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The Origins of Totalitarianism: Introduction by Samantha Power

Hannah Arendt

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The Origins of Totalitarianism is an indispensable book for understanding the frightful barbarity of the twentieth century. Suspicious of the inevitability so often imposed by hindsight, Hannah Arendt was not interested in detailing the *causes* that produced totalitarianism. Nothing in the nineteenth century—indeed, nothing in human history—could have prepared us for the idea of political domination achieved by organizing the infinite plurality and differentiation of human beings as if all humanity were just one individual. Arendt believed that such a development marked a grotesque departure from all that had come before.

In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt sought to provide an historical account of the forces that crystallized into totalitarianism: The ebb and flow of nineteenth-century anti-Semitism (she deemed the Dreyfus Affair a dress rehearsal for the Final Solution) and he rise of European imperialism, accompanied by the invention of racism as the only possible rationalization for it. For Arendt, totalitarianism was a form of governance that eliminated the very possibility of political action. Totalitarian leaders attract both mobs and elites, take advantage of the unthinkability of their atrocities, target “objective enemies” (classes of people who are liquidated simply because of their group membership), use terror to create loyalty, rely on concentration camps, and are obsessive in their pursuit of global primacy. But even more presciently, Arendt understood that totalitarian solutions could well survive the demise of totalitarian regimes.

The Origins of Totalitarianism remains as essential a book for understanding our times as it was when it first appeared more than fifty years ago.

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