

'BECOMING EICHMANN' BY DAVID CESARANI

The Everyman of Genocide

Review by BARRY GEWEN

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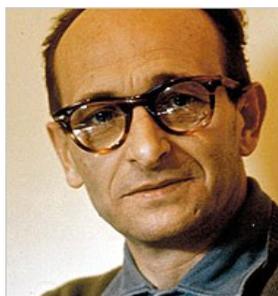
BECOMING EICHMANN

**Rethinking the Life,
Crimes, and Trial of a
"Desk Murderer."**

By David Cesarani.

458 pp. Da Capo Press. \$27.50.

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Associated Press

Adolf Eichmann in prison in
Jerusalem, 1961.

A SPECTER haunts this book, and her name is Hannah Arendt. At his trial in Jerusalem in 1961, Adolf Eichmann was portrayed by the prosecution as a gleefully genocidal monster intent on eliminating every Jew from the face of the earth. This picture was consistent with the common view of Nazis at the time: they were the embodiment of evil, the point at which reality merged with melodrama and kitsch. But Arendt saw something else. Eichmann, responsible for transporting millions of Jews to the death camps, was essentially a bureaucrat, with little more on his mind than pleasing his superiors. He was neither fanatical nor bloodthirsty, in fact had never directly killed anyone. He made trains run on time. Yet he was indisputably a mass murderer, and in the articles she wrote for *The New Yorker*, as well as in "Eichmann in Jerusalem," the book that followed, Arendt introduced a phrase to describe him that has become part of the modern vocabulary — "the banality of evil."

"Anyone writing on the subject today works in the shadow of Hannah Arendt," David Cesarani observes in "Becoming Eichmann," the first full biography to appear since the 1960's. It is thoroughly researched, densely factual; there may never be need for another biography of the man. Cesarani, a British scholar specializing in Jewish history, can be a plodder — turf battles among the Nazis are like turf battles anywhere else — but his accounts of Eichmann's early years, of his escape to Argentina and eventual capture are richly informative.

Cesarani believes his details add up to a portrait at odds with Arendt's banal bureaucrat, but what is

striking is how far his research goes to reinforce her fundamental arguments. No issue is more important to understanding Eichmann than the nature of his anti-Semitism, and Cesarani is quite good on the context of Eichmann's anti-Jewish upbringing. He was raised in northern Austria, in a conventional middle-class household where conventionality included at least a casual anti-Semitism. But describing a gentile Austrian in the 1920's as an anti-Semite is like describing a white

Mississippi in the 1920's as a racist; it tells us nothing about an individual. In Austria, Eichmann had Jewish friends, was employed by Jews as an oil and kerosene salesman, had Jewish relatives by marriage. In 1932 he became a Nazi not out of anti-Jewish conviction but, Arendt says, because he was a joiner. Cesarani stresses issues and personal connections more: Eichmann liked the Nazis' position on the Versailles Treaty. But he shares Arendt's opinion that it wasn't anti-Semitism that led Eichmann into the party.

Both Arendt and Cesarani point to hard work and happenstance as the factors that propelled Eichmann's career forward. His job at first was to round up Jews and force them to leave the Reich, a task he undertook with his customary diligence as well as a repulsive brutality, yet not with any particular ideological fervor. The turning point came after 1941, when forced emigration gave way to genocide. Under the pressure of his new duties, Eichmann changed. Arendt depicts the change as a loss of whatever conscience he may have had, especially when he saw his superiors accepting and implementing the Final Solution.

Cesarani presents a more committed Eichmann, who was no longer simply carrying out orders but had adopted eliminationist anti-Semitism as his own. Trying to sort out the difference between Arendt and Cesarani on this point plunges us into the hopeless murk of human psychology. But the larger truth is that Arendt and Cesarani both disagree with the Israeli prosecution: rabid anti-Semitism wasn't the motivating force throughout Eichmann's years as a Nazi. He had to become Eichmann.

Neither are Arendt and Cesarani far apart in the conclusions they draw. One of Arendt's achievements was to tear down the wall that separated the Nazis from everyone else. Eichmann's ordinariness proved that normality was no protection against the commission of terrible crimes. "It would have been very comforting indeed to believe that Eichmann was a monster," she writes; melodrama, after all, with its white hats and black hats, is a form of absolution. But she will have none of that. She points an accusing finger at us all. So does Cesarani. Under the right circumstances, normal people will commit mass murder, he says, and the circumstances of our age — with its racism, ethnic cleansing, suicide bombers and genocidal killings — are ominous. "Eichmann appears more and more like a man of our time," are his concluding words. "Everyman as génocidaire."

But if Cesarani is so close to Arendt, why is he so hostile to her? Her judgments were "wayward," he says. Her depiction of Eichmann was "self-serving, prejudiced and ultimately wrong." Arendt could be infuriatingly arrogant, and to impugn her objectivity, Cesarani cites disparaging comments she made about Eastern European Jews in private letters. He goes further: "She had much in common with Eichmann. There were two people in the courtroom who looked up to the German-born judges as the best of Germany and looked down on the prosecutor as a miserable Ostjude: one was Eichmann and the other was Hannah Arendt."

This slur reveals a writer in control neither of his material nor of himself. Arendt did look down on the prosecutor, Gideon Hausner. She disapproved of his handling of the case. And Cesarani? He finds Hausner's conduct "bullying and aimless," "erratic," "half-baked," "a shambles." Maybe he doesn't like Ostjuden either.

There's an easy explanation for Cesarani's hostility. He is writing "in the shadow" of one of the great books of the last half-century, and has to tear Arendt down to make space for himself. Still, more seems at stake here than a competition between scholars. Arendt's approach was unyieldingly universalistic. Her analysis of Eichmann was a demand for individual responsibility, an insistence on the need constantly to exercise personal choice, whatever society might dictate. This is a cold

ethic, as severe as Kant's, so difficult it has a quality of the inhuman about it. For who among us can maintain the unceasing moral awareness she calls for?

And, indeed, there is something inhuman in the passages of "Eichmann in Jerusalem" that have drawn the most criticism — the attack on the Jewish leaders who cooperated with the Nazis. For Arendt, the leaders embodied the general "moral collapse" of those years. She refused to grant Jews any special status, even as victims, rejecting what she called the "absurd assertion of a kind of collective innocence of the Jewish people." The Holocaust, she insisted, was "a crime against humanity, perpetrated upon the body of the Jewish people."

The great historian Gershom Scholem, reproaching Arendt for this austere universalism, accused her of lacking "Ahabath Israel: Love of the Jewish people." Cesarani, though he doesn't say so explicitly, obviously sides with Scholem. He writes that Eichmann's "disdain for Jews found more than an echo" in Arendt. But he mistakes impartiality for hostility. One doesn't have to love the victims of genocide to hate the perpetrators.

A fairer criticism is that Arendt ignored the particularity of the Holocaust, its central place in Jewish history and psychology. Her thought tended to move from individuality to universality without passing through the communal, lived world that provides most people with their sense of identity. Such radicalism is what gives her writing its power, but also what makes it so troubling. In her response to Scholem, she wrote: "I have never in my life 'loved' any people or collective — neither the German people, nor the French, nor the American, nor the working class or anything of that sort. I indeed love 'only' my friends and the only kind of love I know of and believe in is the love of persons." This is a statement that manages to be warm and chilling at the same time.

Barry Gewen is an editor at the Book Review.

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