Hitler’s Female Executioners?

Eric A. Johnson  
johnssea@cmich.edu

Some years ago at a publishing party in New York, I had a brief conversation with the celebrated Holocaust survivor and author Elie Wiesel. At the time, I was somewhat perplexed by the blurb he had written on the back cover of Daniel Goldhagen's controversial bestseller *Hitler’s Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*. Since I was then preparing to write a review of Goldhagen’s book myself, and since there was already so much criticism leveled against Daniel Goldhagen, I was all the more curious as to why Elie Wiesel had wanted to endorse such a lightning rod of a book. When I asked him why he had written the blurb, I did not at first understand his wise response. Elie Wiesel told me that he did not wish to endorse wholeheartedly the contents and arguments of the book. But he did offer the endorsement nonetheless because he “especially liked the questions Goldhagen’s book raised.”

Now, many years later, Wendy Lower has written a book which in some ways reminds me of Daniel Goldhagen’s book and also of Elie Wiesel’s response to me. Hence, to my mind the strength of her new volume is her provocative thesis that hundreds of thousands of German women (she estimates “at least half a million”) were deeply involved in the murder of the Jews of Eastern Europe (166). These women were mostly quite young, from their late teens to early thirties. They went to the East often because it offered new horizons for their careers as nurses, secretaries, teachers, guards, and sometimes wives. It was also attractive to many young German women because it also put them in contact with an enormous pool of eligible and young German men. Although she does admit that usually these German women in the killing fields of Eastern Europe did not usually pull the trigger themselves, she documents with a number of case examples that they sometimes did.

Even if German women did not actually shoot all that often, they did certainly become deeply involved in the killing process, according to Lower. Many German nurses, for example, administered fatal injections of morphine and lethal overdoses of medicines to tens of thousands of mentally and physically handicapped people, who, mirroring the murdered Jewish population of the Holocaust, consisted of great numbers of children as well as completely
innocent and vulnerable women and men of all ages. While nurses may have led the way in the mass murder, they certainly were joined, Lower maintains, by German women of many professions. For example, many women came to the East who were already married to SS officers or met their new SS husbands after they had gone to the East as secretaries, teachers, or women in other professions. Many of these SS wives seem to have been especially brutal, and Lower provides examples of them luring Jewish children out of hiding in the forests or other places they were hiding to then kill them in the most sadistic fashion. Other wives simply shot at Jews who were working for them in their gardens from the porches of their homes and estates as a type of sick sport. Still others assisted directly in the Holocaust by acting as camp and prison guards. Even secretaries were often deeply involved in mass murder by administering and recording and passing on crucial information from SS, Gestapo, military, party, and other offices in the East. All of this activity, Lower argues, adds up to a completely new view of German women’s involvement in Nazi society in general, and in the Holocaust in particular. In her words, “The large number of female collaborators—who stole from the Jews, administered the genocide, and participated in the crime scenes—are missing from our collective memory and official histories. The role of German women in Hitler’s war can no longer be understood as their mobilization and victimization on the home front. Instead, Hitler’s Germany produced another kind of female character at war, an expression of female activism and patriotism of the most violent and perverse kind” (119).

Although Lower’s book has already provoked a good deal of discussion and much more will likely follow, many will be less than fully comfortable with her contentions. To begin with, the role of German women in the Third Reich has been a subject of much debate over the years and certainly many scholars have argued that German women were not simply victims of the masculine Hitlerian society (Koonz 1986; Frevert 1988; Mailänder Koslov 2009). But even if one were to accept her estimate that something in the order of a half million German women were involved in the murder operations in the East during the Holocaust in one fashion or another, what does this really mean? Certainly it does not mean that most German women took part in such activities. And it does not mean that the killing in the East was not primarily perpetrated by men.

It is likely that many scholars will not be convinced by Lower’s argumentation. Most importantly, because her arguments seldom rely on very much hard evidence and many seem to be simply backed by the author’s guessed estimates; it is the relative lack of hard evidence that is probably the greatest shortcoming of this rather small, if powerful, book. Mostly the author seems to cherry pick a few special examples of women who shot Jews from their