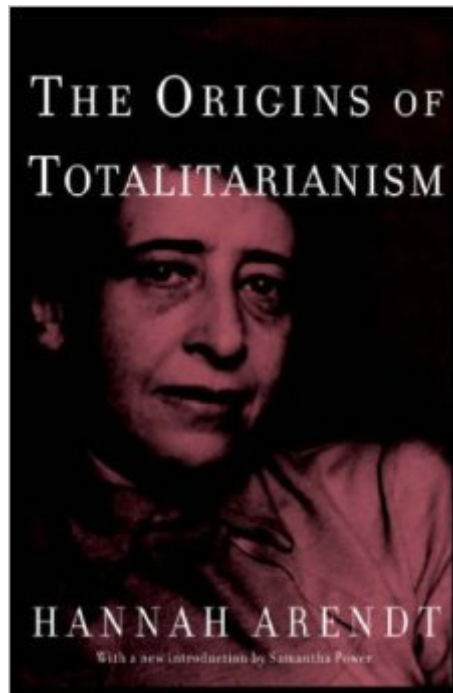


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The Origins Of Totalitarianism: Introduction By Samantha Power



Synopsis

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 the 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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Customer Reviews

Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* is a book that takes a hard look at two rival totalitarian movements in the twentieth century, Soviet Communism and Nazism, and traces their historical roots. The book is divided into three volumes focusing on Antisemitism, Imperialism, and Totalitarianism. The first of these volumes is concerned with the historical origins of Antisemitism. Arendt examines some of the ways historians have dealt with the historical roots of Antisemitism. For example, some historians have argued based on a "scapegoat theory" that the Jews were used as an innocent scapegoat for the world's ills. Arendt concludes that such approaches are flawed because they fail to take into account the full historical situation of the Jews. Arendt explores the rise of Antisemitism in the birth of the nation-state, the emancipation of the Jews, the rise of the Jewish financiers, the roles of Jews within society, and the infamous Dreyfus affair. Of particular interest here is the role of conspiracy theories concerning such individuals as Benjamin Disraeli or the infamous forgery *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. The idea that the Jews constitute a race or are members of secret societies or clubs played an important role in the historical development of Antisemitism. The second of the volumes in this book is concerned with the rise of Imperialism. Here, a discussion of racism and racial thinking is examined involving such racial theorists as Count Arthur de Gobineau and various forms of Social Darwinism. The role of the Boers in South Africa is looked at and a thorough examination of the lives of such individuals as Cecil Rhodes, who called for the creation of a secret society of aristocratic Nordic elite, is made.

Over half a century after its original publication, *"The Origins of Totalitarianism"* is still the most important treatise on totalitarianism in government. Arendt's book is also just as relevant and important today as it was in the mid-20th Century. The book is divided into three main sections: Antisemitism, Imperialism, and Totalitarianism. In the first section, Arendt tracks the rise of antisemitism in Europe, looking mainly at 19th Century events and situations that aided the spread of this phenomenon through European culture. The Dreyfus Affair, which sharply divided France and ultimately became a political battle between antisemites and their opponents at the end of the 19th Century, gets more attention than any other event in this chapter. In the middle section on imperialism, Arendt shows how the rise and fall of the continental European imperialist movements of the 19th Century (mainly, Pan-Germanism and Pan-Slavism) helped set the stage for their 20th Century totalitarian successors. As she puts it in opening the chapter on "the Pan Movements": "Nazism and Bolshevism owe more to Pan-Germanism and Pan-Slavism (respectively) than to any other ideology or political movement. This is most evident in foreign politics, where the strategies of

Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia have followed so closely the well-known programs of conquest outlined by the pan-movements before and during the first World War that totalitarian aims have frequently been mistaken for the pursuance of some permanent German or Russian interests. While neither Hitler nor Stalin has ever acknowledged his debt to imperialism in the development of his methods of rule, neither has hesitated to admit his indebtedness to the pan-movements' ideology or to imitate their slogans.

Haannah Arendt's *THE ORIGINS OF TOTALITARIANISM* (TOT) is both a thoughtful book and a frightening view of both the background of totalitarianism as well as the practical application of this political phenomena. The reader should realize this book requires time and careful thought to appreciate the book's importance. The first section of the book deals with antisemitism which Miss Arendt argues was a cornerstone of later totalitarianism. She argues that the gradual development of mass culture and mass politics resulted in targeting and scapegoating any target minority such as Jews. She explains that antisemitism was a gradual political movement that exploded in the late 19th and especially in the 20th century. A different thesis could have been presented, but thus far this is the best one this reviewer has read. Part two of the book explains how imperialism and racism merged especially during the Age of Nationalism. Religious discord was replaced by sociological and political theories that not only extolled nation but also race and blood. This section deals with these two concepts both in Western Europe and Eastern Europe. One must remember that persecution of Jews was particularly lethal in Eastern Europe between World War I and World War II and especially during The Second World War. Part three of the book is the best section of *THE ORIGINS OF TOTALITARIANISM*. If readers have difficulty with sections one and two of this book, they owe it to themselves to at least read section three.

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