

HANNAH ARENDT

THE ORIGINS OF
**TOTALI-
TARI-
ANISM**

Containing two new chapters: IDEOLOGY AND TERROR
& REFLECTIONS ON THE HUNGARIAN REVOLUTION

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The Origins of Totalitarianism

by HANNAH ARENDT

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*Weder dem Vergangenen anheimfallen noch
dem Zukünftigen. Es kommt darauf an, ganz
gegenwärtig zu sein.* KARL JASPERS

Preface to the First Edition

TWO WORLD WARS in one generation, separated by an uninterrupted chain of local wars and revolutions, followed by no peace treaty for the vanquished and no respite for the victor, have ended in the anticipation of a third World War between the two remaining world powers. This moment of anticipation is like the calm that settles after all hopes have died. We no longer hope for an eventual restoration of the old world order with all its traditions, or for the reintegration of the masses of five continents who have been thrown into a chaos produced by the violence of wars and revolutions and the growing decay of all that has still been spared. Under the most diverse conditions and disparate circumstances, we watch the development of the same phenomena—homelessness on an unprecedented scale, rootlessness to an unprecedented depth.

Never has our future been more unpredictable, never have we depended so much on political forces that cannot be trusted to follow the rules of common sense and self-interest—forces that look like sheer insanity, if judged by the standards of other centuries. It is as though mankind had divided itself between those who believe in human omnipotence (who think that everything is possible if one knows how to organize masses for it) and those for whom powerlessness has become the major experience of their lives.

On the level of historical insight and political thought there prevails an ill-defined, general agreement that the essential structure of all civilizations is at the breaking point. Although it may seem better preserved in some parts of the world than in others, it can nowhere provide the guidance to the possibilities of the century, or an adequate response to its horrors. Desperate hope and desperate fear often seem closer to the center of such events than balanced judgment and measured insight. The central events of our time are not less effectively forgotten by those committed to a belief in an unavoidable doom, than by those who have given themselves up to reckless optimism.

This book has been written against a background of both reckless optimism and reckless despair. It holds that Progress and Doom are two sides of the same medal; that both are articles of superstition, not of faith. It was

written out of the conviction that it should be possible to discover the hidden mechanics by which all traditional elements of our political and spiritual world were dissolved into a conglomeration where everything seems to have lost specific value, and has become unrecognizable for human comprehension, unusable for human purpose. To yield to the mere process of disintegration has become an irresistible temptation, not only because it has assumed the spurious grandeur of "historical necessity," but also because everything outside it has begun to appear lifeless, bloodless, meaningless, and unreal.

The conviction that everything that happens on earth must be comprehensible to man can lead to interpreting history by commonplaces. Comprehension does not mean denying the outrageous, deducing the unprecedented from precedents, or explaining phenomena by such analogies and generalities that the impact of reality and the shock of experience are no longer felt. It means, rather, examining and bearing consciously the burden which our century has placed on us—neither denying its existence nor submitting meekly to its weight. Comprehension, in short, means the unpremeditated, attentive facing up to, and resisting of, reality—whatever it may be.

In this sense, it must be possible to face and understand the outrageous fact that so small (and, in world politics, so unimportant) a phenomenon as the Jewish question and antisemitism could become the catalytic agent for first, the Nazi movement, then a world war, and finally the establishment of death factories. Or, the grotesque disparity between cause and effect which introduced the era of imperialism, when economic difficulties led, in a few decades, to a profound transformation of political conditions all over the world. Or, the curious contradiction between the totalitarian movements' avowed cynical "realism" and their conspicuous disdain of the whole texture of reality. Or, the irritating incompatibility between the actual power of modern man (greater than ever before, great to the point where he might challenge the very existence of his own universe) and the impotence of modern men to live in, and understand the sense of, a world which their own strength has established.

The totalitarian attempt at global conquest and total domination has been the destructive way out of all impasses. Its victory may coincide with the destruction of humanity; wherever it has ruled, it has begun to destroy the essence of man. Yet to turn our backs on the destructive forces of the century is of little avail.

The trouble is that our period has so strangely intertwined the good with the bad that without the imperialists' "expansion for expansion's sake," the world might never have become one; without the bourgeoisie's political device of "power for power's sake," the extent of human strength might never have been discovered; without the fictitious world of totalitarian movements, in which with unparalleled clarity the essential uncertainties of our time have been spelled out, we might have been driven to our doom without ever becoming aware of what has been happening.

And if it is true that in the final stages of totalitarianism an absolute evil

appears (absolute because it can no longer be deduced from humanly comprehensible motives), it is also true that without it we might never have known the truly radical nature of Evil.

Antisemitism (not merely the hatred of Jews), imperialism (not merely conquest), totalitarianism (not merely dictatorship)—one after the other, one more brutally than the other, have demonstrated that human dignity needs a new guarantee which can be found only in a new political principle, in a new law on earth, whose validity this time must comprehend the whole of humanity while its power must remain strictly limited, rooted in and controlled by newly defined territorial entities.

We can no longer afford to take that which was good in the past and simply call it our heritage, to discard the bad and simply think of it as a dead load which by itself time will bury in oblivion. The subterranean stream of Western history has finally come to the surface and usurped the dignity of our tradition. This is the reality in which we live. And this is why all efforts to escape from the grimness of the present into nostalgia for a still intact past, or into the anticipated oblivion of a better future, are vain.

Summer, 1950

Preface to the Second Enlarged Edition

SINCE 1951, when this book first appeared, only one event happened that had a direct bearing upon our understanding of totalitarianism and total domination as a novel form of government. This is not Stalin's death, nor even the succession crisis in Russia and the satellite countries, but the Hungarian revolution—the first and yet unique instance of a people's uprising against total domination. At this moment, hardly two years after the uprising, no one can tell whether this was only the last and most desperate flare-up of a spirit which, since 1789, has manifested itself in the series of European revolutions, or if it contains the germ of something new which will have consequences of its own. In either case, the event itself is important enough to require a re-examination of what we know, or think we know, about totalitarianism. The reader will find in this new edition a last chapter, in the form of an Epilogue, where I have tried to bring the older story up to date. However, the reader should bear in mind that developments of the year 1958 have not been taken into account, with the result that the partial restalinization in Soviet Russia and the satellite countries is hinted at as a strong probability, but not told and analyzed as an accomplished fact.

This is not the only addition. As sometimes happens in such matters, there were certain insights of a more general and theoretical nature which now appear to me to grow directly out of the analysis of the elements of total domination in the third part of the book, but which I did not possess when I finished the original manuscript in 1949. These are now incorporated in Chapter XIII, "Ideology and Terror," of the present edition and they replace the rather inconclusive "Concluding Remarks" that closed the original edition, some of which, however, have been shifted to other chapters.

These changes are not revisions. It is true that in the present edition, even apart from the two new chapters, Part III on Totalitarianism and the last chapters of Part II on Imperialism (dealing with such pretotalitarian phenomena as statelessness and the transformation of parties into movements) are considerably enlarged, while Part I on Antisemitism and the chapters 5 to 8 on Imperialism have remained untouched. But the changes are technical additions and replacements which do not alter either the analysis or argument of the original text. They were necessary because so much documentary and other source material on the Hitler regime had become accessible years after this book was finished. Thus I knew the Nuremberg documents only in part and only in English translations, and many books, pamphlets and magazines published in Germany during

the war were not available in this country. Additions and replacements, therefore, concern mainly quotations in text and footnotes where I can now use original instead of secondary sources.

However, what I tried to do for source material, I could not do for the huge literature of recent years on Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia. Not even all of the more important contributions are mentioned. While I sincerely regret this omission, I left out of account, without regret, the rather voluminous literature of memoirs published by Nazi and other German functionaries after the end of the war. The dishonesty of this kind of apologetics is obvious and embarrassing but understandable, whereas the lack of comprehension they display of what actually happened, as well as of the roles the authors themselves played in the course of events, is truly astonishing.

For kind permission to peruse and quote archival material, I thank the Hoover Library in Stanford, California, the Centre de Documentation Juive in Paris, and the Yiddish Scientific Institute in New York. Documents in the Nuremberg Trials are quoted with their Nuremberg File Number; other documents are referred to with indication of their present location and archival number.

The two new chapters of this edition appeared before in the *Review of Politics*, July 1953, under the title, "Ideology and Terror, a Novel Form of Government," and in the *Journal of Politics*, February 1958, under the title, "Totalitarian Imperialism: Reflections on the Hungarian Revolution."

The additions and enlargements of the present edition, with the exception of the analysis of the Hungarian revolution, appeared first in the German edition published in 1955. Therefore they had to be translated and incorporated into the English edition. This difficult job of editing and translating was done by Mrs. Therese Pol, to whom I am greatly indebted.

Hannah Arendt

New York, April, 1958

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PART ONE

Antisemitism

This is a remarkable century which opened with the Revolution and ended with the Affaire! Perhaps it will be called the century of rubbish.

ROGER MARTIN DU GARD

ONE: Antisemitism as an Outrage to Common Sense

MANY STILL consider it an accident that Nazi ideology centered around antisemitism and that Nazi policy, consistently and uncompromisingly, aimed at the persecution and finally the extermination of the Jews. Only the horror of the final catastrophe, and even more the homelessness and uprootedness of the survivors, made the "Jewish question" so prominent in our everyday political life. What the Nazis themselves claimed to be their chief discovery—the role of the Jewish people in world politics—and their chief interest—persecution of Jews all over the world—have been regarded by public opinion as a pretext for winning the masses or an interesting device of demagoguery.

The failure to take seriously what the Nazis themselves said is comprehensible enough. There is hardly an aspect of contemporary history more irritating and mystifying than the fact that of all the great unsolved political questions of our century, it should have been this seemingly small and unimportant Jewish problem that had the dubious honor of setting the whole infernal machine in motion. Such discrepancies between cause and effect outrage our common sense, to say nothing of the historian's sense of balance and harmony. Compared with the events themselves, all explanations of antisemitism look as if they had been hastily and hazardedly contrived, to cover up an issue which so gravely threatens our sense of proportion and our hope for sanity.

One of these hasty explanations has been the identification of antisemitism with rampant nationalism and its xenophobic outbursts. Unfortunately, the fact is that modern antisemitism grew in proportion as traditional nationalism declined, and reached its climax at the exact moment when the European system of nation-states and its precarious balance of power crashed.

It has already been noticed that the Nazis were not simple nationalists. Their nationalist propaganda was directed toward their fellow-travelers and not their convinced members; the latter, on the contrary, were never allowed to lose sight of a consistently supranational approach to politics. Nazi "nationalism" had more than one aspect in common with the recent nationalistic propaganda in the Soviet Union, which is also used only to feed the prejudices of the masses. The Nazis had a genuine and never re-

voked contempt for the narrowness of nationalism, the provincialism of the nation-state, and they repeated time and again that their "movement," international in scope like the Bolshevik movement, was more important to them than any state, which would necessarily be bound to a specific territory. And not only the Nazis, but fifty years of antisemitic history, stand as evidence against the identification of antisemitism with nationalism. The first antisemitic parties in the last decades of the nineteenth century were also among the first that banded together internationally. From the very beginning, they called international congresses and were concerned with a co-ordination of international, or at least inter-European, activities.

General trends, like the coincident decline of the nation-state and the growth of antisemitism, can hardly ever be explained satisfactorily by one reason or by one cause alone. The historian is in most such cases confronted with a very complex historical situation where he is almost at liberty, and that means at a loss, to isolate one factor as the "spirit of the time." There are, however, a few helpful general rules. Foremost among them for our purpose is Tocqueville's great discovery (in *L'Ancien Régime et la Révolution*, Book II, chap. 1) of the motives for the violent hatred felt by the French masses for the aristocracy at the outbreak of the Revolution—a hatred which stimulated Burke to remark that the revolution was more concerned with "the condition of a gentleman" than with the institution of a king. According to Tocqueville, the French people hated aristocrats about to lose their power more than it had ever hated them before, precisely because their rapid loss of real power was not accompanied by any considerable decline in their fortunes. As long as the aristocracy held vast powers of jurisdiction, they were not only tolerated but respected. When noblemen lost their privileges, among others the privilege to exploit and oppress, the people felt them to be parasites, without any real function in the rule of the country. In other words, neither oppression nor exploitation as such is ever the main cause for resentment; wealth without visible function is much more intolerable because nobody can understand why it should be tolerated.

Antisemitism reached its climax when Jews had similarly lost their public functions and their influence, and were left with nothing but their wealth. When Hitler came to power, the German banks were already almost *judenrein* (and it was here that Jews had held key positions for more than a hundred years) and German Jewry as a whole, after a long steady growth in social status and numbers, was declining so rapidly that statisticians predicted its disappearance in a few decades. Statistics, it is true, do not necessarily point to real historical processes; yet it is noteworthy that to a statistician Nazi persecution and extermination could look like a senseless acceleration of a process which would probably have come about in any case.

The same holds true for nearly all Western European countries. The Dreyfus Affair exploded not under the Second Empire, when French Jewry was at the height of its prosperity and influence, but under the Third Re-

public when Jews had all but vanished from important positions (though not from the political scene). Austrian antisemitism became violent not under the reign of Metternich and Franz Joseph, but in the postwar Austrian Republic when it was perfectly obvious that hardly any other group had suffered the same loss of influence and prestige through the disappearance of the Hapsburg monarchy.

Persecution of powerless or power-losing groups may not be a very pleasant spectacle, but it does not spring from human meanness alone. What makes men obey or tolerate real power and, on the other hand, hate people who have wealth without power, is the rational instinct that power has a certain function and is of some general use. Even exploitation and oppression still make society work and establish some kind of order. Only wealth without power or aloofness without a policy are felt to be parasitical, useless, revolting, because such conditions cut all the threads which tie men together. Wealth which does not exploit lacks even the relationship which exists between exploiter and exploited; aloofness without policy does not imply even the minimum concern of the oppressor for the oppressed.

The general decline of Western and Central European Jewry, however, constitutes merely the atmosphere in which the subsequent events took place. The decline itself explains them as little as the mere loss of power by the aristocracy would explain the French Revolution. To be aware of such general rules is important only in order to refute those recommendations of common sense which lead us to believe that violent hatred or sudden rebellion spring necessarily from great power and great abuses, and that consequently organized hatred of the Jews cannot but be a reaction to their importance and power.

More serious, because it appeals to much better people, is another common-sense fallacy: the Jews, because they were an entirely powerless group caught up in the general and insoluble conflicts of the time, could be blamed for them and finally be made to appear the hidden authors of all evil. The best illustration—and the best refutation—of this explanation, dear to the hearts of many liberals, is in a joke which was told after the first World War. An antisemite claimed that the Jews had caused the war; the reply was: Yes, the Jews and the bicyclists. Why the bicyclists? asks the one. Why the Jews? asks the other.

The theory that the Jews are always the scapegoat implies that the scapegoat might have been anyone else as well. It upholds the perfect innocence of the victim, an innocence which insinuates not only that no evil was done but that nothing at all was done which might possibly have a connection with the issue at stake. It is true that the scapegoat theory in its purely arbitrary form never appears in print. Whenever, however, its adherents painstakingly try to explain why a specific scapegoat was so well suited to his role, they show that they have left the theory behind them and have got themselves involved in the usual historical research—where nothing is ever discovered except that history is made by many groups and that for certain reasons one group was singled out. The so-called scapegoat necessarily

ceases to be the innocent victim whom the world blames for all its sins and through whom it wishes to escape punishment; it becomes one group of people among other groups, all of which are involved in the business of this world. And it does not simply cease to be coresponsible because it became the victim of the world's injustice and cruelty.

Until recently the inner inconsistency of the scapegoat theory was sufficient reason to discard it as one of many theories which are motivated by escapism. But the rise of terror as a major weapon of government has lent it a credibility greater than it ever had before.

A fundamental difference between modern dictatorships and all other tyrannies of the past is that terror is no longer used as a means to exterminate and frighten opponents, but as an instrument to rule masses of people who are perfectly obedient. Terror as we know it today strikes without any preliminary provocation, its victims are innocent even from the point of view of the persecutor. This was the case in Nazi Germany when full terror was directed against Jews, *i.e.*, against people with certain common characteristics which were independent of their specific behavior. In Soviet Russia the situation is more confused, but the facts, unfortunately, are only too obvious. On the one hand, the Bolshevik system, unlike the Nazi, never admitted theoretically that it could practice terror against innocent people, and though in view of certain practices this may look like hypocrisy, it makes quite a difference. Russian practice, on the other hand, is even more "advanced" than the German in one respect: arbitrariness of terror is not even limited by racial differentiation, while the old class categories have long since been discarded, so that anybody in Russia may suddenly become a victim of the police terror. We are not concerned here with the ultimate consequence of rule by terror—namely, that nobody, not even the executors, can ever be free of fear; in our context we are dealing merely with the arbitrariness by which victims are chosen, and for this it is decisive that they are objectively innocent, that they are chosen regardless of what they may or may not have done.

At first glance this may look like a belated confirmation of the old scapegoat theory, and it is true that the victim of modern terror does show all the characteristics of the scapegoat: he is objectively and absolutely innocent because nothing he did or omitted to do matters or has any connection with his fate.

There is, therefore, a temptation to return to an explanation which automatically discharges the victim of responsibility: it seems quite adequate to a reality in which nothing strikes us more forcefully than the utter innocence of the individual caught in the horror machine and his utter inability to change his fate. Terror, however, is only in the last instance of its development a mere form of government. In order to establish a totalitarian regime, terror must be presented as an instrument for carrying out a specific ideology; and that ideology must have won the adherence of many, and even a majority, before terror can be stabilized. The point for the historian is that the Jews, before becoming the main victims of modern terror, were the center of Nazi