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Jay Y. Gonen, *The Roots of Nazi Psychology: Hitler's Utopian Barbarism*, Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2003. ISBN 0-8131-9046-0, 240 pages, \$19.95, paperback.

### **An alternative view:**

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Retired psychology professor Jay Gonen attributes Nazi success in mobilizing the masses for ultimately genocidal ends primarily to an ideological message that fell on receptive ears. Analyzing the underlying psychology of Hitler's ideology, Gonen concludes that Hitler was an expert reader of the contemporary *Zeitgeist*, a charismatic leader who promised the "masses" what they subconsciously desired. Repackaging old myths and grievances that existed in the cultural and historical collective German repository, Hitler found allegedly fertile soil for his racial and expansionist goals in the German people's "shared group fantasies." Hitler, the ultimate salesman, sold the nation on the dream of reestablishing the Holy Roman Empire and rebuilding the utopia of the racially pure "German tribes of yore." The obstacle to *Lebensraum* and racial health, of course, was the "insidious" Jews, whose elimination would solve all of the nation's undeserved ills and allow Germany to complete its "glorious world mission."

Hitler found millions of disciples for his *Weltanschauung*, but only because of a preexisting demand. It is the masses, according to Gonen, who ultimately determine which ideas will have a "magic impact" and therefore mobilize them. It simply took Hitler, the expert scanner of the *Zeitgeist*, to recognize the subconscious demand and bring the shared group fantasy to reality by harnessing the energy of the emotional masses through the leadership principle.

Gonen thus explains the Holocaust in the simplest terms: Hitler's National Socialist government implemented a policy of genocide because the masses desired it. Gonen

attempts to qualify this position in the final chapter by stating that virulent anti-Semitism was a “necessary but not sufficient” precondition for the Holocaust. This, however, is not the case he argues in the rest of the book.

The fundamental problem with Gonen’s analysis lays in the irreconcilable contradiction between his basic premise and his conclusions. He does not and cannot place the events between 1933-1945 in their proper historical context. If he did so, it would completely undermine the thesis that Hitler rose to, and maintained, power because Nazi ideology promised to fulfill the shared group fantasy. In Gonen’s version of history, the Nazi regime’s totalitarian features were irrelevant. Indeed, the shared group fantasy thesis can only be sustained if the author portrays Hitler, from beginning to end, as the “folk appointed supreme leader” and the “acknowledged folkish genius” who was swept into power by a *Zeitgeist*-induced wave of national consensus. He must be portrayed as a leader who did not have to resort to totalitarian tools because the “masses,” driven by the shared group fantasy, concurred with his vision.

Belatedly asserting that the power of a totalitarian state (along with virulent anti-Semitism) was a necessary precondition for genocide, Gonen attempts to square his version of Nazi Germany with reality. Unfortunately, he is one hundred ninety pages too late. Under his instruction, the reader has long since learned that the SS and Gestapo had no important function. They, along with the rest of the apparatus of state, were superfluous because the masses desired what Hitler was selling. In Gonen’s hands, the regime’s totalitarian features have been rendered completely immaterial to the Final Solution’s origin, implementation, and evolution. After cutting through the psychoanalytical clutter, all that remains is Daniel Goldhagen’s exterminationist anti-Semitism theory, to which Gonen refers in support of his own conclusions.

Gonen’s repackaging of Goldhagen’s controversial explanation for the Holocaust is not this volume’s only shortcoming. Denying the relevance of administrative momentum and bureaucratic inertia, Gonen has summarily rendered the work of accomplished scholars, such as Hannah Arendt and Raul Hilberg, irrelevant. Most disconcerting of all, he has apparently not heard of Christopher Browning, whose highly regarded book, *Ordinary Men*, seems incredibly pertinent to the topic, but is neither mentioned in the text nor listed in the bibliography. Rambling page-long paragraphs rife with jargon permeate the

text. When addressing the psychology of *Lebensraum*, for example, Gonen writes, “The overwhelming orality suggests that the underlying psychological loadings of the lebensraum drive for geographic expansion fit an infantile organism without fixed ego boundaries, which can omnipotently expand without limits but which is also frightened of being invaded and devoured (p. 123).” As eloquent as this may be in Freudian terms, this passage has little historical explanatory power. In short, this volume provides little that is original, compelling, or persuasive, and I cannot recommend it to serious scholars of Germany and the Holocaust.



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