
“Ich Bin Adolf Eichmann”
Recalling the Banality of Evil

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The Nazi extermination policy toward the Jewish population of Europe created the greatest tragedy in the history of human conflict. Obviously, the primary perpetrator of the Holocaust was Adolf Hitler. Heinrich Himmler holds his rightful place in the history books sitting at Hitler’s right hand. Yet there was another man—another Adolf, in fact—whose name has become synonymous with the crime against the Jews and the horrifying potential of seemingly regular individuals—the quality which Hannah Arendt referred to as the “banality of evil.”¹ This German officer—despite never rising above the rank of Obersturmbannführer² in the Schutzstaffel (SS)—held “more power at his command than any general in the German Army.”³ He was Adolf Eichmann, the SS “expert on the Jewish question.”⁴ Who was Adolf Eichmann? What was his role in the extermination of the Jews? If he truly was just an ordinary man, what caused him to take part in such a terrible atrocity? Numerous historians and sociologists have attempted to answer this question, particularly since Eichmann’s spectacular trial in the early 1960s. How did Eichmann view his own actions, and how should people in the present and future remember the man?

Upon his capture by Israeli agents in Argentina in 1960, *The New York Times* published a full-page biography of Adolf Eichmann. The newspaper described Eichmann as “The man whose name led most of the rest on the list of the ‘blackest Nazis’” and “the most evil monster of humanity.”⁵ He was not an obvious candidate from the beginning to become such a despicable figure. In the 1930s, he established himself as a German scholar on Jewish matters, particularly Zionism. Hannah Arendt claimed that Theodore Herzl’s *Der Judenstaat* was the first serious book Eichmann ever read in his life, the second was Adolf Bohm’s *History of Zionism*, and the list may have ended there.⁶ In fact, Eichmann, the leader of the list of “blackest Nazis,” was asked in prison if he ever read *Mein Kampf*, to which he replied “Never all of it, and never carefully.”⁷ He also stated that Jews wrote all books he read on Jewish matters, because “No others were of any use to me in my . . . study. My mind was not clouded by previous knowledge.”⁸ He successively was in charge of the Bureau of Jewish Emigration in Vienna and the emigration center in Berlin, and adopted Herzl’s plan for establishing a Jewish homeland in Madagascar.⁹ Eichmann fully believed that

such a plan was feasible, and worked diligently to accomplish it. In his trial, “He asserted that the Viennese Jews who dealt with him ‘knew I wasn’t a Jew-hater’ and insisted that his relations with them had always been ‘decently businesslike.’”¹⁰ Dr. Franz Mayer, a Zionist leader in Berlin prior to the war, testified in Eichmann’s trial that he had often sought and received aid from Eichmann in those early years, shocking most of the members of the audience. “I considered him a quiet man, behaving in a very normal way—a correct person,” said Mayer.¹¹

As part of his duties in the Jewish emigration services, Eichmann became responsible for the transportation of Jews throughout Germany. His efficiency in this task impressed his superior, Reinhard Heydrich, who combined a collection of SS offices into Section IV A 4b of the Reich Security Main Office, nominally called Eichmann Authority.¹² In time, however, war meant—as Eichmann recalled—that “Madagascar was out of the question. It was all over, the plan had been wrecked. I capitulated. The dream was over.”¹³ Eichmann was adamant that the term “Final Solution of the Jewish Question” was already in use at this time, referring first to emigration and then to withdrawal of citizenship and confiscation of property—all of which were the responsibilities of IV A 4b.¹⁴ Soon, however, the solution became a violent one by Hitler’s order (not—as often believed—by Eichmann’s own initiative at the Wannsee Conference, where he represented Heydrich).¹⁵ Eichmann personally witnessed a massacre of Jews at Minsk, and afterward argued with one of his superiors—Heinrich Müller—that:

The solution, Gruppenführer, was supposed to have been a political one. But now the Führer has ordered a physical solution, obviously a physical solution it must be. But we cannot go on conducting executions as they were done in Minsk and, I believe, other places. Our men will be educated to become sadists. We can’t solve the Jewish problem by putting a bullet through the brain of a defenceless woman who is holding her child up to us.¹⁶

So it could be seen that Eichmann—the great architect of the Holocaust—was uncomfortable with the physical violence of it. Speaking in prison of it, he said, “Everything was taken away from me. All the work, all the efforts, all the interest . . . were extinguished.”¹⁷ In short time, however, he would overcome this extinguishment of his previous efforts and enter into the transportation of Jews to the concentration and death camps with the same level of enthusiasm, diligence, and—tragically—efficiency.

For the remainder of the war, Eichmann's IV A 4b was responsible for rounding up and delivering the Jews to the camps for labor and extermination. Eichmann, who had been so disgusted at Minsk by the sight of the massacre of Jews, avoided visiting the camps himself as much as possible. "Eichmann was sickened when he toured the concentration camps, but, in order to participate in mass murder he had only to sit at a desk and shuffle papers."¹⁸ His distance from the actual killing was a fact that Eichmann consistently touted during his imprisonment and trial. On July 13, 1961, Eichmann testified in his trial: "I saw in the murder of the Jews, in the extermination of the Jews, one of the most hideous crimes in the history of mankind." However, he continued on to say, "I had to deal with the transport technicalities, on orders from my superiors . . . I regarded myself as not guilty, and I was glad I had no direct share in the physical extermination of Jews. The part that I had to play was quite enough anyway."¹⁹ And so it could be seen that Eichmann recognized the wickedness of the events, and yet managed to distance himself from them sufficiently in his mind to allow him to do his horrible work. He had taken an oath to the government, and would maintain that oath no matter the circumstances. That, at least, was his defense; whether he truly believed it will never be known. The consistency of his answers in this regard—both in his trial and in his interviews in prison—suggest that this was his honest state of mind, but it must be remembered that he had fifteen years between the fall of the Third Reich and his capture to practice a prepared script for a situation in which he was forced to answer for his deeds.

His efficiency in acquiring trains, assembling SS personnel, rounding up Jews, and keeping shipments of Jews moving to the camps demonstrate that Eichmann had an extremely practical, rational, and active mind and energy. Could he honestly believe that he was not playing an active part in the extermination of the Jews by sending them to the places of their deaths? Could blind obedience to superiors and their orders take such a hold on the mind of a man? He was not predisposed to anti-Semitism, and the scenes of passive violence sickened him. Yet he went about his task with "excellent initiative and the required toughness"—as his last promotion report read.²⁰ Whatever his true motive—be it a new anti-Semitism grown out of a life in the SS or a simple determination to advance his career—Eichmann was responsible for the delivery of millions of Jews to their deaths at Auschwitz, Chelmno, and other locations which have gone down in infamy. He certainly recognized at the end of the war that he would be pursued as a criminal, and for this reason went about the task of sneaking away to Argentina without even his family. It was there, in 1960, that Jewish agents captured Eichmann and snuck him back to Israel for trial.²¹

The question of how Eichmann should be punished for his crimes raised a strong debate in both world opinion and among Jewish intellectuals and religious leaders. While some believed the death penalty should be reduced to a life sentence, many were pleased to see the most prominent remaining Nazi leader executed. There was a feeling, however, that no punishment the court could inflict on Adolf Eichmann would accomplish anything to bring satisfaction and full justice in regards to the crimes that he had committed. C. L. Sulzberger, a correspondent for the *New York Times*, offered his own perspective on the question, writing on 12 April 1961: “Everyone should be pleased to see him brought to justice. The question of what sentence he receives is wholly unimportant. He can’t be hanged 6,000,000 times.”²² A life in prison would not bring a single life back; nor would an execution. Either way, Adolf Eichmann would be removed from the world, but execution would create a much more dramatic scene in the minds of men. Eichmann on the gallows may have been “cold and unyielding to the end,”²³ but the fiery memory of Nazi crimes was reignited. The world was reminded “of the ghastly chasms into which any paths of prejudice may lead.”²⁴ Finally, the possibility of his burial site becoming a shrine for future anti-Semites was swept away by the current of the Mediterranean when his ashes were dumped in international waters.²⁵

It was natural for the world to attempt to forget the horrific atrocities that had been committed in Europe during the Second World War. Fifteen years had passed, and the world had new concerns about nuclear powers in a Cold War. Nazis were a thing of the past. Much of the world had called off any attempt at hunting for Adolf Eichmann within a few years of Germany’s surrender. “Memories of the extermination of the Jews and attitudes towards Nazi war criminals had gone from fierce indignation to indifference”²⁶ by 1950, according to historian David Cesarani. But Jewish leaders refused to allow the world to forget what had happened. As large as his role in the terror had been, the trial of Adolf Eichmann made the man into much more than even he was. He was the embodiment of Nazi Germany, the last of the great names of criminals. His old boss, Heydrich, had been assassinated during the war. His subordinates such as Hoess—who had served as commandant of Auschwitz—had been executed.²⁷ His associates—among them Karl Hermann Frank—had long since been tried and executed.²⁸ But Eichmann remained as “the most wanted Nazi war criminal still at large.”²⁹ Eichmann was the name; Eichmann was the man; Eichmann was the symbol. The Jewish world desired to see Eichmann squirm. From the very start of his trial, when he answered his first question with simply, “Ich bin Adolf

Eichmann” in a “firm clear voice,”³⁰ the fight was launched to paint the image of the Holocaust—in all its horror—into the collective memory of mankind forever. “Adolf Eichmann, you are charged with causing the deaths of millions of Jews in Germany and the enemy-occupied countries in the years 1938 to 1945,” was the charge.³¹ This was not a trial of one man and the question of duty versus conscience. This was a trial on Nazism and all it represented. With the execution of Eichmann in the end, the state of Israel and the Jewish people of the world could claim a kind of pyrrhic victory. The last of the “blackest Nazis” was gone forever, and a complacent world was reminded of the atrocity suffered by them less than two decades earlier.

Eichmann has come to represent a great many things since his death. Without a doubt, he was a terrible criminal. His cog-in-the-machine defense may have represented how he honestly viewed himself, but does not exonerate his part in the horrible tragedy that the Nazis carried out. There can be no plea of ignorance for genocide. The world has seen several instances of genocide in the time since Eichmann. Hatred has no defense. Cesarani explains that each generation has found in Eichmann a person fitting its own needs: totalitarian man of an evil state, an example of the awful capability of man with modern equipment and distance between themselves and targets in a world living in fear of nuclear conflict during the Cold War, and a simple proponent of ethnic cleansing like that which has been seen in areas such as Kosovo and Rwanda in the last fifteen years.³² A more controversial memory of Eichmann came following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, when University of Colorado at Boulder professor Ward Churchill stated that the victims in the Twin Towers were “Little Eichmanns” who simply ignored their own parts in American policy.³³ Undoubtedly, more incarnations of the memory of Eichmann will come with time. The goal of the trial against him was accomplished: Eichmann (along with Hitler, obviously) became the lasting symbol of the Holocaust in the collective memory of mankind. His apparent normality—Hannah Arendt’s “banality of evil”—did and will likely continue to instill fear in the hearts of men about the capacity for evil possible within themselves and their neighbors. In a world of growing mistrust between nations and peoples, with genocide ongoing in the Sudan and the Middle East, and with the creations of new and more complex bureaucracies, one may be forced to accept Cesarani’s conclusion that “Eichmann appears more and more like a man of our time.”³⁴ Yet it may be more accurate to say that Eichmann was a man of all times, as people have never failed to demonstrate their ability to injure and destroy one another. This realization may be much more beneficial for the perspective of the people of the world, because it will encourage vigilance for the emergence of

such men—hopefully with sufficient time to stop their heinous deeds. This is a much better option, indeed, than choosing the route of Eichmann: distancing oneself from the reality, pretending to be powerless and far-removed, and not having the strength of character to stand up to that which is clearly wrong. That is what Eichmann did, and now Eichmann is gone. But the memory of Eichmann must never leave, else he may emerge again in another time, in another place, and enact another terrible crime on humanity in the name of “following orders”—be they orders from a government, a religion, or any other group not yet recognized.

Notes

1. Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Viking Press, 1964), title page.

2. Lieutenant-colonel.

3. Quentin Reynolds, *Minister of Death: The Adolf Eichmann Story* (New York: Viking Press, 1960), 102.

4. Arendt, 36.

5. “Killer of 6,000,000,” *New York Times*, May 26, 1960.

6. Arendt, 40-41.

7. Jochen von Lang and Claus Sibyll, ed., *Eichmann Interrogated: Transcripts from the Archives of the Israeli Police* (London: Bodley Head, 1983), 36.

8. von Lang and Sibyll, 37.

9. “Killer of 6,000,000,” *New York Times*; von Lang and Sibyll, 69.

10. David Cesarani, *Becoming Eichmann: Rethinking the Life, Crimes, and Trial of a “Desk Murderer”* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2006), 71.

11. Garven Hudgins, “Witness Tells of Eichmann’s One Kind Act,” *Washington Post*, April 27, 1961.

12. Reynolds, 102. “IV stood for Gestapo, A for internal affairs, 4 for religion, and b for Jews.”

13. von Lang and Sibyll, 68.

14. *Ibid.*, 73.

15. Cesarani, 107.

16. *Ibid.*, 106.

17. *Ibid.*, 107.

18. *Ibid.*, 354.

19. Homer Bigart, "Eichmann Terms Killing of Jews a 'Hideous Crime,'" *New York Times*, July 14, 1961.
20. "Killer of 6,000,000," *New York Times*.
21. "Israelis Seize Nazi Eichmann," *Washington Post*, May 24, 1960.
22. C. L. Sulzberger, "The True Meaning of the Eichmann Trial," *New York Times*, April 12, 1961.
23. Lawrence Fellows, "Eichmann Dies on Gallows for Role in Killing of Jews," *New York Times*, June 1, 1962.
24. Sulzberger, "Meaning of the Eichmann Trial."
25. Fellows, "Eichmann Dies on Gallows."
26. Cesarani, 211.
27. During his trial, Eichmann was questioned in a lively exchange about what his view was of Hoess's guilt. He persistently evaded the question, concluding simply that "I do not care to recall my inner feelings," and stating that Hoess, too, was duty-bound to follow his orders. This interrogation is recorded in: Homer Bigart, "Eichmann Terms Killing of Jews a 'Hideous Crime,'" *New York Times*, July 14, 1961.
28. Jan G. Wiener, *The Assassination of Heydrich* (New York: Grossman Publishers, 1969), 174.
29. "Israelis Seize Nazi Eichmann," *Washington Post*.
30. "Eichmann is Arraigned," *New York Times*, May 24, 1960.
31. Ibid.
32. Cesarani, 368.
33. Michelle York, "Professor Quits a Post over a 9/11 Remark," *New York Times*, February 1, 2005.
34. Cesarani, 368.

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