

# **Assigning Blame in History: The Case of the Holocaust**

by Theodore Plantinga

## I

"Face the facts!" we sometimes tell one another. Of course it would be fair to ask: "Which ones?" Any retelling of human deeds is necessarily selective -- all the more so when the deeds in question are massive and hard to circumscribe, such as the Holocaust. (When a non-Jew died in a gas chamber at Auschwitz, after being caught hiding Jews from the Nazis, does his death count as part of the Holocaust?)

Many philosophers maintain that we do not get at truth simply by facing or pointing to facts. Selection and re-arrangement play a major role in historical narrative. Wilhelm Dilthey was certainly familiar with the tension between fact and pattern in history. In a book review article published in 1862, he declared: "To tell of the deeds of men and to hear them told is a peculiar need of the human spirit which can be satisfied neither by art nor by science, since neither one is content to present the facts simply, just as they happened. Art casts a veil over naked reality, which is to make it more beautiful and to transfigure it; science seeks an abiding law in the succession of appearances." [NOTE 1]

It would have been interesting to read Dilthey's reflections on the Holocaust, which began about four decades after his death. I'm sure he would not say that we must "face the facts" or that we should simply present this vast network of systematically perpetrated evil "just as it happened." The case of the Holocaust would be somewhat difficult for Dilthey to handle because of his tendency to stay away from the moral element in historical narration. It might well challenge his thinking in a fruitful way, so as to provoke the emergence of new elements or aspects.

## II

In my own reflection on the Holocaust and my teaching about it (especially in philosophy of history and Jewish philosophy courses), I have had the benefit of Dilthey's insights to draw on as a resource. Adopting something of the gentle spirit that is characteristic of his work, I have usually told students that the Holocaust was the work not just of "the Germans" but of anti-Semitic people in all of the countries that came under German occupation. The Holocaust was a very big operation, and in all of the occupied countries the Nazis sought and found helpers. And then I add that in all of these same countries -- including Germany itself -- there were people who resisted the Nazis and their policy of genocide, some of them to the point of losing their lives. The upshot is that we should not speak of the Holocaust as something perpetrated by "the Germans."

On occasion I have been told by students of German descent that all the teaching about the Holocaust that goes on nowadays makes them distinctly uncomfortable. Even if they are descended from Germans who were living in North America during World War II, they wince when they hear the atrocity stories of that war paraded before them. It is for their sakes, too, that I caution against speaking of the Holocaust as the work of "the Germans."

Christian philosophical considerations also play a role here. A key Christian imperative is peacemaking. After a conflict we must make peace with our enemies. The Bible instructs us to *love* our enemies (Matthew 5:44; Luke 6:27, 35). Therefore it would make sense to become friends with former enemies. This was, by and large, the policy of the Western Allies after World War II, and it has been my own policy since I was old enough to understand these things.

I should note here that I myself do not need to cringe when there is talk of "the Germans" and the horrible things they did during the war. My wife does cringe, to some degree, since she is German on her father's side. But my roots are in the Netherlands. Although I was born after the great war, members of my family did suffer under Nazi occupation. But, since I was raised with Christian ideas, I also felt the need to make friends with Germans and to do my part to heal the breach caused by the war.

Partly for these reasons, I became interested in Germany and its language and culture. I also accepted the hospitality of the (West) German government during the 1970s. Back in those days, a great many students from various countries who studied at German universities enjoyed the financial support of the (West) German government. I was among them. This foreign student program was intended to encourage the rest of the world to re-establish normal

ties of friendship and cultural interchange with the German people. It was a fine program, and it worked.

We learned (here I believe I can speak for other students as well) that there was more to German history than the Nazi period. Yet the Nazi atrocities were not forgotten. I remember vividly that one day I reported to my German composition class at the University of Freiburg, a class in which all the students were foreign but the professor was German. (The class was required for any student whose proficiency in written German had not yet risen to a certain prescribed level.) On the day in question the professor began by asking what anniversary it was. I did not know, but I should have. Neither did any other student know. He then informed us that it was the thirty-fifth anniversary of the infamous *Kristallnacht* (night of the broken glass), which took place in November of 1938.

What had happened thirty-five years earlier was a savage and shameful outburst of anti-Jewish activity which made it abundantly clear to any who might still be wondering -- and there were people who were not sure at that point in time -- just where Hitler's policy in relation to the Jews was headed. Our professor then proceeded to tell us the *local* history of that infamous night - - what had happened in Freiburg. He spoke simply and forthrightly. He did not seem to want to hide anything. One could surely say that he was facing the facts. And he won my respect that day.

### III

I present these considerations as background to my main concern in this essay, namely Daniel Jonah Goldhagen's controversial book, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York: Knopf, 1996). Goldhagen would not approve of my lectures on the Holocaust, for what he tells us repeatedly is that "the Germans" did this and that. Thus the killers should be called Germans -- not Nazis or SS men (see pp. 6-7).

A brief summary of his thesis is needed at this point (see also his pp. 8ff, 14, 23, 128, 162-3, 185, 193-4, 199ff, 257, 276, 317ff, 363, 369, 377ff, 388ff, 399, 400, 404ff, 406, 409, 418-19, 425, 443, 448, 449ff, 454). Goldhagen maintains that the ordinary Germans were not "indifferent" to the fate of the Jews, as some have argued (see pp. 439ff). Neither were they in the dark. They knew what was going on. A great many of them approved; quite a number were enthusiastic (see pp. 395, 440-1). Moreover, Hitler did not select his genocide workers exclusively from the ranks of committed Nazis; a great many of his murderous helpers were not affiliated with Nazi organizations. Thus, it was not

that "the Nazis" made war on the Jews: rather, "the Germans" did so. And no one *made* them participate. One of Goldhagen's most chilling claims is that the killers could have chosen not to kill (see pp. 278ff, 379ff.)

Goldhagen also has an assertion to make about anti-Semitism. It was not that the Nazis promoted anti-Semitism and sold it to more and more Germans after they seized power; rather, anti-Semitism was widely embraced by "the Germans" and helped bring the Nazis to power. Even the opponents of the Nazis, including the great theologian Karl Barth, talked an anti-Semitic line (see pp. 113-14). It was the widespread anti-Semitic attitude that united "the Germans" behind Hitler's policies against the Jews. Goldhagen affirms that many Germans found the execution of the policy too rough and crude, but they nevertheless believed that something needed to be done about the Jews once and for all.

A word that struck me in his account was "Sonderweg" (singular or solitary path, see p. 419). Goldhagen claims that he has substantiated "... the *Sonderweg* thesis: that Germany developed along a singular path ...." Thus "the Germans" were different. My own Christian impulse to say that sin lurks in the hearts of *all* of us and that the murderous hatred of the Jews was present in all European countries back in those days is contradicted here. Goldhagen brushes such sentiments aside.

#### IV

His "Sonderweg" emphasis brings forward a classic question in philosophy of history, namely, how uniqueness can be understood and presented. Science seeks similarities and tries to formulate a law, so that similar instances can be grouped together. Therefore, when we feel the need to make much of uniqueness, we may have to turn to art, which, in Dilthey's words, "casts a veil over naked reality, which is to make it more beautiful and to transfigure it." We are inclined to say that only an artistic presentation can do justice to the uniqueness of great deeds in history.

But what are we to say when the deeds of men of which we tell are great not in their *goodness* but in their unspeakable *evil*? For that matter, if they are unspeakably evil, can we tell of them it all? Goldhagen seems to handle this problem rather simply: he informs us that "the Germans" did this and that.

But much of Europe had a different reaction after the war. When the reality of the Holocaust began to sink in, many wondered who would have been able to carry out such atrocities. It was easy, in such circumstances, to speak of "the

Nazis" as having done this or that. But who were the Nazis, and who had supported them and allowed them to come to power? Some had been executed or imprisoned after the war, and many had fled. But it seemed they were not such a large group. And just because the group that could easily be branded as "the Nazis" was not so large, these genuine evil-doers became all the more menacing in people's minds, for they had wrought unbelievable devastation. Indeed, they took on mythological status. Works of fiction suggested that perhaps "the Nazis" were hiding in the jungles of South America, awaiting the right time to strike again and subject the world to a fresh round of horrors.

It is in relation to such questions that Goldhagen's book is especially valuable. The sad truth, it appears, is that the murderers of World War II were much more numerous than we had imagined, and that they were, for the most part, ordinary people, many of whom returned to ordinary roles in German society after the war. There were hosts of them -- millions were involved in one way or another, according to Goldhagen (see pp. 166ff).

What is also hard to argue against is what he says about the savagery and sheer gratuitous cruelty of so many of the murderers. Goldhagen deliberately uses the word "Germans," where we have become accustomed to using "Nazis." Consider the following passage: "With their ubiquitous and ever-present whips and rods, with their bare hands, with their boots, the Germans pummeled Jews, lacerated their flesh, trampled them underfoot, and forced them to perform bizarre and self-abasing acts. ... The very being, the very sight of the Jews, regardless of their conduct, aroused in the German overlords the impulse to violence" (pp. 386-7).

The Holocaust, then, is not a case of "unspeakable evil." Rather, the story can be spoken or told fairly simply: "the Germans" did this and that. Therefore Goldhagen rejects talk to the effect that the Holocaust "defies" explanation (see p. 5). The point of his book is to explain how this horrible train of events came about. The immense project called the "final solution" did not prove as difficult as might have been expected, for willing helpers stepped forward in great numbers.

## V

Throughout this essay I have been indicating that one must somehow take issue with Goldhagen, who is well aware that his research and conclusions have some "far-reaching implications" (see p. 376). First of all, I should indicate that I do not plan to question the basic historical research Goldhagen has done -- his reading of the sources. I am not in a position to question him in this area,

except to say that it does seem to me (I use the word "seem" deliberately) that he systematically underplays the role of people drawn from other countries and ethnic groups in the day-to-day operations of the Holocaust. Instead I would raise some objections drawn from themes in a Christian philosophy of history.

For three basic reasons, I plan to persist in *not* speaking of the Holocaust simply as the work of "the Germans." The first has already been mentioned: there were indeed people from many nations who cooperated in the ghastly work of the Holocaust, some of them showing great enthusiasm in the process. If we must pin the blame somewhere, it should be on the population of Europe more broadly conceived.

Even those who did resist the Holocaust project -- but not as vigorously as they should have -- deserve some measure of historical blame. Included in their ranks, of course, are those Allied government and military leaders who turned down pleas that the railway lines being used to transport Jews to the death camps be bombed. The standard response to such questions was that the Allies would put an end to the slaughter of the Jews by winning the war and thereby overthrowing Nazism completely. It is a matter of fairness to apportion blame in such a grave situation.

The second reason is that the term "the Germans" takes in so many people who lived before or after the Holocaust period and therefore cannot be connected directly with it. I think especially of people of my generation in Germany, growing up with the dark cloud of the Holocaust hanging over their heads. They have, for the most part, unfolded their destiny along democratic paths; they have chosen to respect human rights and the values that prevail in the countries that make up the Western world. They are "the Germans" today. To say that "the Germans" perpetrated the Holocaust is not fair to them.

Those who lived *before* the Hitler era could, of course, be accused of having prepared the way for it. Anti-Semitic talk and assumptions turned out to have horrible consequences. In this regard, prior generations, including many people who died before Hitler even came to power, must take some share of the responsibility for the Holocaust. But I find it hard to believe that only anti-Semitic talk on the part of *Germans* should be considered here. Were the Nazis influenced only by people of their own land and blood? Or does historical causality on the level of ideas flow across national borders? It seems to me that the latter is the case throughout the history of our race.

In this context we should remember that it was the conviction of a great many Jews who lived in central and eastern Europe that Germany was a civilized

country to be preferred to cruder and less hospitable lands to the east. Hosts of Jews identified with the German language and culture. In the earlier stages of Nazi oppression it seemed amazing to the Jews that such horrible things could be happening in *Germany*, of all places. It was later, when people could look back on the Holocaust as part of history, that the tendency arose to identify hatred of the Jews with Germany.

The earlier part of Goldhagen's own book makes it clear how much hatred of the Jews was festering in eastern Europe, ready to be used by the Nazis for their evil designs. Indeed, stage one in the systematic slaughter drew heavily on the "labor" of non-Germans; it was the later, industrial phase of the slaughter that saw Jews themselves being forced to do much of the work, under the supervision of guards and overseers who were mainly ethnic Germans.

The third reason why it is wrong, in my judgment, to speak simply of "the Germans" as the people who perpetrated the set of horrible acts that we call the Holocaust is that it freezes their future. In Christian thought we make much of repentance and the possibility of restoration to the right path. Goldhagen's way of speaking seems to me to close off this possibility.

Perhaps the point can more easily be understood on an individual level. If I were a notorious convicted murder whose name caused people to shudder with revulsion, but then underwent a spiritual and moral conversion that led to my pardon and release into society, how would things stand with me? It would remain factually correct that I had perpetrated such-and-such murders. No matter how much I tried to atone for my past misdeeds, the facts would stand unchallenged. No lengthy Goldhagen book would be needed to hammer the point home.

But there would be an option open to me: I could try for a new start by changing my name. I would not thereby be denying that I was the person who was guilty of such-and-such murders. I would simply say, if challenged on this point, that I had besmirched my original name by my misdeeds and was no longer using it. Presumably my children would also change their surname.

Is such a course open to the Germans? Perhaps it is, but for a nation to do it would be something of a stretch. If it were done successfully and thoroughly, it would create confusion in the minds of further generations. Children would ask: "Where is this notorious land, Germany, that carried out these atrocities? We can't find it on the map!" (Prussia is also hard to find on today's map.)

It remains better, I believe, to say of Germany that there is much more to her history than the Holocaust. And I would want to point especially to the history she has made since the end of World War II. Finally, remembering that all nations have episodes in their history to be ashamed of, I think to myself: "Let him who is without sin cast the first stone" (see John 8:7). Canada, my adopted homeland, is certainly not without historical sin either.

Yes, those horrible deeds happened, and we need to commemorate them in various ways. I certainly make it a point to do so in my own teaching. But to my mind they remain a blot on the human race as such -- and not just on "the Germans."

## NOTES

[NOTE 1]

*Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. 16, ed. Ulrich Herrmann (published by Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, of Goettingen), p. 100; see also Theodore Plantinga, *Historical Understanding in the Thought of Wilhelm Dilthey* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980), pp. 12-13.