



Hannah Arendt (1906 – 1975)

Hannah Arendt was born on October 14, 1906, in Hanover, Wilhelmine, Germany. Raised in Königsberg, she was the only child of Paul and Martha (Cohn) Arendt, both prodigy of entrepreneurs from Russian-Jewish families. When she was seven, her father died of paresis (syphilitic insanity). Her mother married Martin Beerwald in 1920, bringing two older stepsisters, Eva and Clara Beerwald, into Hannah Arendt's home.



Arendt was an avid reader from a young age, and by her sixteenth year her literary interests included Kant and Goethe. In 1924, she graduated from high school in Königsberg. Perhaps inspired by the theology and romantic thought of Kierkegaard's poetry, she decided to study theology at the University of Marburg with Rudolf Bultmann. Martin Heidegger was lecturing at Marburg on Existenzphilosophie, and writing what would eventually become *Sein und Zeit* [*Being and time*] in 1927. It was during her time at Marburg that Arendt began her long relationship with Heidegger, sparked by a brief and passionate affair. The affair ended when Arendt learned of Heidegger's involvement in the National Socialist party, but the friendship, however strained, would continue for years to come, and Heidegger's phenomenological method had a notable influence on her work.

Arendt went on to study the phenomenological method with Husserl and became a student at the University of Heidelberg, studying with the existentialist Karl Jaspers. It was under Jaspers that she wrote her dissertation on St. Augustine's concept of Love (*Der Liebesbegriff bei Augustin*). Jaspers and Arendt maintained a close relationship throughout their lives.

Arendt's unique approach to political thought was derived from her education in and fidelity to the phenomenological method. Unlike typical political or philosophical writings which might begin with an analysis of general political concepts or empirical data associated with political science and then impose conceptual structures on experience after the fact, she began by prioritizing human life in its 'factual' and experiential character. By using the phenomenological method, returning to 'the things themselves', she attempted to reveal the fundamental structures of political experience, or political being-in-the-world, in its distinct existence apart from other ways of being.

In September 1929 Arendt earned her doctorate, and married Günther Stern (whose nom-de-plume was Günter Anders). Anti-Semitism was on the rise in Germany, and Arendt undertook a project that would help her understand the conflict between German Nationalism and minority status. The book *Rabel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewish Woman* was a biography of a Jewish salon hostess in Berlin in the early 1800s who converted to Christianity. It remained unpublished until 1958.

In 1933, with National Socialism on the rise, Arendt increased her political activity. In association with the German Zionist Organization lead by Kurt Blimfeld, she assisted with the publication of information



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regarding victims of Nazism. She was arrested by the Gestapo for conducting research on anti-Semitic propaganda, but managed to escape her prison sentence and fled to Paris. In Paris she gained the friendship of Walter Benjamin and Raymond Aron, continuing her political activism through work with Youth Aliyah moving Jewish children from Germany to Palestine.

In 1939 Arendt divorced her first husband and remarried the following year to Heinrich Blücher whom she had met in 1936. Blücher, a political refugee from Germany, was a communist and had been a member of the Spartacus League run by Rosa Luxemburg. Only six months into their marriage in 1940 the couple was separately interred in Gurs, Southern France, the fate of many other stateless Germans when the Wehrmacht invaded. Arendt managed to escape and reunite with Blücher. In May 1941 she found safe passage to neutral America.

During the rest of World War II, Arendt lived in New York, and worked on what would eventually be published as *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. This text was finally published in 1951, the year in which she became a citizen of the United States. *The Origins of Totalitarianism* was received enthusiastically and made Arendt an intellectual celebrity. It was reprinted as an expanded edition in 1958, having taken into account the Hungarian Revolution of 1956.

In New York, Arendt worked in two main intellectual circles. Her writing appeared early on in the journal 'Jewish Social Studies', and she later became friends with the editor and his wife, Salo and Jeannette Baron. She wrote arguments proposing a Jewish army in magazines such as 'Jewish Frontier' and '*Aufbau*' [*Reconstruction*]. She worked as an editor at Schocken Books, a German Jewish publishing firm that had been reestablished in New York and Palestine. Baron charged Arendt with the task of redistributing Judaic artifacts and salvaged treasures for the Jewish Cultural Reconstruction. Her other intellectual circle of activity included Dwight Macdonald and Mary McCarthy, and she became associated with the 'Partisan Review'. In this circle, Arendt met the critic Alfred Kazin who aided her with the writing of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.

In 1952 Arendt received a Guggenheim Foundation Grant for the study of Marxism and totalitarianism. Her next three books came from this work: *The Human Condition* (1958); *Between Past and Future* (1961); and *On Revolution* (1968). In these texts we can read her desire to reconstruct political philosophy in phenomenological terms. The controversial text *Reflections on Little Rock* (1959) examined the emerging Black civil rights movement. Additionally, Arendt wrote articles for the 'New York Review of Books' in the 1960s and early 1970s criticizing the abuse of executive power and what she called the "imperial presidency" associated with military intervention in Vietnam. She became the first woman to hold a full professorship at Princeton University and she went on to teach at the University of Chicago, Wesleyan University, and the New School for Social Research in New York.

Arendt published the most controversial work of her career in 1963 with *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. Arendt covered Eichmann's trial in Israel as a correspondent for The New Yorker in 1960, when the Israeli security forces had captured the SS lieutenant colonel responsible for the transportation of Jews to death camps. *Eichmann in Jerusalem* is the collection of revised articles from her coverage of the trial. According to her text, Eichmann



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had not had a sadistic will to do evil, but had been thoughtless; he had failed to think about what he was doing. Her concept of the banality of evil caused considerable friction between herself and the organized Jewish community as her book was read by some as an elevation of Eichmann's character and a questioning of Jewish innocence. Arendt was concerned that the ability to act according to conscience and rational thought was becoming obscured by partisanship and nationalism, combined with modernization. Most of her writing explored the sense of a shared world and the possibilities of freedom grounded therein.

Arendt's writing on the Eichmann trials led to a series of lectures on judgement, the neo-Kantian meditation, and which became part of the work for *The Life of the Mind* (1978). While in Aberdeen, Scotland, delivering these Gifford Lectures, she survived a heart attack. The second and fatal attack occurred while entertaining the Barons in her New York apartment on December 4, 1975. The first two volumes of *The Life of the Mind* were published posthumously, Volume 1 *Thinking* and Volume 2 *Willing*, as her death cut short her work on the third volume, *Judging*.

Arendt's life became the inspiration for the novel *An Admirable Woman* (1983) by Arthur A. Cohen, possibly because her personal struggles and romantic life were so intriguing. Her romantic interests included Leo Strauss, Hans J. Morgenthau, and W. H. Auden. During her life, she fiercely guarded her privacy, tending to resist doing interviews or appearing on television. Although she was one of the United States' most prominent intellectuals, she rebelled against the Anglo-American philosophical tendencies of pragmatism, empiricism, and liberalism. Her texts have had an enormous impact on political theory, and many conferences, books and anthologies continue to celebrate her work.

In 1975 Hannah Arendt was awarded the Sonning Prize by the Danish government for Contributions to European Civilization, an award that has never before been received by an American or a woman.

Source: Adapted from: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/arendt/>



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