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Explaining Evil:

The Holocaust in Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem*

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Incalculable amounts of intellectual and emotional energy have been spent by scholars from a myriad of disciplines in an ongoing attempt to understand how individuals could ever bring themselves to commit the crimes of the Holocaust. One work in particular, Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, constitutes essential reading for students of the Holocaust, attracting great scrutiny even half a century after its initial publication.<sup>1</sup> When studied alongside two more recent books, Arendt's work helps those seeking introduction to the history of the Holocaust to familiarize themselves with lasting debates on the concept of individual moral responsibility in the Holocaust.

In her analysis of Adolf Eichmann, Arendt emphasizes with worried tone the *normal* occupational and psychological background of the infamous *Schutzstaffel* (SS) officer, who rose to this position of administrative authority after having been a poor student and meager vacuum oil salesman before Hitler's rise to absolute power.<sup>2</sup> Expecting to lay her eyes upon a monster nearly glowing with a distinct aura of evil following her arrival to the Israeli courtroom where Eichmann's trial took place, Arendt saw instead a balding, middle-aged former businessman, certified as "normal" by six psychiatrists (one of whom considered Eichmann "[m]ore normal" than even himself; another actually deemed his psychological

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<sup>1</sup> See Roger Berkowitz, "Misreading 'Eichmann in Jerusalem,'" *The New York Times*, July 7, 2013, accessed September 20, 2014, [nyti.ms/1p50nDI](http://nyti.ms/1p50nDI)

<sup>2</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963; republished New York: Penguin, 1994), 28-29.

outlook “desirable”).<sup>3</sup> Eichmann’s commonplace physical appearance—combined with a frustrating tendency to defend himself with ideas repeated so frequently as to be rendered completely stale—led Arendt to conclude that evil in the modern world is characterized not by black-and-white distinguishability, but instead by a deceptively simple *banality*.

Despite the heated controversy that marked its reception half a century ago, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* warrants careful reading and thorough discussion by Holocaust students of the present day for several reasons. First, the case of Adolf Eichmann should not be interpreted in a vacuum as an oddity worthy only of revulsion and swift dismissal. Despite his prominent position within the unwieldy, adversarial Nazi bureaucracy, Eichmann was but one of thousands of bureaucrats extensively involved in the development and execution of Hitler’s most vague and sinister demand: the goal of realizing the complete annihilation of European Jewry by any means deemed feasible. It follows logically that to see Eichmann as nothing more than a lunatic placed within a system tragically well-suited to his talents would be akin to characterizing a significant portion of German society during the Third Reich as thoroughly insane, a notion that is patently untenable on its face and contradictory to the evaluations of the half dozen psychiatrists previously mentioned.

The unwavering pride shown by Eichmann, even at his trial, for the fact that he carried out his charges to the fullest extent of his ability challenges common notions about the supposedly inherent morality associated with hard work and efficient use of resources in and of themselves; indeed, this is the area in which the most enduring value of Arendt’s work is contained. This challenge is echoed by the implications drawn from sentiments expressed by other administrators of the Final Solution after the collapse of Nazi Germany. In his 1946 War Crimes Testimony at Nuremberg, Rudolf Hoess, commander of the extermination camp at Auschwitz, explained in an almost self-congratulatory fashion his role in ensuring that the

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<sup>3</sup> Arendt, *Eichmann*, 26-27.

genocidal practices implemented at Auschwitz constituted “improvements” upon the model developed at Treblinka in at least two respects: increased holding capacity for gas chambers and the use of deception upon imminent victims of execution.<sup>4</sup> To the extent that the importance of taking pride in one’s work – not explicitly one’s *moral* work – is a value still passionately inculcated in the members of many societies today, Arendt’s chilling conclusion that “ultimately the entire human race sits beside the defendant in the dock”<sup>5</sup> rings alarmingly true even half a century after its initial publication; in this regard at least, there remains “an Eichmann in every one of us.”<sup>6</sup>

A second value that readers of today may still see in Arendt’s work is an understanding of how Weber’s theory of the “steel-hard casing”<sup>7</sup> is readily observable in the history of modern *bureaucratization*. From Eichmann’s careerist ambitions, imaginative and enthusiastic embellishment of vague orders issued by bureaucratic superiors, and personal pride in the efficiency of his professional actions, we can see that humans are enabled to ignore the moral implications of their actions through a social rationalization that emphasizes meticulously calculated control and efficiency above all else. In other words, if Arendt’s assertion that the murderous potential of Eichmann rests within every individual is true due to those values held both by the desk-bound killers of the Third Reich and by members of advanced societies from the time of her writing all the way to the present, then it follows that

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<sup>4</sup> Rudolf Franz Ferdinand Hoess, “Affidavit, 5 April 1946,” in *Trial of the Major War Criminals Before the International Tribunal, Nuremberg, 14 November 1945 – 1 October 1946* (Nuremberg: Secretariat of the International Military Tribunal, 1949), Doc. 3868PS, vol. 33, 27579.

<sup>5</sup> Arendt, *Eichmann*, 286.

<sup>6</sup> Arendt, *Eichmann*, 286.

<sup>7</sup> Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Stephen Kalberg (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 177. Weber’s phrase in the original German – *stahlhartes Gehäuse* – has more commonly been interpreted to mean “iron cage,” as first written in the well-known 1930 translation of Weber’s *Protestant Ethic* by sociologist Talcott Parsons. However, some recent Weber scholars have questioned this translation, using phrases more similar to Stephen Kalberg’s “steel-hard casing.” For discussion on competing interpretations of Weber’s German phrase, see Peter Baehr, “The ‘Iron Cage’ and the ‘Shell as Hard as Steel’: Parsons, Weber, and the *Stahlhartes Gehäuse* Metaphor in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*,” *History and Theory* 40 (May 2001): 153-169.

the capability for mechanized genocide persists in these societies, in light of the growing bureaucratization of life after the Second World War and into the twenty-first century.

In this regard, Weber's metaphorical conception of a "steel-hard casing"<sup>8</sup> that enables individuals to compartmentalize reality is reinforced by the phenomenon known as *cognitive dissonance*, demonstrated by Eichmann at his trial in Israel. For example, Eichmann was asked the following question (in German) by one of the trial's three presiding judges: "Did you ever feel a crisis of conscience?"<sup>9</sup> Eichmann replied that "there were times when I felt as if I were in a conscious split state, when I had to retreat into one side from the other in order to obey my orders."<sup>10</sup> If Eichmann's remark is accepted at face value, he managed to create for himself a psychological framework in which he separated his actions from the moral views regarding human life that he had been taught long before the ascent of Nazism in Germany. Such an outlook would have enabled him to claim an understanding of and belief in the immorality of murder alongside a simultaneous conviction that he had done nothing wrong in his function as a lieutenant colonel of the *Schutzstaffel* (SS).

Even if one does not believe Eichmann's comment to be true, similar instances of rationalization-through-compartmentalization among other desk-bound killers working for the Third Reich are well documented. Walter Stier, a railway clerk stationed near Krakow during the Holocaust, explained to an interviewer that he worked day and night during the latter half of the war to process a high volume of "eastbound traffic," including many "special trains."<sup>11</sup> Even as late as the 1980s, Stier asserted that his complicity in the Holocaust was negligible due to his strictly bureaucratic function: clerking at the last station before the final "destination" (Treblinka).<sup>12</sup> Stier insisted that he "had no idea that Treblinka meant extermination" and that he had never heard a word about what was happening at Auschwitz,

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<sup>8</sup> Weber, *Protestant Ethic*, 177.

<sup>9</sup> *The Specialist: Portrait of a Modern Criminal*, directed by Eyal Sivan (Berlin: Kino International, 1999).

<sup>10</sup> *The Specialist: Portrait of a Modern Criminal*, directed by Eyal Sivan (Berlin: Kino International, 1999).

<sup>11</sup> *Shoah*, directed by Claude Lanzmann (New York: New Yorker Films, 1985).

<sup>12</sup> *Shoah*, directed by Claude Lanzmann (New York: New Yorker Films, 1985).

even though he was working just 40 miles away.<sup>13</sup> While it is virtually impossible that Stier had no knowledge whatsoever about what happened to the Jews densely packed onto “special trains” during the Holocaust, one sees in his hollow assertion of innocence the same sort of cognitive dissonance that Eichmann described for the judge. In other words, Stier built Weber’s “steel-hard casing”<sup>14</sup> around himself by rationalizing his complicity in genocide through a compartmentalization of reality, in which his duty to follow orders had no relation whatsoever to his beliefs on the immorality of murder. Stier considered himself a moral person by way of his deference to authority, chasing away from his conscience the glaring reality that it was exactly this uncritical deference which made his actions immoral in nature.

Stier’s comments also remind one of the fact that the Nazi bureaucracy was carefully structured to promote such compartmentalization as a way to mitigate the psychological stress of the work at hand for desk-bound perpetrators: “special trains,” for example, were actually cattle cars packed so tightly with soon-to-be victims of genocide that many died of suffocation and disease before reaching the death camps. The meticulous documentation that accompanied the Third Reich’s implementation of genocidal policy confirms the use of additional euphemisms as a way to promote rationalization through the compartmentalization of reality. A form containing transcribed SS radio station orders from Auschwitz requested “permission for a truck to Dessau to fetch *material* [camp detainees] for *special treatment* [murder in the gas chambers]” (emphasis added).<sup>15</sup> Today – in a society which largely dismisses innocent civilians killed in drone strikes overseas as “collateral damage” and regularly describes the torture of war prisoners as “enhanced interrogation” – the problem of serious wrongdoing being tacitly understood, dramatically understated, and repeatedly permitted shows that the serious moral problems of distorting reality through rationalization, compartmentalization, and euphemistic language remain all too real.

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<sup>13</sup> *Shoah*, directed by Claude Lanzmann (New York: New Yorker Films, 1985).

<sup>14</sup> Weber, *Protestant Ethic*, 177.

<sup>15</sup> SS Radio Station orders, Auschwitz, August 26, 1942, Wannsee Conference Archive, Berlin.

In spite of the lasting value of Arendt's work, there are two serious flaws in her analysis that accentuate each other quite severely: first, her assignment of blame for much of the suffering that occurred during the Holocaust to the Jews who were targeted by the Nazis; and second, her failure to acknowledge that Eichmann – an enthusiastic implementer of Nazi genocidal policy – was indeed a responsible perpetrator who *knew* that he was committing moral atrocities, but chose to continue with his work in the SS. Arendt argues that “[w]herever Jews lived, there were recognized Jewish leaders, and this leadership, almost without exception, cooperated in one way or another, for one reason or another, with the Nazis.”<sup>16</sup> She seeks to support this point by referencing instances of Jews and Gentiles accepting the categorization of Jews in hopes of prompting the Nazis to construct more inclusive definitions of “privileged” groups, members of which appeared to stand a better chance of surviving Hitler's attempt to destroy European Jewry: “the acceptance of privileged categories—German Jews as against Polish Jews, war veterans and decorated Jews as against ordinary Jews, families whose ancestors were German-born as against recently naturalized citizens, etc.—had been the beginning of the moral collapse of respectable Jewish society...”<sup>17</sup>

What Arendt fails to take into account regarding those who sought to save their peers in this way is that they were confronted with a perplexing dilemma, that of either seeking to save some parts of the imperiled Jewish community in Europe by interacting with an oppressive and powerful regime in order to alleviate the effects of its genocidal policy, or risking total failure – and thus complete elimination – by expressing dissent and encouraging resistance. When considered in this way, one can see that the Jews and Gentiles who sought to save their peers by supporting the conferral of privileged status upon a lucky few did not have much of a choice at all, especially when one recalls the stark reality that “they had

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<sup>16</sup> Arendt, *Eichmann*, 125.

<sup>17</sup> Arendt, *Eichmann*, 131-133.

possessed ... no army ... no caches of weapons, no youth with military training”<sup>18</sup> with which to fight the Nazis, had they chosen the second option. Arendt’s suggestion that this approach made the Jews complicit in their own destruction is unconvincing at best.

Although Arendt is willing to assign some degree of blame to Jews for the extent of the Holocaust itself, she remains needlessly inconclusive regarding Eichmann’s indisputable guilt as a knowledgeable, willing, and enthusiastic perpetrator of genocidal crimes. Worse, Arendt’s analysis actually comes close to mirroring the arguments advanced by Eichmann and Stier, who posited that the bureaucratic nature of their work eliminated the possibility of their understanding its direct connection to the worst atrocities of the Third Reich: “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...this normality was much more terrifying than all the atrocities put together, for it implied...that this new type of criminal, who is in actual fact *hostis generis humani*, commits his crimes under circumstances that make it well-nigh impossible for him to know or feel that he is doing wrong.”<sup>19</sup>

Arendt’s conclusion regarding the nature of Eichmann’s work is difficult to believe when one considers that the defendant himself acknowledged that he could only continue performing his murderous deeds by compartmentalizing his perception of reality and, in so doing, ignoring whatever pangs of conscience struck him as he completed his assignments. Eichmann did not walk away from his murderous work, in spite of the fact that no evidence has been found to support the idea that he would have suffered punishment had he chosen to do so. As an individual whose formative years occurred well before the rise of Hitler, and who admitted at his own trial to compartmentalizing his view of reality in such a way as to repress the wailings of his conscience, one may safely conclude that Eichmann *knew* he was

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<sup>18</sup> Arendt, *Eichmann*, 125.

<sup>19</sup> Arendt, *Eichmann*, 276.



doing wrong and chose to continue working as a facilitator and promoter of the greatest crime in history.

Given the weaker aspects of Arendt's book, students of the Holocaust should read *Eichmann in Jerusalem* alongside more recent works that explore the concept of individual responsibility in the perpetration of genocide. Indeed, Christopher Browning's book *Ordinary Men* derives value of its own from the compelling argument that it advances regarding the capability of individuals and entire societies to become willfully immersed in terrible crimes. As a historian who openly embraces a multi-causal approach to understanding the motives of Reserve Police Battalion 101 in carrying out the Final Solution in Poland, Browning focuses on a number of motives applicable in varying degrees amongst members of the battalion to explain why most of them made the choice to kill. For example, Browning examines racism, careerism, deference to authority, wartime brutalization of conscience, and pressures to conform along lines of perceived ideals, including comradeship and masculinity.<sup>20</sup>

Furthermore, in describing the background of the men in Reserve Police Battalion 101, Browning is careful to point out that special selection of the ranks (in order to ensure that those carrying out the massacres would be those best suited to the work) almost certainly did *not* occur. After all, the vast majority of the men in the battalion were from Hamburg,<sup>21</sup> one of the least Nazified cities in all of Germany throughout the duration of the Third Reich. About 63 percent of the rank-and-file members in the battalion came from a working-class background, most holding such positions as dock worker, truck driver, warehouse worker, construction worker, machine operator, seaman, waiter, or police officer.<sup>22</sup> About 35 percent were in the lower middle class, most of these being involved in sales of some sort.<sup>23</sup> Only two percent were middle-class professionals, though these positions too – like those of

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<sup>20</sup> Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (1993, republished, New York: Harper, 1998), 159.

<sup>21</sup> Browning, *Ordinary Men*, 47.

<sup>22</sup> Browning, *Ordinary Men*, 47.

<sup>23</sup> Browning, *Ordinary Men*, 47.

druggist and teacher – were modest at best.<sup>24</sup> Taken as a whole, the prevailing socioeconomic background of these men suggests a strong likelihood that at least a few of them were, at some point before 1933, integrated into political cultures that had opposed the ascent of Nazism, including communists, socialists, and labor union members whom the Nazis would hardly have seen as promising recruits for the implementation of Hitler's genocidal visions.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, the average age of the men was 39 years, and over half were between 37 and 42; in other words, this was a group that would have experienced its formative years well before the rise of Hitler in the early 1930s.<sup>26</sup> The men of Reserve Police Battalion 101 hardly had anything in common with the Third Reich's ideal conception of young, educated, enthusiastic SS officials who had been raised to believe in the tenets of Nazism and trained in a system designed to provide requisite skills for the execution of genocide.

In light of the fact that the men of Reserve Police Battalion 101 were hardly prone to throwing their blind and wholehearted support behind exterminationist anti-Semitism *before* going to Poland to kill Jews, Browning seeks to explain their murderous choices as an example of previously held prejudices being accentuated through the implementation of "atrocious by policy,"<sup>27</sup> which would encourage (as a rationalizing device) the wartime dehumanization of the perceived enemy as a monstrous "other." Indeed, Browning asserts that the men of Reserve Police Battalion 101 provide just one example of this wartime rationalization-through-hatred in the history of the twentieth century: "From the Nazi 'war of destruction' in eastern Europe and 'war against the Jews' to the 'war without mercy' in the Pacific and most recently Vietnam, soldiers have all too often tortured and slaughtered unarmed civilians and helpless prisoners, and committed numerous other atrocities... War, a struggle between "our people" and "the enemy," creates a polarized world in which 'the

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<sup>24</sup> Browning, *Ordinary Men*, 47-48.

<sup>25</sup> Browning, *Ordinary Men*, 48.

<sup>26</sup> Browning, *Ordinary Men*, 48.

<sup>27</sup> Browning, *Ordinary Men*, 162

enemy' is easily objectified and removed from the community of human obligation...Distancing, not frenzy and brutalization, is one of the keys to the behavior of Reserve Police Battalion 101. War and negative racial stereotyping were two mutually reinforcing factors in this distancing."<sup>28</sup>

Browning also argues that racism must be addressed as just one motive of the men insofar as it was reinforced, encouraged, and thus made more powerful by the war itself. For such men as those in Reserve Police Battalion 101, whose backgrounds offer little to suggest that they would become the murderous first-hand implementers of the Final Solution in Poland, the existence of an exterminationist anti-Semitism before the war makes very little sense.

As a work focused specifically on addressing the many reasons *why* most men of Reserve Police Battalion made a personal choice to kill in the utter absence of being forced to do so, Browning's book offers a more satisfactory account of perpetrators' motives than does Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. After all, Arendt's energies were spent not only on assessing Eichmann's motives, but also on the complex question of whether the bureaucratization of the Final Solution meant that he was incapable of understanding the extreme immorality of his actions. Given his sharper focus on the motives of the perpetrators, Browning is able to provide a more readily accessible account of the factors that drove the perpetrators of the Holocaust in eastern Europe to commit such terrible deeds.

However, despite its appealing acknowledgment of the complexity of individual decision-making, and its consistent adherence to the findings of relevant documentary evidence, the multi-causal argument advanced by Browning in *Ordinary Men* has elicited serious concern from other historians, who question his heavy reliance on the postwar testimonies of the perpetrators themselves. Indeed, Browning's use of this evidence as the

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<sup>28</sup> Browning, *Ordinary Men*, 160-162.

backbone of his analysis becomes especially worrisome when one considers that the many motives other than racism offered in the testimonies of the perpetrators might have constituted nothing more than self-exculpatory lies. As Browning himself stated: “The testimony is marked by similar omissions concerning German attitudes toward Jews. One reason for this is stark legal consideration. According to German law, among the criteria for defining homicide as murder is the presence of a ‘base motive,’ such as racial hatred. Any member of the battalion who openly confessed to anti-Semitism would have seriously compromised his legal position; anyone who talked about the anti-Semitic attitudes of others risked finding himself in the uncomfortable position of witness against his former comrades.”<sup>29</sup> With this passage in mind, Browning’s aforementioned conclusion – that racial hatred motivated Reserve Police Battalion 101 only insofar as wartime dehumanization exacerbated an originally non-exterminationist anti-Semitism—arguably needs a more diverse array of sources.

The reaction against this weakness in Browning’s work largely motivated Daniel Goldhagen’s writing of *Hitler’s Willing Executioners*, wherein he describes German history as being marked by a particularly virulent strand of anti-Semitism that Hitler only had to unleash in order to bring about the Holocaust. Indeed, Goldhagen asserts that men on the eastern front, such as those in Reserve Police Battalion 101, were driven to kill innocent civilians solely by way of the violent anti-Semitism they had embraced even before Hitler’s rise to power: “Most of them, as the training schedules show, also had very little training because the Nazi regime and the Order Police did not conceive of the possibility that much further ideological preparation would be necessary in order to gain these men’s accedence and willing cooperation in Jew-killing...By choosing not to excuse themselves from the genocide of the Jews, the Germans in police battalions themselves indicated that they wanted

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<sup>29</sup> Browning, *Ordinary Men*, 150.

to be genocidal executioners.”<sup>30</sup> Although Goldhagen’s work points out an important shortcoming in Browning’s book, his argument as a whole is less convincing than that of *Ordinary Men* because of its structural reliance on the fallacious idea of a German *Sonderweg* (“special path”), which is supported by virtually no evidence in the overall composition of Holocaust perpetrators in eastern Europe. After all, Browning’s research shows that Latvian and Lithuanian *hiwis* participated in almost every atrocity that Reserve Police Battalion 101 carried out.<sup>31</sup> Simply stated, Goldhagen’s overall argument is far more problematic than Browning’s because of its disregard for the international reach of eliminationist anti-Semitism in twentieth-century Europe and its reductionist claim that the men were motivated to commit genocide solely out of hatred for Jews, with no eye toward their own personal gain through career advancement or the establishment of a good reputation with one’s comrades.

The arguments advanced by Arendt, Browning, and Goldhagen together constitute an excellent starting point for students seeking greater familiarity with challenging discussions regarding individual complicity in the Holocaust. Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem* is relevant even today in light of the important questions it asks about the very nature of morality and individual responsibility in a bureaucratized and largely depersonalized world. Browning’s *Ordinary Men*, by virtue of its keen focus on a number of motivational factors that were all likely present in Reserve Police Battalion 101, offers a valuable explanation of why the citizens of an advanced industrial society chose to act with such unmitigated barbarity. Lastly, *Hitler’s Willing Executioners* by Goldhagen forces readers to confront the possibility that hate alone can indeed motivate human beings to commit atrocious acts of violence. However, all historical sources – primary and secondary – have their own unique values and limitations in what they can and cannot tell historians, and the works of these three famous authors are by no means exempt from this important rule in the study of history.

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<sup>30</sup> Daniel J. Goldhagen, *Hitler’s Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York: Vintage, 1996), 277-279.

<sup>31</sup> Browning, *Ordinary Men*, 52, 80-81, 83-85, 89-91, 93-95, 99, 104, 106, 107-110, 115, 158, 163.

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