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History 133C

“Your Friendly Neighborhood *Schutzstaffel*: Eichmann, Arendt and the Banality of Evil”



Braun, Werner. “Adolf Eichmann behind Bulletproof Glass during his Trial in Jerusalem.” *Bildarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz*. 1961.

The above scene, perhaps one of the most recognizable images in the media history of the latter half of the twentieth century, depicts the trial and eventual conviction of Otto Adolf Eichmann (1906-1962), pictured in the glass box on the left of the frame flanked by two security personnel, by Israeli authorities after he was captured in Argentina and spirited away by Mossad agents in May of 1960.[[1]](#footnote-1) Eichmann had previously served as an *SS- Obersturmbannführer* within the Nazi Reich, where he helped to orchestrate the Holocaust under the supervision of *SS- Obergruppenführer* Reinhard Heydrich (1904-1942).[[2]](#footnote-2) The image itself was captured by Israeli photojournalist Werner Braun (1918-2018), a pioneering photographer and reporter who originally fled Germany with the rise of the Nazi regime.[[3]](#footnote-3) This image ties into a greater social theme and topic of identity for the legacy of Nazi Germany, namely the ‘banality of evil’ as coinedby Hannah Arendt (1906-1975) ,[[4]](#footnote-4) a Jewish-German political theorist who had previously escaped the tide of Nazism sweeping Europe at the outset of World War II.[[5]](#footnote-5) The aforementioned banality apparently inherent in the persona and background of Eichmann has been a topic of great debate, supported by his non-descript demeanor during the trial and seemingly humble beginnings while simultaneously being challenged by accounts of the pre-meditated nature of the Nazi commander’s actions. This exploration of the literary and historical record will endeavor to determine, as concretely as possible, whether the concept of the ‘banality of evil’ holds up philosophically and how it has permeated the modern consciousness in the face of unspeakable crimes.

In order to understand the concept of evil as ‘banal’ with regard to Adolf Eichmann, it becomes necessary to examine his life and background before the eyes of the world turned to scrutinize him in 1961. Eichmann was born to a large working-class family in Solingen, Germany in 1906 where he atended several secondary and vocational schools without earning a degree. He spent his years prior to joining the SS as a sales clerk for several enterprises in Salzburg, Austria where he would eventually enlist in the elite Nazi organization in 1932.[[6]](#footnote-6) While Eichmann was raised in an at-least casually antisemitic environment, most historians argue that this fact did not directly influence his decision to ally with the Nazis, but merely smoothed his path through the bureaucratic labyrinth of the party and its ideals. His transition from life as a man of logistics and desk work to the orchestration of mass-murder therefore appears jagged and abrupt, setting the stage for a fascinating legal and ideological showdown upon his capture some sixteen years after the end of World War II.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Eichmann’s tumultuous life would end in the early hours of June 1, 1962 after being convicted of mass murder and genocide by Israeli courts in the wake of his arrest by Mossad the previous year. Eichmann’s defense rested on the claim that he had not been the calculating architect of death the world painted him to be, but rather was a pawn in the machiations of far more ambitious and sinister men higher up in the Nazi party.[[8]](#footnote-8) Contemporary media covered his trial and execution, with the New York Times noting Eichmann’s general ‘unremarkability’ when on the stand in Jerusalem.[[9]](#footnote-9) Such accounts, even before the release of Hannah Arendt’s description of the trial in 1963, noted with regularity the judgement of a man who by all accounts could have passed as any average reader’s neighbor or co-worker, had his background in the Holocaust not been brought to light.[[10]](#footnote-10) Nonetheless, the general undercurrent of cries for justice and vengeance for the murdered millions remained, coming to a head with Eichmann’s execution the summer following his trial and subsequent appeals; a marked increase in vitriol directed at the former SS officer was seen through with a final label for Eichmann as an ‘unapologetic mass-murderer’ whose last words were a defiant shout of “Long live Germany!”[[11]](#footnote-11) This contrast best encapsulates the feelings toward the war criminal at the time of his death: hatred for unspeakable crimes committed and an apparent lack of remorse, but a puzzling sense of normalcy.

However, can the overall assessment of a man whose actions in wartime are undoubtedly evil still be considered banal? Is the eventual outcome of the Holocaust a mere cause-and-effect of functionalism,[[12]](#footnote-12) devoid of emotional and personal investment in genocide? The apparent, albeit hotly contested answer is a resounding ‘no’; the conventional and all-too-easy narrative of Germans as victimized citizens ignorant of or cowed into particpation in mass-murder simply does not hold up, and cannot be applied to Eichmann.[[13]](#footnote-13) Perhaps most damning in the case of the SS Lieutenant is his role during the Wannsee Conference of 1942, the pivotal meeting at which details of the ‘Final Solution to the Jewish Question’ were agreed upon. Eichmann served as the organizer and scribe for the meeting, handling logistics on the behalf of his commander Reinhard Heydrich before taking to the task of exterminating Jews by firing squad in the Balkans during the months following the assembly. In testimony regarding the conference, Eichmann is known to have remarked on the surprising general agreement of the SS officers and ministers present, betraying a sickening consciousness and understanding of what those assembled there, including himself, were about to do.[[14]](#footnote-14) Accounts of the affair all portray Eichmann as thoroughly calculating and businesslike in the discussion of mass murder, a stark contrast to the humble character displayed during his trial in Jerusalem some nineteen years later.[[15]](#footnote-15) This flies in the face of the image of a man, ‘normal’ to all the world before the Second World War and later during his personal spotlight on the world’s stage in 1961. Rather, evidence of this sort suggests that Adolf Eichmann had an active and willing relationship with the atrocity of the Shoah and was not merely an unwitting cog in a much larger factory of death – a premise that countless scholars and historians now examine with ever-greater scrutiny.[[16]](#footnote-16)

A general contention of modern Holocaust scholars holds that the actions of Nazi officials like Eichmann were done out of a misplaced sense of altruism or justice, ridding Germany of a demographic that they belived was a genuine threat to the fictionalized ‘Aryan’ way of life. While a minority of historians may agree with Arendt’s assessment of Eichmann and claim that he acted out of ‘thoughtlessness’ toward moral considerations, far more hold that the manner of Eichmann’s sins cannot be considered anything other than pre-meditated and cold-blooded; more important in the philosophical sense, the labeling of such evil as ‘banal’ complicates the act of confronting evil when it presents itself.[[17]](#footnote-17) This notion is an intriguing one, displaying considerably more justification for Eichmann’s eventual death than Arendt’s approach, deemed by many to be far too apologetic on behalf of a war criminal. This was to be the view held by the Israeli courts that convicted Eichmann in late 1961; of particular note was the prosecution’s argument that physical distance from an act of murder cannot excuse the bureaucratic officials and process that made the act possible. On the contrary, greater distance from the literal trigger being pulled often more concretely implicates the individual pulling the proverbial one.[[18]](#footnote-18) The bulk of scholarly analysis on the subject in the years since, with the notable exception of Arendt herself, vindicates this legal ruling, with the greatest point of disagreement being whether or not the legal process fully grasped the supposed unconsciousness of Eichmann’s actions even if the accused was, from the moment of his capture, doomed to die. [[19]](#footnote-19) In contrast to Arendt’s notion of Eichmann as merely blinded by the Nazi world around him rather than as consciously evil, modern political theorists and reviewers of *Eichmann in Jeruslaem* put forth the argument that the Nazi authoritarian state inherently caused a moral decay whereby men like Adolf Eichmann could freely commit atrocities with full knowledge that their actions were wrong and that they would be protected from repercussions by the government.[[20]](#footnote-20) If this argument holds up, then the nature of evil with regard to the legacies of Nazism is anything but banal.

While the philosophical argument over whether or not Adolf Eichmann and men like him acted and continue to act out of societal duty, ignorance, numbness or genuine malice will continue to rage, the complexity of the debate is self-evident and always draws back to Arendt’s (in)famous phrase, “The Banality of Evil”; almost no source published on the subject after 1963 and cited here or elsewhere can escape reference to the now-classic concept. Nonetheless, the bulk of evidence continues to mount in favor of evil as an excuse all its own, incapable of justification through social amorality or a lack of understanding. This likelihood, perhaps the most terifying aspect of Eichmann’s story and its implications for humanity, implies that evil by the hand of man is inherently conscious, willing and calculated; ‘banality’ has been woefully mistaken for venemous concealment, waiting for the opportune moment.

Annotated Bibliography in Chronological Order

Trevor-Roper, H.R. "'Eichmann is Not Unique'." *New York Times.* September 17, 1961.   
 This article from the *New York Times* begins to articulate the idea of Eichmann as not only complicit in the Holocaust, but merely as one of untold thousands of willing conspirators. The author makes moral appeals to the readers on the basis of the Holocaust only being possible through the cooperation of seemingly normal men like Eichmann; this, no doubt, is meant to serve as a warning to future generations and inadverdently serves to preface Arendt’s more firmly-worded treatise on the subject two years later.

“Eichmann Hanged: ‘Long Live Germany!’ Last Words On Scaffold As Israel Executes Ex-Nazi As Killer Of 6 Million Jews.” *Los Angeles Times*. June 1, 1962.   
 This article from the *Los Angeles Times* follows up on accounts of Eichmann’s trial by relating the details of his execution the following year. It paints a thoroughly unapologetic picture of Eichmann, clearly vilifying him in the title as a man who could not separate love of his country from mass-murder. The article shows the fervor of the time; a clamoring for justice in an era when the atrocities of the Holocaust were beginning to come to light and be confronted in full.

Arendt, Hannah. “Eichmann in Jerusalem – I.” *The New Yorker.* February 8, 1963.   
 This article published in *The New Yorker* magazine by Arendt some eight months after Eichmann’s execution was one of a series of five publications that would grow into her famous “Report on the Banality of Evil.” It includes her eyewitness testimony at the trial and her musings on both the accused and the legal proceedings surrounding her in Jerusalem at the time. The collection would posit that Eichmann was a soldier devoid of serious malice who was merely following orders and the laws of his nation.

Arendt, Hannah. *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil.* Viking Press, 1963.  
 This book is comprised of Hannah Arendt’s thoughts on the Eichmann trial, arguing that the accused acted within the constraints of what was normalized for Nazi society, not thinking for himself or acting with outright malice. Arendt questions the legality of Israel’s prosecution of Eichmann, for which she has been heavily criticized. Many critics and historians deem her account to be ‘apologetic’ on behalf of the Nazi officer.

Schleunes, Karl*. The Twisted Road to Auschwitz. University of Illinois Press,* 1970.  
 This publication explores the factors that led to the institutionalized oppression and slaughter of the Holocaust by figures such as Eichmann. Schleunes addresses what modern Holocaust historians refer to as ‘functionalism,’ whereby the end product of the ‘Final Solution’ resulted to from bureaucratic evolution rather than a wicked and pre-meditated master plan for the extermination of the Jews. This source’s argument is in line with the general idea of Nazi evil as ‘banal,’ previously put forth by Arendt.

Clarke, Barry. "Beyond 'The Banality of Evil'." *British Journal of Political Science* 10, no. 4: 417-39. 1980.  
 This article analyzes Arendt’s arguments and claims of Eichmann’s thoughtlesness in his actions during the Holocaust. In the article, Clarke argues that although Arendt eventually relents and agrees that Eichmann was guilty of terrible crimes, her line of thinking in reaching that point absolves Eichmann of far too much blame. Rather, Eichmann is guilty of a blind obedience to the whims of clearly evil and malicious masters; this obedience is just as damning as any malice.

Goldhagen, Daniel. *Hitler’s Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust.* 1996.  
 This source examines the backstories and cases of Germans during the lead-up to the Holocaust, including Nazi officials and ordinary Germans who made the eventual genocide possible, even if unwittingly. The tone of the source at times contradicts Arendt’s notion of ‘banal thoughtlessness’ in the actions of men such as Adolf Eichmann and his contemporaries, creating a sense that even indifference to injustice is tantamount to its perpetration.

Reid, Richard, Blayney Colmore, Paul Oppenheimer, Erich Vieth, John Raffensperger, and Ken Whelan. "The Banality of Evil." *The Wilson Quarterly* (1976-) 23, no. 1 (1999): 4-7.  
 This source addresses the legacy of Hannah Arendt and the criticisms of her famous assessment of Eichmann. It acts as a response to an article published by Stephen Miller on the subject in a previous edition of *The Wilson Quarterly*, essentially opening up a discussion of Miller’s points and the opinions of several other critics. Opinions on the validity of Arendt’s thesis vary, though a general middle ground is reached on which evil such as Eichmann’s can be partially banal but not absolving.

Roseman, Mark. *The Wannsee Conference and the Final Solution: A Reconsideration.* 2003.  
 Drawing on handwritten notes fro and eyewitness testimony of the infamous Wannsee Conference, Roseman revisits the narrative of how a small handful of Nazi officers met in 1942 to quickly formulate what would become the ‘Final Solution’. Roseman paints Eichmann in particular in an unflattering light, with his off-handed remarks and comments on record at the conference differing greatly from his later claims of relative unwittingness and lack of pre-meditation.

Browning, Christoper R. *The Origins of the Final Solution: The Evolution of Nazi Jewish Policy, September 1939 – March 1942.* Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004.  
 In this source, Browning tracks the course of the ‘Final Solution’ to the Wannsee Conference of 1942, detailing Eichmann’s role in facilitating the deportaion of Jews to extermination centers and later the SS death squads operating in the Balkans under his command. The historical account provides ample evidence to deem Eichmann’s actions as conscious and knowingly destructive.

Cesarani, David. *Eichmann: His Life and Crimes*. Vintage Press, London. 2005.   
 This biography provides a similar picture to the aforementioned account of the Wannsee Conference, but also details Eichmann’s earlier life and the various influences in his childhood that may have resulted in his conversion to Nazism. These factors do not entirely condemn Eichmann as an evil man from his very beginnings, though his actions later in life are difficult to defend.

Cesarani, David. *Becoming Eichmann: Rethinking the Life, Crimes, and Trial of a "Desk Murderer"*. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2006.  
 Cesarani, after previously examining Eichmann’s origins and actions during the Shoah, takes time to explore his trial and its philosophical implications. The source takes a similar tone to his previous publication, but more firmly cements the idea that Eichmann was not a mindless drone operating out of ignorance to the harm he was causing during the Holocaust.

Bascomb, Neal. *Hunting Eichmann: How a Band of Survivors and a Young Spy Agency Chased Down the World's Most Notorious Nazi.* New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. 2009.  
 This source details, in sometimes sensationalized fashion, how the Israeli Mossad managed to track down Adolf Eichmann during his period of hiding in Argentina. The book explores how witnesses and family friends were able to identify the ex-Nazi and how Mossad responded in its efforts to kidnap Eichmann. See, “Operation Finale.”

Lipstadt, Deborah E. *The Eichmann Trial. New York: Nextbook/Schocken,* 2011.  
 This source provides a competing account of Eichmann’s trial, focusing on the testimony of Holocaust survivors against the Nazi officer. Lipstadt explores how such testimony shaped the public’s views and perceptions of Eichmann and the media spectacle that was his prosecution in Jerusalem.

Stangneth, Bettina. *Eichmann Before Jerusalem: The Unexamined Life of a Mass Murderer.* 2011.   
 Like Cesarani, Stangneth addresses the life of Adolf Eichmann before his capture and execution, focusing on the factors that led to his rise within the Nazi party and his eventual implementation of genocide. This source provides a welcome step back from the image of Eichmann as the cold and calculating murderer, a trap which is all too easy to fall into.

Menke, Christoph. “At the Brink of Law: Hannah Arendt’s Revision of the Judgment on Eichmann.” *Social Research 81* (3): 585–611. 2014.  
 This source explores the legality of Israel’s prosecution of Eichmann, using Arendt’s arguments as a basis. The source directly cites *Eichmann in Jerusalem* and compares Arendt’s assesment of the trial to principles put forth by Kant and other renowned thinkers. It does not wholly defend Eichmann, but it does well to explain with greater clarity some of the points for which Arendt has been heavily criticized.

Waldron, Sharn. “Contorted Images.” *Jung Journal: Culture & Psyche 12* (4): 88–105. 2018  
 This source argues that the inherent nature of Nazism and the totalitarian state that it operated under caused a moral decay that allowed for the perpetration of atrocities completely in opposition to human morality. It does not vindicate Eichmann and others like him, but it does serve to show how perceptions of right and wrong can become distorted in such a society.

Aderet, Ofer. “Israeli Photojournalist Icon Werner Braun Dies at 100,” *Haaretz.* December 25, 2018.   
 This source serves as a brief notice of the passing of Werner Braun, a renowned Israeli photojournalist. Braun is credited with capturing the image previously displayed in this exploration.

Berenbaum, Michael. “Adolf Eichmann,” *Encyclopedia Brittanica.* March 15, 2019.   
 This source serves as a general overview of the life of Adolf Eichmann, drawn from other sources that have been explored and referenced here.

“Hannah Arendt,” *Jewish Virtual Library. .* [*https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/hannah-arendt*](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/hannah-arendt)This source serves as an account of the life of author Hannah Arendt, broadly mentioning her accomplishments including her most famous work, *Eichmann in Jerusalem.*

1. Bascomb, Neal. *Hunting Eichmann: How a Band of Survivors and a Young Spy Agency Chased Down the World's Most Notorious Nazi.* New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. 2009. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Berenbaum, Michael. “Adolf Eichmann,” *Encyclopedia Brittanica.* March 15, 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Aderet, Ofer. “Israeli Photojournalist Icon Werner Braun Dies at 100,” *Haaretz.* December 25, 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Arendt, Hannah. *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil.* Viking Press, 1963. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. “Hannah Arendt,” *Jewish Virtual Library**.* <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/hannah-arendt> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Cesarani, David. *Eichmann: His Life and Crimes*. Vintage Press, London. 2005. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Stangneth, Bettina. *Eichmann Before Jerusalem: The Unexamined Life of a Mass Murderer.* 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Lipstadt, Deborah E. *The Eichmann Trial*. New York: Nextbook/Schocken, 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Trevor-Roper, H.R. "'Eichmann is Not Unique'." *New York Times.* September 17, 1961. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Arendt, Hannah. *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil.* Viking Press, 1963. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. “Eichmann Hanged: ‘Long Live Germany!’ Last Words On Scaffold As Israel Executes Ex-Nazi As Killer Of 6 Million Jews.” *Los Angeles Times*. June 1, 1962. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Schleunes, Karl. *The Twisted Road to Auschwitz*. University of Illinois Press, 1970. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Goldhagen, Daniel. *Hitler’s Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust.* 1996. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Browning, Christoper R. *The Origins of the Final Solution: The Evolution of Nazi Jewish Policy, September 1939 – March 1942.* Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Roseman, Mark. *The Wannsee Conference and the Final Solution: A Reconsideration.* 2003. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Cesarani, David. *Becoming Eichmann: Rethinking the Life, Crimes, and Trial of a "Desk Murderer"*. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2006. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Reid, Richard, Blayney Colmore, Paul Oppenheimer, Erich Vieth, John Raffensperger, and Ken Whelan. "The Banality of Evil." *The Wilson Quarterly* (1976-) 23, no. 1 (1999): 4-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Clarke, Barry. "Beyond 'The Banality of Evil'." *British Journal of Political Science* 10, no. 4: 417-39. 1980. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Menke, Christoph. “At the Brink of Law: Hannah Arendt’s Revision of the Judgment on Eichmann.” *Social Research 81* (3): 585–611. 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Waldron, Sharn. “Contorted Images.” *Jung Journal: Culture & Psyche 12* (4): 88–105. 2018 [↑](#footnote-ref-20)