Fifty years ago, The New Yorker published a series of articles that became one of the most controversial books of the 20th century: Hannah Arendt’s Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil. The articles dealt with the trial of Adolf Eichmann, the Nazi SS officer who coordinated the logistics of transporting millions of European Jews to their death during World War II. Arendt portrayed Eichmann and other Nazi criminals not as hate-filled, anti-Semitic monsters but as petty bureaucrats and spoke openly about the role played by Jewish councils in the deportation and destruction of their own people. Arendt’s central insight into what she called “the banality of evil”—that great crimes can arise from mindless conformity and thoughtlessness about the humanity of others—came paired with sharp criticism of Israeli insensitivity to legitimate Palestinian claims and disregard for the rights of minorities and neighbors.

Arendt suffered ferocious personal attacks that continue today, 37 years after her death. Criticism of her Eichmann book inevitably incorporates some variant of the assertion that she felt herself to be more German than Jewish and was a self-hating, anti-Semitic Jew—a strange charge against a woman who worked on behalf of Jewish organizations most of her life. The 50-year battle over Arendt's reputation has pitted her defenders against those who would deflect her criticism of Israel as anti-Jewish, thus turning people away from her ideas about democratic pluralism and regional cooperation without having to discuss them.

Soon after the Eichmann pieces began to appear, civil rights activist Henry Schwarzschild warned Arendt that Jewish organizations in New York were furiously planning a campaign against her and that she should expect to be the object of great debate and animosity.

Siegfried Moses, a friend from Arendt’s youth who had immigrated to Israel and risen to the position of state comptroller, sent a note to Arendt on behalf of the Council of Jews from Germany, declaring war on her and her Eichmann book. Moses then flew to Switzerland to meet with...
Arendt and demanded that she stop the book’s publication. She refused, warning him that the intensity of criticism was “going to make the book into a cause célèbre and thus embarrass the Jewish community far beyond anything that she had said or could possibly do.” Indeed, literary critic Irving Howe would describe the vitriolic public dispute that ensued as “violent,” while novelist Mary McCarthy would liken it to a pogrom.

It began on March 11 with a memorandum distributed by the Anti-Defamation League alerting its members to “Arendt’s defamatory conception of Jewish participation in the Nazi Holocaust,” by which they meant her reporting that evidence at the trial showed that leaders of Jewish communities across Europe had negotiated the orderly demise of their communities with Eichmann. The ADL followed up with a pamphlet, “Arendt Nonsense,” which called the Eichmann articles evil, glib, and trite.

On May 19, 1963, The New York Times published a highly critical review of Eichmann in Jerusalem by Michael A. Musmanno, a retired Navy rear admiral who had served as a judge at the U.S. Nuremberg Military Tribunals and was then a sitting justice on Pennsylvania’s supreme court. Musmanno had also appeared as a witness for the prosecution at the Eichmann trial. In her book Arendt had disparaged Musmanno’s testimony that Nazi foreign minister Joachim von Ribbentrop told him at Nuremberg that Hitler’s madness had come about because he had fallen under Eichmann’s influence. Even the prosecution knew this was a fabrication. Musmanno wrote in the Times that Arendt was motivated by “purely private prejudice. She attacks the State of Israel, its laws and institutions, wholly unrelated to the Eichmann case.”

That summer New York intellectuals weighed in. A review by playwright and critic Lionel Abel in Partisan Review accused Arendt of having portrayed the Nazis as more aesthetically appealing than their victims. Journalist Norman Podhoretz’s review in Commentary concluded that Arendt had exemplified “intellectual perversity [resulting] from the pursuit of brilliance by a mind infatuated with its own agility and bent on generating dazzle.” Zionist activist Marie Syrkin wrote in Dissent that Eichmann was the only character who came out better in the book than he went in and accused Arendt of manipulating the facts with “high-handed assurance.” Arendt had published often in all three journals.

In July, when she came home from Europe, where she had been traveling since the articles appeared, Arendt wrote to a friend, the German philosopher Karl Jaspers, that her “apartment was literally filled with unopened mail … about the Eichmann business.” Much of it bordered on hate mail, like the letter from a woman in New Jersey who began with a declaration that she had never read the Eichmann book and “would never read such trash” and concluded with the hope that “the ghosts of our six million martyrs haunt your bed at night.”

More measured criticism came in a letter from Gershom Scholem, a friend from Arendt’s youth.
and then a professor of Jewish mysticism at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. He affirmed his “deep respect” for Arendt but characterized the tone of her book as “heartless,” “flippant,” “sneering and malicious,” replacing balanced judgment with a “demagogic will-to-overstatement.” He could never think of her, he wrote, as anything other than “a daughter of our people” but admonished her for insufficient Ahabath Israel, love of the Jewish people: “In you, dear Hannah, as in so many intellectuals who come from the German Left, I find little trace of this.”

Arendt replied that she came not from the German Left but from the tradition of German philosophy and that of course she was a daughter of the Jewish people and had never claimed to be anything else: “I have always regarded my Jewishness as one of the indisputable actual data of my life, and I have never had the wish to change or disclaim facts of this kind. There is such a thing as basic gratitude for everything that is as it is.” But you are quite right, she told him, in what you say about Ahabath Israel. “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.”

IN THE FULL FLUSH of the attack, Mary McCarthy stepped forward as Arendt’s champion. Writing in the Winter 1964 issue of Partisan Review, she observed that the hostile reviews and personal attacks on Arendt were written almost entirely by Jews. She dismissed Lionel Abel’s assertion that Arendt made Eichmann aesthetically palatable: “Reading her book, he liked Eichmann better than the Jews who died in the crematoriums. Each to his own taste. It was not my impression.”

Fevered discourse continued to rage across the pages of Partisan Review’s next issue. Marie Syrkin accused McCarthy of intellectual irresponsibility and ignorance, and writer and historian Harold Weisberg characterized her defense of Arendt as wholly lacking in charity and logic. Poet Robert Lowell countered that Arendt’s only motive was a “heroic desire for truth.” Journalist and critic Dwight Macdonald called Eichmann in Jerusalem a masterpiece of historical journalism and defended McCarthy’s “brilliant” observation that the split over the book was between Christians and Jews, especially “organization-minded Jews.”

In 1965, Jacob Robinson, an adviser to the prosecution in the Eichmann trial, published a 400-page denunciation of Arendt’s scholarship, And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight: The Eichmann Trial, The Jewish Catastrophe and Hannah Arendt’s Narrative. With the assistance of teams of researchers in New York, London, Paris, and Jerusalem, Robinson scoured Arendt’s book and found 400 “factual errors,” including such minutiae as the misspelling of a first name. Some of the things he listed, it turned out, were not errors at all. Nevertheless, an essay by historian Walter Laqueur in The New York Review of Books asserted that Arendt lacked the factual knowledge needed to make a scholarly contribution. Laqueur characterized Robinson as “formidable,” an eminent authority on international law, an erudite polymath with knowledge of many languages and unrivalled mastery of sources. Robinson’s motivation for undertaking a full-scale refutation of “Miss Arendt’s” flippant display of cleverness, Laqueur wrote, was the natural “resentment felt by the professional against the amateur.”

Arendt had been reluctant to react publicly to the controversy, preferring to let her work speak for itself. In January 1966, however, she responded, in The New York Review of Books, to Laqueur’s essay. Laqueur, she wrote, was so overwhelmed by Robinson’s “eminent authority” that he had failed to acquaint himself with the facts. For a start, she had not written a narrative about the Jewish catastrophe, but only a report about a trial. She criticized the prosecution for repeatedly raising questions about why there had not been more Jewish resistance during the Holocaust—a line of questioning she dismissed as Israeli militarist propaganda. She also pointed out that Robinson
was not a historian but a lawyer who had published practically nothing prior to his book. The honorific of “eminent authority” had been attached to him only after he joined the chorus of critics attacking her. What is formidable about Robinson, Arendt concluded, is that his words were amplified by the Israeli government with its consulates, embassies, and missions throughout the world, along with the American and World Jewish Congress, B’nai B’rith, and the ADL, in a coordinated effort to characterize her book as a posthumous defense of Eichmann and her as the evil person who wrote it.

Arendt worried that the backlash against the Eichmann book had blown the controversy out of proportion and that partially informed people would believe “all the nonsense” critics were spouting. At the height of the scandal, however, Jaspers assured her that she would emerge with her reputation intact: any fair-minded person who read the Eichmann book would see her seriousness of purpose, honesty, fundamental goodness, and passion for justice. “A time will come that you will not live to see, when Jews will erect a monument to you in Israel, as they are doing now for Spinoza,” he wrote. “They will proudly claim you as their own.” Now, as the debate began to subside, Jaspers wrote that though she had suffered greatly, the critical uproar was adding to her prestige. Arendt wrote back that she had been warmly received by the mostly Jewish students who had turned out in substantial numbers for her lectures on politics at Yale, Columbia, Chicago, and other universities. “The funny thing,” she told Jaspers, was that after speaking her mind openly about “the formidable Mr. Robinson,” she was once again “flooded with invitations from all the Jewish organizations to speak, to appear at congresses, etc. And some of these invitations are coming from organizations that I singled out to attack and named by name.”

In the next few years she would collect a dozen honorary degrees from American universities and be inducted into both the National Institute of Arts and Letters and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, which awarded her its Emerson-Thoreau Medal for distinguished achievement in literature. In Denmark, where Jews had been heroically protected during the Nazi occupation, Arendt in 1975 received the Sonning Prize (worth the equivalent of roughly $200,000 today) for “commendable work that benefits European culture.”

For a long moment, which lasted another quarter-century after her death in 1975, Arendt had beaten back her detractors, with her reputation intact. New Yorker editor William Shawn wrote that Arendt’s death had removed “some counterweight to all the world’s unreason and corruption,” that she had been “a moral and intellectual force that went beyond category,” and that her influence “on intellectuals, artists, and political people around the world was profound.”

More recently, though, the battle over Arendt’s reputation and the value of her work, especially Eichmann in Jerusalem, has been joined again, rekindled by evidence in Arendt’s papers that as a young woman, she had a love affair with the German philosopher Martin Heidegger. It was known that Arendt had been Heidegger’s student, but the posthumous revelation of their romantic relationship by Arendt’s biographer, Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, came as a bombshell. Arendt and Heidegger were lovers for about six months, beginning in November 1924. She was an 18-year-old philosophy student; he was 35, married with two children, and was in something of a creative frenzy writing Being and Time, the all but inscrutable masterpiece that established his position as an existentialist. Arendt thought she was his muse. The love affair cooled by summer, when Heidegger withdrew into family and professional life, and there was less and less contact. Arendt appears to have suffered the bittersweet longings of unrequited love.

What seemed a final break between them occurred when the Nazis came to power in 1933. Arendt fled Germany, and Heidegger very publicly joined the Nazi Party and was elevated to the posi-
Rektor at Freiburg University. He resigned after one year, having fired the Jewish faculty, disbanded the university senate in favor of a Führer system of governance, and exhorted students to military service, often ending his speeches, right arm stretched out and up in salute, with “Heil Hitler,” repeated three times. After the war he downplayed the significance of all this and told transparent lies about the past, claiming to have done it all in an effort to protect the university.

Nevertheless, five years after the war, Arendt reconciled with Heidegger. She was in Germany directing a State Department project to preserve and distribute unclaimed Jewish cultural property looted by the Nazis—mostly books and religious artifacts—to synagogues and Jewish museums, libraries, and universities around the world. Passing through Freiberg, she sent a note to Heidegger, who came to see her. A lifelong friendship and affectionate correspondence ensued. After the affair became public, Heidegger’s reputation as a Nazi seeped into the Eichmann controversy, giving new shape to the old calumny that Arendt was a pathologically self-hating Jew, whose opinions about Israel and Jewish politics were not to be taken seriously.

Arendt understood the distinction, once referring to Heidegger as a man who lied at the drop of a hat in order to manage a situation. Heidegger nurtured fantasies of power as the foremost Nazi intellectual and had grandiose ambitions to restore philosophy to a state of grace not known since the Greeks, but his ignorance of the world, Arendt concluded, prevented him from seeing that the Nazis were interested only in people who thought as they did. In a public address honoring Heidegger on his 80th birthday, Arendt referred to his Nazi time as a mistaken “escapade,” spent primarily in “avoiding” (which implies willfully looking away from) the reality “of the Gestapo’s secret rooms and the torture cells of the concentration camps.”

Her critique was not strong enough for Heidegger’s most severe critics, nor for Arendt’s. Heidegger scholar Emmanuel Faye asserts that Heidegger’s texts reveal an inveterate Nazi not only during the Hitler years but before and after as well. Faye finds that even Being and Time, written 10 years before the Nazis came to power, is so thick with veiled proto-Nazi messages that it should be shelved next to Hitler’s Mein Kampf.

Literary critic Carlin Romano, in a 2009 review of a book Faye wrote about Heidegger, laid the philosopher’s guilt at Arendt’s feet, identifying her among the acolytes who venerated the “pretentious old Black Forest babbler.” Journalist Ron Rosenbaum adds that it will never be possible to think about Arendt or her “intellectually toxic

In the right circumstances masses of otherwise ordinary, decent people can be transformed into collaborators and perpetrators of reprehensible crimes.
relationship” with Heidegger the same way again because of her “lifelong romantic infatuation with the Nazi-sympathizing professor.” He dismisses the “banality of evil” as the “most overused, misused, abused pseudo-intellectual phrase in our language” and finds Arendt’s use of it “deceitful,” “disingenuous,” and “utterly fraudulent” in relation to Eichmann, concluding that the man responsible for the “logistics of the Final Solution” simply could not be “a banal bureaucrat.”

Deborah Lipstadt’s *The Eichmann Trial* (2011) concludes that Arendt was just plain wrong about Eichmann. On the basis of “new” evidence that Eichmann was a bully, braggart, and liar, Lipstadt proposes to supplant Arendt’s image of the banal bureaucrat with a hate-filled, mad-dog, anti-Semitic monster.

Arendt was wrong, Lipstadt declares, to think that Eichmann “did not really understand the enterprise in which he was involved.” But this is certainly not what Arendt meant when she concluded that the trial had been a “long course in human wickedness [that] had taught us the lesson of the fearsome, word-and-thought-defying banality of evil.” Lipstadt’s insight into Arendt’s supposed misjudgment of Eichmann is based on the reporting of a French journalist, Joseph Kessel, who was present at the trial on a day when Arendt was not. When damaging depositions of SS officers were read aloud, Kessel could detect “the passion and rage of the true Eichmann” beneath the “hollow mask” of a bumbler that he held up to the world.

Why does Lipstadt think Arendt was unable to detect Eichmann’s true character? Because, she tells us, Arendt was writing for only one person, the only person whose approval mattered to her: Martin Heidegger. A more plausible understanding of Heidegger’s significance in the history of the Eichmann book is that during her first postwar encounter with her former mentor, in 1950, Arendt intuitively recognized the banality of evil: Martin was still Martin. He had behaved despicably, but she recognized his humanity and admired his genius. The epiphany when she saw Eichmann a decade later was that, even at that level of culpability (so far beyond Heidegger’s), the motives for direct participation in mass murder were still fundamentally banal: not blood lust but ambition to advance one’s career, to enjoy status and opportunity, to fulfill an oath of loyalty, to be regarded as capable, a leader, a good fellow, perhaps to have a place in history.

The more recent battles over Arendt’s reputation and her criticism of Israeli policy and Jewish politics have taken a desperate turn with their focus on her love affair with Heidegger. Everything else about their relationship was known in 1963. The assertion that Arendt was hard-hearted and uncaring is supported by nothing new and is no stronger now than it was 50 years ago.

Arendt’s insight into the banality of evil remains undiminished: human character is malleable, not fixed; in the right circumstances masses of otherwise ordinary, decent, law-abiding people can be transformed into collaborators and perpetrators of reprehensible crimes against humanity.

Likewise, her depiction of the Eichmann trial as political theater is still cogent. Arendt was not alone in her criticism of the prosecution: the Israeli judges also complained that the prosecutor relied on survivors’ inflammatory testimony about the horrors of the Holocaust without showing a connection to the defendant. What Arendt hoped to learn in Jerusalem was how Eichmann had done his work, how the mass murders had been organized and implemented. Who had said and done what with and to whom? But the prosecutor’s ambition was to capture the imagination of Israeli youth and world Jewry with a retelling of the suffering of the Holocaust.

Real justice, in Arendt’s view, requires full disclosure, including self-disclosure, not only retribution for Nazi crimes against humanity but also an effort to understand how political systems can produce the complicity of perpetrators, bystanders, and even victims. If evil is banal, it can turn up anywhere, even among victims, even among Jews, even in Israel. ●