

CHALLENGING THE POLITICAL ZIONIST NARRATIVE: HANNAH ARENDT

A foundation of political Zionism was the assertion that Jewish suffering was unparalleled in world history, and therefore that all Nazis were inhuman monsters. Hannah Arendt (1906–1975) dared to challenge this narrative pillar. For her report and book on the Adolf Eichmann trial, Arendt was vilified by the Israeli establishment. Arendt envisioned a federated, pluralistic state that would be a homeland for all its citizens.

There is wide consensus that Zionism emerged in reaction to anti-Semitism. Regarding the root causes of anti-Semitism, however, there is less agreement. Academic and popular explanations for anti-Semitism range from direct blame for the murder of Christ to social Darwinism to the Aryan Ubermensch “master race” doctrine. Many historical studies attest that German and Austrian Jews were the most integrated in Europe. Many intellectuals and diverse talents who came to prominence in the years leading up to the Second World War were secular Jews from these communities, among them: neurologist and founder of psychoanalysis Sigmund Freud, physicist Albert Einstein, poet Heinrich Heine, philosophers Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Edmund Husserl; composers Gustav Mahler and Felix Mendelssohn, and more. Why anti-Semitism erupted with such explosive force in a country that seemed to have so fully assimilated its Jews is among the many questions tackled by one outstanding member of that community, Hannah Arendt, in her comprehensive political-philosophical writing about European Jews, totalitarianism, and Zionism.

A Consummate European

Hannah Arendt was born in 1906 in Hannover, Germany, to educated parents, nonreligious social democrats who brought her up as a European.

Despite occasional encounters with anti-Semitism during her school years, she was secure, almost passionate, about her identity as a German Jew. Her initial academic interests were German literature and the classics, Greek and Latin, and Christian theology, which she studied at the University of Berlin. She then attended Marburg University to study philosophy with Martin Heidegger, moved to Heidelberg University to study with Karl Jaspers, and worked with several of the great philosophers of her age.

During the early 1920s, she was remote from Jewish and Zionist concerns, and “found the so-called ‘Jewish Question’ quite boring.”⁴⁶ But by the 1930s, as German fascism took over the political landscape, she could no longer be bored by the Jewish question and her lack of interest was dramatically transformed. Arendt wrote prolifically on the historical bases of anti-Semitism in Europe, on the Enlightenment, the Emancipation of the Jews, the failure of assimilation, and on the potential benefits, as well as the inherent dangers, of Zionism. A persistent theme of her evolving but lifelong intellectual inquiry was the problem of Jewishness in the modern world.

Arendt was not a Zionist and not particularly inclined to join the movement, but she became a great friend of Kurt Blumenfeld, the charismatic president of the German Zionist Organization, whom she met in 1926 at a lecture he gave on Zionism. Blumenfeld, who had also recruited the secular Albert Einstein to Zionism, stated that he found Zionism through Goethe and wanted a “post-assimilation” form of Zionism, closer to German Idealism than to Jewish tradition. An extreme secularist, he advised Jews against insincere religious adherence.

Arendt’s personal involvement with Zionism began in the 1930s when, at Blumenfeld’s request, and just weeks after the Nazi seized power; she undertook research on the extent of anti-Semitism in Germany. She was denounced by a librarian for collecting anti-state propaganda and arrested. After eight days of police detention, she immediately went into exile, slipping into Bohemia and making her way to France. In Paris, she continued to work for Zionist organizations, principally for Youth Aliyah, which rescued young Jews from Europe; feeding, clothing, and providing them with legal documents to prepare them to emigrate to Palestine as agricultural workers.

“A People without a History”

Much of Arendt’s writing focused on the relationship between Jews and history, or the creation of a history for the Jews who, according to some influential intellectuals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, didn’t really have one. She refers to Johan Gottfried Herder who regarded Jews as alien to Germany and Europe. He considered them:

“a parasitic growth on the stem of other nations, a race of cunning brokers all over the earth. They have caused great evil to many ill-organized states, by retarding the free and natural economic development of their indigenous population.”⁴⁷

Herder argues that since the destruction of the temple in 70 AD Jews never possessed their own territory or state, and with some exceptions, depended entirely upon the protection of non-Jewish authorities for their physical existence. Although totally subject to the global forces of history, they had no clear vision, no grasp of the larger historical context in which they lived. In an essay she wrote in the 1930s entitled “The Enlightenment and the Jewish Question,” Arendt describes Herder’s Jew as one who is deprived of his own past and must form his identity on the basis of a past that is alien to him.

The Jews have become a people without a history within history ... Once again they stand face-to-face with nothing. From within a historical reality, from within a European secular world, they are forced somehow to adopt themselves to this world, to form themselves. But for them formation is by necessity everything that is the non-Jewish world.⁴⁸

She saw some unappealing merit in his understanding. Assimilated European Jews who had spent decades trying to rid themselves of their Jewishness were, in the end, always Jews who had discarded the Judaic heritage of their ancestors’ fathers, without gaining a deeply rooted home in Europe. Arendt counted herself among them, but while rejecting Judaism, which she saw as a system of beliefs that one can adopt or reject, she always accepted her Jewishness as an existential given that one cannot escape.⁴⁹

With no political tradition or experience, the Jews of Europe were mostly unaware of social or political tensions in their host state and therefore unaware of risks to themselves as loyal citizens. For Arendt, this lack of awareness of the historical context they inhabited, what in later writings she calls their “worldlessness,” played a part in their tragedy. In an essay entitled “The Crisis of Zionism,” from 1943, she writes:

During the years between 1933, the year in which Hitler came to power, and 1940, only a small fraction of the Jewish people could grasp the fact that they were at war, and this small fraction was without influence, formed of scattered individuals who more often than not did not even know one another.⁵⁰

Lacking a fundamental overview of the long history of Jewish-gentile relations prior to the rise of Nazism, Jews largely misunderstood the history of anti-Semitism, which only aggravated their lack of political aptitude. Jewish historians have tended to present the Jews as innocent victims of intense hostility, which was exclusively the fault of the gentiles. Arendt rejected this and considered it a harmful premise. She claimed that for much of their history, Jews had segregated themselves—morally, culturally, and linguistically. In July 1967, in the preface to Part 1 of a new edition of her massive work, *On the Origins of Totalitarianism*, she asserts:

It was Jewish historiography ... that undertook to trace the record of Jew-hatred in Christian history, while it was left to the anti-Semites to trace an intellectually not too dissimilar record from Jewish authorities. When this Jewish tradition of an often violent antagonism to Christians and Gentiles came to light, the general Jewish public was not only outraged but genuinely astonished ... Judaism, it was now maintained chiefly by Jewish historians, had always been superior to other religions in that it believed in human equality and tolerance. That this self-deceiving theory, accompanied by the belief that the Jewish people had always been the passive, suffering object of Christian persecutions, actually amounted to a prolongation and modernization of the old myth of chosenness ...⁵¹

Although her allocation of any part of the blame for centuries of Jewish alienation was clearly unpopular among conventional Jewish historians, whose theory of complete victimhood was being contested, she argued that for much of history the Jews chose separateness in order to preserve their identity, unaffected by outside influences. They intentionally isolated themselves from extensive contact with the world and considered isolation crucial to maintaining their uncontaminated “chosenness.”

It is bitterly ironic, however, that the great flourishing of anti-Semitism began in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when assimilated Jews aspired to be accepted, as equals, by European societies. And that, she believed, was the impetus for Zionism. Only then, “after emancipation and with the spread of assimilation, has anti-Semitism played any role in the conservation of the people, since only then did Jews aspire to being admitted to non-Jewish society.”⁵²

On Eternal Anti- Semitism

Initially, Arendt respected the idealism and courage of the early Zionist response to anti-Semitism, and immediately after the fall of France, she even supported the creation of a Jewish army to join the forces confronting Hitler. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, she explains how, in their desperation, Jews found the idea of eternal anti-Semitism ironically consoling, as it could provide “a mysterious guarantee of the survival of the Jewish people,” a means of keeping Jews together.⁵³ Regardless of her many subsequent disagreements with political Zionism throughout her life, Hannah Arendt appreciated Zionism as the Jews’ first positive political response to their hostile reality, one that no longer considered victimhood a measure of faith.

On the other hand, she was intensely opposed to the doctrine of eternal and universal anti-Semitism adopted by mainstream Herzlian Zionism, according to which Jews could continue to have no responsibility for their fate. Because, as she wrote in 1944:

...the courage of despair, which drives individuals to suicide, can never organize a people. A people finds the courage to fight only if there is even the smallest chance of success. No one can defend himself against a whole world of enemies.⁵⁴

More forcefully, in 1946 she elaborates:

Herzl's picture of the Jewish people as surrounded and forced together by a world of enemies has ... conquered the Zionist movement and become the common sentiment of the Jewish masses ... If we actually are faced with open or concealed enemies on every side, if the whole world is ultimately against us, then we are lost.⁵⁵

In "Zionism Reconsidered," she perceptively observed that the Herzlian Zionist vision of an eternal and unchangeable anti-Semitism "was held to be sound precisely because it was irrational, and therefore explained something unexplainable and avoided explaining what could be explained ..."⁵⁶

Arab-Jewish Cooperation

From 1940 onwards, Arendt argued for a political solution to the Jewish question. Her hope was a European federation in which the Jews would be one nation among others, with representation in a common parliament. At one point, she conceded that a settlement in Palestine might also be feasible, but only if it was attached to some European commonwealth. She envisioned a federated, pluralistic, democratic, secular state—a homeland for Palestinians and Jews coexisting peacefully as neighbors without any official state religion. Much like Ahad Ha'am and Buber, she wanted the Zionist project to develop slowly, through local agricultural and irrigation projects, to build trust among neighbors. She objected to an explicitly Jewish state, which she feared would always treat the Arab population as second-class citizens, and become militaristic and dominant. The strength of her conviction about federation was based in large part on her rejection of the idea of a nation-state with subjugated minorities.

Arendt shared many of the misgivings about the Zionist movement held by other European intellectuals of her time, especially about Jewish-Arab cooperation. An unwelcome presence in the Middle East, surrounded by a vastly larger Arab population, would inevitably create continual inner insecurity for Israel. It would not be the culmination of a longed-for ideal homeland. "A home that my neighbor does not recognize and respect is not a home."⁵⁷

Moreover, she was appalled by the indifference of nationalist Zionists to the Arab population already residing in Israel, and by their myopic political maneuvering with the bigger global powers for an exclusively Jewish state, supported by the same powers that were complicit in their own recent tragedy. “Only folly could dictate a policy which trusts a distant imperial power for protection, while alienating the goodwill of neighbors.”⁵⁸ Such a state could only become an armed and introverted society, she predicted, one in which political thinking would be limited to military strategy. Such a state would make the Arabs homeless exiles and the Arab problem a lasting ethical, political, and military dilemma.

Nationalism is bad enough when it trusts in nothing but the rude force of the nation. A nationalism that necessarily and admittedly depends upon the force of a foreign power is certainly worse ... the Zionists, if they continue to ignore the Mediterranean peoples and watch out only for the big faraway powers, will appear only as their tools, the agents of foreign and hostile interests. Jews who know their own history should be aware that such a state of affairs will inevitably lead to a new wave of Jew-hatred; the anti-Semitism of tomorrow will assert that Jews not only profited from the presence of the foreign big powers in that region but had actually plotted it and hence are guilty of the consequences.⁵⁹

In “Peace or Armistice in the Middle East,” written in 1948, Arendt decried the unreasonable demands and irreconcilable predicament of the Jewish state.

The Jews are convinced, and have announced many times that the world—or history or higher morality—owes them a righting of the wrongs of two thousand years and more specifically, a compensation for the catastrophe of European Jewry which, in their opinion, was not simply a crime of Nazi Germany but of the whole civilized world. The Arabs, on the other hand, reply that two wrongs do not make a right and that no code of morals can justify the persecution of one people in an attempt to relieve the persecution of the other.⁶⁰

Foreshadowing the plight of Palestinians, Arendt expressed what very few Jews were willing to say so soon after the horrors of World War II: that the Palestinians bore no responsibility for the collapse of civilization in Europe but ended up being punished for it.

An Obligation to Her Past

Stripped of her German citizenship in 1937, Arendt was stateless until 1950 when she became a US citizen. After the initial 1948 publication of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, which examines the history of anti-Semitism, the rise of modern imperialism, and the evolution of totalitarian subjugation, she became an internationally recognized public intellectual. She taught at some of the most prestigious universities in the US, among them the University of Notre Dame, University of California, Berkeley, Princeton, Yale, and the University of Chicago. She also returned to Germany as research director of the International Commission for the Cultural Reconstruction of European Jewry, where she was responsible for one and a half million objects, books, and artifacts of Judaica held by Allied authorities as “abandoned property.”

But by the 1950s, after Israel’s establishment, she despaired over the lack of cooperation between Arabs and Jews, and stopped writing about the Jews and their promised land. Instead, she concentrated on her prodigious writings in political philosophy. In an interview with Gunter Gaus on October 28, 1964, broadcast on West German television,⁶¹ she protested belonging to “the circle of philosophers” and stated that her profession, if she had one at all, was political theory. Most of her eighteen books attest to her original thinking in her chosen field and her enduring effect on contemporary studies of political philosophy, theory, and action.

Eichmann and “the Banality of Evil”

In 1960 Israeli intelligence captured the Nazi Lieutenant Colonel Adolf Eichmann in Argentina and transported him secretly to Jerusalem, where it was announced that he would stand trial for crimes against humanity. He had been the senior officer charged with the deportation of Jews to concentration camps. Arendt requested and was given the assignment of reporting on the trial for *The New Yorker*. She explained her need to

attend the trial as an obligation she owed to her past. Her coverage of the trial subsequently resulted in the book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*,⁶² published in 1963.

The phrase, “the banality of evil,” which completes the title and ends the book, may also be the most frequently quoted words Arendt ever wrote, and ones by which she is most widely identified. The self-explicit phrase refers to Eichmann, the man on trial, who considered himself an ordinary law-abiding citizen, displaying no guilt for his actions and no hatred for those placing him in a court of justice. In his defense he claimed that he bore no responsibility because he was simply “doing his job.” This understatement seems even more horrifying as described by Arendt. “He did his duty ... he not only obeyed orders, he also obeyed the law.”⁶³ The moral inversion of totalitarian rule allowed this to be the law of the land.

In the epilogue she observes, “The trouble with Eichmann was precisely that so many were like him, and that the many were neither perverted nor sadistic, that they were, and still are, terribly and terrifyingly normal.”⁶⁴ But this normalcy is terrifying precisely because they do not and can never know or feel that they are doing evil. Eichmann was one such normal man incapable of thinking for himself. Trapped in the moral distortion of totalitarianism, he believed he must obediently follow orders that he had neither the power nor the intellectual capacity to judge.

Arendt was struck by the absence of viciousness or overt anti-Semitism in Eichmann, who appeared more a banal bureaucrat than an inhuman monster. Her insight was that ordinary people might commit the most awful, reprehensible crimes. Many years later, in *The Life of the Mind: Thinking*, first published posthumously in 1978, she observed, “The sad truth is that most evil is done by people who never make up their minds to be good or evil.” Throughout the trial, she became increasingly suspicious of the prosecution’s caricature of Eichmann as “the monster” responsible for all the suffering of the Jewish people. If Eichmann is perceived as the devil and not as a man, how could any criminal proceeding lead to a just outcome?

Furthermore, she objected to the use of a judicial proceeding to replay the history of Jewish suffering before the world. In Ben-Gurion’s

words: “We want the nations of the world to know ... and that they should be ashamed.”⁶⁵ It was an orchestrated endorsement of Zionist militarism as the only way for Jews to be safe in a world populated with hate-filled, Jew-killing monsters. The political intention of the Israeli government was to use the trial to demonstrate that the only viable resistance to the Nazis among world Jewry had come from Zionists.⁶⁶

But Arendt did not want this to be the purpose of the trial. It was important to her that the trial be about justice and not a repetition of the “age-old and, unfortunately, religiously anchored dichotomy of Jews and gentiles.”⁶⁷ Anti-Semitism could not be considered the only motivation for the crime and eternal anti-Semitism as the justification for endless militarism. Her apprehension that the Holocaust would become a new civil religion, used to justify any of Israel’s future aggressions, was prophetic. Like Buber, she feared that once Israel turned into a militaristic state with threatened borders, any vestiges of Jewish culture would gradually vanish. In the long run, the survival of Israel depended more on creating peace with its neighbors than on blaming the entire world for anti-Semitism.

Her criticism of the simplistic proposition that all gentiles are anti-Semites went further. It was this kind of blindness, she said, that prevented Jewish leaders in Europe during the war from distinguishing between friends and foes and led them—without exception—to underestimate their enemies. More perniciously, it allowed them to cooperate in some way with the Nazi bureaucracy.⁶⁸ She excoriated these Jewish functionaries.

In Amsterdam as in Warsaw, in Berlin as in Budapest, Jewish officials could be trusted to compile the lists of persons and of 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 ... distributed the Yellow Star badges ... ⁶⁹

This analysis of the Jewish leaders’ and council’s cooperation with the Nazis was certain to antagonize many within the Jewish communities, whether they were Zionists or not. Despite her vast amount of work on anti-Semitism, Jewish politics, and the Zionist project, written

during the 1930s and 1940s, long before her controversial *Eichmann in Jerusalem* appeared, her report on Adolf Eichmann's trial resulted in her virtual excommunication in Israel and ensuing international notoriety. The article for *The New Yorker* and subsequent book turned some friends into fierce foes, but it also demonstrated her enormous moral and intellectual courage.

The Reception of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*

The New Yorker presumably valued the buzz created by the article Hannah Arendt delivered. William Shawn, the editor of the *The New Yorker*, observed that no one talked about anything else. However, the reviews of the article and then of the book were ferocious. According to one Jewish American writer, Irving Howe, the bitter public dispute over the Eichmann book was "violent." Mary McCarthy, the novelist and a close friend of Hannah Arendt, wrote that it assumed the proportions of a pogrom. Arendt was described as a "self-hating Jewess" who was pro-Eichmann. She was accused of being oblivious to the suffering of Jews, of appealing to the anti-Semites of the world, and was threatened by at least one Jewish organization to withdraw the book or suffer retaliation. In a debate organized by *Dissent Magazine*, one Jewish American playwright, essayist, and theatre critic, Lionel Abel, apparently pounded on the table to loudly criticize the work, claiming that Arendt considered the holocaust banal and the Nazis more appealing than their victims.⁷⁰ To avoid such a gross misunderstanding, perhaps he should have actually read the book.

An old friend, highly respected German-Jewish intellectual Gershom Scholem, wrote a public letter accusing Arendt of having no love for the Jewish people and making a mockery of Zionism.⁷¹ Scholem, a renowned scholar of Jewish mysticism, who had immigrated to Palestine in 1923 and was a cultural Zionist like Ahad Ha'am, with evident ties to Buber, had a complex history of shared and divergent interests with Arendt since the 1940s. His reaction was particularly hurtful to Arendt. Responding to Scholem's charges in a letter dated July 24, 1963, she responded:

You are quite right—I am not moved by any "love" of this sort, and for two reasons: I have never in my life "loved" any people

or collective—neither the German people, nor the French, nor the American, nor the working class or anything of that sort. I indeed love “only” my friends and the only kind of love I know of and believe in is the love of persons. Secondly this “love of the Jews” would appear to me, since I am myself Jewish as something rather suspect. I cannot love myself or anything which I know is part and parcel of my own person . . . I do not love the Jews, nor do I believe in them: I merely belong to them as a matter of course, beyond dispute or argument.⁷²

Scathing reviews of the book also came from those enraged by her critique of extreme nationalist or chauvinist justifications for military rule in Israel. Arendt dreaded the spread of religious and nationalist fundamentalism among Israelis. She opposed the principle of *might is right*, which the government clearly endorsed; and she did not accept the idea that any military conquest in the area served the historical purpose of Zionism. She could not tolerate the fact that the Holocaust itself had been incorporated into a new civil-Zionist religion that could be used at any time to vindicate Israel’s policies. She was astounded that at the end of such a momentous trial, the Jews could even contemplate the denial of equal rights for the Palestinians. It can be no surprise that the first Hebrew translation of the book came out in 1999, more than two decades after Arendt’s death.

In the introduction to a new edition of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*,⁷³ Amos Elon compared the treatment of Hannah Arendt to the excommunication of Baruch Spinoza, another “enemy of Israel.” Like Spinoza, Arendt today seems to prevail over her detractors, since her books are still in publication four decades after her death and are translated into dozens of languages. But her reflections on Zionism do not form any part of the contemporary narrative, and her name is rarely mentioned in courses on the history of Zionism, as the discourse within Zionism about Israel’s path to security and peace has not been tolerant of such dissenting ideas.

Arendt’s Continuing Presence

Hannah Arendt died in New York City on December 4, 1975, leaving behind through her work a lens for unraveling some of the most

fundamental elements political Zionism. Her work reminds us of how repression of dissent may operate as a key dynamic giving way to the rise of authoritarian and totalitarian regimes, a phenomenon that can be observed globally today. In the preface to her major work on this theme, she points out:

Totalitarian politics—far from being simply anti-Semitic or racist or imperialist or communist—use and abuse their own ideological and political elements until the basis of factual reality, from which the ideologies originally derived their strength and their propaganda value—the reality of class struggle, for instance, or the interest conflicts between Jews and their neighbors—have all but disappeared.⁷⁴

One of the important lessons we can draw from *Eichmann in Jerusalem* is that evil is not committed solely by demonic monsters, but as often by ordinary people, unable to think critically or independently. A modern executioner emerging from a totalitarian inversion is the most dangerous, for he represents a loss of conscience, or any capacity for self-reflective judgment.⁷⁵

Hannah Arendt's exhaustive historical knowledge, her unrelenting pursuit of clarity and honesty in all of her writing, made her warnings about the future of Zionism and the need for Arab-Jewish cooperation all the more prescient then—and relevant today.