

inexplicable historical error, cannot be rationalized, and other tautologies of that kind. They are the gestures of one who wishes to stand above the fray. I have never succumbed to the temptation of self-pity, nor, it may be, to that of true sublimity and divine perspicacity, but I have known from the beginning that my disgrace was not merely a humiliation; it also concealed redemption, if only my heart could be courageous enough to accept this

redemption, this peculiarly cruel form of grace, and even to recognize grace at all in such a cruel form.» And if you now ask me what still keeps me here on this earth, what keeps me alive, then I would answer without any hesitation: love. ←

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European Humanism and the Jewish Catastrophe:

Hannah Arendt's Answers to Questions Discussed in a *Maariv* Round Table

In a letter of June 9, 1964, Geula Cohen, the editor of the Round Table Department at the Israeli evening paper *Maariv*, published in Tel Aviv, invited Hannah Arendt to write a contribution for a »Round Table« devoted to »the causes of the Jewish catastrophe under Hitler« to be printed on July 17, 1964. According to *Maariv*, which identified Arendt as a »Jewish-American historian,« a Hebrew edition of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* was due to be published »soon.« (Note: As it happened, the Hebrew edition did not appear until the summer 2000, in a translation by Arieh Uriel. At that time, the original translator, Boas Evron, stated in *Ha'aretz* that it may have been Prime Minister David Ben Gurion himself who intervened to stop the book's planned publication in 1964.)

Hannah Arendt responded to the request; a copy of the English typescript she sent to Tel-Aviv that summer is preserved with her papers at the Library of Congress in Washington (Container 34). The following September, this English original was printed without significant changes by *The Jewish World: An Independent Illustrated Monthly Review* (published by the American Jewish Community, Inc.), with a reference to the publication in *Maariv*. The *Jewish World* version is reprinted below. The Hebrew version published in *Maariv* is largely a literal translation of the original; its few minor changes do not distort the meaning of Arendt's

statements. For instance, the editors cut out the sentence »the Nazis, alas, were no »barbarians,« which has no bearing on Arendt's argument, provocative as it is in itself. It is all the more surprising, indeed, that the sentence was not eliminated by the editors of *The Jewish World*. (We thank Dr. Edna Brocke, director of the Alte Synagoge Essen, Germany, for her help in providing the Hebrew version and comparing it with the English.)

Besides Hannah Arendt, eleven well-known figures contributed to the Round Table, among them Nahum Goldmann, President of the World Zionist Organization, the British historian Arnold J. Toynbee, the Italian poet Salvatore Quasimodo and the French writer André Maurois. (Only a selection of the pieces from the *Maariv* symposium were published in *The Jewish World*.)

The *Newsletter* reprints Arendt's statements primarily for two reasons: (1) The document itself has remained almost unknown, as *The Jewish World* was little read among academics and intellectuals. It provides a short and clear statement of an opinion of Arendt's on a topic that occupied her intellectually for her entire life, and which forms the background for her often-quoted words, »This ought not to have happened.« Some of her comments here bear directly on *Eichmann in Jerusalem* and the controversy it provoked. (2) The document gives proof of a fact which, if known at all, deserves →

more attention than it has received so far, i.e., the fact that in Israel »Hannah Arendt's excommunication« (Amos Elon) did not begin immediately after her English trial report had appeared in *The New Yorker* in February and March of 1963; nor even right after the publication of the letters exchanged between Arendt and Gershom Scholem over the book, occurring the following summer. (Note: For Elon's statement see his speech delivered at a conference held at Einstein Forum, Potsdam, in 1997, cf. *Hannah Arendt Revisited*, [Suhrkamp, 2000], pp. 17ff., and *The New York Review of Books* [November 6, 1997], pp. 25ff. Scholem's letter dated June 23, 1963, appeared in print together with Arendt's reply in Israel on August 16 of that summer in the *Mitteilungsblatt des IOME*; the exchange became widely known after it was published in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* on October 19, 1963).

Maariv posed the following questions

A. Hitler slaughtered and the world kept silent. Does the continuous silence and the reappearance of neo-Nazism imply that the Nazi barbarism may have its roots in European humanism?

B. Are the sources of the helplessness of the Jewish masses, as displayed when they were driven to their slaughter, as well as the helplessness displayed by the Jewish leadership both in Palestine and in the Diaspora, before and during the catastrophe – of an objective or of a subjective nature?

Hannah Arendt replied

Ad A. The world did not keep silent; *but apart from not keeping silent, the world did nothing.*

In 1938, years before the slaughter began, the world, for instance England and America, had almost unanimously reacted with »horror and indignation« (Alan Bullock) to the November pogroms. But these verbal denunciations were contradicted by administrative measures in the immigration policy of all European and a great number of overseas countries; this policy confirmed in fact, though only rarely in words, Nazi antisemitism. Those whom the Nazis had declared to be outlaws in their own territory became outlaws everywhere. Antisemitism was neither the only nor the decisive reason for this development; the political structure of the European nation state was unable to assimilate

late large groups of foreigners, and its legal system was unable to cope with statelessness. However, the simple fact that all refugees from Nazi territories had been »undesirable« by definition was of considerable importance as a psychological preparation for the holocaust.

The slaughter took place in the midst of a war whose outcome for years was, to put it mildly, uncertain. It is understandable that the reaction was slow to come; it came in 1943, when victory had become a certainty, with the Moscow Declaration where for the first time »monstrous crimes« are officially mentioned. At about the same time, the first preparations for the trials of »war criminals« were made, and the peace aims, laid down in 1941 in the Atlantic Charter, were changed into »unconditional surrender.« These were matters of policy, considerably more than verbal denunciations; since deliberate extermination of a whole people was unprecedented since the days of antiquity, it is difficult to compare the world's reaction to the slaughter of the Jewish people with its reaction to similar atrocities in time of war. The nearest analogy is the Armenian massacre in World War I, when 600,000 people were slaughtered by the Turks – a very high figure if one considers the difference in technique – and there is hardly any doubt that »the world's« reaction both in word and deed was stronger in our case. Still the truth is that, apart from planning for the coming victory, the Allies did nothing to stop the slaughter: they did not bomb the death centers or the communication lines leading to them; and the neutral powers, with very few exceptions, did less than nothing; they did their best in closing their borders hermetically against all those who might try to escape.

Before we jump to any general conclusions about »European humanism« let us consider some of these facts. *First*, the denunciations were wrong and remained ineffective because they did not mention the Jews by name, although everybody knew that Jews were killed regardless of nationality and denomination. The reason was that not only those in power but public opinion in general – large parts of Jewish public opinion not excluded – labored under the fantastic illusion that to call a Jew a Jew and a spade a spade would be a concession to Hitler. This was a failure, not of European humanism, but of European liberalism (socialism not exclu-

ded) – its unwillingness to face realities and its tendency to escape into some fool's paradise of firmly held ideological convictions when confronted with facts. *Second*, while we don't yet know the reason for the failure of the Allies to act on the military level, there is no doubt that a fatal misunderstanding was among the contributing factors: since the slaughter took place in time of war and was perpetrated by people in uniform, it was considered as part of the war, a »war crime« in the authentic sense of the word, i.e., an excess transgressing the rules in the pursuit of victory. The best way to stop the excesses of war, thus the argument ran, was to stop the war. That these massacres had not the slightest connection with military operations was obvious even then, but it was not understood, and the fact that first the Nuremberg Trials and then all other postwar trials have counted these killing operations among »war crimes« – the new concept of »crime against humanity« not-withstanding – shows how plausible this argument must have sounded during the war. It seems that the world has needed two decades to realize what actually happened in those few years and how disastrously almost all the concerned, and certainly all men in high position, failed to understand it even when they were in possession of all factual data.

The last sentence implies that I don't agree with you about the »continuous silence.« A study of the literature published during the last decade, even a mere glance at the bestseller lists of the last few years – Grass and Hochhuth in Germany, Schwartz-Bart in France, Shirer in America, the Anne-Frank-Diary everywhere – prove, on the contrary, that few matters are so much in the center of the world's interest and attention as that »Hitler slaughtered and the world did nothing.« Moreover, public denunciations on the governmental level have by now become a routine performance in most countries outside the Arab world. And still, there is an ominous continuity with the past and its catastrophic failures in the continuing disparity between word and deed. Millions of words have been written and spoken about the »crime against humanity« and yet, there is no sign that we have come any nearer to the establishment of an International Tribunal where mankind, the plaintiff, could bring suit against those who have offended humanity. Or take Germany, where people continue to assure us of how guilty they »feel« and where nevertheless

surprisingly lenient sentences are handed down in almost all Nazi trials against convicted murderers while prominent former Nazis are being kept in high public positions, and recent public opinion polls show that about 40% of the population are against all these trials and another 40% preferred to know nothing about them. This failure to act is dangerous enough, but I don't believe that it is due to a »reappearance of neo-Nazism« of which I can hardly see any serious signs in either Europe or America (I presume you think of Nasser's Egypt).

What then is the connection between »Nazi barbarism« and »European humanism«? The Nazis, alas, were no »barbarians,« and I even suspect that your question was prompted by those Hölderlin-reading mass murderers with academic titles who were so very prominent in the Nazi bureaucracy. But is it really an argument against Hölderlin or Beethoven to be read and listened to, perhaps even appreciated, by the commanders of the *Einsatzgruppen*? What does it prove for or against Greek culture when a well-known Professor of Greek in Germany was able to translate the *Horst-Wessel-Lied* into classical Greek verse in order to prove how reliably he would serve the new regime?

Still, I don't deny the significance of the extraordinary ease with which almost the whole intelligentsia in Germany, and a large part of it in other countries, be made into Nazi fellow-travellers and sometimes into fellow-criminals. But this is hardly to be blamed upon the contents of »European humanism« however one may define it; it speaks against no ideas or notions or even ideologies so much as it does against this new class of intellectuals who, as literati and bureaucrats, as scholars and scientists, no less than as critics and providers of entertainment, are so urgently needed by modern society that they are about to become its »ruling class.« Here we have indeed every reason to be worried, for they have proved more than once in recent times that they are more susceptible to whatever happens to be »public opinion« and less capable of judging for themselves than almost any other social group.

There is, finally, another aspect to your question which you don't mention and upon which I touch only because it seems to me rather important. European humanism, far from being the »root of →

Nazism,« was so little prepared for it or any other form of totalitarianism that, in understanding and trying to come to terms with this phenomenon, we can rely neither on its conceptual language nor on the traditional metaphors. And while the ensuing and necessary reappraisal of our mental habits is truly agonizing, this situation certainly contains also a threat to »humanism« in all its forms – it is in the danger of becoming irrelevant.

Ad B. *The Jewish masses inside Nazi-occupied Europe were objectively helpless.*

Once they were caught and driven to their deaths, they behaved like all other groups in the same circumstances. Many reports from the concentration camps as well as the death centers, where of course not only Jews were massacred, stress the horror of watching »these processions of human beings going like dummies to their deaths.« (I quote intentionally from David Rousset's report on Buchenwald where no Jews were involved.)

There are several factors which may help to explain this apathy. *Foremost* among them is the simple and often forgotten fact that there are many things considerably worse than death, that there is a great difference between dying a slow and agonizing death and dying the relatively quick and easy death before the firing squad or in the gas chambers. There is, *second*, what Tadeusz Borowski, the Polish poet, had to say in his report on his own stay in Auschwitz: »Never before was hope stronger than man, and never before did hope result in so much evil as in this camp. We were taught not to give up hope. That is why we die in the gas oven.« *Hope stonger than man* – that means hope destructive of the very humanity of man. And even more destructive perhaps of this humanity was the very innocence of those who were trapped in this whole monstrosity, namely, that they were innocent even from the viewpoint of their persecutors. Their apathy was to a very large extent the almost physical, automatic response to the challenge of *absolute meaninglessness*.

The Jewish leadership inside Europe was objectively hardly less helpless than the Jewish masses. And nothing more needed to be said about them if they had recognized this helplessness and relinquished their positions. Objectively speaking, there were hardly more than three alternatives: to admit their

impotence and to tell the people all is lost, *sauve qui peut*; or, to accompany their charges on the voyage to the East and suffer the same fate; or, as was notably done in France, to use the Nazi-controlled Jewish council as a cover for underground work in which one tried to help Jews to escape. Wherever Jews, either because of their numbers or because of their geographical location, could not be killed on the spot – that is, everywhere except in Soviet Russia – the Jewish leadership, instead of being merely helpless, became in fact an important factor in the bureaucracy of destruction. To quote but one of the many extant documents – from the Nazis or from survivors – »with the aid of the Jewish council, the deportations from [Dutch] provinces proceeded without a hitch.«

And now, finally, the Jewish leadership both in Palestine and in the Diaspora: It has often been argued that they failed to dramatize the plight of European Jewry, that they were not insistent or not imaginative or not courageous enough in their dealings with the Allies, and I have no wish to deny this. Still, I believed then, and I am inclined to believe today, that under the circumstances nothing would have helped but a »normalization« of the Jewish position, that is, a real declaration of war, the establishment of a Jewish army, composed of Palestinian and stateless Jews all over the world, and the recognition of the Jewish people as belligerents. (It is well known that Jews who enjoyed the status of belligerents were saved – American and English Jews in civilian internment camps, Jewish prisoners-of-war from all Allied armies even from the defeated French army. (The only exception was the Red army. Russia had never signed the Geneva Convention.)

Whether or not this was a pipe dream, no one can tell who has not studied the archives of the Jewish Agency for Palestine and those of England and America, which are not yet open to the public. ←