HANNAH ARENDT: THE PHILOSOPHER IN HISTORY

THESIS

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This paper explores the major historical interpretations of Hannah Arendt and analyzes her philosophy of history. Chapter One includes an introduction and a brief survey of the life of Hannah Arendt. Chapters Two and Three examine The Origins of Totalitarianism. The discussion concludes that Arendt's loose use of terms and some of her evidence can be called into question. Nevertheless, her work contains original insights about modern European political history.

Chapter Four, a discussion of Arendt's Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil, emphasizes her portrait of Adolph Eichmann as a shallow, Nazi bureaucrat. Although the work is flawed with inaccuracies, her portrait of Eichmann as a prototypical bureaucratic killer is thought provoking. Chapter Five, an analysis of Arendt's philosophy of history, concludes that Arendt understood the pitfalls of theories of historical causality.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The works of Hannah Arendt constitute a valuable legacy for students of history and political theory, as well as the educated reading public. With great intellectual vigor, she analyzed some of the most sensitive political issues of twentieth-century European history, reformulating traditional political concepts, and evolving an original political theory of great subtlety. In her writings, she helped to illuminate many dark facts of the recent past, dealing with historical phenomena such as anti-Semitism, totalitarianism, and the mass murders of World War II. She dealt with historiographical issues as well. As a political philosopher, she addressed herself to the enduring themes of political speculation, theorizing on such topics as authority, revolution, violence, imperialism, and political community. Her unorthodox views often surprised her readers. She appeared to have an innate repugnance to what is commonly called "conventional wisdom," preferring instead to delve into the hidden recesses of an event, or to expand and develop a traditional political concept in a novel manner.
This paper is an exploration of her major historical writings, including a brief analysis of her philosophy of history. While her major historical interpretations will be examined in some detail, her political theory and philosophical works will be discussed only when they relate specifically to her historiography. Although Arendt was primarily a political theorist, she wrote about a wide variety of topics, ranging through politics, philosophy, history, and literature. Arendt was not a professionally trained historian, nor did she write specifically for historians, but her works contain many thought-provoking historical analyses and insights. Arendt wrote about events with that "intellectual passion" which George Macaulay Trevelyan asserted was a prerequisite for the writing of history. In addition, she reexamined some of the age-old preoccupations of historiography: the significance of events, the problem of causality, historical objectivity, and the purposes of history.

The Life of Hannah Arendt

Both sides of Hannah Arendt's family, the Arendts and the Cohns, were descendants of Russian Jews who had settled in Königsberg, East Prussia, during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Their descendants were

financially comfortable, non-Orthodox Jewish families whose members were active in business and the professions. Hannah Arendt was born in 1906 in Hanover, where her parents lived for a time. Neither her father, Paul Arendt, an engineer, nor her mother, Martha Cohn Arendt, was religious, although the Arendt grandparents sometimes took Hannah Arendt to the synagogue. In 1910, Hannah Arendt's family moved back to Königsberg. Her father was seriously ill, and he died in 1913. Except for a ten-week stay in Berlin in 1914, provoked by the Russian advance into East Prussia, Martha and Hannah Arendt lived a quiet life during the war years. Martha Arendt remarried in 1920, and her daughter Hannah acquired two stepsisters. Hannah Arendt was a precocious student and an avid reader of literature, philosophy, and the Greek and Latin classics. She passed her examinations and graduated from the Gymnasium in 1924, a year ahead of her class.2

Arendt began her university career at Marburg in the fall semester of 1924. She attended seminars conducted by Martin Heidegger and became a close friend of the philosopher. In 1925, she spent a semester at Freiburg University, where she studied under Edmund Husserl, the noted phenomenologist. Heidegger then advised Arendt to go to Heidelberg, in order to study under the philosopher Karl

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Jaspers. She followed Heidegger's advice and began to attend Heidelberg University in 1925. There she had a major in philosophy, with minors in theology and Greek. She worked under Karl Jaspers and became very close to Jaspers and his wife Gertrud. They were to remain friends for life. Jaspers supervised Arendt's doctoral dissertation on Saint Augustine, Der Liebesbegriffe bei Augustin, (The Concept of Love in Saint Augustine). She was awarded her doctorate in 1928, and her dissertation was published in 1929.3

In 1929, Arendt moved to Berlin and married Günther Stern, a young man from a secularized, Jewish, middle-class family. While Stern sought a university post as a lecturer in philosophy, the couple lived for a time in Frankfurt, where Arendt attended the seminars of sociologist Karl Mannheim and theologian Paul Tillich. During this period from 1930 to 1933, Arendt wrote articles and reviews on philosophy, Jewish history, and German poetry, which were published in several newspapers and journals, including the Frankfurter Zeitung, Die Gesellschaft, and the Neu Schweizer Rundschau. In addition, she began to research and write a study of Rahel Varnhagen, the Jewish hostess who had maintained a famous Berlin salon during the formative period

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of the German romantic movement in the early nineteenth century.⁴

When the couple moved back to Berlin, Arendt resumed her friendship with Kurt Blumenfeld, a leading Zionist organizer and speaker, who Arendt had met at Heidelberg in 1926. While her husband Günther Stern joined a circle of artists and writers, mostly communists and leftist fellow-travelers (including playwright Bertolt Brecht), Arendt attended Zionist meetings and discussion groups. Arendt's interest in Zionism brought her into the realm of practical political questions, particularly the ambiguous position of the Jews in Germany. Arendt later wrote in a 1952 letter to Karl Jaspers: "I had been as a young woman truly naive; I found the so-called 'Jewish Question' quite boring. Kurt Blumenfeld opened my eyes to the matter." Under Blumenfeld's guidance, Arendt lectured on Zionism and the history of German anti-Semitism in various German cities. It was during this period 1930-1933, that Arendt came to deplore the tendency of many Jews to regard anti-Semitism solely as a question of social discrimination, ignoring the political implications of the issue. Although the Jews professed to be good Germans, many conservative Christian nationalists and racial anti-Semites denied that one could be both a German and a Jew. In their criticism of

⁴Young-Bruehl, pp. 77-97.
assimilation, the Zionists argued that Jews must acknowledge their unique Jewish status, while fostering a sense of Jewish identity, and formulate a political program centered around the building of a Jewish homeland. Arendt's involvement with Zionism brought about her political awakening.5

During the early 1930s, Arendt paid close attention to current events and broadened her reading to include political texts, such as the works of Karl Marx, V. I. Lenin, and Leon Trotsky (although she never became a Marxist). In her apprehension about the growth of the Nazi movement and the popularity of Adolph Hitler, she became impatient with intellectuals who were oblivious to the gloomy political situation in Germany. In 1932, Arendt mentioned to a friend that she was considering the possibility of emigration from Germany. In a 1931 letter to Arendt, Jaspers had noticed a strong "anti-academic mood" in her. When the Nazis came to power in 1933, Arendt was distressed to see the voluntary cooperation of so many intellectuals with the new regime. She remarked years later in an interview, that during 1933, she had compared people living in an intellectual environment (as she had) with those who did not; she had concluded that "cooperation was ... the rule among intellectuals, but not among others. And I have never forgotten that."

She bitterly resolved never again to have dealings with what

5Ibid., pp. 72-73, 91-92, 99, quote p. 91.
she termed "the history of ideas," or with academic society.⁶

The events of 1933 precipitated profound changes in Arendt's life. After the Reichstag fire on 27 February 1933, Günther Stern fled to Paris, because the Nazis were rounding up communists and leftists. The Gestapo had the address book of Bertolt Brecht, a friend of Stern. Meanwhile, Arendt began to provide a temporary refuge for political fugitives (mostly communists) at her Berlin apartment. She also began to do research at the Prussian State Library for the Zionists. Within a few weeks, she was arrested and held for questioning by the police for eight days. Luckily, the authorities knew nothing about her having hidden fugitive communists. When Arendt was released, she and her mother fled to Paris via Karlsbad, Prague, and Geneva.⁷

Arriving in Paris in the fall, 1933, Arendt found a job with a Zionist organization which provided training for young Jews emigrating to Palestine. In 1935, Arendt became general secretary of the Paris branch of Youth Aliyah, a Zionist organization which prepared Jewish children for emigration to Palestine. Her husband, Günther Stern, left for America in 1936. Arendt meanwhile developed a close

⁶Ibid., pp. 95-98, quotes pp. 95, 108.
⁷Ibid., pp. 102-110.
relationship with Heinrich Blücher, a German communist refugee, whom she married in 1940 after her divorce from Stern. Blücher, a Berliner of working-class origin, was a self-taught man with a keen intellect, a World War I veteran who had joined in the abortive Spartacist uprising and other postwar struggles of Zionist trainees to Palestine in 1935. When the Youth Aliyah headquarters moved to London in 1938, Arendt found a job with the Jewish Agency, aiding refugees from Austria and Czechoslovakia.8

In 1940, Arendt and her husband, along with thousands of other refugees, were interned by the French government. She was sent to a camp near Gurs in southern France. After the French defeat, Arendt left the camp and walked to Montauban, where she found her husband. Late in 1940, Arendt and Blücher were granted American visas and, after procuring Vichy exit permits in January 1941, they took a train to Lisbon. Three months later, they sailed for New York City. Arendt's mother joined them later. They were fortunate because the U.S. State Department tightened its entry policies within weeks.9

Arendt and her husband arrived in New York City in May 1941. Because her visa was delayed, Martha Arendt arrived a few weeks later. Upon their arrival, all three of the new

8Ibid., pp. 115-48.
9Ibid., pp. 150-59.
immigrants were ignorant of the English language. Hannah Arendt was a quick learner, however, and she mastered English as she had French years before. She found work first as a columnist for the German-language newspaper Aufbau in November 1931, then as a part-time instructor at Brooklyn College in 1942. In 1944, she became director of research for the Conference on Jewish Relations, working with its Commission on European Jewish Cultural Reconstruction from 1944 to 1946. This organization was attempting to catalogue, rescue, and reassemble Jewish literature and artifacts looted by the Nazis. Arendt also served as chief editor at Schocken Books from 1946 to 1948, where she prepared a German edition of Franz Kafka's Diaries. During the years 1948-52, Arendt was the executive director of Jewish Cultural Reconstruction. As the official representative of this organization, Arendt travelled in Europe from August 1949 to March 1950. During this visit, her first in Europe since the war, Arendt lectured at the Universities of Heidelberg, Tubingen, and Manchester and did research on the history of socialism while in Paris.  

Arendt had resumed her writing in 1942 after a nine-year hiatus. She became a prolific writer of reviews, articles, and commentaries covering a wide range of topics, although her main focus in the 1940s was upon Jewish

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Ibid., pp. 164-92, 244-48, 277.
affairs. During her first ten years in the United States, Arendt published over fifty articles and reviews in various journals and magazines, including The Review of Politics, Partisan Review, The Nation, Commentary, and Jewish Social Studies. She became a naturalized United States' citizen in 1950, just as she put the finishing touches to her first book, The Origins of Totalitarianism. The book was published in 1951 and was generally well-received. The work brought her fame, and it marked the beginning of her extraordinary academic career. She was awarded a Guggenheim Foundation grant for 1952-53, in order to afford her the opportunity to study Marxism extensively and to extend the historical analyses presented in Origins.

Arendt appeared as a guest lecturer at many universities, including Princeton (fall 1953), The University of Chicago (spring 1956), Columbia University (fall 1960), Northwestern University (winter 1961), and Wesleyan University (fall 1961). Her first full-time teaching position was as a visiting professor at the University of California, Berkeley, in 1955. She was appointed full professor at Princeton in 1959 (the first woman to receive the position). In addition, she taught at the University of Chicago


12Young-Bruehl, pp. 181-211, 250-58.
(1963-67), commuting between Chicago and New York. Her last teaching position was with the New School for Social Research (1967-75), a position which she held until her death.13

Arendt and Blücher maintained a close-knit circle of friends in New York City, most of them German-speaking émigrés such as Hans Jonas, Paul Tillich, Hermann Broch, and Hans Morgenthau. The couple made friends with many native-born Americans as well, such as the poet Randall Jarrell and the writer Mary McCarthy. Many of their friends, however, were neither famous nor intellectual. Both Arendt and Blücher harbored some distrust towards academics, because both of them believed that the German elite, which they had observed closely during the 1930s, had for the most part, collaborated with the Nazis. While they enjoyed the open give and take of American intellectual life, they had misgivings over the way in which the ideological lines were rigidly drawn between the liberal and conservative camps during the McCarthy years. Moreover, Arendt, with her classical background, and Blücher, the self-taught ex-revolutionary, regarded much of the social and psychological sciences as rubbish, not worthy of consideration. Their distrust of academic life is ironic, because Arendt had a

13Ibid., pp. 252-93, 329-54.
very successful academic career, and Blücher taught philosophy at Bard College after 1952.\textsuperscript{14}

Arendt received numerous honorary degrees and was admitted into the National Institute for Arts and Letters and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. She was awarded the Lessing Prize of the Free City of Hamburg in 1959, the Sigmund Freud Prize of the German Academy in 1967, the Emerson-Thoreau Medal of the American Academy in 1969, and the Danish government's Sonning Prize for Contributions to European Civilization in 1975. As an author, she was very productive. Her major works include: \textit{The Origins of Totalitarianism} (1951), \textit{The Human Condition} (1958), \textit{Between Past and Future} (1961), \textit{On Revolution} (1963), \textit{Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil} (1963), \textit{Men in Dark Times} (1968), \textit{On Violence} (1970), \textit{Crises of the Republic} (1972), and \textit{The Life of the Mind} (published posthumously in 1978). In addition, she wrote well over one hundred essays, articles, and reviews. Her husband, Heinrich Blücher, died in 1970. Hannah Arendt died of a heart attack on 4 December 1975.\textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{14}Ibid., pp. xiv-xv, 108, 274, 295.

\textsuperscript{15}Ibid., pp. 392, 460, 467.
Arendt's Unorthodox Methodology

Arendt had little to say about methodology. She was "a sort of phenomenologist" she once remarked, although not in the same manner as G.W.F. Hegel or Edmund Husserl. She was preoccupied with the historical character of political concepts, their roots in concrete human experience. In her etymological analyses of fundamental concepts, Arendt sought the primary historical referents of commonly used terms--authority, revolution, the state--in order to shed light on the phenomena in question, and to illuminate the way in which our perception of particular phenomena has evolved. If the meaning of a concept had become fuzzy or distorted in our own time, Arendt would often seek the cause, assuming that the new usage signalled a shift in the perception, or misperception, of the phenomenon to which the concept referred. She was sensitive to the nuances of language and the subtle shades of meaning which adhered to certain key concepts. Once she had defined the primary experience which had given rise to a concept, she would use this as a basis for a critical comparison with the present. In a 1960 letter, she referred to this method as Perlenfischerei (pearl fishing)."17

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16 [Ibid.], p. 405.
17 [Ibid.], p. 95.
It is evident from her political and philosophical essays, as well as from the comments of her former students, that Arendt habitually departed from the texts of classic works in order to illuminate some half-hidden meaning or to interpret past thinkers in a novel manner. She collected parables and quotes which provided a departure point for new lines of speculation. Arendt often adopted an authoritative tone in her writing, and she tended to disregard judgments about political or historical problems. This tendency was both a strength and a weakness. She sometimes glossed over particular historical facts while over-emphasizing others. One will find occasional errors and distortion throughout her works. But more importantly, there are in her writings fresh insights into fundamental political problems.

Arendt's training in philosophy and the classical languages was evident in most of her works. Her political and philosophical essays teemed with learned allusions and quotes from the classical authors. She often used history, especially Greek and Roman history, as a reservoir of human experience, a rich inheritance which provided fresh insights into human thought and action. In her historical works, The Origins of Totalitarianism and Eichmann in Jerusalem, 19

18Peter Stern and Jean Yarbrough, "Hannah Arendt," The American Scholar (Summer, 1978), pp. 372-76.

Arendt did not use the traditional narrative approach, for which she had neither the training nor the inclination. Rather than attempting to imaginatively reconstruct or depict a specific period of the past, Arendt tried to think through the past and distill from it ideas or insights which had some bearing upon the present. Her description of past events was very selective.

Arendt's consciousness of her status as a Jew of German culture, and the political implications of this fact, provided the impetus for her early thinking on political and historical matters. As a Jewish refugee during a period of political and social turmoil, Arendt was wrenched into an awareness of contemporary political problems which began to hold her interest: the decline of the European state system, the creation of stateless people, the cycle of war and revolution, the rise of totalitarianism, and the disintegration and destruction of European Jewry. Arendt's desire to understand the events of her own time led her to the past. In fact, the general aim of her work was understanding, rather than the accumulation of facts or the formulation of principles.

It is difficult to classify Hannah Arendt. As a political theorist, her essays are part of a great tradition of political analysis which stretches from the ancients, Plato and Aristotle, through such modern thinkers as Niccolò Machiavelli, Edmund Burke, and Alexis de Tocqueville.
Indeed, this grand tradition of political theory has provided the soil from which the modern social sciences have arisen. In her own way, Arendt continued this ancient tradition of political and historical analysis. Her originality and remarkable erudition set her work apart from the behavioral and comparative studies popular in American political science. Her research was no more "replicable" than her mind.
CHAPTER II

ANTI-SEMITISM AND IMPERIALISM

Arendt's first major work, The Origins of Totalitarianism, was published in 1951. The book was an attempt at understanding how totalitarianism had appeared in Europe. This complex work is neither a narrative history, nor is it an abstract political discourse: it is a wide-ranging examination of those European attitudes and experiences which, in her opinion, made totalitarianism possible in the twentieth century. Although Arendt emphasizes specific events or persons on occasion, the bulk of her analysis is concerned with general institutional developments and psychological attitudes. This highly idiosyncratic work contains numerous sociological observations and grand historical generalizations, but it is not an orthodox historical work.

Arendt avoided the form of the historical narrative in part because she did not wish to preserve or justify, for posterity, the main phenomenon she described, totalitarianism.¹ She felt strongly that to write a narrative

history of totalitarianism would, in a subtle way, tend to justify or "explain away" an event which was "new and shocking." Because she believed that totalitarianism was a unique and preceded development in modern history, Arendt used unorthodox means in achieving an understanding of what, at first glance, "appeared simply outrageous". Arendt states that she "did not write a history of totalitarianism but an analysis in terms of history."

The title of the work was suggested by her publisher. Arendt was uncomfortable with the word "origins," with its implications of causality and development. In her own words, she was attempting to give "a historical account of the elements which crystallized into totalitarianism. . . ." She rejected deterministic explanations of events, or any view that implied that historical developments simply flowed from their antecedents by necessity. The idea that an event could be reduced to its assumed causes or precedents did not accord with her own belief in the efficacy of the human will and the contingent nature of events. In an unpublished lecture from 1954, she commented upon her methodology:

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2 Ibid., p. 83.


5 Ibid.
The elements of totalitarianism form its origins if by origins we do not understand 'causes'. Causality, i.e., the factor of determination of a process of events in which always one event causes and can be explained by another is probably an altogether alien and falsifying category in the realm of the historical and political sciences. Elements by themselves probably never cause anything. They become origins of events if and when they crystallize into fixed and definite forms. Then, and only then, can we trace their history backwards. The event illuminates its own past, but it can never be deduced from it.6

This idea of "crystallization" was central to her historical thinking, yet she never fully explained the implications of the concept. It is a metaphor for her conceptualization of historical movement or change. This aspect of her thinking will be discussed later.

Arendt argued that certain aspects of anti-Semitism, racism, and imperialism had previously been unnoticed by learned opinion since these elements "belonged to a subterranean stream of European history. . . ."7 Only the catastrophes of the twentieth century had brought many of these historical phenomena to light. She warned, however, that it would be fallacious "to simply equate totalitarianism with its elements and origins."8 All manifestations of anti-Semitism and racism were not totalitarian, in Arendt's view; totalitarianism itself should be regarded as

6Young-Bruehl, p. 203.
7Arendt, Antisemitism, p. xi.
8Ibid.
a unique, twentieth-century phenomena, qualitatively different from other forms of authoritarianism.

The work is divided into three parts (or volumes, depending upon the edition), Antisemitism, Imperialism, and Totalitarianism. In the first two parts of the study, her analysis revolves around two related questions: Which elements in European social and political history made totalitarianism possible? How were attitudes developed in various societies during the nineteenth century which contributed to totalitarian politics and ideology in the twentieth century? In her attempt to answer these questions, she focused upon anti-Semitism, imperialism, and racism in the first two volumes. The third volume of the work consists of a description of totalitarianism in practice. What follows is a summary and an evaluation of the main points of the first two volumes.

Jewish Separation from the Gentiles

In Antisemitism, Arendt examined certain aspects of anti-Semitism which she termed "the prehistory . . . of totalitarianism." Although the Nazi ideologues made preposterous claims concerning Jewish power and influence, these absurdities still found fertile ground in the minds of many Europeans. In Arendt's view, it was neither accidental nor arbitrary that anti-Semitism came to occupy a central

9Ibid.
place in Nazi ideology. The problem for her, therefore, was to discover the historical factors which enabled this to happen. Arendt argued that it was unhistorical to assume that Nazi anti-Semitism was merely a manifestation of extreme nationalism, or a rebirth of medieval prejudice. She also maintained that to equate medieval superstitions with the anti-Semitic ideologies of the nineteenth century was to make a serious error in interpretation. During the late medieval period, religious differences, aggravated by social and economic factors, accounted for the anti-Semitism then existing. In other words, doctrinal differences between Jews and Christians were crucial in the Jewish separation from the gentile world. But during the nineteenth century, the era of Jewish emancipation and assimilation in central and western Europe, a host of new factors emerged: virulent nationalism, racism, and significant changes in the relationship of the Jews to state and society. In Arendt's view, the religious differences between Jews and Christians lost much of their former importance. Therefore the nineteenth-century ideology of anti-Semitism was different from "religious Jew-hatred" according to Arendt. She did not view modern anti-Semitism as a secularized form of "popular medieval superstitions."

Arendt rejected the scapegoat idea, because it avoided the

\(^{10}\text{Ibid.}, p. 3.\)
question: Why the Jews? She found unsatisfactory as well what she termed "eternal antisemitism," the idea that Jew-hatred and persecutions were normal and to be expected in history, because this glib notion overlooked the differences between historical periods.\textsuperscript{11}

In her brief comments upon Jewish-gentile relations during the early modern period of European history, Arendt relied upon the study by Jacob Katz, \textit{Exclusiveness and Tolerance, Jewish-Gentile Relations in Medieval and Modern Times}.\textsuperscript{12} Katz argued that Jewish-gentile relations from the sixteenth through the early eighteenth centuries were "dominated by Jewish exclusiveness" and indifference to the outside world. To a much greater extent than before, Judaism became "a closed system of thought" and the medieval dialogue between Jewish and Christian thinkers virtually ceased. Important Jewish thinkers, according to Katz, found that "the difference between Jewry and the nations was fundamentally not one of creed and faith but one of inner nature," a difference which was "likely to be racial in origin."\textsuperscript{13} Arendt found it significant that European Jewry during the period preceding the Enlightenment became

\textsuperscript{11}Ibid., p. vii.


\textsuperscript{13}Ibid., pp. 133, 140, 137.
intellectually detached from the gentile world just as the modern nation-states of Europe were forming. She also pointed out that this "shift in evaluating the alien character of the Jewish people" first occurred among the Jews and only later became common among gentiles during the late Enlightenment period.\footnote{Arendt, \textit{Antisemitism}, p. viii.} This shift in attitude she considered to be the essential prerequisite for the rise of modern anti-Semitism. Anti-Semitic writers of the nineteenth century stressed Jewish antagonism towards the Christian world and claims of Jewish superiority. Turning the Jewish claim of chosenness on its head, anti-Semites could argue that Jewish inferiority was grounded in the inner nature of the Jew, and that as a race, Jewry had always existed as an alien, hostile adversary of the Christian peoples. Jewish apologists created their own stereotypes based upon the idea that Jewish separation was due solely to the hostility of gentiles.\footnote{Ibid., pp. viii-ix.}

Arendt agreed with Katz that the voluntary Jewish separation from the Christian world was necessary for Jewish survival as a people. But Arendt maintained, contrary to prevailing views among many Jewish apologists, that anti-Semitism played a primary role in Jewish preservation as a separate group only during the nineteenth and twentieth
centuries, when many secularized Jews attempted to enter
gentile society. She argued that Jewish thinkers of the
nineteenth century, faced with Jewish assimilation and
secularization, propounded the idea of "eternal anti-
semitism" as a convenient means of holding the Jewish people
together. This glossing over of the historical facts led
these Jewish apologists to mistake racist anti-Semitism for
the old religious Jew-hatred of the past. The danger in
this attitude, according to Arendt, was that it blinded them
to the explosive potential of modern anti-Semitism, with its
irrational, racist overtones. Arendt claimed that the
Jewish apologists of the nineteenth century, although fully
aware of the decline and disintegration of their own people
as autonomous corporate entities, were unaware of the rapid
decline of traditional Christianity on the one hand, and the
self-destructive nature of the nation-state system on the
other. She held that the Jews, with no nation or government
of their own, were unable to develop the faculty of politi-
cal judgment. They had existed historically either as a
despised minority or as a protected, privileged group. The
result of their ignorance, in Arendt's opinion, was a fatal
passivity and a blindness to political reality.

16 Ibid., pp. viii-x.
17 Ibid., pp. 7-8.
The Jews and the Nation-State

The crux of Arendt's analysis was her view of the relationship of Jewry to the European nation-state system. Arendt pointed out that as the nation-states developed during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, influential court Jews often emerged to handle the finances of various European princes. These wealthy Jews received privileges, and often noble titles, in return for services to their patrons. The Jewish masses were little affected by these relationships. During the period following the Jewish emancipation decrees in France (1790-1791), the special status of Jews appeared to be a part of the old feudal order which European liberals wished to abolish. The post-revolutionary national state was based upon equality before the law, although the inequality of the class system appeared to contradict this principle. Arendt argued that Jewish communal autonomy was gradually destroyed in central and western Europe during this period, but that Jewish privileges were maintained and extended because of state needs. Although the Jews were never fully integrated into the class society, Arendt stated that this existence as a special group was consonant with Jewish self-preservation.18

Arendt stressed that during the post-revolutionary period of the early nineteenth century, state financial

18Ibid., pp. 11-13.
needs grew enormously. As a result, the wealthier class of western and central European Jewry combined their wealth under the leadership of Jewish bankers, who were able to place large amounts of capital at the disposal of the state. The state granted special privileges, previously reserved for court Jews, to the wealthier class of Jewry as a whole. Emancipation was then granted in the more highly developed states, although this was not the case in the backward regions of eastern Europe. Arendt claimed that this special relationship between the state governments and Jews developed because the bourgeoisie was largely indifferent to state finance and politics. Imperialism brought an end to this special relationship because capitalist expansion demanded state intervention on behalf of bourgeois interests. She argued that the nation-states, as well as the European comity of nations as a whole, were eroded by the competitive spirit of capitalism which entered into the politics of the period. The gentile, imperialistic businessmen replaced the Jews in the realm of state business, although individual Jews managed to keep their positions as financial specialists and negotiators. These exceptional Jews often became estranged from the Jewish community as a whole, which was in a state of flux. From the gentile perspective, these wealthy individual Jews came to symbolize Jewry as a whole, although this was a faulty perception. After World War I, upper-class Jewry was "atomized into a
herd of wealthy individuals." The European balance of power and the comity of nations were destroyed by the war, and the wealthier Jews, with their inter-European connections, were cast adrift without a public function.19

Arendt borrowed an insight of Alexis de Tocqueville, that those who have "wealth without visible function" are regarded by the masses as parasitic and contemptible. Arendt observed that anti-Semitism intensified in both France and Germany as the public influence of Jews declined.20 She complicated her argument, however, with the generalization that the mob, composed of the dregs of all classes, hated the Jews in part because they supposedly wielded a vast secret power with which they could bend governments to their will. There appears to be a contradiction in her argument. Were the wealthy Jews perceived by the mob as power brokers or as powerless, rich parasites? Arendt did not clarify this ambiguity. She pointed out that in the state-sponsored foreign business involvements of the late nineteenth century, a portion of the petty bourgeoisie lost their savings. The Panama Scandal in France revealed the corrupt relationship between the Panama Company and various members of the Chamber of Deputies and the French civil service. Most of the middlemen who distributed the

19 Ibid., pp. 11-15.
20 Ibid., p. 4.
bribes to various members of the Chamber of Deputies were Jewish. The Third Republic, rather than the sovereign arbiter of class interests, appeared to be a corrupt business concern with Jewish agents. Groups who were violently opposed to the Third Republic tended to be anti-Semitic, although by this time Jewish influence upon the state was nil. The anti-Semitic press and movement in France grew enormously after the Panama Scandal, reaching its climax during the Dreyfus Affair.\textsuperscript{21}

The Imperfect Assimilation of Western Jewry

One of the most intriguing elements of Arendt's analysis is her discussion of the ambiguities of the Jewish relationship to high society during the late nineteenth century. In this consideration of the social aspect of anti-Semitism, Arendt drew upon the writings of Marcel Proust. Arendt argued that one Jewish response to the more fluid social conditions of the nineteenth century was that of the parvenu, the individual who sought assimilation whatever the cost. As these secularized Jews sought acceptance in polite society, upper-class society entertained what it considered "upstart" Jews because of their exotic appeal, their strangeness. In Arendt's view, the high society of the Faubourg Saint-Germain in Paris opened its doors to Jews and homosexuals because of its boredom,

\textsuperscript{21}\textit{Ibid.}, pp. 95-96.
its need to rub shoulders with vice. In public, members of society expressed their disgust with Jews and homosexuals, both considered criminal types. In the salons, however, these members of polite society found a perverse pleasure in associating with outcasts. These assimilated Jews, she asserted, were Jewish, yet they were expected to be different from other Jews, "the Jew in general."  

In Arendt's judgment, there were undesirable repercussions which arose from this conditional social acceptance. For secularized Jews, divested of their religious and cultural origins, "Jewishness" became a "psychological quality," and for many, an obsession.  

For people outside of polite society, in the streets, Jews became stranger than ever before. The odd acceptance of Jews into high society only provided to ordinary folks that the upper classes were as profligate and eccentric as they had always suspected. Arendt gauges the effect of this imperfect assimilation in the following passage:

Social "philosemitism" always ended by adding to political antisemitism that mysterious fanaticism without which antisemitism could hardly have become the best slogan for organizing the masses. All the declasses of capitalist society were finally ready to unite and establish mob organizations of their own; their propaganda and their attraction rested on the assumption that a society which had shown its willingness to incorporate crime in the form of vice into its very structure

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22Ibid., pp. 61, 80-83.

23Ibid., p. 84.
would by now be ready to cleanse itself of viciousness by openly admitting criminals and by publicly committing crimes.\textsuperscript{24}

Arendt argues that this process occurred in France during the Dreyfus Affair in the 1890s.

Arendt states, hyperbolically, that "the whole of France's political life during the Dreyfus crisis was carried on outside Parliament."\textsuperscript{25} The anti-Dreyfusards, led by members of the aristocracy, the army, and the Church, used the streets. The Dreyfusards, led by George S. Clemenceau, Emile Zola, and Jean Jaurès, worked through the courts and the press. Anti-Semitic propaganda, in the hands of men such as Edouard Drumont, was used by the anti-Dreyfusards to mobilize the mob for agitation and intimidation. According to Arendt, the mob was "the residue of all classes," a group of declassed persons produced after a series of scandals and public frauds.\textsuperscript{26}

Clemenceau, with his appeal to impartial justice, human rights, and the honor of the republic, was actually defeated by the ambiguous pardon of Dreyfus, in Arendt's opinion. Clerical anti-Semitism suffered a blow, and army intelligence was put under civil authority, but the Chamber of Deputies remained much the same as before, an institution

\textsuperscript{24}\textit{Ibid.}, pp. 87-88.
\textsuperscript{25}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 115.
\textsuperscript{26}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 107.
dedicated to vested interests and the preservation of the status quo. Arendt pointed out that few members of the Chamber wanted to involve themselves in the affair, even though the exploitation of the Dreyfus case by the Jesuits, the anti-Semites, and the French officers was detrimental to the republic and democratic institutions. The Chamber was, in Arendt's view, much more concerned with appeasement and the resumption of the status quo than with defending the Third Republic against its enemies. In addition, very few French Jews lent their wholehearted support to Dreyfus. Although the officer caste lost some of its public credibility, and the clerical party was defeated, Dreyfus was pardoned without being given a regular trial. The Dreyfusards were unable to clear Dreyfus in a French court of law. Arendt concluded that the Third Republic was compromised by the affair.27

Arendt described the Dreyfus Affair as "a huge dress rehearsal for a performance that had to be put off for more than three decades."28 It is important to note, however, that Arendt did not believe that French anti-Semitism directly influenced Nazism. She is careful to delineate the affair as a purely nineteenth-century, French political phenomenon. In Arendt's view, the significance of the

27 Ibid., pp. 118-120.
28 Ibid., p. 45.
affair was that it "was the earliest instance of the success of antisemitism as a catalytic agent for all other political issues." Arendt argued that the novel aspect of the conflict lay in the systematic, political organization of the mob under leaders who were worshipped by their cohorts, all of whom believed that they could, by striking out against "the Jew", attack their enemies and give vent to their resentment. Arendt observed that, under its leaders, the mob sought secret conspiracies and used "extraparliamentary action" to enforce its will. The Dreyfus episode subsided by 1900, but Arendt stressed that a precedent had been established in European politics.

Imperialism and Racism

In the second volume of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, entitled *Imperialism*, Arendt stated that European imperialism of the late nineteenth century "was caused by the incongruity of the nation-state system with the economic and industrial developments in the last third of the nineteenth century. . . ." Echoing the interpretation of J. A. Hobson's *Imperialism* (London, 1902), Arendt argued that the production of excess capital, based upon domestic underconsumption and the inequalities in wealth in the capitalist


economies, led to a demand for foreign outlets for capital export. Arendt claimed that this period, which she dated from 1884, witnessed "the political emancipation of the bourgeoisie." When the need for investment outlets and economic expansion became acute, she argued, the bourgeoisie became interested in world politics and attempted to use state power for economic ends. Heretofore, the bourgeoisie had been content to carry on economic activities within the bounds of the nation-state; but by the late nineteenth century, the need for economic expansion dominated other concerns.

Arendt stated: "Expansion as a permanent and supreme aim of politics is the central political idea of imperialism." She asserted that the bourgeoisie adopted imperialism in the feverish attempt to expand power and investments worldwide. Although the idea of "expansion for expansion's sake" made sense within a capitalist economic system, limitless expansion was ill-suited to the political framework of the nation-state. The western European nation-state was based upon a relatively stable legal framework, developed over the centuries, which rested upon

32Ibid., p. 3.
33Ibid., pp. 3-4.
34Ibid., p. 5.
the consent or acquiescence of the population. When the nation-state imposed its rule over alien peoples, it was forced to use naked coercion: the police, the army, and the bureaucracy. Arendt pointed out that this imperialism awakened the desire for independence and sovereignty amongst the conquered peoples. The conquest of foreign peoples necessitated forms of rule which were at variance with the constitutional and cultural traditions of western Europe. Arendt used the concept of "superfluity" to describe not only the production of excess capital, but also the creation of surplus men as well. She claimed that this human by-product of economic scandals and depressions became the mob, the "refuse of all classes." This conglomeration of people, either unemployed or marginally employed, merged with the underworld of society. The mob element, Arendt claimed, was present in the anti-Dreyfusards, in the adventurers who left Europe to plunder Africa, and in the supporters of Pan-Germanism and Pan-Slavism in Europe. This mob was not the same thing as the industrial working class, according to Arendt, nor was it large enough before World War I to bring its cynicism and unpredictability into the political arena (except during the Dreyfus Affair).

36 Ibid., pp. 4-7.
37 Ibid., pp. 30, 35.
38 Ibid., pp. 35-37.
Arendt asserted that the ideology of racism became the mainstay of imperialistic politics. Although she discussed early racial theorists such as Arthur de Bogineau, Arendt claimed that an ideology of racism would have developed, of necessity, during the age of imperialism as a justification for imperialist policies, with or without intellectual antecedents. One of the strangest parts of her analysis was her explanation of European racism in Africa. She relied to a great extent upon a fictional text, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Arendt pointed out that the rootless Europeans who first penetrated Africa, completely cut off from the social conventions and morality of western society, were confronted with black Africans living savagely in a symbiotic relationship with nature. The white Europeans were at first appalled and overwhelmed by the dreamlike existence of a race without a past, or a future, a race whose humanity was somehow fantastic and unreal. The result of this shocking encounter of white Europeans with black savages was the massacre and subjugation of the Africans by Europeans who did not regard their own actions as murder. Arendt felt that the Boers were pioneers in this grisly field of endeavor. Their response to natives, whom they could not accept as fully human, was massacre or enslavement. Indeed, Arendt argued that in South Africa, Europeans learned from experience how a society can be grounded in the concept of
race, including a master race, and below it, the "lower breeds".39

In Algeria, Egypt, and India, Arendt argued that the bureaucratic means for ruling subject races were developed and refined. When the elements of administration and coercion were detached from their institutional setting in Europe and placed over backward regions, race was substituted for the nation, bureaucracy for government, and rule by decree for the rule of law. This despotic form of rule was often justified either with hypocritical notions of "the white man's burden," or the idea that the European imperialists were part of a vast historical movement, agents in an unending process.40 Arendt claimed that the imperialists had actually created a new method of political rule, which utilized race as a means of organizing populations and bureaucracy as a means of ruling them. The Nazis were to elaborate on this political precedent once Europe was conquered and the peoples were divided into higher and lower breeds.

Pan-Germanism and Pan-Slavism

Arendt found the ancestry of Nazism and Bolshevism in the Pan-Germanic and Pan-Slavic movements of the late nineteenth century. The spokesmen for these movements

39Ibid., pp. 69-87.
40Ibid., pp. 87-101.
advocated a "continental imperialism", expansion on the continent of Europe in order "to unite all people of a similar folk origin."\textsuperscript{41} The hotbed of the pan-movements, according to Arendt, was Austria, a multinational state which contained both irredentist Germans and Slavs. In a region cluttered with numerous nationalities and ethnic groups, often jumbled together in the same province, conditions were hardly propitious for the emergence of western-style nation-states. In the other great multinational empire, Russia, Arendt claimed that most of the intelligentsia was Pan-Slavic in sympathy. The Pan-Slavs rhapsodized on the profound depths of the Russian soul and contrasted the violence and suffering of Russia with the shallow rationalism and materialism of the West.\textsuperscript{42}

The "tribal nationalism" of the pan-movements, Arendt asserted, was concerned with race, folk origins, and ties of blood. This tribalism was an arrogant, pseudo-mystical attitude that went beyond the usual claims of chauvinistic nationalists in the West. Rather than pointing to the concrete historical and cultural achievements of a nationality, the Pan-Germans and Pan-Slavs spoke of the Germanic or Slavonic "soul", which was somehow imbued with

\textsuperscript{41}Ibid., pp. 105, 103.

\textsuperscript{42}Ibid., p. 126.
mysterious, unique qualities.\textsuperscript{43} Arendt stressed that each group eagerly affirmed its "chosenness" and its "divine origin" as a race.\textsuperscript{44} Adherents of these movements were as hostile to the ideal of a humanity with a common origin as they were to the western notion of liberal individualism. The anti-Semitism of the pan-movements went beyond the Jew hatred which was common in these regions, according to Arendt. In the eyes of the Pan-Germans and Pan-Slavs, the Jews were living proof of a people who existed tribally, exercising secret power within the state. In her discussion of the Pan-Slavic and Pan-Germanic anti-Semitism, Arendt claimed that "the pan movements' claim to chosenness could clash seriously only with the Jewish claim."\textsuperscript{45} Arendt contended that the pan-movements hated the Jews in part because the racists feared that the Jews might, after all, be the people chosen by divine providence.

Arendt emphasized the fact that the pan-movements arose in countries lacking a firm constitutional tradition, despotisms which ruled through bureaucracies and the use of decrees. Arendt believed that rule by bureaucracy created "an aura of pseudomysticism," promoting an atmosphere of

\textsuperscript{43}\textit{Ibid.}, pp. 112-113.
\textsuperscript{44}\textit{Ibid.}, pp. 113-115.
\textsuperscript{45}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 120.
political anonymity in the governmental sphere. The Pan-Slavs conceived of Czarism as the embodiment of God's power on earth, an all-encompassing, elemental force which pervaded the entire people and would, in the end, consecrate the race. The Austrian Pan-Germans, on the other hand, were generally hostile to the state in which they lived. Arendt stressed that the pan-movements always claimed to be above parties and to represent the true interests of the nation as a whole. The leaders of the pan-movements claimed that the essential interests of a people could never be fully served by a parliamentary system of government or a political party. While the pan-movements enjoyed only limited successes during the pre-1914 period, Arendt argued that in their untrammeled xenophobia and their anti-western mood, they were the essential forerunners of the totalitarian movements. The pan-movements conceived of themselves, as did Nazism and Bolshevism, as concrete manifestations of historical processes. Arendt argued that the Nazis and Bolsheviks, understanding the great value of ideology as an organizational tool, succeeded for the first time in coordinating enormous masses of people for the purposes of a movement. They accurately gauged the degree of popular alienation from existing institutions, the fears and hatreds

of those ruined by inflation and unemployment, and those discouraged by military defeat. The leaders of these movements were then able to exploit popular prejudices, finding willing allies in their destruction of a hated status quo.\textsuperscript{48} Nazi and Bolshevik leaders were not merely seizing state power; they were consciously making history.

The Problem of Nationalism after the Treaty of Versailles

The final chapter of \textit{Imperialism}, entitled "The Decline of the Nation-State and the End of the Rights of Man," is a provocative essay on the catastrophic political consequences of World War I and its aftermath. She states bluntly that World War I "exploded the European comity of nations beyond repair."\textsuperscript{49} After the war, Europe was plagued with revolutions, civil wars, inflation, unemployment and the displacement of many thousands of refugees. The defeated nations, she pointed out, suffered the worst effects of these multiple disasters. When Austria-Hungary and the Russian Empire collapsed, the old state bureaucracies were no longer there to manipulate the old national rivalries and hatreds endemic in eastern Europe. In the midst of this turmoil, many Europeans became stateless. Both stateless people and the numerous minorities formed together a "new

\textsuperscript{48}\textit{Ibid.}, pp. 142-145.

\textsuperscript{49}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 147.
element of disintegration" in postwar Europe since they could not be easily assimilated, nor could the European states guarantee their rights. Arendt argued that these hapless victims were "a practical demonstration of the totalitarian movements' cynical claims that no such thing as inalienable human rights existed, and that the affirmations of the democracies to the contrary were mere prejudice, hypocrisy, and cowardice. . . ."\(^{51}\)

Arendt felt strongly that the attempt by the Allies to establish new nation-states in eastern Europe, and protect selected groups with minority treaties, was a colossal failure. The so-called "state peoples" in the successor states--Poles in Poland, Czechs in Czechoslovakia, and Serbs in Yugoslavia--were not numerically strong enough to compel their minorities to assimilate, although, in Arendt's view, the French and British diplomats expected that gradual assimilation would solve the problem of minorities. The minorities, however, resisted assimilation and became convinced that "people without their own national government were deprived of human rights."\(^{52}\) Arendt believed that events proved them right.

\(^{50}\)Ibid., p. 149.

\(^{51}\)Ibid., pp. 148-149.

\(^{52}\)Ibid., p. 152.
She observed that the men who made the French Revolution had linked national sovereignty with the Rights of Man, freedom for the nation and universal liberty for mankind. Legal equality and civic rights, Arendt maintained, could be viewed as the concrete manifestation of the Rights of Man, within the constitutions of the various western nation-states. Although national sovereignty and the ideal of liberty and equality might come into conflict, and sometimes did, the two concepts could be successfully linked in states with a relatively homogeneous ethnic composition. But after World War I, minorities who found themselves suddenly outside of the nation-state system were without rights or legal status. It became apparent, Arendt argued, that only people with a common national origin and a state of their own could enjoy full civic rights. She considered this to be evidence of the priority of the nation over the state, completing "the transformation of the state from an instrument of the law into an instrument of the nation. . . ."

Whenever refugees were denationalized by their home governments, they were seldom welcome anywhere and became a burden upon their unwilling host countries. They were at the mercy of the police and bureaucracy. The right of

53 Ibid., P. 152-155.
54 Ibid., p. 155.
asylum and the naturalization process were both inadequate to handle large masses of people. Expulsion of undesirable aliens was only a temporary solution, since the police of neighboring nations could smuggle the refugees back into the original host country. Arendt stressed that these stateless people, existing without a political community and outside the protection of a legal system, became "superfluous."

Arendt said that "Man . . . can lose all so-called Rights of Man without losing his essential quality as man, his human dignity. Only the loss of a polity itself expels him from humanity."55 When people lack any political or legal status, they then become only members of a species living in a "state of nature."56

Arendt's compelling arguments on the problem of statelessness are an indication of her skill in grasping the political implications of a modern political problem. Stephen J. Pollak, in his article "The Expatriation Act of 1954," acknowledged the importance of Arendt's discussion of the problem of statelessness.57 The Supreme Court, in a 1958 decision, Perez v. Brownell, upheld the Expatriation Act, although dissenting Chief Justice Earl Warren cited Pollak's article as a support for his view that punitive

55Ibid., p. 176-177.

56Ibid., p. 180.

denationalization contravened the Eighth Amendment.\(^{58}\) Warren's view prevailed in *Trop v. Dulles* in 1958, when the Supreme Court ruled against the use of denationalization as a punishment.\(^{59}\) In the 1963 decision *Kennedy v. Mendoza-Martinez*, Justice Goldberg quoted from Arendt's discussion in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* as support for the majority view that deportation for the evasion of military service in wartime was illegal.\(^{60}\) Arendt's penetrating discussion of the issue, therefore, had an unexpected impact on American law.

**General Criticism of Arendt's Analysis**

Viewed strictly as a historical work, this first portion of *Origins* is both brilliant and uneven. She seldom provides a concrete definition of what she means with a given term. One of Arendt's critics states that Arendt's "whole technique is in fact a social scientist's nightmare."\(^{61}\) Arendt does state clearly that her primary model for the nation-state is France after the revolution. But her generalizations concerning the nation-state system are very broad and sweeping. Furthermore, in the nineteenth

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century, only a portion of Europe was organized into nation-states. She argues that imperialism eroded the nation-state system, but she is unclear as to how this happened.

Her use of literary evidence can also be questioned. Arendt's discussion of Jewish assimilation into high society, relying heavily upon the writings of Marcel Proust, is subtle and masterful. On the other hand, her strange account of European racism in Africa, utilizing Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* as evidence, is questionable. Arendt had never visited Africa and the Conrad text is the primary evidence in her psychological conjecture on racism. The images she creates in this analysis are powerful, but more evidence is needed to support her argument. The relationship between the European exploitation of Africa and later developments on the continent of Europe is vague.

In his review of the work, Hans Kohn found the first part of *Antisemitism* to be "inconclusive," although he had high praise for the concluding chapter on the Dreyfus Affair. Kohn, the author of *Pan-Slavism*, did not find fault with her analysis of the racial pan-movements and quoted her approvingly. Nevertheless, it is easier to see the relationship between Pan-Germanism and Nazism than that

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between Pan-Slavism and Bolshevism.\textsuperscript{64} Despite the dubious quality of many of Arendt's historical generalizations, the work is permeated with an intensity and an intellectual brilliance which is striking.

\textsuperscript{64}Canovan, p. 38.
CHAPTER III

TOTALITARIANISM

In the third volume of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, entitled *Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt analyzed the appeal of totalitarian movements and their form of organization once in power. She was adamant in her view that totalitarianism was a unique phenomena which represented the most significant event of our time. She underlined this opinion in the essay "Tradition and the Modern Age."

Totalitarian domination as an established fact, which in its unprecedentedness cannot be comprehended through the usual categories of political thought, and whose 'crimes' cannot be judged by traditional moral standards or punished within the legal framework of our civilization, has broken the continuity of occidental history.¹

In Arendt's view, the totalitarian leaders, in an atmosphere of economic and social disintegration, were able to create a new form of government which was not traditional tyranny. Unlike the barbarian massacres perpetrated by Mongols or Crusaders, Arendt claimed that totalitarian crimes were carefully organized on such a vast scale that their actions almost defy our understanding.

Arendt pointed out that after World War I, there was a generation of men in Europe whose attitudes reflected an intellectual climate of despair. She stressed the importance of this group she labelled the "elite," the European intellectuals who waged a war of subversion against the dominant values of bourgeois Europe. She felt that the "front generation" of intellectuals contributed to the extremist atmosphere of Europe between the world wars. Arendt argued that the experience of life and death in the trenches had fostered cynicism and a supreme disgust with the bourgeois values of security, liberalism, and humanitarianism. In response to what the elite regarded a bourgeois sham and hypocrisy, these disenchanted intellectuals embraced an impersonal credo which was activist and radical. Arendt argued that in their search for new values, they glorified violence and cruelty in order to expose the hypocrisy and pointlessness of bourgeois culture. In the eyes of the elite (and Arendt as well), the bourgeoisie had "confounded all moral issues by parading publicly virtues which it not only did not possess in private and business life, but actually held in contempt. . . ."² In this context it appeared revolutionary to despise all traditional values and public respectability. Arendt claimed that the

elite came to admire the mob, the European underworld which made a mockery of respectability and whose values were ironically "the attitudes and convictions of the bourgeoisie cleansed of hypocrisy--- . . ."³ What this elite did not expect, however, was that the bourgeoisie (at least in Germany) would openly accept mob values and follow mob leaders in the end. The alliance between the intellectual elite and the mob, therefore, was only temporary.⁴

Arendt felt a great deal of contempt towards what she considered the bourgeois "double standard," that is, proclaiming publicly humanistic values and the common good while actually regarding political institutions "as the facade for private interests" and nothing more. According to Arendt, the totalitarian leaders, who were mainly recruited from the mob, were quick to capitalize on this bourgeois weakness. These leaders realized that "masses of co-ordinated philistines" were more useful than criminals in mass crimes "provided only that these crimes were well organized and assumed the appearance of routine jobs."⁵ The philistine, according to Arendt, was the bourgeois individual produced by the breakdown of his class. He was concerned only with his private interests and security.

³Ibid.
⁴Ibid., pp. 26-32.
⁵Ibid., p. 35.
Arendt believed that the totalitarian leaders understood that the most reliable servants of the movement were not fanatics or adventurers, but average philistines absorbed with the concerns of family, career, and private life.  

The masses, people declassed by the events of the interwar period, made totalitarianism possible in Arendt's opinion. She argued that totalitarian movements after 1930 recruited most of the members from this large mass of people heretofore apathetic or hostile to the traditional party system. The economic and social breakdown in Europe was so severe, according to Arendt, that a "new terrifying negative solidarity" developed against the status quo. The masses which developed from this process of social atomization often espoused a virulent nationalism and were on the lookout for sinister powers behind the scenes and secret conspiracies. In Arendt's analysis, which is based primarily upon the German experience, the masses could no longer accept a reality which appeared to them in comprehensible and fortuitous. When the masses lost their social status in Germany and Austria, through inflation and unemployment, Arendt maintained that "they lost the whole sector of communal relationships in whose framework common sense makes sense." In this poisoned environment, the

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6 Ibid., pp. 34-36.
7 Ibid., p. 13.
masses were prepared to accept the "fantastically fictitious consistency of an ideology. . . ." The totalitarian movement presented in its propaganda a world which was more consistent and logical than the real world. In an atomized society of alienated individuals, Arendt argued that mass ideologies, with all of their pseudoscientific absurdities, provided a clever means of organizing and manipulating deeply felt mass prejudices.

Propaganda, according to Arendt, was useful in two ways. During the initial stage, the totalitarian movement used propaganda to win over the masses during the struggle for power. But once in power, the totalitarian leadership used propaganda both to justify the movement to the outside world and to appeal to the groups at home who had not yet been indoctrinated. Arendt argued that totalitarian movements in power gradually shifted from propaganda to indoctrination and terror in order to achieve their aims. Totalitarian propagandists presented their absurd claims and predictions--cloaked in pseudoscientific intellectual garb and infused with fatalistic assumptions--to masses who were prepared to accept a consistent, ideological fiction.

Arendt believed that totalitarian leaders in power were making sure that their prophecies came true. They wanted to

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8Ibid., pp. 12-15; quotes on pp. 50, 51.
9Ibid., pp. 40-42.
appear infallible and were prepared to go to monstrous lengths in order to appear as the agents of irresistible historical forces. While Hitler publicly proclaimed that the Jews were parasites unfit to live in a racially pure Germany, he took measures to insure that the Jews were ruined and prepared secretly for their ultimate annihilation. When Stalin described the deviationists as members of "dying classes" in his speech before the Central Committee of the Communist Party in 1930, he was, in effect, making a prophecy which would be fulfilled through the wholesale liquidation of his political enemies, real or suspected. This process represents the self-fulfilling prophecy in its cruelest form. Arendt believed that whenever movements in power consistently acted upon reality in accordance with an ideology, then the totalitarian world came to resemble their peculiar perception of it. Arendt argued that Hitler and Stalin took pride in their ability to start from an ideological premise, such as the Jewish conspiracy or the class struggle, and then proceed with an iron logic to deduce the radical implications of the original idea. They ultimately achieved "the emancipation of thought from experience."\(^{10}\) Arendt felt that the totalitarian leaders were innovative not in their ideas, which were borrowed, but in their understanding of the

\(^{10}\)Ibid., p. 169.
compulsive nature of ideological thinking and their ability to restructure historical reality on this basis.

Arendt found much of the novelty of totalitarian movements in their unique forms of organization. She described the onion-like organization of the movement in which each layer became increasingly militant as one moved towards the center. The outside layer consisted of front organizations and sympathizers. The next layer was the party membership, which considered itself an elite within the general population. Within this party organization existed elite formations, such as the SS, which were more militant than the general party membership. Finally, there were other formations such as the SS Security Service which developed out of the general SS, itself originally an elite group formed from the SA. This structure served a two-fold purpose. Each inner-party group was surrounded by a less militant mass of party members which insulated the extreme militants from the outside world and served as a backdrop of normality for their actions. Fellow-travellers and outside observers generally came into contact with average party members and, therefore, could be deceived as to the radical nature of the movement.11

The totalitarian state itself, Arendt contended, was not monolithic, but rather shapeless. The acquisition of

11Ibid., pp. 62-69.
state power was not the final goal of the movement, but only the means to an end. She pointed out that the exercise of state power presented the movements with the dangers of ossification in office and de-radicalization. Therefore "the duplication of offices was a matter of principle," in order to prevent an unwanted institutionalization of state-party relations and to keep the movement fluid and in motion at all times.\footnote{12} The lines of responsibility were left vague and power constantly shifted among inner-party organizations. Only the leader could decide which agency would exercise his will in a given situation. The will of the leader at all times superseded the power of any existing hierarchy or constitutional precept.\footnote{13}

Arendt stressed the importance of terror in totalitarian rule, claiming that it was "the very essence of its form of government."\footnote{14} She felt strongly that the terror enforced by the Nazis and the Bolsheviks went far beyond the utilitarian violence of a traditional tyranny, which would be preoccupied with eliminating real enemies and frightening the population into submission. These traditional purposes came into play, but Arendt argued that the primary function of terror was to actualize the ideological fiction of the

\footnote{12}{Ibid., p. 95.} \footnote{13}{Ibid., pp. 94-99.} \footnote{14}{Ibid., p. 42.}
movement. While people were dominated and manipulated through terror, its primary purpose was "to liberate the forces of nature or history." Guilt or innocence did not exist on an individual basis. "Inferior races" or "dying classes," which violated by their very existence the laws of historical movement, were guilty by definition. Arendt believed that totalitarian terror aimed at destroying any vestige of human freedom and spontaneity. After the real enemies of the movement were eliminated, the "objective enemies" were rounded up for special treatment. Initially, these enemies were determined by ideology, for instance, Kulaks in Russia or Jews in Germany; but afterward, new objective enemies were uncovered and exterminated in turn.  

Arendt stressed the anti-utilitarian strain in the policies of the totalitarian regimes. There were numerous examples of this. Stalin eliminated many "objective enemies" whose expertise would have been invaluable in the economic development of the Soviet Union. His purge of the officer corps crippled the Red Army and probably contributed to Soviet military difficulties during the Russo-Finnish war and the early stages of the war against Germany. Hitler and his subordinates committed valuable resources to the implementation of the Final Solution late in the war when

15Ibid., pp. 162-163.
16Ibid.
conditions on the eastern front had deteriorated, and German military needs should have been of the utmost importance. The totalitarian leaders, according to Arendt, valued their secret police cadres more than the natural resources or productive powers of their respective countries.17

Arendt found this dogged defiance of common utilitarian motives most evident in the Nazi concentration camps. She considered these camps to be experiments in total domination as well as killing centers. An important function of the camps was to serve as proving ground for the elite formations. Their ideological indoctrination, she argued, was intensified in this grisly experiment in total domination. From the perspective of traditional conceptions of guilt or innocence, the selection of victims was arbitrary, dependent upon organizational and ideological needs. Arendt stressed that only after the real opposition had been eliminated or enslaved in Germany did the full development of the camp system occur. The vast numbers of Jews after 1938 provided the "objective enemy" which swelled the ranks of camp inmates.18

Arendt made a case that the ultimate aim of totalitarian domination in the camps was the "transformation of

17Ibid., pp. 115-16.
18Ibid., pp. 137-50.
human nature itself." The Nazi SS was attempting to destroy the individuality and spontaneity of victims, reducing them to an animal species existing in oblivion. The Nazis believed that "everything was possible," and felt that "human omnipotence" could result from proper organization. Arendt maintained that the camps were the most important institution of a totalitarian regime. The SS men desired not only submission and obedience from the victim, but aimed to destroy the will and identity of the unfortunate before he was killed. His juridical and spiritual death preceded his bodily destruction. Arendt claimed that the totalitarian leaders attempted to demonstrate that human beings were superfluous and expendable and that human freedom was an illusion. The reason that terror succeeded, to a large extent, was that the masses were steeped in pessimism and loneliness, existing within a spiritual isolation in which a common reality no longer existed. The over-arching reality of the ideology was not only a guide to action, but a higher reality to which all were subject.

19Ibid., p. 156.
20Ibid., p. 85.
21Ibid., pp. 148-56.
22Ibid., pp. 172-77.
Criticism of Her Model

On the whole, Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* met with a favorable reception upon its publication in 1951. Hans Kohn reviewed the book, and although he had a few reservations about the first and second parts of the work, he had high praise for the third part, *Totalitarianism*, and paraphrased her main arguments in a review article. H. Stuart Hughes said that the work was "unconventional history," but nevertheless was "a magnificent effort of creative imagination." Commenting upon the power of her analysis, Hughes stated: "It lights up in marvelous flashes of understanding the dark corners of recent history where the documents can never penetrate." This is an apt description of Arendt's unusual approach as a historical analyst.23

Academic critics were sometimes baffled by her unorthodox method and frequently criticized her loose terminology. Arendt used terms such as "bourgeoisie," "mob," "elite," "masses," and many others in great profusion, sometimes defining her terms idiosyncratically and other times not defining them at all.24 Critics pointed out that Arendt

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made many loose generalizations, for instance: "Imperialism must be considered the first stage in the political role of the bourgeoisie, rather than the last stage of capitalism." Many social scientists were bothered by Arendt's use of terms and sweeping statements, while at the same time, they admired her fresh insights.

A fundamental problem with Arendt's analysis of totalitarianism was that her portrait of Nazi Germany appeared to be more accurate than that of the Soviet Union under Stalin. She appeared to make generalizations from the German political experience and apply these findings to the Soviet Union. A critic remarked that Arendt's "unitotalitarian" assumption, equating Nazism and Stalinism, weakened her explanation of the Stalinist system. Many argued that while the Soviet communists rooted out and destroyed social classes wholesale, the Nazis were far less prone to disturb traditional social groups (except the Jews). Property confiscation was more sporadic in Nazi Germany than in the

25Arnold, "Three Critics of Totalitarianism" p. 31; Arendt, Imperialism, p. 18.


Soviet Union. Arendt failed to provide background information on Czarist Russia or the revolution, making her jump from the nineteenth century to Stalinism rather abrupt. The dates that Arendt provided as to when totalitarianism was established in Germany and the Soviet Union fluctuated, leading one critic to remark on her "indifference to professional standards..." Furthermore, the same critic wondered why, within the framework of Arendt's theory, Germany was the only large industrial state which became totalitarian. Other industrialized, mass societies had some of the same problems as Germany: inflation, depression, economic stagnation, social unrest, postwar exhaustion, political instability. Why did other western nations not develop totalitarian systems?

Arendt has often been criticized for underestimating the significance of nationalism within Nazism and Stalinist communism. She denied that nationalism played a significant role in the totalitarian movements, except for propaganda purposes, as in the Soviet Union during the war.


29Whitfield, Into the Dark, pp. 53-55, 58.

30Ibid., pp. 97-98.

31Ibid., pp. 73-80.
According to Arendt's theory, both totalitarian movements were supra-nationalist in character, owing to their Pan-Germanic and Pan-Slavic roots. (The relationship between Pan-Slavism and Bolshevism is vague in her analysis.) She was struck by the fact that members of the Nazi elite, describing themselves as racists rather than nationalists, often expressed contempt for the German people. Although the Nazis mouthed nationalist slogans, Arendt was impressed by the fact that "they tried and half succeeded in converting their defeat into a final catastrophe for the whole German people." In the logic of Nazi ideology, such a prosaic concern as national survival in case of defeat was unimportant. In Arendt's opinion, the Nazis and the Stalinists, with their profligate waste of human beings and national resources, behaved as foreign conquerors in their own nations.32

Arendt's arguments have merit, but perhaps she brushed aside the significance of nationalism too easily. There is no question that Hitler recklessly led Germany to the verge of ruin. Solicitude for one's own people is a desirable, although not a necessary, quality in a national leader. But her analysis begs the question: Does a despot lose his nationalist character through the adoption of an irrational ideology, the inefficient squandering of national resources,

32Arendt, Totalitarianism, pp. 111, 170, quote p. 114; Whitfield, Into the Dark, p. 78.
the murder of millions of persons, or the establishment of unrealistic national goals? Nazism had little in common with the liberal nationalism of the early nineteenth century. Nazism was a cynical, perverse manifestation of racial nationalism in which the biological, pseudo-scientific component was the ideological cutting-edge. In their propaganda and their public spectacles, however, the Nazis used the symbols of German nationalism in order to arouse the traditional patriotism of the German masses and to identify the Nazi party as the legitimate heir of Charlemagne, Frederick the Great, and Bismarck. These activities were designed to cement the loyalty of the majority of Germans to the new regime and to legitimize the Nazi party. Yet, it would be mistaken to assume that the nationalism of the Nazi party was only superficial. The "Germanophilism" and racism of many German thinkers dates back at least to 1848 and is well-documented.33 Hitler and the other Nazi leaders drew the most radical conclusions from a racist nationalism with sturdy roots in German cultural history. The punitive Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in 1918 foreshadowed Hitler's eastern policies. In a discussion of Hitler's ideology, Hajo Holborn stressed the continuity between the Pan-Germanic war aims of the Second

33A good discussion of this problem is in Hans Kohn, The Mind of Germany (New York, 1960).
Reich during World War I and Hitler's Plan for a new Germanic empire.\textsuperscript{34}

It is equally difficult to discount the element of nationalism in the policies of Stalin. The Great-Russian chauvinism of Stalin was a salient characteristic of his regime. The internationalist character of communist theory notwithstanding, Stalin's foreign policy included an aggressive pursuit of Russian territorial aims which were firmly grounded in Russian national tradition.\textsuperscript{35} Arendt argued that in both Germany and the Soviet Union the ideologies of Nazism and Stalinist communism transcended the traditional limitations of nationalism. Carrying her argument one step further, she asserted that in each case, the substance of the ideology "is devoured by the logic with which the 'idea' is carried out."\textsuperscript{36} Indeed, she presented an excellent discussion of how the coercive means obliterated the ends of each movement. In fact, her entire analysis in \textit{Totalitarianism} rested upon a deterministic model which was uncharacteristic of her other writings. This determinism presents a problem. If the totalitarian political process was such a relentless all-encompassing

\textsuperscript{34}Hajo Holborn, \textit{Germany and Europe} (New York, 1970), pp. 222-23.


\textsuperscript{36}Arendt, \textit{Totalitarianism}, p. 170.
phenomenon, and if neither Stalin nor Hitler was a traditional despot, then why did both of these totalitarian systems fail to survive the deaths of their leaders? Obviously, Germany was conquered by superior force, but the Soviet case is problematic. Arendt herself claimed that after Stalin's death, the Soviet Union could no longer be regarded as totalitarian.\textsuperscript{37} If the Stalinist totalitarian system could not survive the death of its leader, then her model appears to be faulty.\textsuperscript{38}

Critical evaluations of \textit{Origins}, and of the concept of totalitarianism itself, have fluctuated over the thirty years since its publication. Historian H. Stuart Hughes, who praised the book in a 1951 review article previously cited, castigated Arendt's analysis for its "historical amateurishness" in his 1975 book, \textit{The Sea Change}. Hughes described Arendt's book as a cold war relic which was "overwrought, highly colored, and constantly projecting interpretations too bold for the data to bear."\textsuperscript{39} In a similar vein, political scientist Robert Burrowes, in a 1969 journal article, alleged that \textit{Origins} was fatally flawed by an "over-reliance on deductive reasoning" and "a disregard for data" which caused the book "to lose touch with

\textsuperscript{37}\textit{Ibid.}, pp. xviii, xix.

\textsuperscript{38}\textit{Canovan, Political Thought}, p. 41.

\textsuperscript{39}\textit{Hughes, Sea Change}, p. 123.
reality." Burrowes questioned Arendt's credentials as a social scientist because her analysis was infused with a "judgmental and pejorative tone." He argued that cold war hysteria led many readers to mistake this "vast morality play" with reality. As a political scientist, Burrowes was offended by Arendt's denial that Stalinist terror was an inevitable by-product of a forced modernization process. Because totalitarianism developed as a concept outside of the realm of comparative politics, Burrowes found it to be suspect. He suggested that social scientists retain the concept, but use it sparingly.40

The concept of totalitarianism has had a checkered career. The adjective totalitario (totalitarian) appeared in a liberal Italian newspaper, as well as in a speech by Mussolini in 1925. In the 1932 edition the Enciclopedia Italiana, Mussolini referred to himself as a totalitarian in an article on fascism.41 Many would argue that Mussolini hardly qualified as a totalitarian leader. The term "totalitarian" appeared in both England and the United States in the years 1928 and 1929. Walter Lippman used the term in 1937 in the sense of an all-embracing ideological

despotism. In a 1939 symposium on totalitarianism, Carleton J. H. Hayes presented a paper called "The Novelty of Totalitarianism in the History of Western Civilization." According to Stephen Whitefield, Hayes anticipated several of Arendt's insights about totalitarianism, although Arendt never acknowledged Hayes' paper. During the 1930s and 1940s, the term "totalitarian" was used to denote an ideological one-party state, under a despotic leader, in which the official police power was dominant over all major social institutions. Historians and social scientists usually cited fascist Italy, Nazi Germany, and Soviet Russia as the prime examples of this form of government. Arendt's analysis, however, furthered the tendency to regard Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia as the only relevant examples of totalitarianism. During the 1950s, cold war analysts in the West used the term in referring to the Soviet Union and its satellites (and sometimes China). The term was abused to such an extent during the 1950s, and especially in the 1960s, that its usage often bordered on the absurd. Subsequently, many social scientists came to regard the term "totalitarian" as a propaganda tool which had little value.

for scholarly analysis. In the 1968 edition of the International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences, under the entry "Totalitarianism," Herbert J. Spiro discarded the term and predicted that in a future edition of the encyclopedia the term would probably be absent. Other social scientists favored retaining the term in the scholarly vocabulary and attempted to define it more precisely. When viewed from a historical angle, one is struck by the fact that if Arendt was correct in her application of the term, then it would apply at most to twelve years of German and twenty-five years of Russian history. Its usefulness, therefore, is limited.

Despite all of the qualifications and objections that can be raised about Origins, it remains a work well worth reading. Judged strictly according to accepted standards of historical scholarship, many parts of her analysis do not hold up to close scrutiny; yet to judge the work only in

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this manner is to do it an injustice. Margaret Canovan said of the work that "when it fails as history it succeeds as reflection." Stating "reflections of permanent value may be based on dubious history," Canovan cites Edmund Burke's Reflections on the Revolution in France as an example. Arendt's Origins is another example of a theoretical work which attempts to trace the causes of contemporary events in a very revealing and original manner. For readers accustomed to the traditions of positivism, empiricism, or pragmatism--especially scholars advocating "value-free" social sciences--Origins appears to be hopelessly disordered. The moral passion and the harsh intensity of the work are indicators of Arendt's unconcern with the methods and assumptions of American social science. Even with its flaws, however, Origins offers original insights about mass movements, one-party states, and the nature of twentieth-century politics. With its emotional intensity and its imaginative, yet critical, grasp of modern events, Origins ranks as literature.

46 Canovan, Political Thought, p. 48.
CHAPTER IV

THE EICHMANN CONTROVERSY

Hannah Arendt seized upon a unique opportunity after the capture of Adolph Eichmann in 1960. She offered her services as a reporter to the editor of The New Yorker, William Shawn. Shawn accepted her offer, and in 1961, Arendt attended the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem as a special correspondent. Her account of the trial, and its implications, was published in The New Yorker in February and March, 1963. A slightly enlarged edition of this work was published later that year by The Viking Press, entitled Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil. The book raised a storm of controversy and provoked a rancorous debate which lasted for several years. The tenor of the debate was shrill and uncompromising. The intellectual level of the arguments put forth by most of her critics was lamentably low. Arendt, for her part, made little effort to answer the serious charges levelled at her work.¹

¹The literature is voluminous. For a sampling, see Lionel Abel, "The Aesthetics of Evil: Hannah Arendt on Eichmann and the Jews," Partisan Review, 30 (Summer, 1963), 211-30; A. Alvarez, "It Did Not Happen Everywhere," New Statesman, 66 (October 11, 1963), 488-89; Daniel Bell, "The Alphabet of Justice: Reflections on 'Eichmann in Jerusalem,'" Partisan Review, 30 (Fall, 1963), 417-29;
One aspect of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* which enraged many readers was her view of Eichmann's personality and character. She viewed Eichmann as a middle-class mediocrity who, when assigned as chief of section IV-B-4 of the Reich Main Security Office (RSHA), emerged as a dull, colorless bureaucrat with no strong convictions. His only strengths, according to Arendt, were his undeniable organizational ability and his talent as a negotiator. At the trial, she found Eichmann to be imbued with self-deception and false bravado, usually expressing his opinions in the form of clichés. She quoted Eichmann's statement that he had never killed anyone and had never given orders to kill Jews. The striking thing about Eichmann, in Arendt's view, was that he was not a sadist, a pervert, or a killer, but was "terribly and terrifyingly normal."² She found him to be a rather shallow person who had merely obeyed the rules and discharged his responsibilities with dedication and diligence.


He claimed to have never hated the Jews, an assertion which Arendt accepted. She wrote: "Except for an extraordinary diligence in looking out for his personal advancement, he had no motives at all." Lacking any evil intent or deep ideological convictions, Eichmann appeared in her analysis as a dutiful totalitarian bureaucrat.

This portrait of Eichmann as career-man many Jewish readers found hard to swallow. The prosecution at Jerusalem had portrayed Eichmann as a vicious anti-Semite, "a perverted sadist," and an evil monster. This view was reinforced by two books written to discredit Arendt's findings: And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight by Jacob Robinson, former Israeli ambassador to the United Nations, founder and director of the Institute of Jewish Affairs of the World Jewish Congress, and the main assistant to the prosecution at the Eichmann trial; and Justice in Jerusalem by Gideon Hausner, former Attorney-General of Israel and prosecutor at the Eichmann trial. Robinson described Eichmann as the "overseer of most of the Nazi program to exterminate the Jews," a brutal Nazi with an "implacable lust for

3Ibid., p. 287.
4Ibid., pp. 21-51.

5Jacob Robinson, And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight: The Eichmann Trial, the Jewish Catastrophe, and Hannah Arendt's Narrative (New York, 1965); Gideon Hausner, Justice in Jerusalem (New York, 1966).
annihilation." Eichmann was not, in fact, "overseer" of the Final Solution, but was the main Nazi negotiator with Jewish leaders and organizations and the organizer of numerous deportations to the death camps. In these activities he was considered an expert. Hausner described Eichmann as "a dangerous, perverted personality" who was responsible, among many other things, for organizing the Jewish ghettos in Poland. This claim is unfounded. Much of the responsibility for the organization of the Jewish ghettos in Poland can be assigned to Reinhardt Heydrich, head of the RSHA, Eichmann's superior. In Poland, the Nazi administrators at the city or district level, to whom the Jewish councils were responsible, simply took the initiative in the formation of Jewish ghettos, in accordance with directives issued by the higher SS leaders or Nazi officials of the General Government of Poland. Eichmann's sphere of action did not include Poland, the USSR, or the Baltic states.

The corollary to Arendt's view of Eichmann was indicated in the phrase in the subtitle, "the banality of evil." Arendt felt that Eichmann's acts were characterized by an extreme "thoughtlessness," an inability to consider and

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7 Hausner, pp. 7, 55-56.
weigh the consequences of his actions. In a colloquial sense, she wrote, he "never realized what he was doing." If one examined his actions and statements closely, she argued, one could not "extract any diabolical or demonic profundity from Eichmann. . . ."9 Eichmann was no villain, in the traditional sense of choosing evil over good, but was a thoughtless totalitarian bureaucrat. Arendt argued that this did not explain away or justify his crimes, but only aided in the understanding of the circumstances surrounding his acts. Arendt returned to this subject in later writings, arguing that evil was possible even when wicked motives were absent.10 Lack of conscience could be a consequence of an inability to think, to reflect upon reality and one's relation to others. Eichmann, according to Arendt's portrait, was notably lacking in the ability to think and reflect. He had totally adapted himself to bureaucratic routine procedures during the war, and removed from this context, he was left only with pathetic clichés or stock platitudes. Arendt argued that the thinking process tends to erode accepted opinions and unexamined assumptions, thereby liberating the faculty of judgment and the human conscience. Evil itself, despite its monstrous potential in


the world, may be in many cases a very shallow phenomena, with no great spiritual or psychological depth.\textsuperscript{11} Alfred Kazin, Arendt's erstwhile friend, labelled the above arguments as "appalling German intellectual swank" based upon an "unpolitical Heideggerian elitism. . . ."\textsuperscript{12}

The most controversial portion of Arendt's \textit{Eichmann in Jerusalem} dealt with the complicity of the Jewish councils in the implementation of the Final Solution.\textsuperscript{13} She wrote: "To a Jew this role of the Jewish leaders in the destruction of their own people is undoubtedly the darkest chapter of the whole dark story." Without Jewish help in administrative and police matters, she argued, the Germans could not have carried out the huge task of annihilation with such efficiency. The tone of her remarks can be seen in the following:

Jewish officials could be trusted to compile the lists of persons and their property, to secure money from the deportees to defray the expenses of their deportation and extermination, to keep track of vacated apartments, to supply police forces, to help seize Jews and get them on trains, until, as a last gesture, they handed over the assets of the Jewish community in good order for final confiscation.\textsuperscript{14}

\textsuperscript{11}Ibid.


\textsuperscript{14}Ibid., pp. 117-18.
She wrote of the Jewish Councils, that in reading their manifestoes, "we can still sense how they enjoyed their new power--. . ."15 The Jewish resistance groups, for their part, were small, weak, and not representative of the Jewish population as a whole. Arendt felt that the prosecution at the Eichmann trial was understandably reluctant to discuss the degree of cooperation between the Nazis and the Jewish authorities. Arendt paraphrased Eichmann as saying that "the Nazis had regarded this cooperation as the very cornerstone of their Jewish policy." Without the cooperation of the Jewish leadership, which Arendt claimed was almost universal, there would have been a much smaller number of victims in the Final Solution.16

The charges raised by Arendt created an explosive debate which lasted almost three years. This controversy cost Hannah Arendt both friends and valuable time.17 Numerous articles attacking or defending different aspects of the book appeared in Partisan Review and other journals and magazines. There were several forums and panel debates about the book. Jewish organizations, anxious to discredit the work, sponsored speakers and publicists to refute Arendt and in some cases, to question her credentials as a scholar,

15Ibid., p. 118.
16Ibid., pp. 61, 114-26.
17Young-Bruehl, pp. 339-78.
or her loyalty as a Jew.\textsuperscript{18} Other writers had touched upon the theme of Jewish compliance in the destructive process, notably Gerald Reitlinger, \textit{The Final Solution}, and Raul Hilberg, \textit{The Destruction of the European Jews}, both of which Arendt used in the preparation of her work.\textsuperscript{19} Critics argued that both Arendt and Hilberg were unable to read and use the source materials available in such languages as Yiddish, Hebrew, Polish, Hungarian, and Russian. Critics were quick to point out errors in fact and distortions of the evidence on Arendt's part. Arendt participated little in this debate, although she answered a few of the charges in a postscript added to the paperback edition of \textit{Eichmann in Jerusalem} and in an article "Truth and Politics."\textsuperscript{20} Unfortunately, both Arendt and her critics generally left behind the main elements of her interpretation, as outlined


above, and dealt with side issues and polemical irrelevancies.\footnote{Whitfield, \textit{Into the Dark}, pp. 237-47; Young-Bruehl, pp. 337-77.}

In the work, Arendt's occasional flippant or sarcastic remarks about the Jewish leadership were accentuated by an ironic detachment towards the actions and sufferings of the Jewish people. Her critics were offended by the cold, analytical quality of her analysis. Jacob Robinson discussed at length the intense moral dilemma faced by the Jewish leaders responsible for drawing up deportation lists for the Nazis. He pointed out the fact that ultimately, the Jewish councils were in no position to change or influence Nazi policy.\footnote{Robinson, \textit{Crooked Made Straight}, pp. 173-87, 166.} Lionel Able argued that Arendt blurred the distinction between the Nazi-selected Jewish councils and the indigenous Jewish leadership.\footnote{Abel, "The Aesthetics of Evil," p. 212.} Daniel Bell, in a well-written piece, pointed out that Arendt's condemnation of Jewish leaders transformed a historical proposition into a moral judgment.\footnote{Bell, "The Alphabet of Justice," p. 423.} Other critics discussed the moral ambiguities inherent in the position of the Jewish leaders, and stressed the deceptive practices used by the Nazis in
order to achieve Jewish compliance. Critics argued that the sweeping character of Arendt's statements was unwarranted, because it could not be proven, according to the historical evidence, that the role of the Jewish councils was always such a decisive factor in the destruction of European Jewry. In countries such as Greece and Yugoslavia, where Jewish councils were weak or nonexistent, Jewish populations were still rounded up for deportation. The mobile killing units, the Einsatzgruppen, murdered two million Jews in eastern Poland, the Soviet Union, and the Baltic states, regions where Jews were mostly disorganized. In a recent study, Lucy S. Dawidowicz pointed out that at the time that Arendt published her book, little scholarly research had been published about the Jewish councils and their role in the Final Solution. Few of the essential documents had been published and most of these were available only in Hebrew, Yiddish, and Polish, languages with which Arendt and most scholars were unfamiliar.

Arendt detested apologetics and assumed a stern, moralizing tone which was offensive to many readers. She seemed to sacrifice historical accuracy for shock effect on


26 Laqueur, p. 256.

occasion. One finds curious statements in the work, such as
the assertion that Eichmann's reading of Theodor Herzl's Der
Judenstaat (The Jewish State) "converted Eichmann promptly
and forever to Zionism." The assertion may be hyperbole,
but it is an example of her tendency to exaggerate, to
overstate her case. She has been criticized for emphasizing
the comic, incidental, or ludicrous aspects of the Final
Solution, while ignoring the tragic implications of the
events of this period. The unfortunate tone of Eichmann
in Jerusalem, along with the factual errors which occur all
too often in the text, tend to detract from her main
arguments. The work is flawed and does not represent Arendt
at her best.

Despite the inadequacies of the work Arendt's portrait
of Eichmann, although certainly not the last word on the
matter, was compelling and thought provoking. To some
extent, her discussion of Eichmann has set the parameters
for debate concerning the obedient Nazi bureaucrats who had
organized mass murder. She found it difficult to take
Eichmann seriously, yet her portrait of Eichmann comple-
mented her discussion in The Origins of Totalitarianism
dealing with the importance of average mass-men, or
"philistines," in the implementation of totalitarian

28Arendt, Eichmann, p. 40.

29Scholem, p. 242; Bell, "The Alphabet of Justice,"
p. 428.
policies. Her brilliant sketch of Eichmann may well have been the saving grace of the book. She destroyed any vestiges of romance or mystery surrounding Eichmann and created an image of the mild-mannered bureaucratic killer which was unforgettable and chilling.

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CHAPTER V

THE PHILOSOPHER IN HISTORY

As a political theorist, Hannah Arendt dealt with such problems as the breakdown of tradition and authority, the loss of political community, alienation, the nature of freedom, and the rise of novel forms of government in the twentieth century. With penetrating insight, she probed the spiritual malaise of modern Europe, and examined the political and cultural roots of the European decline since World War I. Arendt knew that some of these problems could be divorced from its historical context. Arendt often commented upon the significance of events:

Events, past and present—not social forces and historical trends, nor questionnaires and motivation research, nor any other gadgets in the arsenal of the social sciences—are the true, the only reliable teachers of political scientists, as they are the most trustworthy sources of information for those engaged in politics.¹

Although Arendt was a political philosopher rather than an historian, she had some very pronounced opinions about the study of the past. She regarded the study of events as a primary means of utilizing the rich store of human experience found in the literature and records of the past.

There are several important philosophical presuppositions which underlie Arendt's speculations about history. One of these she phrases in the following manner: "Ideas are mental artifacts, and their history presupposes the unchanging identity of man the artificer." There are numerous variations of this idea in historiography. Henri Pirenne once wrote: "All historical construction ... rests upon a postulate: that of the eternal identity of human nature." In Arendt's view, human identity is a constant; but the problematical concept of "human nature" is moot in Arendt's thinking. If there were such a thing as a human nature, she argued, then we must need a god to define it. Arendt was loath to discuss man's "inner nature" or possible spiritual motivation.

Arendt believed that freedom was manifest in the human ability to act in the world and "the capacity to begin," to initiate actions or processes. She asserted that "to be free and to act are the same." Historical processes set in motion by human actions might become as automatic and

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3Henri Pirenne, "What Are Historians Trying to Do?," The Philosophy of History in Our Time, edited by Hans Meyerhoff (Garden City, 1959), p. 95.


5Arendt, Between Past and Future, p. 153.
compelling as natural processes, since automatism is characteristic of all processes. Nevertheless, she held that a spontaneous freedom characterizes the exercise of the will, the human faculty which binds us to the world. Arendt affirmed the existential view that man could always freely act upon the world, but the outcome of his actions could never be predicted or controlled. Human action was indeterminate or contingent in nature. Arendt often pointed out that much of what we accept as historical reality seems to have originated in a fortuitous manner. Contingency and unpredictability appear to rule human affairs to a greater extent than we sometimes are willing to admit. In Arendt's view, contingency was the price that man paid for freedom.

In the examination of any concatenation, or casual series of events, Arendt points out what has become a commonplace among historians: that the human mind is never able to unravel all of the relevant elements in an event or situation. The observer must exercise his good judgment, in light of his understanding, to identify and explain the most significant and compelling of the many causes which give rise to an event. She warns the observer, however, not to reject unusual historical antecedents which might appear improbable at first glance. One must be prepared "to look

6Ibid., p. 168.
7Arendt, Willing, pp. 27-28, 134-36.
for the unforeseeable and unpredictable" in human affairs. Historical phenomena can follow "subterranean" passages which escape the view of enlightened observers, accustomed to charging European history from the tradition of western rationalism or from the perspective of an ideology. In light of her observations, one can understand the caution of modern historians who usually assume multiple causation in describing the origins of a historical event. Furthermore, the multitude of modern historical approaches, and the proliferation of new fields of historical research, attest to the fact that creative historians can always amplify well-known facts, open new lines of inquiry, and pose new questions to old historical problems. The past offers a virtually inexhaustible store of human experience.

Arendt rejects a primary assumption of historicism, that the nature of something can be sufficiently understood by an explanation of its origins or development. She argues that however we might construe the meaning of an event, this meaning that we find will transcend the causes which we attribute to it. She offers as an example the disparity between cause and effect in an event as cataclysmic as World War I. She remarks:

This past itself comes into being only with the event itself. Only when something irrevocable has happened

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8Arendt, Between Past and Future, pp. 169-71.
9Arendt, Antisemitism, pp. x-xi.
can we even try to trace its history backward. The event illuminates its own past, it can never be deduced from it.\textsuperscript{10}

Whenever an important event occurs--one with significant consequences--it appears to the historian as the culmination of what came before. When this provisional "end" occurs, the historian can find in the maze of past events a beginning and reconstruct a story which may have been hidden.\textsuperscript{11} Thus, there is an analytical reciprocity between past and present.

Returning to the problem of causality, Arendt stated in an early work that "causality is an altogether alien and falsifying category in the historical sciences."\textsuperscript{12} At this point in her thinking, serious difficulties arise for the historian. Taking her assertion at face value, one would need to consider each event as unique and unprecedent, as if floating in air. The historian who accepted this view would be compelled to write chronicles or tales, rather than history as we know it. It is interesting that Arendt herself, in her overtly historical works, did, of necessity, sketch casual sequences which culminated in the rise of totalitarianism. The reason that she overstated her case in this earlier work is found in her rebellion against the


\textsuperscript{11}\textit{Ibid.}

\textsuperscript{12}\textit{Ibid.}
notion that modern men are helpless captives of historical processes which determine events and human actions. She was, in other words, incorrigibly opposed to determinism. She felt that we should never humbly submit to the "weight of past events" as if things could not have occurred in any other way.  

She freely admitted in her final work, The Life of the Mind, that "without an a priori assumption of some unilinear sequence of events having been caused necessarily, and not contingently, no explanation of any coherence would be possible."  

Arendt observes that the world we are born into as a "given" is the result of various actions or events in the past. Natural and man-made processes, [technology has brought these two very close together], condition the historical environment so that man confronts a world in which necessity appears to rule. Arendt follows a simple argument of Bergson that once an act has been performed, it loses "its air of contingency" and becomes a fact which conditions our existence. Then the act, however arbitrarily it happened originally, appears clothed in necessity. The danger which this poses for historical perspective is that "every sequence of events looks as

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13 Arendt, Antisemitism, p. x.
14 Arendt, Willing, p. 140.
15 Ibid., pp. 30-31.
though it could not have happened otherwise." Arendt calls this an illusion. She stresses that the historian must always be aware of the contingent nature of processes. Through their actions, men will modify these processes over time.16 Historians are familiar with the problem of describing and attempting to explain what has happened, or evolved, without giving the phenomena in question an aura of inevitability.

Arendt was caustic in her comments on positivism and the modern social sciences. Her opinions bring to mind the observation of Wilhelm Dilthey that positivism tends to "mutilate historical reality in order to adapt it to the ideas of the natural sciences."17 She regarded modern social science vocabulary and jargon as "repulsive," and considered as ludicrous the belief that the careful gathering of facts would somehow generate theory. She deplored the tendency of many social scientists to ignore what historians regard as the primary sources.18 Throughout her works she stressed the importance of events, past and present, as an infinitely more reliable source of


18Arendt, Between Past and Future, p. 102.
information about human affairs than empirical gadgetry.\textsuperscript{19} Arendt often stated what historians are acutely aware of: that factual truth itself is often difficult to establish and verify. Witnesses may be unreliable and evidence cannot always be accepted at face value. Whenever controversial events are discussed, even in an open society, opinionated observers may regard certain factual truths as mere opinion. In closed societies, inconvenient facts are distorted or obliterated entirely. Arendt urged that the separate categories of fact, opinion, and interpretation be strictly maintained.\textsuperscript{20}

Arendt reminded historians to preserve their impartiality without concerning themselves with objectivity as such. She was critical of Leopold von Ranke's ideal of the "extinction of the self," coupled with the maintenance of a perfect distance from the events as revealed in the sources. She quoted Johann Gustav Droysen, who once labelled this attitude as "the objectivity of the eunuch." Arendt admitted that one might withhold praise and blame, but she pointed out what all historians encounter: the selection of material, the criteria for selection, and the arrangement of facts, all condition history as it is written. On the question of impartiality, Arendt admired the example of


\textsuperscript{20}Arendt, "Truth and Politics," pp. 6-17.
Herodotus, who set out to keep the deeds of the Greeks and the barbarians from falling into oblivion. Arendt questioned whether a history of ideas was possible in the strictest sense, since she disputed "the assumption that ideas follow and generate one another in a temporal succession." She felt that the assumption just cited made sense only in Hegelian dialectics. Arendt was repelled by the abstract character of Hegel's philosophy of history, with its tendency to transform the institutions and activities of men into personified concepts held within a rigid teleological structure. Her method of dealing with the history of ideas was flexible, idiosyncratic, and often unorthodox.

Arendt was more interested in unique or cataclysmic events than in the routine aspects of human affairs. Interruptions and extraordinary events she regarded as more significant than the cycles of economic and social activity by which we subsist. She stated that the "impact of an event was never wholly explicable." Much of our world came into being, she argued, through coincidence or the

21Arendt, Between Past and Future, pp. 49-51.
22Arendt, Willing, pp. 28, 149.
23Ibid., p. 156.
24Arendt, Between Past and Future, p. 43.
25Ibid., p. 170.
"miracle of accident." Human initiative itself insured a high degree of unpredictability. Since "the unforeseeable and unpredictable" constantly arise in the realm of human affairs, Arendt affirms "the miraculous character inherent in those events which establish historical reality." The "miracle" she describes is that of men who can freely act and create a common reality.26

Arendt believed that history is not merely a record, but is also a story which makes sense of the past. Whenever a great event altered the course of history and provided an end to what came before, then other events of the past could be formed into a meaningful story by the historian, using not only his scholarly skills, but also the eye of human understanding. She defined this understanding as "that form of cognition, by which acting men... eventually can come to terms with what irrevocably happened and be reconciled with what unavoidably exists."27 She reminded her readers that remembrance was, for the Greeks, a way of providing some permanence for the works, deeds, and words of men. Mnemosyne, the goddess of memory, was the mother of the other muses.28 If memory were tempered with a sympathetic

26Ibid.
28Arendt, Between Past and Future, p. 43.
appreciation of our heritage and our past, then the faculty of judgment could lead to this understanding.

Does history teach lessons? Arendt thought not, at least in the literal sense. But she did believe that the past was always with us, in a very real sense:

I rather believe with Faulkner, "The past is never dead, it is not even past," and this for the simple reason that the world we live in at any moment is the world of the past; it consists of the monuments and the relics of what has been done by men for better or worse; its facts are always what had become. . . . In other words, it is quite true that the past haunts us; it is the past's function to haunt us who are present and wish to live in the world as it really is, that is, has become what it is now.29

For those particularly "haunted" by the past, professional historians, history need not be didactic, but it should help to explain who we are in the world. The historian need not worry about the "lessons of history," or questions of ultimate meaning, as long as he can formulate plausible explanations which are true to our experience. He will never lack questions.

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