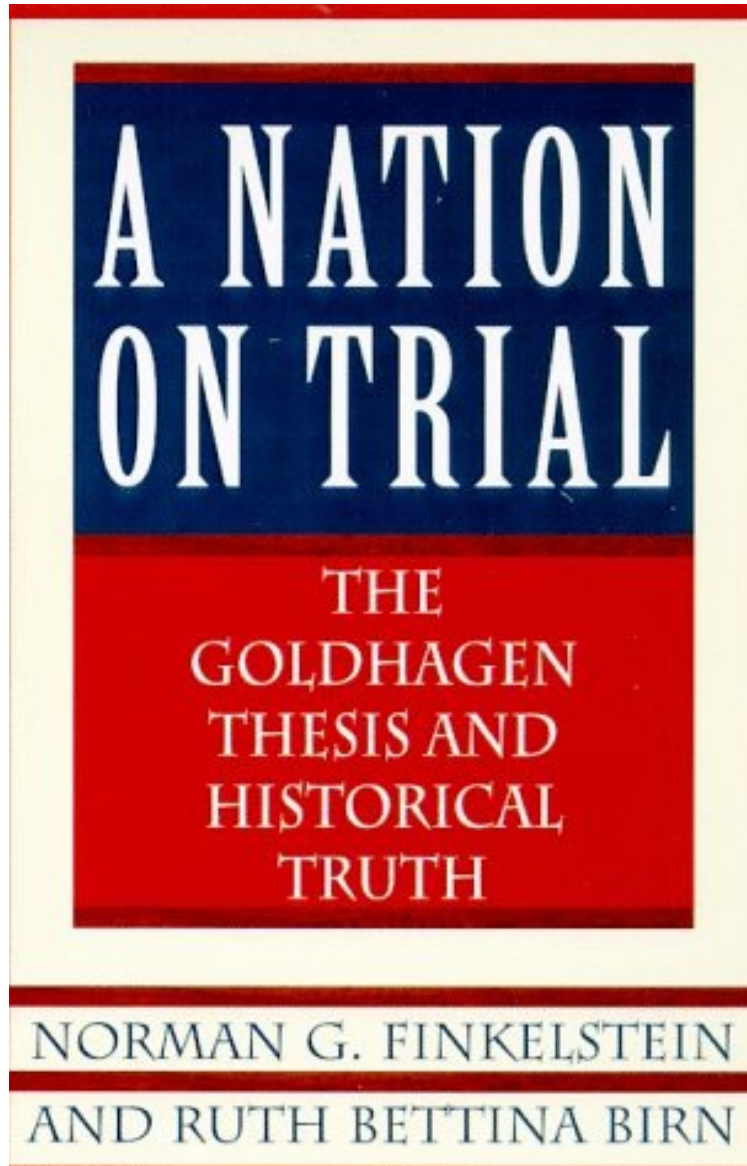


(Mobile ebook) A Nation on Trial: The Goldhagen Thesis and Historical Truth

## A Nation on Trial: The Goldhagen Thesis and Historical Truth

*Norman G. Finkelstein, Ruth Bettina Birn*

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**Norman G. Finkelstein, Ruth Bettina Birn : A Nation on Trial: The Goldhagen Thesis and Historical Truth**  
before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised A Nation on Trial: The Goldhagen Thesis and Historical Truth:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. As with all of Norman's books, it is well ...By Philip J, Hearn, Jr.As with all of Norman's books, it is well documented, and finally a myth buster that deals objectively with the German

peoples' connection to WWII and history in general. 1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. THE definitive source for critical reading, and reviewing, of so-called history

By John S. Reid This book is presented in two parts: Part One is Norman Finkelstein's critical review and analysis of the book *Hitler's Willing Executioners* (D. J. Goldhagen), and Part Two is Ruth Birn's similar review. I will address each part separately.

Norman Finkelstein's critique of *Hitler's Willing Executioners* serves as THE definitive primer on how to critically read opinion-oriented historiography (and, indeed, ANY book proclaiming to report history). In short, the lessons are: (i) apply logic to what you read; and (ii) don't blindly accept a citation as necessarily supporting what the author contends. Regarding the first lesson, Finkelstein demonstrates masterful use of logic to refute the premises and conclusions of Goldhagen's book. Regarding the second lesson, Finkelstein shows that any careful reading of a historiography requires the reader to perform their own independent research in order to verify that what the author alleges to be shown by a citation (and in particular, one that is supportive of the author's agenda) is actually supported by the citation. Much too often a critical citation which purports to support the author's point of view is: (i) taken out of context; (ii) omits relevant contrary material; and/or (iii) is just flat wrong. Further to this point, a citation which includes a translation from a foreign language is frequently subject to various meanings based on translation, and the author may select only one translation (or meaning) which is supportive of his position, while ignoring reasonably possible alternative translations (and meanings) which do not support the author's position. Yes, all of this requires effort on the part of the reader, but that is what the investigation of history should be all about: looking at a multitude of different resources, and then drawing your own conclusion.

Ruth Birn's critique of *Hitler's Willing Executioners* takes a different tact than does Finkelstein. Birn goes after Goldhagen's circumscribed and biased use of archival sources (pg. 134), and in particular the selective way in which he has interpreted his sources (see esp. pg. 130). Basically, Birn contends that Goldhagen cherry-picks (my expression) data which is favorable to his thesis, while ignoring data which tends to disprove his thesis. The combined approaches of Finkelstein and Birn in confronting Goldhagen's thesis (and in critically reviewing Goldhagen's book), together serve as a valuable lesson in the critical reading of any text which alleges to be history. Further, they both serve as a roadmap for how to critically review a book, and how to write a proper critical review of a book.

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. A Defence of the German people (not the Nazis!)

By Inset Pseudonym A rigorous refutation of Goldhagen's claim that the entire German nation was collectively responsible for the Holocaust. Claims that this work is "anti-Semitic" are nonsensical. Finkelstein's family was murdered by the Nazis in the Holocaust. He is neither a denier nor a trivializer, but rather a purveyor of truth. Reputable historians of Nazi Germany, like Ian Kershaw, Yehuda Bauer and Raul Hilberg, have criticized the Goldhagen thesis as well. It simply has no scholarly support. Rather than try and respond to his critics, Goldhagen attempted to launch a nonsensical lawsuit against Birn. You cannot change history through lawsuits, Mr. Goldhagen.

No recent work of history has generated as much interest as Daniel Jonah Goldhagen's *Hitler's Willing Executioners*. Purporting to solve the mystery of the Nazi holocaust, Goldhagen maintains that ordinary Germans were driven by fanatical anti-Semitism to murder the Jews. An immediate national best-seller, the book went on to create an international sensation. Now, in *A Nation on Trial*, two leading critics challenge Goldhagen's findings and show that his work is not scholarship at all. With compelling cumulative effect, Norman G. Finkelstein meticulously documents Goldhagen's distortions of secondary literature and the internal contradictions of his argument. In a complementary essay, Ruth Bettina Birn juxtaposes Goldhagen's text against the German archives he consulted. The foremost international authority on these archives, Birn conclusively demonstrates that Goldhagen systematically misrepresented their contents. The definitive statement on the Goldhagen phenomenon, this volume is also a cautionary tale on the corruption of scholarship by ideological zealotry.

... Daniel Jonah Goldhagen's *Hitler's Willing Executioners* was one of the most acclaimed nonfiction books of 1996 ... in the mainstream press, that is. Some historians who specialize in World War II-era Germany and the Holocaust have had considerably less kind things to say about Goldhagen's hypothesis that, rather than an aberrant anomaly perpetrated by Nazi archvillains, the Holocaust was an atrocity in which ordinary Germans at all levels of society, motivated by underlying anti-Semitic cultural assumptions, willingly took part. *A Nation on Trial* is a reprinting and expansion of two scholarly articles published in 1997 which directly challenged Goldhagen's thesis and research techniques. Norman Finkelstein considers Goldhagen's book "a monument to question-begging" that is "worthless as scholarship." He attacks what he describes as Goldhagen's overemphasis on "eliminationist antisemitism," which raises every anti-Semitic sentiment in German history to murderous intent. "How many white Americans do not harbor any negative stereotypes about black people?" Finkelstein asks rhetorically. "If Goldhagen is correct, we are all closet racial psychopaths." To debunk that notion, Finkelstein analyzes at length Goldhagen's consideration of the pre-Holocaust social segregation of the Jews, which Goldhagen identifies as "the maximum feasible eliminationist option possible given the existing opportunities and constraints," ultimately concluding that it "barely differed from the Jim Crow system in the American South." Although this is clearly intended to undermine Goldhagen's argument about the intensity of Germany's desire to kill the Jews in its midst, it is not exactly reassuring. One can easily flip the idea

around so that "the Jim Crow system barely differed from pre-Holocaust Germany's treatment of the Jews," and while that might not make America precisely a nation of "closet racial psychopaths," it certainly does not--and should not--provide any comfort for American readers. Ruth Bettina Birn pronounces an equally harsh verdict: "His treatment of these matters is nave and does not meet accepted scholarly standards." At one point, she even accuses him of deploying irony in a sarcastic manner "wholly undignified" in an academic work. Like Finkelstein, she raises important questions about the methods by which Goldhagen selected the source material from which he extrapolated his conclusions, and about the risk Hitler's Willing Executioners runs of succumbing to the pornography of violence to drive home its theoretical points. And Birn shares Finkelstein's conclusion that "Goldhagen wants to graft an ahistorical and monocausal thesis onto a body of historical and multicausal scholarship." One of the most important questions A Nation on Trial must address is why Hitler's Willing Executioners was able to capture so much attention. Birn is content to credit the "professional American marketing strategy" behind the book for its public success. Finkelstein jumps into a much more dangerous minefield by delineating a distinction between "holocaust scholarship" and "Holocaust literature," identifying the latter as "in effect the Zionist account of the Nazi holocaust," a genre of writing that positions the Holocaust as a historically unique incident in which only the suffering of the Nazi's Jewish victims merits substantial consideration. In making this categorization, he essentially labels Goldhagen's work an act of propaganda, "touted as the ultimate testament to the Nazi Holocaust... [which] fundamentally diminishes its moral significance." Goldhagen does have a tendency toward the hyperbolic, as indicated in statements such as, "The extent and virulence of the verbal violence assaulting the Jews from their own countrymen have no parallel in modern history," a point which African Americans, Pakistanis in England, and a host of others might care to debate. But while he argues that "Germans' antisemitic beliefs about Jews were the central causal agent of the Holocaust," he also freely admits, in the introduction to the German edition, that "[n]o adequate explanation for the Holocaust can be monocausal," and that anti-Semitism accounts only for the motivation of "the will to kill Jews." And while both authors accuse Goldhagen of blaming the entire German nation for the Holocaust, Goldhagen (again, in the German edition) explicitly rejects collective guilt, stating that "we must recognize that individual Germans were not will-less cogs in a machine, were not automatons, but were responsible actors, were capable of making choices, and were ultimately the authors of their own actions." The debate certainly does not end with this book; both Goldhagen and Finkelstein have created Web sites to which they routinely post responses to the ongoing criticism of their work. If you want to understand the controversy surrounding Hitler's Willing Executioners, however, A Nation on Trial is a necessary point of reference. --Ron Hogan "All readers of Goldhagen's controversial book should take note of these much-needed studies which authoritatively dismantle its arguments." --Eric Hobsbawm "Finkelstein's contribution is more than a dessection: it tells us something about where we are." --Raul Hilberg