

Complicity in the Holocaust

Churches and Universities in Nazi Germany

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Preface

In 2004, I was invited by Professor Milton Shain at Cape Town University to give the biennial Kaplan Holocaust Lectures. Those lectures represent the first time I formally combined my interest in German churches and German universities. They also represent the first time I began explicitly to consider the question of Holocaust complicity in relation to these two institutions. The following summer, Christopher Browning and I hosted a small conference in Gig Harbor, Washington, on the topic of “Future Directions in Holocaust Studies.”¹ It was at this conference, funded by Zev Weiss and the Holocaust Education Foundation, that I began to ponder more seriously another question: If we try to identify complicity in the Holocaust, does that mean we are also identifying how not to be complicit? Does scholarship on the Holocaust imply a right, or even an obligation, to search for “lessons” of the Holocaust?

Anyone familiar with Holocaust education will recognize the ubiquity of this idea of lessons, whether in teaching children not to bully or teaching adults to value tolerance and oppose injustice. These are worthy goals. However, pieties in response to the Holocaust can become saccharine and simplistic. In the worst case, they can trivialize events and impede understanding. The Holocaust was horrific, probably beyond our understanding, and it likely has no “meaning” in any important sense of the word. Furthermore, anyone familiar with the norms of modern scholarship will detect another problem in the instrumental use of Holocaust

¹ Attendance at that conference of July 2005 included Omer Bartov, Yehuda Bauer, Doris Bergen, Christopher Browning, Robert Ericksen, Saul Friedländer, Peter Hayes, Dagmar Herzog, Susannah Heschel, Steven Katz, Claudia Koonz, Peter Longerich, Michael Marrus, Dan Michman, John Roth, and Zev Weiss.

education. Objectivity is an important expectation among scholars.² Can that be reconciled with turning history into moral judgments or the pronouncement of moral lessons? The nineteenth-century German, Leopold von Ranke, set the standard for historians when he said we must describe history “as it actually was,” without letting our present concerns or points of view impinge.

I was trained in this expectation of historical objectivity. However, my first serious work on churches in Nazi Germany put me face-to-face with a difficult question: Must we really view Adolf Hitler with moral neutrality? It is hard, of course, to find historical treatments of Hitler and the Holocaust that do not indulge in some measure of moral criticism, and rightly so. In my first article on Gerhard Kittel and in my first book, *Theologians under Hitler*, I took the stance that we could assess these theologians by measuring, among other things, how explicitly and enthusiastically they supported Adolf Hitler, the Nazi Party, and the Nazi worldview.³ I argued that our retrospective gaze since 1945 makes it clear that Hitler got it wrong. We are right to condemn the Holocaust and other crimes of the Nazi state. We are right to condemn the Nazi ideology and Nazi policies. Objectivity may be appropriate in analyzing how and why certain theologians praised Hitler and Nazism, trying to recognize the historical and intellectual determinants of their stance; but we also have a right to claim that any stance that involved enthusiastic praise for Nazi ideas and practices was a mistake, even a profound mistake.

In this book, I start with the moral judgment that murdering Jews and other innocent men, women, and children was wrong. Few would disagree, I am sure. I also argue that the Nazis signaled their basic approach to politics from the beginning, with harsh rhetoric and brutal policies in violation of well-established legal and civil rights. Each radical step

² I am speaking about the norms of “modern” scholarship, as rooted in the Enlightenment tradition of rationalism. “Postmodern” scholarship, by contrast, rejects the ideas of neutral objectivity and “historical truth.” This can lead to a stance that allows both praise and condemnation of Hitler, or an unwillingness to distinguish between claims that the Holocaust occurred and claims that it did not. I agree with Richard J. Evans, *In Defense of History* (New York: Norton, 1999), 206–10, that this hyperrelativism represents a serious flaw in postmodern thought, alongside some useful contributions it has made. Good historians are obligated to search for truth, even in the realization that truth is exceedingly elusive. The recognition that the Holocaust happened is one of those truths not to be denied.

³ See Robert P. Ericksen, “Theologian in the Third Reich: The Case of Gerhard Kittel,” *Journal of Contemporary History*, 12 (1977), 595–622, especially 595–96; and *Theologians under Hitler: Gerhard Kittel, Paul Althaus and Emanuel Hirsch* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), especially 177–91.

from 1933 to 1939 was known to the German public – including the Aryan Paragraph of 1933, the Nuremberg Racial Laws of 1935, and the *Reichskristallnacht* pogrom of 1938. We can connect the dots and not be entirely surprised that the culmination of these policies included the murder of “lives unworthy of life”; the mobile killing units putting bullets in the brains of Jews lined up alongside mass graves; and the creation, beginning in December 1941, of half a dozen death camps whose primary purpose was the efficient murder of Jews. Seeing no need to remain morally neutral about these behaviors, I think it appropriate to ask questions about who helped make these behaviors possible.

Konrad Jarausch – writing about German lawyers, teachers, and engineers – also thinks it appropriate to ask such questions and make such judgments:

The contribution of the professions to modern life has been profoundly ambiguous. On the one hand, the improvement of the legal system, the spread of learning, and the development of machines have increased justice, enlightenment, and comfort, thereby earning for professionals public gratitude and material rewards. On the other hand, the same experts have perpetrated callous injustice, engaged in stultifying indoctrination, and created engines of death for their own gratification and benefit... Perhaps the most dramatic corruption of professionalism in the twentieth century was the evolution of German professions from internationally respected experts to accessories to Nazi crimes.⁴

Phrases such as “callous injustice,” “stultifying indoctrination,” and “corruption of professionalism” certainly represent value judgments. Although Jarausch deals with a different set of professionals, I believe similar judgments can be reached against pastors and professors.

Other observations by Jarausch are also relevant. For example, he notes that “[a]lthough the temptation to moralize about the catastrophes of recent German history is overwhelming, drawing overly facile lessons ought to be resisted.” Then he adds, “Of course, it is equally misleading to approach the upheavals of the first half of the twentieth century in a machinelike ‘objective’ fashion. Values of the historian and the reader necessarily enter into interpretation, because humans are not robots.”⁵ While defending the need to include values in the discussion, he indicates certain value judgments of his own: “How could competent, individually decent university graduates fall collectively for the Austrian corporal?

⁴ Konrad Jarausch, *The Unfree Professions: German Lawyers, Teachers, and Engineers, 1900–1950* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), vii.

⁵ *Ibid.*, ix.

What material and ethical price did these experts pay for their collaboration in the inhumanity of the Third Reich?”⁶

This book will describe many pastors and professors who “fell for the Austrian corporal” and thereby collaborated “in the inhumanity of the Third Reich.” They gave a ringing endorsement to the “rebirth” of Germany under Adolf Hitler, even with all his anti-Jewish hostility readily apparent. Furthermore, this enthusiastic praise was not the message of just a few pastors and professors, but it was a predominate message within churches and universities as a whole. Finally, neither of these two respected institutions ever recanted their early endorsement of Nazism or harbored significant instances of resistance within their ranks. When a few examples of resistance did occur, those resisters were more likely to be condemned and isolated than congratulated or emulated within their institutions. That is what I am calling the complicity of churches and universities. Because the institutional approval of church and university for the Nazi state was expressed so openly and never recanted, I believe that approval is the primary impression Germans at the time would have perceived. When ordinary Germans, including church members and university graduates, were asked to do horrific things by the Nazi state, they presumably had a right to think they were given permission by their pastors and by their professors. Hitler had been praised as God’s gift to Germany. Nazi rule had been praised as the wonderful culmination of German history.

If this level of approval for Hitler and Nazism seems hard to imagine today, that is partly because Germans threw up their hands in denial after 1945. Also, ironically, the nearly universal post-1945 condemnation of the Nazi regime makes it harder for us to imagine the alternative, that is, pre-1945 approval. Neo-Nazis who admire and defend Hitler are usually dismissed as an angry fringe group whose ideas are unworthy of discussion. It is thus hard for us to get inside the heads of Germans within the Nazi period, those who thought Hitler was a hero rather than a villain.

I am quite certain the “good Germans” we criticize today, those Germans who considered themselves respectable scholars and church leaders, would not have imagined our willingness to condemn their ideas and their values. When we read their actual words, however, and see their unabashed praise of Hitler, it is easy to condemn them for being dangerously wrong. I am happy to make that judgment. Nonetheless, my primary goal is to follow Ranke’s advice and describe the world of German

⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

pastors and professors “as it actually was.” That means we must filter out the widespread condemnation since 1945 of Nazi ideas and Nazi practices. The level of that condemnation makes it hard for us to imagine that “good Germans” could support such bad things. It tempts us to give them the benefit of the doubt, to assume that they really felt much as we do about harsh and brutal Nazi behavior but simply could not say so. That certainly applies to some Germans of the period. I am convinced, however, that the majority spoke honestly when they praised Hitler to the heavens or otherwise indicated a level of enthusiasm beyond what might have been necessary for safety’s sake.

This brings me back to the question about lessons of the Holocaust. If it is appropriate to identify the mistakes of these “good Germans” in the Nazi period, should we also try to identify similar mistakes today, similar blind spots? Will future generations look back in astonishment at our moral obtuseness, our inability to recognize contradictions in our alleged values? Jarausch warns us against “drawing overly facile lessons” in response to “the catastrophes of recent German history.” I agree and will leave the search for lessons primarily to readers of this book. However, the idea that we might learn from history is certainly an appropriate component in our study of the Holocaust.

As I prepared my Kaplan Holocaust Lectures in 2004, one issue did stand out for me. The pastors and professors who gave their enthusiastic support to Hitler all were marked by a particularly intense nationalism. Furthermore, this nationalism justified in their minds any number of compromised values. If it would strengthen Germany at a time of crisis, the burning of books, the firing of professors, the attack on German Jews, and making war against German neighbors could all be rationalized as necessary and appropriate. These supporters of Hitler looked at the world through very German eyes, and they were proud to do so. Thus, they justified virtually any behavior deemed necessary to renew German strength and prosperity, even behaviors that seriously violated previous norms. For each critical word that might reach them from abroad, they had a justification or a rationalization. They would point to perceived injustices against Germany, along with the claim that Germany had every right to flex its muscles and protect its rightful place in the world. It is hard to imagine that “my nation, right or wrong” could ever be an appropriate maxim. In light of the German experience, I am inclined to see it more as a cause for alarm.

When I delivered the lectures that led to this book, I was speaking to an audience of students, academics, and an educated public. I still have that

audience in mind. Readers will note that “good German women” play a small role in this book. They were neither uninvolved nor unimportant. However, my focus is on representatives of the churches and universities who made up the public face of those institutions. During that era these were primarily men. Finally, readers will notice that many of my examples come from Göttingen University. It is a prominent and respected university, founded in 1737, the *alma mater* of Otto von Bismarck, with a reputation in the 1920s as perhaps the best place in the world to study math and physics and a very solid reputation in many other disciplines. I have returned to the libraries and archives at Göttingen for three decades. As is the case with all examples in this book taken from my own research, I believe them to be representative of the German experience. I also am convinced that the arguments I present in this book are consistent with a growing body of evidence from scholars on both sides of the Atlantic.

RPE
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Why the Holocaust Matters in a Century of Death

This book assumes that the Holocaust represents a very important event in modern history, not just for Jews and Germans, but for all thinking people who care about human behavior, human nature, and the future of human society. The German murder of approximately six million Jews and five million other victims of the Holocaust (besides tens of millions dead in World War II) certainly represents a low point in human history, the details of which are unusually horrific.¹ From mass death in gas chambers to medical experiments with human subjects, from bullets in the brains of children to beards of old rabbis pulled out at the roots, we are left with stories that make us wonder how human beings could have been so cold and so brutal. We are also left with the pledge expressed by many survivors, “never again,” as well as the reality that genocide *has*

¹ Absolute precision on numbers is impossible, but the conclusion that Germany murdered at least 11 million innocent men, women, and children during the Holocaust is widely accepted and almost certainly not overstated. This number does not include the millions of war dead, whether military personnel killed in a war instigated by Germany or the millions of civilians killed as “collateral damage,” a figure that may include more than two-thirds of the 26 million estimated Soviet losses. Rather, the claim that 11 million were murdered by Germans during the Holocaust includes those individuals or groups determined by Nazi ideology and practice to be “life unworthy of life:” Jews, Polish intelligentsia, Soviet POWs, Sinti and Roma, the disabled, homosexuals, and a variety of political or religious opponents who questioned the Nazi state. It is assumed throughout this book that these victims were innocent. It is also assumed they were murdered because of a brutal Nazi ideology that refused to acknowledge a simple right to life for Jews, the disabled, political opponents, or any category considered “less than human.” Finally, it is assumed that enthusiastic support of and praise for Adolf Hitler and the Nazi state may or may not have been specifically antisemitic, but it always included a recognition that the Nazi state was hard-edged and brutal, both in its rhetoric and its policies. That was the constant, self-proclaimed identity of the Nazi movement, and it was apparent to all.

happened again, more than once, since the Nazi-perpetrated Holocaust.² This is a depressing topic, especially when we search out the trail of death from the beginning of the twentieth century to the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Despite the depressing nature of the material, this book also assumes that the Holocaust emphatically deserves our attention. The more we know about the Holocaust, the more we might be sensitized to the horror of genocidal actions or threats in our own day. Through the Nuremberg Trials, the United Nations, and the International Criminal Court, the world has expressed its condemnation of war crimes and of crimes against humanity. This type of response to the Holocaust, although sometimes tepid and ineffectual, might offer hope for the future. More importantly, perhaps, greater awareness of the Holocaust can provide a warning set of measurements by which to consider our own actions and inclinations, whether as individuals, as nations, or as members of an international community. It is very easy to view the Holocaust as an event and a set of behaviors completely outside our reality. However, the best historical inquiry draws us closer to the complexity of the past and makes it harder for us to dismiss other peoples and ages as totally “other.”

To emphasize the complexity, I focus on two institutions – churches and universities – that usually enjoy broad respect. Churches aspire to spiritual and ethical insight. Universities cultivate intellectual acuity. In both cases, we might expect that leaders in these institutions would have seen the moral and intellectual flaws in Adolf Hitler and in the Nazi agenda, but there is little evidence of opposition and much evidence of support. Pastors and professors in Germany during the Nazi period probably never imagined that their stance could be considered contemptible; they may never have thought we would be looking back at their ideas and their behavior in condemnation. Many or most believed they were behaving morally and honorably, that they were acting out of idealism, *even as*

² The term “Holocaust” is widely used to describe the event at the center of this book: the German murder of Jews and others during World War II. This word means “destroyed by fire.” It has the disadvantage of being Greek in origin and, more importantly, of possibly including a sacramental connotation. Burnt offerings sacrificed in ancient religious rituals were “destroyed by fire.” Some prefer to use the term “*Shoah*,” a Hebrew word that connotes only terrible destruction. “Holocaust” is also sometimes used for other examples of mass killing, and during the Cold War it was used to describe a potential nuclear war. For purposes of clarity and in line with widespread usage, I will use the word primarily to describe the event perpetrated by Germans and suffered by Jews and other victims. I will often use the words “massacre” or “genocide” when referring to other examples of mass killing.

they gave their support to Adolf Hitler. For that is the reality.³ Many or most of those we might expect to have been the “good Germans” went along with the regime quite enthusiastically, endorsed its rationale, and supported its measures; and they did so in the conviction that they were the ones committed to a better Germany. In Peter Fritzsche’s words, “It should be stated clearly that Germans became Nazis because they wanted to become Nazis and because the Nazis spoke so well to their interests and inclinations.”⁴ This book is an attempt to describe the acceptance of Nazi ideals by pastors and professors, and also to ponder the significance of their historical role.

Among genocides, the Holocaust is the one perpetrated by a nation and culture most deeply rooted in the modern West, and thus much like the United States and other Western nations today. Furthermore, pastors and professors represent categories of people we might most expect to mirror our best values. Modern, highly educated, Christian Germany produced an Adolf Hitler and perpetrated the Holocaust. Of the fourteen Germans who sat around a table at the Wannsee Conference in January 1942, planning the killing process, seven held a PhD. Michael Wildt describes the leadership of the Reich Security Main Office, the people who “designed the institutions of murder themselves, offered ideological justifications for them, and personally supervised the implementation of mass murder on location” while leading *Einsatzgruppen* and *Einsatzkommando* killing squads.⁵ He notes the remarkably high level of education achieved by these men. More than three-quarters had passed the *Abitur*, their university entrance exam. Of the 221 he researched, approximately two-thirds earned a college or university degree and one-third earned a doctorate. In the sample of law students, one-third earned a PhD and two-thirds of students in the humanities earned that degree.⁶ This gives us a snapshot of the young educated Germans who made the Holocaust possible. I argue that we best understand the Holocaust when we acknowledge

³ This “idealism in support of Hitler” is implicit in the many statements of support described throughout this book. It was also extremely common during denazification trials for individuals to claim they joined or supported the Nazi Party out of idealism. See also Claudia Koonz, *The Nazi Conscience* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

⁴ Peter Fritzsche, *Germans into Nazis* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 8.

⁵ Michael Wildt, *An Uncompromising Generation: The Nazi Leadership of the Reich Security Main Office*, trans. Tom Lampert (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2009), 18. See also Götz Aly and Susanne Heim, *Architects of Annihilation: Auschwitz and the Logic of Destruction*, trans. A. G. Blunden (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003).

⁶ Wildt, *An Uncompromising Generation*, 38.

the role of university and church, and when we acknowledge that these perpetrators were people much like ourselves. Then we can try to understand what drove them to radical measures and perhaps even recognize circumstances that could tempt us in a similar direction.

Germans faced an unusual array of crises in the 1920s and 1930s: military, economic, political, and cultural crises that many or most Germans regarded as threats to their entire future as a nation. Might modern Westerners ever face such an array of crises? Would we be able to handle such crises without giving up our belief in human rights and civil liberties or otherwise pushing aside our democratic principles? Imagining ourselves into the world of “good Germans” in the Nazi era might be our best prophylactic. “Good Germans” almost certainly did not think we would pore through their papers half a century later and label them villains. We must hope that historians half a century from now will not be trying to understand behaviors of ours that they have learned to condemn.

The Century of Death

All of us born into the twentieth century carry the stigma of death, even though some might manage to ignore it.⁷ Those who enjoyed middle-class comfort and Western affluence in the second half of the century might think it an idyllic period, and they might remember the good times, cultural achievements, human comforts, and relative safety. Europeans, especially those west of the Cold War divide, picked themselves out of the rubble of World Wars I and II and created a half-century of unprecedented peace and prosperity, capped by euphoria when the Berlin Wall came down and the Cold War came to an end. Americans during that period invented rock and roll, laid down ribbons of asphalt, built bigger cars and smaller computers, and built or imported a dizzying array of gadgets with which to cocoon or communicate in comfort. Those Americans not directly impacted by wars conducted abroad or pockets of poverty at home witnessed the horrors of the second half of the century only in their newspapers, in books, or on television.

Those who experienced only the second half of the century of death, and those whose access to the most violent parts has been only secondhand, can still recognize that the horrors were considerable, from starving children in Biafra to recurring examples of genocide. The word

⁷ For one treatment of Europe in this period, see Mark Mazower, *Dark Continent: Europe's Twentieth Century* (New York: Vintage, 2000).

“genocide” itself was invented only mid-century, when Raphael Lemkin, who had managed to escape the Nazi Holocaust, saw the need for a term to describe what the Germans had done. He then encouraged the newly created United Nations to take a stand. That body ratified a Genocide Convention, which since 1948 has condemned any attempt to kill or destroy an entire people. However, the killing did not stop. As we look back at the entire twentieth century, we see echoing images of genocide: from the Herero massacre in the first decade to the Rwandan massacre in the last, from the Armenian massacre in Turkey to “ethnic cleansing” in the Balkans, from the Jewish Holocaust to the killing fields of Cambodia.

The first half of the twentieth century provided a bloody counterpart to genocide in the form of two wars of unprecedented carnage. Europeans entered the Great War in a state of near innocence, at least in terms of understanding the horrors of modern warfare. British troops at the Somme were encouraged to kick a soccer ball across no-man’s-land as they approached the German trenches, presumably to spur them onward and perhaps in some surreal attempt to make this seem like a game. However, 60,000 of those British troops were cut down like grass on the very first day of the attack, July 1, 1916. Despite the losses and what seems in retrospect to have been the insanity of marching directly into machine gun and artillery fire, General Haig sent his soldiers across no-man’s-land again and again until the Somme offensive squished and squandered its way to a halt in the rain and mud of November. Losses on both sides totaled nearly one million men killed or wounded, with no appreciable change in the location of the front. Unfortunately, the Battle of the Somme was neither the first nor last of the interminable trench battles on the Western Front, battles fought out of wet, muddy, rat-infested trenches under the iron rain of modern, exploding artillery shells as heavy as Volkswagens. Both sides used poison gas during this war, with mustard or chlorine gas burning the soft, wet tissues of eyes and lungs, rendering victims blind, maimed, or dead, but not advancing the prospects of victory for either side.

Nearly nine million soldiers died in World War I and many more were maimed. These losses, nearly unimaginable, left few families in the participating nations untouched. Today one sees monuments in towns and villages across Germany, Austria, Russia, Italy, France, and Great Britain listing the large numbers of dead, often including several members of the same family. If we were to extrapolate the German war dead at approximately 2 million in a nation of 60 million, that would

correspond, for example, to some 10 million soldiers from the present American population of 300 million. By contrast, America lost 58,000 dead in Vietnam, 37,000 dead in Korea, more than 400,000 dead in the European and Pacific theaters of World War II, 115,000 dead in World War I, and 600,000 dead during the Civil War, counting both North and South. Losses in the Revolutionary War, the War of 1812, the Mexican-American War, the Indian wars, the Spanish-American War, and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are minute by comparison. Thus the total number of American dead in more than two centuries of fighting falls well short of 1.5 million, and yet Americans rightly grieve. Imagine the grief in post-World War I Germany.

Many historians say that the twentieth century did not really begin until 1914. The outbreak of war that year ushered in the century of death, bringing in its baggage both horror and disillusionment, as can be seen in Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* and other literature from the war; but this horrible war proved merely a precursor to greater horrors. Twenty years after the Great War came to an end, Hitler plunged Europe into a second war, with the carnage this time reaching at least 50 million dead. Furthermore, in World War I most of the dead were combatants, even though murdered Armenians and some civilians in the battle zone represent exceptions. Relatively little death was inflicted beyond the battlefields, at least compared to World War II, in which noncombatants died in unprecedented ways and in unprecedented numbers. Aerial bombardment took a great toll. For example, the Allied bombing of German cities may have killed as many as half a million civilians, which would be more than the total number of American battle deaths suffered in World War II. The number of victims in the Soviet Union dwarfed these figures, with the total of civilian and military deaths estimated at 26 million. World War II also included the Holocaust, of course. Germans managed to murder approximately 6 million Jews and 5 million others, including (but not limited to) Soviet POWs, Poles, Gypsies (Sinti and Roma), the handicapped, homosexuals, and various categories of political opponents.

The record of death in the twentieth century also includes millions of victims of Joseph Stalin and Mao Tse-tung, each accounting for 10 million or more dead. Their victims died from starvation, from harsh treatment in prison camps, or by execution, having been selected on the basis of class and politics as determined by a dogmatic ideology coupled with raging paranoia. The depredations of Stalin and Mao should never be denied or dismissed, nor should the genocides: from the Herero massacre

in 1906 to the Rwandan and Balkan genocides of the 1990s, as well as the Congolese and Sudanese genocides at the turn of the twenty-first century. Despite the enormity of these other crimes, however, this book claims we should reserve a special place in our panoply of twentieth-century death for the German Holocaust.

The German Holocaust and Western Culture

Growing interest in comparative genocide tells a staggering tale of death and leaves us with some controversy about definitions. Most observers now apply the label of genocide to a number of massacres besides the Holocaust, including those in Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia, the Congo, and Darfur. In a world of many grievances and in the shadow of the deadly twentieth century, it seems impossible and inappropriate to try to calibrate and compare levels of pain and injustice in each of these events. Nonetheless, I will make two claims about the nature and importance of the German Holocaust, which underlie my purpose in writing this book. First of all, there is no other genocide in which the killing process included the methodical, industrial manner by which Germans accomplished a significant portion of the deaths. This killing process employed architects, chemists, engineers, doctors, lawyers, and a vast bureaucracy, both civilian and military. A clear governmental purpose undergirded the process, and it culminated in actual factories of death. This was modern, mechanized, purposeful killing, which means, for example, that many important perpetrators did not even see their victims – yet they were necessary and culpable cogs in a massive machinery of death. My second claim arises from the first: There has been no other genocide undertaken by a culture so rooted in the modern, educated, technologically advanced West.

Despite this parallel, however, the story of Nazi Germany routinely conjures up a sense of “otherness” that makes it difficult to imagine ourselves into that world. Nazis have often been portrayed as monsters or demons. It has been suggested that Adolf Hitler was a particularly evil and powerful figure who hypnotized the German people or took over the nation against its will and forced it to participate in his monstrous crimes. Daniel Goldhagen gives another version of this “otherness” point of view, one that cuts a much broader swath. He suggests that we should never think of German killers as being anything like ourselves. Rather, he argues, the German version of antisemitism was especially vicious and ultimately eliminationist. He recommends that we imagine all Germans

to have been as different from us as those Aztecs of the fifteenth century who sacrificed and ate human flesh.⁸

I would argue that these emphases on German “otherness” are based on mistaken assumptions and inaccurate history. German universities, for example, were arguably the best in the world during the nineteenth century. Germans such as Leopold von Ranke and Max Weber invented modern scholarship as we know it. This educational foundation made Germany a leader also in the creation of modern physics, as can be seen in the careers of Albert Einstein, Max Planck, and Werner Heisenberg, and it resulted in a large number of Nobel Prizes won by Germans. German education also helped establish the foundations of engineering and science, which still make that nation a leading producer of automobiles and other forms of high technology. During the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, these same skills helped Germany become one of the major military powers in the world, probably the most powerful nation per capita in terms of martial spirit, military technology, and commitment to the maintenance of its war-making ability.

Germany also has a very important place in the arts, having raised up within its cultural tradition some of the greatest classical composers, geniuses such as Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven. Goethe and Schiller represent a similar level of genius in the field of literature. By the early years of the twentieth century, Germany held an acknowledged place of leadership in art, architecture, theater, and film. Berlin became a cultural mecca in the 1920s, which is one more indication that Germany’s cultural contributions to our modern world are broad and deep. If we turn to religion, it was a German, Martin Luther, who founded the Protestant tradition. German Protestants then built on the tradition of Luther and coupled it with the highly developed world of German scholarship. By the nineteenth century, German theologians led the world in Biblical scholarship and continued to exert enormous theological influence well into the following century. Karl Barth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Rudolf Bultmann, and Paul Tillich all represent this German tradition, and the work of each continues to resonate in seminaries and schools of theology. Even Gerhard Kittel, deeply tainted by his enthusiastic support for the Nazis, still holds an important place in Biblical study through his massive *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*.⁹

⁸ Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler’s Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996), 27–28.

⁹ See my treatment of Kittel in Robert P. Ericksen, *Theologians under Hitler: Gerhard Kittel, Paul Althaus and Emanuel Hirsch* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985), 28–78.

When Adolf Hitler came to power, 97 percent of the German population considered itself Christian, with about two-thirds being Protestant and one-third Catholic. Less than 1 percent of Germans were Jewish in 1933, and only a slightly larger percentage registered as pagans or nonbelievers. It is true that the entire 97 percent registered as Christian did not attend church regularly or maintain a vibrant Christian identity. However, all of them agreed to pay the church tax, money they could have saved by the simple act of leaving their church. Furthermore, they received religious education in all German schools, and, of course, many of these 97 percent of the population were fervent Christians active in their faith. Germany in the 1930s almost certainly represented church attendance and a sense of Christian commitment and identity similar to that in America today, for example.

This highly educated, technologically advanced, Christian nation voted for Adolf Hitler in numbers large enough to make Nazis the single strongest party and result in his appointment as chancellor in 1933. Germans then followed his lead, both in the implementation of his vicious politics of antisemitism and in the various stages of World War II. All of these factors about Germany and its place in the modern world are worth noting as we contemplate the Holocaust. Among the many outbreaks of genocidal behavior, it is the German-perpetrated Holocaust that is most likely to reward our modern gaze with some faintly mirrored image of ourselves. Many of us, of course, are not tempted to look in this mirror, or perhaps we are unable to recognize ourselves. I will argue that this is only because we have distorted the mirror.

Our minds stop short at the horror of the Holocaust, and rightfully so. It is virtually impossible to look closely at the myriad grisly details without feelings of revulsion. Nearly every possible vile deed occurred during the Holocaust, nearly every example of human bestiality. The film footage of bulldozers pushing emaciated corpses into mass graves might be the image that pushes us to the brink, or perhaps it is the quiet testimony of a survivor describing some particularly egregious pain or humiliation. Not only are these details painful, they are also necessary to the story. We can never in retrospect fully understand the depths of horror that the Holocaust represents; however, we cannot even begin to understand if we do not at some point look closely at the details and put our noses into the stench of the camps and the ghettos.

If it is difficult to study the Holocaust, it is even more difficult to imagine that we see ourselves in that mirror. The most comfortable approach is to dismiss the Nazi killers as a small group of monsters, no matter how we choose to place them outside our world. Perhaps they were a

generation scarred by the loss of their fathers in World War I. Perhaps they were hypnotized by the evil genius of Hitler. Perhaps they were in thrall to an unprecedentedly vicious form of antisemitism. We could even imagine they were mutants or aliens from outer space, but we would be better advised to consider another “perhaps.” Perhaps they were more like us than we would like to believe. We will be much more likely to understand the Holocaust and have a much greater chance to learn from this horror if we begin by imagining that the perpetrators were humans much like ourselves.

How Could It Happen?

For anyone exposed to the horrors of the Holocaust, the question typically arises, “How could it happen?” Historians in the 1980s argued among themselves over two broad explanations.¹⁰ “Intentionalism” placed the blame on a few individuals, especially Adolf Hitler and his inner circle of supporters, arguing that they simply set out with a plan to kill Jews and then proceeded to do so. This explanation has the advantage of identifying evil and placing blame. Specific people made specific decisions to kill, and they can be condemned for doing so. It also accounts for the reality that certain people, such as Adolf Hitler, Heinrich Himmler, Adolf Eichmann, and Joseph Goebbels, held powerful positions in the Nazi state and did indeed lead that state into genocide.

Intentionalism drew criticism, however, for claiming too much. For example, Lucy Dawidowicz in her book, *The War Against the Jews*, claims that all of World War II was essentially a cover for killing Jews or a mechanism for doing so.¹¹ It is certainly true that the Holocaust could not have produced the death of millions of Jews if Germany had not invaded Poland and the Soviet Union, where most of those Jews actually lived. Furthermore, war created an atmosphere of death and emergency in which the list of “enemies” to be killed could be broadened, even to include noncombatants ideologically defined as dangerous; and the actual killing could occur in places guarded by military force and under the assumption of military necessity. However, most historians would

¹⁰ See, for example, the treatment of this issue in Christopher R. Browning, *The Path to Genocide: Essays on Launching the Final Solution* (New York: Cambridge University Press, Canto Edition, 1995), especially 86–121; or Michael R. Marrus, *The Holocaust in History* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1987).

¹¹ Lucy Dawidowicz, *The War Against the Jews, 1933–1945* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1975).

list a number of causes besides antisemitism in explaining the origins of World War II.

Another issue involves the question of when the “intention” to murder Jews developed. During the 1930s, the Nazi regime established a program to encourage Jews to leave Germany. During the early stages of the war, the SS spent time developing a “Madagascar Plan,” with Germany hoping to acquire this African island from France as a place to send European Jews. Neither program would seem to make sense if the Nazi goal had always been simply to murder these Jews. “Functionalists” began to argue that the Holocaust developed incrementally, especially during the war years. A broad variety of actors and institutions faced a series of specific problems to be solved, often with the goal of anticipating Hitler’s preferences or “working toward the Führer,” as Ian Kershaw has described it.¹² By this analysis, the Holocaust developed as a complex society “functioned” in a particular setting.

Functionalism proved very good at showing the complexity of the Holocaust, including the complex chronology by which anti-Jewish measures escalated. It also showed the pervasiveness of the Holocaust, with a very large number of perpetrators making it happen. Functionalism has the potential danger, however, of leaving no one to take the blame for the murder of six million Jews and five million others. It is a little like looking so closely into the childhood and background of a criminal that the notion of guilt disappears. It becomes not really the criminal’s fault, but the fault of his parents or his friends or his neighborhood or his deprivation in one or another aspect of life.

Most historians now merge intentionalism and functionalism, holding individuals accountable for their decisions and behavior but also acknowledging the complex development by which killing became policy. Complexity and multicausality are almost always allies to good historical writing. Good history is also wary of anomaly. It might be convenient to describe the Holocaust as an anomaly, placing the Nazi regime into a chronological box that began in 1933 and ended in 1945. Such a severing from the past and future can be good for Germans, if they do not want to take responsibility for the rise of Hitler or the crimes Germans committed under his lead. The idea of a complete Nazi takeover in 1933, an aberration in German history, and then a complete rebirth in 1945, a *Stunde Null*, severs Germans before and after from connection to that regime.

¹² See, for example, Ian Kershaw, *Hitler, the Germans, and the Final Solution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), especially chapter 1.

This approach can also be the most comfortable for the rest of us. The more the Nazis resemble monsters without forebears or progeny, the less they resemble us, and the less we must worry that we will resemble them. But this is bad history.

When we place the Holocaust into a larger historical context, it is possible to mine many centuries for evidence. Already in 1941 a book appeared under the title *From Luther to Hitler*, suggesting there was something in German character and culture that inevitably made Germans into Nazis.¹³ Others look to the late development of the German nation-state, which emerged only in 1871 under the “blood and iron” politics of Otto von Bismarck.¹⁴ Did Germany during that time suffer from an inferiority complex? Did it then try to catch up too quickly to the centuries of power and prestige enjoyed by nations such as England and France? Such speculations can be useful. Speculators in this vein, however, can be suspected of knowing the answers they want to find before asking the questions, as well as failing to hold other nations besides Germany to similar standards in the identification of deficiencies. For example, we can identify a long and deep history of hostility toward Jews in German culture, an obvious place to start looking for origins of the Holocaust. However, we can find a very similar tradition in most Western, Christian cultures. In fact, Jews moved in large numbers from other nations *into* Germany during the half-century before the Holocaust, suggesting that they found German culture a less- rather than more-hostile environment for Jews. The search across centuries for broad historical explanation, although important, includes significant problems of ambiguity and uncertainty. It seems easier, more concrete, and more directly relevant to look closely at the tumultuous quarter-century that preceded the Holocaust, beginning with the Great War.

World War I weighed very heavily on all participating nations. Besides the carnage, which provided virtually an entire generation of conscripts the experience of a hellish life in the trenches and a likely death or dismemberment in the field, the lives of civilians were also disrupted, physically

¹³ William Montgomery McGovern, *From Luther to Hitler: The History of Fascist-Nazi Political Philosophy* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1941).

¹⁴ The *Sonderweg* thesis advanced by historians such as Ulrich Wehler focuses on the failure of Germany in the nineteenth century to act like democratic Western nations. See David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley, *The Peculiarities of German History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985) for a critique of the *Sonderweg* idea. See also George Steinmetz, “German Exceptionalism and the Origins of Nazism: The Career of a Concept,” in Ian Kershaw and Moshe Lewin, eds., *Stalinism and Nazism: Dictatorships in Comparison* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 251–84, for his review of these issues.

as well as emotionally. Mothers were called on to donate their sons, and young women were called on to work in munitions factories or in what had been men's mechanical work on farms. All were called on to donate brass or cash or give up eating meat at certain meals; many went hungry, especially in Germany; and each nation set up a propaganda office to regulate and control its citizens' enthusiasm for this war. Despite all of the hardships held in common, the British and French had the benefit of victory, whereas Germans had to accept defeat, along with all the other hardships, as recompense for their efforts and sacrifice.

Because of the control of news during that war, Germans up until the final weeks had expected victory to result from their massive effort. The shock of defeat then culminated within months in a peace agreement – the Versailles Treaty – that Germans resented and quickly labeled a *Diktat* (a dictated peace). Some of their complaints were surely overdrawn in the emotions of the moment. However, the transfer of all colonies to Britain and France (because Germans were said not to be civilized enough to have colonies); the loss of territories in eastern Europe to Poland and Czechoslovakia and in western Europe to France; the requirement to make very large reparation payments (which turned out to be less onerous than thought, because they were only paid sporadically and in small installments); the restriction on Germany's military (limited to 100,000 troops and with no right to possess tanks, airplanes, or other modern weapons); and the so-called War Guilt Clause (Article 231, which affirmed Germany's responsibility for Allied damages, because the war had been “imposed upon them by the aggression of Germany and her allies”) are examples of the postwar treatment that left virtually all Germans across the political spectrum deeply embittered.¹⁵ They had been defeated in war, and now their enemies dictated their postwar existence – if necessary, with troops on German soil.

The political system that grew up in response to military defeat and the abdication of Kaiser Wilhelm II could not work itself out from under the weight of a lost war and a harsh peace. This new system, which came to be known as the Weimar Republic, included all the democratic principles favored by the victorious Western powers; but it suffered from serious problems and lasted only fourteen years before being hijacked by Hitler and the Nazi Party in 1933. There may have been flaws in the system

¹⁵ The idea that the Versailles Treaty blamed Germany exclusively for starting World War I is now known to be a misconception. For example, the same clause appeared in treaties with Turkey, Austria, and Hungary.

itself, including the likely development of multiple parties and splintered government. Emergency provisions in the constitution allowed the aged President von Hindenburg and his advisors to abuse the system. This led eventually to Hindenburg's appointment of Hitler as chancellor, even though the Nazis could not command a majority in the Reichstag. We can imagine alternative outcomes and speculate that this or that change in the Weimar system might have prevented the rise of Hitler and all that then ensued. However, the political problems faced by this government extended far beyond the intricacies of constitutional language.

No matter how wisely developed, the Weimar system would still have suffered from its association with Germany's recent enemies in France, Great Britain, and the United States. Framers of a German constitution could not have created a democratic government without incorporating ideals associated with their recent enemies. Furthermore, American President Woodrow Wilson had specifically suggested in his "Fourteen Points" that Germany should adopt democracy in order to open a new and beneficial postwar relationship. Conservative and nationalistic Germans, who tended to despise Weimar throughout its existence, routinely suggested that it had been created by traitors to Germany for treasonous purposes.

Hitler was only one of many on the right who accused Weimar politicians of having "stabbed Germany in the back." This theory began with the contention, against all evidence, that Germany could have won the Great War, except that left-wing Germans inside the country, especially Jews and Socialists, had weakened the war effort. Leftists were blamed for damaging morale during the war by counseling caution and compromise, and the behavior of so-called Jewish profiteers was blamed for food riots and other examples of discontent.¹⁶ These same "traitors" were blamed for creating a liberal, democratic government specifically to weaken Germany at a time when strong, authoritarian leadership was thought to be needed. The fact that the Weimar government signed the Versailles Treaty (under duress) and then could not solve the many problems of postwar Germany, especially including the economic crises that ensued, left this system of government with too few supporters when crises came. At the same time, classic scapegoating allowed many Germans

¹⁶ See Belinda J. Davis, *Home Fires Burning: Food, Politics, and Everyday Life in World War I Berlin* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000). See also Roger Chickering's study of the impact of World War I on one German city, *The Great War and Urban Life in Germany: Freiburg, 1914–1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

to think none of these problems were their fault – it must have been traitors, leftists, or Jews.

Economic crises in the Weimar period added significantly to a growing sense of desperation, beginning with a period of hunger, unemployment, and general dislocation in the immediate aftermath of war. In 1922–1923, Germany suffered what may have been the greatest inflationary crisis in history, so that within months the one mark that would have purchased a loaf of bread needed to be one trillion marks for the same purpose. One can easily imagine the impact of this inflation by imagining the level of fortune in a bank account that would seem to guarantee lifelong security. Then consider how it would feel if that amount of money – let’s be generous and say, perhaps, \$50 billion – could no longer buy a postage stamp. Every German who had accumulated a margin of comfort denominated in cash – whether in a savings account, life insurance, a cash inheritance, or otherwise – saw the value stripped away practically in an instant. Although some benefited from inflation – individuals with mortgages to pay, for example, or farmers with commodities to sell – a general sense of financial catastrophe prevailed. Whoever could be blamed for this – the Western Allies and their demands for war reparations, the Weimar government and its inability to solve the problem, or even Jews under the stereotypical charge that they controlled international finance – could expect a huge portion of anger. The second economic crisis, the Great Depression, hit Germany in 1930, grew worse until 1933, and created a mood of desperation. One result was that more and more Germans risked voting for the Nazi Party and its radical critique of the status quo. The implacability of the depression may have seemed to give credence to Hitler’s scapegoating rhetoric, pointing to the inadequacies of Weimar, the machinations of Germany’s enemies, and the idea that Jews must somehow be responsible.

Discontent in Weimar Germany went beyond the spheres of politics and economics. It also developed for some in response to the “roaring twenties,” a time of rapidly changing cultural norms and challenges to traditional families and family values. Just as in other Western countries, the 1920s in Germany were marked especially by changing roles for women. This had grown out of women’s role in World War I, to a certain extent, but also out of the inexorable logic of modern economies. All agricultural, pre-industrial, rural societies place women in a traditional role of helping in the production of crops but also producing and caring for large numbers of children. These children are cheap and useful. All modern, industrial, urban societies place women in a different role, working

more outside the home, gaining a higher level of education to make better careers possible, marrying later, and producing fewer children. Children in modern, middle-class societies are expensive and – at least until they have been cared for through their primary and secondary school years and then supported, perhaps, through a university education – are not particularly useful. Many cultural changes coincide with this changed role for women in modern society, including political rights for women consistent with the principles of democracy and claims by women to get out from under a double standard of sexual morality.

Democratic ideals play a large role in this change by supporting the idea of individual freedom and personal choice. Suddenly, in Weimar Germany women could seek out new identities; and other minority groups, including Jews, could claim full rights within the society. These groups and individuals could also express their ideas – on stage, in print, in the arts, and at political gatherings – under the protection of a political system that promised freedom of thought and expression. Many conservative groups in Germany, certainly including representatives of the traditional bastions of church and university, felt threatened by these changes and opposed them.

This cultural crisis may have been a small concern alongside the military humiliation suffered by Germans at the end of World War I, the apparent political crises unresolved by the Weimar Republic, and the recurrent economic crises that so disrupted normal life; but it added to the weight of discontent. Few powerful nations have ever suffered political, economic, and cultural crises in such proximate intensity and under the shadow of a military defeat in which foreign nations could dictate the location of borders, the size and scope of the military, and the financial obligation to be paid to former enemies. Germans had created a powerful, modern nation with many accomplishments to be admired; but in the aftermath of World War I they faced an unusually acute convergence of crises. This is the reality we must remember as we note the German willingness to experiment with the leadership of an angry, aggressive, and radical politician such as Adolf Hitler.

Historical research over the past three decades has increasingly shown that many Germans facing these circumstances and this choice proved very willing to cast their lot with Hitler. Nazis did not inflict themselves on Germany; rather, Germans greeted Hitler, appreciated the economic success and renewed unity and strength that he offered, and proved ready to cooperate with his policies. One extreme example of cooperation can be found in Christopher Browning's *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion*

101 and the Final Solution in Poland.¹⁷ Browning describes a group of men who were assigned the task of gathering up Jews in small towns in Poland and then murdering them. In some cases, this meant putting a bullet in the back of the victim's neck before rolling him or her into a mass grave, a process so personal that often blood and brain matter splashed on the shooter's uniform and into his face. In other cases, these men simply rounded up Jews and put them on trains bound for a death camp. Through both methods, the five hundred men of Reserve Police Battalion 101 accounted for the deaths of approximately 85,000 Jews.

It is crucial to note Browning's use of the term "ordinary." Historians had previously assumed that Nazi killers would have been young men, those who had reached adolescence and maturity within the Nazi state and under the full impact of Nazi forms of education and training. Furthermore, they were thought to be fervent Nazis, members of the Party and of the most ideological party formation, the SS. Browning's killers, however, were older, less likely to belong to the Party, much less the SS, and so uncommitted to the cause that by 1941 most were living at home and – nearly two years into the war – avoiding duty in either the military or a Nazi organization. These ordinary men were conscripted into a reserve police battalion to perform unexplained duties behind the front lines in Poland. Furthermore, when the duties were explained early one morning, as these men were given their first assignment to kill, they were told they did not have to participate if they found it objectionable. Browning estimates that 10 to 15 percent of these men opted out of the killing, either right away or over time, which means, of course, that approximately 85 percent of these ordinary men killed methodically, in some cases even enthusiastically, whenever they were told to do so.

Omer Bartov gives us a second example of cooperation in his book *Hitler's Army*.¹⁸ For several postwar decades, the professional German military, the Wehrmacht, enjoyed a reputation for being isolated from the Holocaust and relatively clean of Nazi crimes. Bartov and many subsequent historians have poked holes in such a representation. For example, a documentation known as the "Wehrmacht Exhibition"¹⁹ includes

¹⁷ Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992).

¹⁸ Omar Bartov, *Hitler's Army: Soldiers, Nazis, and War in the Third Reich* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

¹⁹ I viewed this exhibition in Peenemunde in 2003. It was presented as "*Verbrechen der Wehrmacht: Dimensionen des Vernichtungskrieges 1941-1944*" ("Crimes of the Wehrmacht: Dimensions of the War of Annihilation, 1941-1944").

pictures of Wehrmacht soldiers shooting point-blank at civilian Jews standing on the edge of mass graves. Major subsequent studies, those by Saul Friedländer, Richard Evans, Peter Longerich, and Timothy Snyder, among others, all take for granted that the German Wehrmacht facilitated the Holocaust in a variety of ways and participated itself.²⁰

Military leaders in October 1939 heard these words directly from Hitler: “The hard struggle of nationalities (*Völkertumskampf*) does not allow for any legal constraints. The methods will be incompatible with our principles ... [but] the old and new territory should be cleansed of Jews, Polacks and rabble.”²¹ In June 1941, German generals received and passed on Hitler’s “Commissar Order,” in which troops were told that political commissars in the Red Army and all those identified as “thoroughly bolshevized” should be shot. Peter Longerich quotes Commanding Generals Walther von Reichenau, Erich von Mannstein, and Karl-Heinrich von Stülpnagel, each giving orders in 1941 with invidious comments about Jews, making it clear that the “thoroughly bolshevized” enemy and “Jews” were virtually the same. Von Reichenau, for example, spoke to the “necessary execution of criminal, Bolshevik, and mainly Jewish elements.” Longerich draws a somber conclusion: “The role of the Wehrmacht in the annihilation of the Jewish civilian population was by no means exhausted by instances of excess ... or by isolated examples of support for the SS and Police during executions. Agencies and units of the Wehrmacht ... did in fact cooperate so closely with the SS and the Police that one can legitimately speak in this context of a systematic cooperation and division of labour.”²² In sum, the attacks on Poland and the Soviet Union inaugurated a different sort of war, with German officers encouraging German soldiers to treat the peoples of central and eastern Europe – especially Jews – with unrestrained violence and contempt. It is clear that the Wehrmacht deeply engaged itself in the crimes of the Eastern front, that it was truly “Hitler’s Army,” and that it simply does not represent a body of professional German soldiers with clean hands.

²⁰ Saul Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews, 1939–1945: The Years of Extermination* (New York: Harper Collins, 2007); Richard Evans, *The Third Reich at War: 1939–1945* (London: Penguin, 2009); Peter Longerich, *Holocaust: The Nazi Persecution and Murder of the Jews* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); and Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin* (New York: Basic Books, 2010).

²¹ Quoted in Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews*, 12. Hitler’s words were recorded by an officer present at the meeting he held with military officers and Party officials on October 17, 1939.

²² Longerich, *Holocaust: The Nazi Persecution and Murder of the Jews*, 242–43.

Turning to the home front, we can consider Robert Gellately's study of the Gestapo, the famed secret police of Nazi Germany. He noticed that the vast majority of Gestapo actions came not from spy work by the organization itself but from denunciations by German civilians.²³ This organization had supposedly turned Germany into a police state under Nazi control. Gellately shows, however, that Gestapo agents were very few in number, especially if we are to assume they were terrorizing an entire nation. Rather, it seems, ordinary Germans were policing themselves, informing on neighbors who might have assisted Jews or said nice things about them and informing on neighbors who told jokes about Hitler or criticized him. Gellately argues that the Nazi police state was self-imposed by the great majority of the German people. They simply endorsed and participated in the Nazi regime and its policies.²⁴

One common denominator in the work of Browning, Bartov, Friedlander, Longerich, Evans, Gellately, and many other recent scholars is this realization: Everywhere you look at implementation of the policies of the Nazi state, you find large numbers of Germans participating willingly.²⁵ The same story applies if you look, for example, at doctors, lawyers, judges, or sociologists. These groups have each been studied, and in each case one finds a strong majority who went along with Hitler's policies, often enthusiastically. I studied Protestant theologians and reached the same conclusion.²⁶ Doris Bergen has shown that the pro-Nazi Deutsche Christen were far more significant in German Protestantism than previously admitted.²⁷ Susannah Heschel's book, *The Aryan Jesus*, identifies an extraordinary willingness in modern scholarship to deny the Jewishness of Jesus, which culminated, of course, among Nazi Christians who submerged historical reality in their commitment to Nazi antisemitism.²⁸ The trajectory in historical scholarship over the last

²³ Robert Gellately, *The Gestapo and German Society: Enforcing Racial Policy 1933 to 1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

²⁴ See also Gellately's follow-up study, *Backing Hitler: Consent and Coercion in Nazi Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

²⁵ Götz Aly has added an interesting explanation for this willingness, arguing that Nazi plunder of Jews and of the rest of Europe bought public support, giving Germans economic benefits and material comfort. See *Hitler's Beneficiaries: Plunder, Racial War, and the Nazi Welfare State* (London: Picador, 2008).

²⁶ See Ericksen, *Theologians under Hitler*.

²⁷ Doris L. Bergen, *Twisted Cross: The German Christian Movement in the Third Reich* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

²⁸ Susannah Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus: Christian Theologians and the Bible in Nazi Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

two decades points in one clear direction. Whenever one looks at a specific group of Germans, one finds an unexpectedly high level of support for and commitment to Adolf Hitler and the Nazi ideology.

Nazis, Germans, “Good Germans,” and Decent Human Beings

Some Allied interpretations of the Nazi state tended toward a simple, black-and-white recognition of only two categories: Nazis and decent human beings.²⁹ That grew out of wartime emotions, of course, as well as the need for wartime unity, as can be seen in the now somewhat embarrassing films of the “Why We Fight” series, created by Frank Capra for the American military. The harshest version assumed that Germans in general inclined toward Nazi behavior or at least blind obedience to the Nazi state through some deficiency in their character or culture, so that decent human beings could be found only on the Allied side. Another version accepted that the number of true Nazis might have been small, and those true Nazis could exercise sufficient control over their neighbors in a totalitarian state. This opened the door for a postwar situation in which the Allies found themselves in need of “good Germans,” both to help preserve their faith in human nature and to have a foundation of persons on whom to build a new, cleansed Germany. By that reasoning, some Germans had to be found on the “decent human being” side of the ledger.

Recent scholarship has complicated our interpretation in two ways. First of all, many or most of the “good Germans” no longer look as good as they once did. As I will argue in Chapters 6 and 7, there developed a mutual need in which large numbers of Germans learned to deny their past connections to and support of the Nazi Party and the Allies learned to accept that denial. Entire professions enjoyed better reputations after 1945 than they deserved, and that left entire professions vulnerable to the sort of research undertaken recently. Many skeletons were hidden in the closet, ready to come clattering out. Another side of recent scholarship has “bad Germans” no longer looking quite as bad as they once did. Not that their behavior was less evil, but that they are seen as more

²⁹ See Michaela Hoenicke Moore, *Know Your Enemy: The American Debate on Nazism, 1933–1945* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), for the argument that American attitudes before and during the war were ambivalent. This was based on a cultural affinity toward Germans among some, which meant less clarity in America’s commitment to the war. It also led toward a quick postwar willingness to see West Germans as natural allies for the Cold War.

complex. This research tends to bring Nazis back into the company of other human beings, a German subset of the human family. They may have responded to a particular set of historical circumstances in ways that we rightly condemn, but accurate historical knowledge could help us to better understand that behavior and also relate it to ourselves and our circumstances.

Christopher Browning's *Ordinary Men* represents a good example of this latter tendency. Struggling to understand the murderous behavior of the men he studied, he turned to postwar psychological experiments conducted in the United States. For example, Stanley Milgram showed that many normal Americans will administer electric shock to other humans, despite hearing their screams and even to the point of risking their death, so long as an authority figure in a white lab coat directs them and takes responsibility. Philip Zimbardo conducted a role-playing prison experiment at Stanford University in which American subjects were assigned the role of either prisoner or guard. Behavior deteriorated so quickly and dangerously that Zimbardo chose to end the experiment early for fear that someone would be seriously harmed. These and other experiments suggest that humans in specific situations can behave much more brutally than we might have thought.

What Constitutes Complicity?

Germans in the early postwar period complained bitterly about the alleged Allied charge of "collective guilt." The Allies never actually ascribed collective guilt to Germans, but they followed the precept that specific criminals should be tried in courts of law for specific crimes.³⁰ That still left massive room for disagreement, however. Germans tended to argue that only a very small number of leading Nazis held real responsibility for the crimes of the Holocaust. All others had simply had jobs to do, possibly under duress, and thus they were "only following orders" and should not be held accountable. The ideal version of this logic would have placed all blame on Hitler and Himmler, and they were conveniently dead. The Allies, however, insisted on culpability for those who committed war crimes and crimes against humanity, whether ordered to do so or not.

Besides these questions of specific guilt or innocence, there exists a much more complicated question of complicity and responsibility. Doris Bergen describes a workshop in which she asked a group of teachers

³⁰ For the somewhat more complicated circumstances of denazification, see Chapters 6 and 7.

the question, “Who killed Anne Frank?”³¹ Each person was given a slip of paper with a name or description of some individual, and they were asked to place themselves in a line, with the most culpable individuals at the front. Bergen expected that Adolf Hitler would be at or near the front of the line, and perhaps those who revealed the Franks’ hiding place. However, one person had been given the description of a pastor who preached on Sunday mornings, describing the evils of the Jewish people. She marched to the front of the line and refused to cede her place to others.

Clearly there exists a continuum on which ambiguous examples of culpability can be placed. This book assumes that churches and universities were significant institutions in German life, and that pastors and professors had a measure of influence in shaping public attitudes and behavior. The entire history and identity of church and university include their self-evident assumption that they are significant, that they have an effect on the members of their society. If that were not true, pastors and professors would surely have been failing in their intentions. Does that mean they should take credit for the “ordinary men” who went to Poland and murdered Jews? That is a question fundamental to this book.

It is difficult or impossible to ascribe specific culpability to those who dealt only in words, a circumstance typical for most individuals described in this book. Some exceptions exist. It is relatively easy to assign culpability to those figures in church and university who went beyond words, who participated directly in the killing process. However, most representatives of church and university can only be examined in terms of their words and their response to the issues of their day. How did they react to the rise of Hitler? Did they lend their support to the Nazi regime? Did they endorse the antisemitic policies of the Nazi state?

The rest of this book will look at the behavior of church and university leaders and the ideas they expressed. It will do so with the assumption that these individuals occupied respected positions and carried weight. Sunday sermons in church and religious education lessons in the schools together reached virtually the entire German population, and the rest of the teaching apparatus in German schools was built comprehensively on teaching and research undertaken in the universities. Most of the behavior to be described here would never be labeled criminal, except, perhaps, as an attenuated form of aiding and abetting. Is it possible, however,

³¹ Doris Bergen describes this experiment in Steven Martin’s film, *Theologians under Hitler*, created by Vital Visuals, Inc., in 2005 and based on my book of the same name.

that ordinary Germans who became killers for the Nazi state felt they had received permission from their churches or from their universities? Inquiring about the complicity of “good Germans” in church and university seems necessary in our attempt to develop more insight into how, really, such a horrific event as the Holocaust could have taken place.