

The Reception of Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem* in the United States 1963-2011

By Daniel Maier-Katkin

Professor of Criminology and Criminal Justice, and Fellow of the Center for Advancement of Human Rights, Florida State University; author of *Stranger from Abroad: Hannah Arendt, Martin Heidegger, Friendship and Forgiveness* (2010)

Eichmann in Jerusalem first saw the light of day as a series of five articles in the *New Yorker* in February and March of 1963. Hannah Arendt was traveling in Europe at the time. Her first indicator of the magnitude of the storm of indignation that would follow was a friendly letter from Henry Schwarzschild, warning that his organization, the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai Brith, and others were preparing a hostile attack. The articles in the *New Yorker*, he wrote, were fast becoming

the sensation of the New York Jewish scene. Much wailing and wringing of hands, especially on the part of the German Jews, who feel their honor and that of their late friends attacked. You may confidently expect to be the object of very great debate and animosity here; the straws in the wind blow more furiously everyday.

Schwarzschild admired Arendt's insight into Eichmann as "Kafkaesquely normal," her "demotion" of Eichmann to his real place in the Nazi hierarchy, her emphasis on "grey bureaucratic normality," as "greatly valuable contributions." He explained that he was writing to forewarn her that others were reading the articles differently. "Come back [to New York] soon," he ended, "I can't single-handedly preserve you from character and scholarship defenestration."¹

A few days later she received a hostile note from Siegfried Moses, written on behalf of the Council of Jews from Germany, making a "declaration of war" on her and the Eichmann book.² Moses flew to Switzerland to meet with Arendt and demanded that she stop publication of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* in book form. She refused, and warned Moses that "her Jewish critics were going to make the book into a cause célèbre and thus embarrass the Jewish community far beyond anything that she had said or could possibly do."³

William Shawn, the editor of the *New Yorker* sent a telegram saying that "people in town seem to be discussing little else."⁴ Hans Morgenthau, whose review in the *Chicago Tribune* lauded Arendt's work as "superb," "concise," "incisive," and "powerful,"⁵ wrote to

¹ Schwarzschild, Henry, Letter to Arendt. March 6, 1963. Arendt Archive, Library of Congress.

² Moses, Siegfried, Letter to Arendt. March 7, 1963. Arendt Archive, Library of Congress.

³ Young-Bruehl, Elisabeth, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World*. New Haven: Yale, 2004 (2d edition) pp. 348-349.

⁴ Shawn, William, Telegram to Arendt, March 8, 1963. Arendt Archive, Library of Congress.

⁵ Morgenthau, Hans J., "Review of Eichmann in Jerusalem," *Chicago Tribune*, May 26, 1963.

her that the Jewish community was up in arms and in a state of “psychological havoc.”⁶ A few weeks later the Anti-Defamation League distributed a memorandum informing its members about the *New Yorker* series and alerting them to “Arendt’s defamatory conception of Jewish participation in the Nazi Holocaust.”⁷ This was followed by a public statement condemning the book and by several critical reviews published in the Jewish magazine *Aufbau*,⁸ where many of Arendt’s articles had been published in the 1940s. Irving Howe later described the bitter public dispute that ensued as “violent,”⁹ and Mary McCarthy said at the time that it had assumed the proportions of a pogrom.¹⁰

Although Arendt had never been religious, and had long been open in her criticism of the Jewish leadership, her involvement with Jewish issues and the Zionist cause had been such that Alfred Kazin characterized her as “a blazing Jew.”¹¹ Now, however, she became a pariah among her own people. Leo Mindlin wrote in *The Jewish Floridian* that Arendt was a self-hating Jew who had turned her back on her faith and promulgated a hostile attack on the integrity of the Jewish leaders in Europe with a post-mortem defense of Eichmann, concluding that she was “digging future Jewish graves to the applause of the world’s unconverted anti-Semites.”¹² Trude Weiss Rosmarin, the editor of the *Jewish Spectator* published a review under the title “Self-Hating Jewess Writes Pro-Eichmann Series for the New Yorker” arguing that “Miss Arendt should disqualify herself from writing on Jewish themes to which she brings the pathology and confusion of the Jew who does not want to be a Jew and suffers because ‘the others’ will not let him forget that he is a Jew.”¹³ The Anti-Defamation League followed its original denunciation with a pamphlet entitled *Arendt Nonsense* calling the book banal, evil, glib and trite, and encouraging Rabbis to speak out in their congregations in opposition to the book, perhaps with the goal of persuading readers either to hate the book before reading it, or simply not read it at all.¹⁴

At the beginning of May, Michael Musmanno, a Justice of the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania and a former Naval officer who had been a judge at the second round of Nuremberg trials, published a highly critical review in the Sunday *New York Times Book Review* section. Musmanno had been a witness for the prosecution at the Eichmann trial, and Arendt ridiculed his testimony that von Ribbentrop, the Nazi foreign minister, had told him at Nuremberg that Hitler would have been all right if he had not fallen under Eichmann’s influence.¹⁵ Now, he wrote that Arendt had been motivated by “purely private

⁶ Young-Bruehl, Elisabeth, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World*. New Haven: Yale, 2004 (2d edition) p. 349.

⁷ Ibid., p. 348.

⁸ See, for example, Strauss, Herbert, “The Thesis of Hannah Arendt,” *Aufbau*, May 17, 1963.

⁹ Howe, Irving, “The New York Intellectual: A Chronicle and a Critique,” *Commentary* 46, No. 4, October 1968, pp. 29-51.

¹⁰ Arendt, Hannah and Mary McCarthy, *Between Friends: The Correspondence of Hannah Arendt and Mary McCarthy 1949-1975* (Carol Brightman, ed.). New York: Harcourt 1995, p. 149.

¹¹ Kazin, Alfred, *New York Jew*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978, p. 196.

¹² Mindlin, Leo, “During the Week...” *The Jewish Floridian*, March 15, 1963.

¹³ Rosmarin, Trude Weiss, “Self-Hating Jewess Writes Pro-Eichmann Series for New Yorker Magazine,” *Jewish News*, April 19, 1963.

¹⁴ Prinz, Joachim, “Arendt Nonsense: A Reply to Hannah Arendt’s ‘Eichmann in Jerusalem,’” New York: American Jewish Congress, 1963.

¹⁵ Arendt, Hannah, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (fourth edition). New York: Penguin Books, 2006, p. 210.

prejudices,” and had “attacked the State of Israel, its laws and institutions, wholly unrelated to the Eichmann case.”¹⁶ He read Hannah’s assertion that Eichmann was not a Jew-hater as an expression of sympathy, not recognizing her horror of the banal evil that could undertake mass murder even in the absence of the usual sordid motives.

The day after Musmanno’s review appeared, the *Times* published a report of a meeting of the Bergen-Belsen Survivors Association in New York at which Gideon Hausner, the Israeli prosecutor, expressed “sharp criticism” of Hannah Arendt and others who “twisted and distorted” the facts of the Eichmann trial. Dr. Nahum Goldmann, the president of the World Zionist Organization, also present at this meeting, was quoted as saying that people like Hannah Arendt who charge Holocaust victims with their own destruction “are devoid of any psychological understanding and perspective of those terrible days, as well as all reverence for the unparalleled suffering and tragedy of the 6,000,000 who perished.”¹⁷

In June, Bruno Bettelheim published a review in *The New Republic* lauding the book’s powerful impact, drawing on Arendt’s previous work to assert that the Holocaust was less a part of the ancient history of anti-Semitism than an aspect of totalitarianism, something new in the world. He agreed with Arendt that the stories of the ghettos would have been different had the leadership been less cooperative with the Germans, had not restrained the small minority that wanted to resist, and been more forthcoming about their knowledge of what lay in store. He concluded that Arendt had furnished readers with rich material with which to form a personal understanding of events as they had actually transpired, which he called “our best protection against oppressive control and dehumanizing totalitarianism.”¹⁸

Returning to New York in July, Arendt wrote to Karl Jaspers (on July 20, 1963) that her “whole apartment was literally filled with unopened mail about the Eichmann business.” Much of this bordered on hate mail, like the letter from a woman in New Jersey which began with the declaration that she had never read the Eichmann book and “would never read such trash,” and concluded with the hope that “the ghosts of our six million martyrs haunt your bed at night.”¹⁹

That summer debate among the New York intellectuals began in earnest in the pages of *Partisan Review* with a scathing review by Lionel Abel, who had always found Arendt too self-assured: Hannah Arrogant is what he sometimes called her. Arendt never forgave the editors, who had published so much of her work in the preceding years, for choosing a reviewer who was widely known to dislike her. She wrote to Mary McCarthy (who twenty-five years earlier had been a founding editor of *Partisan Review*) that she was breaking her relationship with the journal not because of Abel’s comments, but because the editors showed an extraordinary lack of the most elementary respect for her and her work by choosing him as a reviewer.

¹⁶ Musmanno, Micheal A., “Man With An Unspotted Conscience,” *The New York Times Book Review*. May 19, 1963.

¹⁷ Spiegel, Irving, “Hausner Criticizes Book on Eichmann,” *The New York Times*, May 20, 1963.

¹⁸ Bettelheim, Bruno, “Eichmann; the System; the Victims,” *The New Republic*, Vol. 40, No. 24, June 15, 1963, pp. 23-33.

¹⁹ Unsigned letter to Arendt, Arendt Archive, Library of Congress.

Abel suggested that Arendt had called the Holocaust itself banal, ignoring that it was the motives and character of the Holocaust's operatives (Eichmann and others) and not the harm they had done that she identified as banal. It was preposterous, he wrote, for her to deny that Eichmann was a moral monster: How could a man who had murdered five million people (ignoring the point that however great his guilt, Eichmann had not personally killed anyone) be anything other than morally monstrous? "And all the more a monster if he did not know he was one." Then, opening the door to the calumny that Arendt was more German than Jewish, he declared that Arendt's portrayal of the Nazis made them more aesthetically appealing than their victims,²⁰ which overlooks the fact that the Eichmann book is very severe in its judgment of the Germans both during the Third Reich and in the years after.

At least a dozen intensely critical reviews of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* appeared in the next few months. Marie Syrkin's vitriolic review, "Hannah Arendt: The Clothes of the Empress," in *Dissent*, a relatively new high-brow, leftist Jewish journal, asserted that Eichmann was the only character who came out better in the book than he went in, and accused Arendt of manipulating the facts with "high-handed assurance."²¹ The English historian Hugh Trevor-Roper took a similar approach in the *Sunday Times* of London, writing that Arendt was "unbearably arrogant," and that she was guilty of bias, half-truths, loaded language and double standards of evidence.²²

Norman Podhoretz, the editor of *Commentary* (one of the journals in which Arendt published frequently), a deeply committed Zionist, and already well along the path from a socialist childhood to eventual prominence as a neo-con leader of the Project for the New American Century and a hawkish advisor to George W. Bush, published a complex review entitled "Hannah Arendt on Eichmann: A Study in the Perversity of Brilliance." He applauded her portrait of the mind of a middle-echelon Nazi and of the world that produced him and gave him the power to do the things he had done. He also admired Arendt's scrupulous account of the almost total unwillingness of the Federal Republic of Germany "to prosecute and mete out adequate punishment to Nazi war criminals still at large and in many cases flourishing." But on balance he thought the weakness of the book was that "in place of the monstrous Nazi, [Arendt] had given us the 'banal' Nazi; in place of the Jew as virtuous martyr ... the Jew as accomplice in evil; and in place of the confrontation between guilt and innocence ... 'collaboration' of criminal and victim." In the end, he declared with no supporting evidence, the banality of evil thesis "violates everything we know about the nature of man... no person could have joined the Nazi Party, let alone the S.S., who was not at the very least a *vicious* anti-Semite." *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, he concluded, demonstrated that "intellectual perversity can result from the pursuit of brilliance by a mind infatuated with its own agility and bent on generating dazzle."²³

²⁰ Abel, Lionel, "The Aesthetics of Evil" *Partisan Review* XXX, No. 2, Summer 1963, pp. 210-230.

²¹ Syrkin, Marie, "Hannah Arendt: The Clothes of the Empress," *Dissent* X, No. 4, Autumn 1963, pp. 344-352.

²² Trevor-Roper, Hugh, "How Innocent was Eichmann?" *Sunday Times* (London), October 13, 1963; reprinted in *Jewish Affairs*, Vol. 19, January 1964, pp. 4-9.

²³ Podhoretz, Norman, "Hannah Arendt on Eichmann: A Study in the Perversity of Brilliance," *Commentary*, Vol. 36, No. 3, September 1963, pp. 201-208.

"I am amazed," Arendt wrote to Jaspers, "and never expected anything like this." Gideon Hausner, she explained, had come to America "for the express purpose of heating things up." She complained that "three or four large organizations, along with whole regiments of 'scholarly' assistants and secretaries" were busying themselves with ferreting out mistakes she might have made as a ruse to delegitimize her criticism of Israel and her characterization of Eichmann as banal. She worried that this was seriously dangerous business. "People are resorting to any means to destroy my reputation. They have spent weeks trying to find something in my past that they can hang on me."²⁴ No one knew about Arendt's youthful love affair with Martin Heidegger (who years later became a Nazi); but a quarter of a century later, after she and Heidegger were both dead, hostile critics, still incensed over *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, would use this against her, arguing that love for Heidegger distorted Arendt's understanding of German culpability.²⁵

Gershom Scholem, whom Arendt had known in her youth, wrote a letter affirming his "deep respect," but asserting that her version of the Nazi past came between the reader and the actual events because her tone was "heartless," "flippant," "sneering and malicious," replacing balanced judgment with a "demagogic will-to-overstatement." Acknowledging that he could never think of her as anything other than "a daughter of our people," he nevertheless admonished her that in the Jewish tradition there is a concept known as "Ahabath Israel: Love of the Jewish people [and that] in you, dear Hannah, as in so many intellectuals who come from the German Left, I find little trace of this."²⁶

Arendt wrote back that she did not come from the German Left, but from the tradition of German philosophy; and that of course she was a daughter of the Jewish people and had never claimed to be anything else: "I have always regarded my Jewishness as one of the indisputable actual data of my life, and I have never had the wish to change or disclaim facts of this kind. There is such a thing as basic gratitude for everything that is as it is." But you are quite right, she told him, in what you say about Ahabath Israel: "I have never in my life 'loved' any people or collective – neither the German people, nor the French, nor the American, nor the working class or anything of that sort. I indeed love 'only' my friends and the only kind of love I know of and believe in is the love of persons."²⁷

Arendt wrote to Mary McCarthy on September 20, 1963, that the intense public criticism was part of a political campaign to discredit a book that had never been written in order to create an image that would turn people away from the real book.

I cannot do anything against it ... because an individual is powerless by definition and the power of image-makers is considerable – money, personnel, time, connections

²⁴ Arendt, Hannah and Karl Jaspers, *Correspondence: 1926 – 1969* (Lotte Kohler and Hans Saner, eds.), New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1992, pp. 510-51

²⁵ See, for example, Wolin, Richard, *Heidegger's Children: Hannah Arendt, Karl Lowith, Hans Jonas, and Herbert Marcuse*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001.

²⁶ "Eichmann in Jerusalem: An Exchange of Letters between Gershom Scholem and Hannah Arendt," *Encounter* 22, No. 1. January 1964, pp. 51-54; reprinted in Arendt Hannah, *The Jew as Pariah: Jewish Identity and Politics in the Modern Age* (Ron. H. Feldman, ed.), New York: Grove Press, 1978, pp. 240-251, 241.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, reprint p. 246; also reprinted in Arendt, Hannah, *The Jewish Writings* (Kohn, Jerome and Ron H. Feldman, eds.) New York: Schocken, pp. 465-471, 466-467.

etc. My position is that I wrote a report and that I am not in politics, either Jewish or otherwise.

McCarthy wrote a response to Lionel Abel in *Partisan Review* beginning with the observation that the hostile reviews were all written by Jews or special cases like Judge Musmanno who had been criticized in the Eichmann book, or Hugh Trevor-Roper “who has a corner on Nazi history in its popular form.” Her own Gentile friends and family, Mary wrote, spoke of the book in hushed tones, asking: “Did you get that out of it?”

The division between Jew and Gentile is even more pronounced in private conversation, where a Gentile, once the topic is raised in Jewish company (and it always is), feels like a child with a reading defect in a class of normal readers – or the reverse. It is as if *Eichmann in Jerusalem* had required a special pair of Jewish spectacles to make its “true purport” visible. And such propagandists as Lionel Abel ... and Marie Syrkin, have been eagerly offering their pair to the reader for a peep into Miss Arendt’s mind ... [to expose] her as an anti-Semite. ... More moderate parlor critics talk of “arrogance” or “lack of proportion” while conceding that Miss Arendt is of course not an anti-Semite or an admirer of Eichmann’s. But this is said in a tone of concession; these Jews, many of whom call themselves friends of the author, are more interested in enumerating the shortcomings of her book than in repelling the slanders that are circulating about her in and out of print. These slanders, which they hear all the time and which are intended to destroy the reputation of a living woman, excite them far less than Miss Arendt’s “slander” of the Jewish leadership, who are dead and beyond being hurt by it, if it is a slander.²⁸

Of Abel’s conclusion that Arendt had made Eichmann aesthetically palatable and his victims aesthetically repulsive, McCarthy wrote that he offered no evidence on behalf of this idea, and that it was merely his personal impression of the book, which revealed more about him than about Arendt: “Reading her book, he liked Eichmann better than the Jews who died in the crematoriums. Each to his own taste. It was not my impression.” McCarthy agreed that of course it was evil to send millions to their deaths, but it was Abel who by constructing Eichmann as a depraved and wicked creature made him an object of aesthetic interest. To Abel’s argument that a man who puts a gun to the head of another and forces him to kill his friend is aesthetically uglier than the one who out of fear does the killing, McCarthy responded that nobody can force another to kill anybody: “If someone points a gun at you and says ‘Kill your friend or I will kill you,’ he is *tempting* you to kill your friend. That is all.”

Pointing out that in a book of two hundred and sixty pages only about ten were devoted to the Jewish Councils or the treatment of privileged Jews, McCarthy observed that some of the book’s critics complained that this was too much space and prominence to the topic, while others including Abel said that Arendt’s treatment of the issue was too short.

²⁸ References to Mary McCarthy’s review of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* are drawn from McCarthy, Mary, “The Hue and the Cry,” *Partisan Review*, Vol. XXXI, No.1, Winter 1964, pp. 82-94; reprinted in McCarthy, Mary, *The Writing on the Wall and Other Literary Essays*, New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1970, pp. 55-71.

“The only way to have satisfied both parties would have been to omit the whole subject, which is probably what most Jews would have liked best.”

McCarthy's own position was that the Eichmann book, despite all the horrors in it, was morally exhilarating.

I freely confess that it gave me joy and I too heard a paean in it – not a hate-paeon to totalitarianism but a paean of transcendence, heavenly music, like that of the final chorus of *Figaro* or the *Messiah*. As in these choruses, a pardon or redemption of some sort was taking place. The reader “rose above” the terrible material of the trial or was born aloft to survey it with his intelligence. No person was pardoned, but the whole experience was brought back, redeemed, as in the harrowing of hell.

In April 1964 a review of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* in *The Times Literary Supplement* turned these words against McCarthy, the reviewer claiming that the reference to the great choral masterpieces implied that she was exulting over the mass murder of Jews. McCarthy wrote to Arendt (June 9) that her internal alarm system had warned her that there was something dangerous about the reference to Mozart and Handel, but she left it in specifically so as “not to be like *them*,” who would never tell the truth if there was a possibility it might be used against them. She had not imagined that anyone could twist her words in quite that way. “I don't even mind that, she wrote, what I do mind is that they have used it to compromise you.... I should have shown more caution. Please forgive me if you can.”

Arendt wrote back (June 23) that she thought it would have been better not to have included “the Mozart business ... because the comparison even of effects is too high. But I always loved the sentence because you were the only reader to understand what otherwise I have never admitted – namely that I wrote this book in a curious state of euphoria.” Writing *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, the exercise of intellect as a way of mastering the past, had been a *cura posterior*, a path of healing involving neither forgiveness or forgetting, but of finding peace through the hard work of thinking.

The controversy continued into 1964. The Spring issue of *Partisan Review* contained over thirty pages of argument, counter argument and accusations much of it directed at Mary McCarthy who was accused by Marie Syrkin of intellectual irresponsibility and ignorance, and by Harold Weisberg as wholly lacking in charity and almost equally lacking in logic. The poet Robert Lowell defended *Eichmann in Jerusalem* as a masterpiece, characterizing Arendt's only motive as a “heroic desire for truth.” Dwight MacDonald, a former editor of *Partisan Review*, referred to the book as a masterpiece of historical journalism and defended McCarthy's “brilliant” observation that the split over the book was between Christians and Jews, especially “organization-minded Jews.” He concluded by noting that he had known both Mr. Abel and Miss Arendt for many years, and that “the notion of the former giving lessons in morality to the latter strikes me as comic.” Abel responded that Mary McCarthy's defense of Arendt was “worthless,” and that MacDonald, unable to advance any argument of his own, chose “to abuse me. ... It all comes down finally to calling people ‘Jews.’” The last word went to William Phillips, the editor of *Partisan Review*, who regretted the procession of polemics, wit and logic as if

the objective was to use the terrible events of the Holocaust to sharpen one's mind and rhetoric. He thought the criticism of Arendt, about whom he had heard people say that she was worse than Eichmann, was excessive, but regretted that her defenders had turned the issue into a disagreement between Christians and Jews; whether a person is Jewish or Gentile, he argued, should be of biographical and not intellectual interest.²⁹

In 1965, Jacob Robinson, who participated in the Eichmann trial as an advisor to the prosecution, published a 400 page scathing denunciation of Hannah's work entitled *And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight: The Eichmann Trial, The Jewish Catastrophe, and Hannah Arendt's Narrative*. Robinson had the advantage of teams of researchers in New York, London, Paris and Jerusalem with whose help he scoured *Eichmann in Jerusalem* and found four hundred "factual errors," many of which, as it turned out were over such minutiae as the correct spelling of a first name, and some of which turned out not to be errors at all (for example Arendt was correct in saying that the head of the Nazi People's Court was killed in February 1945 and not as Robinson claimed in 1944).³⁰ Nevertheless, a review in the *New York Review of Books* by Walter Laqueur, an employee of one of Robinson's research institutes, asserted that Arendt lacked the minimum of factual knowledge needed to make a scholarly contribution, and that Robinson, who was characterized as formidable, an eminent authority on international law, an erudite polymath with knowledge of many languages and unrivalled mastery of sources, had been motivated to undertake a full scale refutation of "Miss Arendt's" flippant display of cleverness by the natural "resentment felt by the professional against the amateur."³¹

Arendt, who had been reticent to speak out on the Eichmann matter since publication of the original articles in the *New Yorker*, took this opportunity to respond with an essay in the January 20, 1966 issue of *New York Review of Books* entitled "The Formidable Mr. Robinson." Mr. Laqueur, she wrote, was so overwhelmed by Mr. Robinson's "eminent authority" that he had failed to acquaint himself with the subject under attack. For a start, he just accepted the assertion in Robinson's subtitle that she had written a narrative about the Jewish catastrophe, when in fact she had criticized the prosecution for having made the Eichmann trial a pretext to put forward such a narrative. It was the prosecutor, not she, who had repeatedly raised the question of why there was not more Jewish resistance; she had merely reported this and dismissed the question as "silly and cruel, since it testified to a fatal ignorance of conditions of the time."

In response to the claim of Mr. Robinson's eminence as a scholar, Arendt pointed out that he was a lawyer not an historian, that he had published practically nothing before this book and that the claim that he was an "eminent authority," never applied to any of his earlier work, but was only attached to him after he joined the chorus of critics attacking her. What is formidable about Mr. Robinson, she concluded, is that his words, amplified by the Israeli government with its consulates, embassies and missions throughout the world, the American and World Jewish Congresses and B'nai Brith with

²⁹ "More on Eichmann," *Partisan Review*, Vol. XXXI, No. 2, Spring 1964, pp. 253-283.

³⁰ Robinson, Jacob, *And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight: The Eichmann Trial, The Jewish Catastrophe, and Hannah Arendt's Narrative*, New York: Macmillan, 1965.

³¹ Laqueur, Walter Z., "Footnotes to the Holocaust," *The New York Review of Books*, Vol. 5, No. 7, November 11, 1965, pp. 20-22; reprinted in Arendt Hannah, *The Jew as Pariah: Jewish Identity and Politics in the Modern Age* (Ron. H. Feldman, ed.), New York: Grove Press, 1978, pp. 252-259, 253.

its powerful Anti-Defamation League, had led to the widespread belief that her book contained hundreds of errors. These organizations had joined in advancing the formidable Mr. Robinson's career and manufacturing his eminence as part of a coordinated effort to characterize her book as an "evil" posthumous defense of Eichmann, and of her as an "evil" person to have written it, and to turn people away from her criticism of Israel and Jewish leaders. In the process they had become increasingly extreme in their rhetoric with the effect of making the book more important than it could possibly otherwise have been, thus promoting the exact opposite of their goal:

If they had left well enough alone, this issue, which I had touched upon only marginally, would not have been trumpeted all over the world. In their efforts to prevent people from reading what I had written ... they blew it up out of all proportion, not only with reference to my book but with reference to what actually happened. They forgot that they were mass organizations, using all the means of mass communication, so that every issue they touched at all, pro or contra, was liable to attract the attention of masses whom they could no longer control. So what happened after a while in these meaningless and mindless debates was that people began to think that all the nonsense image makers had made me say was the actual historical truth.³²

Although Arendt did have more to say in the years ahead about Adolf Eichmann and the evil with which he is associated, this was her last public utterance about the controversy surrounding the Eichmann book. The tide of history since then has been mostly with her. In politics this is due to the widespread opposition especially among students and intellectuals to the Viet Nam war in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The conduct of American leaders – Lyndon Johnson and Robert McNamara, and then Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger – brought home the idea of "banal" evil. In social science, landmark studies of obedience to authority by Stanley Milgram³³ at Yale and of prisoners and guards by Philip Zimbardo³⁴ at Stanford gave shocking evidence of the extent to which ordinary people could be induced to harm others. Among historians, with the notable exception of Daniel Goldhagen's book *Ordinary Germans: Hitler's Willing Executioners*³⁵ (which attributes the Holocaust to a tradition of exterminationist anti-Semitism in German culture) recent scholarship on the Third Reich – Ian Kershaw on Hitler,³⁶ Robert Gellately

³² Arendt, Hannah, "The Formidable Mr. Robinson: A Reply," *The New York Review of Books*, Vol. 5, No. 12, January 20, 1966, p. 20; reprinted in Arendt, Hannah, *The Jew as Pariah: Jewish Identity and Politics in the Modern Age* (Ron. H. Feldman, ed.), New York: Grove Press, 1978, pp. 260-276, 276; also reprinted in Arendt, Hannah, *The Jewish Writings* (Kohn, Jerome and Ron H. Feldman, eds.) New York: Schocken, pp. 496-511, 510-511.

³³ Milgram, Stanley, *Obedience to Authority*, New York: Harper, 1975.

³⁴ Zimbardo, Philip, *The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil*, New York: Random House, 2007.

³⁵ Goldhagen, Daniel Jonah, *Ordinary Germans: Hitler's Willing Executioners*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996.

³⁶ Kershaw, Ian, *Hitler: (vol.1) 1889-1936 Hubris; (vol.2) 1936-1945 Nemesis*. New York: W.W. Norton (2000), pp. 257-258.

on the S.S.,³⁷ Christopher Browning on the Einsatzgruppen³⁸ – tends to confirm Arendt's thesis that ordinary people were complicitous with the Nazi regime for reasons best characterized as banal. In international affairs, the collapse of Soviet totalitarianism and recent genocidal catastrophes in Bosnia, Rwanda and Darfur have reinforced the idea that great evil may arise from the false beliefs and banal motives of ordinary people.

As the Eichmann controversy began to recede Karl Jaspers wrote to Arendt that though she had suffered greatly, ultimately the whole critical uproar would only add to her prestige;³⁹ and she confirmed with real pleasure that students who turned out for her lectures at Yale, Columbia, Chicago and other universities received her with warmth and enthusiasm, and that these were mostly Jewish students. The old guard, she concluded, had not been able to control the opinions of young people. "The comical thing," she wrote to Jaspers, was that after speaking her mind openly about "the formidable Mr. Robinson," she was once again "flooded with letters from all the Jewish organizations with invitations to speak, to appear at congresses, and so forth – even from those I have attacked."⁴⁰

Nor was it only students or Jewish groups that rallied around her. Arendt was awarded a dozen honorary degrees from American universities including a Doctor of Laws from Yale, and was inducted into the National Institute for Arts and Letters and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, which in 1969 awarded her the Emerson-Thoreau Medal for distinguished achievement in literature. Earlier recipients had included Robert Frost, T.S. Eliot, Katherine Anne Porter and Lewis Mumford.

Nevertheless, battle lines are still drawn and the controversy continues. Richard Wolin's important book about Heidegger and his students⁴¹ published in 2001, asserts that Arendt was "hard-hearted and uncaring," about the Jewish people, displayed a "lack of empathy," blurred "the lines between perpetrators and victims," and that all of this arose from "her problems with her own Jewish identity, which he associates with her youthful "amorous liaison during the 1920s" with Martin Heidegger, which was first reported in Elisabeth Young-Bruehl's biography of Arendt, published seven years after her death. The argument is that Arendt, blinded by love for Heidegger and of German high culture, which he represented, had to excuse his subsequent Nazi affiliation as trivial, and did this by blaming the Jews for their own destiny. This is an extreme version of an old calumny: that there is something unwholesome about any Jew who criticizes Israel or Jewish leaders.

David Cesarani, whose 2004 book *Becoming Eichmann* won the 2006 National Jewish Book Award for History, goes to great lengths to separate himself from Arendt, asserting that her depiction of Eichmann as banal was "self-serving, prejudiced and ultimately wrong." Yet his own conclusion that under the right circumstances normal people can

³⁷ Gellately, Robert, *The Gestapo and German Society: Enforcing Racial Policy 1933-1945*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1990.

³⁸ Browning, Christopher, *Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*, New York: Harper Collins, 1992.

³⁹ Arendt, Hannah and Karl Jaspers, *Correspondence: 1926 – 1969* (Lotte Kohler and Hans Saner, eds.), New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1992, pp. 527, 549.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 632.

⁴¹ Wolin, Richard, *Heidegger's Children: Hannah Arendt, Karl Lowith, Hans Jonas, and Herbert Marcuse*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001; see especially pp. 52-62.

become mass murderers is identical to Arendt's: "Eichmann," Cesarani concludes, "appears more and more like a man of our time. Everyman as génocidaire."⁴²

Deborah Lipstadt's new book,⁴³ published in recognition of the fiftieth anniversary of the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem, more measured and less abusive than Wolin's or Cesarani's, is nevertheless in the tradition of dismissing Arendt while adopting her insights. There is only a single chapter dedicated to Arendt, forty pages out of two hundred, and only one of these suggests that Arendt was really writing to secure Heidegger's approval, but Arendt is present throughout Lipstadt's account of the Eichmann trial.

In the introduction, for example, Lipstadt refers to a previously undisclosed memoir written by Eichmann as he awaited execution, which shows, she tells us, without evidence, that Arendt was wrong when she claimed that Eichmann "did not really understand the enterprise in which he was involved." But readers of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* will know that Arendt does not deny that Eichmann knew he was engaged in mass murder, but rather tries to understand how ordinary people (as opposed to hate filled monsters) become involved in such activities.

Lipstadt observes that while some people see the Eichmann trial as momentously important, others dismiss it as unimportant claiming that Israel aggrandized the matter for political ends, and that Eichmann was simply a "transportation specialist ... a bureaucratic 'clown,' who really did not understand what he was doing." Lipstadt's quotation marks around the word "clown" make it clear that she has Arendt in mind since Arendt, though she never said Eichmann did not understand what he was doing, did write that observers of the trial could plainly see that Eichmann was not a monster but might think him a "clown" on the basis of the thoughtless and inconsistent things he said. Attacking Arendt has long been a good strategy for selling books, and no doubt this one will win some prize from a Zionist organization for having "shown" that Arendt was wrong.

If Eichmann was not, as Arendt concluded, a banal bureaucrat, what was he? Lipstadt notes that Eichmann reveled in his power, citing a letter he wrote to an SS colleague boasting about his control over the leaders of the Jewish community in Vienna: "I put these gentlemen on the double, believe me.... I have them completely in my hands, they dare not take a step without first consulting me. That is how it should be, because then better control is possible." But on trial for his life in Jerusalem he sang a different tune, describing his relations with the leading Jews of Vienna as a "decently businesslike" collaborative effort. But what does this prove? That Eichmann was a bully and a liar comes as no surprise, and does not contradict Arendt's insight that ordinary people can be induced to behave in this way even if they are not hate-filled anti-Semites. Is Eichmann transformed from an ordinary man acting out of banal motives into a "mad dog" anti-Semite because he was a braggart and liar?

Later Lipstadt documents how badly Eichmann behaved in Hungary deporting Jews to death camps at breakneck speed late in the war when it was clear the Red Army was approaching and the Third Reich collapsing. She does not mention that virtually all these

⁴² Cesarani, David, *Becoming Eichmann: Rethinking the Life, Crimes, and Trial of a "Desk Murderer,"* New York: Da Capo Press, 2004, p. 368.

⁴³ Lipstadt, Deborah, *The Eichmann Trial,* New York: Schocken, 2011.

details of Eichmann's career were discussed in detail in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, showing that Arendt knew just whom Eichmann was and what he had done.

Where Lipstadt and Arendt do have a disagreement in this part of the story is in the judgments they make about the role of the Jewish Councils. In Hungary, for example, Eichmann succeeded in sending half a million Jews to places like Auschwitz in a matter of months. This could not have been done if the Jewish community had become disorganized, chaotic, anarchic or even rebellious. The Germans were able to do the job on the cheap because the leadership of the Jewish community arranged for people to show up for transports at the appointed time and place. Then, at the end, 1684 Hungarian Jews, chosen by Rezso Kasztner, the Jew who had negotiated with Eichmann, were transported to Palestine on trains protected by SS guards. For Arendt this was another manifestation of the banality of evil. Kasztner was not a monster; he may honestly have thought, as Lipstadt seems to, that he did the best he could under very challenging circumstance. In an earlier libel action in his court, Judge Benjamin Halevi, one of three Judges on the Eichmann tribunal, declared that Kasztner had sold his soul to the devil. Arendt, taking a middle ground, recognizes the great pressure Kasztner was under, but concludes that he, in some ways like Eichmann, took up an appointed role in a highly dangerous and circumscribed structure of opportunities, facilitating mass murder by keeping the machinery of society running; and that this cannot be said to have been done with disregard for personal survival and self-interest.

Lipstadt's position on Kasztner seems to be "who are we to judge?" Worse, she sides with Arendt's critics who accuse her of insensitivity in talking about victims in this way, and declares that it was wrong of Arendt to wash dirty Jewish laundry in public. This suggests that in the interests of "propriety" Lipstadt would suppress honest thinking about how events really unfolded.

In the end Lipstadt concludes that Eichmann, whom many observers beside Arendt thought dull, was really play acting; that beneath the bumbling exterior there was a man who could "snarl" and "bark." She cites one authority, Joseph Kessel, a French journalist, who at a particular moment in the trial when depositions of SS Officers that implicated Eichmann were read, felt "passion and rage" emerging beneath the "hollow mask." This, Kessel declared (and apparently Lipstadt concurs) was "the true Eichmann."

Why does Lipstadt prefer Joseph Kessel's intuition to Arendt's more reasoned analysis? Because Kessel's epiphany arose from a momentary observation! He was there; he saw the mask fall off the imperious, seething, hate-filled Nazi mass murderer. Arendt missed that moment; she was not in the courtroom that day. Lipstadt makes much of this, and of the fact Arendt was not physically present at the trial every day it was in session.⁴⁴ Lipstadt, whose own book is based entirely on transcripts and written records, acknowledges that many great trial books have been written from transcripts alone, that Arendt read thousands of pages of the pre-trial police interrogation of Eichmann and that

⁴⁴ The trial was in session between April 11 and July 24. Arendt was present in the courtroom from April 11 through May 8. Between May 8 and June 23 the trial was dominated by sessions on the admissibility of more than 1000 documents; Arendt, who was travelling in Europe during those weeks, had full access to all of those documents. Arendt was present between June 20 and 23 to hear the first sessions of Adolf Eichmann's testimony, but not for the final two weeks of trial when he was cross-examined by Gideon Hausner, whose approach to the trial as a telling of the story of the Holocaust rather than a juridical inquiry into Eichmann's role Arendt found tiresome and disquieting.

she had many other sources in addition to transcripts, nevertheless charges that Arendt's "agency" derived from her status as a witness, and that her failure to reveal that she was not there for significant portions of the proceedings constituted a breach of faith with readers. This is an ad hominem assertion, typical of Arendt's detractors and somewhat removed from reality. Arendt was a scholar accustomed to working with documents. An extended visit to the trial was an additional method, not a primary tool of analysis.

Another area of disagreement between Lipstadt and Arendt involves the actual conduct of the trial. Arendt was especially critical of the performance of the chief prosecutor, Israeli Attorney General Gideon Hausner, describing his opening statement as "cheap rhetoric and bad history." Lipstadt asserts that virtually everyone else thought it was a brilliant statement like the "eloquent thunderings and lamentations of ancient prophets." Then she goes on to admit that Hausner did get much of the history wrong, and that the judges were often furious with Hausner for repeatedly introducing inflammatory survivor testimony about the horrors of the Holocaust without any showing of a connection to Eichmann. Lipstadt acknowledges that the judges were trying "to conduct a scrupulously fair legal proceeding," while Hausner's goal was to tell the story of the Holocaust in order "to capture the imagination of Israel's youth and world Jewry." Lipstadt is with Hausner, Arendt, who understood that a trial for any political purpose is a corruption of the objectivity and independence of the judiciary, sided with the Judges.

Moreover, Arendt disapproved of the lesson Hausner aimed to teach: that the world is a dangerous place full of murderous anti-Semites, and that survival requires an ingathering of Jews in Israel combined with fierce militarism. This way, Arendt thought, lies disaster. In her view the long-term survival of the Jewish people required them to find a path to peace with their neighbors. Eventually, Arendt wrote, all of the outside powers on which Israel might rely for support would eventually leave the Middle East, but hundreds of millions of Arabs, with whom peace was essential, would be there forever.

It is this difference over the efficacy and morality of Israel's relationship to her Arab neighbors and citizens that explains the tradition of vitriolic hostility to Arendt to which Lipstadt subscribes. If Lipstadt does not go so far as to claim that Arendt was a self-hating, anti-Semitic Jew, she nonetheless contributes to the delegitimization of Arendt's thought for no better reason that it leads toward criticism of Israeli policies as based on fear and aimed at regional domination. Arendt, on the other hand, understood that real love, the love of true friends or of parents for children does not shy away from criticism or correction when a dangerous path has been chosen.

Ultimately, Arendt understood that the status of victim is not a guarantee that a people cannot also become perpetrators. Like Cassandra, who foresaw the destruction of Troy but could do nothing to prevent it because her curse was not to be believed, Arendt has been excoriated for daring to disagree with the dominant sentiment among her own people. Lipstadt's book continues in this tradition even as conditions in the Middle East grow increasingly dangerous. Let us hope, as Arendt did, that there is still time to save a Jewish homeland, but this goal is not facilitated by dismissing Arendt or her insight into the actual nature of evil.

Real justice, in Arendt's view, requires full disclosure, including self-disclosure, not only retribution, but also an effort to understand how political systems can produce the

complicity of perpetrators, by-standers and even victims. If evil is banal it can turn up anywhere, even among victims, even among Jews, even in Israel. That a people were victimized, Arendt argued, does not mean that they are absolved from responsibility to examine their own roles or that they do not have to be concerned about the possibility of victimizing others. This provocative thesis is the reason why for half a century *Eichmann in Jerusalem* has been a book that militant Zionists don't want people to read, and why Arendt continues to be maligned, and her loyalty to the greatly abused Jewish people deliberately misunderstood.