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Book Review: G'otz Aly, Hitler's Beneficiaries: Plunder, Racial War, and the Nazi Welfare State

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Book Review

Götz Aly, *Hitler's Beneficiaries: Plunder, Racial War, and the Nazi Welfare State*, trans. Jefferson Chase. New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007. Pp. 332. \$32.50 US.

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Every so often, in the broad history of the human world, a madman comes along with a plan for a “New World Order” that includes the targeted mass killing of fellow human beings. This is no great surprise in a world so broad and humanly diverse. The mystery most compelling to genocide scholars is: *Why do so many “ordinary people” support their leader’s genocidal project?* In the case of the Holocaust, decades of scholarship have produced a spectrum of historical, psychological, and sociological theories to address this mystery.

Hannah Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem* argues for the “banality of evil” among citizens under the power of a totalitarian political regime. Daniel Goldhagen’s *Hitler’s Willing Executioners* posits a peculiarly virulent form of anti-Semitism universally shared by ordinary Germans of the early twentieth century. Christopher Browning’s more nuanced *Ordinary Men*, a major research source for Goldhagen’s book, argues against the notion of a uniquely Germanic evil; Browning’s interviews of hundreds of Nazi executioners demonstrate instead that “ordinary” Germans became killers through peculiar historical circumstances and ideological indoctrination, but also because of dangerously common human values such as loyalty to the battalion, a sense of duty, and national pride.¹

This argument has proved central to scholarly debates about genocides in general. But the debate takes a fresh twist with Götz Aly’s *Hitler’s Beneficiaries*. Aly writes to challenge current Holocaust scholarship, which in its latest phase targets German industrialist elites with complicity in Nazi barbarisms. While Aly acknowledges the role of German bourgeois elites in Nazi murder projects, he sees the recent debate as a problematic shift of the burden of blame from the German population at large to a handful of individuals. This shift, he argues, redirects public attention from a pivotal driving factor of the Holocaust—“the potential advantages everyday Germans derived from the Nazi regime” (2).

The Nazis were not only racist, Aly argues, but classist as well. The welfare of the common people (*Volk*) was a primary consideration in determining Nazi policy. From the start of the regime’s power, the commoners’ needs were prioritized and their lot economically improved, first through an efficient campaign to eradicate unemployment and then, throughout the war, by incurring an irresponsible level of state debt that was balanced by political and economic violence in occupied territories. Ultimately the Nazis plundered their European neighbors, crippled the economies of the nations they conquered, and starved local populations so that these countries, rather than the German populace, could be made to bear the economic burden of Hitler’s war.

In short, Aly argues, racist ideology (Goldhagen’s argument), political realism (Arendt’s “banality of evil” in a totalitarian regime), and historical forces and

bureaucratic standards of compliance (Browning's Theory) were not the only, or even the primary, motivating factors that drove ordinary Germans to tolerate Nazi racist ideology and to condone and even participate in the murderous acts undertaken during the Third Reich. Rather, Hitler's pragmatic program of redistributing the plunder of genocide and war to the underprivileged classes convinced the "ordinary" German people that the Nazi leadership had the good of the *Volk* at heart both in its grandest designs for world domination and in its least pleasant homicidal duties. Wartime expenditures of Hitler's advancing *Volkstaat* may have reached dizzying proportions—and Aly documents in the finest detail each phase of the regime's financial suicide—but the economic care the Nazis extended to the ordinary German *Volk* of "proper racial pedigree" convinced the people that Germany was headed toward a great and glorious future, a new *Volkisch* age, directly promoting their material interests.

Aly's stark economic explanation for general German complicity in murderous Nazi projects is well documented in Nazi records, but the fact that Aly, himself a German, explains the motivation for his research in the paradoxes of his personal life—his recollections of immediate family members' receiving abundant goods from the front—grants a deep sense of authenticity to his theory. This book deserves recognition from specialist and student alike as a valuable contribution to the ongoing debate about the willingness of ordinary citizens to join in state genocidal projects.

Note

1. Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Viking Press, 1963); Daniel Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners* (New York: Knopf, 1996); Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992).