

“Why Didn’t Our Boys Just Shoot Him and Leave a Little Note?”

The Trial of Adolf Eichmann in Israel

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Abstract. Historically speaking, the trial of former Nazi Adolf Eichmann was an unavoidable spectacle of the 1960s. For some, it could have been seen as a farce due to its inherent impartiality as the accused was illegally kidnapped out of Argentina and the proceedings were held in the fledgling state of Israel. For others, it reopened unpleasant wounds and brought back the horrors of Nazi Germany. For the world, it was an educational opportunity that allowed a new generation to learn about the atrocities of the Holocaust. My paper examines Eichmann’s role in the Holocaust, his trial and subsequent sentence, the question of the legitimacy of the proceedings, and the trial’s significant impact on how society viewed the Holocaust. From public opinion on Israel to new philosophical ideas, the Eichmann trial challenged people to reevaluate everything that they had known about Nazi barbarities, specifically those committed against the Jews. The reason why the Israelis did not simply “shoot him and leave a little note” was because his trial would, in fact, serve a political purpose. Was Eichmann really that important? Was he as central to the Holocaust as Israel would like the world to believe? There is a substantial amount of evidence that indicates Eichmann was not quite so important and that, instead, his highly-publicized trial was used to further the belief that the Holocaust was a uniquely Jewish experience thus validating the existence of the newly-created state of Israel in the Middle East.

Panel Paper

“Why didn’t our boys just shoot him, and leave a little note?” (*The Times*, 1961). The trial of Adolf Eichmann was an unavoidable spectacle of the 1960s. For some, it could have been seen as a farce due to its inherent impartiality. For others, it reopened unpleasant wounds and brought back the horrors of Nazi Germany. For the world, it was an educational opportunity that allowed a new generation to learn about the atrocities of the Holocaust. We will first look at both Eichmann’s role in the Holocaust as well as his trial and subsequent sentence. Above all, Eichmann’s trial had a significant impact on how people viewed the Holocaust. From public opinion on Israel to new philosophical ideas, the Eichmann trial challenged people to reevaluate everything that they had known about Nazi barbarities, specifically those committed against the Jewish people. The reason why the Israelis did not simply “shoot him and leave a note” was because his trial would, in fact, serve an eventual purpose.

Otto Adolf Eichmann was born in Solingen, Germany in 1906 (Arhoni and Deitl, 1997: 18) to Protestant parents (Yablonka, 2004: 13). He attended Kaiser-Franz-Josef State Secondary School and later, worked as a salesman for some time before being persuaded to join the Schutzstaffel (SS) by a family friend (Arhoni and Deitl, 1997: 18). Eichmann had been a mediocre student, could never hold a consistent job, and was seen as largely a failure to his family. He moved up through the ranks of the SS somewhat surprisingly, given his background. His colleagues considered him to be an expert on the Jewish people, as he took it upon himself to learn Yiddish

and gave lectures on Zionism to the SS. He had read Theodor Herzl's *The Jewish State* and Adolf Bohm's *The History of Zionism* (Yablonka, 2004: 13-14). He later became the head of the Reich Main Security Office (RSHA)'s Section IVB4 in 1941, which concerned itself with "Political Churches, Sects and Jews" (Kitchen, 2006: 278). He would hold this position until the fall of the Third Reich.

Eichmann was a peculiar character as he was described by his colleagues as "pedantic, conscientious and without any specialized knowledge," since they did not care for his fascination with what they saw as a subclass race (Arhoni and Dietl, 1997: 20). Moreover, he attempted to make up for his shortcomings with "fanatic dedication" (Arhoni and Dietl, 1997:20). He was praised for his work, and in January 1938, he was given official recognition for "broad knowledge of the organizational and ideological methods of the enemy, the Jews" (Arhoni and Dietl, 1997: 20). Eichmann had, supposedly, finally found where he belonged and his dedication was such that he would follow his *Führer* to death if need be (Stangneth, 2016: 54).

After the annexation of Austria in March 1938, Eichmann was appointed the head of the emigration office in Vienna and within 18 months had forced some 100, 000 Jewish Austrians to leave the country (Yablonka, 2004: 14). At this point, the Nazi regime's goal was still emigration (Arhoni and Dietl, 1997: 21), however the Wannsee Conference in 1942 ironed out the details of the "Final Solution" (Yablonka, 2004: 14). Eichmann took the minutes at this conference where Reinhard Heydrich announced his intention to rid all of Europe, including Britain, Sweden, and North Africa, of the Jewish race. At his trial, Eichmann recalled that there was a lengthy discussion at Wannsee about the merits of different types of mass murder (Kitchen, 2006: 305). This is not surprising, since as early as September 3rd, 1941, Cyclon-B was already being used to gas enemies of the Nazi regime in Auschwitz (Arhoni and Dietl, 1997: 33).

Over the course of the war, Eichmann was considered by many to be the architect behind the colossal transfer of the Jewish people to Eastern Europe, and later, to the concentration camps. He began in Austria, and at the end of the war, he arrived in Hungary to deport 500, 000 Jewish Hungarians in just a few short weeks (Yablonka, 2004: 14-15). In his book, *The Eichmann Operation*, Zvi Aharoni, a former Mossad agent, stated that Eichmann was responsible for the organization of "the industrialized extermination of a whole race" (1997: 21). His nicknames ranged from Manager of the Holocaust, Engineer of the Jewish Genocide, the Final Solutionist, the Bureaucrat, and the Mass Murderer (Stragneth, 2014: xvi). David Ben-Gurion, the Prime Minister of Israel during Eichmann's trial called him "one of the greatest Nazi criminals" (Yablonka, 2004: 16). David Astor referred to him as one of the worst Nazis to have survived the war, and could not believe that he had the audacity to try to live a normal life after what he had done (1961: 6).

On the other hand, people like Hannah Arendt expressed sympathy for Eichmann. She asserts that Eichmann had been following orders and had never killed anyone, Jew or non-Jew (Arendt, 1963: 15). In *Eichmann Before Israel*, Bettina Stragneth stated:

"Depending on whose account you read, he comes across variously as an ordinary man who was turned into a thoughtless murderer by a totalitarian regime; a radical anti-Semite whose aim was the extinction of the Jewish people, or a mentally ill man whose innate sadism was legitimated by the regime." (2014: xvii)

Eichmann became an extremely controversial figure, and his trial was widely publicized. There were many different views of this ex-Nazi, and it seemed that everyone had an opinion.

Moreover, much contradicting evidence about Eichmann's character existed, thoroughly confusing anyone who delved into researching him.

As expressly stated earlier, Eichmann had an affinity for Jewish studies. He admired Theodor Herzl, the founding father of Zionism, and he was known as sort of an expert amongst his SS peers. In fact, while stationed in Vienna, he issued an order to punish anyone who desecrated Herzl's grave and even visited it himself on the 35th anniversary of Herzl's death (Mulisch, 2005: 15). He was a pro-Zionist and conceded that the annihilation of the Jewish people was "one of the greatest crimes in the history of humanity." He apparently bore the Jewish people no ill will and acted solely out of his responsibility to the regime (Hartouni, 2012: 23). Eichmann himself said during his interrogations in Israel that he had encouraged Zionism, or the creation of a Jewish homeland, since it fell nicely in line with the Nazis' desire for Jewish emigration (Von Lang and Sibyll 1983: 24-25). It is this version of Eichmann that was seen as a mere "transportation officer," (Hartouni, 2012: 1) who shouldered little blame for his actions, as he was "just a small cog in Adolf Hitler's extermination machine" (Strangneth, 2014: xv).

There is also plenty of evidence that suggests Eichmann was an anti-Semite. In Hungary he was known for such slurs as: "I am the bloodhound!", "I'll set the mills of Auschwitz grinding!", and "I'll do away with the Jewish filth of Budapest" (Strangneth, 2014: 49). When he was captured, the headline in London's *The Times* referred to him as the "Gestapo's Chief Jew-Baiter" (1960: 12). His most infamous quote was that he "would jump into his grave laughing, in the knowledge that he was responsible for the death of five million Jews" (Mulisch, 2005: 5). He bragged that the term "Final Solution" was his brainchild (Strangneth, 2014: 31). According to Arendt, Eichmann's greatest downfall was his desire to boast and brag (1963: 26). He claimed that the Jewish ghetto system was all his idea, and that he came up with the plan of shipping the Jewish to Madagascar. Both of these last two pieces of information are verifiably false, but for one reason or another, he wanted people to believe that they were true. For Rudolph Kastner, the leader of Hungarian Jewry, Eichmann was depicted as a god (Bilsky, 2001: 140). Kastner attempted (and failed) to negotiate a deal with Eichmann that offered 10, 000 trucks for the Nazi war effort in exchange for sparing the lives of a million Jews (Bilsky, 2001: 137). Eichmann was seen as a deity since he was the one responsible for the destruction of the Jewish people, but he also symbolized hope since it was he who could save them.

The fall of the Third Reich put a decisive end to Eichmann's career. He was fortunate enough to evade capture by the Americans after he escaped to Argentina. Soon after, his wife and children joined him and they assumed new identities, with Eichmann taking the name of Ricardo Klement (Yablonka, 2004: 15). His whereabouts were very much a mystery for a long time. For instance, the year before he was captured, *The Times* published that he had been seen in Kuwait (*The Times*, 1959: 9).

The Nuremberg Trials began at the end of 1945 to bring members of the Nazi regime to justice for their war crimes. During the proceedings, his name was brought to the public for the first time as the administrator of the Final Solution (Pearlman, 1963: 9). He was believed to be dead, and was described as ghost hovering over the trials. Though it was futile, the defendants at Nuremberg attempted to push all the blame onto Eichmann for their actions. This may have been out of sheer desperation on their parts, or perhaps it was the simple fact that they thought him to be dead, and the dead cannot testify.

One other notable occurrence happened between the end of the Second World War and Eichmann's eventual capture in 1960. The British Mandate of Palestine was experiencing considerable turmoil due to tensions between the Zionist Jews and the Palestinian Arabs and in

1947, the United Nations put forth a partition plan as a compromise. The Palestinian Arab village of Deir Yassin was massacred at the hands of Irgun, a Jewish terrorist paramilitary group, which started the flood of hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees into neighbouring Arab countries, creating the Palestinian refugee crisis as we know it today. In May 1948, the independent state of Israel was declared, which the Americans and the Soviets immediately recognized, however was met by resistance from Egypt, Iraq, and the former Transjordan (Wheatcroft, 1996: 231-35). This upset of the status quo in the Middle East is crucial to the understanding of the Eichmann trial.

Mossad, the Israeli intelligence service, captured Eichmann in Argentina on May 11, 1960 (Arhoni and Dietl, 1997: 146). The Israelis had received fragments of information regarding Eichmann's whereabouts as early as 1957. This was a somewhat exceptional case due to the fact that Israel's priorities in the 1950s were far from hunting Nazis. They were trying to stabilize themselves as a new state after the War of Independence and were in the middle of an economic crisis. The 1950 Nazi and Nazi Collaborators (Punishment) Law put in place by the Israeli government was requested by the thousands of new Holocaust survivor immigrants, but it did not result in the active search for remaining elusive Nazis. Mossad itself was not yet fully established as an intelligence service, and functioned as a small-time investigative group for internal security threats (Yablonka, 2004: 9-13). The capture of Eichmann could somewhat be considered a coincidence, however waiting in the recesses of many survivors' minds was the desire for revenge.

Before we examine the impact of the trial, it must be noted that the circumstances of the trial often negatively affected people's perception of Israel. In 1961, Charles Glock, Gertrude Selznick, and Joe Spaeth conducted a study called *The Apathetic Majority* whereby they interviewed a portion of the population of Oakland, California about their opinion on the Eichmann Trial (1966). The study revealed that 28 per cent of the participants believed the trial to be illegal for one reason or another. One participant was quoted as saying: "They had no right to arrest a man in another country and kidnap him out. According to international law, they didn't have the right. Definitely, it's illegal" (Glock et al, 1966: 88-89). The Argentine government commented that though they understood Israel's need for vengeance, they did not appreciate the breach of their sovereignty and condemned Israel for not going through proper channels to extradite Eichmann (*The Times*, 1960: 10). Another issue with the legality of the trial was the impartiality of the Israeli judges. As the Holocaust is a deeply disturbing moment in Jewish history, it is logical to assume that Jewish judges would have a significant conflict of interest causing some considerable bias. Public opinion went so far as to suggest an international court or a mixed tribunal for Eichmann instead (Papadatos, 1964: 40-42). Another problem was the question of whether Israel had the right to actually prosecute Eichmann for his crimes. He was a German citizen, the acts were perpetrated outside Israeli territory, and furthermore, Israel did not exist as a state when these acts were committed. All of these challenges are a far cry from Ben-Gurion's statement that "it is historic justice that [Eichmann] be tried by a Jewish state. Only a Jewish state can try him, from a moral point of view" (Glock et al, 1966: 87).

All of these viewpoints aside, Adolf Eichmann's trial began on April 10, 1961. There were 15 charges laid against him: eight for crimes against the Jewish people, four for crimes against non-Jewish people (specifically Poles, Slavs, and those deemed "gypsies"), and three for membership in illegal groups (as determined by the Nuremberg trials). Eichmann did not plead guilty and instead claimed "moral guilt" in the death of the Jewish people, which attempted to solidify his defense that he was simply following orders (Glock et al, 1966: 12-13). During his trial, Eichmann stated before the judge, when faced with evidence about the deportation of the

Jewish people that: “I could not decide anything on my own authority, I received my orders, and the matter was dealt with in accordance with the orders” (“The Trial of Adolf Eichmann: Record of Proceedings in the District Court of Jerusalem, Volume IV,” 1993: 1449). He also stated in his interrogations, “with the delivery of the transports to their designated terminals in accordance with the timetables set by the Scheduling Conference, [his] authority came to an end” (Arhoni and Deitl, 1997: 34). However, Arendt (1963: 14) explored the idea that it had been Eichmann’s “duty to obey” and she asserted, like his lawyer, Robert Servatius, that he was “guilty before God, not the law.” Nevertheless, Eichmann was found guilty on all 15 counts, his appeal went unanswered, and he was sentenced to death by hanging on May 30, 1962 (Glock et al, 1966: 14).

Though Eichmann died almost 55 years ago, the debate surrounding his trial still continues to this day. This is due to the considerable impact that the trial had on people. For simplification purposes, these impacts can be broken down into four categories: the reopening of old wounds, the educational purposes of the trial, the political aims, and the philosophical debate generated around Arendt’s “banality of evil.”

Firstly, and quite obviously, the Eichmann trial, fifteen years after the end of Hitler’s rule, brought horrors to the forefront that people wanted to forget. Firstly, the Eichmann trial brought the horrors that people had spent 15 years attempting to repress back to the forefront of their thoughts. Many people, Holocaust survivors and the general population alike, wanted to forget the Second World War and the atrocities associated with it. Especially in Israel, survivors turned their attention away from their experiences in the camps and notions of revenge to rehabilitate themselves and their families (Yablonka, 2004: 12). In 1961, *The Times* published an article called “Disquiet in Israel Over Eichmann Trial” which outlined all the challenges facing Holocaust survivors now that their past had been unearthed and they were being forced to live through the painful memories again. The article states:

“For one thing, too many homes lodge too many ghosts which gradually had been laid to rest and are now beginning to stir and make ready to come forth. Obviously the re-telling of their narrative must provoke many of them to appear before those who survived the morning. The effect of this should not be exaggerated, of course. It may even be for the greater good that the ghosts should walk.: (*The Times*, 1961: 9)

In Germany, the intergenerational clash was only aggravated by the Eichmann trial. The “culprit generation”, those who had lived through the Nazi era, suffered from collective amnesia and were considered “infantile.” The younger generation, those born during or after the war, experienced inexplicable guilt for what had happened and resented the older generation for their smugness and self-righteousness (Kitchen, 2006: 349). Both the Auschwitz Trial in 1963 and the Eichmann Trial were uncomfortable reminders of a past that many did not want to remember.

Secondly, the trial served as an educational tool to teach a new generation about what had happened under the Nazi regime. The Eichmann trial appeared as a perfect opportunity for the world to be reminded about the dangers of anti-Semitism (Glock et al, 1966: 5). Ben-Gurion even conceded that bringing Eichmann to justice was not the purpose of the trial, but rather to expose the world to the truth of what the Nazi regime did to Europe’s Jewry (“Israel’s Right to Try Eichmann,” 1960: 11). The Eichmann trial was also the first trial where survivors were present and publicly vocal (Mulisch, 2005: xxii). For the first time, the suffering of those who endured the Holocaust was validated. It changed the world’s perception about the victims of the genocide (Lipstadt, 2011: xi) and challenged not only the anti-Semitism that was present in Germany, but also anti-Semitism all over the world. The chief prosecutor of the trial, Gideon Hausner, expressed

that in prosecuting Eichmann, he was speaking for all six million Jewish victims of the Holocaust. He continued, "But alas, they cannot rise to level the finger of accusation in the direction of the glass dock and cry out *J'accuse* against the man who sits there" (Felman, 2001: 214-216). His use of French here was subtle and yet significant; making reference to Emile Zola's outrage over the Dreyfus Affair in France, thus questioning the existence of deep-rooted international anti-Semitism.

Unsurprisingly, the Eichmann trial had political aims as well. Shoshana Felman argued in her article "Theaters of Justice" (2001: 208) that Ben-Gurion actually planned this trial as a means to achieve his own political goals. The questions that were on everyone's mind: was Eichmann really that important (Yablonka, 2004: 17)? Was he as central to the Holocaust as Israel would like the world to believe?

He is often seen as the sole person responsible for putting the Jews on the trains to concentration camps; however, he was only known to do this in Austria and Hungary, as aforementioned. In other pro-Nazi or Nazi-occupied states there were others charged with this duty. For example, in Slovakia, it was Dieter Wisliceny, a German SS officer, who was dispatched to organize the deportation of the Jewish Slovaks. He was considered a "deputy" of Eichmann and attempted to impoverish the Jewish people in Slovakia to encourage emigration by creating a social problem (Ward, 2013: 215). All of this, of course, could not be possible without the support of Jozef Tiso, the Catholic priest and leader of the newly-declared Nazi-satellite state of Slovakia, who asserted that the Jewish people needed to be eradicated like the parasites they were to liberate the Christians from their presence (Ward, 2013: 229). The Hlinka Guard, the remnants of Slovakia's storm troopers, engaged in anti-Semitic practices and was instrumental in the deportations since they looted the vacant Jewish homes as soon as they were forced to leave (Jelinek, 1976). Ironically enough, Eichmann defended Tiso during his trial, saying the Slovak leader was a moral Catholic priest who wanted nothing to do with the deportations (Ward, 2013: 244). If Eichmann was the sole perpetrator of the deportations, as Israel would like the world to believe, it is curious that Wisliceny would be listed alongside of him as an equal (Fisher, 1958: 95).

One other group of accomplices that Arendt implicates in her book (1963: 60-61) were the Jews themselves. She accuses the *Judenrat* of cooperating in the "destruction of [their] own people." She regarded them as "instruments in the hands of murderers." For her, the Jews who worked with Nazis were just as much to blame as Eichmann. It was these Jewish people in Warsaw who were exempt from deportation, along with Jewish people who worked in factories for the German war effort and the Jewish police. This convenient agreement also included the immediate families of those implicated (Gutman, 1982: 2004). However, in such trying times, it is basic instinct for humans to try to save themselves and their families at any costs. It is not surprising, then, that this was the case.

In terms of political agendas, one argument is that the trial was used to further the belief that the Holocaust was a uniquely Jewish experience (Yablonka, 2004: 9). This serves to justify the existence of the newly-created state of Israel as the victims of the Holocaust did not die in vain, but rather died so Israel as a nation could live (Wheatcroft, 1996: 264). It can also be seen as "revenge by restoration"; that Israel was founded to "show the world that the Nazis had failed to exterminate the Jewish nation." For Hanna Yablonka, the Eichmann trial is as important to the understanding of Israel as it is to understanding the Holocaust itself (2004: 7). Moreover, the equation of anti-Semitism and anti-Israel rhetoric is often made, and this comparison is a dangerous one. Ironically, Eichmann, in his Argentine writings, is actually accused of this. He

criticized Israel's participation in the Suez Canal crisis and is immediately labelled as an anti-Semite (Strangneth, 2014: 226-27). It is not surprising then, that Arendt, who showed sympathy for Eichmann, was despised in Israel. She was denounced by Jewish critics and was accused of betraying her people (as she, herself, was a German Jew). The Eichmann trial could be seen as a way to justify the existence of Israel. Playing on world sympathies for the Holocaust survivors and their ordeal would certainly be effective.

Finally, the Eichmann trial gave birth to a philosophical debate that still captivates historians and academics to this day. Hannah Arendt attended the highly-publicized trial as a journalist for the *New Yorker* and wrote *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. After it was released, Arendt was heralded as a "self-hating Jewess" who wrote a "pro-Eichmann series" (Wheatcroft, 1996: 263). The book attempted to debunk much of the mythology surrounding his place in the Holocaust. For example, she explained that his famous quote about leaping laughing into his grave was not about "five million Jews" but instead "five million enemies of the Reich" (Arendt, 1963: 26). Arendt's report became a phenomenon. Strangneth commented that since *Eichmann in Jerusalem* was published, every work on Eichmann has "also been a dialogue with Hannah Arendt" (2014: xxii). The concept of banality of evil that Arendt puts forward is that Eichmann was not stupid nor was he demonic. Instead, he acted out of thoughtlessness in that he "never realized what he was doing" (Arendt, 1963: 134). One critic likens her idea of the banality of evil to bacteria, since it can cause plagues that wipe out entire nations but remains simply bacteria (Hartouni, 2012: 117). Arendt suggested, "No deep-rooted or radical evil was necessary to make the trains to Auschwitz run on time." Geoffrey Wheatcroft in his book, *The Controversy of Zionism*, explained that "Eichmann himself was a vapid and pointless human being, a bureaucrat who had applied himself to the task of killing Jews as he might have done to improving a water supply or a banking system, all part of a day's work" (1996: 264). The point was that Eichmann was not a monster, but he was actually something much worse - a man. It is easy to explain away the Nazis as aberrations, but it is much more terrifying to realize that they were just human beings, and that means all humans, despite our idealism, are capable of horror as well.

The Eichmann trial was a pivotal landmark in Holocaust history. Its placement in the 1960s, 15 years after the Nuremberg Trials, ensured that it would have a considerable impact on how the world viewed the Holocaust. It reopened old wounds, allowed for education on the dangers of anti-Semitism, served a political goal in Israel, and gave birth to one of the most prominent philosophical debates in modern history. The issue of innocence versus guilt is not necessarily the most prominent question in the discussion of this topic. Eichmann bore the legal culpability to some extent and deserved the punishment that followed. The better question is if his trial should have been relevant to the course of history or if it was used deliberately (or unwittingly) to achieve an ulterior goal. It is probable, especially coupled with the conception of the Holocaust as a uniquely Jewish experience, that it was utilized as a strategic move. Arendt's report on the banality of evil actually refuted the uniqueness of the Holocaust in a subtle way. In explaining that everyone was capable of what Eichmann did, she stripped away the glorification of the Holocaust and instead, attributes genocidal tendencies as a simple facet of human nature. After all, the Holocaust was not the first genocide of the twentieth century, nor was it the last.

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