



Short Oxford History of Germany

NAZI GERMANY

Jane Caplan

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Edited by Jane Caplan

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Abbreviations and glossary

<i>Anschluss</i>	annexation (of Austria in 1938)
Arbeitsdienst	Labour Service
Auslands-Organisation	Foreign Organization (of the NSDAP)
BA	Bundesarchiv
BDM	Bund Deutscher Mädel (League of German Maidens)
<i>Beamtenstaat</i>	civil service state
Blitzkrieg	lightning war
BRD	Bundesrepublik Deutschland (German Federal Republic)
CDU	Christlich Demokratische Union (Christian Democratic Union)
DAF	Deutsche Arbeitsfront (German Labour Front)
DAP	Deutsche Arbeiterpartei (German Workers' Party)
DDP	Deutsche Demokratische Partei (German Democratic Party)
DDR	Deutsche Demokratische Republik (German Democratic Republic)
Deutsche Christen	German Christians
Deutsches Tag	German Day
Deutsches Turnfest	German Gymnastics Festival
Deutschvölkische Freiheitspartei	German National Freedom Party
Deutschvölkisches Schutz- und Trutz-Bund	German Völkisch Defence and Combat League
DNVP	Deutschnationale Volkspartei (German National People's Party)
Dreierausschuss	Committee of Three
Dreierkollegium	Group of Three

DVP	Deutsche Volkspartei (German People's Party)
<i>Endlösung der Judenfrage</i>	'Final Solution of the Jewish Question'
<i>Erbhof</i>	hereditary farm
<i>ernste Bibelforscher</i>	Jehovah's Witnesses
Freikorps	Free Corps
Führer	Leader
<i>Führerprinzip</i>	leadership principle
Gau	region (territorial division of the NSDAP)
Gauleiter	regional leader of the NSDAP
GDP	gross domestic product
<i>Gemeinschaftsfremde</i>	community aliens
Gestapo	Geheime Staatspolizei (Secret State Police)
<i>Gleichschaltung</i>	coordination
<i>Heimat</i>	homeland
<i>Historikerstreit</i>	historians' dispute
HJ	Hitlerjugend (Hitler Youth)
IMT	International Military Tribunal
Kaiserreich	German Empire (1871–1918)
KdF	Kraft durch Freude (Strength Through Joy)
KPD	Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands (Communist Party of Germany)
Kreisleiter	district leader of the NSDAP
<i>Kulturkampf</i>	'struggle of civilizations' (between state and Catholic Church)
Land (pl. Länder)	state in German federal system
<i>Lebensraum</i>	living-space
Luftwaffe	air force
<i>Mischling</i>	half-Jew (lit. 'half-breed')
<i>Mittelstand</i>	middle class
Napola	Nationalpolitische Erziehungsanstalten (National Political Education Institutions)

NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NSDAP	Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei (National Socialist German Workers' Party)
NSDStB	Nationalsozialistischer Deutscher Studentenbund (National Socialist German Students' Association)
NSDtDB	Nationalsozialistischer Deutscher Dozentenbund (National Socialist German University Lecturers' Association)
NS-Lehrerbund	German Teachers' League
NSF	Nationalsozialistische Frauenschaft (National Socialist Women's Group)
NSV	Nationalsozialistische Volkswohlfahrt (National Socialist People's Welfare Organization)
OKW	Oberkommando der Wehrmacht (High Command of the Armed Forces)
<i>Ostjuden</i>	Eastern European Jews
PO	Political Organization of the NSDAP
POW	prisoner of war
RAF	Royal Air Force
Reichsorganisationsleiter	Head of the (NSDAP) Reich Organization
Reichsstatthalter	Reich governor
Reichstag	federal parliament
RM	Reichsmark
RNS	Reichsnährstand (Reich Food Estate)
Roma and Sinti	German 'Gypsy' peoples
RSHA	Reichssicherheitshauptamt (Reich Central Security Office)

SA	Sturmabteilung (Stormtroopers <i>or</i> Storm Divisions)
Schönheit der Arbeit	Beauty of Labour
<i>Schutzhaft</i>	protective custody
SD	Sicherheitsdienst (Security Service of the SS)
SED	Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands (Socialist Unity Party of Germany)
<i>Sicherungsverwahrung</i>	security confinement
<i>Sonderweg</i>	special path (of German history)
SPD	Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (Social Democratic Party of Germany)
SD Einsatzgruppen	SD task forces
SS	Schutzstaffel (Protection Division of the NSDAP)
Stahlhelm	Steel Helmets
StdF	Stellvertreter des Führers (Führer's Deputy)
<i>Untermenschen</i>	subhumans
USAAF	United States Army Air Force
Vaterlandspartei	Fatherland Party
<i>Volk</i>	people <i>or</i> nation
<i>Volksdeutschen</i>	ethnic Germans
<i>völkisch</i>	ethnic <i>or</i> national
<i>Volksempfänger</i>	people's radio
<i>Volksgemeinschaft</i>	people's <i>or</i> national <i>or</i> ethnic community
<i>Volksgerichtshof</i>	people's court
<i>Volksprodukte</i>	people's (consumer) products
<i>Volkschule</i>	elementary school
<i>Volkssturm</i>	people's storm brigades
<i>vorbeugende Polizeihaft</i>	preventive police custody
Waffen SS	Armed SS
Wehrmacht	(German) Armed Forces
WP	Wirtschaftspartei (Business Party)

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Introduction

Jane Caplan

No one could accuse the Third Reich of being a topic neglected by historians, with something like 37,000 titles published so far, and still counting. But isn't there a paradox here? On the one hand, few periods of human history, especially any as brief as this, can have been subjected to such intensive scrutiny, and on such a remarkably international scale. How can there possibly be anything new to be said about the twelve years of the Third Reich, or even the twenty-five years of National Socialism's existence as a political movement? And on the other hand, surely there are few other periods of history on which the consensus view is so uniform, and so little divided by national loyalty. None of the passion or intensity that has invested academic and popular arguments about the French or Russian revolutions would appear to attach to the topic of Nazi Germany as such. If we discount a handful of crackpot Holocaust deniers, there is unanimity of judgement on the Nazis, their state, and their projects. They have no apologists, no defenders. What room could this leave for debate?

The answer is, a lot. Historians are primarily in the business of explanation and contextualization, not judgement, and here there is considerable scope for disagreement and argument, precisely because of what was packed into the career of National Socialism between 1919 and 1945. The questions provoked by this intense, abridged history are numerous and compelling. How could a political movement with such inauspicious beginnings—an unknown Austrian leader, a failed putsch—thrust itself onto the German political stage so spectacularly only a few years later? In a politically mobilized and deeply divided nation, how did the National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP) manage to harvest a higher proportion of votes in 1932 than any German party hitherto?

How did Hitler manoeuvre his way into the chancellorship in 1933, and then so rapidly throw off the tutelage of conservative allies who had expected him to follow their bidding? What explains Germany's remarkable economic recovery, taking it from bust to boom in a scant four or five years? Did this economic revival underpin the construction of an enthusiastic German 'national community' (*Volksgemeinschaft*) lined up behind its Führer and eager to exclude all 'outsiders', or was this a propaganda figleaf covering division, apathy, non-compliance, and repression? Who held the reins of power in the Third Reich, and who were the main beneficiaries of its policies? How did political anti-Semitism become embedded in a culture in which Jews were so assimilated? How did the Christian churches and individual Christians come to terms with a regime that seems so incompatible with core religious values? How do we account for Hitler's extraordinary foreign-policy successes, which propelled Germany so sensationally to the centre of the European international arena? Was the war that was launched in 1939 the planned culmination of Hitler's foreign policy, or a mistimed expedient forced on him by the strains of his domestic policies or the actions of other powers? Behind these questions looms the figure of Adolf Hitler himself: a man of limitless will to power and prodigious, nightmarish ambitions, who was not simply the Führer of his party and nation in name, but (as he himself claimed) almost metaphysically identical with them. How are we to understand the man and the part he played?

If these were the only questions, the historiography of National Socialism might resemble that of any other period of political upheaval and war. In fact, most of the essays in this volume discuss problems of this kind: for example, the chapters by Richard Evans on Nazi ideology, Peter Fritzsche on the Nazi rise to power, Jill Stephenson on the Nazi *Volksgemeinschaft*, Richard Steigmann-Gall on religion, Adam Tooze on the economy, and Gerhard Weinberg on foreign policy after 1933. The questions they discuss present their own specific challenges, but the normal tools of historical reconstruction and explanation ought in principle to be as adequate as they ever are to making sense of the past. But then we have to add in the culminating question. How are we to understand and explain the grotesquely

violent 'biopolitical' programme of eugenic and racial engineering undertaken by the Nazi regime, with its climax in the war of annihilation against Slavic 'subhumans' and the exterminationist paroxysm that consumed Europe's Jewish populations between 1939 and 1945?

These facts, discussed particularly in the chapters by Nikolaus Wachsmann and Doris Bergen, utterly transform the framework of interpretation. Apart from their own magnitude, they also beg the question whether any aspect of the history of Nazi Germany—and perhaps even the history of Germany as a whole—can ever be addressed without taking these climactic 'achievements' into account. The extreme violence and demagoguery that were integral to National Socialism have always demanded a deep explanation, and it was common among historians in the 1960s and 1970s to argue that the Third Reich arrived as the culmination of a long history of German misdevelopment. But the sense that the Third Reich was something truly anomalous was reinforced once the Holocaust came to be studied in depth. It implied that the history of Nazi Germany is unique: not only in the ordinary sense that any historical event or process is not strictly replicable, but 'uniquely unique', in the sense that the singularity of the Holocaust, its unprecedentedly evil and totalizing character, defies the normal explanatory categories.

What context of explanation can make sense of this without relativizing its meaning? It is a dilemma which shadows all attempts to understand the history of Nazi Germany. Nevertheless, historians have never shied away from the challenge of understanding it, beginning with the efforts made by contemporaries in the 1930s and 1940s. Twenty years after the end of the war, this had become a remarkably international project, with a growing sense of collaboration particularly among German- and English-speaking historians. Still, not surprisingly, the arguments were sharpest among historians in Germany itself, where political and academic perspectives usually overlapped. This Introduction will begin by concentrating on the German context of interpretation, before moving on to some of the more specific interpretive issues raised by the essays in this volume.

Contexts of interpretation

In the face of the wreckage of German culture in the 1940s, it is hardly surprising that early commentators were tempted to take one of two positions on the historical logic of the Third Reich, the unprecedented wars it launched, and the question of German responsibility. For some, like the venerable German historian Friedrich Meinecke, it was the catastrophic train-wreck of a civilization: an accident that defied the normal laws of historical explanation, the work of a gang of criminals who had usurped the German name for their own purposes. The opposite argument, proposed by Edmond Vermeil, Peter Viereck, or A. J. P. Taylor, and discussed in Richard Evans's chapter on the origins of Nazi ideology, was that Nazi Germany could be seen as the culmination of German history, the logical endpoint of a malign potential nurtured in that culture for centuries. In a curious sense, both views were mirrored in the Allies' policies in defeated Germany. As victors, they speedily brought the major Nazi criminals to trial at Nuremberg in November 1945, while as occupiers they initiated a process of denazification and German cultural re-education intended to purge the nation of its lethal traditions. Meanwhile most Germans, as Robert Moeller's chapter argues, ignored these extremes in favour of other more directly usable understandings of their recent past.

This kind of starkly dualistic evaluation is understandable as an immediate reaction to war, mass murder, and the problem of guilt, but it partly reflected national loyalties and assumptions and was never an adequate explanation for the history of National Socialism. It has long since given way to what historians like to call more 'nuanced' interpretations by German and non-German historians alike, based on the careful evaluation of primary sources—the evidence produced by participants and witnesses, in the shape of official records, diaries, letters, memoirs, oral testimony and interviews, even artefacts and material objects. 'Nuance' means taking into account the gaps and silences in these records, the

conflicting evidence, the contradictions of both policies and perceptions, together with the wash of scholarly debate about the problem sites of interpretation. It has also meant a gradual retreat from the ideological agendas that had helped to power arguments about the character of National Socialism since its emergence as a political movement in the 1920s. Here too we can identify two broad tendencies, which had initially arisen in the heat of the ideological and political conflicts among the various exponents of fascism, Marxism, and liberal democracy after the First World War.

In very broad terms, the left saw fascism, including National Socialism, as a variant of bourgeois capitalism, a crisis mechanism for disciplining the working class and restoring the viability of capitalism in a period of dangerous economic instability and revolutionary potential. The 'Marxist' or class interpretation (in its many variants) was that National Socialism obeyed the fundamental logic of history in the sense that it was explicable in terms of the class struggle and the economic interests it served. Despite any superficial appearances of incompatibility between Nazism and big business, in this view, the Nazi Party was ultimately sponsored by, and served, the economic interests of capitalism. The same was true of the Nazi regime, specifically its espousal of rearmament and a war of conquest, which was driven as much by the economic interests of capital as by the Nazis' own ideological imperatives. The principal alternative, which we can call the 'liberal' view, was that fascism was a manifestation of the risks inherent in mass society, demonstrating that it could be the nursery of irrational ideologies, demagoguery, and totalitarianism as well as democracy and pluralism. Liberals thus rejected a class analysis of National Socialism on principle, and asserted the primacy of politics and ideology over economics. They took the view that the Nazi regime was fundamentally anti-capitalist and that it rode roughshod over every rationality of the market, in an ideologically motivated quest for power and conquest.

These differences of interpretation have had a weighty bearing on all kinds of crucial and contentious questions about the character of National Socialism—in particular, which social classes supported it before 1933, which benefited from Nazism after 1933 and from the opportunities provided by the war, and how to explain the war itself

and the genocide it enabled (issues discussed below in the chapters by Richard Evans, Peter Fritzsche, Adam Tooze, and Doris Bergen, in particular). We will also see echoes of these interpretations in the important debate between ‘functionalist’ (regime-centred) and ‘intentionalist’ (Hitler-centred) interpretations of the Third Reich, which is discussed in detail in the chapter by Jeremy Noakes, and will be reviewed later in this Introduction.

Variants of these arguments had a political afterlife as well, for they were nourished by the continuing conflict between communism and liberal or bourgeois democracy, and by its political embodiment in the cold war and Germany’s own territorial division. As Robert Moeller’s chapter shows, the legacy of National Socialism was immensely important in defining the national identities and claims to political legitimacy of the two Germanies between 1949 and the 1960s. It was the means by which each German state could differentiate itself both from Germany in the past, and from each other. For the German Federal Republic, Nazism was a variant of the totalitarianism that, in a different form, was still in power in East Germany and the Soviet bloc. For the German Democratic Republic, it was an outgrowth of the capitalist system that still ruled in the West.

Although German understandings of the Nazi past therefore carried a political and even polemical character, it would be wrong to see them as entirely divorced from, or incompatible with, the professional academic agenda, even in the more controlled culture of the German Democratic Republic. In revived or renewed forms, arguments about the conditions that had nurtured National Socialism and sponsored its political agenda accompanied the growth of empirical historical research between the 1960s and 1980s. This was a period when higher education was expanding, the archives were more and more accessible, and historical scholarship was becoming increasingly internationalized (if more rapidly within the West than between East and West) through specialist journals, academic conferences, and scholarly exchanges. Great strides were made in two areas especially: explaining the precise political and electoral processes by which the Weimar Republic had collapsed and the Nazis came to power; and uncovering the institutional history of the Third Reich and the political and military decision-making procedures that had led to such catastrophic outcomes.

One major focus of disagreement was the extent to which Nazi Germany could be seen as the outcome of a so-called *Sonderweg*, or ‘special path’ of historical development in modern German history. Had Germany undergone an inadequate or peculiar process of modernization, as some influential historians argued, by comparison with other Western nations which had managed the transition to industrialism and democracy more successfully? Connected to this was persistent controversy, sharpened by the East–West division, about the relationship between fascism and capitalism. New momentum was given to this old debate by the process of generational change and renewed political mobilization in West Germany during the late 1960s and 1970s. This included the emergence of radically critical voices from the ‘new left’, with their accusations that West Germans had failed, individually and collectively, to confront or come to terms with their Nazi past. In a significant political shift, the Social Democrats had entered the West German government for the first time in 1966, leading the coalition from 1969. Their chancellor, Willy Brandt, inaugurated a new phase of rapprochement with Germany’s eastern neighbours, including his hugely symbolic gesture of penitence at the Warsaw ghetto memorial in December 1970. For all these reasons, the history of National Socialism claimed a new prominence in public consciousness, and this was reflected in popular culture—most notably in 1979, when West German television broadcast the American series *Holocaust*, which had an extraordinary public impact.

As the results of research proliferated and were more widely disseminated, vigorous debates took place among proponents of one or another interpretation, precisely because the intellectual and political stakes were so high. Although these were academic disputes, they were rarely confined within academia itself, at least in West Germany, where the press responded to and nourished popular interest by covering them in some depth. There were moments when historians voiced angry suspicions that their opponents were playing down or relativizing the shameful excesses of National Socialism, pursuing purely ideological and political agendas with scant regard for historical truth, or wilfully misunderstanding the relationship between Germany’s Nazi past and its divided political present.

The ‘Historians’ Dispute’

The most contentious, politically charged, and public of these debates was the so-called ‘Historians’ Dispute’ (*Historikerstreit*) of the mid-1980s, which erupted at a time when West Germany’s government and public life had entered a renewed conservative phase. The return of the conservative Christian Democrats (CDU) to a coalition government in 1983 coincided with two significant anniversaries: fifty years since the Nazi takeover in 1933, and forty years since the end of the Second World War in 1945. The commemorations prompted by these anniversaries demonstrated a new readiness among conservative politicians and historians to question the burden of German guilt, including in a controversial project to establish a national museum of German history. There was an important international dimension to this too. With Ronald Reagan’s election as US president in 1981, the cold war entered a new phase which highlighted Germany’s status as the West’s frontline state. Reagan and the new West German chancellor Helmut Kohl engaged in ‘an extraordinary series of bungled negotiations’ (Mary Fulbrook) which were intended to cement West Germany’s partnership in a strengthened Western alliance. Both leaders overstepped the mark in their eagerness to draw a line under the divisive legacy of the Second World War—most notably in connection with their official visit to the graves of Wehrmacht and SS soldiers in the German military cemetery in Bitburg in May 1985. Reagan had made some highly inappropriate remarks in advance of this visit, equating the soldiers’ suffering with that of the victims of Nazi concentration camps; and the furore this aroused was not calmed by a hastily arranged parallel visit to the camp at Bergen-Belsen.

Mismanaged as these events were, they nevertheless reflected a newly truculent public mood among conservatives. Among other voices, the well-known historian Michael Stürmer epitomized this when he argued that Germany ought no longer to be defined by the shame of National Socialism, as if that short period had

consumed Germany's entire right to a national history like any other country's. Forty years after the end of the war, so it was claimed, the Federal Republic needed a revived sense of national history and legitimacy in order to ensure its long-term stability as a democratic order. For historical and political reasons, therefore, it was time to 'overcome the past', in the words of the Berlin historian Ernst Nolte: to 'historicize' the Third Reich by letting the past become history in the fullest sense of the word. There it could be allowed to take its place alongside any other period marked by radical violence and conflict, of which history offered all too many examples.

The term 'historicization' is not very familiar in English, but in Germany 'Historisierung' carries a freight of meaning from the discipline's nineteenth-century origins, and calls on a deep sense of what 'history' means, morally as well as intellectually. Discussions of the terms on which Nazi Germany could be 'historicized' were not confined to the right: in fact, one of the first arguments for historicization had been made in a restrained and thoughtful essay by one of Germany's most respected historians, Martin Broszat. But in its politicized form in the mid-1980s, the issue became hugely controversial, centring on two questions in particular.

The first was on what terms National Socialism might finally be treated as one episode in Germany's history—rather than as something embedded deep within German history, something that so shattered the patterns of normal historical development that it must continue to define Germany's national identity in the present and future. How could Germany recover its right to a 'normal' history, a normal sense of national pride and patriotism? The answer to this question depended on a second one: how to understand the Nazi genocide against the Jews, condensed in the powerful metonym of 'Auschwitz'. Was this a singular event which defined the uniqueness of National Socialism, and hence determined its legacy as something extraordinary? Or was it an event comparable with other episodes of annihilationist violence, perhaps even inspired by them? In the 1970s, as we have seen, argument had often turned on the relationship between fascism, capitalism, and totalitarianism as systems of *domination*. Now, in the 1980s, the issue of comparison was pushed into a new register with Nolte's claim that Nazi Germany and Bolshevik Russia were

comparably *exterminatory* regimes—and that the Bolsheviks had even set the precedent for Auschwitz with their own programmes of mass murder since 1917. Not only did this claim question the singularity of National Socialism, but (echoing Nazi propaganda in 1944–5) it also endowed Germany’s wartime struggle against the Soviet Union with a certain defensive legitimacy.

Appalled by these arguments, numerous historians, led by Germany’s most prominent public intellectual, the philosopher Jürgen Habermas, mounted a passionate and successful public counter-attack. The crux of their counter-argument was that the confrontation with the Nazi past, with Auschwitz at its core, remained the indispensable condition of West Germany’s declared identity as a civilized democracy. Nothing else would guarantee the Federal Republic’s painfully rebuilt commitment to universal human values, set out in the opening articles of its 1949 constitution, the Basic Law (*Grundgesetz*). West Germans must continue to assert a concretely founded and rational ‘constitutional patriotism’, and not chase after the kind of metaphysical and dangerous national patriotism that had proved so treacherous in the past.

In their avowedly political bid to refound the legitimacy of the Federal Republic and create a new sense of German identity, the conservative protagonists in the *Historikerstreit* therefore failed. Moreover, the dispute was swiftly overtaken by astonishing events on the much grander stage of international politics: the collapse of Communist regimes in Russia and Eastern Europe, the shrinkage of Soviet power in Eastern Europe, and the political crises that engulfed parts of these regions in the 1990s. These unexpected events had a direct impact on Germany. Following the collapse of communism in the German Democratic Republic (signalled by the literal collapse of the Berlin Wall in November 1989) and the decision to incorporate ‘East Germany’ into the Federal Republic, unified Germany was faced with new opportunities for creating a national identity, not to mention a new vantage-point for interpreting the entire post-war epoch between 1949 and 1989. Along with Europe as a whole, Germany was released from the geopolitical paralysis that had gripped the continent in the aftermath of the Second World War. In this sense, therefore, it was history itself—the end of the cold war—that was creating the real conditions for ‘historicizing’ the Third Reich and opening the way,

as we shall see below, to new kinds of public engagement with the legacy of Nazism.

In more narrowly historiographical terms, the *Historikerstreit* had mixed effects. The more extreme claims that Germany no longer needed to define itself by its Nazi past were undoubtedly sent packing. The singularity of the Holocaust was affirmed, together with its overriding significance for German collective identity, including in reunified Germany, and the scene was set for a new receptivity to international research on anti-Semitism and genocide. At the same time, the debate helped to move the question of 'identity' to centre stage, where it converged with an already growing interest in recovering the texture of ordinary people's everyday lives under National Socialism—their individual and group experiences, the preservation of pre-Nazi collective identities, and the construction of new ones.

This approach had originally been embraced in the 1970s by historians who wanted to discover whether everyday patterns of working-class solidarity survived the assaults of the Nazi regime after 1933, and whether people contrived to distance themselves from the regime in ways short of open resistance—given that concerted political opposition appeared to have been rapidly crushed, as we see from the chapters by Jill Stephenson, Nikolaus Wachsmann, and Richard Steigmann-Gall. What the Germans call 'Alltagsgeschichte', the history of everyday life, therefore had to confront the question of what 'normality' meant in terms of Germans' ordinary daily lives. This was a different level from the nation, to be sure, but it was not entirely insulated from the larger historiographical issues implicit in national history. In fact, one of the books that had figured prominently in the *Historikerstreit*, Andreas Hillgruber's (1986) *Zweierlei Untergang: Die Zerschlagung des deutschen Reiches und das Ende des europäischen Judentums* ('Two Kinds of Downfall: The Destruction of the German Empire and the End of European Jewry') had aroused great misgivings precisely on this score. Hillgruber attempted to reconstruct the 'daily life' of German soldiers on the Eastern front in 1944–5 as (in his eyes) they battled to shield their fellow Germans from the Soviet advance. It was hard to miss the implication that 'Germany' itself was worth saving too. And by balancing the sufferings of German soldiers and civilians against those of the Nazis' Jewish

victims, Hillgruber's book (including its title) indicated a deliberate and shocking sense of priorities, and a wilful neglect of causal relationships and the chain of responsibility. This was a crass example, but other less aggressively revisionist historical research was also opening up disconcerting perspectives on the degree of identification that had existed between 'ordinary Germans' and the purposes of the Nazi regime—issues that are also discussed in the chapters by Jill Stephenson and Nikolaus Wachsmann.

Willing executioners?

Retrospectively, these projects can be seen as a first step in the development of new perspectives on the character of experience and victimhood in the Third Reich. Once again, this shift of sensibilities was crystallized in public controversy, or rather, two controversies that followed in quick succession. The first was prompted by a public exhibition of photographs and texts mounted by a private foundation in Hamburg, the Institut für Sozialforschung (Institute of Social Research), in March 1995 and titled 'War of Annihilation: The Crimes of the Wehrmacht between 1941 and 1944'. The exhibition detailed the German army's complicity in the mass murder of civilians on several war fronts in Eastern Europe and Russia, and exploded the myth of the 'clean Wehrmacht', that is, the post-war claim that only the SS had been responsible for war crimes, and that the German army had fought an honourable war. It was unexpectedly popular, attracting thousands of visitors and eventually going on tour in Germany and other countries, where it was seen by something approaching a million people.

For many visitors, it came as a shocking revelation that ordinary German soldiers—their fathers, grandfathers, uncles—had been directly involved in some of the worst crimes of the war. But it also attracted angry condemnation on the grounds that it vilified the memory of soldiers who had fought and died for Germany; and the condemnation became louder when it was revealed that (as a result of unintentional but careless misidentifications) at least some of the photographs in the exhibition pictured not German but Soviet wartime atrocities. The public recriminations

this caused continued for several years and eventually led to the withdrawal of the exhibition.

The second controversy was aroused by a book written by a young American political scientist, Daniel Goldhagen, whose *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* was published in New York in 1996 and immediately translated into German. Reduced to its essentials, Goldhagen's argument was that 'ordinary Germans' had been willing to participate hands-on and enthusiastically in the mass murder of Europe's Jews, prepared by the fact that German culture had embraced a peculiarly 'eliminationist' brand of racial anti-Semitism for at least a century. Hitler's Third Reich simply provided the opportunity for the expression and enactment of Germans' cultural disposition to the literal physical elimination of the Jewish race. To back up his argument that Germans had been 'willing executioners', Goldhagen described in graphic and excruciating detail events of the Holocaust that were generally less familiar than Auschwitz and the extermination camps: the mass shootings of Jews in Eastern Europe and Russia, the process by which Jewish slave labourers were deliberately worked to death, and the final spasm of murder in the 'death marches' in 1944–5, as the Germans emptied their camps in the face of the Allied advances.

The book provoked a storm of controversy on both sides of the Atlantic. Specialists in the history of Nazism, anti-Semitism, and the Holocaust were quick to criticize Goldhagen. They pilloried not only his deficiencies as a historian—for example, his misrepresentation of the complex historic relations between Germans and Jews, and in general his neglect of decades of research in favour of his own preconceptions—but also his intemperate, emotional, and accusatory tone. They also pointed out that an American expert on the history of the Nazi genocide, Christopher Browning, had already published a far more thoughtful and no less damning account of the mass shootings a few years earlier, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (1992), which had come to very different conclusions about why 'ordinary Germans' had been induced to participate in mass murder.

Nevertheless, the popular reception of Goldhagen's book was considerably warmer. No doubt the public sensation was fanned by an astute publicity campaign (something Browning's book had

not benefited from), and more people were prepared to offer opinions on the book than had probably read it. Yet there was a sense that academics had lost touch with public opinion in the US as well as Germany: that Goldhagen's book, for all the professional criticism it attracted, hit a popularly accessible note of emotional identification with the victims of Nazi genocide that earlier more policy-oriented studies of anti-Semitism and the 'Final Solution' had ignored. Like the TV series 'Holocaust' ten years earlier, or Stephen Spielberg's film *Schindler's List* which riveted Germans in 1994, just two years before the publication of *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, Goldhagen's book delivered a view of the Holocaust that was individualized, immediate, and compelling. For this reason, although many historians would continue to regard the book as bad history, it had a significance that went far beyond its own intrinsic quality.

In a way, the reception of Goldhagen's book marked the point at which 'the Holocaust' definitively eclipsed 'the Final Solution' as the recognized term for the Nazis' extermination of the Jews. To understand what this means, we need to go back a bit and look at some of the more specific historical issues that lie behind the topics discussed in this volume.

Institutions and intentions

The 'Final Solution of the Jewish Question' (*Endlösung der Judenfrage*) was the Nazis' own euphemism for extermination. In the 1960s and 1970s it was taken over by historians researching into the official decision-making processes and institutional mechanisms through which anti-Semitic measures were adopted after 1933 and extermination became a policy. In fact, most early research into the Third Reich was similarly devoted to investigating its institutions and structures, especially in relation to the crucial questions of the making of Nazi foreign policy, the decision to go to war, and the military conduct of the war—issues discussed in the chapters by Gerhard Weinberg and Doris Bergen. Making war was integral to the identity of the Third Reich and to its historical impact on the rest of Europe; the wars launched by the Nazi regime remain

a prominent focus of research, with the emphasis having shifted from foreign policy and the military machine to broader questions about the nature of Nazi war-making and the impact of the occupations in both Western and Eastern Europe. But institutions and structures also played a key role in debates about the character of the Third Reich as a whole.

The most familiar images of Nazi Germany—the serried ranks of party members at Nuremberg, the columns of invading soldiers and tanks, the all-pervasive pictures of Hitler—convey its own self-representation as a nation of dedicated and purposeful followers of the Führer and his ideology. They also sustain the external and partly compatible judgement that Nazi Germany was an absolutist dictatorship run by fanatics, a frighteningly disciplined police state answerable to Hitler alone, a totalitarian system capable of vast feats of repression and aggression. The extent to which these images capture anything accurate about the social organization of Nazi Germany is discussed below in Jill Stephenson’s chapter on Nazi Germany as a *Volksgemeinschaft* of ‘valuable’ Germans, while the violent exclusion of opponents, Jews, and ‘community aliens’ is examined by Nikolaus Wachsmann. Between them, these chapters demonstrate that Nazi Germany was neither the solidaristic national community envisaged, as Richard Evans shows, by Nazi ideology, nor a nation of submissive, atomized individuals obedient to the dictates of a police state and living in constant fear of the concentration camp. Rather, while some Germans certainly remained unconvinced by Nazi programmes and policies and many of these were subject to brutal repression, many other ‘valuable’ Germans exercised a kind of self-monitoring self-control that limited their exposure to the terrors of the police state. And for these citizens, the Third Reich even seemed to deliver enough that was positive to make the bargain appear worthwhile—at a heavy cost to others.

Even if, as Jill Stephenson suggests, the genuinely classless *Volksgemeinschaft* remained a myth (and true egalitarianism was never a Nazi objective), many Germans caught their first glimpse of the good life under Nazi rule. As Peter Fritzsche argues in his chapter on the Nazi rise to power, National Socialism offered Germans an alternative vision of their nation to substitute for the failures of the post-war system encapsulated in the Weimar Republic. With the Nazis in power after 1933, a certain kind of political stability

was restored; the economic chaos of the post-war years and the Depression was banished, as Adam Tooze's chapter shows; unpopular social groups were officially ostracized; and the foreign-policy and military successes described in Gerhard Weinberg's chapter brought rewards both psychological and material. Persecution and terror were confined to particular categories of people—notably, political opponents on the left, Jews, some religious groups (as Richard Steigman-Gall's chapter shows), and the ragged ranks of the 'community aliens' and 'asocials'. These were certainly large populations, but they were also more or less identifiable and bounded: if you were not among them, you ran much less risk of arrest or mistreatment. The vast majority of other Germans therefore made their peace with the Third Reich through a mixture of self-interest and a cultivated indifference to the sufferings of its victims. That so many people actively denounced acquaintances and strangers whom they suspected of political and racial 'offences' might even suggest that some Germans displaced their own fears of Nazi terror by ensuring that it was visited on others.

Historical research has thus modulated the popular images of Nazi Germany as a nation of either disciplined fanatics or powerless and terrorized victims. But what of the other side of the picture: the figure of the totalitarian party state, led by an omnipotent Führer? Perhaps this overloaded image of power was always understood to be something of an exaggeration, but the centrality of Hitler to any explanation of Third Reich seemed unassailable. His beliefs dictated policy, his power was undisputed, his word was law. In a word, the key to understanding Nazi Germany must be to identify Hitler's own ideological intentions and the political priorities he was able to impose. In this model, Hitler controlled the direction and pace of policy in every field, notably in foreign policy and military strategy. And, as historians like Lucy Dawidowicz and Gerald Fleming argued, the explanation of the Holocaust was simple, if devastating: it was the intended outcome of Hitler's ideological anti-Semitism and it unrolled programmatically from the first discriminatory measures of 1933, through the deliberately calibrated acceleration of persecution in the pre-war years, to the killing fields and extermination camps of the 1940s.

From the late 1960s, however, this depiction of the Third Reich as a primarily 'intentionalist' power structure, controlled by