In the context of the period 1819-1945, to what extent could it be argued that Germans were “Hitler’s Willing Executioners”?

The Holocaust was the systematic killing of around six million Jews in Europe under the Nazi regime, largely using the camp system. It has become a controversial event in history, principally due to its nature and its temporal proximity to the contemporary world, with many disputes among historians over the historical evidence of the events, its causes and the motivation behind it.

The two main explanations for the Nazi governance as well as the Holocaust are the functionalist approach and the intentionalist approach, the most widely accepted approach among Western historians being the functionalist approach. The Goldhagen vs. Browning debate outlines the clear distinctions between these two interpretations.

Functionalist historian, Christopher Browning argues that the Holocaust was a piece of improvisation in an unplanned situation, without specific or direct orders from the top of the Reich, dismissing the notion that the Holocaust was the final phase of a long-cherished plan, favouring, instead, the idea of situational and opportunistic factors in the circumstances leading up to the Holocaust. Anti-Semitism, he argues, was not exclusive in Europe to Germanic peoples, nor particularly pervasive within German society. Moreover, resistance towards the Nazi regime and its persecution not only existed, but was a significant entity within the nation state.  

In contest, the intentionalists argue that the Holocaust was in fact planned, detailed and executed by the Führer, Adolf Hitler, an account argued by Jewish historian, Daniel Goldhagen, in his controversial book, “Hitler’s Willing Executioners.” Goldhagen rejects the functionalist view of the Holocaust, insisting that there was a strong, widespread anti-Semitic feeling, unique to Germany, during and beyond the nineteenth century, which stemmed from religious-based anti-Semitism in medieval Christendom. As Germany became progressively more secular, he claims, anti-Semitism grew increasingly racially motivated. The Holocaust, according to Goldhagen, was an extreme expression of this deep-rooted sentiment that had existed long before the Second World War. He argues that, due to the prevalence and pervasiveness of ‘eliminationist antisemitism’, in Germany at this time, the Holocaust was inevitable; the Germans and Hitler were ‘of one mind’. This uniquely German anti-Semitic feeling made it so that the Germans were to be ‘Hitler’s willing executioners’, readily following the orders of the Führer to carry out mass industrial killings of Jews. 

“The views during the Nazi period were extremely anti-Semitic, making the ordinary Germans willing to become not only mass-executioners.”

Goldhagen goes further to allege that the very moral fabric and social landscape of Germany was altered during the late nineteenth century and especially under the Third Reich. He somewhat unreservedly asserts that the camp system with its new ethos of “moral dispensation” for acts of cruelty and inhumanity, “the antithesis of Christian morality”, was in fact to become the order of German society and its occupied territories. This moral dispensation is essentially an ethical exception and suspension of normative ethical boundaries in certain circumstances prescribed by the NSDAP and its organisations. While murder, for example, would almost always be seen as an immoral and negative act, the same very act visited upon a certain or specific group or individual could be justified and seen as being positive. Goldhagen argues that the Nazi regime gave a moral dispensation to its soldiers and police officers to commit grievous violations of ethical laws if they were committed against Jews.

Goldhagen uses primary evidence in the form of testimonies from the Reserve Police Battalion 101 of the Ordnungspolizei to support his thesis that the German people were ‘Hitler’s Willing Executioners’. As a cross-section of Third-Reich society, the ‘ordinary’ perpetrators of the Holocaust, the Police Battalion 101, unlike the SS,  


3 Goldhagen. Ibid. pg.? 

4 Goldhagen. Ibid. pg.? 

5 Goldhagen. Ibid. pg.?