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Vietnam, Watergate, and the Emergence of Holocaust Studies

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My parents were both raised and educated in California. My father, with ABD status at UC Berkeley, was hired as an instructor in the Philosophy Department at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 1940 but—as a Norman Thomas socialist, anti-segregationist, and pacifist—was dismissed from that job two years later. He quickly took another job teaching elementary physics to “90-day wonders” in the officer training program in Chapel Hill until the end of the war. I was born in May 1944 in Duke Hospital in nearby Durham because Chapel Hill did not yet have even a hospital, much less a medical school. One year later we moved north. With dissertation in hand, my father taught briefly at Syracuse University before teaching virtually his entire career at Northwestern University.

Raised in the very conservative suburban milieu of the Chicago Northshore, I was a distinct outcast at school, wearing Stevenson and Kennedy buttons in the election years of 1956 and 1960. Donald Rumsfeld was an earlier graduate of my high school and started his political career as our district's congressman. To distance myself from my high school environment as much as possible, I chose to attend Oberlin College.

I went to Oberlin in 1962 thinking that I would become a political science major, but was not enchanted by my first course in that field. As my father had a Ford Foundation “globalization” grant in 1963-4 to prepare a course on non-western philosophies and spent the year studying in various sites such as Istanbul, Beirut, Calcutta, and Kyoto, my brother and I took a ‘gap’ year from college and, along with several friends, travelled around the world as cheaply as we could, occasionally meeting up with my parents. My trip from New York across Europe, the Middle East, South and Southeast Asia, and Japan, ending in Anchorage, Alaska for a summer job took 11 months and cost \$1300. Highlights were hiking in Nepal from Kathmandu to Pokhara (there was no road yet), riding bikes through the jungle trails around Angkor Wat and the surrounding temples in Cambodia, and visiting the absolutely pristine beach (not yet a building in sight) of Phuket, Thailand. Iran was the most difficult country of our trip. When we checked into a very cheap hotel in Teheran, the desk clerk asked in astonishment what we were doing there now, since the Shah's monthly public hangings in the nearby square, which were apparently the main source of the hotel's business, had happened the week before! Our bus from Shiraz to Isfahan had a head-on collision with an oil tank truck, which we survived but those in the front rows of the bus did not. In Zahedan, waiting for the once-a-week train to Quetta, Pakistan (the subsequent birth place of the Taliban), we first heard of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, though we had to wait many days to learn the details.

I returned to Oberlin College in the fall of 1964, having decided to major in history before taking a single course. During my year of travel, I had become increasingly aware of the need to know something of the histories of the countries I passed through if I were to have any understanding of the current situation. The question was on which area and era to focus. I had toyed with the idea of staying in Japan to learn that country's language, but given the difficulty of that challenge and my own linguistic deficiencies, I wisely opted for Europe, with the doable goal of adding college French to my high school German. My initial history courses in my sophomore year—a two-semester survey of European history—confirmed my

decision to complete a major focusing on Modern European History, with the self-evident goal of proceeding to graduate school and a hoped-for academic career. I never seriously weighed any other alternative. My most influential professors were historian of England Barry McGill (my honors supervisor), the historian of Germany Robert Neil (a brilliant lecturer), and a one-year visitor Herman Lebovics, who offered a superlative seminar on European fascism.

Fascinated by A.J.P. Taylor's provocative *Origins of the Second World War*,¹ I increasingly gravitated toward diplomatic history and in my senior year wrote my honors thesis on the failure of Soviet-British negotiations in the spring and summer of 1939. Before leaving campus for Christmas break, McGill made clear the enormous amount of work he wanted accomplished before I returned in the new year. I naively blurted out, "But that's vacation," to which McGill replied cryptically, "Honors students have no vacation." It was a valuable lesson both in what future professional expectations would be and in what could be accomplished when no excuses were accepted. McGill remained mystified that I pursued two varsity sports (ice hockey and lacrosse) while presuming that I could complete an honors thesis for him. However, in the end not only did the thesis meet his expectations but he and I even developed a genuine and enduring friendship.

Most of the Oberlin History Department held Harvard Ph.D.s and assumed I would follow that path. When I chose instead to attend the University of Wisconsin-Madison, McGill proclaimed that he felt "like a Presbyterian minister whose son had gone on the stage." However, not only was Madison in the late 1960s a very exciting place, but the History Department also had faculty best suited to my interests. The triumvirate of Robert Koehl (my advisor), George Mosse, and Theodore Hamerow in German history, and Ed Gargan in modern France (as well as John Dower and Maurice Meisner for my internal minor in Asian History), constituted an extraordinary collection of faculty with whom to work. The chief challenge to (and disruptor of) my graduate studies in the following years came not from the university but external events.

Shortly after I began my graduate studies in the fall of 1967, President Lyndon B. Johnson announced that, unlike previous cohorts whose draft deferments had been routinely renewed, males who had entered graduate studies that fall would not have their student draft deferments renewed the following year. I was not present that same fall when a demonstration against Dow Chemical recruiters led to the first police assault against student protesters on the Madison campus, inaugurating years of campus activism and unrest. Following the Tet Offensive after the turn of the year, however, I did participate in the Eugene McCarthy primary campaign to unseat Johnson. The imminent prospect of a primary defeat in Wisconsin helped induce Johnson to end his candidacy for reelection, but this seeming victory was quickly followed by the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy, Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev's repression of the Prague Spring uprising, the infamous police riot at the Democratic convention in Chicago, and the ultimate catastrophe of Richard Nixon's electoral victory that would ultimately both prolong the Viet Nam war many years and expand it disastrously into neighboring Cambodia with genocidal consequences. Some look back on 1968 with nostalgia as a year of exhilarating activism, but for me it was a very bad year!

During that tumult and in a race against time, I researched and wrote my MA thesis on an obscure topic in diplomatic history—French Prime Minister Eduard Herriot's diplomacy at the Geneva Disarmament Conference of 1932—which I successfully defended in the summer of 1968. With the hope of an M.A. degree in hand, I also frantically applied for teaching jobs, for which my Selective Service Board (unlike many others) was still giving deferments. In late August, just days before my deferment expired, I was offered a teaching job at a private school—St. John's Military Academy—between Madison and Milwaukee. I would spend the next year teaching alongside returned NCOs from Viet Nam who were taking "R and R" between tours of duty. I fully exploited the ironic situation of my having sanctuary from the draft by virtue of teaching at a military academy to launch another round of job applications.

I had the unexpected success of landing a job as instructor in history at Allegheny College in Meadville, Pennsylvania, after three other candidates had rejected offers. I was to teach about half the department's sequence of western civilization courses, but was also allowed to offer several upper-level courses for each of my two years there. This was a vital turning

¹ A.J.P. Taylor, *The Origins of the Second World War* (London: Hamilton, 1961).

point in my career in several ways. First, I asked to teach courses in the areas in which I was planning to take preliminary exams when I returned to grad school. By reversing the normal sequence of preparing for exams in the areas one expected later to teach, I taught courses in preparation for future preliminary exams. This enabled me to recover one and one-half years of lost time when I returned to Madison and immediately took prelims in my third semester. Second, the department at Allegheny asked me specifically to teach a course in modern German history, the preparations for which had life-long consequences.

I wrote to several of my professors and asked for suggestions about assigned reading, and Herman Lebovics replied that he had used Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem*² because it was "good for discussion." I read the book and was fascinated to learn about a topic that had been scarcely mentioned in my undergraduate education. Moreover, in the midst of the Viet Nam War, Arendt's notion of "banality of evil" resonated with me. Even though news of the My Lai massacre had not yet broken, there were many suggestions concerning the nature and implications of American counter-insurgency tactics already. Most important, Arendt occasionally acknowledged her debt to Raul Hilberg's *Destruction of the European Jews*³ as the most authoritative source on Nazi Jewish policy.

I ordered Hilberg's book, but when I discovered upon its arrival that it was over 800 double-columned pages in miniscule print, I threw it on the table next to my bed. Hurriedly preparing to teach my first college courses, I could not devote a fraction of the time that would have been needed to read such a book for what presumably would have been one lecture in my course on Modern German History. I then fell seriously ill and was bedridden for nearly a month. When I felt well enough to read, the one book I could physically reach was Hilberg. Once I began reading, I could not put it down. Quite simply, it was a book that changed my life; I had a true academic conversion experience.

Hilberg convincingly portrayed the Holocaust as a vast bureaucratic and administrative process employing a cross-section of German society, not the aberrational accomplishment of a few ideological fanatics. The Holocaust was, in short, historically important. I could no longer conceive of returning to the study of French diplomatic history after discovering that the destruction of the European Jews could be a legitimate topic of academic research and analysis that probed the most basic questions about the legacy of western civilization, the mobilization capacities of the nation-state, and human nature. I met with my M.A. thesis adviser, Robert Koehl, who in addition to specializing in the study of the Nazi SS also supervised graduate thesis topics in European diplomatic history. I told him of my desire to switch fields (but not advisers) and undertake my Ph.D. thesis on some aspect of the Nazi persecution of the Jews. We did not then use the term "Holocaust." As I already had experience in diplomatic history and Koehl specialized in the SS, I suggested a thesis on the "Jewish experts" of the German Foreign Office who were the official liaison to SS coordinator of Jewish deportations, Adolf Eichmann. His response was mixed. It was a good dissertation topic, he said, but one that had "no professional future." Despite this warning, however, Koehl advised me to go ahead with the topic if I really wanted to. The most important thing was to be truly interested, whatever the dissertation topic chosen, as there was no fate worse than trying to write a dissertation if one's heart were not in it. At that time, of course, Koehl's warning quite accurately reflected the non-existence of what we now call Holocaust Studies. No courses were taught on American campuses, and there were virtually no venues for offering professional papers or publishing articles on the topic. I would be specializing in an as yet non-existent field that for all practical purposes had none of the infrastructure that provides academic legitimacy and standing in American higher education.

After a three-year hiatus, I returned to graduate school in the fall of 1971. At Allegheny I was replaced by a student of Gordon Craig's from Stanford University with Ph.D. in hand—a measure of how completely the history job market had collapsed with the onset of the 1970s! I passed my preliminary exams with distinction the first semester back, and I could then devote myself to the dissertation and course work in my internal minor in Asian History. One spur to completing my

² Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, rev. ed. (New York: Viking, 1964).

³ Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews* (Chicago: Quadrangle, 1961).

graduate studies as quickly as possible was financial. I had been supported by a Woodrow Wilson Fellowship and a National Collegiate Athletic Association Post-Graduate Fellowship my first year at Wisconsin, with the promise of four years of university financial aid thereafter. However, when I asked for this promised aid to be deferred when I left Madison in the summer of 1968, the dean—with a gleeful smirk that is impossible to forget—told me there were just two ways to have my financial aid deferred: to volunteer or get drafted. She was true to her word, and I never received financial aid from the University of Wisconsin. However, the Department did offer me remission of out-of-state tuition and helped obtain for me the university's nomination for a DAAD (German Academic Exchange Service) Fellowship for my dissertation research abroad in 1972-3. Upon returning to Madison, I wrote the dissertation in 1973-4. After three non-consecutive years on the Madison campus and one year of research abroad, I was fortunate to finish my graduate studies with no debt (thanks to my wife's job and my parents' generosity), a publishable dissertation, and a job offer from Pacific Lutheran University in Tacoma, Washington, which was my academic home for the next 25 years.

The dissertation, clumsily entitled “Referat D III of Abteilung Deutschland and the Jewish Policy of the German Foreign Office, 1940-1943,” was a case study that focused on how and why a small group of bureaucrats, who trained as lawyers, joined the *Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei* (NSDAP) as “bandwagon” Nazis in the spring of 1933, and became involved in the mass murder of Europe's Jews. If the Viet Nam War was an omnipresent background factor that shaped my perceptions and choices at the very beginning of my career, politics in the form of the Watergate Affair impacted the writing of my dissertation quite directly. On Sunday morning, June 18, 1972, as my wife and I prepared to depart for my year of dissertation research in Germany, we sat on the porch at her parents' house and read in the newspaper a bizarre story about the arrest of burglars at the Washington, D.C., Democratic headquarters in the early hours of the preceding day. Two years later, in the first week of August 1974, I turned in the completed draft of my dissertation. Just before our departure for Tacoma, on August 9, Nixon resigned from the presidency, bringing the Watergate crisis to an end. The eerie coincidence of the Watergate Affair and my research and writing of the dissertation was not just a matter of chronological overlap, however. Inescapable to me were the parallels between the criminal bureaucrats of the Nazi regime whom I was studying and the criminal political operatives of the Nixon regime, the news reports about whom I had been following avidly for two years.

The four most important members of the Jewish Desk of the German Foreign Office were well-educated—three with law degrees and one with a doctorate in anthropology. All had ambitions for a career in government, and all joined the NSDAP in the spring of 1933 as so-called “March casualties” or bandwagon Nazis, a move that undoubtedly advanced their career prospects under the new regime. None had demonstrated any particular interest or expertise in Jewish policy until they were appointed to the Foreign Office Jewish Desk. Two became self-made, professional antisemites, while two cautiously sought and eventually obtained re-assignment. But while at the Jewish Desk, all performed their duties conscientiously regardless of personal disposition.

Their direct boss was Undersecretary Martin Luther, head of *Abteilung Deutschland*, an improbable upstart by traditional Foreign Office standards. A “high school drop-out” who had left his Gymnasium before completing his *Abitur* in order to fight in World War I, he had an up-and-down though eventually successful business career in the 1920s. He ingratiated himself with the Ribbentrop family and was brought into the Foreign Office as an indispensable hatchet-man for the vicious political infighting of the Third Reich when Joachim von Ribbentrop became Foreign Minister. Eventually promoted to the rank of Undersecretary, he tenaciously defended Foreign Office jurisdiction in Nazi ‘turf battles,’ despite the incompetence of his preening boss and the declining importance of that institution after 1939. This led him, without direct or explicit orders, but with a keen sense of the regime's priorities, to ally with Heinrich Himmler's deputy in the SS Reinhard Heydrich in making the Foreign Office an accomplice in implementing the Final Solution.

As I sought to unravel the political dynamics behind Foreign Office participation in criminality, the Watergate drama unfolded. At the lower echelons of the various ‘dirty tricks’ operations of the Nixon re-election campaign were a group of ambitious young men with law degrees, who had come to Washington to make their career as loyal ‘team players.’ Working for the White House, they felt themselves above the law. Their energies and ambitions were harnessed and directed by callous and arrogant political operatives of the Nixon regime, particularly chief-of-staff Bob Haldeman, White House adviser John Ehrlichman, and Attorney General John Mitchell, who again needed no micro-managing and direct orders

from Nixon, merely the exhortations of their boss that the re-election of the president had to be assured and that no surprises from the opposition would be tolerated. None of the above is meant to imply a moral or historical equivalency between the Holocaust and Watergate criminality. Genocide and the attempted subversion of American democracy are crimes of entirely different magnitude and consequence. But for me, the coincidence of researching and writing my thesis on one aspect of the Jewish policy of the Third Reich in the midst of the Watergate scandal certainly made me sensitive to certain mundane political processes they shared in common.

I set about revising my dissertation for publication, shortening it by sending out two chapters as articles⁴ but adding a broader introduction. Included in the introduction was a long footnote explaining how my approach differed fundamentally from that of the recent best-seller by Lucy Dawidowicz, *The War Against the Jews*.⁵ I wanted to alert the editor of Princeton University Press to whom I submitted the manuscript as to one potential reader to whom it would best not be sent for evaluation. This strategy failed. The negative reader's report from Princeton was unmistakable in its style and tone. In a four-page, single-spaced evaluation, simultaneously scornful and dismissive, the reader argued that any work that did not focus on the SS and antisemitism was inconsequential. Furthermore, the reader incorrectly claimed that I had not researched beyond already well-known Nürnberg documents, when in reality I had consulted the entire Foreign Office archival record beyond those selected as Nürnberg documents and had been the first scholar to make use of an entire set of post-war German trial records for Holocaust research. The reader concluded that my case study of Foreign Office bureaucrats "cannot be regarded as providing any contribution, no matter how minor, to scholarship in the field."

A second press, Holmes & Meier, to which I sent the manuscript, consulted Raul Hilberg, who recommended it for publication. Our subsequent correspondence began an important professional and personal relationship that lasted until his death in 2007. In addition to Hilberg's support, I had the exceptional good fortune to receive help from two other senior scholars very early in my career. George Mosse, a member of my dissertation committee at the University of Wisconsin, was consistently supportive. By virtue of Mosse's advocacy, I was approached by Yehuda Bauer and made my first contact with the Israeli community of Holocaust scholars. All three of these men—Hilberg, Mosse, and Bauer—became not just helpful colleagues but valued, lifelong friends. As in any profession, who are one's friends and who are one's enemies matters, and at no time more so than at the beginning of one's career.

The publication of my first book in 1978, *The Final Solution and the German Foreign Office*,⁶ coincided with a phenomenal growth of interest in the Holocaust. On the academic side in the U.S., successive Holocaust conferences were held in New York in 1975 and San Jose in 1977 and 1978.⁷ Outside the academic world a similar trend could be observed. NBC showed its "Holocaust" docudrama, President Jimmy Carter formed the commission that eventually led to the creation of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, and congress passed Elizabeth Holtzman's amendment to American immigration law that established an Office of Special Investigations within the Justice Department to find and expel Nazis and Nazi collaborators who had illegally entered the US. In 1977 David Irving also published his notorious claim that Nazi Führer Adolf Hitler neither ordered the Final Solution nor even knew what was being done behind his back by zealous underlings until late

⁴ Christopher R. Browning, "Referat Deutschland, Jewish Policy, and the German Foreign Office, 1933-40," *Yad Vashem Studies*, XII (1977), 37-73, and Browning, "Unterstaatssekretär Martin Luther and the Ribbentrop Foreign Office," *Journal of Contemporary History*, XII/2 (April 1977), 313-44.

⁵ Lucy Dawidowicz, *The Holocaust and the Historians* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981).

⁶ Browning, *The Final Solution and the German Foreign Office* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1978).

⁷ Yehuda Bauer and Nathan Rosenstreich, eds., *The Holocaust as Historical Experience* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1981); Henry Friedlander and Sybil Milton, eds., *The Holocaust: Ideology, Bureaucracy, and Genocide: The San Jose Papers* (New York: Kraus International Publications, 1980).

1943. As a publicity stunt, Irving flaunted the offer of an immediate one-thousand-pound reward for anyone who could produce the Hitler order.

Irving's claim of Hitlerian ignorance and innocence of the Final Solution was rebutted by Martin Broszat, the director of the Institute for Contemporary History in Munich. However, at the same time Broszat advanced the argument that neither Hitler nor anyone else had given a comprehensive order for the systematic mass murder. The Final Solution had emerged out of a sequence of events. The deportation of Jews eastward in the fall of 1941, which had been envisaged as a prelude to expulsion into Siberia, had backed up when the Blitzkrieg against the Soviet Union failed. Killings initiated by local commanders to deal with the logjam of surplus Jews evolved into a program of total extermination that no one had ordered or planned beforehand. For Broszat, conception of a comprehensive program of mass murder followed escalating local improvisation.⁸

The Broszat thesis opened up an academic debate on the decision-making process behind the Final Solution and the question of Hitler's direct role therein. It also offered me, as a young scholar who had done recent archival research relevant to the issue, the opportunity to make a serious contribution. Though I was in considerable sympathy with much of Broszat's general interpretational approach to the history of National Socialism, I could not accept his argument in regard to Hitler and the decision-making process behind the Final Solution. With considerable trepidation, I wrote a critical reply and submitted it to Broszat's own journal. Broszat promptly published it, an act of academic integrity and graciousness for which I was very grateful.⁹ This piece, "On the origins of the Final Solution. A reply to Martin Broszat," proved to be a turning point in my career in two ways. First I was approached and then contracted by Yad Vashem in Israel to take part in their projected, multi-volume "Comprehensive History of the Holocaust" by writing the volume on "The Origins of the Final Solution," which finally appeared 25 years later in 2004.¹⁰ Second, when Broszat fell ill in the spring of 1982, I was invited as a last minute replacement to deliver a paper on the decision-making process for the Final Solution at a conference in Paris organized by Francois Furet and Saul Friedländer.

At the Paris conference I took the terms "intentionalism" and "functionalism," which Tim Mason had originated to identify the two current historiographical approaches to Nazi Germany,¹¹ and applied them for the first time to the debate over Hitler and the Final Solution. In this debate I articulated a "moderate functionalist" position between the ultra-intentionalist position of Dawidowicz that Hitler consciously aimed at the systematic mass murder of the Jews from the beginning of his political career in 1919 and the ultra-functional position of Broszat and Hans Mommsen that the Final Solution emerged through improvisation from below, without comprehensive decisions and orders by Hitler, in response to the thwarted expectations of Blitzkrieg victory and Jewish expulsion in the fall of 1941. I argued on the one hand that the Final Solution emerged out of a series of decisions taken in the particular circumstances of 1941 and was not simply the

⁸ Martin Broszat, "Hitler und die Genesis der 'Endlösung.'" Aus Anlass der Thesen von David Irving," *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 25:4 (1978): 739-775

⁹ Browning, "Zur Genesis der 'Endlösung.' Eine Antwort an Martin Broszat," *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 29:1 (1981): 97-109. For an expanded English version of this article: Browning, "The Genesis of the Final Solution. A Reply to Martin Broszat," *Simon Wiesenthal Center Annual* 1:6 (1984), 113-132.

¹⁰ Christopher R. Browning, *The Origins of the Final Solution: The Evolution of Nazi Jewish Policy, September 1939-March 1942* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004).

¹¹ Tim Mason, "Intention and Explanation: A Current Controversy about the Interpretation of National Socialism," in Gerhard Hirschfeld and Lothar Kettenacker, eds., *Der "Führerstaat," Mythos und Realität* (Stuttgart: Ernst Klett, 1981), 23-42.

implementation of a premeditated grand design, and on the other hand that Hitler was very much at the center of this evolving and contingent decision-making process.¹²

Ian Kershaw has recently reminded us that as late as 1979, in the famous debate at the Cumberland Lodge over conflicting interpretations of Hitler and the Nazi state, the Holocaust was not even mentioned.¹³ In the aftermath of the Paris conference and a follow-up conference in Stuttgart two years later,¹⁴ such an omission was unthinkable. On the contrary, henceforth, the centrality of the Holocaust to understanding the historical significance of not just National Socialism but also twentieth-century European history was unquestioned. In hindsight it is easy to see that the “intentionalist-functional” controversy was unnecessarily and artificially polarized around extreme positions that cried out for synthesis. But the criticism that it was a ‘sterile’ debate is, in my opinion, unfair. The sometimes hair-splitting and scholastic qualities of that debate should not obscure our appreciation of two important consequences, namely the extraordinary wave of fruitful research that the debate stimulated and the fact that Holocaust studies had come of age. Thereafter Nazi racial policy and the Final Solution obtained equal standing with issues about the Nazi rise to power and the path to and waging of World War II long-discussed by mainstream historians of Nazi Germany.

The following decade of the 1990s witnessed further substantial changes in the field of Holocaust Studies, two of which impacted my career in particular. First, the opening of the East European archives following the collapse of Communism offered a documentary bonanza. I had nearly completed my manuscript on the origins of the Final Solution for Yad Vashem, but completion now had to be put off for more than a decade while I absorbed the vast microfilm collections that arrived periodically at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. The field at large was enriched by an outpouring of regional studies, mostly written by a new generation of emerging scholars, that filled in the blank spots on our historiographical map of Nazi-occupied Eastern Europe.¹⁵ The geographical focus of Holocaust Studies shifted decisively eastward.

If one shift in focus was geographical, the second was the shift from preoccupation with decision-making to an expanded examination of perpetrators. In addition to my case study of Foreign Office “Jewish experts,” I had also published case studies of the German military administration in Serbia,¹⁶ the ghetto managers and public health doctors in Poland,¹⁷ and

¹² Browning, “The Decision Concerning the Final Solution,” in François Furet, ed., *Unanswered Questions: Nazi Germany and the Genocide of the Jews* (New York: Schocken, 1989), 96-118.

¹³ Ian Kershaw, *Hitler, the Germans, and the Final Solution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).

¹⁴ Eberhard Jäckel and Jürgen Rohwer, eds., *Der Mord an den Juden im Zweiten Weltkrieg: Entscheidungsbildung und Verwirklichung* (Stuttgart: DVA, 1985).

¹⁵ Key examples include Dieter Pohl, *Nationalsozialistische Judenverfolgung in Ostgalizien 1941-1944: Organisation und Durchführung eines staatlichen Massenverbrechens* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1996), Christian Gerlach, *Kalkulierte Morde: Die deutsche Wirtschafts- und Vernichtungspolitik in Weissrussland 1941 bis 1944* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 1999), and Wendy Lower, *Nazi Empire-Building and the Holocaust in the Ukraine* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

¹⁶ Browning, “Wehrmacht Reprisal Policy and the Mass Murder of Jews in Serbia,” *Militärgeschichtliche Mitteilungen* 1983/1: 31-47; Browning, “The Final Solution in Serbia. The Semlin Judenlager--A Case Study,” *Yad Vashem Studies*, XV (1984): 55-90; Browning, “Harald Turner und die Militärverwaltung in Serbien, 1941-42,” in Dieter Rebenisch and Karl Teppe, eds., *Verwaltung contra Menschenführung im Staat Hitlers. Studien zum politisch-administrativen System* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1986), 351-373.

¹⁷ Browning, “Nazi Ghettoization Policy in Poland, 1939-1941,” *Central European History* 19/4 (1986): 343-368; Browning, “Genocide and Public Health: German Doctors and Polish Jews, 1939-1941,” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 3/1 (1988): 21-36.

the chemists and auto-mechanics who invented the gas van.¹⁸ These studies involved middle-echelon officials in bureaucratic institutions who left written records and subsequently were sometimes the subject of post-war German judicial investigation. More elusive were the anonymous face-to-face killers at the bottom of the killing hierarchy. My greatest ‘eureka’ moment in my years of archival research came in the summer of 1986 in the *Zentrale Stelle der Landesjustizverwaltungen* in Ludwigsburg near Stuttgart, when I read the indictment of members of Reserve Police Battalion 101. I was stunned by a witness account of commanding officer Major Trapp’s speech to his men before the initial massacre at Josefow, in which he offered the choice of opting out for those who “did not feel up to” killing Jews, but only a handful of men initially took this option.¹⁹ Also the horrific and graphic descriptions contained in lengthy quotations of testimony from other witnesses stood in stark contrast to the mountains of transparently mendacious denials I had encountered in so many other trial records. I knew that I had taken a peek into the potential source base for a case study of a Holocaust killing unit.

I obtained permission to see the complete judicial records held in the State Attorney’s Office in Hamburg. Because a roster of the battalion had survived and most of the rank and file had been drawn from Hamburg, 210 former members had been located and interrogated by a special team of investigators (since some suspects were still in the Hamburg police, which was not allowed to investigate itself). Unlike other police battalion investigations, this was not a case in which a handful of officers—well coached by their lawyers—could lie for one another without contradiction.²⁰ Having worked through this massive collection of testimonies and recreated as best I could the itinerary, chronology, and spectrum of behavior of the battalion, I concluded that additional insight could best be provided through a social-psychological approach that emphasized the dynamics of group behavior rather than individual psycho-pathology. These men’s behaviors were shaped more by their interactions within the group than by their individual dispositions; they did things together that they would not have done on their own. Hence, I invoked the power of conformity, deference to authority, and role adaptation as part of a multi-causal explanation for how “ordinary men” became killers.

I thought the manuscript had the potential for a “cross-over” trade book, and Raul Hilberg put me in contact with his agent, who took it on. Three publishers declined the manuscript (two respectfully, one quite disparagingly), but the fourth—HarperCollins—offered a contract. *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* was published in March 1992, and the reception was very positive with one major exception. When I had presented my first paper on the battalion at the Holocaust Educational Foundation’s first Lessons and Legacies conference in November 1989,²¹ a young man introduced himself to me: “I’m Daniel Goldhagen. You scooped me.” He subsequently reviewed *Ordinary Men* in the summer of 1992. My book was both methodologically and conceptually flawed, he argued. I had been duped by the mendacious German testimonies, whose problematic and systemically mendacious nature I did not understand, he claimed, and I had mistakenly conceived of the perpetrators as “ordinary men” rather than “ordinary

¹⁸ Browning, “The Development and Production of the Nazi Gas Van,” *Fateful Months: Essays on the Emergence of the Final Solution* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1985), 57-67.

¹⁹ Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), 2, 57.

²⁰ For a study of the investigation and trial of RPB 101 itself: Jan Kiepe, *Das Reservepolizeibattillon 101 vor Gericht: NS-Täter in Selbst- und Fremddarstellungen* (Hamburg: LIT Verlag, 2007).

²¹ Browning, “One Day in Josefow: Initiation to Mass Murder,” in Peter Hayes, ed., *Lessons and Legacies: The Meaning of the Holocaust in a Changing World* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1991), 196-209.

Germans,” who were the carriers of a unique German antisemitism imprinted by a unique German culture. It was erroneous, he argued, to explain these Holocaust perpetrators’ behavior in more universalistic and situational terms.²²

In 1996 Goldhagen published *Hitler’s Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*, in which *Ordinary Men* was discussed critically in more than 30 footnotes but not mentioned in the main text. Beyond arguing that the Holocaust perpetrators were “ordinary Germans” driven by “eliminationist” antisemitism, Goldhagen formulated four other theses: first, that antisemitism was the leitmotif of German history; second, that the Hitler dictatorship was not formative, but had merely “unleashed” and “unshackled” Germans to do what they had always yearned to do; third, that the Final Solution is best conceived of as a gigantic pogrom, an explosion of hatred, not a bureaucratic-administrative process; and fourth, that Germans were totally “deprogrammed” from the cultural imprint of centuries of “eliminationist” antisemitism by Allied re-education programs in the late 1940s and overnight became just like everyone else.²³ We then had our second face-to-face confrontation in a heated symposium at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in April 1996.²⁴

Goldhagen’s straight-forward argument—Germans wanted to kill Jews because they were “eliminationist” antisemites, and they were “eliminationist” antisemites because they were Germans—was favorably received in the initial popular press reviews, and he gained further publicity on numerous television and radio programs and book tour appearances in the US. A six-city tour of Germany further boosted *Willing Executioners* to the status of a best seller in two countries. Returning from Germany, Goldhagen dismissed all of his critics summarily. In particular, he accused me of failing “to present any actual evidence” and constructing my theses “out of thin air.” This serious charge of academic dishonesty, which he later grudgingly disavowed, ended any further discussion between us.²⁵ Only gradually, especially as critical academic reviews began to appear, did the controversy begin to fade. It was a stressful experience to be in the crosshairs of a best-selling author and publishing sensation; it was a great relief to emerge with academic reputation not only intact but ultimately enhanced.

The so-called “Goldhagen Debate” was not my only stressful experience in this mid-career phase from the late 1980s to 2000. I also became involved in a number of court cases as an historical expert witness. In the 1980s in Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom, legislatures granted their courts original jurisdiction over suspected Nazi criminals who had chosen to reside on their soil. Between 1992 and 1999 I was engaged as an expert witness for the Heinrich Wagner case in Australia, the Radislav Grujicic and Serge Kisluk cases in Canada, and the Simon Serafimovich and Andrei Sawoniuk cases in England. My role in all of these cases was to provide the court with historical background information on the nature of Nazi policies and occupation authorities to help it understand and assess the credibility of eyewitness testimony. Due to Grujicic’s declining health, his case was dropped before I could give testimony in court. For the Wagner and Serafimovich cases, I testified in magistrates’ hearings that established that there was sufficient evidence to bring these cases to court, but

²² Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, “The Evil of Banality,” *New Republic* (July 13 & 20, 1992), 49-52. This was followed by an exchange at the opening conference of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in December 1993. Browning, “Ordinary Germans or Ordinary Men? A Reply to the Critics,” and Goldhagen, “Ordinary Men or Ordinary Germans,” in Michael Berenbaum and Abraham J. Peck, eds., *The Holocaust and History: The Known, the Unknown, the Disputed, and the Reexamined* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 252-265, 301-307.

²³ Goldhagen, *Hitler’s Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York: Knopf, 1996).

²⁴ “The ‘Willing Executioners’/‘Ordinary Men’ Debate,” Occasional Paper published by the USHMM, 1996.

²⁵ Goldhagen, “A Reply to my Critics: Motives, Causes and Alibi,” *The New Republic*, (December 23, 1996), 37-45. My letter to the editor and Goldhagen’s reply, *The New Republic* (February 10, 1997), 4-5. For my responses to his critiques: Browning, “Human Nature, Culture, and the Holocaust,” *Chronicle of Higher Education* (October 18, 1996), and “Browning, Daniel Goldhagen’s *Willing Executioners*,” *History & Memory* 8/1 (1996): 88-108, and finally the “afterword” to the second edition of *Ordinary Men*, published in 1998.

once again the deteriorating health of the defendants intervened to preclude trial. Kisluk and Sawoniuk came to trial in 1998 and 1999 respectively, and I appeared as an expert witness in each case. Both were convicted.

In addition, I served as an expert witness in two even more unusual court cases, the so-called “Holocaust denial” trials of *Crown v. Ernst Zündel* in Toronto in 1988 and *David Irving v. Penguin Books and Deborah Lipstadt* in London in 2000. The first case was a felony trial for Zündel’s alleged violation of Canada’s “false news” law, while the second was a civil suit for libel undertaken at Irving’s initiative with Lipstadt as the defendant. In both cases the crux of the issue before the court was *not* to prove that the Holocaust had happened, but rather to prove that the deniers made their claims in bad faith. In this sense, it was not the Holocaust but the practice of History that was on trial. Could historians acting as expert witnesses provide the means for the court to make a viable distinction between honest history and dishonest falsification. Ultimately, in addition to laying out the evidence available to any reasonable historian and exposing the contrived allegations of the deniers as conscious falsification, the job of the historical expert witness was to set the standard of historical competence and integrity in reports and courtroom testimony against which the deniers of the Holocaust could be measured and found wanting.²⁶

In one particular way, namely the deniers’ understanding of history and historical knowledge, the cases were very different. Irving claimed to be a practitioner of ‘real history’ and a super-sleuth who found new documents while lazy mainstream professional historians read only the books contained within the four walls of their offices and plagiarized one another. While he claimed to uphold the accepted standards of the profession, we could show how consistently he violated them in practice. And when, ironically, Irving then pleaded that he could be held responsible only for knowing the books and documents within the four walls of his study, the judge curtly noted that in his court Irving would not be allowed to “put the telescope to the blind eye.” He would be held responsible for all pertinent documents any “objective” and “open-minded” historian would have seen if he had only looked.²⁷

Zündel’s lawyer, Doug Christie, in contrast, tried to prevent my qualification as an historical expert witness because “history is not a subject upon which an expert can testify as to the matters of fact.”²⁸ History was purely a matter of subjective opinion, and one man’s interpretation of documents was no more privileged than any other. Hence his client could in good faith believe there had been no plan to exterminate the Jews and no gas chambers, and there had been far fewer victims than six million. This strange venture into post modernism carried to absurdity conflicted with both the claims of fact made by the denial pamphlet his client had disseminated and with the common sense of the jury. These last two trials were not just judicial proceedings; they were also transformed by the deniers into political theater in order to obtain publicity for their cause. Thus the stakes for success or failure were particularly high, and the fact that the deniers did not prevail in either case spared our profession from colossal embarrassment.

The concluding or late phase of my career was marked by two developments. First, after 25 years teaching at a small, regional, undergraduate institution, I was offered a chair at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill as Gerhard Weinberg’s successor. Until then, despite publishing four books, I had had little opportunity to move. Departments with open German history slots at research universities did not consider the Holocaust an appropriate specialization, and Jewish Studies programs did not want Holocaust experts who specialized in German history. I fell between two stools. My only job interview in those 25 years was for the Holocaust chair at Harvard University, but a front-page article in the *Harvard*

²⁶ Browning, “Law, History, and Holocaust Denial in the Courtroom: The Zündel and Irving Cases,” in Nathan Stoltzfus and Henry Friedlander, eds., *Nazi Crimes and the Law* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 197-215. For the Irving trial, see also: Deborah Lipstadt, *History on Trial* (New York: Ecco, 2005); and Richard Evans, *Lying About Hitler: History, Holocaust, and the David Irving Trial* (New York: Basic Books, 2001).

²⁷ *Irving v. Lipstadt*, January 25, 2000 (day 7), 85, 89, 92-94, 105-106.

²⁸ *Crown vs. Zündel*, vol. 13, 2935.

Crimson reported from a source “close” to the search committee that I was “not Harvard material.” In fact, neither the history department nor Jewish studies at Harvard wanted the search to succeed. They succeeded in not succeeding, and the position was cancelled. The exclusion of Holocaust specialists from German history slots at research universities finally ended when I joined the UNC Chapel Hill history department in 1999 (and just one year later Brown University hired Omer Bartov as its German historian). In my years at Pacific Lutheran University I had been given ample leave for research, and I had enjoyed the company of a number of wonderful colleagues. But the chance finally to work with graduate students has been one of the greatest satisfactions of my career.

Second, I finally brought to conclusion, after a 25-year gestation period, my project on Nazi decision- and policy-making with the publication of *The Origins of the Final Solution*.²⁹ And after working on decision-making and perpetrators, I now added a third strand to my fields of research. In Ludwigsburg, alongside the indictment of Reserve Police Battalion 101, I had come across the shocking acquittal verdict of the German police chief in the small Polish industrial town of Starachowice and filed it as a possible future project. By the time I took another look at Starachowice, my initial interest in this egregious miscarriage of justice gave way to two other concerns. First, I was increasingly intrigued with the challenge of using post-war survivor testimony as my primary source, and fortunately the number of survivor testimonies available for this project had doubled in the interim because of various testimony-gathering projects. Second, I began to appreciate that privately-operated factory slave labor camps, which in Starachowice provided the “narrow bridge to life”³⁰ for numerous Jewish workers, had been a ubiquitous phenomenon in the Holocaust but were nonetheless a neglected topic in its historiography. The final result of this new direction in my research was *Remembering Survival: Inside a Nazi Slave Labor Camp*.³¹

In addition to growing collections of survivor testimonies, yet another source base for examining the Jewish experience and struggle for survival came my way as a ‘windfall.’ Out of the blue I was contacted by Richard Hollander concerning a suitcase full of letters that he had found in the attic of his parents’ house following their deaths in an auto accident. The letters were to Richard’s father, who escaped Poland in 1939, from his family (mother, three sisters, two nieces, and three brothers-in-law—all of whom perished in the Holocaust) in Cracow from November 1939 to December 1941. I enlisted the help of Nechama Tec, and together we three published this extraordinary and moving collection of letters.³²

Two highlights of the late phase of my career were invitations to deliver the George Macaulay Trevelyan Lectures at Cambridge University (1999) and the George L. Mosse Lectures at the University of Wisconsin (2002).³³ I retired in 2014, but two other post-retirement projects came my way. In another ‘windfall,’ I was offered access to the letters and journals of a young American rescuer who set up the second safe-house in Le Chambon-sur-Lignon.³⁴ After decades of working on

²⁹ Browning, with contributions by Jürgen Mathäus, *The Origins of the Final Solution: The Evolution of Nazi Jewish Policy, September 1939-March 1942* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004).

³⁰ I borrow this very apt phrase from: Bella Gutterman, *A Narrow Bridge to Life: Jewish Forced Labor and Survival in the Gross-Rosen Camp System, 1940-1945* (New York: Berghahn, 2008).

³¹ Browning, *Remembering Survival: Inside a Nazi Slave Labor Camp* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010).

³² Browning, Richard S. Hollander, and Nechama Tec, eds., *Every Day Lasts a Year: A Jewish Family’s Correspondence from Poland* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

³³ Published as Browning, *Nazi Policy, Jewish Workers, German Killers* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), and Browning, *Collected Memories: Holocaust History and Post-war Testimony* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003).

³⁴ Browning, “From Humanitarian Relief to Holocaust Rescue: Tracy Strong Jr., Vichy Internment Camps, and the *Maison des Roches* in Le Chambon,” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 30/2 (2016): 211-46.

Nazi perpetrators, it was a novel but very enjoyable experience to write about Tracy Strong Jr., a truly good man. And alongside Peter Hayes, I republished Raul Hilberg's little known but path-breaking scholarship on the role of the German *Reichsbahn* in the Final Solution (with additional historiographical commentary and selected documents).³⁵ It seemed fitting to close the circle on my career as a Holocaust historian by paying posthumous homage to my original inspiration. In October 2019, just before the COVID-19 epidemic rendered further such events impossible, I experienced another gratifying act of career closure. The Villa ten Hompel Historical Site in Münster, the memorial study center and museum to the German Order Police in the Third Reich, sponsored a conference in my honor, entitled "A Generation after Christopher R. Browning's 'Ordinary Men.' Facing Police and Holocaust." And on that occasion, I was presented with a *Festschrift* from colleague and former students.³⁶

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³⁵ Browning, Peter Hayes, and Raul Hilberg, *German Railroads, Jewish Souls: The Reichsbahn, Bureaucracy, and the Final Solution* (New York: Berghahn, 2019).

³⁶ Thomas Pegelow Kaplan, Jürgen Matthäus, and Mark W. Hornburg, eds, *Beyond "Ordinary Men": Christopher R. Browning and Holocaust Historiography* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2019).