

Arendt Controversy

Public debate incited by the 1963 book *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, written by philosopher and political scientist, Hannah Arendt. Arendt had been sent by *The New Yorker* magazine to cover the 1961 trial of Nazi leader Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem. Her subsequent report dealt with the Nazis' attempt to annihilate European Jewry, Eichmann's part in it, and the trial itself.

What provoked public controversy was Arendt's assessment of Eichmann's motivations and behavior on one hand, and her depiction of Jewish behavior during the Holocaust on the other. Arendt looked at Eichmann within the context of Nazi Germany, a society that had accepted evil behavior as a value. She saw his actions as a totally normal result of that society, and Eichmann as an ordinary bureaucrat who exemplified the "banality of evil." At the same time, Arendt denounced Jewish communities all over Europe for their behavior: she claimed that European Jews and their leaders were morally irresponsible in their protection of certain elements of their society and their willingness to forfeit other elements.

Arendt's work was alternately condemned and praised. A main topic of debate was the boundaries of moral judgment with regard to the persecutors and the victims. The controversy provides an interesting reflection of the public perception of the Holocaust during the early 1960s, and it was the jumping-off point for a large body of research about the nature of Jewish response and Nazi evil.