

The Eichmann Polemics: Hannah Arendt and Her Critics

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Introduction

Hannah Arendt, the German Jewish political philosopher who had escaped from a Nazi internment camp, [1] had obtained international fame and recognition in 1951 with her book *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. [2] Feeling compelled to witness the trial of Adolf Eichmann ('an obligation I owe my past'), [3] she proposed to the editor of *The New Yorker* that she report on the prominent Nazi's trial in Jerusalem. The editor gladly accepted the offer, placing no restrictions on what she wrote. [4] Arendt's eagerly awaited 'report' finally appeared in *The New Yorker* in five successive issues from 16 February – 16 March 1963. In May 1963 the articles were compiled into a book published by Viking Press, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*.

During the Second World War, Adolf Eichmann had been the head of Section IV-B-4 in the Nazi SS, overseeing the deportation of the Jews to their deaths. After the war Eichmann escaped to Argentina where he lived under an assumed name. In May 1960, the Israeli Security Service, Mossad, kidnapped Eichmann in Argentina and smuggled him to Jerusalem to stand trial for wartime activities that included 'causing the killing of millions of Jews' and 'crimes against humanity.' The trial commenced on 11 April 1961 and Eichmann was convicted and hanged on 31 May 1962.

Arendt's Thesis

Enormous controversy centered on what Arendt had written about the conduct of the trial, her depiction of Eichmann and her discussion of the role of the Jewish Councils. Eichmann, she claimed, was not a 'monster'; instead, she suspected, he was a 'clown.' He had no 'insane hatred of Jews' and did not suffer from any kind of 'fanatical anti-Semitism.' She reported Eichmann's claim that 'he had never harbored any ill feelings against his victims' and accepted it as fact. As far as Arendt was concerned, Eichmann simply had 'an inability to *think*.' She concluded: 'The trouble with Eichmann was precisely that so many were like him, and that the many were neither perverted nor sadistic, that they were, and still are, terribly and

terrifyingly normal.' In a postscript to later editions of the book she added that Eichmann simply '*never realized what he was doing*' and that his criminal actions were due to 'sheer thoughtlessness.'

Still more shocking to Arendt's critics was her discussion of the Jewish Councils (Judenrat). These Councils were administrative bodies that the Nazis forced the Jews to establish in many occupied countries. The leaders had to follow Nazi orders under threat of immediate execution for disobedience. These orders included providing Jews for slave labour and organising the deportation of Jews to death camps.

Although Arendt's discussion of these Councils took up no more than a few pages, it provoked outrage. 'To a Jew,' asserted Arendt, 'this role of the Jewish leaders in the destruction of their own people is undoubtedly the darkest chapter of the whole dark story.' The next two sentences proved to be the most controversial:

Wherever Jews lived, there were recognized Jewish leaders, and this leadership, almost without exception, cooperated in one way or another, for one reason or another, with the Nazis. The whole truth was that if the Jewish people had been really unorganized and leaderless, there would have been chaos and plenty of misery but the total number of victims would hardly have been between four and half and six million people.

The Reaction

Anson Rabinbach has argued, no doubt correctly, that the controversy surrounding *Eichmann in Jerusalem* 'was certainly the most bitter public dispute among intellectuals and scholars concerning the Holocaust that has ever taken place.' [5] The controversy was so intense that Irving Howe, editor of the democratic socialist magazine *Dissent*, described it as 'violent.' [6] Arendt's friend Mary McCarthy wrote to her in September 1963 stating that the ferocity of the attacks was 'assuming the proportions of a pogrom.' [7] Almost twenty years after the book appeared, Howe was able to write: 'within the New York intellectual world Arendt's book provoked divisions that would never be entirely healed.' The *Eichmann in Jerusalem* controversy was 'a civil war that broke out among New York intellectuals.' [8]

In Howe's words, 'What struck one in reading *Eichmann in Jerusalem* – struck like a blow – was the surging contempt with which she [Arendt] treated almost everyone

EZRA | Arendt in New York

and everything connected with the trial, the supreme assurance of the intellectual looking down upon those coarse Israelis.' [9] Nevertheless, even those hostile to the book still took *Eichmann in Jerusalem* very seriously. As Marie Syrkin, the editor of *Jewish Frontier* explained, 'The author's considerable reputation and that of the magazine in which the articles were published unfortunately make it impossible to dismiss her account out-of-hand as a prime example of arrogance and intellectual irresponsibility.' [10]

One of the first counterblasts came in May 1963 when Justice Musmanno wrote a damning indictment in the *New York Times Book Review*. Given his role in the Eichmann trial, Justice Musmanno was well placed to comment, although he could hardly claim a position of Olympian impartiality. He concluded: 'The disparity between what Miss Arendt states, and what the ascertained facts are, occurs with such disturbing frequency in her book that it can hardly be accepted as an authoritative historical work.' [11]

Arendt was invited to respond. She argued that Musmanno had distorted her words and attacked the *New York Times Book Review* for its 'bizarre' choice of reviewer. In his rejoinder, Musmanno pointed out that for 32 years he had been a judge and for 18 years had studied documentation on war crimes and crimes against humanity. 'Miss Arendt,' he insisted, 'is not qualified to condemn so crassly the solemn judgment of the highest court of a nation.'

In his original review, Musmanno had raised the following accusation against Arendt:

...she says that Eichmann was a Zionist and helped get Jews to Palestine. The facts, as set forth in the judgment handed down by the District Court of Jerusalem, are entirely to the contrary. As far back as November, 1937, after an espionage trip into the Middle East he reported that the plan for emigration of Jews to Palestine 'was out of the question,' it being 'the policy of the Reich to avoid the creation of an independent Jewish State in Palestine.'

Arendt protested that she had not represented Eichmann as a Zionist. Musmanno quoted her again: 'A certain von Mildenstein ... required him [Eichmann] to read Theodor Herzl's *Der Judenstaat*, the famous Zionist classic, which converted Eichmann promptly and forever to Zionism.'

Many of the critical reviewers saw Arendt's depiction of Eichmann as a sympathetic one. Her energetic denials left them unmoved. Musmanno, for example, commented: 'She says that Eichmann was misjudged, misrepresented, misunderstood, that he was victim of "hard luck." Is that not sympathizing?'

Musmanno's appraisal alone brought the *New York Times Book Review* over 100 letters, with the majority defending Arendt and attacking the review. Passions on both sides ran high. 'Rarely,' protested one correspondent, 'can a reviewer have missed the point of a book as widely as Judge Musmanno did.' Another thought that 'Judge Musmanno's rather childish piece clearly showed him to be so vastly inferior to Miss Arendt intellectually that no one of intelligence who read her remarkable book could take him seriously.' In contrast, another letter stated that 'Justice Musmanno's review is a powerful rebuttal of an appallingly ugly and vicious work. Like Miss Arendt, I, too, was at the Jerusalem trial as an observer, but unlike her I came away sick and nauseated by the massive evidence.' It was even suggested that 'Miss Arendt's book should give comfort to Eichmann's family and his numerous accomplices and be well received in Germany.' [12]

Gideon Hausner, the Israeli prosecutor, was in New York giving a speech in May 1963 and went on the attack. According to the *New York Daily News*, Hausner flew to New York 'to answer Hannah Arendt's bizarre defense of Eichmann.' [13] With specific reference to Arendt, he criticized those who had 'twisted and distorted' the facts in the Eichmann trial: 'There are now some historians,' he said, 'fortunately few in number who for one reason or another cruelly and falsely blame the Jews and their leaders for "letting themselves" be slaughtered.' These writers 'blatantly distort facts and evidence.' [14]

Marie Syrkin, in *The Jewish Frontier*, accused Arendt of 'polemical vulgarity.' Syrkin ridiculed Arendt's attack on Zionism: 'Miss Arendt manages to imply that "Zionists" as such were a privileged group enjoying Nazi favor, instead of being the spearheads of whatever resistance to the extermination program was offered.' Arendt's accusation against the Jewish Councils was 'scandalous.' Although Arendt was 'a very gifted writer' who had 'brilliant perceptions,' 'she takes extraordinary liberties with the record' and 'the overwhelming effect of her report is of a blinding animus and of a vast ignorance.' [15] Syrkin wrote an even more vitriolic review in *Dissent* where she stated, 'At the end of the script the only one who comes out better than when he came in is the defendant.' She concluded 'As history, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* is shockingly inaccurate and insofar as her thesis depends

EZRA | Arendt in New York

on the objective marshalling of evidence it is on shaky ground.... the book is a tract in which the author manipulates the material with a high-handed assurance.' [16]

Gertrude Ezorsky, a philosophy lecturer at Brooklyn College, launched an onslaught in the left-wing journal *New Politics*. Ezorsky questioned Arendt's argument that psychiatric reports had certified Eichmann as normal: 'The only certification which the court required was not that Eichmann was normal but that he was legally sane; otherwise they could not have tried him.' Ezorsky quoted the results of a psychiatric test: the subject was 'a man obsessed with a dangerous and insatiable urge to kill, arising out of a desire for power.' She concluded, 'Miss Arendt's tale that Eichmann was without fanatical hatred of Jews seems initially implausible and turns out to be false.' She ridiculed the claim by Arendt that Eichmann converted to Zionism forever, by quoting directly from a 1937 report signed by Eichmann on the need to 'avoid the creation of an independent Jewish state in Palestine.' Recalling the tricks the Nazis used to mislead the Jews about Auschwitz, she insisted that 'Eichmann exemplified not the banality, but the *cunning* of evil.' As far as Ezorsky was concerned, Eichmann was indeed a 'monster,' As for the Jewish leaders:

I do not intend to commit an absurdity – parallel to Miss Arendt's – and claim that all or even most of Jewish leaders in Eastern Europe were heroes. Yet her wholesale damning of Jewish leaders, as Quislings who cooperated in the Final Solution seems willfully ignorant. A glance at the history of modern East Europe Jewry could have warned her against such pronouncements. [17]

But Arendt had her supporters. Against Ezorsky, Rutgers philosopher Robert Olson defended Arendt's argument that Eichmann was not a sadist: 'if Eichmann was a sadist, his sadism is so atypical that the person who takes it upon himself to prove it has accepted an almost impossible challenge.' Olson accepted that Eichmann was an anti-Semite, but tried to prove Arendt's claim that he was not a fanatical anti-Semite by defining a fanatic, in part, as someone 'who acts at considerable risk to his own personal safety.' Since there was no record of activities by Eichmann that would be a threat to his personal safety and hence he was not a fanatical anti-Semite. However, as Ezorsky hastened to point out, psychiatrists did regard Eichmann as a sadist; Olson, she wrote, was guilty of confusing fanaticism with idealism: 'A fanatic is someone who tenaciously pursues a goal in blind disregard of its rational basis. While many fanatics have also been idealists, the concepts are not one and the same.' [18] Another supporter was Stephen Spender, who stated in *The New York*

Review of Books that *Eichmann in Jerusalem* was 'a brilliant and disturbing study of the character and the trial of Adolf Eichmann.' [19] In *Commonweal*, Alice Mayhew thought that overall, Arendt's study was 'a genuine achievement.' [20]

The most prominent defender of Arendt's work was camp survivor Bruno Bettelheim who wrote a positive review for *The New Republic*. The book's impact was 'powerful.' Bettelheim agreed with Arendt that Eichmann was not an anti-Semitic monster and that the Holocaust was not the climax of the long history of Jew-hatred but, in his words, 'merely one part of the master plan to create the thousand year totalitarian Reich.' For Bettelheim – and apparently for Arendt – 'the issue was not Eichmann, but totalitarianism.' He shared Arendt's opinion that the Holocaust 'was not the last chapter in anti-Semitism but rather one of the first chapters in modern totalitarianism.' On Jewish 'cooperation' he stated:

No doubt the stories of the ghettos would have been different if most Jews and their leadership had not been more or less willing, out of anxiety, to cooperate with the Germans, if they had not opposed the small minority that called for resistance at all costs, including violent fighting back. No doubt many Jews would have been quicker to support the pitifully small fighting minority had they been told what lay in store for them by Jewish leaders who knew, or should and could have known, what fate awaited them. Many others might have tried to escape.

Bettelheim concluded, 'So while I would recommend this book for many reasons, the most important one is that our best protection against oppressive control and dehumanizing totalitarianism is still a personal understanding of events as they happen. To this end Hannah Arendt has furnished us with a richness of material.' [21] This review prompted a letter from the writer Harry Golden, who alleged that both Bettelheim and Arendt were suffering from 'an essentially Jewish phenomenon...self-hatred.' [22]

Musmanno wrote two sequels to his initial review. In the Summer 1963 issue of the *Chicago Jewish Forum* he poured scorn on Arendt's claim that Eichmann did not hate Jews: 'Perhaps she is right' he stated, 'because hatred is too mild a term.' [23]. In the September 1963 issue of the *National Jewish Monthly*, Musmanno took the opportunity to answer Bettelheim's accusation that he had misunderstood the trial. He pointed out that he was a Catholic, reiterated his conclusion that *Eichmann in Jerusalem* 'contained as many factual errors as there are cinders in a fireplace'

EZRA | Arendt in New York

and he wondered why it should be necessary to debate with people such as Arendt and Bettelheim who ‘wildly proclaim that the Jews should have resisted their murderers.’ He asked ‘What kind of mentality is it that will argue that these naked men, woman and children could in some way have overcome their killers bristling with firearms?’ The position of those that make such an argument was ‘so blatantly foolish that it could not possibly convince even the most unlettered person.’ [24]

The Arendt-Scholem Letters

In an exchange of letters subsequently published in *Encounter*, Hannah Arendt’s friend, the scholar Gershom Scholem, accused her of using a ‘heartless, frequently almost sneering and malicious tone.’ ‘Your account,’ he wrote, ‘ceases to be objective and acquires overtones of malice.’ Scholem explained why the Jewish critics at least were so upset by the book: ‘In the Jewish tradition there is a concept, hard to define and yet concrete enough, which we know as *Ahabath Israel*: “Love of the Jewish people....” In you, dear Hannah ... I find little trace of this.’ Since the subject was the destruction of a third of the Jewish people, ‘I have little sympathy with that tone – well expressed by the English word “flippancy” – which you employed so often in the course of your book. To the matter of which you speak it is unimaginably inappropriate.’

In the early edition of the book, subsequently changed, Arendt had referred to Leo Baeck ‘who in the eyes of both Jews and gentiles was the “Jewish *Führer*.”’ Scholem inveighed: ‘the use of the Nazi term in this context is sufficiently revealing. You do not speak, say, of the “Jewish leader,” which would have been both apt and free of the German word’s horrific connotation – you say precisely the thing that is most false and most insulting.’ Scholem went on to accuse Arendt of a ‘demagogic will-to-overstatement.’ He added ‘your description of Eichmann as a “convert to Zionism” could only come from somebody who had a profound dislike of everything to do with Zionism.... They amount to a mockery of Zionism; and I am forced to the conclusion that this was, indeed, your intention.’

Arendt’s reply to Scholem was unapologetic:

You are quite right – I am not moved by any ‘love’ of this sort, and for two reasons: I have never in my life ‘loved’ any people or collective – neither the German people, nor the French, nor the American, nor the working class or anything of that sort. I indeed ‘love’ only my friends and the only kind of love

Democratiya 9 | Summer 2007

I know of and believe in is the love of persons. Secondly, this 'love of the Jews' would appear to me, since I am myself Jewish, as something rather suspect.... I do not 'love' the Jews, nor do I 'believe' in them; I merely belong to them as a matter of course, beyond dispute or argument.

As well as defending herself on other points that Scholem had raised, Arendt elaborated on her view of the Jewish Councils:

I said that there was no possibility of resistance, but there existed the possibility of *doing nothing*. And in order to do nothing, one did not need to be a saint, one needed only to say: I am just a simple Jew, and I have no desire to play any other role.... These people had still a certain, limited freedom of decision and of action. Just as the SS murderers also possessed, as we now know, a limited choice of alternatives. They could say: 'I wish to be relieved of my murderous duties,' and nothing happened to them. Since we are dealing in politics of men, and not with heroes or saints, it is this policy of '*non-participation*'... that is decisive if we begin to judge, not the system, but the individual, his choices and arguments. [25]

It did not help. The publication of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* led to the end of Scholem's friendship with Arendt. [26]

The Debate in *Partisan Review*

It was in *Partisan Review* that the most widely discussed debate by the 'New York intellectuals' took place. The literary critic Lionel Abel was invited to open up the discussion, and – as the editors conceded – his article was submitted as a 'frank polemic.' [27] Abel launched an outright and full frontal assault on the book. The review was so hostile that William Phillips, the editor, who was a friend of Arendt, sent her a copy with a covering letter that betrayed his embarrassment. [28]

Abel accused Arendt of grave 'faults of omission,' of 'frequent misstatements of fact' and of making a 'terrible charge against the Jewish leaders.' On Arendt's charge of cooperation, Abel declared: 'One might as well accuse the people of Nagasaki and Hiroshima for having made their own deaths possible, since they lived in cities, and cities make the best targets.' Whilst Arendt said that the Jews would have been better off with no Jewish Councils, Abel points out that in Soviet Russia there was no Jewish Council or leadership as 'Jewish organizations of any kind had

EZRA | Arendt in New York

been destroyed by Stalin long before the war'; nevertheless, hundreds of thousands of Soviet Jews were murdered by the *Einsatzgruppen*. Arendt had not dealt with the killing of Jews in Russia; had she done so 'she would have had to abandon her whole thesis that so much of the responsibility for the deaths of so many Jews rests finally with their own leadership.' Arendt's argument on Eichmann-as-Zionist was 'completely unconvincing.' Eichmann 'comes off so much better in her book than do his victims.' Arendt argued that when Eichmann said 'I will jump into my grave laughing, because the fact that I have the death of five million Jews on my conscience gives me extraordinary satisfaction,' he was suffering from the 'common vice' of 'bragging.' Abel thundered in response, 'How many people in the history of the world have ever boasted of having killed five million people?' The argument that Eichmann was a 'moral monster' was 'valid and intelligent'; 'How could the man not have been morally monstrous? And all the more a monster if he did not know he was one!' Moreover, according to Abel, 'Arendt's judgment of Eichmann as an insignificant and commonplace official will be seen to be perverse and arbitrary.' Abel compared arguments used in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* to her earlier book:

Miss Arendt's book *On the Origins of Totalitarianism* strongly stressed the impossibility of effective resistance to totalitarian rule.... Every position Miss Arendt maintained in her book on totalitarianism she would today have to retract and deny in order to seriously criticize the decisions made by the leaders of the Jewish Councils between 1941 and 1944. [29]

In the following issue, Daniel Bell defended Arendt. He argued that for Arendt, Eichmann was a symbol of a new type of criminal – a criminal that obeys totalitarian laws. Bell accepted the evidence of Abel and other critics that Jews were killed irrespective of what recognized Jewish leaders did or did not do, but nonetheless asked, 'is it a question of numbers?' He argued that even if Jewish Councils did not cooperate in some places they did in others and 'this cooperation was regarded by the Nazis as the cornerstone of their Jewish policy.' [30]

Mary McCarthy then also intervened in Arendt's defence; but in doing so she opened up a religious divide. She thought *Eichmann in Jerusalem* was 'splendid and extraordinary,' but noted that with few exceptions favourable reviews had been produced by Gentiles and hostile ones by Jews. As far as McCarthy was concerned, the non-Jewish criticisms were 'special cases'; for example she mentioned that Richard Crossman, the socialist intellectual and Labour party Member of Parliament, who wrote a hostile review for the British newspaper *Observer*, was a

regular visitor to Israel. (That Crossman's visits were vacations was no obstacle to her argument.) McCarthy dismissed Abel and Syrkin as 'propagandists.' She also voiced her suspicions – all too familiar in the context of today's debates about the demonisation of Israel – of a coordinated effort to conflate criticism with anti-Semitism:

[Arendt's antagonists] in private 'expose' her as an anti-Semite, and a newspaper story speaks of the wife of an Israeli official who kept calling her 'Hannah Eichmann' – by a slip of the tongue of course.

Abel's essay was merely a visible manifestation of this clandestine 'hate campaign.' No doubt this Jewish conspiracy was all the more insidious because of McCarthy's inability to prove its existence.

McCarthy referred to Zionism as 'the Jewish Final Solution' and defended Arendt against the critics' major charges. McCarthy felt that *Eichmann in Jerusalem* had been misinterpreted. Abel was wrong to interpret the conduct of Jewish leaders in terms of duress ('a man [who] holds a gun at the head of another and forces him to kill a friend'). McCarthy was indignant: 'Forces him to kill a friend? Nobody by possession of a weapon can force a man to kill anybody; that is his own decision ... he is *tempting* you to kill your friend that is all.' [31] This objection was, of course, uninformed by analysis of the criminal defence of duress in any legal jurisdiction.

But of course it did not end with McCarthy. The following issue of *Partisan Review* contained over thirty pages of arguments, counter arguments and accusations. Marie Syrkin accused McCarthy of 'intellectual irresponsibility,' 'myopia,' and (to be 'charitable') of 'ignorance.' For Harold Weisberg, McCarthy was 'wholly lacking in charity and almost as much in logic.' Weisberg preferred the 'Zionist-Israeli' view to Arendt's universalist interpretation of the Eichmann case. Was it not incontrovertible that 'If the Jews pinned their hopes on "humanity" more of them would be dead and many more would be victims of a variety of anti-Jewish persecutions?'

Others were more generous. The poet Robert Lowell called Arendt's portrait of Eichmann 'a masterpiece.' Arendt's only motive was 'a heroic desire for truth.' Still more effusive was Dwight MacDonald, a former editor of *Partisan Review*, who found *Eichmann in Jerusalem* to be a 'masterpiece of historical journalism' and also thought that McCarthy's contribution 'brilliantly (and sensibly) dealt with Mr.

EZRA | Arendt in New York

Abel.’ For good measure, he added: ‘I have known both Mr. Abel and Miss Arendt for many years, and I must confess that the notion of the former giving lessons in morality to the latter strikes me as comic.’

MacDonald defended McCarthy’s charge that the split was along Christian/Jewish lines and agreed that the divide ‘is even more pronounced in private conversation.’ He commented, ‘the hostile reviews I’ve read do seem motivated less by rationality than by Jewish patriotism – goys [Gentiles] like Crossman and Musmanno might be called Honorary Semites.’ He declared that the hostile reviewers were ‘writing more as Jews than as critics’ and added in a footnote, ‘And as peculiarly organization-minded Jews at that.’

In his rejoinder, Abel dismissed McCarthy’s defense of Arendt on the Jewish leadership as ‘worthless.’ He criticized MacDonald for turning the debate into a ‘barroom brawl’ and noted that ‘he has been unable to advance any argument of his own.... His contribution is to abuse me.... It all comes down finally to calling people “Jews.”’

The last word – and perhaps the most perceptive one – went to William Phillips, who was moved to protest: ‘Particularly depressing is the procession of polemics, with everyone arguing so cleverly, with so much wit and logic, as though those awful events were being used to sharpen one’s mind and one’s rhetoric.’ Claiming that he had ‘actually heard people say Hannah Arendt is worse than Eichmann,’ he thought that reactions to her were ‘excessive.’ But he also regretted that McCarthy and others had chosen to focus on the religion of Arendt’s critics: ‘hunting for “Jewishness” is going too far.... we might recall the days when the question whether someone was Jewish or Gentile was of biographical and not intellectual interest.’ [32]

Confrontation in Manhattan

If the debate in print in *Partisan Review* between the New York intellectuals was vitriolic, it was tame compared to what transpired at a public meeting in autumn 1963, sponsored by Dissent at what Irving Howe later described as ‘the seedy Hotel Diplomat’ in midtown Manhattan. Hannah Arendt was invited to participate but never responded. [33] Bruno Bettelheim, whose views were similar, also declined. The distinguished Holocaust historian Raul Hilberg agreed to replace them. The other speaker generally sympathetic to Arendt’s views was Daniel Bell. Opposing

them were Lionel Abel and Marie Syrkin. [34] Nearly 500 people crowded into the audience. [35]

According to Arendt's biographer, Elisabeth Young-Bruehl (based on a report of the meeting sent to Arendt), Hilberg argued that 'the European Jews had refused to face the reality of their imminent destruction, that they had not responded actively as they might have.' [36] Hilberg takes up the story:

I was not allowed to finish. A panelist [Lionel Abel] pounded on the table with his fist. His banging, magnified by the microphone, was followed by a cascade of boos. Irving Howe invited the audience to ask questions and make comments. Now one after another individual rose, one to accuse me of sadism, another to read from a prepared written statement challenging my figures on the German dead in the Warsaw ghetto battle, and so on, on and on. [37]

Young-Bruehl added, 'No one from the audience rose to defend Arendt until just after Howe had closed the open discussion, when Alfred Kazin made his first public effort to defend his old friend, only to be ushered out with a roar from Lionel Abel: "Who asked you to come up here? Who asked for your opinion?"' [38]

The editors of *Dissent* reported: 'The discussion, from the platform and the floor, was passionate and exciting: one of the most vivid political meetings held in New York for many years.' [39] The editors were being kind: in the words of another observer, 'The meeting was, to put it mildly, unruly.' [40] William Phillips stated that 'the atmosphere was too excited to permit calm discussion.' [41] Irving Howe, who chaired the meeting, denied that anyone had been 'shouted down,' as Mary McCarthy was claiming, [42] but he subsequently recounted that the meeting was 'sometimes ugly and outrageous, yet also urgent and afire.' [43] He admitted that there were also 'frequent interruptions.' [44] In fact, Howe was accused by one commentator of 'gathering a mob' and staging a 'lynching.' [45]

Irving Howe reflected on the effect of this meeting in his autobiography:

Such controversies are never settled. They die down, simmer, and erupt again. A year after the 1963 debate I ran into Hannah Arendt at a party and stretched out a hand in greeting. With a curt shake of the head and that bold grim smile of hers, she turned on her heel and walked off. It was the most

EZRA | Arendt in New York

skillful cut I have ever seen or received, and I was wounded quite as keenly as she wanted me to be. Four or five years passed and we began to see each other again, talking gingerly about the Vietnam war and the New Left. Finding at least some agreement, we were still bruised, still wary, still – I like to think – sharing a faint glow of residual affection. [46]

Commentary and others

Elsewhere, Norman Podhoretz carried out ‘A Study in the Perversity of Brilliance’ in a review essay for *Commentary*, ‘Arendt,’ he complained, ‘is all cleverness and no eloquence.’ He noted that the book ‘is in no sense a work of objective historical research’ and that Arendt’s ‘manipulation of evidence is at all times visibly tendentious.’ Her ‘cavalier treatment of evidence’ created ‘distortions of perspective.’

Podhoretz ridiculed Arendt’s thesis that Eichmann was no fanatical anti-Semite: ‘The man around the corner who makes ugly cracks about the Jews is an anti-Semite, but not Adolf Eichmann who sent several million to their death: *that* would be uninteresting and would tell us nothing about the Nature of Totalitarianism.’ Her claims about Jewish cooperation were ‘wholly unwarranted.’ He was unwilling to enter into ‘the endless moral debate over the behavior of the Jewish leaders,’ concluding:

They did what they did, they were what they were, and each was a different man. None of it mattered in the slightest to the final result. Murderers with the power to murder descended upon a defenseless people and murdered a large part of it. What else is there to say? [47]

Irving Howe also wrote an article for *Commentary*. Protesting that *The New Yorker* (which ‘has never claimed to be a serious intellectual journal’) did not accept rebuttals or refutations even from highly responsible scholars, he feared that its readers deprived of an opposing view, might actually come to believe what Arendt had written. [48]

Konrad Kellen wrote a comparably mild hostile review for *Midstream*. He argued that whilst Arendt’s book ‘contains a truly extraordinary amount of folly,’ has ‘numerous grievous shortcomings’ and is ‘guilty of many biases,’ nevertheless ‘there is considerable worthwhile matter in it’ and Arendt ‘makes some valid and important points.’ Noting some of the more vitriolic reviews in the ‘super-heated controversy,’

and attempting to insert some realism into the debate, he concluded: 'But let us not lose our heads. Hannah Arendt is not the enemy. The enemy is elsewhere.' [49]

Judaism, the journal of the American Jewish Congress, published two critical responses to *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. Ernst Simon compared the book to her earlier work and concluded 'Hannah Arendt would have been well advised to stick to the perceptions in [*The Origins of Totalitarianism*].' [50] Alexander Donat argued that the 'dazzling explosion of fact and insight' contained in the book 'cannot obscure the essential vulgarity of the author's thought.' Arendt's thesis that 'Jewish leaders cooperated with the Nazis in the destruction of their own people' was 'a wicked fallacy.' Her argument about Jewish resistance was 'in many parts patently false' and in areas 'a vicious and irresponsible misinterpretation.' As for her views on the Jewish Councils, 'like so many of Miss Arendt's shocking pronouncements, this one too is based on isolated facts and second-hand sources, and utterly void of any understanding of the historical and factual background.' [51]

The American Jewish Congress also published a pamphlet entitled 'Arendt Nonsense.' Its author, the President of the organisation, concluded: 'Hannah Arendt's banalities stand as a shocking disservice to scholarship – and to human spirit.' [52]

Morris Schappes was apoplectic in a review of Arendt's book that extended over three issues of *Jewish Currents*, the journal he edited. *Eichmann in Jerusalem* was 'destructive, mischievous and pernicious' as well as being 'full of questionable and already debated judgments and of interpretations that seem quite distorted.' It was also 'liberally sprinkled with factual errors, both gross and petty.' Shappes rebutted Arendt's denial that Eichmann was a fanatical anti-Semite by citing the testimony of the Nazi Kurt Becher, who as a witness for the defence admitted that 'Eichmann was a convinced National Socialist and a fanatical anti-Semite.' Some of Arendt's narrative was 'untrue and shocking,' other parts 'nonsense.' Her views included a 'strange mixture of arrogance and foggy thinking.' 'Dr. Arendt is cruelly unfair to prosecutor Gideon Hausner.' She 'ignores' information. She was 'repulsively contemptuous' of a witness to the trial. A statement she made was 'comically astounding.' Her attempt to discredit the trial was 'strange and misguided.' Her picture of 'vast Jewish criminal collaboration with the Nazis and of almost total Jewish passivity and cowardice' was 'exaggerated and distorted.' Her opinion on the Jewish leadership was 'downright perverse,' 'quite misleading' and contained 'unfounded generalizations.' On Jewish resistance 'she seems uninformed, not

EZRA | Arendt in New York

having taken the trouble to consider the available evidence.’ Her image of Jews in the Second World War was ‘so patently false that one marvels at the gullibility of those that accept this image.’ ‘It would be charitable to hope,’ Schappes concluded, that *Eichmann in Jerusalem* was a book that Arendt would ‘live to regret – and to live down.’ [53]

Recognizing the extent of the controversy, Louis Harap stated in *Science and Society* that *Eichmann in Jerusalem* ‘is no longer just a book: it has become a *cause célèbre*.’ In his view, Arendt had written ‘an arrogant, perverse book,’ replete with ‘deplorable lapses in scholarship,’ displaying a ‘pervasive and obsessive tendency to generalize beyond the facts’ and committing ‘errors of both omission and commission’ (he provided numerous examples). Harap was so disgusted with Arendt that his final paragraph began: ‘*Eichmann in Jerusalem* will, however, have certain positive if unintended effects. It will do much to deflate Miss Arendt’s reputation as a profound political thinker.’ [54]

All of this led Norm Fruchter, the editor of *Studies on the Left*, to write an article castigating the critics of a book which ‘questioned the myth of the victim which Jews substitute for their history.’ As for the religious divide over the book:

the attempt to see the controversy as a simple Jew versus non-Jew split is inaccurate. One of the crucial divisions maybe between those Jews whose ethnicity is part of their identity, but whose concerns, work, direction and commitment transcends their Jewishness and relates them to a wider community of purpose and value, and those Jews who tend to maintain the traditional myths of Jewish identity, and are more closely connected to Jewish organizations, and seem more rooted in Jewish ambiance. [55]

In his rebuttal, Louis Harap argued that the ‘entire thought’ of Fruchter’s piece was characterized by ‘illogic.’ Morris Schappes then denounced Fruchter as ‘uninformed and misinformed’ about Jewish history and accused him of having ‘a position of national nihilism, which is anti-Socialist.’ Schappes was especially critical of Fruchter’s argument that Jewish Socialists who attacked the book had sacrificed their socialism to their Jewishness:

Jewish radicals and Socialists developed their *own* criticism and of Arendt’s book... because they felt that she had maligned and affronted the Jews as a

people, that she had stimulated among some Jews a disgust, not with some Jewish collaborators and with some Jews' weakness, folly or crimes, but with the Jewish people as a whole. Therefore we Jewish radicals and Socialists, because we are no less part of the Jewish people because of our radicalism... felt it our duty to defend the Jewish people against such misrepresentation. The fact that her attack on the Eichmann trial and her false picture of the Jews could be used for its own purposes by the neo-Nazi international added urgency and an edge of wrath to our counterattack. [56]

The overseas debate

The debate also raged abroad. In Britain, John Gross wrote a review for *Encounter*. He thought that Arendt had presented 'an artificial picture of the Jewish Councils' – 'a picture that is both inaccurate and curiously unfeeling, and one which cannot be allowed to pass unchallenged.' He proceeded to provide evidence challenging it. [57] Walter Laqueur, director of the Institute for Advanced Studies in Contemporary History (Weiner Library) wrote a highly critical review in the *Jewish Chronicle* concluding that 'the damage caused by *Eichmann in Jerusalem* is incalculable.' [58] Hugh Trevor-Roper, a noted authority on the Third Reich, was full of condemnation in the *Sunday Times*: Arendt was 'unbearably arrogant,' her style both 'evasive' and 'deeply biased'; she was guilty of 'half truths and loaded language and double standards of evidence.' [59] *The Times Literary Supplement* savaged Arendt: 'the items of evidence with which she constructs "her charge against the Jewish leadership" hardly stand up to examination.' [60] In *the Observer*, Richard Crossman thought that Arendt's thesis on the failure of the Jews to understand the extermination plans of the Nazis was 'claptrap.' [61]

Prior to publication of the English edition, the scholar Reuben Ainsztein had argued in the *Jewish Observer* and *Middle East Review* that Arendt had 'no excuse' for the 'outright distortions' in her book. Moreover, readers of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* would find Arendt's position on the shortcomings of the Eichmann trial 'quite untenable, if not preposterous' and would read her words with 'a feeling of steadily growing unreality.' [62] The British section of the World Jewish Congress even held a public meeting in London entitled 'Answering Hannah Arendt.' Its political director described *Eichmann in Jerusalem* as 'an offensive, revolting book.' [63]

EZRA | Arendt in New York

German critics also had problems with *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, notably the issue of Jewish resistance and cooperation. In relation to whether the actions of Eichmann and other perpetrators of the Holocaust were normal, one German critic wrote: ‘We Germans have every reason to show discretion in this aspect of the discussion.’ [64] The German publisher told Arendt that a number of bookstore owners were boycotting *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. [65] In 1966 the French edition of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* was published and this also met with hostility. *Le Nouvel Observateur* even published two pages of letters under the headline ‘Hannah Arendt, est-elle une Nazi?’ [66]

Jacob Robinson’s refutation of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*

Within a few months of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* being published, Judge Musmanno had declared, in his review for the Chicago Jewish Forum:

Miss Arendt’s book is so kernel-full of hopelessly inexplicable inconsistencies, unutterably illogical utterances and unfathomably preposterous conclusions that one could only wholly cover the absurdities in her book by writing one equally as long to refute it. [67]

This was the project undertaken by Jacob Robinson. His book-length refutation of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* was published in 1965 under the title *And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight*. Extending to over 400 pages it was a comprehensive demolition of her narrative.

Miss Arendt does not convey reliable information. She has misread many of the documents and books referred to in her text and bibliography. She has not equipped herself with the necessary background for an understanding and analysis of the trial. [68]

From the available documentation, Robinson concluded that far from being banal, Eichmann was a ‘a man of extraordinary driving power, master in the arts of cunning and deception, intelligent and competent in his field, single minded in his mission to make Europe free of Jews (*judenrein*) – in short a man uniquely suited to be the overseer of most of the Nazi program to exterminate the Jews.’ The statement that Eichmann was not a fanatical antisemite had no foundation. In an interview given in 1957 from his hiding place in Argentina, Eichmann had boasted that his only regret was his failure to massacre all eleven million European Jews. Rudolf Höss,

camp commandant of Auschwitz, had confirmed this: 'He was completely obsessed with the idea of destroying every single Jew he could lay his hands on.'

In response to Arendt's criticism of the trial itself, Robinson cited an abundance of legal precedents, including war crimes trials, to show that the Eichmann case had been conducted in accordance with international law.

In his discussion of the actions of the Jewish Councils, Robinson used an array of information from memoirs, diaries and monographs in Polish, Hungarian, Yiddish and Hebrew as well as German sources. Arendt had contended that members of the Councils were 'as a rule the locally recognized Jewish leaders.' Robinson provided numerous examples demonstrating that even where the Councils had originally consisted of pre-war Jewish leaders, 'the Germans usually acted according to the principles of negative selection, replacing people of standing with newcomers.' Consequently, more often than not, the Jewish Councils had been administered by 'little men' appointed by the Nazis, rather than pre-war Jewish leaders. Robinson also showed that, although there were inevitably some scoundrels and traitors, Council members were victims, like their fellow Jews; in any case, whether or not a particular Jewish Council cooperated with the Nazis, the result was always the same.

Arendt had attempted to substantiate her claim that Jews would have been better off without leadership by asserting that in Belgium there was no Jewish Council and 'it is not surprising that not a single Jew was ever deported.' Robinson showed that in Belgium there was a Jewish Council and Jews were deported. Moreover, in Russia, Jews not governed by a Jewish Council were slaughtered even faster than in Poland where there were Jewish Councils. In France, Yugoslavia, Greece and other countries where there were no Jewish Councils, the Nazis still managed to carry out the 'Final Solution' effectively. Arendt had claimed, in her letter to Scholem, that Jewish Council members could ask to be relieved of their duties 'and nothing happened to them.' The reality, according to a non-Jewish witness of the Cracow ghetto, was that 'To resign [from the Jewish Council] was equivalent to signing one's own death sentence.' [69]

Robinson's critique was devastating. As Ezorsky put it in *Dissent*:

After Robinson's argument not a single one of Miss Arendt's main contentions can be credited; and a great many of her minor contentions ...

EZRA | Arendt in New York

have also to be tossed out. She was wrong about Eichmann, she was wrong about international law, she was wrong about Jewish leaders, she was wrong about Jewish resistance, she was wrong about Jewish 'cooperation' with the Nazis.... She was wrong, wrong, wrong. [70]

Robinson's book, however, read like a lawyer's brief. As Marie Syrkin pointed out in *Midstream*: 'While Dr. Arendt is hopelessly outclassed by Dr. Robinson's scholarship and command of first-hand sources, he is in turn not a literary essayist of flashing polemical power like Hannah Arendt.' [71] No-one reading Robinson's book could have any doubt that Arendt had painted a distorted picture. But I tend to agree with Walter Laqueur, who – despite stating that 'Dr. Robinson proves beyond any shadow of doubt that Miss Arendt has made literally hundreds of mistakes, has used incorrect statistics, and has quoted out of context' – found it 'regrettable that Dr. Robinson's great knowledge of the period has been employed in a book of comments on another book, rather than in preparation of the major work which is so badly needed.' (In fairness to Arendt, Laqueur did state that Dr. Robinson was not 'infallible' and mentioned that 'Had Miss Arendt a team of researchers at her disposal they could, no doubt, find mistakes in Dr. Robinson's book,' and listed three of those minor errors.) [72]

Arendt provided a long response to Laqueur's review of Robinson's book. Dismissing the ADL review of her book in *Facts* as a 'propaganda pamphlet,' she concurred with Mary McCarthy that many of the hostile reviews were from the ADL's 'mimeographing machine' of information. She questioned the 'eminent authority' of Dr. Robinson, accused him of 'a truly dazzling display of sheer inability to read,' and ridiculed him for producing 'a prime example of a non-book' which itself contained 'monumental errors' – of which she provided two examples. She also suggested that there was a worldwide campaign against her book that involved the Israeli government and a number of 'powerful' Jewish organisations. [73] This last claim produced a retort from Laqueur: 'I think I can assure her that the Elders of Zion are not yet out to get her.'

Conclusion

Arendt and her supporters believed that many of the critics had misread, misrepresented, or misunderstood what she was saying in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. To a certain extent they may be correct, but it is clear that if so the misinterpretations were widespread and were not confined to the critics. Robert Berman, in a positive

Democratiya 9 | Summer 2007

review of the book, actually inferred that 'Eichmann.... rather liked Jews.' [74] Arendt had said no such thing; nevertheless she was 'delighted' with that particular review, 'the most perceptive and... most intelligent review that appeared.' [75]

Some thought Robinson's book should have put an end to the debate. Moshe Decter observed in *New Politics* in 1965, 'What he [Robinson] demonstrates can be stated very simply: Hannah Arendt is a fraud.' [76] But the debate did not end. Arendt thesis continues to be discussed regardless of how often it has been discredited. In 2004, David Cesarani published his highly acclaimed biography of Adolf Eichmann. Cesarani was highly critical both of Arendt as a person and as a would-be historian of the Holocaust. But he had to acknowledge that *Eichmann in Jerusalem* had become 'one of the most influential books about the Nazi mass murder of the Jews and genocide in the twentieth century.' [77]

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