

Eichmann in Jerusalem  
1961–1963

“Going along with the rest and wanting to say ‘we’ were quite enough to make the greatest of all crimes possible.”

– Hannah Arendt, interview with Joachim Fest, 1964.

Afterward, when Hannah Arendt published her book-length account of the trial of Adolf Eichmann, the fugitive Nazi SS officer who had helped to implement Adolf Hitler’s Final Solution, the tumult the book created deeply shocked her. “People are resorting to any means to destroy my reputation,” she wrote to her friend Karl Jaspers soon after the book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, appeared in 1963. “They have spent weeks trying to find something in my past that they can hang on me.”

The Anti-Defamation League and other Jewish organizations, the editors of influential magazines she had written for, faculty members at colleges where she earned a precarious living as a visiting professor, and friends from every period of her life objected to her characterization of Eichmann, who had been popularly branded “the most evil monster of humanity,” as “terribly and terrifyingly normal.” Many were infuriated by her depiction of Nazi-era European Jewish leaders – some of whom were still alive and highly regarded – as having (“almost without exception”) cooperated with Eichmann in sending ordinary Jews to Auschwitz, Treblinka, and Chelmno. Where only months earlier Arendt had been celebrated as a brilliant, original, and deeply humanistic political thinker, she was now attacked as arrogant, ill-informed, heartless, a dupe of Eichmann, an enemy of Israel, and a “self-hating Jewess.” “What a risky business to tell the truth on a factual level without theoretical and scholarly embroidery,” she wrote to her best friend and steadfast defender Mary McCarthy. But the trouble with her book *was* its theory – namely that ordinary men and women, driven not by personal hatred or

by extreme ideology but merely by middle-class ambitions and an inability to empathize, voluntarily ran the machinery of the Nazi death factories, and that the victims, when pushed, would lie to themselves and comply. The book launched a pitched battle among intellectuals in the United States. It blunted Arendt's reputation at its height and has cast a shadow on her legend ever since.

Hannah Arendt was seated in the press benches when the Eichmann trial opened to a tidal wave of publicity on April 11, 1961, in a makeshift courtroom in west Jerusalem. The State of Israel was only thirteen years old. No Israeli courthouse was big enough to accommodate the spectacle, so a brand-new performance theater called the House of the People was taken over for the proceedings. It seated 750 people, but interest far outpaced capacity. In the opening days, as many as seven hundred reporters from three dozen countries, international politicians and celebrities, jurists, Israeli and European camp survivors, historians, and tourists competed to squeeze into the arena for a glimpse of the notorious Nazi. Arendt was on assignment for the *New Yorker*, and on many days she brought along her seventeen-year-old first cousin once removed, Edna Brocke, née Fuerst, who had grown up in Israel. Taking notes nearby were former war correspondent Martha Gellhorn, representing the *Atlantic Monthly*; Elie Wiesel, writing for the Yiddish-language American *Jewish Daily Forward*; former deputy judge advocate general Lord Russell of Liverpool and Oxford professor Hugh Trevor-Roper, both writing for the *London Sunday Times*; along with reporters from the *New York Times*, *Der Spiegel*, and the *Washington Post*. Cables and electrical wires crisscrossed the courtroom floor to transmit the first continuous live television feed and videotaping of a judicial proceeding for an international audience, and transcripts were distributed daily. Later, Arendt's critics would claim that she attended too few courtroom sessions and depended too heavily on tapes and transcripts, and in fact she was on hand in Jerusalem for a total of only five or six weeks of the five-month trial. But others also came and went, while the world watched on television.

The indictment against Eichmann was read by the chief judge on the first day of the trial; it ran to fifteen counts. These enumerated “crimes against the Jewish people” and “against humanity” that had been committed or caused by Eichmann between 1938 and 1945, beginning with his alleged participation in the murderous Kristallnacht pogroms of November 1938 and encompassing the forced transportation and extermination of the majority of Jews then living in Germany, the Axis countries, and the nations occupied by the German army during the war years. The indictment listed the concentration and death camps to which Eichmann “and others” knowingly sent Jews for the purpose of mass murder, the approximate number of Jews sent to the camps, and the dates during which the camps operated. At the end of the reading, Eichmann, asked if he understood the indictment, spoke for the first time. “Yes, certainly,” he said in German. Asked how he pleaded, he answered, “Not guilty in the sense of the indictment.”

There were a number of reasons for the almost hysterical interest in the Eichmann trial – the international equivalent of the O. J. Simpson trial in its day. At the end of World War II, hundreds of fugitive Nazi officers were rumored to be hiding in towns and cities around the world, evil phantoms abetted by right-wing governments and networks of fascist fellow travelers. Eichmann and his bosses in the notorious SS, or Schutzstaffel – Heinrich Himmler’s elite paramilitary corps, which was directly responsible for carrying out Hitler’s plan to exterminate the entire Jewish population of Europe – had either disappeared, been murdered, or, in the case of Himmler, committed suicide and thus escaped prosecution and sentencing during the historic war crimes trials at Nuremberg in 1945 and 1946. Partly as a result, the destruction of as many as six million Jewish men, women, and children – murder on a scale previously unknown in history – had not been thoroughly adjudicated or even acknowledged at Nuremberg or in the successor tribunals of the late 1940s, which had focused on Germany’s illegal actions against other sovereign states in Europe. With Eichmann now in the seat of judgment in Jerusalem, the full story of the Jewish Holocaust, including, for the first time, the

testimony of concentration camp survivors, would finally be heard. Or so the young State of Israel expected.

Another reason was that a year earlier, in May 1960, Israeli secret service agents had extracted Eichmann from his hiding place in Argentina, sedated him, kidnapped him, and brought him to Jerusalem in a dramatic, extralegal maneuver that had been cheered, criticized, and generally debated around the world for months before the trial. The compelling attraction for most observers and for Arendt, however, was the mysterious figure of Eichmann, who, for his own protection, sat sealed in a bulletproof glass cage at the foot of the judges' raised platform for the duration of the trial. Slight, balding, bespectacled, with a runny nose and a compulsive twist of his thin and bitter mouth, he looked more like "a ghost who has a cold on top of that," as Arendt aptly described him in a letter to Karl Jaspers, than the representative of a self-appointed master race. He had been the head of the Office of Jewish Affairs of the Gestapo, the Nazi secret police, as well as a midranking lieutenant colonel in Himmler's murderous SS, and he was considered the most wanted war criminal alive in the early 1960s. The Israeli and American newspapers of the period characterized him not only as monstrous and "bloodthirsty" but also as Hitler's foremost architect of and technician for the implementation of "the Final Solution to the Jewish Question," a particularly repellent Nazi euphemism for unprecedented genocide. This last characterization of Eichmann turned out not to be entirely credible, as Arendt and others made clear at the time.

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