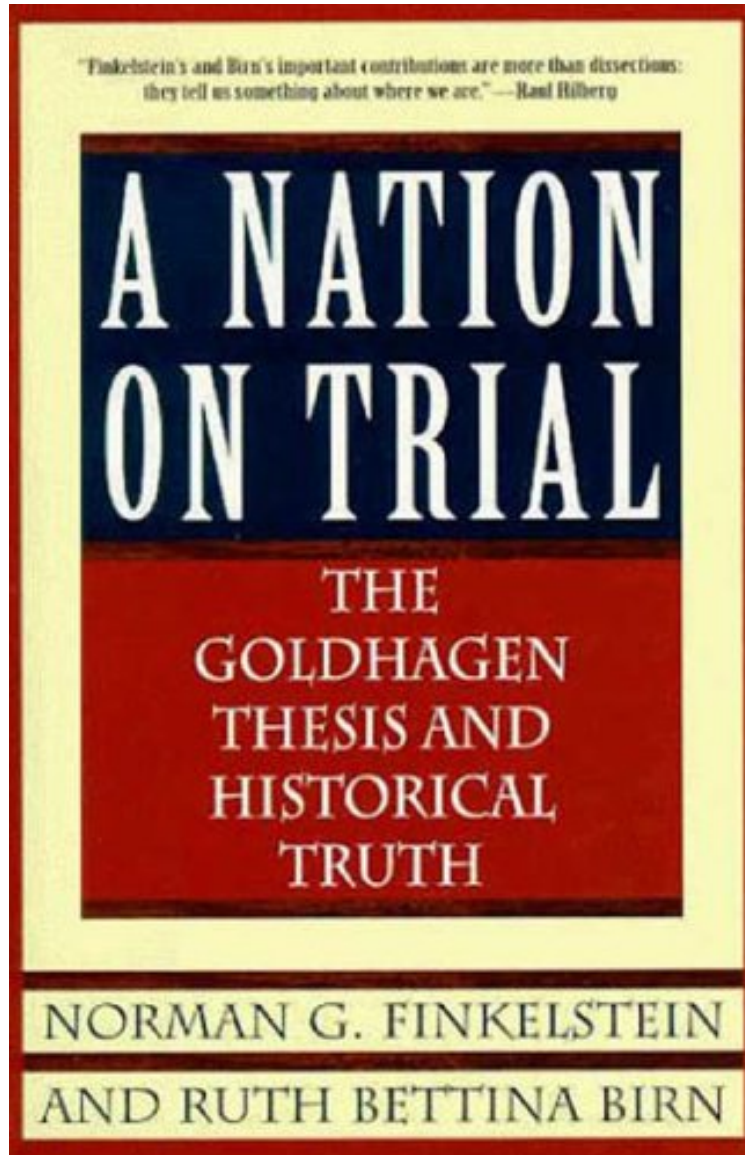


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## A Nation on Trial: The Goldhagen Thesis and Historical Truth

*Von Norman G. Finkelstein, Ruth Bettina Birn*  
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**Von 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:

Kurzbeschreibung 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.

deDaniel 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 naive 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

Pressestimmen "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