

4. THE ARENDT CONTROVERSY

In this chapter, I will analyse the public controversy surrounding Arendt's book. As Elisabeth Young-Bruehl (1982) has provided an excellent account of the controversy (see also Barnouw 1990; Cohen 1991; Ring 1997; Novick 1999), its background and aftermath, there is no need to meticulously scrutinise every single comment made about the book. Instead, it is sufficient to select a few representative and authoritative contributions and analyse the most important features of them in order to gain a general understanding of the character of the entire controversy.

I will begin by focusing on the first contributions published in *Aufbau-Reconstruction*, since this was the site and context in which the public controversy really began to take shape. *Aufbau* did not even wait for the book to be released as it published its first accounts immediately after Arendt's *New Yorker* series. Moreover, *Aufbau* was in no hurry to end the debate either, and it indeed dragged on until the end of 1963. In fact, no other journal published as many contributions on the theme, and a number of *Aufbau* pieces were later translated into English and republished in other publications. In addition, the debate initiated in *Aufbau* later became intertwined with the British and German debates; the latter reached its peak when the German translation of Arendt's book appeared in 1964. *Aufbau* also closely followed the debate in other fora and published short reports on it. Although this German Jewish weekly pretended to be impartial and objective, almost all the articles published in it were contra-Arendtian. Indeed, it may be argued that *Aufbau* was not only the initial site of the controversy but also one of the most important sites of the smear campaign against Arendt. Had *Aufbau* been published in English, it in all likelihood would have become one of the leading media of the controversy. However, the fact that it was published mainly in German inevitably

diminished and restricted its readership. This restriction was partly compensated by the fact that the arguments originally published on its pages were used and repeated elsewhere.

Other newspapers and journals mostly waited for the appearance of the book in May and then almost simultaneously published reviews of it. As I have already indicated in the previous chapter, not all of them were condemning. However, from the very beginning of the controversy, it was characterised by a conspicuous distinction between Jewish and gentile contributions. Whereas the gentiles embraced Arendt's analysis as a highly original and refreshing account, the Jewish reviewers approached it with a profound sense of suspicion. The first and most authoritative review that was published after the appearance of the book was Michael Musmanno's review in the *New York Times Book Review*. It can be characterised as having been one of the most systematic misreadings of Arendt's book published in a widely spread newspaper or journal, and it caused heated reactions amongst Arendt's readers. It soon became clear that Musmanno did, indeed, belong to those functionaries who held nothing back in their smear campaign of Arendt's book and reputation.

In this chapter, I will compare Musmanno's piece with another important contribution which appeared almost simultaneously, namely Eugene Rostow's review in the *Herald Tribune*, which may be read as a sincere attempt to evaluate the juridical and ethical significance of Arendt's book. More importantly, had the Jewish campaign against Arendt's book not been so immense and furious, making calm and dispassionate discussion virtually impossible, Rostow's piece could have decisively led the debate to take an entirely different shape. In other words, had this piece gained an instrumental and authoritative role, the entire debate could have focused on the role and future of international law on the one hand, and political judgement and the possibilities of independent individual action in politically extreme situations on the other.

An overview of the most important pieces of the initial phases of the controversy would not be complete without an analysis of Jacob Robinson's account in the July-August issue of the Anti-Defamation League's bulletin *Facts*. In fact, this piece is not just another book review, but instead provides the programmatic guidelines which should have been followed in the public accounts of Arendt's book. This publication was used, for example, by Nehemiah Robinson in a pamphlet distributed by the World Jewish Congress, by Marie Syrkin in an article in *Dissent*, by Norman Podhoretz in *Commentary*, by Gertrud Ezorsky in *New Politics*, by Morris Schappes in *Jewish Currents*, and by Louis Harap in *Science and Society* (Young-Bruehl 1982, 356).

In the following, I will discuss a piece which surpassed all others in its authoritativeness, sealing Arendt's excommunication from the Jewish intelligentsia and rendering her not only an intellectual but also a political pariah for the rest of her life. This piece was a letter written by Gerschom Scholem, one of the most esteemed Jewish philosophers and spiritual leaders, which was deliberately republished several times both in America and Europe. The fateful effect of this letter was due to the fact that it was written in an apparently sincere and sympathetic tone which turned out to be one of the most cunning traps into which Arendt would be led. Once the ramifications of the correspondence between Scholem and Arendt began to become clear, Arendt wrote to Jaspers:

You said it was as if I had stumbled into an ambush. And that is absolutely true. Everything proves, in retrospect, to have been a trap. Like the exchange of letters with Scholem, to whom I responded in good faith – and who then went out to shout this whole sordid story from the rooftops in *Neue Züricher Zeitung* and *Encounter*. Which accomplished nothing else, it seems to me, than to infect those segments of the population that had not yet been stricken by the epidemic of lies. And everybody goes along. I can't do anything about it. Scholem was determined to publish, and I assumed he would in the Tel Aviv *Mitteilungsblatt*, which seemed harmless to me. And he did that first, but then used all his connections to broadcast the letters to the world. (Arendt 1985/1992, 523)

My aim in discussing these early contributions to the debate is to construct a thematic frame in order to identify its most important points and characteristics. This is important because it was precisely in these early contributions that the entire controversy took shape. Once the controversy became established, the very same arguments were repeated and circulated everywhere with astonishing monotony and to such a degree that the reception of Arendt's Eichmann report was never really capable of liberating itself from them. On the contrary, the majority of the later rereadings of Arendt's book have been overshadowed by a preconception created by this debate (Young-Bruehl 1982, 348–349; cf. Barnouw 1990 and Ring 1997).

Finally, I will examine a few of the “constant” themes of the debate, including the responsibility of the intellectuals, Arendt's right to judge wartime Jewish politics, Arendt's “Jewish revisionism,” and the attempt of the young Jewish leftist radicals to counter argue against Arendt's critics and read Arendt's book in the context of the new left of the 1960s.

4.1. *AUFBAU*, 29 MARCH

The proper starting point of the public campaign against Arendt and the controversy surrounding her trial report was the aforementioned issue of *Aufbau-Reconstruction*, which was published on 29 March 1963, and in which *The Statement by the Council of Jews from Germany* was published with three other critiques of Arendt's series. These other critiques were *So war Rabbiner Leo Baeck* by Adolf Leschnitser, *Der Jude wird verbrannt* by Hugo Hahn and *Ein Meisterwerk ohne Seele* by Frederic R. Lachman.

It is no coincidence that the Council's statement, entitled *Jewish Dignity and Self-Respect*, was published in English despite the fact that *Aufbau* appeared almost exclusively in German. Its aim was to gain the largest possible amount of publicity, also among those Jews who had not mastered the German language. It was based on

the argument that Arendt had badly distorted the role of the Jewish leadership in the destruction of the European Jews. The Council condemned Arendt's argument, according to which the Jewish leaders had played an active role in the annihilation of their own people and that this cooperation was of decisive importance in the execution of the Final Solution. It argued that the salvation of more than 250,000 Jews was due to the work of Jewish organisations and communities. The statement maintained that Arendt's mistake was to interpret this work as "cooperation," whereas in reality it was a mark of integrity and self-sacrifice. It admitted that Jewish communities were forced to provide technical assistance in the execution of the orders given to the communities, but in its view this assistance should not have been seen as cooperation. It concluded: "[T]he German Jews by straining their moral and material resources to the utmost, organized themselves to assist each other and to maintain under the most trying circumstances their dignity and self-respect." Ultimately, it identified Arendt's gravest mistake as her impudence to pass judgement without personal experience: "It does not become those who were not there to pass moral judgements on this grim chapter. The allegation that the Nazi regime could not have achieved its Satanic aim without using Jews must appear absurd to any sensible person." (*Aufbau*, 29 March 1963)

The statement behind these lofty words was not only inspired by moral indignation but also by a mystifying reverence of the community leaders, which stemmed from hierarchical thinking characteristic of the Jewish tradition. The respect and adoration of rabbis and other community leaders was unquestionable – at least in public and in hostile gentile environments and environments to which gentiles had access. In the Council's view, there was no question that both the rabbis and secular Jewish leaders were selfless and righteous persons under all circumstances. Without making reference to this mystifying reverence, it would be difficult if not impossible to understand the importance given to the figure of Leo

Baeck, who was one of the most reverend Jewish rabbis in Germany and whose name the institute behind the Council carried.¹⁷ The fact that an entire institute had been founded in his memory implied that he had been hailed as a symbol of incomparable Jewish integrity and self-sacrifice, and any criticism of his memory was considered blasphemy. As such, Baeck deserved to be raised above all the other Jewish figures mentioned in Arendt's report and issued a separate apology in the pages of *Aufbau*.

Rabbi Baeck had been the president of the German Rabbis' Association since 1924. In addition to this, he was grand master of the Independent Order of B'nai B'rith in Germany, co-chairman of the Keren Hayesod, and a member of the board of the Jewish Agency for Palestine. During the Nazi period, he became the head of the National Association of German Jews. Although he was constantly harassed and arrested by the Gestapo on the one hand, and received numerous requests to leave Germany on the other, he considered it his duty to stay and continue his work on behalf of the German Jewry to the end (Boehm 1985 [1949], 282–283).

Until 1943, Leo Baeck was spared deportation precisely because of his work as head of the National Association of German Jews; he belonged to the group of Jewish leaders with whom the Nazis negotiated about Jewish matters. He was eventually deported to Theresienstadt, where he immediately became a member of the Jewish Council. Arendt refers in her book to the following moment in August 1943. A fellow inmate of Baeck's from Czechoslovakia approached him and told him about the gassings in Auschwitz. Baeck decided not to tell anybody about this horrible news, and he would later explain his decision to remain silent as follows:

17. The Leo Baeck Institute was founded in 1955 and engages in historical research, the presentation and publication of the history of the German speaking Jewry, and the collection of books and manuscripts in this field (*American Jewish Yearbook* 1964, 367).

So it was not just a rumor or, as I had hoped, the illusion of a diseased imagination. I went through a hard struggle debating whether it was my duty to convince Grünberg that he must repeat what he had heard before the Council of Elders, of which I was an honorary member. I finally decided that no one should know it. If the Council of Elders were informed the whole camp would know within a few hours. *Living in the expectation of death by gassing would only be the harder*¹⁸. And this death was not certain for all: there was selection for slave labor; perhaps not all transports went to Auschwitz. So I came to the grave decision to tell to no one. (Baeck 1949, 293)

In *Aufbau*, Adolf Leschnitzer was assigned the task of explaining how great a person Rabbi Baeck really was. He had three main objections to Arendt's work, and they were related to the role of the Jewish officials in the execution of deportations, the fact that Baeck did not tell the deportees what was awaiting them at Auschwitz, and the ironic parallel drawn by Arendt between Baeck and Hitler.

Leschnitzer argued that Baeck's attempt was not to make death easier for the members of his community by hiding the truth about their impending execution, but rather his decision to keep silent about their fate was part of a deliberate strategy based on the firm conviction that the national-socialist empire would not last long. Expecting the collapse of the Third Reich to occur any day, he attempted to minimise the suffering of the Jews by not telling them about the reality of the death camps. As to the cooperation with the Nazis, in Leschnitzer's view, Baeck did not cooperate *per se*, but rather complied when left with no other choice and attempted to maintain decorum among the Jews in order to avoid more suffering caused by the chaos of the situation. Nor was he a *Führer* simply because *Reichsvereinigung*, where all the decisions concerning the Jewish communities were made, acted according to the collegial principle: all important decisions were made through a vote.

Leschnitzer argued that all this pointed to the fact that Baeck was a political realist with a supreme capacity for judgement. He proved his

18. My italics. This was the phrase Arendt quoted. See Arendt 1963/1965, 119.

integrity and capacity to sacrifice himself for his people by remaining in Germany among the Jews, although he was repeatedly offered the chance to escape and work abroad. He was not a simpleminded humanist who did not know what he was really doing. He was a profoundly righteous man whose greatness was reflected in the fact that he never thought about himself, always putting the best interests of his people ahead of his own. Because of the magnitude of the circumstances he was facing, Baeck was compelled to adopt the policy of lesser evil, which really was the only possible way of dealing with this impossible situation.

While Leschnitzer focused mainly on Leo Baeck's personality and actions, there was another contribution which attempted to judge Arendt's account of Jewish cooperation and the lack of resistance in a broader frame. Hugo Hahn's piece introduced a classification of the critical – and hence false – attitudes towards Jewish policy in the Third Reich. He distinguished between the passive Gandhian attitude on the one hand, and the militant Bettelheimian attitude on the other. His basic argument was that, paradoxically enough, Arendt simultaneously represented both of these attitudes.

The reference to the Gandhian attitude was more concrete than one might expect. During the 1930s, Gandhi did indeed intervene in Zionist policy by writing an open letter in which he suggested that German Jews should have been sacrificed in order to make the rest of the world understand what was awaiting all the Jews if the Nazis were left to act as they pleased. More precisely, in his view, the German Jews should have adopted a strategy of passive resistance which, although it would not have saved them, would have caused the world to fight the Nazis through their heroic conduct in the face of destruction. There were no illusions about Hitler behind his lofty idea. Instead, he believed that the self-sacrifice of the German Jews was necessary in order to awaken the world to their plight:

The calculated violence of Hitler may even result in a general massacre of the Jews by way of his first answer to the declaration of such hostilities.

But if the Jewish mind could be prepared for voluntary suffering, even the massacre I have imagined could be turned into a day of thanksgiving and joy that Jehovah had wrought deliverance of the race even at the hands of the tyrant. For the God-fearing, death has no terror. It is a joyful sleep to be followed by a waking that would be all the more refreshing for the long sleep. (Gandhi 1938/1942, 186)

He went on to write:

I am convinced that, if someone with courage and vision can arise among them to lead them in non-violent action, the winter of their despair can in the twinkling of an eye be turned into the summer of hope. And what has today become a degrading man-hunt can be turned into a calm and determined stand offered by unarmed men and women possessing the strength of suffering given to them by Jehovah. It will be then a truly religious resistance offered against the godless fury of dehumanized man. The German Jews will score a lasting victory over the German gentiles in the sense that they will have converted the latter to an appreciation of human dignity. (Gandhi 1938/1942, 187)

These quotations show that Gandhi did not see anything inherently good or politically wise in the politics of lesser evil. On the contrary, the most important principle of his politics was (also in India) based on personal and political courage. The German Jews should have been told the truth of the situation so that they could have organised themselves in resistance. In his mind, this self-chosen and courageous self-sacrifice could have contributed to Hitler's defeat. Even more importantly, it could have helped prevent Hitler from carrying out the Final Solution. In this way, the case of the European Jews would have become an example of a courageous political fight even under seemingly hopeless circumstances.

As for Bruno Bettelheim, he published an article in 1962 entitled *Freedom from Ghetto Thinking*. He also saw the main problem as being the lack of resistance, although he approached it in the context of Jewish mental and political history. In his view, the basic problem of the Jewish conduct under Nazi rule was that very few resisted. The Jews' reluctance to resist did not stem from a lack of courage or

the impossibility of resisting in front of a superior enemy. Rather, it was the result of a certain pattern of thought and inactivity developed over centuries of exile. Bettelheim referred to this pattern as the “ghetto mentality”. It had developed as a response to the Jews’ existence in or outside of the ghetto, which lacked human dignity. In this situation, Jews provided themselves with the psychological excuses that enabled them to bear a situation that was basically intolerable, to live under conditions that were basically unliveable (Bettelheim 1962, 18).

In Bettelheim’s view, the basic survival strategy in a ghetto situation, which was shaped by an undignified existence, was to avoid knowing, thinking, and acting:

A certain type of ghetto thinking has as its purpose to avoid taking action. It is a type of deadening of the senses and emotions [...] To believe that one can ingratiate oneself with a mortal enemy by denying that his lashes sting, to deny one’s own degradation in return for a moment’s respite, to support one’s enemy who will only use his strength the better to destroy one. (Bettelheim 1962, 20)

This pattern of thought would ultimately prove fateful under Nazi rule. Instead of efficiently finding out what was really going on and organising an escape while there was still time, the Jews procrastinated, did not want to know and did not take action. This gave the Nazis time to develop a comprehensive policy of physical annihilation:

This was not callous self-interest; it was deliberate ignorance both of what might be in store for the Jews left behind and of the fact that their personal fortunes, so hard won, would now be lost. Thus, doubly ignorant for themselves and for those who would have to stay, they became inhuman, not because they were evil, but because they permitted themselves not to know. (Bettelheim 1962, 21)

From all this, Bettelheim concluded that the basic problem with the ghetto mentality was that it caused an inability to act in self-defence, as a Jew. This inability was dramatically contrasted by the

fact that the very same persons were capable of acting violently and aggressively when ordered to do so by the authority of a state. The reason the Jews did not fight back lay in their inner feelings of resignation, in their careful eradication over the centuries of their tendency to rebel, based on the ingrained belief that those who bend do not break (Bettelheim 1962, 21–22).

Hahn argued that Arendt became, on the one hand, Gandhian by admiring the solution of Adam Czerniakov, the Jewish leader of the Warsaw Ghetto, who committed suicide in the midst of a politically impossible situation in which there was no chance for successful self-defence. On the other hand, she represented the Bettelheimian attitude by complaining about the scarcity of Jewish resistance and accusing the Jews of having refused to face the facts. This Gandhian-Bettelheimian stance meant that Arendt judged the Jewish leadership completely unfairly. She did not understand that the Jewish leaders were forced to act under impossible circumstances, and those who were not in the same situation ought not judge their actions at all. What he considered even worse was that Arendt blurred the distinction between victims and perpetrators, arguing that the victims participated in their own destruction by cooperating with the enemy. In this way, she approached an interpretation according to which the victims were solely to blame for their own fate.

Hahn did not understand Bettelheim's main argument, which was not focused on the wartime German Jewish leadership at all, but, rather, aimed at the American Jewry. In the very beginning of his article, Bettelheim argued that the American debate surrounding the Eichmann trial was, by implication, about what the American Jews did and did not do, about the cruel fact that the Jews outside of Germany did not stand up and fight, thus rendering themselves guilty of non-participation, guilty of not having done all they could have done (Bettelheim 1962, 17). Had Hahn admitted this, he would have also recognised that there was a decisive difference between Bettelheim's and Arendt's reasoning. Whereas the former

argued that the Jews' principal problem was their lack of action, the latter maintained that the Jews' actions followed an odd track. The odd and erroneous track to which Arendt was referring was the cooperation of the Jewish leadership with the Nazis.

Hence, there was a significant difference between Bettelheim and Arendt in terms of their schemes of interpretation, as the former offered a mass-psychological explanation which was unable to distinguish between different groups of Jews, arguing instead in favour of a general Jewish attitude which ultimately proved fateful. Arendt, for her part, argued in favour of a political explanation which focused on the deeds and acts of individual Jews. As a result, whereas Bettelheim's psychological explanation rendered all Jews equally guilty of inaction, Arendt's political explanation was able to distinguish between different Jewish and non-Jewish strategies. In this framework, inaction was not a specifically Jewish problem, whereas Jewish cooperation pointed to a peculiar survival strategy of the Jews, which had been based for centuries on a policy of compliance with gentiles.

Of the four contributions published in the 29 March issue of *Aufbau*, the most favourable to Arendt was apparently Frederick R. Lachman's piece, in which he called Arendt's series "a masterpiece". In reality, this characterisation was an ironic compliment rather than a sincere appraisal, as he also highlighted a number of major problems in it. Firstly, he argued that Arendt's text was too difficult for the average reader, who was incapable of judging a phenomenon of such enormous proportions as the destruction of the Jews. The tragedy of millions of people seemed to be simply incomprehensible to the majority of readers. This was, of course, a very elitist assessment, as it contained a conception of "ordinary people" as lacking the capacity for judgement. Secondly, in Lachman's view, there was something inherently wrong with Arendt's attitude towards the annihilation of the Jews, as she compared it with the destruction caused by an atom bomb, arguing that in this light Hitler's gas chambers were

merely toys. Here, Lachman approached a stance that would later be widely adopted and according to which the Holocaust is incomparable to any other horrors ever perpetrated in the human world and throughout history.

Thirdly, and most importantly, Lachman argued that Arendt's articles were "a masterpiece without a soul". Similarly to Hahn, he argued that she was incapable of approaching the phenomenon from the victims' point of view, and because of this she failed to grasp the full truth of the situation. In Lachman's view, the whole truth could only be grasped by a suffering soul who could sympathise with the victims, no matter how many mistakes they had made. As long as a considerable number of Hitler's victims were still alive, the time was not right for the kind of cool, matter-of-fact account presented by Arendt. In other words, Lachman did not understand the role of political judgement as an essential part of the political action that is supposed to take place between existing actors and spectators in the form of dialogue and debate as opposed to a kind of eulogy in which the memory of the departed has to be respected. As we will see below, Lachman's argument of Arendt's heartlessness came very close to Scholem's view, which saw her callousness as an indication that she was a traitor to her people. In addition, Lachman implicitly argued in favour of the view according to which the victim's view was somehow more truly correct than other possible views and standpoints.

In Chapter Six we will see that this understanding has significantly and steadily strengthened since the emergence of so-called "victim studies" in the 1980s. Over the past three decades or so we have seen how the survivor-Jews in particular but also Jews in general have become what might be described as privileged victims who presume to have the inherent privilege of being the truth-tellers in questions concerning the Holocaust and its political and moral judgement.

According to *Aufbau*, the four pieces discussed above were meant to provide the readers of Arendt's series with a critical yardstick with

which to judge her arguments. They were probably more successful than the editors of *Aufbau* had ever expected. In addition to the circular letters from Jewish organisations and a few special issues of their magazines dedicated to Arendt's book, they set the tone of the entire debate. The questions of the role of the Jewish leadership in the destruction of the European Jewry and Jewish resistance were to remain central throughout the debate.

4.2. *PRO DOMO*

Simultaneously with the debate raging on the pages of *Aufbau*, another major branch of public controversy over Arendt's book broke out in the *New York Times Book Review* as a result of Michael Musmanno's review, which was published immediately after the publication of the book on 19 May. Whereas the *Aufbau* debate was mainly concerned with the role of the Jewish leadership, Musmanno focused on Eichmann's person and his role in the destruction of the European Jews.

Musmanno's review was undoubtedly one of the most important contributions to the Arendt controversy for at least three reasons. Firstly, it was one of the very first to appear and thus gained a lot of attention. Secondly, it was published in one of the most prominent American newspapers with a large readership. Thirdly, being one of the Nuremberg lawyers,¹⁹ Musmanno was formally competent to review a report on the trial of a Nazi criminal. However, in practice his review proved to be one of the most outstanding examples of a systematic misreading of Arendt's book.

Musmanno argued that the book was a strange defence of Eichmann and his "unspotted conscience":

19. Justice Musmanno had interviewed Goering, Ribbentrop, Kaltenbrunner and Hans Frank and served as judge in the US-run trials. In addition, he presided over the *Einsatzgruppen* case (Cesarani 2004, 267).

There will be those who will wonder how Miss Arendt [...] could announce, as she solemnly does in this book, that Eichmann was not really a Nazi at heart, that he did not know Hitler's program when he joined the Nazi party, that the Gestapo were helpful to the Jews in Palestinian immigration, that Himmler (Himmler!) had a sense of pity, that the Jewish gas-killing program grew out of Hitler's euthanasia program and that, all in all, Eichmann was really a modest man. (Musmanno 1963a, 1)

He went on to argue that "the author believes that Eichmann was misjudged in Jerusalem," that she is "sympathizing with Eichmann," "defends Eichmann against his own words," and "says that Eichmann was a Zionist and helped Jews to get to Palestine." (Musmanno 1963a, 1)

All these charges reflect Musmanno's reading strategy, which can be characterised by two main traits. Firstly, he read Arendt's arguments literally without understanding the ironic language games and rhetorical play inscribed in them. Secondly, he was neither able nor willing to read them in the right context. The above quotation shows that this strategy caused him to believe that Arendt was arguing that Eichmann actually was not a Nazi at heart, but rather a Zionist. As I will show in the following chapter, this kind of interpretation can only be based either on the complete inability to distinguish and identify different stylistic solutions and choices of text or the deliberate intention to misread every single sentence and expression written. Given that Musmanno was a highly educated person equipped with an extensive amount of knowledge about the Holocaust and war crime trials, one is inclined to conclude that the distortions made by him were intentional.

As to the nature of Eichmann's evil, it is possible that Musmanno's critique was based on substantial disagreement with Arendt, as his conception of evil certainly differed significantly from hers. He sincerely seemed to believe that a person needed to have a certain kind of nature or essence in order to become a Nazi at all. Consequently, he argued that Arendt failed to understand Eichmann's real nature;

here we had in many ways a thoroughly evil man who was able to commit his crimes precisely because of his evil nature.

Throughout his review, Musmanno accused Arendt of sympathising with Eichmann, even defending him against his own words, and trying to portray him as a less important figure in the massacre of the Jews than he actually was. In addition, he did not see anything arguable either in the way the trial was organised or the propaganda strategy of its main promoters. On the contrary, he accused Arendt of attacking the state of Israel, its Prime Minister and attorney general, Gideon Hausner. In Musmanno's understanding, these quarters really seemed to possess unspotted consciences.

Hannah Arendt was flabbergasted by Musmanno's review for several reasons, and she not only substantially refuted his account but also the choice of reviewer. Although Musmanno was a technically competent reviewer, there were two factors which compromised his capacity to do the job. First, his impartiality was compromised by the fact that he had been a witness at the Eichmann trial, and second, Arendt mentioned him several times in her book in a critical light. She decided not to keep silent about these facts and wrote a statement on Musmanno's review which was published in the *New York Times Book Review* on 23 June. This statement was not only a reply to the reviewer but also a charge against the newspaper.

Arendt argued that the choice of reviewer was bizarre because she had characterised Musmanno's views on totalitarian government in general and on Eichmann's role in it in particular as "dangerous nonsense". She pointed out that he chose not to mention that he was writing *pro domo*. Although this was no secret, Arendt found it hard to understand why the *New York Times* did not publish this information:

You mention yourself that the reviewer was 'a witness at the Eichmann trial', hence he was likely to be mentioned in a report on it. The book's index could have shown you in a few minutes all you needed to know. If, on the other hand, you chose your reviewer in full *connaissance de cause*, this would

constitute such a flagrant break with normal editorial procedures as to make it much more interesting than the review itself.

I shall assume that you were ignorant of the pertinent facts in your choice. Still, I find it hard to understand that the review itself did not surprise you. Obviously, you never read the book and therefore could not be aware of the over-all misrepresentation.

The core of Arendt's argument was simply that Musmanno should have been disqualified from writing a review of a book in which his own name was mentioned. Neither the *New York Times* nor Musmanno understood this. The *New York Times* replied to Arendt in two responses published with her statement, the first of which referred to Musmanno's reply to Arendt, in which the reasons for his selection were outlined. The second note refuted Arendt's accusation that nobody had even read the book before it was handed over to Musmanno to review. Strangely enough, it was Musmanno himself – and not the editors of the newspaper – who wrote a lengthy explanation as to why he had been selected to review the book. It was included in his response to Arendt that was published in the same issue of the *New York Times Book Review* as Arendt's statement:

There was nothing 'bizarre' about the *New York Times Book Review* asking me to write the review on 'Eichmann in Jerusalem'. Everyone knows that the *Book Review* endeavours to select as reviewers those individuals who are, because of profession or experience, more generally familiar than others with the subject of the book to be reviewed. The editors assumed that I qualified in this respect because I was a judge at three of the war crimes trials in Nuremberg. I testified at the Eichmann trial, have been a judge for 32 years, and for 18 years have studied the documentation on war crimes and crimes against humanity. (Musmanno 1963b, 4)

After this explanation as to why he was a competent reviewer, Musmanno proceeded to directly attack Arendt's reply. He claimed that Arendt was not aware of the actual content of her own book, implying that because of her lack of expert knowledge she had made a number of unintentional factual errors. In addition, he defended

himself, arguing that his “review was not *pro domo*. It was *pro bono publico*. It was imperative that the public know of Miss Arendt’s many misstatements of facts in the Eichmann case, because that case has taken an important place in the history of the world and the human spirit.” (Musmanno 1963b, 4)

As we saw in Chapter Two, Arendt’s contention that Eichmann’s personality was characterised by ordinariness rather than inhuman monstrosity was generally shared by a considerable number of journalists and other attendees of the trial and had been repeated countless times in the press. However, while nobody attempted to correct the portrayal of Eichmann in the daily press, Arendt’s argument of Eichmann’s ordinariness was immediately attacked as completely false. Belonging to those who fiercely attacked Arendt’s depiction of Eichmann, Musmanno claimed in the September issue of the *National Jewish Monthly* that her book was a “disservice to Jewry” and that there was nothing trivial or ordinary about Eichmann:

For devilry at its peak, criminal deception at its worst, cruel cynicism at its ultimate, inhumanity at its murkiest depth, and for brutality of spirit without compare, Adolf Eichmann must stand out as the very antithesis of ordinariness. His crime rears up like a colossus of iniquity at the apex of a pyramid of skeletons. No word can be found to mitigate the totality of his guilt, even though Hannah Arendt tries hard to do so. (Musmanno 1963c, 54)

Another influential personality who adopted a similar line of argumentation to Musmanno was Max Nussbaum, the President of the Zionist Organization of America. He declared in the *American Zionist* that in his view, “the superficiality of Professor Arendt’s interpretation is nowhere as disturbing as in her glib and invidious comments on the submission to death of our helpless brothers and sisters, and her effrontery in depicting Eichmann as a small cog in the large wheel of the Nazi machine”. He went on to assure his readers that “those of us who had the doubtful privilege of knowing him and his activities in Berlin did not have to wait for the Eichmann

trial [...] to disclose the primary responsibility of Eichmann for saturating a whole continent with the blood of our people". Then he concluded his outburst by declaring: "Our Prophets warned us once that some of the greatest enemies we will encounter will come from the inside [...] I am afraid Professor Arendt has done a great disservice to the Jewish people and most of all to the cause of truth." (Nussbaum 1963, 4)

Joachim Prinz, who attacked Arendt on behalf of the World Jewish Congress in *Congress Bi-weekly*, did not even bother to spell Arendt's name correctly, as he systematically referred to her as "Ahrendt", repeating Musmanno's and Nussbaum's arguments in other words:

By some weird turn of the imagination, Dr. Ahrendt has managed the incredible trick of humanizing Eichmann. Indeed, of all the people she writes of, Eichmann, that 'leaf in the whirlwind of time', is the only human being with whom she sympathizes. According to her, he was a Nazi 'without conviction', a timid soul, a mere cog in the Nazi machine which he found dreadful (All this must be true; he said so himself!). (Prinz 1963, 9)

What all these critiques have in common is their failure to comprehend the point of Arendt's depiction and discussion of Eichmann. They failed to see that Arendt was practising a kind of *Umwertung der Werte* of Jewish political culture in terms of ironic rhetoric. The notion of Eichmann's ordinariness was meant to raise the question of the character of his evil. As we will see in more detail in the following chapter, Arendt suggested that this new kind of evil, as carried out in the deeds of an ordinary man, might be far more dangerous and difficult to identify than the classical radical evil. Either Arendt's critics did not understand this point or they did not want to accept and share its conceptually rhetorical potential.

These statements illustrate the kind of tone the campaign against Arendt was beginning to take. For these men, Eichmann was no more and no less than an incarnation of the devil on earth, and his devilish nature explained his evil deeds. However, these contributors

were not satisfied with mere factual argumentation but let their imaginations run wild by regularly succumbing to tasteless and naïve personal assaults against Arendt's character. They depicted Arendt as a traitor among the Jewish people who lacked the knowledge and experience to judge anything related to the Holocaust because she had not personally experienced it for herself.

4.3. EICHMANN'S NEW CRIME

Simultaneously to the publication of Musmanno's account, the *Herald Tribune* published a review of Arendt's book by Eugene Rostow on 19 May. It had an entirely different tone than the other accounts discussed in this chapter. This was a review by a professional lawyer who did not stumble over trivialities but attempted to get to the very core of Arendt's book by reading it for what it was, a trial report. From this point of view, Rostow singled out two major themes on which he focused in his review. He began by highlighting Arendt's style, which in his view was quintessential to understanding the book at all. Second, he pointed to Arendt's discussion of the nature of the Nazi crimes as unprecedented new crimes of the 20th century.

Rostow characterised the texture of the book as that of "good ruminative talk", which he clearly distinguished from pure scholarly studies. He further described it as "discursive and speculative; personal, impressionistic and opinionated", adding that, not being very systematic, "it is full of ironic thrusts, perceptive associations, and argumentative passages, and passages, too, of eloquence and indignation." (Rostow 1963)

He admired Arendt's style instead of seeing it as somehow inappropriate, as so many others had, even praising her impatience with "Jewish pomp, folly, xenophobia, and hypocrisy" and the expressions of her independence as a thinker. Similarly, he did not doubt Arendt's portrayal of Eichmann but situated it in the context

of the description of her style, where it came out proportionally as a stylistic distancing weapon (Rostow 1963).

At the heart of Rostow's review was, however, his estimation of Arendt's basic thesis of the novelty of the new type of crime represented by Eichmann:

The Nazi attempt to destroy the Jewish people, she contends, was not a crime against the Jewish people, nor yet against the statutes of Israel, but an example of 'the new crime, the crime against the human status,' or against the very nature of mankind [...] For her, the Nazi crime in undertaking to destroy a whole people was not just another episode in the long history of anti-Semitism. It was so bizarre and so great an evil, she argues, that 'justice' cried out for retribution. The compelling and ultimate element of retribution in our concept of justice, she avers, so persistent and so often denied, warrants the otherwise indefensible and illegal act of kidnapping Eichmann and the death penalty for that poor, confused, petty, evil man who thought clichés and spoke in the official language of a minor bureaucrat. (Rostow 1963)

This was the point at which the lawyer in Rostow came out. He pointed out that lawyers would be tempted to dismiss Arendt's disturbing contention as the yearnings of a layman (Rostow 1963). From a juridical point of view, the problem was Arendt's claim according to which new unprecedented crimes created a situation in which it was necessary to render justice without the help of or beyond the limitations set by positive, posited law:

Miss Arendt's thesis is [...] intolerable for the seemingly uncontrolled power it would give to the judges, and for its implication that the ends of justice justify recourse to illegal or arbitrary meanings. (Rostow 1963)

In Rostow's understanding, the notion that the end of justice justifies recourse to illegal or arbitrary meanings came frighteningly and perilously close to the notions of Ben-Gurion. Had Arendt said that the end justified the means, Rostow would have been completely correct, as Ben-Gurion's strategy was precisely to apply this principle. However, that is not what Arendt said, and this was the point at which Rostow was blinded by his judicial viewpoint,

which prevented him from understanding that in order to grasp what Arendt had really said, it was necessary to distinguish between the juridical and the political. He was not able to see that Arendt had actually pointed to the fact that new crimes such as those committed by Eichmann rendered a normal legal procedure problematic precisely because they lacked precedents. Even though “the essence of judicial art is to come as close as possible to the end of justice within the established and accepted limits of the judicial process” (Rostow 1963), the fact remained that the Nazi crimes went beyond the sphere of law because they were characteristically political. In Arendtian terms, they were political in two ways. On the one hand, they did not fit within the pre-existing process of law because of their novelty; there was no established legislature on the basis of which to judge them. On the other hand, they were political because they were violations of a fundamental political right of every human being to share the earth with other people.

Despite its critical remarks, Rostow’s review was decisively unique compared with the accounts presented by the participants of the smear campaign because it accepted Arendt’s book as a serious contribution to the discussion over the future of the law in a world in which new types of crimes were being born. Had this kind of approach gotten the upper hand in the controversy, its contribution to international law and the development of political theory might have been entirely different.

4.4. THE EVIL OF BANALITY: FACTS

A review on the most authoritative and influential attacks against Arendt’s report in the initial phase of the controversy would not be satisfying without mentioning Jacob Robinson, who served as one of Gideon Hausner’s assistant prosecutors in Jerusalem. Right from the beginning, he did everything in his power to smear Arendt’s reputation and prevent people from independently taking sides in

the controversy. He even wrote a book on Arendt's book, in which he attempted to disprove every single phrase in it (see Robinson 1965). One of the several public arenas used by Robinson was the Anti-Defamation League's bulletin *Facts*, which published a special contra-Arendtian issue in the summer of 1963. It consisted of a review article compiled by Jacob Robinson, which was entitled *A Report on the Evil of Banality: The Arendt Book*. The article began with a general explanation of why the issue had been published, claiming that it would have been a tragic disservice to Jewish and world history had Arendt's book gone unchallenged and been accepted as gospel. It claimed that the book's research was glib and trite, and, as such, that it was a banal book. Even worse, if it gained acceptance as a work of unquestioned authority by undermining the realities of history, it would become an evil book (Robinson 1963c, 263).

Robinson listed four major areas of concern to be dealt with in his account: the scholarship of the author, Arendt's treatment of Eichmann and his role in the destruction of the European Jewry, her criticism of the judgement at Jerusalem and Jewish complicity and cooperation.

Robinson began his attack on Arendt's scholarship by arguing that her book was filled with errors, misstatements of fact, misinterpretation, and generalisations, particularly with regard to the areas of contemporary history and law, specifically international law and criminal procedure, which in his view were central to her book (Robinson 1963c, 264). He indeed read it as if it were an historical study as opposed to a trial report. He completely ignored the fact that Arendt did not do her own basic research for the book, but leaned mostly on the material that was produced or used in the context of the trial. In addition to this, she used reports and studies written by journalists, historians, and lawyers which appeared before the publication of her own report. However, Robinson also somewhat contradictorily argued that Arendt's book was not really a study of history but belonged to "a small body of literature,

representing particular perspectives, which purports to offer insight into the whole subject.” (Robinson 1963c, 263)

Apart from the accusation that Arendt lacked the scholarly competence to even touch on an issue like the Eichmann trial, Robinson’s most powerful attack was directed against what Arendt said about Jewish collaboration and Eichmann’s personality. Indeed, these two themes were to remain the most debated issues in the controversy, while the juridical aspects of the trial would quickly fade into the background.

A number of contributors to the debate preferred to lean on Robinson’s misreading as opposed to personally trying to understand what Arendt really intended to say. The best example of this is perhaps Robinson’s reading of Arendt’s account of Eichmann’s “Zionism”. When Arendt wrote that Theodor Herzl’s *Der Judenstaat* caused Eichmann to convert to Zionism, Robinson refused to admit or understand the deep irony contained in her words. Similarly, he refused to see that Arendt’s depiction of Eichmann as dangerously normal was not meant to be a statement in defence of Eichmann the criminal but rather a call to reflect more on what kind of a criminal was in question here.

As to Jewish collaboration, Robinson was hopelessly unable to read the political criticism that was inscribed in Arendt’s discussion of this theme. Thus, he argued that “the greatest evil of ‘Eichmann in Jerusalem’ [...] is the author’s theme that European Jews were guilty of complicity in their own destruction” (Robinson 1963c, 267). He wrote that “[t]he Jewish population in Nazi Europe was exempt from the authority of the local administration and physically separated from the outside world” (Robinson 1963c, 268), without recognising that this was precisely what Arendt was saying by pointing to the fact that the European Jewish population lacked a political organisation that could have organised a mass escape if not a mass resistance. Instead, he ended up in defending political ignorance by arguing that “[t]he normal human mind could not accept the fact that the

real aim of the Nazis was total destruction and the Germans did all they could to lull the Jews.” (Robinson 1963c, 269)

Robinson’s basic message was that Arendt was mistaken in virtually everything she wrote. As mentioned above, he went to the length of writing an entire book to prove this. However, what is more important in the context of this study is the fact, also mentioned above, that a number of people were satisfied with Robinson’s contribution and never bothered to read Arendt’s book and judge its contents personally.

All of the above analysed contributions sowed the seeds of hatred against Arendt. One more contribution would be needed to seal Arendt’s excommunication from the entire American Jewish intellectual community: an open letter by Gerschom Scholem.

4.5. EXCOMMUNICATION

Hannah Arendt received a huge amount of letters from her readers and others who wanted to comment on her book or the debate aroused by it. Most of these letters were, of course, not meant to be published and never were published. There is, however, a remarkable exception which became one of the most important and influential contributions to the entire controversy – a letter sent to Arendt on 23 June 1963, by Gerschom Scholem, a highly esteemed Jewish philosopher.

For Arendt, Scholem’s letter was not just another one of the numerous letters she had received. She had learnt to respect and admire Scholem’s views on Jewish philosophy and history, and had probably not expected him to react in such a passionate and condemning way. In addition, his letter was the result of six weeks of reflection and pondering, and was not written on a whim. Unlike many of Arendt’s other critics, he really had read the book and reflected carefully on what to say about it. The fact that he wanted his letter to be published shows that he not only wanted to express his

opinion privately but also wanted to influence the public reception of Arendt's book. This point is crucial because Scholem certainly knew that his account would not be received as the opinion of an ordinary Jew, but instead would have been received such as it was; as an authoritative statement of one of the leading Jewish philosophers.

Scholem did not refute Arendt's account of Jewish policy during the Third Reich as such, although he did claim that it included certain problematic aspects. Compared with other contributions of the smear campaign, he chose an original line of argumentation which proved to be a more efficient critique of Arendt than many of the other wordier contributions. Firstly, he denied the possibility of making a fair and truthful historical judgement of events that were of such recent origin. He also argued that he did not believe that "our generation is in a position to pass any kind of historical judgment. We lack necessary perspective, which alone makes some sort of objectivity possible – and we cannot but lack of it." (Scholem 1963/1964, 241) On the other hand, he also refuted the possibility for him to make any personal judgements on the grounds that he had not personally experienced the horror of the Nazi Reich: "There were among them also many people in no way different from ourselves, who were compelled to make terrible decisions in circumstances that we cannot even begin to reproduce or reconstruct. I do not know whether they were right or wrong. *Nor do I presume to judge. I was not there.*" (Scholem 1963/1964, 243, my italics)

This refusal to judge historically and personally reflects the fact that Scholem did not share Arendt's understanding of the task of judgement. For Scholem, judging was about telling the historical and moral truth about a given matter, whereas it was an essential part and prerequisite of meaningful political action and practice for Arendt. For her, without judging it was impossible to remember and understand the political significance of empirical events, and without remembering and understanding it was impossible to exist politically in a meaningful and durable manner.

Another important aspect of Scholem's critique concerned Arendt's style and her relationship to the Jewish community as being inscribed in it. Scholem complained that Arendt had acquired overtones of malice: "It is that heartless, frequently almost sneering and malicious tone with which their matters, touching the very quick of our life, are treated in your book to which I take exception." (Scholem 1963/1964, 241) In Scholem's view, this tone revealed that Arendt did not love the Jewish people as she should have: "In the Jewish tradition there is a concept, hard to define and yet concrete enough, which we know as *Ahabath Israel*: 'Love of the Jewish people' [...] In you, dear Hannah, as in so many intellectuals who came from the German Left, I find little trace of this." (Scholem 1963/1964, 241) He took offence to Arendt's "flippant tone" but still regarded her "wholly as a daughter of our people, and in no other way." (Scholem, 1963/1964, 242)

These words reveal Scholem's antipolitical conception of Jewishness, which Arendt most certainly did not share. For him, belonging to the Jewish people was a religious-national bond which should have been respected and revered. In this understanding, it was the duty of every Jew to love all other Jews irrespective of their thoughts and actions.

Scholem's nationalistic and antipolitical conception of Jewishness was also reflected in his inability to understand Arendt's ironic description of Eichmann's Zionism. Although he did understand that Arendt's words were not meant to be taken literally, he missed the point of her irony, believing that she was mocking Zionism instead of Eichmann: "[Y]our description of Eichmann as a 'convert to Zionism' could only come from somebody who had a profound dislike of everything to do with Zionism. These passages in your book I find quite impossible to take seriously. They amount to a mockery of Zionism; and I am forced to the conclusion that this was, indeed, your intention." (Scholem 1963/1964, 245) As I will argue throughout this book, Arendt's book did include a significant

amount of criticism of Zionism, although not in this particular passage. In it, she simply ridiculed the prosecution's portrayal of Eichmann as an expert in Zionism. In Arendt's view, the truth was that Eichmann knew surprisingly little about Zionism considering how many years he had spent pondering "the Jewish question".

In my view, Scholem's letter was a factual, albeit rather delicate, attempt to excommunicate Arendt from the Jewish community. He did not explicitly break with Arendt, implying instead that she had done something irreversible, which could have no other effect than to create a gap between her and the rest of the Jewish community:

Why, then, should your book leave one with so strong a sensation of bitterness and shame – not for the compilation, but for the compiler? How is it that your version of the events so often seems to come between us and the events – events which you rightly urge upon our attention? Insofar as I have an answer, it is one which, precisely out of my deep respect for you, I dare not suppress; and it is an answer that goes to the root of our disagreement. (Scholem 1963/1964, 241)

Had Scholem's letter remained merely one of the many private comments Arendt received, it would not have had the power to have her excommunicated from the Jewish community. However, given that Scholem consciously intended for it to be published, one cannot avoid drawing the conclusion that he purposefully used his authority in order to encourage the entire Jewish community to distance itself from Arendt's kind of apostate. As the above quotation illustrates, he was not only speaking on his own behalf but addressed Arendt in the name of "us", that is to say in the name of the entire Jewish community.

What made this excommunication drastic from Arendt's point of view was the fact that it came from somebody whose judgement she had learnt to trust. In addition, Scholem was an intellectual authority figure among the Jews, not just one of the Jewish politicians with whom Arendt had become used to disagreeing. For Arendt, Scholem's appraisal was further proof of the disastrous influence

of public opinion over individual opinions. All of a sudden she had personally become living proof of the isolation to which a conscious pariah, the political fate of whom she had so passionately analysed during the 1940s, was doomed.

In my view, what were really at stake in the correspondence between Scholem and Arendt were the criteria of judgement. Scholem clearly represented the Jewish tradition, in which individual judgement was intended to respect the judgement of the Jewish leadership. What makes this aspect of Scholem's account difficult to grasp is the fact that he carefully veiled his argument behind the notion of what he referred to as Arendt's heartlessness. His intention was not simply to say that Arendt was cruel in her assessment of Jewish conduct, but rather that she lacked the correct type of moral judgement. This type of moral judgement should have been based on a deep and unquestionable reverence and respect for the Jewish leadership.

In a way, Scholem was right. Arendt was heartless in the sense that she lacked any kind of blind and uncritical reverence for anybody. Arendt's conception of good political judgement was exactly the opposite of Scholem's. In Arendt's view, good political judgement could only be based on the independent and courageous consideration of events. Thus, what really came between Arendt and the Jewish community were her independence, originality, and disobedience as a thinker, as well as her demand for personal responsibility as opposed to blindly following leaders.

4.6. THE RESPONSIBILITY OF THE INTELLECTUALS

In the previous subchapters we have seen that two of the major themes of the controversy over Arendt's report on the Eichmann trial concerned Jewish cooperation on the one hand and the nature of Eichmann's evil on the other. We saw that the main motivation driving Arendt's enemies was self-defence; in the final analysis, they were not only concerned about the conduct of the European Jews as

such but also about saving their own reputations. More precisely, one of the problems with Arendt's book was that it raised unpleasant questions about the role and contribution of American Jews to the fate of the European Jewry.

We have also seen that the contra-Arendtian campaign was organised by representatives of the most important Jewish organisations and shaped by their accounts of how Arendt's report should have been read and understood. They succeeded in turning virtually the entire Jewish community against Arendt, which meant that it was not only Jewish politicians and devoted believers of the Jewish faith who turned against her but also her former friends, as more and more Jewish intellectuals began to criticise her book. This was reflected in the fact that the condemning words of Jacob Robinson *et alia* were not only used by the functionaries of Jewish organisations in their attempts to spread the smear campaign everywhere but also by a number of Jewish intellectuals in their journal reviews, which were not official organs of any of the Jewish organisations but instead represented independent intellectual fractions within the Jewish community. These writers included Marie Syrkin, who wrote for the *Jewish Frontier* and *Dissent*, Norman Podhoretz, who wrote for *Commentary*, Morris Schappes, who wrote for *Jewish Currents*, and Louis Harap, who wrote for *Science and Society*. In all of these contributions, the reading of Robinson was either openly acknowledged or otherwise obvious. However, the accounts published in other journals of the Jewish intelligentsia were not much more favourable to Arendt, although they lacked direct reference to Robinson. These contributions included Konrad Kelien for *Midstream*, Gertrud Ezorsky for *New Politics*, Ernst Simon for *Judaism*, and Lionel Abel for the *Partisan Review*.

Arendt was not so much depressed about the controversy itself, but rather its low intellectual level, which was at least partly determined by the editorial policies of the major magazines and journals (cf. Young-Bruehl 1982, 358–359). We have already discussed the

questionable decision by the *New York Times* to invite Michael Musmanno to review Arendt's book. Had this odd choice remained a one-off, Arendt would probably not have been all that bothered. However, a similar kind of choice was repeated, for example, in the *Partisan Review*, which was much more devastating to Arendt on a personal level because she had been a frequent contributor and distinguished member of the magazine's intellectual community for years (for Arendt's relation to the "family" of the *Partisan Review*, see Bloom 1986). The choice of Lionel Abel to review Arendt's book was odd because it was known in advance that he was openly hostile towards Arendt. His hostility had become clear a couple of years earlier when he published an article in *New Politics* entitled *Pseudo-Profundity*, in which he fiercely criticised Arendt's collection of essays, *Between Past and Future* (Abel 1961).

In the following, I will take a closer look at the intellectual controversy surrounding Arendt's book. Although the distinction between intellectual and other debates is, of course, partly artificial, it is not entirely baseless. It is precisely because it was less directed and shaped by the Jewish organisations that it is a good source from which to more closely approach the question of why the entire Jewish intelligentsia were so enraged over Arendt's book. As far as the powerful Jewish organisations were concerned, it was no surprise that they attacked Arendt, as they had their own political interests to defend. The situation of the more leftist Jewish intellectuals was entirely different because most of them had loose ties to Jewish political groups and religious tradition. In addition, they maintained a clear distance between themselves and the new Jewish state. Thus, they should not have had anything either to hide or defend. They firmly believed that they were at least as much American as they were Jewish, and as such they could not even consider the possibility of moving to Israel. In other words, the debate of the intelligentsia is interesting and important because it was not motivated by direct political or power interests; something else was at stake here.

A closer look at the intellectual debate reveals that two things in particular were at stake. First, there was the question of the personal responsibility of American Jewish intellectuals for what had happened and what was going to happen to the Jews in Europe in particular and in the world at large. Without explicitly admitting it, they read Arendt's critique of the Jewish leadership as an accusation of their own political ignorance and blindness shaped by self-deception. This is why much of the intellectual controversy was about what should and could have been known during the 1940s, about Arendt's status within the Jewish community, and her competence and right to make a judgement about the conduct of the European Jewry. Second, there was the question of American Jewish identity, which was in deep crisis during the years of the Eichmann trial and Arendt controversy. Along with the process of assimilation and their increased wealth, the American Jews were also becoming secularised and losing their Jewish identity. Arendt's book concretely raised the question of the character of modern Jewishness to the fore.

I will focus on the question of how the writers approached the questions of commitment and responsibility, and I will show that the accounts were shaped by an attempt to evade this question by turning it into the aforementioned question of Arendt's status and competence. I will argue that American Jewish intellectuals vaguely understood that Arendt's critique extended beyond the context of the Jewish Councils but that they refused to see its ramifications. They also vaguely grasped that what was at stake was the political role and duties of the intellectuals, although they refused to include themselves in the discussion about them.

I will take a closer look at a few representative and significant contributions to the controversy surrounding the role and responsibility of the intellectuals. I will focus on those characteristics and traits which distinguish this branch of the debate from the rest of it. My aim is to illustrate the way in which the controversy surrounding Arendt's book was – partly between the lines – a debate over the

political identity of the American Jewish intelligentsia and its political role and duties. I will argue that this was an episode of conspicuous inability and represented a lack of political judgement and responsibility caused by people's self-deceptive belief that they are capable of remaining outside of the sphere of political commitments by maintaining a critical distance from established power structures.

4.6.I. To Know Enough to Judge

One of the most important arguments repeated in the intellectual debate was that Arendt was wrong in presuming that American Jewish intellectuals really knew the full extent of what was going on during the mass destruction of European Jews in the 1940s. Those who presented this argument maintained that it would have been impossible for them to know because there was not a sufficient amount of reliable information available, which is why Arendt's most serious mistake was to take the position of the *Besserwisser*. In *Midstream*, Konrad Kelien complained:

In fact, most people would probably agree that not enough that is worthwhile has been written on these subjects [...] Only a philistine, parroting pat political and psychological chiches can claim to know the full answers. Yet, in a curious way, almost everybody insists that he knows, and the closer he was to the forest, the more he insists that he knows all the trees. This is also true of Miss Arendt's book. She, too, has, and in her peculiarly petulant way, flings into our faces, 'all the answers'. This is perhaps this book's most striking weakness. Regardless of its merits the book is the work of what Germans call a *Besserwisser* – a know-it-all, or know-it-better. The book is pervaded by vanity, and vanity is the least profitable posture that can be brought to bear upon the subject under discussion. (Kelien 1963, 25)

There has been an endless debate since the end of the Second World War over the point at which people ought to have known about the existence of the concentration camps. This is undoubtedly a difficult question. The answers vary from that of Alberto Moravia, who has

claimed that all the necessary information was available to those who *wanted* to know as early as 1939, to that of Karl Jaspers, who said he had only learnt of the existence of concentration camps after the war. Peter Novick has argued that Americans knew about the destruction on a general level but more often than not were not willing to believe the news about the volume of the destruction (Novick 1999, 19–29). Arendt herself later said that she only began to really believe the news coming from Europe in 1943, as the reports initially appeared to be too absurd to be true (Arendt 1965). What is peculiar about Kellen's argumentation is his attempt to deny that people had the chance or ability to know what had happened during the 1960s, 20 years after the war. Although the memoirs and other accounts of a number of concentration camp survivors and many thorough historical studies had been published since the end of the 1940s, Kellen argued that not enough information had been available to the public. In my view, this is a clear-cut sign of his attempt to defend himself and other American Jewish intellectuals "who were not there".

The question of knowing was inevitably intertwined with the question of judging, as the former was a prerequisite of the latter. It was often argued in the apologies of American Jewish intellectuals that they had never had a sufficient amount of knowledge in order to be able to judge. From another point of view, they accused Arendt of applying a higher standard of judgement where the Jews were concerned, and this, of course, was not considered fair. From their perspective, the conduct of the Jews ought not to have been judged at all. Norman Podhoretz wrote in *Commentary*:

This habit of judging the Jews by one standard and everyone else by another is a habit Miss Arendt shares with many of her fellow-Jews, emphatically including those who think that the main defect of her version of the story is her failure to dwell on all the heroism and all the virtue that the six million displayed among them. But the truth is – *must* be – that the Jews under Hitler acted as men will act when they are set upon by murderers, no better

and no worse: the Final Solution reveals nothing about the victims except that they were mortal beings and hopelessly vulnerable in their powerlessness. (Podhoretz 1963, 208)

Thus, in Podhoretz's view, the conduct of the victims should not have been judged at all because they did what they did under circumstances that were impossible to judge. What made Arendt's account even worse, according to her critics, was that she applied her own standards of judgement and knowledge of history and did not lean on any conventional interpretation of Jewish history. Marie Syrkin argued for the *Jewish Frontier*:

What is at the root of the shortcomings of Miss Arendt's trial of the trial is *her* view of Jewish history, a view commonly held by assimilationists of the Council for Judaism stripe, on the one hand, and 'radicals' of the old school on the other. In this view every affirmation of Jewish national awareness is culpable and to be strictured either as multiple loyalty or treason to a larger international ideal. That is why a Jewish intellectual of Miss Arendt's caliber is able not only distort the fact but – more important – to fail so signally in sympathy and imagination. (Syrkin 1963a, 14)

Representing labour Zionism, Syrkin obviously considered strong Jewish national consciousness a *sine qua non* of successful Jewish politics. She wholeheartedly supported Israeli politics and believed that Israel was and should remain the national state of the Jews. Arendt, for her part, was very critical of the nationalistic aspect of the politics of Israel.

According to some critics, relying on a conventional interpretation of Jewish history would have provided Arendt with the political point of view she dramatically lacked. For example, in *New Politics*, Gertrude Ezorsky equated the "political" with political ideology in such a way that only those who agree with and belong to Jewish ideological movements may be spared a deeply antipolitical attitude:

Miss Arendt's attitude toward political ideology, organization and leadership points up her antipolitical views. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, she declared all political ideologies to be incipiently totalitarian. (p. 458) In

Eichmann in Jerusalem, Miss Arendt castigates Jewish ideological movements, organizations and leaders. Surveying the Jewish leaders who stood unaided against Nazism, she extends her approval only to 'the few who committed suicide.' (p. 105) She claims that had the Jews been 'unorganized and leaderless' more would have survived. (p. 111) Could the political point be plainer? (Ezorsky 1963, 73)

This quotation shows that Ezorsky's understanding of what politics is was profoundly ideological and dramatically different from Arendt's conception of politics. For the former, politics meant being uncritically committed to an ideological movement and wholeheartedly promoting it in every way, while for Arendt, the political meant, among other things, to retain an independent individual capacity for judgement in every situation and to never blindly trust anybody else's judgement. As we will see in the following chapter, in Arendt's understanding, the importance of maintaining the capacity for independent judgement was only emphasised in politically extreme situations in which the majority of people were tempted to lose their sense of reality and capacity for judgement.

The main problem with Ezorsky's deeply partial and ideological conception of politics lies in the fact that it does not allow room for independent thinking. In addition, from this stance, shared by most of Arendt's critics, changing one's mind in terms of politics and/or one's political affiliation could only lead to inexcusable apostasy. After leaving the Zionist movement in the 1940s, Arendt had definitely become a renegade of Zionism who was not to be trusted:

Since Dr. Arendt is, so to speak, an ex-Zionist, one is tempted to remark that apparently one can no more trust the objectivity of an ex-Zionist than of an ex-Communist or ex-Catholic. Zionists, notably Marie Syrkin in the *May Jewish Frontier*, have already exposed some of Dr. Arendt's manipulation of evidence on this subject. (Schappes 1963c, 21)

In this reasoning, being "ex-something" implied that a person was completely dishonest and capable only of lying and distorting the

truth. A significant point in the accounts of all of Arendt's critics was their view that the only person guilty of distorting the truth and manipulating evidence was Arendt herself. It was as if they had never heard the word "interpretation". If one did not share their standard view of Jewish history, he or she was seen as a dishonest apostate. Simultaneously, they never doubted anything that people like Jacob Robinson or Gideon Hausner told them, as these men were seen as entirely trustworthy and truthful. These men did not interpret anything, nor did they have to choose between significant and insignificant facts and details. They did not judge but merely reported plain facts.

4.6.2. Hannah Arendt's "Jewish Revisionism"

It would seem reasonable to assume that the harshest critique of Arendt's work would have come from those Jewish quarters which were intellectually and politically furthest from her. Correspondingly, one would think that her leftist intellectual friends would not have been cruel and unfair in their critique of her book. They were. More often than not former friendship made it virtually impossible for a number of Arendt's critics to judge her fairly and impartially, while some of the most decent critiques came from quarters to which she had loose ties. This holds particularly true regarding her critique of Zionist politics and the Jewish leadership, which only very few of her intellectual friends could accept. Conversely, one person who did try to present a fair critique was Ernst Simon, who wrote a lengthy account for *Judaism*, a quarterly of the American Jewish Congress, to which Arendt was most certainly loosely tied. Being an early account based on the version of her assessment published in the *New Yorker*, it was not entirely "contaminated" by the smear campaign, but, rather, represents at least an attempt to presenting an independent account of Arendt's report. This is why Simon's piece deserves closer examination. Nevertheless, it should not, of

course, be forgotten that the Orthodox Jews of *Judaism* had their own political reasons to judge Arendt differently from the other quarters that had contributed to the debate. They sympathised with Arendt's critical attitude towards the state of Israel and partly shared her critique of wartime Jewish politics from their own viewpoint of Jewish orthodoxy, to which the state of Israel and Zionism represented the highest form of heresy.

Similarly to Morris Schappes, who was quoted above, Simon also defined Arendt as an ex-Zionist. However, he did not see this as a problem, instead considering her distance from the Zionist movement and her personal and theoretical knowledge about it as providing her with a "high objectivity mated with profound knowledge". Unlike most of Arendt's other critics, Simon also appreciated her "stylistic dexterity", recognising her capacity for irony even in the face of the most horrible events. Thus, amongst other things, he pointed out that "one is not to take seriously her remark that Theodor Herzl's *Judenstaat*, the Zionist classic, 'converted Eichmann immediately and forever to Zionism' (I, 93). With all her hostility to Zionism, Hannah Arendt would surely not equate Eichmann and Zionism; that would be carrying a joke a bit far." (Simon 1963, 388–389)

For Simon, Arendt's ironic style was not a problem as such. The problem was that it was lacking something, namely the relativising and refreshing aspect of self-irony: "Her lack of self-irony and self-criticism makes it possible for her to consider herself more than an ordinary mortal and to apply to herself a standard other than the one she uses for the objects of her criticism. Upon these she pours out the plentitude of her stylistic ability." (Simon 1963, 389)

This argument is not far from Podhoretz's aforementioned complaint that Arendt applied more rigorous criteria of judgement to Jews than to gentiles. Without entirely understanding it, these two men were on the right track, as they correctly pointed to the fact that there was something peculiarly imbalanced in Arendt's

stylistic operations. Simon also correctly pointed to the fact that this imbalance stemmed from irony:

Irony is of all literary styles the one that creates the greatest distance between writer and subject. It always establishes a hierarchy, the writer on top, his subject below. (Simon 1963, 390)

Nevertheless, he did not understand, or did not want to understand, that this imbalance stemmed from the very structure of independent and critical judgement. He should have pushed his reasoning a step further in order to see that irony is one of the most fundamental tools of independent judgement because of its sharp illuminative character, which all other tropes and linguistic strategies lack. It produces a hierarchical distance from which it is possible to judge a phenomenon without harmonising sympathy, which is inevitable if one stands too close to the phenomenon under scrutiny. Simultaneously, this glance from above also allows one to see the purposeless paradoxes and dilemmas of the situation, which more often than not are indispensable in allowing us to make an accurate political judgement, but which easily remain obscured if one stands too close to the phenomenon or is overly sympathetic to some of the actors involved. As I will argue in Chapter Five, as much as political judgement aims at being sharp and accurate, it is inevitably impudent and relentless, since otherwise it would not be able to get to the “heart of the matter”. Correspondingly, a sympathetic and balanced judgement must always leave something unsaid, thus losing some aspects of its accuracy and sharpness.

Furthermore, Simon pointed out that a style that tends to lean towards polarities attracts parallels as well as contrasts, and he argued that her use of this style led Arendt to carry out a dramatic misinterpretation of the policy of the Jewish Councils:

[W]e may conclude that what was at work in the writer was a curious fantasy of a sort which is quite alien to that of the real historian. It might be called a compulsive supplementing neurosis. Someone (for instance, sociologist)

organizes all new evidence to fit a preconception, at which she has arrived from previous research. Anything that does not fit into the preconceived structure is mercilessly forgotten, anything that is missing is supplied to plug the hole in the structural pattern; it must not evince a lacuna. This is what happens when someone is dominated by a conceptual *horror vacui*. (Simon 1963, 394)

Had Arendt aimed at an historical analysis of the Jewish policy under the Nazi Reich, this evaluation might have been correct. However, what Simon failed to see was that Arendt's intention was not to present an historical narrative of what really happened in the Third Reich. Rather, she had attempted to make a political judgement of Jewish politics. Arendt did make dramatic parallels and contrasts, but her intent was not to distort the conduct of the Jews. Rather, her aim was to highlight the potential problematic ramifications a mistaken policy could have in a politically extreme situation in which there is no possible "good" outcome. Arendt had thus not fabricated entirely new evidence in order to fit a specific preconception, but, rather, the Jewish leaders had failed to understand the novelty and unprecedented character of the Nazi policy of the Final Solution, believing that it was possible to deal with the Nazis as they had always dealt with gentiles. In my view, these quasi-methodological remarks reveal that Simon's intention was not, after all, to be as fair as the introduction to his review would lead us to believe. It turns out that he had merely chosen a different rhetorical strategy than the other reviewers in showing that Arendt's judgement of Jewish politics was mistaken.

This strategy became more explicit at the point at which Simon began dealing with Arendt's relationship to Zionism, in which he found an inherent paradox which rendered her a kind of Revisionist:

Hannah Arendt's Zionist, or rather anti-Zionist, conversion did not keep her from retaining a certain sympathy for that Zionist group which constituted the polar opposition to the *Ihud* on the Arab question, namely, the so-called Revisionists. Founded by the late Vladimir Jabotinsky, they have become the

extreme nationalistic opposition in today's Israel as the Herut ('Freedom') Party [...] Then follows a section which conforms precisely to the position of the (not mentioned) *Ihud* group, namely, that official Zionist policy was helping to tie a Gordian knot which would be untangled, if at all, only by means of a "tragic conflict". Unfortunately, we and the Arabs are still in the midst of this conflict. (Simon 1963, 397)

In order to confirm this argument, Simon referred to a quote from one of Arendt's early articles, published in the *Menorah Journal* in 1945, in which she complained that the policy of the General Zionists would lead to the strengthening of Revisionist extremism. His mistake was to interpret what Arendt wrote as implying that in spite of its extremity, Revisionist terrorism was somehow more honest and idealistic than the policy of the General Zionists. In reality, Arendt was actually criticising both groups, as she did not think either of them was right. As I have shown in Chapter One, for Arendt, the only possibility for there to be a durable solution in Palestine would have had to have been based on the federative principle.

Another more dramatic misreading followed which provided an explanation as to why Simon saw Arendt's attitude towards Zionism in such a negative light. First, he argued that Arendt had experienced Zionism only as a reaction to external pressure, and that she had ignored its primary component, namely its relation to the ancient and uninterrupted Jewish longing for Zion. He then once again quoted Arendt's *Menorah* piece, in which she argued that historically the Jewish people had managed to maintain a kind of quasi-polity in the form of its specific in-between space (Simon 1963, 398–399). Had Simon been better acquainted with Arendt's early writings he might have understood that the notion of a common in-between space of a people as a necessary prerequisite for political existence was always present in Arendt's line of thought. As I showed earlier, Arendt located the mistake of Jewish politics in the interpretation of this principle in a radically nationalistic way which excluded Arabs from the future polity. Arendt criticized

the Jews for not wanting to share Palestine with the Arabs. She never criticised the basic desire of the Jews to found a homeland in Palestine, although she was opposed to the manner in which it had been carried out in practice. She identified a paradox in the fact that the Jews were just as unwilling to share Palestine with the Arabs as the Nazis had been to share Europe with the Jews. This is not a form of anti-Zionism but an example of a political judgement that plays with irony.

A portion of Simon's misreading simply stemmed from the fact that he disagreed with Arendt as to the significance of certain historical events. It is precisely because of this disagreement that his piece confirmed a general trend in the accounts of Arendt's critics. Hardly any of them grasped what she was doing, and hardly anyone understood – or wanted to understand – that it was not her intention to give a balanced historical account of what had happened but to make a political judgement of Jewish politics. This is why Simon also failed to see the context in which Arendt's stylistic and argumentative choices should have been read.

4.6.3. The Crisis of Jewish Identity

I have argued above that much of the intellectual controversy surrounding Arendt's book was caused by American Jewish intellectuals' unwillingness to admit their personal commitment to and responsibility for the fate of the European Jews. This unwillingness kept them from grasping the real character of Arendt's report as a political judgement as opposed to an historical or moral account of events. However, it did not stem from any kind of intrinsic political inability but rather from the highly peculiar situation in which the American Jewish intellectuals lived, characterised by a deep identity crisis.

In other words, the American Jewish intellectuals were inclined to turn their own problems of political and cultural identity into

an attack against Arendt because she managed to touch on certain sore spots of their crisis, which they were unwilling to admit. Most of Arendt's critics never really admitted that there was a connection between the controversy and this identity crisis, and even those who did admit it had difficulty accurately defining and grasping it. One person who almost got the point without accepting Arendt's arguments was Irving Howe, who described the situation as a chance to be released from the repressed feelings caused by the shock of the death of six million Jews in the 1940s. More precisely, since the 1940s, the American Jews had repressed the desire to discuss the Holocaust; Arendt's book was a provocation which disclosed this "tongue-tiedness", ultimately enabling the Jews to speak about the unspeakable (Bloom 1986, 329). With almost 20 years of hindsight, Howe remarked in his memoirs that one of the ramifications of the excesses of speech and feeling in the controversy was a sense of guilt concerning the Jewish tragedy that was seldom allowed to see daylight. In addition, he pointed out that in the years following the formation of the state of Israel, a wave of simple-hearted nationalist sentiment had swept over the entire American Jewry. However, the very success of the Zionist project meant that there was little room in the diaspora for Zionist declamation (Howe 1982, 275–277).

Despite the provocative power of Arendt's book, only a tiny minority of those involved in the controversy managed to actually grasp what it was all about. This minority was comprised of members of the younger generations of Jewish intellectuals, most gentiles and a handful of Jewish intellectuals who were courageous and independent enough to resist the pressures of the smear campaign.

Norman Fruchter, the editor of *Studies of the Left*, was the voice of young Jewish radicals who found in Arendt's work both a rebellion against the myth of the victim, which Jews tended to substitute for their history, and an argument according to which citizen responsibility was necessary in every modern state in order to prevent the re-emergence of the totalitarian movements like

the one which ravaged Germany. As, for example, Young-Bruehl (1982, 360) has noted, he made these arguments at a moment when the comparison between the Germany of the 1930s and the America of the 1960s was becoming common among the New Left. Understandably, the Old Left was far from pleased, as both arguments criticised its ability to correctly interpret the country's political situation and act accordingly.

In Fruchter's view, the American Jew was in a deep crisis caused by assimilation and its ambiguous effects:

Jews currently exist within the polarities of a traditional European Judaism and a totally secular, bankrupt Americanism. The only vibrancies within those polarities are the victim myth of the Jewish past, which suggests an unending, dangerous uniqueness, and the State of Israel, which offers both refuge and at least a partial conclusion to the epochs of Jewish suffering. (Fruchter 1965, 23)

By the "victim myth", Fruchter was referring to an ancient dictate according to which until the manifestation of God's justice by the Messiah, the Jewish people would suffer repeated persecution and face endless misery caused by the implacable hostility of the gentile world. In Fruchter's view, there were two problems in this myth. On the one hand, it guaranteed a unified identity to the communities of Orthodox Jews who lived separately from whatever national community within which they temporarily resided. On the other hand, the victim myth replaced the continuities of political and economic conflict, which form the history of most cultures. (Fruchter 1965, 23) In other words, within the frame of the victim myth, Jewish history was not really history at all, that is to say it was not characterised by contingent events and occurrences which were impossible to predict in advance, but instead formed a stable and unchanging situation from which there was no escape without God's help.

As to the state of Israel, Fruchter pointed to the fact that the American Jews had always nourished a curious ambivalence towards

Israel. While they granted it continuous emotional, political, and financial support, they steadfastly refused to emigrate. They voluntarily and deliberately preferred their assimilated existence in America to nationally independent existence in Israel. As a result, the American Jew faced three pressures: the demands of the old myth, which dictated traditionalism and denigrated the chances for assimilation; the appeal and advantages of assimilation into America, which suggested that the myth must be discarded, but offered no replacement; the state of Israel, which defined itself as the culmination of the victim myth and offered refuge should that myth become a reality in the United States (Fruchter 1965, 24).

In Fruchter's view, it was because Arendt suggested new definitions for all three pressures that her book caused such controversy:

She interprets the man Jews have defined, since 1945, as a monster epitomizing fanatic anti-Semitism as a banal functionary [...] She assesses the role of the Jews in their extermination, and finds, not the martyrdom of the eternal victim, but cooperation of the Jews with their exterminators. Finally, her evaluation of the conduct of the Israeli trial of Eichmann suggests that Israel is predominantly a national state, involved in the same competitive policies, international duplicity, warfare, and atrocities which characterize the behavior of most national states. (Fruchter 1965, 24)

In retrospect, Fruchter's parallel between 1960s America and 1930s Germany is unconvincing. However, it is easy to understand that this parallel drove the elder generations of American Jewish intellectuals mad as far as it implied that the organised American Jewish community statically and uncritically accepted contemporary American society. What Fruchter really wanted to argue by presenting this parallel was that the American Jewish intellectuals were as conformist and politically naive as their German counterparts – Jewish intellectuals included – had been during the 1930s.

Although Fruchter spoke about Jewish identity in general, it is obvious that his critique pointed, above all, to the problematic character of the political identity of American Jews. In this respect,

assimilation as such was not necessarily a problem, although it became a problem if confronted in the passive and self-deceptive way in which most American Jewish intellectuals viewed it. They defended the Jewish leadership in order to avoid the unpleasant question of their own political passivity. They were bystanders who allowed things to happen without leaving room for active political resistance and citizenship. This choice stemmed from the ancient acceptance of the hierarchical structures within Jewish communities and their antipolitical character, which was shaped by the unquestionable leadership of the rabbis. This attitude was an inevitable contradiction to their outspoken political identity as leftist intellectuals, who were committed to a worldview according to which it was people themselves who decided worldly matters, not religious leaders guided by God. Consequently, Fruchter concluded that American Jewish intellectuals were not really able to face the challenge posed by Arendt (Fruchter 1965, 42).

In sum, Fruchter took his reading between the lines as far as possible, arriving at the conclusion that Arendt's book was almost more about American Jews than it was about the Eichmann trial itself. Although this is a clear-cut exaggeration, he makes an invaluable point understood by few people. Namely, he understood that Arendt's book was a political judgement of the political conduct of both European and American Jews that was based on an empirical analysis of their political choices prior to and during the Second World War.

In this chapter, I have provided a general overview of the controversy over Arendt's report on the Eichmann trial, focusing specifically on its major problematic points. I have illustrated that much of the controversy was caused by an organised campaign based on a systematic misreading of Arendt's text. I have also pointed to the fact that even the majority of those who did read the book under the pressure of Jewish authorities failed to understand what Arendt

was really saying and what she really meant. This was because very few people succeeded in reading the book for what it was: a concrete political judgement of Jewish politics during the Nazi era. In fact, the entire controversy was shaped by a curious distinction between those who understood but did not want to admit and those who could not admit because they did not understand.

Those who understood but did not want to admit were, of course, the organisers of the smear campaign, who considered Arendt's arguments politically dangerous to the American Jewish establishment. They preferred to engage in the character assassination of a single intellectual simply because the only alternative would have been to engage in a profound process of self-criticism and re-evaluation of Jewish politics. Those who could not admit because they did not understand were a group that was comprised of Jewish intellectuals who never really grasped the deeply political character of Arendt's pamphlet. They tended to read it as a heartless manifesto which blamed the victims for their own destruction as opposed to a political evaluation of Jewish political strategies during the Third Reich. They were not politically-minded enough to grasp that political judgement requires distance and impartiality in order to really get to the point, but continued instead to complain about Arendt's heartlessness and harshness.