

Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem* – Edition und Interpretation

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The conference, which took place on 4 and 5 November 2025 at the Topographie des Terrors in Berlin, was organised by the editorial team of the critical edition of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*: Prof. Dr Michael Wildt (Humboldt University), Dr Lutz Fiedler (Humboldt University/Moses Mendelssohn Center), and Lisa-Maria Renner (Free University Berlin). The conference was held in preparation for the new edition of the book, which is scheduled to appear in 2026/27 as Volume 10 of the *Hannah Arendt: Critical Edition*. The Edition is the first scholarly publication of all of Arendt's works with critical commentary, both in printed and digital form. The conference hosted several experts on Arendt's most well-known work. In particular, controversies surrounding Arendt's phrase "the banality of evil", among her other statements in her report on the trial of Adolf Eichmann for *The New Yorker*, took centre stage.

Tom Segev, PhD gave the keynote of the conference with both timely commentary on Arendt's moral philosophy and intriguing personal stories involving Arendt herself. He had known Arendt through his family; his parents had been acquainted with Arendt's later husband, Heinrich Blücher. Segev recalled meeting Arendt on her travels to Israel and described her as "fully without ego", fascinated by his work as a young journalist and eager to discuss Israeli politics with him. Interestingly, Arendt characterised her book on the Eichmann trial as a "flop", misunderstood by the public and misconstrued by opponents. This became one of the recurring topics of the conference—could Arendt have expressed her point in a different way? What was she truly trying to say behind the controversy?

Segev, as an Israeli historian, made reference to the current Israel–Gaza war, which despite a ceasefire remains ongoing. He began by referring to a *Haaretz* editorial entitled "The Banality of Death", using it to illustrate how the semantics of Arendt's text and the questions it raises have become ingrained in contemporary discourse. Segev analysed the rhetoric surrounding Israel and Gaza and explored Arendt's relevance today. One could question his characterisation of Arendt as a Zionist turned anti-Zionist—a claim contested by Prof. Annette Vowinckel during the final panel discussion the next day, who referred to Arendt instead as post-Zionist. Segev also spoke of Israel's partially fraught relationship to Arendt, which expressed itself through the late Hebrew translations of her work. Arendt herself was convinced that David Ben-Gurion had prevented the publication of a Hebrew translation in the mid-1960s; Segev argued that this claim was unfounded. Nevertheless, her characterisation of Eichmann as largely un-ideological and banal had

stirred Israeli commentators. Segev took a critical stance towards Arendt: his own historical research on the Sonderkommandos had shown ideology to be a central force in Nazi crimes. He also raised the question of whether Arendt would have formulated the same claims had she read more extensively Eichmann's writings composed before the trial, which attest to his belief in Nazism.

Other panellists also formulated critiques of Arendt's claims. Dr. Fabien Théofilakis' original presentation on the genocide against the Tutsi was shortened and focused in this context on Eichmann and Arendt's interpretation of him. He criticised Arendt's selective use of information about Eichmann and a partially unclear way of dealing with sources, including Eichmann's own statements. Théofilakis nevertheless offered an alternative perspective on "banality", referring to Manon Garcia's interpretation (in her book *Living With Men* about the Gisèle Pelicot trial) of the "banality of evil" as a structural force of normalisation. Arendt had often criticised German society and its inability to truly deal with its history and responsibility, as well as a German affinity to obedience. With this mind, Théofilakis described Eichmann as a product of both a regime and a society, shifting the focus from individual guilt to societal complicity.

Dr. Marie-Luise Knott, by contrast, understood banality as mechanical functioning or pure instrumentality. She quoted Arendt: "Und ich würde nun sagen, dass die eigentliche Perversion des Handelns das Funktionieren ist" (Arendt, 1964). This automatic and thoughtless process comes close to Arendt's concept of work rather than action. There is no conscience, no inner compass, and no capacity to imagine what one is doing. For Knott, Eichmann thus represents the opposite of the ideal of action articulated in *The Human Condition*, the point at which the positive aspects of Arendt's philosophy break down.

The second panel focused on Arendt's highly controversial statements on the Jewish Councils and Jewish leadership. Dr. René Schlott examined Arendt's engagement with the work of Raul Hilberg, the Jewish-Austrian historian and author of *The Destruction of the European Jews*. By comparing her claims with Hilberg's analyses, Schlott demonstrated how she paraphrased and transformed her sources. Drawing on materials from the *Hannah Arendt: Critical Edition*, he traced her writing process and highlighted the value of the Edition in shedding light on the genesis of her texts. He also contrasted Arendt's political position with Hilberg's: whereas Hilberg, a revisionist Zionist, called for armed resistance against the Nazis, Arendt adopted a more ambivalent stance and reflected on the necessity and limits of passive resistance.

Dr. Laurien Vastenhout offered a nuanced portrayal of Arendt's remarks on the Jewish Councils, distancing them from decontextualised snippets often cited in the debate. According to Arendt, the Jewish leaders' utilitarian miscalculations, adopting what she described as the "logic of the oppressor", contributed to their cooperation with Nazi authorities. This was not merely a comment on a historical phenomenon, but a philosophical reflection on the morally corrupting force of totalitarianism. Vastenhout

explained that the Jewish Councils differed significantly by country in their framework and possibilities of resistance; nevertheless, Arendt's observations may remain relevant as reflections on agency and judgement under duress.

The third panel was presented by legal historians and focused on Arendt's legal thought as well as on the implications of the Auschwitz trials. Dr. Anette Weinke pointed out Arendt's unusual use of legal vocabulary and its shortcomings: her interpretations of international law were not always well supported and at times anachronistic in relation to legal scholarship of the 1960s. Arendt largely ignored contemporary figures such as Raphael Lemkin. Because she regarded Nazi crimes as exceeding any existing legal framework, she concluded that no adequate punishment was possible and therefore supported the death penalty for Eichmann. Prof. Dr. Kerstin von Lingen spoke about the various Auschwitz trials, including those in Vienna and Frankfurt, and their procedural practices. Eichmann's self-stylisation as a bureaucrat following orders was typical of many defendants. She also addressed the trials' focus on individual guilt rather than societal responsibility, a concern raised by Arendt, who extended her critique to concepts such as "crimes against humanity" and to the politicisation of the Jerusalem trial. Arendt was particularly critical of the Israeli court's tendency to frame the Shoah as a continuation of antisemitic pogroms rather than as a historically unprecedented crime.

The final panel introduced the reception and controversy surrounding *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. Prof. Dr. Stefania Maffei outlined a chronology of reactions and debates, distinguishing three overlapping phases that corresponded to different audiences: the Jewish community, New York intellectual circles, and the West German public. While Arendt responded to some criticisms, attempts by some friends to defend her were largely overshadowed. She was accused of lacking empathy, of downplaying Eichmann's cruelty, and of incompetence. Much of this criticism was gendered, portraying Arendt as cold, ironic, or arrogant.

Werner Renz focused on the West German reception, particularly among German-Jewish historians. Arendt did not aim to produce a conventional historical account; rather, the trial served as a framework for broader moral and legal questions. Given the unconventional nature of her work and the still limited state of Holocaust research in 1960s Germany, her book was received with ambivalence at best. Although there were objections, they were less intense than those in the United States.

The conference concluded with a discussion moderated by Dr. Lutz Fiedler, with contributions from Prof. Dr. Mirjam Wenzel, director of the Jewish Museum Frankfurt, Dr. Julia Richter, a scholar of translation studies, and Prof. Dr. Annette Vowinckel. The role of language was central, including Arendt's tone, questions of translation, and the reception of style across linguistic contexts. Moving between German and English, Arendt did not always strike a tone that seemed appropriate to all audiences. Wenzel described the perceived lack of empathy in parts of the report as disturbing. At the same time,

Vowinckel noted that Arendt's ideas nevertheless remain an inevitable starting point and impetus for further debate.

Ultimately, the discussion showed that form and content are closely intertwined in Arendt's work. An interdisciplinary approach that considers historical, philosophical, and literary dimensions therefore remains necessary. As Barbara Hahn, editor of the *Hannah Arendt: Critical Edition*, asked from the audience: why would Arendt ask Ingeborg Bachmann, one of the best poets of her time, to translate what was intended as a neutral report? The Critical Edition cannot answer all such questions, but it can bring us closer to understanding the different dimensions of Arendt's writing.

Literature

Arendt, Hannah. 1964. *Im Gespräch mit Joachim Fest. Eine Rundfunksendung aus dem Jahr 1964*. Edited by Ursula Ludz und Thomas Wild. Accessed at <https://www.hannaharendt.net/index.php/han/article/view/114/194>.