Ordinary people and the Holocaust

by Victoria Barnett in the July 28, 1999 issue

> Books reviewed in this essay:
> **Germans into Nazis.** *By Peter Fritsche.*
> **Between Dignity and Despair: Jewish Life in Nazi Germany.** *By Marion A. Kaplan.*
> **My German Question: Growing up in Nazi Berlin.** *By Peter Gay.*
> **Unwilling Germans? The Godhagen Debate.** *Edited by Robert R. Shandley.*

The 20th century has been scarred by the mass murder of ethnic groups in Armenia, Nazi-occupied Europe, Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia and Kosovo. On a smaller scale, hate crimes against certain groups also erupt in this country. What factors converge to make such violence possible? Can anything be done to prevent it?

The relevance of these questions fuels the continued interest in the history of the Holocaust and the close examination of the role of "ordinary" people—both as victims and bystanders. Peter Fritsche, Peter Gay, Marion Kaplan and Robert Shandley offer intriguing glimpses of the people who lived through that devastating experience.

Fritsche presents literary snapshots of four pivotal historical moments, each revealing something of the mood of the German population at that time. In July 1914 Germans exuberantly welcomed the advent of World War I; in November 1918 they marked its end with anger and despondence. Fritsche portrays the popular excitement and energy that surrounded the birth of the Third Reich in January 1933 and, finally, the mood on May 1, 1933, when the new regime's direction had become clear. Some Germans were retreating "into private life" while others continued to show "considerable enthusiasm" for Nazism.

Drawing on a wealth of documentation, including newspaper reports, historical analyses and studies of everyday life, Fritsche gives a fascinating look at the rise of Nazism, the dynamics of populism and the power of ideology. His focus moves him away from some of the usual explanations for German behavior. While he does not discount the role of anti-Semitism, he contends that it was "secondary" in much

early Nazi propaganda. Popular support for Nazism was not grounded either in resentment of the Versailles Treaty or in economic uncertainty, he says, but in a new mood of populist nationalism that most Germans viewed as positive and constructive.

Ultimately, says Fritsche, Nazism succeeded because it felt democratic to most Germans; it was identified "with a new national mood that emphasized national integration, social reform, and economic prosperity." The Nazis rose to power because of "the unprecedented activism of so many ordinary Germans," and this activism continued to support the regime in the disastrous years that followed.

One of the most haunting images in Fritsche's book is a photograph of a large demonstration in August 1914, celebrating the onset of war. Years later, the photographer showed the picture to Hitler, who exclaimed "I was there!" and pointed himself out. Fritsche reproduces the shot, with an enlarged insert of 25-year-old Hitler—then just another face in the crowd.

Fritsche's interpretation helps explain the rapidity with which German society became Nazified at all levels. Kaplan and Gay portray the devastating consequences this had for Germany's Jewish citizens. If, as Fritsche believes, Nazism was both the reason and the vehicle for greater popular participation in politics, this made the divisions between Jews and non-Jews all the more powerful. Open antagonism toward Jews was an early sign of popular support for the new regime.

From the victims' perspective, Kaplan documents the harrowing trajectory that culminated in genocide. She shows how German Jews responded to acts ranging from subtle exclusion to outright hatred. Her book testifies to the psychological and physical wounds this persecution inflicted—and to the courage and dignity with which the Jewish community faced the persecution. They created new organizations to help each other. The Jewish religious community grew and took on new responsibilities as the pressures increased. Bravely and resourcefully, people tried to maintain an intact and dignified private life as long as possible.

Much of this burden was borne by women. Though gender is not the main focus of Kaplan's book, her gender analysis is brilliant and well grounded. The dynamics of daily life were drastically altered by the different kinds of pressures placed upon Jewish women and men. Families were devastated, financially and emotionally, as Jewish men lost their jobs. Jewish women, still able to work quietly at menial jobs,

often became the sole support of their families. In addition, they continued to manage households at a time when the simplest tasks, like buying milk, had become nearly impossible. Because they were not perceived as wage earners, women were less likely than men to receive entry visas from other countries. Many were left behind and unable to join their men later. It was often daughters who stayed behind with elderly relatives and, eventually, were deported with them to the death camps.

Kaplan illustrates how vulnerable Jewish children were to daily taunts and harassment, how quickly they absorbed the fears of their parents and how lonely their lives became. Forced to sit through his school's Mother's Day program but not permitted to participate, a Jewish child was told: "I know you have a mother . . . but she is only a Jewish mother." Sent by his family to buy milk, another child found his way blocked by several neighboring housewives who threatened to denounce him and his family.

One of the fortunate children who escaped was a boy named Peter Frohlich, who emigrated with his parents to the U.S. in 1939, when he was 16. He changed his name to Peter Gay and became a renowned psychoanalyst and historian, the author of several definitive books on Freud. An intriguing aspect of Gay's memoir is his analysis of his own early experiences. Gay describes his survival strategies: a passion for stamp collecting and soccer, retreating to the solace of his family's apartment—all part of what he describes as "mental escape routes" from the frightening world around him.

Those early years left Gay with an unresolved rage. In exploring this rage, he touches on his family history, but the political circumstances that led his family to emigrate are a significant part of the picture. He and his family were seldom direct targets of anti-Semitism, and they owed their lives to a man named Emil Busse, a colleague of his father who helped the family emigrate. Still, Gay confesses to a lasting ambivalence between his gratitude toward people like Busse and his animosity toward Germany and Germans in general. When he returned for the first time in 1961, he was stunned by the emotion he felt during even the simplest encounter with Germans. As Gay puts it, "Some traumas survive everything."

Those words could be the subtitle for Shandley's anthology, which documents the lengthy German debate about Daniel Goldhagen's controversial bestseller, *Hitler's Willing Executioners*. Goldhagen contended that the German people willingly and knowingly carried out the genocide of the Jews. Arranged chronologically, the essays

in Shandley's book include responses from leading journalists and historians, including U.S. historian Christopher Browning, whose essay originally was published in the German periodical *Die Zeit*. Two replies from Goldhagen himself are interspersed among the other essays.

One of the most intriguing things about Goldhagen's book was its popular reception in Germany. As Shandley notes, the scholars and commentators who wrote about it before its German publication condemned it so unanimously that the German edition seemed doomed. Yet the book became a best seller in Germany, and the young author won much of his audience over during his public appearances.

One reason, I think, was that Goldhagen focused specifically on the issue central to all the books reviewed here: the significance of ordinary Germans' role in the Nazi movement and, finally, in the genocide. For years, German scholars avoided this issue, even while much of the world continued to confront Germany with its past. The debate that Goldhagen's book provoked in Germany was overdue, and Shandley's anthology (and his excellent introduction) is a valuable tool for understanding it. As Shandley notes, the debate went beyond Goldhagen's book, and "may have done much to prepare Germany for the roles it will be required to play in the future."

It is important for people of faith to follow this historical conversation because it touches on the fundamental issue of how we see and treat one another—and because the ethical and historical issues raised by the Holocaust are inseparable and still very much with us. It is not just a matter of clarifying what people did, what they knew, or who was on the side of the victims or of the perpetrators. To understand what happened, we must examine the full scope of ordinary life. Perhaps the most enduring ethical lesson the Holocaust teaches is that the violence done to victims corrupts perpetrators and bystanders alike.