

Controversial Conversation:  
Hannah Arendt's Eichmann Trial

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Hannah Arendt reported on the 1961 trial in Jerusalem of Nazi war criminal Adolf Eichmann. Arendt was a German Jew who eventually escaped Nazi Germany and fled to the United States. She became an author and, at the time of the trial, had already published one of her most notable books, *On the Origins of Totalitarianism*. *The New Yorker* magazine asked Arendt to report on the trial. She delivered a controversial and widely critiqued report which she then published as a book under the title *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*.<sup>1</sup> Conversation erupted in newspapers, book reviews, and academic essays arguing the validity of Arendt's report. The main points of the conversation revolve around the report's factual inaccuracies and the apparent lenient portrayal of Eichmann and harsh portrayal of the Jewish people.

The report's factual inaccuracies created one of the greatest points of contention at the time of the publication. Louis Harap's book review from 1964 calls out Arendt for these incorrect statements.<sup>2</sup> Harap says that Arendt's review is "amateurish and groundless" as well as "arrogant."<sup>3</sup> Harap notes the inaccuracies of Arendt's report as well as how many generalizations she makes. In 1963, Ernst Simon, Professor at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, wrote "A Textual Examination" in which he harshly critiqued Arendt's work for similar reasons.<sup>4</sup> Both Simon and Harap point out that Arendt's opinions are too extreme, creating falsities in her

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<sup>1</sup> Erin Overbey, "Hannah Arendt and The New Yorker," May 30, 2013, <https://www.newyorker.com/books/double-take/hannah-arendt-and-the-new-yorker>.

<sup>2</sup> "MS-683: Louis Harap Papers. 1904-1989." Accessed November 15, 2019. <http://collections.americanjewisharchives.org/ms/ms0683/ms0683.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Louis Harap, "Arendt, 'Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil' (Book Review)," *Science and Society; New York* 28, no. 2 (Spring 1964): 224–225.

<sup>4</sup> "Simon, Akiba Ernst." Accessed November 15, 2019. <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/simon-akiba-ernst>.

<sup>5</sup> Ernst Simon, "A Textual Examination," *Judaism; New York* 12, no. 4 (Fall 1963): 400.

report. Simon believes that Arendt makes such extreme statements to appear intelligent, motivated by an urge to be right, with which Harap agrees.

Moshe Kohn's article in *The Jerusalem Post* also points out the lack of factual accuracy in Arendt's report. Kohn describes the inaccuracy of Arendt's "hallucinatory" article in drastic terms – comparing it to *Mein Kampf*, *The Wizard of Oz*, or a work of "science fiction".<sup>6</sup> He claims that Arendt makes over 400 errors, contradicts herself, and forms incomplete conclusions. A book review by Eric Silver featured in *The Guardian* is less aggressive in critique, but still calls out Arendt's errors. While Silver finds that her report is "illuminating", he writes that some of Arendt's errors distract from the best parts.<sup>7</sup>

Irving Howe, a literary critic, focuses on the consequences of Arendt's inaccurate report in his published observation, "'The New Yorker' & Hannah Arendt."<sup>8</sup> Howe emphasizes the effect that the falsities in the report may have on the mass audience reading it. Howe worries that "middle-class Americans" will misjudge and ignorantly accept the faulty information in the report. He believes that the *New Yorker* is not a serious journal, and therefore, should not try to report on such a serious topic, especially in an inaccurate way. Most concerning to Howe is that the *New Yorker* will not publish any responses to Arendt's article, which would provide helpful perspectives and correct the false information so the readers can better understand the Eichmann trials and the Holocaust.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Moshe Kohn, "The Arendt Affair-- a Study in Disenchantment," *The Jerusalem Post* (1950-1988); *Jerusalem, Israel*, December 20, 1963.

<sup>7</sup> Eric Silver, "Arendt in Jerusalem," *The Guardian* (1959-2003); *London (UK)*, October 11, 1963.

<sup>8</sup> "Irving Howe | American Literary Critic | Britannica." Accessed November 15, 2019. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Irving-Howe>.

<sup>9</sup> Irving Howe, "The 'New Yorker' and Hannah Arendt," *Commentary; New York, N. Y.* 36, no. 4 (October 1, 1963): 319.

Besides the false information in the report, scholars also criticize Arendt's portrayal of Eichmann and the Jewish people affected by the Holocaust. Ernst Simon believes that because of Arendt's background and writing style, Arendt is unqualified to conduct this report. Simon feels that Arendt, having fled to the United States, was distanced from the Holocaust. Simon believes that this detachment makes her unsympathetic to the Jewish people. He adds that Arendt's intellectual and ironic writing style creates too great a distance between herself and the subject to accurately reflect the truth. When looking at suffering, distance may seem to allow for a more objective and accurate understanding. However, Simon argues that with Arendt, this distance mistranslates the truth of the event. Therefore, it is wrong for Arendt to make conclusions on behalf of those who are actually victims of the Holocaust. Ultimately, Simon writes that Arendt's report as a whole is fair to "anyone else as long as he is not a Jew," lacks the sympathy that is expected towards the victims of the Holocaust, and instead gives Eichmann the "benefit of the doubt."<sup>10</sup>

Similar to Simon, Moshe Kohn also believes that Arendt's report is harsher to Jews than Eichmann. Kohn points out how Arendt's report makes it seem that the Jews chose to be the victims and did not resist totalitarianism enough. Kohn's book review states that "It is as though the Jewish people and the State of Israel had been on trial and not Adolf Eichmann."<sup>11</sup> Oscar Handlin, historian and Harvard University professor, also mentions Arendt's lenient portrayal of Eichmann in his book review. Handlin believes that Arendt does not clarify questions of the trial,

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<sup>10</sup> Ernst Simon, "A Textual Examination," *Judaism; New York* 12, no. 4 (Fall 1963): 400.

<sup>11</sup> Kohn, "The Arendt Affair-- a Study in Disenchantment."

confuses the opinion of the guilty and the innocent, contradicts herself, and evades the question of responsibility in the trial.<sup>12</sup>

Hannah Arendt's report and book obviously stirred passionate criticism from several sources. Even so, several reviews manage to look past the controversy, overall commending Arendt's work. *The Globe and Mail's* book review by Earl Berger praises Arendt, describing her as of "considerable ability."<sup>13</sup> Berger acknowledges that what she says can be "aggravating," but commends Arendt's ability to challenge readers as well as her bravery in examining such a difficult topic. This book review appreciates Arendt's style of writing and believes that she "illuminates" readers. Berger understands the controversial aspects of the report. Even so, he does not believe Arendt deserves such harsh criticism considering that she has been asked to write about such a sensitive subject.<sup>14</sup> Oscar Handlin, while he criticizes Arendt, also points out that the book has the "most perceptive comments" on totalitarianism that he has ever read.<sup>15</sup> Eric Silver acknowledges that Arendt has been under fire and "accused of sins," yet he believes that her evaluation of Eichmann is overlooked, as everyone jumps to criticize her statements regarding the lack of Jewish resistance.<sup>16</sup>

Hannah Arendt's report in the *New Yorker* and later, her book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* sparked heated debate on the Holocaust, the Eichmann trial, and Arendt as a writer herself. The main critiques are aimed at the report's inaccuracies and

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<sup>12</sup> Oscar Handlin, "Eichmann in Jerusalem" By Hannah Arendt (Book Review)," *New Leader*; New York, N.Y., August 5, 1963.

<sup>13</sup> Earl Berger, "Eichmann Book Sheds Light On the Banality of Evil," *The Globe and Mail (1936-Current)*; Toronto, Ont., July 6, 1963, sec. Review of Books.

<sup>14</sup> Berger, "Eichmann Book Sheds Light On the Banality of Evil."

<sup>15</sup> Handlin, Oscar. "Eichmann in Jerusalem" By Hannah Arendt (Book Review)." *New Leader*; New York, N.Y., August 5, 1963.

<sup>16</sup> Eric Silver, "Arendt in Jerusalem," *The Guardian (1959-2003)*; London (UK), October 11, 1963.

depictions of Eichmann and the Holocaust victims, yet some scholars still give credit to Arendt's work. The controversial conversation in response to Arendt's report is divided, but these reactions all work to preserve the truth of the Holocaust in its aftermath.

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