German has a word for it: Vergangenheitsbewältigung, meaning the process of coming to terms with the past. In Germany, Vergangenheitsbewältigung is the work of every single day. Having lost the Second World War, Germans have had to face up to their ugly racial past materially and historiographically. The German government has compensated Jewish survivors for the Holocaust and, just now, wartime slave laborers of all ethnicities for forced, unpaid toil in the factories of the Third Reich. After fifty years of investigating Hitler, Germans are looking more closely at the industrialists, businessmen, and other elites who nurtured his rise and kept him in power.

Virtually all Germans acknowledge the ugliness of their past and the culpability of perfectly nice, respectable people. They have rightly sprinkled their country with memorials to the victims and warnings to all never to forget Nazi atrocities. In the United States, in contrast, memorials are far more likely to commemorate the memory of slaveowners and confederates than that of racial dissidents. Memorials to the feminist abolitionist Sojourner Truth, for instance, only date back to the late-1990s. (One is just now being unveiled in Northampton, Massachusetts.)

With the writing of history’s being organized along national lines, American historians and historians of the rest of the world seldom compare notes. For this reason,
American slavery and the Shoah (the Holocaust of the Nazi era) usually keep their
distance. But in the mid-1990s a best-selling young author’s highly publicized comments
brought European and southern history together. The controversy swirling around
Daniel Goldhagen, a Harvard political scientist, riveted my attention. Goldhagen’s 1996
disputes the common wisdom that a few evil men or bureaucratic automatons caused
the Nazi genocide of European Jews. He insists, rather, that ordinary Germans willingly
slaughtered Jews.

These ordinary Germans, Goldhagen says, willingly furthered the slaughter of Jews during the Third Reich. According to Goldhagen, this readiness to kill set Germans outside the “community of ‘civilized peoples’” and needs to be explained. His explanation lies in what he calls an “eliminationist” anti-Semitism that had been circulating in Germany since the late nineteenth century. By the 1930s, “ordinary Germans” killed Jews openly and shamelessly, convinced they were doing the right thing. Even as the war was ending in obvious defeat, Goldhagen points out that German soldiers forced starving, diseased Jewish prisoners on otherwise purposeless “death marches.”

Goldhagen’s book remains controversial among European historians. But in general terms, the weight of German historiography is with him. The historian most often compared with Goldhagen--to Goldhagen’s detriment--is Christopher R. Browning. Browning’s book *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* differs from Goldhagen’s in tone and details.¹ But to an American historian of the South, the two books reinforce one another by downplaying the older theme of Gestapo
force and stressing ordinary German’s willingness to kill Jews. Eric A. Johnson, Nazi Terror: The Gestapo, Jews, and Ordinary Germans, is also sometimes summoned up to refute Goldhagen. But Johnson’s thesis, based on research in Cologne, not only does not contradict Goldhagen, it furthers the American parallel. Johnson shows that in Cologne, people not targeted by the Nazis went about their business largely undisturbed. The Nazi regime punished selectively, so that the vast majority of Germans were not disturbed by the persecution visited upon Germans who were Jewish (or Romany or Communist). The regime prospered precisely because its reign of terror affected only stigmatized minorities: another American parallel.

Recognizing that many historians objected to Goldhagen’s stance and rhetoric, I want to separate from all that and use Hitler’s Willing Executioners as a heuristic device. For my purposes, Goldhagen’s book offers a perfect means of comparing the historiographies of Germany and the United States South.

Goldhagen quotes a Jewish witness of a gleeful attack on Jews in the Polish city of Bialystok: the streets full of corpses, and, finally, the Germans’ herding the Jews into their synagogue, dousing the building with gasoline, setting it afire, and shooting at the burning fugitives. Several hundred pages of Hitler’s Willing Executioners describe the splattered blood and gore attendant upon hand-to-hand killing. Relishing the slaughter, Goldhagen’s ordinary Germans sound pretty familiar to a historian whose territory features grinning, souvenir hunting lynch mobs of the United States South.

An exhibition like Beyond Sanctuary reminds us of similar images in American history: the charred, tortured black body, often naked, often burned beyond recognition;
the proud perpetrators, posing like big-game hunters beside their victim; the crowd
staring at the body, looking straight into the camera, sometimes bearing the smiles that
greet a camera in happier circumstances. Like Goldhagen’s ordinary Germans, these
ordinary white southerners document their deeds for the benefit of lovers and friends. I
read Hitler’s Willing Executioners with one eye on the American South, where white
supremacy found its own willing executioners among ordinary white southerners.

Southern historians will also recognize the ugly rhetoric of hate, for southern
white supremacy echoes late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century German diatribes
against Jews. Where Germans would shout “Kill the Jews!” southern white
supremacists yelled “Kill the Niggers!” The bloody threats of the supposed rape-lynch
syndrome belong to the same genre as German anti-Semitism. Yet surprisingly few
southern historians have given that parallel sustained attention. (An exception lies in
Nancy MacLean, Behind the Mask of Chivalry: the Making of the Second Ku Klux Klan
[1994], whose final chapter recognizes the commonality between German Nazis and
southern Klansmen.)

As a best seller in eleven countries, Hitler’s Willing Executioners everywhere provoked
controversy. Critics in the United States and Europe accused Goldhagen of gross
unfairness; he was, they said, incriminating an entire people in the actions of a few.
Goldhagen maintained that “Germans wanted to eliminate Jews from German society
because of the things they believed about Jews.”5 Throughout his book tour in Europe
and Israel, Goldhagen, like his critics, sought justification in the social history of the
United States South. Comparative historiography, also, came into play. To vindicate his
thesis, Goldhagen likened his revision of German history to revisions in southern historiography.

His portraits of cruelty came from the testimony of the victims, he said, and the victims deserved to be heard. Again and again he summoned southern history to the defense of his own methodology:

If a historian of American slavery were to say the testimony of the slaves was not to be used when writing about the masters, it would seem to be a scandal, an outrage. And yet so many who write about the perpetrators say this or passively take that position with regard to the victims. Would it were so! I thought to myself and exclaimed to my husband.

In an article published in Tikkun in Mid-1998, Goldhagen, pursued the southern-German historiographical parallel: Imagining a wrong-headed American history, he asked what if “the precept and practice [were] not to describe the full extent and character of the slave holders’ brutality . . . “ As if to compound my frustration, Goldhagen pushed his point in Berlin: Writing about the Shoah without focusing on the virulence of German anti-Semitism “would be like writing a book about American slavery without writing about racism and saying, ‘So let’s write about the way the plantations were organized.’”

Hmmmmmmmm. That’s precisely the way most southern history has deal with slavery—not all, but most of it. For the longest time, the great majority of historians—certainly those best able to influence the historical profession, the writing of textbooks, and popular conceptions—refused to accept slave testimony as reliable historical source material. Granted, the enslaved have been admitted to history as witnesses to their own
experiences. They are not allowed to characterize southern society in general. It still remains beyond American historians’ conceptual reach to term vicious slave owners “perpetrators,” the term applied to their Nazi counterparts.

By and large, American historians still see mainly through the eyes of the white majority, those exempt from the everyday evils of slavery. Peering through the lenses of the privileged, historians write as though slavery were incidental to the fundamental organization of American culture. They generalize about American society and southern society without listening to slaves. Enslaved people are now allowed a say regarding the experiences of black people, but historians limit their purview. The enslaved cannot characterize the whole culture in which they lived. Those who had actually experienced American slavery describe their human worlds of friends, families, work, and small pleasures. But they also describe a dehumanized world of perpetrators and victims. If former slaves’ views on their society counted, southern historiography would be as gruesome as *Hitler’s Willing Executioners*.

These two great tragedies of the modern era need not compete for ultimate victim status, for they share enough horrendous similarities to both win: the racialization of vulnerable peoples, dehumanization, legal discrimination, segregation, captivity, forced labor, humiliation, cruelty, gratuitous violence, intense bodily and psychic torture. In the aftermath of the Shoah, these resemblances struck Stanley Elkins and produced his adventurous analysis, *Slavery* (1959).

Bruno Bettelheim’s discovery that absolute power could infantilize the smartest of people fascinated Elkins. But Freudian psychoanalysis provided Elkins his best tool
for making deeper sense of American slavery. Where primary source material seemed to be missing, he abstracted meaning from a parallel tragedy, the Shoah, and applied it to the experience of American enslavement.

Elkins advanced some excellent points. But he made uncritical use of the Sambo stereotype and disregarded black people’s own strengths and coping mechanisms (e.g., families and religion). On Elkins’s prototypical southern plantation, the master/father—not the slave child’s own parents—engendered the slave/child’s psyche. Elkins’s depiction of an ego-less slave Sambo quite rightly provoked enormous outcry—against his conclusions and against his methodology. As a result, the baby of Sambo went out with the bath water of Freudian psychoanalysis. Slavery not only doomed psychoanalysis as a tool, but it also made anathema comparisons with the Shoah. To this day, neither the theory nor the comparison has recovered from Slavery. This is a pity.

In my own work on slavery and southern history, I have sought to bring some of the evils of the Shoah—real hurt, real blood, real trauma—into the history of American slave society using tools from the social sciences. After much excellent scholarship on the sequelae of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, child abuse, sexual abuse, and personal violence, historians are in a stronger position than a generation or two ago to make sense of both the psychological and physical injuries of slavery. Once we can write the words “trauma” and “slavery” in the same sentence, we will have enriched our understanding of slavery’s human costs, for enslavers, enslaved, and bystanders. Already Wilma King, in Stolen Childhood: Slave Youth in Nineteenth-Century America,
(1995), has made excellent use of late-twentieth-century Balkan conflicts to illustrate the costs of slave children’s lives in the perpetual war zone of slavery.

Southern history generally listens less to non-elite, non-white southerners than German history has attended to twentieth-century German Jews. As I judge from reading book reviews over the years, it appears to me that the Shoah holds a central place in twentieth-century German history and that Jewish historians were sufficiently respected to have their views of German history accepted as German—not simply Jewish—history.

The difference between the place of Jews in German history and the place of African Americans in United States history relates (in part) to the Second World War. The German defeat “internationalized” (the term is Daniel Goldhagen’s) German history, but American victory left American history in American hands. Germans are not more able to write history critically than Americans. But having lost the war, they had their history taken out of their hands. No such shock has unsettled the verities of American history: “democracy,” “republicanism,” “opportunity.”

The United States, the South in particular, has an ugly racial past of its own. But no such ordeal as losing a world war has forced Americans to revision our history. We have had no reason to look at the American past through the eyes of a victimized minority and focus on the long, pervasive, continuing history of violence visited upon that minority. Most non-black Americans have been content to blame the bad things that happened in American history on a few repulsive racists: Klansmen and their running mates. Finally this pattern of blame is beginning to change, and Vergangenheitsbewältigung is occurring in the United States.
When historians and other Americans face the fact that violence undergirded southern society, we will better be able to measure the weight of institutionalized hatred. Racism will no longer appear as an individual, personal flaw, but, rather, as a way of life, as an ideology. The everyday racism of ordinary people will come into view, together with the evil embedded in every southern chromosome of all southerners of all races and ethnicities.

The testimony of black Americans deserves credence as a description of American society as a whole. Further, the very ordinarness of racism—in this case, southern racism—needs to be faced and admitted. When this omnipresence will have penetrated southern historiography, our overall estimation of the basic meaning of southern history will change. Southern history will look more like the history of the Shoah.


3 Ibid, 17-21, 253-301.


5 “The Fictions of Ruth Bettina Birn,” *German Politics and Society* 15, no. 3 (Fall 1997): 120. One example lies in Martin Chalmers’s Preface to his translation of Victor Klemperer’s journal: Chalmers hones Klemperer’s need to find good in the German people into a stone hurl at Goldhagen, as proof that most Germans were not fundamentally anti-Semitic. I recognize this accusation, for we southern historians
must always take care not to seem to blame all white southerners or an all pervasive bigotry for the mischief of extremists.

Ruth Bettina Birn, another of Goldhagen’s critics, drew an American analogy. In a long, carping review, she wondered whether anyone would “receive a Ph.D. at Harvard who begins by posing the question whether blacks or women are human beings like ‘us’?” In his 46-page rebuttal,

This quote comes from the Jerusalem Post, 28 November 1997, but similar comments are to be found in the Jerusalem Post, 26 December 1997 and Le Monde, 6 May 1997.

Goldhagen, “The Paradigm Challenged, Tikkun 13, No. 3 (May/June 1998) 40-47; the quote is on 40.

