robert Manne's book on *The Hand that Signed the Paper*, apart from other things, reminded us of the parlous state of ethical thinking in contemporary Australia.<sup>4</sup> For a sizeable section of the 'avant-garde' academy, post-Saussurean postmodernism has provided a convenient escape route from the necessity of facing up to hard questions to do with ethics and values: what Jonathan Miller on the back cover calls 'the subtler evasions', the kind of questions which everyone must negotiate everyday of their ordinary lives. Postmodernism has heralded the ludic, the relativist, the amoral, and has prioritised these above most other concerns, even though these things occupy a relatively trivial, or at least incidental, place in most people's lives.

What I am primarily concerned with in this paper is the effect of postmodernism on history, or historiography (as it is preferably called by those who like to emphasise the *written* nature of history). And I wonder if part of the tepid response to the two books I have named - Biderman's *The World of my Past* and Goldhagen's *Hitler's Willing Executioners* - might not, in part, be explained by the influence of postmodernism in how we think about history and evidence from the past.

I want to consider just two recent reviews of Goldhagen's *Hitler's Willing Executioners*. One is John Milful's 'The Book of Daniel',<sup>5</sup> the other Heidi Zogbaum's 'The Germans and Daniel Goldhagen'.<sup>6</sup> John Milful's piece makes one wonder whether in fact he has bothered to read Goldhagen's book at all. All I personally get from his very brief review of a very long historical work is a sort of supercilious yawn. What are Goldhagen's motives? Milful asks. Why does he pick on the Germans when there were

plenty of other antisemites he might have picked on? 'Our collective responsibility to the victims of the Holocaust begins at home'. According to Milful, this is a book predicated on a facile thesis which employs an 'argument [that] leads nowhere'. And in fact Milful prefers to spend most of his review talking about other books and other things, and barely deigns to address Goldhagen's book or the particular historical points it makes. The subtext of Milful's review seems to me very clearly, don't look too hard at, or try to account for, actual historical evidence and, more to the point, leave the poor Germans alone. Historian Richard Bosworth has drawn attention to what he calls 'relativisation' in contemporary historiography, which means, in effect, that everything must be compared with everything else rather than judged independently. This corresponds with the post-Saussurean explanation of the construction of meaning in textual linguistics through *différence* - the idea that we can only attribute significance to historical events by comparing things rather than in judging particular events for themselves apart from the rest; for instance by comparing the Holocaust with genocides in Ethiopia, Rwanda, the former Yugoslavia, etc. The idea is that meaning or significance is engendered in difference and in degrees of fictionality. This is a methodology which is highly suspicious of empiricism and so-called 'factual' evidence, preferring *a priori* ways of knowing; and it is exactly this kind of disregard for empiricism that enables the radical postmodernist Baudrillard to claim, in a recent book, that we have no way of knowing that the Gulf War actually took place. In the context of my present argument, such an approach negates any clear foundational moral or ethical stance as nugatory.

As Heidi Zogbaum's review shows, Milful's response is more than characteristic of the recent polyvocal German response to Goldhagen's book: the same charges of wilfulness, of undisciplined scholarship, of exaggeration, of disguising his real motives, and so on and so forth, but sounding ever so much like sour grapes and sheer professional jealousy, not to mention plain embarrassment. Heidi Zogbaum's review is more generous to Goldhagen. This reviewer at least acknowledges the importance of the central issue in Goldhagen's book, that ordinary German people were more aware and complicit in Jewish genocide than has customarily been assumed. Zogbaum fortunately refrains from Milful's nit-picking (such as his questioning the notion of an 'ordinary' German). Instead she treats the book seriously: 'Goldhagen's book is a serious challenge to many Germans and their memories. He is asking all those questions which for fifty years had gone unasked, not least because of the efforts of professional historians'.

This last is a very interesting point, and it is one of the main reasons I find these two books so worthy of our attention. For whereas the established wisdom (for instance in Zygmunt Bauman's *Modernity and the Holocaust*) tends to downplay the mad and irrational and mythological in the German eliminationist mentality which led to the Holocaust by stressing instead the forces of modernity, technology and rationality, both Biderman and Goldhagen in their different ways attest otherwise. Whereas Bauman is keen to argue (an argument simply repeated by John Milful) that not just Germans, but anyone so coerced, would have behaved, and many others did behave, in exactly the same way, Biderman and Goldhagen insist that, before laying out these kinds of extenuating and very reasonable kinds of arguments, we should first take a good hard look at the empirical evidence - that is, a harder look than we have been yet prepared to do. And it is one of the main shortcomings of both of these reviewers, but particularly Milful, I believe, that in their different ways they fail to counter hard evidence with hard evidence, preferring instead the personal anecdote and the speculative: Milful preferring to ignore most of the specific points Goldhagen's book raises, and Zogbaum rather strangely asserting that 'Goldhagen's central thesis [of the centrality of antisemitism in the Third Reich] can be proved deficient by an undergraduate', an assertion which becomes even stranger in view of the fact that in the rest of her review she largely supports Goldhagen's claims, confessing, 'His reconstruction [of the evacuation of concentration and labour camps] is masterly, deeply moving and is the culmination of his argument of the cruelty of ordinary Germans against Jews.'

Now it appears to me that the specific stumbling block in these arguments pivots on the meaning of Jewish 'centrality' in the Second World War and Holocaust, and I suspect that many of the interlocutors in the historiographical sparring match, and in the commentary on this particular book, founder on this initial semantic difficulty: namely, what does it mean to argue that the Jewish problem was 'central' to the Holocaust?

I presume that Heidi Zogbaum's reference to the glaring deficiency in Goldhagen's presentation has to do with this question of centrality. I concede that there are dangers in Goldhagen's decision to concentrate on what seems a single item at what might seem like the expense of all the rest. Yet, I think it would be wrong to see Goldhagen's argument as regarding the Jews *qua people* to be at the centre of the Second World War - which of course would be absurd, as Zogbaum says, and, yes, probably obvious to her hypothetical undergraduate reader. But if one reads Goldhagen carefully,

particularly the excerpts quoted from a variety of German sources, I think it is perfectly clear that he is arguing something rather different: namely, that in the German mind the Jews came to be associated *symbolically* and *metaphorically* with just about everything that frustrated German ambitions: that is, with matters ranging broadly from the economic to the social and cultural to the linguistic. In fact, Goldhagen makes the important point on many occasions that the German obsession is not so much with the Jews but with the *idea* of Jews, and that historically antisemitism often grew in virulence in the *absence* of actual Jewish inhabitants. He argues that German antisemitism must be seen in relation to a wider 'moral order', and despite the general assertion that we've heard it all before, I personally find Goldhagen's psycho-social analysis on this point fresh and extremely illuminating:

Identifying Jews with evil, defining them as violators of the sacred and as beings opposed to the fundamental good towards which people ought to strive, demonises them, produces a linguistic, metaphorical and symbolic integration of Jews into the antisemites' lives. Jews are not just *evaluated* according to a culture's moral principles and norms but become *constitutive* of the moral order itself, of the cognitive building blocks that map the social and moral domains, which come partly, yet significantly, to depend for their coherence on the then prevailing conception of Jews. Conceptions of Jews, by being integrated by non-Jews into the moral order and hence the underlying symbolic and cognitive structures of society, take on ever wider ranges of meaning, meaning that accrues ever greater structural coherence and integrity... It becomes difficult for non-Jews to alter the conception of Jews without altering a wide-ranging and integrated symbolic structure, including important cognitive models, upon which people's understanding of society and morality rest. It becomes difficult to see the Jews' actions, even their existence, other than as desecration and defilement.<sup>8</sup>

That is, Goldhagen is not positing Jewish centrality in any simple or simplistic sense; but rather the quite subtle idea that Jews posed a strategic *symbolic* threat to the very fabric of German society, that the *idea* of Jews threatened to undermine every aspect of German life, every social, cultural or linguistic, enterprise. To argue, in this metaphoric or mythological sense, that the idea of Jews was paramount in German thinking is quite different from contending that actual Jewish people were paramount, and it seems to me that this distinction makes all the difference to one's understanding of Goldhagen's claims.

I am not a historian and I do not have a historian's training, but I find it very strange that reviewers, German and Australian and others, can so easily shrug aside Goldhagen's claims about the centrality of antisemitism in Germany, given the specific details of his discussion going back to the nineteenth century and beyond, presented complete with documentary

evidence that suggests the exact opposite: for instance citing numerous German writers of the nineteenth, as well as pre-War twentieth, century writers (including some prominent German Churchmen) who speak openly about the obsessiveness concerning the Jews in all walks of German life. Had Goldhagen's account consisted of mere assertion without documentary support, I could better understand the impatience with his book. When he concludes that 'Virtually no evidence exists to contradict the notion that the intense and ubiquitous public declaration of antisemitism was mirrored in people's private beliefs',<sup>9</sup> he is clearly offering to be contradicted: not just by claims predicated on theory or speculation but rather by some citation of specific documents which might be lined up against the literally hundreds of documents he employs to support his thesis.

Certainly I understand that it is possible to be selective with 'evidence', and certainly a degree of relativisation is always necessary for the sake of improving perspective. While I take the point that the historian's job is not so much to master history as to interrogate history, I suggest there exists a very real danger in the uncautious relativisation of history which is precisely the same danger I have associated with the New Theory: namely, the tendency towards an endless deferral of judgment based on the argument that we are all potentially capable of doing these or similar things.

But I suspect that the real nub of this matter is that Goldhagen's account spoils the academic game by travelling a positivist route directly to empirical evidence instead of engaging in the more acceptable sceptical exercise of relativisation, where the demonstrated 'evidence' is regarded as far less important than enunciating one's 'position'. This is more or less the standard assumption in postmodernism where reading a text is concerned. In what is called 'reading-response theory', the aprioristic (what a reader/theorist brings to a book/event) is far more important than anything empirical (what the book/author/event itself 'contains'). In other words, the understanding of literature but also, it seems, of history is a matter of aprioristic solipsism.

And this is where Abraham Biderman comes in. Biderman's views concerning the centrality of antisemitism in German culture, its integrated mythological function in German ideas about their own identity, and its integral involvement in anxieties concerning German unity, chimes fairly exactly with Goldhagen's thesis. The significant point is that Biderman is not a theorist or even an academic but a witness, someone whose personal experience can provide a valuable empirical input into the academic debate. As David McCooley reminds us in his excellent new study of autobiography,

*Artful Histories: Modern Australian Autobiography* (1996),<sup>10</sup> the autobiography as genre is arguably the least 'fictionalised' form of narrative, the most reliably given to remembered personal experience in all of its moral and ethical circumstances and ramifications.

Biderman has no doubt that a widespread German antisemitism was the root cause of the Holocaust; that while a range of more immediate social, regional, economic, historical, etc., factors were also involved, it was at bottom what Goldhagen calls a 'mythological' and hence irrational belief concerning the impossibility of co-existence between Jews and Christians (fed to the populace over many centuries of Christian anti-Jewish rhetoric) that permitted the eliminationist idea to make sense and for Hitler and the Nazis to have their way with the German public. After all, the idea had been mooted in Germany during the century before; Goldhagen cites no less than nineteen publications between 1861 and 1895 in Germany which called for the *physical extermination of the Jews*. Biderman's account from his own experience is peppered with observations from German workers, drivers, apartments overlooking camp walls, and so on, attesting to the impossibility that Germans at large did not know what was happening. And his reminiscences of the way German camp attendants were able to combine acts of blood-lust and utter human depravity with hymn-singing and Christian observance on holidays must cast serious doubts on Bauman's thesis concerning German squeamishness; or on the supposed rationality rather than irrationality of German behaviour in their treatment of the Jews; or the disclaimer that religion or race wasn't a crucial factor.

What to make of it all? Goldhagen's book is not an easy read. It employs a rather long-winded and repetitious style to ram home its points over a length of almost 500 pages. And yet it seems to me that we have a duty to the past which goes beyond the readability of this book or the vested interests of academic fashion - a duty which is neither obsessive nor tokenistic. One knows that the past is likely to be full of unpleasantness that will cause us shame and guilt. Yet this is no reason to avoid looking it fairly and squarely, since it is only by facing it that it may be possible to find release from the past and better negotiate the present and the future. The same goes for Jewish history: Christian and/or German wrong-headedness and complicity in Jewish genocide needs to be countenanced rather than dissembled. The historical and empirical evidence Goldhagen adduces in his book needs to be taken on board with a degree of sober, *bona fide*, circumspection rather than embarrassment or professional condescension. The necessary and creditable quest for balance ought not encompass a kind

of methodology which actually reduces or minimalises the significance of evidence before exhaustive examination; moreover, it is always conceivable that past conclusions require reassessment as new evidence comes to light.

There are many questions Goldhagen raises to support his argument. Why did the German Church insist in helping provide lists of which Germans had a Jewish background? Or again, when there is clear evidence that the German people did have some degree of say in Nazi social policies (Goldhagen notes that between February 1936 and July 1937 there were 192 recorded people's strikes against a variety of Nazi policies), there nevertheless is no evidence of significant public protest over anti-Jewish policies, or even for that matter of privately expressed concern. Why this 'glaring absence', Goldhagen properly asks, at a time when Germans still felt they had a say in social policies? And so the questions go on for almost 500 pages. If a degree of tedium and long-windedness counts against the book, it would nevertheless be something of a feat to come to the end of Goldhagen's account, as some reviewers apparently managed to do, quite so determinedly, quite so ineluctably, unmoved and so totally unconvinced *on all scores and on all issues raised*. It would, in fact, require something of a talent.

My concern in this paper is with what we can learn from observing the contemporary responses of scholars to past events. For amid our predilection for postmodern relativism and relativisation there looms the very real danger of forgetting that 'truth' is as much a moral and ethical problem as a historiographical or postmodern one. It is important we at least *try* to understand what Goldhagen is saying before shrugging him aside, theorising or relativising his account away, or else using his account as another piece of handy ammunition in an endless academic game of my word against your word.

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#### REFERENCES

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- <sup>2</sup> Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*, Little Brown and Co, 1996.
- <sup>3</sup> Peter Singer, *How are we to live?: Ethics in an Age of Self-Interest*, Mandarin, 1995.
- <sup>4</sup> Robert Manne, *The Culture of Forgetting: Helen Demidenko and the Holocaust*, The Text Publishing Co., 1996.
- <sup>5</sup> In *Meanjin*, 55.3.96.
- <sup>6</sup> In *Quadrant*, Oct., 96.
- <sup>7</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, Polity, 1995 (1989).
- <sup>8</sup> Zogbaum, p.38.
- <sup>9</sup> Goldhagen, p.30.
- <sup>10</sup> David McCooey, *Artful Histories: Modern Australian Autobiography*, Cambridge University Press (Melbourne), 1996.



