

History Insights
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The Holocaust: Events, Motives and Legacy

Martyn Housden

*'...The Holocaust shows
with particular clarity
how the past can
continue to live in the
present...'*

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Martyn Housden

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Chapter 3 The motives of the perpetrators

3.1 Introduction

Why did individuals commit these crimes? The study of motivation has to grapple with psychological characteristics which need not have left explicit traces in the historical record. After all, there might have been issues which an actor ‘just assumed’ or ‘took for granted.’ And when written evidence exists, such as personal letters or diaries, the contents need not be objective, representative or even true. Admittedly there is the possibility of carrying out an oral history project, but it may not be possible even for an interview to re-create the immediacy and complexity of an historical situation—particularly if the event in question happened decades ago and is judged shameful today. Oral evidence gathered as part of a criminal investigation obviously is an even more difficult source of information because participants would hardly want to incriminate themselves.

By its very nature, motivation is likely to vary from person to person, from day to day—and even according to mood. More than likely, any given action reflects several different factors influencing an individual’s life at any given moment. So, taking the example of a racist incident on a train, a Nazi party member abused a Jew in a way that made plain he was genuinely anti-Semitic. But the Nazi also owed money to the Jew in question.¹ In this light, what motivated the attack—anti-Semitism or financial frustration? Perhaps both played a part.

We need to relate our discussion to the first chapter of this book. Just because sometimes violent anti-Semitism historically had been a notable feature in some areas of German society, we still have to be careful about the way we link the prejudice to the implementation of the Holocaust. Even senior Nazis were not always completely in agreement about anti-Semitism. Hitler’s prejudice consistently came with a dangerously hard edge that was linked to practical issues like economics and conspiracy. By contrast, Governor General Hans Frank and Reich Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop were not anti-Semites as young men and only ‘grew into’ the prejudice

¹ The case is discussed in more detail in M. Housden, *Resistance and Conformity in the Third Reich* (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 142–3.

during their careers in the party.¹ If there was so much variation in prejudice at the top of the Third Reich, then German society must have been even more varied. Different people felt anti-Semitism to different degrees and responded to Nazism's messages in different ways

It should hardly be surprising that such a difficult topic as motivation has been treated in patchy fashion in the past. When the major war criminals stood trial in Nuremberg in 1946, the tribunal focused pretty much exclusively on what defendants did and what they knew to have been happening.² Their motives for participating in the Third Reich were not explored in detail; they were just assumed to be typically criminal. Something similar happened at the trial of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem in the early 1960s. In this case, questions of motive were raised when he pleaded 'not guilty in the sense of the indictment' to charges associated with the Holocaust. Unfortunately the court did not explore what he meant.³ Eichmann was found guilty on the basis of participation itself, but his motives were left to an academic to discuss after his execution. This gap in the treatment of motive on the part of the law courts matters because such important events have helped colour how the Nazis have been perceived by the wider world.⁴

Motive also matters because it is a substantial intellectual challenge to understand evil—particularly when practiced by well educated people in a cultured nation. Grappling with this problem has led to a great deal of important scholarly work. In psychology, Stanley Milgram's famous experiments about obedience were motivated by trying to understand participation in the Third Reich.⁵ Philosopher Hannah Arendt analysed Eichmann and developed the idea of 'the banality of evil' (see below).⁶ Sociologist Zygmunt Baumann has discussed the way life in large organisations helps generate the conditions for inhuman behaviour (see below).⁷ And academics are not the only people interested here. Relatives of victims and perpetrators alike

1 M. Bloch, *Ribbentrop* (London: Bantam Press, 1992), p. 206.

2 See M. Housden, *Hans Frank. Lebensraum and the Holocaust* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2003), chapter 11.

3 H. Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem. A Report on the Banality of Evil* (London: Penguin, 1994), p. 25.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 221.

5 See K. Deaux and L. S. Wrightsman, *Social Psychology* (Belmont, CA.: Wadsworth, 1988), chapter 8. In an experiment Milgram found that an alarming number of people were willing to give a lethal electric shock to another person if ordered to do so by an authority figure. Interestingly, those who refused included individuals of German background who seemed to have learned an important lesson from their country's history.

6 Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, p. 252.

7 Z. Baumann, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1989).

have shown a clear ‘need’ to understand the carnage that happened during the Second World War. In the mid-1990s, this ‘need’ provided the basis for the massive popular success of Daniel Goldhagen’s book *Hitler’s Willing Executioners*. We will start our discussion of historical literature with this text.

3.2 *Hitler’s Willing Executioners*. Daniel Goldhagen

Goldhagen’s book caused such a stir that it was followed by a collection of letters written to the author by ordinary readers. Lots of the responses were positive, for instance saying that it was most important for Germany that he had written it.¹ So what had he said? Goldhagen’s argument was very simple: popular violent anti-Semitic beliefs caused the participation of ordinary Germans in the Holocaust. To use his words:

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, defenceless Jewish men, women and children by the thousands, systematically and without pity.²

Goldhagen focused on German reserve police men who had executed Jews in the East between 1941 and 1945. He said that since almost a quarter of a million men had been involved, they must have been typical of German society as a whole and their participation was evidence of a fault line running through their national consciousness. Goldhagen proposed that culturally-determined ways of thinking dating back to the Middle Ages ensured that all Germans suffered from ‘cognitive’ anti-Semitism. By the mid-point of the twentieth century, German society had become infected by ‘a demonological anti-Semitism, of the virulent variety’ which provided the foundation for such a murderous race hatred that the ‘genocidal killing of Jews’ became ‘a German national project.’³ Hence he coined a phrase: ‘no Germans, no Holocaust.’⁴ So although Goldhagen accepted that various eastern European peoples also took part in the Holocaust, only Germans provided the drive to force events forwards.⁵

According to Goldhagen, then, the Third Reich witnessed an almost ‘universally

1 D.J. Goldhagen (ed.), *Briefe an Goldhagen* (Berlin: Goldmann, 1998), p. 28.

2 D.J. Goldhagen, *Hitler’s Willing Executioners. Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (London: Little, Brown and Company, 1996), p. 9.

3 *Ibid*, pp. 7, 11 and 392–3.

4 *Ibid*, p. 6.

5 *Ibid*, p. 6.

held' ideology that sought to 'eliminate' Jewish influence from society once and for all.¹ This alone explained why Germans did not simply kill Jews, but did so in ways that were degrading and horrible. The perpetrators of the Holocaust did not have to cut the beards of Orthodox Jews or make old men perform circus tricks. They did not have to use whips on their captives, unleash dogs on them or burn them alive in synagogues. But Germans were cruel whenever the possibility arose.² Likewise, no one could have compelled so very many Germans to implement the Holocaust with enthusiasm rather than reluctance. But most German perpetrators chose to be zealous and six million people died as a result.

A few academics greeted *Hitler's Willing Executioners* warmly. Colin Richmond agreed the photographs of people committing genocide gave the game away. There were 'too many smiles on the faces of killers.'³ But Goldhagen encountered a great deal of hostility too. Writing to him, an ordinary citizen from Hamburg denounced his study as one-sided since he had never witnessed anti-Semitism in northern Germany before 1939.⁴ By far the majority of academics queued up to follow this more critical line. Steven Aschheim accused the book of dealing in national stereotypes and popularist interpretations of the past.⁵ Geoff Eley said that Goldhagen, without good evidence, turned silence on the part of most Germans when faced with persecution into support for violent anti-Semitism.⁶ Hans-Ulrich Wehler accused Goldhagen of 'demonising' Germans without including an adequate comparative angle addressing anti-Semitism as it was displayed by other nationalities.⁷ Istvan Deak added to the point by observing that hundreds of thousands of Estonians, Lithuanians, Latvians, Ukrainians and Romanians had been perpetrators too.⁸ Under the circumstances it was not legitimate to denounce Germans as anti-Semites but ignore these other groups more or less completely. The lack of a comparative perspective was pursued further by Ruth Birn who pointed out that Goldhagen did not locate the genocide of

1 Ibid, p. 48.

2 Ibid, p. 377.

3 C. Richmond, 'Acceptable Atrocity', in *Immigrants and Minorities* 15 (1996) p. 277

4 Goldhagen (ed.), *Briefe an Goldhagen*, p. 112.

5 S.E. Aschheim, 'Archetypes and the German-Jewish Dialogue: Reflections Occasioned by the Goldhagen Affair', in *German History* 15 (1997) pp. 240-2.

6 G. Eley, 'Ordinary Germans, Nazis, and Judeocide' in G. Eley (ed.), *The Goldhagen Effect. History, Memory, Nazism—Facing the German Past* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), p. 11.

7 H-U. Wehler, 'The Goldhagen Controversy: Agonizing Problems, Scholarly Failure and the Political Dimension', in *German History* 15 (1997) pp. 84-7.

8 I. Deak, 'Holocaust Views: The Goldhagen Controversy in Retrospect', in *Central European History* 30 (1997) pp. 301

the Jews in the wider context of occupation policies.¹ After all, atrocities were not just committed against Jews, so what significance should we give this fact? Birn also argued that *Hitler's Willing Executioners* presented its source evidence in ways that were biased and selective. Specifically she said that the interviews with policemen used by Goldhagen also contained expressions of shame and disgust at their actions, but Goldhagen did not take these comments seriously.

Norman Finkelstein has been Daniel Goldhagen's fiercest critic. He has said:

Replete with gross misrepresentations of source material and internal contradictions, *Hitler's Willing Executioners* is devoid of scholarly value.

He maintains that, even during the war years, most Germans were repelled by the very idea of violent anti-Semitism and that, correspondingly, the history of the prejudice in Germany was more complicated than Goldhagen implies. In the process Finkelstein raises some interesting questions, not least this one: how should we evaluate the fact that 3,000 black Americans were lynched in the USA between 1890 and 1930, but such a treatment of Jews was inconceivable even in pre-war Nazi Germany?²

All in all, despite its commercial success, there was extensive agreement that something was not quite right about Goldhagen's work. Admittedly a number of arguments similar to his had been made decades earlier without arousing quite such an outcry. A long tradition of historians had tried to explain Nazism in terms of German intellectual developments since the time of Luther.³ Also, in his classic text, Raul Hilberg noted that Germany's 'machinery of destruction' had been so massive that its staff must have been typical of German society as a whole.⁴ But Goldhagen had been too unsubtle in his treatment of anti-Semitism. Even if we realise well that anti-Semitism was not uncommon in Weimar Germany,⁵ an adequate account of how its importance grew so massively needs to take a closer look at the lives of specific individuals. Hence even Gitta Sereny's biographical study of Franz Stangl, commandant of Treblinka and Sobibór, does not reduce his life to anti-Semitism alone.⁶ Rather she finds that, regardless of his original feelings about Jews, he became a participant in

1 R. B. Birn, 'Revising the Holocaust', in *Historical Journal* 40 (1997) pp. 195–215.

2 Finkelstein and Birn, *A Nation on Trial*, p. 50.

3 For instance W. M. McGovern, *From Luther to Hitler* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1973).

4 R. Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews* (New York: New Viewpoints, 1973), p. 643.

5 U. Herbert, 'Vernichtungspolitik. Neue Antworten und Fragen zur Geschichte des "Holocaust"', in U. Herbert (ed), *Nationalsozialistische Vernichtungspolitik 1939–1945* (Frankfurt aM: Fischer, 1998), p. 42.

6 G. Sereny, 'Colloquy with a Conscience', in *The German Trauma. Experiences and Reflections 1938–2000* (London: Penguin, 2000) and *Into that Darkness* (New York: Vintage, 1983).

the killing process only through a series of incremental steps each of which he found hard to reject at the time. He became a killer through a gradual process of personal corruption, not simply because of belief in a horrid prejudice pure and simple.

3.3 *Ordinary Men. Christopher Browning*

Christopher Browning has tried to provide a more nuanced treatment of those committing Hitler's crimes. He studied the same men as Daniel Goldhagen, namely the members of Reserve Police Battalion 101.¹ His work gives a gritty portrayal of how they secured Łódź ghetto in 1940, guarded trainloads of Jews deported from Germany, Austria and the Protectorate during 1941 and spring 1942, before becoming a front line force perpetrating genocide in summer 1942. Browning's work relies on the same sources as Goldhagen (i.e. investigation materials compiled by the state prosecutor of Hamburg between 1962 and 1972), but interprets them very differently.

In July 1942 the unit drew up at the Polish village of Józefów. The men were told by their officer what they were about to do and were given the chance not to participate. About a dozen of the 500 fell out, while the rest spent the day shooting all the members of the village's Jewish community. Browning's book makes plain it was a gruesome affair indeed but goes on to show how Battalion 101 learned from the horrors of that day. Next time they had to shoot a large number of Jews, they used former concentration camp inmates to do the killing. In upshot, by November 1942, Battalion 101 had killed 6,500 Polish Jews—and the statistics would only rise. In autumn 1943, Senior SS leader Odilo Globocnik decided to liquidate all the Jews still working in camps in his corner of the Government General. 101 participated in 'Action Harvest Festival' and shot 30,500 people in only a couple of days.

The facts alone make us wonder what sort of people would do such things. Now we come to the significance of the book's title. Browning believes the men of Battalion 101 were so 'ordinary' that anyone, if placed in the same position, would have participated alongside them. In his words, if 'the men of Reserve Police Battalion 101 could become killers under such circumstances, what group of men cannot?'² On the face of it, rank and file members of the group were indeed 'ordinary.' Mostly drawn from the lower middle and working classes, aged between 37 and 42 and with only 25% of their number party members in 1942, we might have expected more to have

1 C. Browning, *Ordinary Men. Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: Harper Collins, 1993).

2 Browning, *Ordinary Men*, p. 189.

refused to shoot helpless civilians. In the event, however, 80% of the shooters completed their dreadful task even on the first day in Jósefów.

The reasons for their behaviour become all the more enigmatic when we know that reprisals against people who refused to shoot Jews were forbidden, they could be relieved of their duties at any time and the official political indoctrination process applied in the battalion was weak. Browning also found in the interrogations that ‘the whole question of anti-Semitism is marked by silence.’¹ He implies that it had not been a major motivating factor for the policemen. Relatedly Browning notes stories suggesting the men had refused to kill Jews whom they knew (e.g. their kitchen staff).

Rather than race hatred and ideology, Browning suggests the men of 101 were motivated by a number of ‘ordinary’ factors. They experienced ‘peer pressure.’ A long way from home, they needed the support of their colleagues just to get from day to day and would not risk becoming outcasts by refusing to shoot Jews. Drawing on psychological experiments, Browning notes how Stanley Milgram showed that most people are naturally inclined to ‘follow orders.’ Likewise the experiments of Philip Zimbardo are deployed to show that we tend to conform to whatever role we are allocated in society.² Putting everything together, Browning maintains that all of these normal pressures, supplemented by the fact that almost daily killing ‘habituated’ the men into atrocity and that the experience of war encouraged them to think in terms of ‘friends and foe’ (which in their world became ‘Aryans and Jews’), explain participation in the Holocaust.

But has Browning gone too far in his rejection of racism? It is fair to suppose that when interviewed by prosecutors in the 1960s, the former members of 101 were reluctant to express anti-Semitic convictions, so their evidence might be tainted in this respect. Also we want to know why so many of the men carried out the massacres at Jósefów when they were not yet habituated into murder and were told they could fall out. Peer pressure alone is unlikely to have been a strong enough force to have determined this decision. In a later book Browning does, however, provide an interesting case study of clearing a ghetto at Marcinkance. Here he makes clear that while some men refused to participate at all, and others refused at certain points to shoot fleeing Jews, there was a ‘hard core’ of dedicated anti-Semites who killed with

1 *Ibid*, p. 73.

2 In his experiment at Stanford University, Zimbardo set up an experimental prison and divided a group of students into prisoners and jailers. Over the experimental period he observed how students in the different groups began to conform the roles they were given. Zimbardo had to stop the experiment early because some guards began behaving in too brutally.

enthusiasm (i.e. 4 out of 17 participants).¹ In other words, it is likely that participants always exhibited different levels of enthusiasm for anti-Semitic actions. No doubt they had different reasons for participation too, ranging from largely ideological to predominantly ‘normal.’ If this point is rather obvious, let’s start to explore motivation and the Holocaust from a different angle.

3.4 Bureaucracy and genocide

The participation of hundreds of thousands of people in a project to kill millions meant that the whole affair had to be managed and administered. Hitler’s early comments that ‘emotional’ anti-Semitism only produced pogroms while ‘rational’ anti-Semitism would be more thorough showed that he was aware of the benefits of getting things properly organised.² It was also clear that once whole organisations were set up to deal with the Jewish Question, they would keep pushing the issue forward. In other words, the Holocaust was not just industrialised genocide, it was bureaucratic genocide too.

Bureaucracy thrives on things being done in an orderly, well-regulated manner, and an orderly kind of racism was more acceptable to the German public. The German population never liked unexpected outbursts of violence in the streets where they lived. The bureaucratic organisation of events also raised the possibility that a great many officials could participate in events (for instance making sure that deportation trains ran on time) as if they were doing any other kind of job.³ So given the importance of bureaucracy and bureaucrats in the Holocaust, there are a great many issues to explore about how the project was conducted. For instance, Raul Hilberg observed that (notwithstanding what we have said already) German bureaucracy persecuted the Jews with so much greater efficiency than the bureaucracies of Germany’s allies, that we must wonder how German bureaucrats dealt with their moral scruples from day to day. He also wondered why the more enlightened values typical of life in Weimar Germany did not upset the administration of the Holocaust.⁴

There have been a number of famous texts relating to bureaucrats of genocide. Rudolf Höss was commandant at Auschwitz and while on trial after the war wrote his

1 C. R. Browning, *Nazi Policy, Jewish Workers, German Killers* (CUP, 2000), p. 166.

2 C. R. Browning, ‘The German Bureaucracy and the Holocaust’, in A. Grobman and D. Landes (eds.), *Critical Issues of the Holocaust* (Dallas, Texas: Rossel Books, 1983), pp. 145–8.

3 *Ibid.*

4 R. Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews* (New York: New Viewpoints, 1973), p. 646.

memoirs.¹ Actually they show remarkably few signs suggesting that an unconventional man had helped bring about distinctly unconventional events. Hannah Arendt analysed Adolf Eichmann while he was on trial in Jerusalem.² Eventually hanged on 31 April 1962, a specially convened court found this former official of the Reich Security Head Office guilty of a string of charges associated with the attempted destruction of the Jews. But based on Eichmann's self-presentation in the court, Arendt began to feel that his life spoke of more than just personal mistakes. In a modern world becoming increasingly bureaucratic, she felt that Eichmann's career as a manager of genocide reflected more general issues.

Although Eichmann had organised the deportation of whole communities to Nisko and to extermination camps, Arendt still interpreted his character as 'run of the mill.' She said:

The trouble with Eichmann was precisely that so many [bureaucrats of genocide] were like him, and that many were neither perverted nor sadistic, that they were, and still are, terribly and terrifyingly normal.³

His relations with his family were said to be better than just 'normal' and his personal motivation for participation in the Holocaust was 'an extraordinary diligence in looking out for his personal advancement.' Otherwise, when Eichmann organised genocide, he did not really understand what he was doing.⁴ On a number of occasions as Arendt explored how this could have been possible, she likened him to a machine. He was one of the 'mere cogs in the administrative machinery' of that time and place.⁵ Apparently suggesting that Eichmann had no responsibility for creating the administrative machinery in the first place, no role in deciding how it should be applied and little control over how it worked, Arendt proposed that 'sheer thoughtlessness' led him to become 'one of the greatest criminals of that period.' This thoughtlessness produced 'more havoc than all the evil instincts taken together.'⁶

This is the basis on which Arendt judged Eichmann 'ordinary.' Inhabiting an institution dedicated to the task of genocide, he went about his daily and largely desk-bound routine failing to comprehend the full consequences of his actions. He just

1 R. Höss, *Commandant at Auschwitz* (London: Phoenix Press, 2000).

2 Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. For a more recent study of Eichmann, see D. Cesarani, *Eichmann. His Life and Crimes* (London: Heinemann, 2004).

3 *Ibid.*, p. 276.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 287.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 153 and 289.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 288.

could not stand back and glimpse the bigger picture. Arendt thought this was a dreadfully ‘normal’ response to working in a large, modern institution and she proposed that ‘every bureaucracy’ could ‘dehumanize’ its staff in a comparable way.¹ She said this situation epitomised ‘the banality of evil.’² Her interpretation captured the imagination of many later academics.

3.5 Bureaucracy and the modern world

Zygmunt Baumann took Arendt’s arguments a stage further. For him, the way a bureaucracy works contains ‘all the technical elements’ required to permit genocide.³ For instance, a large organisation works best when its members of staff have few personal ethical standards, but remain sufficiently malleable to be ‘good, efficient and diligent’ workers no matter what they are asked to do.⁴ Hence institutions marginalise individuals who might cause problems on account of personal principles. Baumann also believes bureaucracies generate perpetual pressures to find the most efficient (as opposed to the most humane) solution to any given problem. Putting these points together can turn a bureaucracy into a ‘loaded dice.’ Once such an organisation is set up to deal with an issue, certainly it keeps pursuing this mission in order to justify its existence. In addition, however, because large organisations emphasise values such as cost-effectiveness rather than fellow-feeling, there is always a likelihood they will discover unpalatable ways to deal with the tasks for which they are responsible.⁵

The management hierarchy typical of a bureaucracy makes it easier to do bad things. Orders trickle down from the ‘top’ of an organisation to the ‘bottom’ and on the way seem to acquire an authoritative force, even the quality of a moral obligation, as a ‘superior’ administrator tells a ‘junior’ what to do. This attribute becomes exaggerated when the organisation designates some people ‘experts’ who seem to possess far more knowledge about a topic than their colleagues and members of the public. In fact, the experience of being a single link in the whole bureaucratic system leading from key policy decisions taken at the ‘top’ to their implementation at the ‘bottom’, encourages an individual to feel a lack of personal responsibility for what is happening. A senior member of a bureaucracy finds it easy to take a nasty decision because, safe in an office far removed from its consequences, he will not have to grapple with

1 *Ibid*, p. 288.

2 *Ibid*, p. 252.

3 Z. Baumann, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1989), p. 104.

4 *Ibid*, p. 102.

5 *Ibid*, p. 104.

its implementation. Mid-level officials interpret themselves as simply intermediaries who are only passing things ‘down the line,’ while those actually implementing policy ‘at the coal face’ inevitably are junior staff with the whole weight of an organisation bearing down on them. How can the latter refuse any demand?

All these characteristics plausibly help bureaucracies produce actions which individuals might not carry out if left to their own devices, and Baumann’s analysis meshes well with Hans Mommsen’s reading of the Holocaust. He thinks that the creation of mass, impersonal and technical ways of killing (such as the gas chamber) helped people suppress possible qualms about what they were doing.¹ It was also important that bureaucrats could rationalise their behaviour as actually in the victim’s best interests. Mommsen argues that as the position of the Jews in ghettos in the East deteriorated during winter 1941–42, then German officials could tell themselves it would actually be more humane to kill them quickly rather than wait for a slow death from cold, starvation or disease.²

3.3 Criticisms of bureaucratic theory

Unfortunately the views of Arendt and Baumann do not give us the full story. As David Cesarani’s recent biography of Eichmann makes clear, although as a young man he was not a radical anti-Semite, at some stage Eichmann had to *choose* to become a perpetrator of genocide.³ Could this choice really have been ‘banal’ and could Eichmann actually have turned himself into a ‘cog in a machine’ as a result? Indeed, could the demands of bureaucratic life really have overpowered all the other characteristics of what it is to be human?

Michael Thad Allen’s study of mid-level SS camp managers tells us these were not well trained bureaucrats.⁴ They were less educated party men in search of a job. Their efforts at administration were sloppy and, far from being ‘cogs in a machine’ they thought of themselves as ‘big fish’ in their particular ‘small pond’ who could wield authority. They did not sit back and wait for orders from a superior, but knew they had a lot of autonomy when it came to running their particular facilities. What’s more Allen found their paperwork crammed full of Nazi ideology. These men seemed passionately involved in what they were doing.

1 Mommsen, ‘Realization of the Unthinkable’, p. 250.

2 See Höppner’s memorandum in chapter 1.

3 Cesarani, *Eichmann*.

4 M. T. Allen, ‘The Banality of Evil Reconsidered: SS Mid-Level Managers of Extermination Through Work’, in *Central European History* 30 (1997) pp. 253–94.

We must question whether Nazi bureaucrats ever really could have been disinterested administrators. On the one hand, the Hitler State was such a chaotic place that people had to enter into events whole-heartedly or else face insignificance. What's more, senior officials generally tried hard to promote an anti-Semitic spirit in the workforce. This was why, when he spoke to his juniors, Governor General Hans Frank sometimes referred to Jews as lice, vermin and parasites. He even made bad jokes about their suffering which, incidentally, seem to have been greeted by shouts of 'Bravo!' from the audience.¹ So there is much to be said in favour of M.R.Marrus's comment:

In the final analysis the destruction of the Jews was not so much a product of laws and commands as it was a matter of spirit, of shared comprehension, of consonance and synchronization.²

A comparative perspective suggests that specifically German organisations were uniquely culpable in committing genocide during the Second World War. Long ago Raul Hilberg pointed out that Nazi officials in the East were few in number and over-stretched in their jobs. But he also observed:

The German administration, however, was not deterred by the pressures of other assignments; it never resorted to pretences [not to implement anti-Semitic policies], like the Italians, it never took token measures, like the Hungarians, it never procrastinated, like the Bulgarians. The German bureaucrats worked efficiently, in haste, and with a sense of urgency. Unlike their collaborators, the Germans never did the minimum. They always did the maximum.³

Jonathan Steinberg's comparison of the German and Italian armies reaches a similarly unfortunate conclusion. To his knowledge, every single Jew who fell into the hands of the *Wehrmacht* went to a concentration camp, but not a single one under the authority of the Italian army suffered that fate. Steinberg concluded that, when it came to dealing with Jews, the two armies 'inhabited different moral universes.'⁴

1 Hans Frank's official diary. Federal Archive, Berlin. Entry of 18 May 1940. R52 II / 177.

2 M.R. Marrus, *The Holocaust in History* (London: Penguin, 1993), p. 49

3 Hilberg, *Destruction of European Jewry*, p. 644.

4 J. Steinberg, *All or Nothing: The Axis and the Holocaust 1941–43* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 219.

3.4 Conclusion

What motivated ordinary Germans to participate in the Holocaust? A convincing answer requires a careful balancing act. Germany certainly had a history of vicious anti-Semitism, and Nazi Party ideology fitted the trend. But Goldhagen goes too far when he turns anti-Semitism into the sole cause of popular participation in genocide. It is obviously that the events of 1941 to 1945 could not have happened in 1933, not even in 1939. So it is indeed plausible that some process of change happened in Germany that turned genocide into a practical possibility. Over the years, popular attitudes to Jews must have been corroded, first thanks to Nazi rule and then the experience of war. Likewise we can believe that some people (perhaps like Stangl¹) were drawn into genocide gradually, in a manner that made it hard to draw a line at any given point. It is also possible that both the men of Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the office bureaucrats involved in the Holocaust did have a number of things on their minds during the war years, with anti-Semitism being just one of them. But our analysis must not stop at this point.

Not all Germans ever became enthusiastic anti-Semites, but as Browning's case study of ghetto clearing in Marcinkance shows, some were. Perhaps their certainty helped pull along the doubters with whom they rubbed shoulders on a daily basis. As Raul Hilberg says, time and again the perpetrators of the Holocaust had to confront what they were doing and overcome the sort of moral scruples which must have been the order of the day during the Weimar years.² In the end, this can only have been possible if most found a way to convince themselves that what they were doing was right. Such a step might only have come with actual participation. That is to say, people might only have adopted anti-Semitism as a means to justifying involvement in a dreadful initiative which previously they would never have thought possible. But when faced with the Holocaust, we really should accept quite firmly that racism cannot be air-brushed out of the picture. Although the exact relationship between anti-Semitism and participation in the Holocaust has not been defined once and for all, it has to remain the single most important component of a convincing explanation.

1 See chapter 2.

2 Hilberg, *Destruction of the European Jews*, p. 649.