



A controversy on Moral Judgement
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Fifteen historian-reviewers in the controversy on Hannah Arendt's book *Eichmann in Jerusalem* in the US, West Germany and France, 1963-1967. A historical and a pragma-dialectical perspective

Thesis summary

Vehement debates on the Holocaust between historians, other scholars and the general public are a recurring phenomenon of the past decades. Although regarded as problematic by many, there is no agreement among historians on what precisely is problematic about these controversies; or on why they keep occurring. More importantly, for all their discussion of the phenomenon, historians rarely scrutinise their own role in these heated discussions. This study is intended as a starting point for that scrutiny.

This study looks at the participation of historians in a controversy that Holocaust historians and other Holocaust scholars regard as one of the founding debates of their discipline: the controversy on Hannah Arendt's book *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. It studies historians from three countries where this book was fervently discussed: the US, Germany and France. The timespan of these three discussions are the years 1963-1967.

The three main questions this study answers are:

- How did the Arendt-controversy develop in the US, West Germany and France?
- What is the organisation of the discussion of Arendt's book by historians?
- In their discussion, can one detect problems related to the problematic character of the Arendt-controversy?

The historiography of this controversy raises more questions than it answers. In addition, the controversy has been such a popular topic of discussion that a body of what one might call controversy lore has come into being, with quite dominant misconceptions on the development of the discussion and the positions of its participants. Finally, Arendt's book is still controversial, and misrepresentations of her positions persist to this day. Before it turns to the role of historians in this controversy therefore, chapters 2 and 3 of this study first address those misrepresentations of Arendt's positions; address the misconceptions of controversy lore; and fill gaps in the historiography of the controversy.

Chapter 2 comprises a detailed survey of the controversial issues in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. It answers the questions:

- In detail, what were the controversial issues in Arendt's book?
- How are Arendt's controversial standpoints and arguments related in the larger context of the book?

Chapter 3 is a detailed historical analysis of the controversy. Chapter 3 focuses on:

- The controversy's chronological development: how the content and the atmosphere of the debate evolved over time
- The content of the controversy: which issues were often discussed, what arguments were often used
- The power play in the controversy between Arendt and her opponents
- The problematic aspects of the discussion

After painting this detailed background, this study turns to the examination of the participation of fifteen historian-reviewers in the Arendt-controversy. For this examination, this study uses the pragma-dialectical theory and method of argumentation. Discussions of Holocaust controversies are abundant among historians, but they are not very systematic. This study therefore attempts a more systematic analysis and evaluation of these fifteen contributions to the debate.

Chapter 4 is a brief, general introduction to pragma-dialectical theory, explaining its basic tenets and how it is applied in this study. In chapters 5 and 6, parts of the results of this analysis and evaluation are presented. From the existing historiography, it is hard to tell which differences of opinion precisely were at the root of the Arendt-controversy – different historians give different answers. Chapter 5 therefore presents the organisation of the reviewers' discussion of Arendt's book, on the basis of the overviews of the (reconstructed) argumentation structures of each of the reviews. Chapter 5 answers the questions:

- Which standpoints and arguments of Arendt's do the fifteen historian-reviewers respond to?
- What are their differences of opinion with Arendt on the three controversial themes?
- Which arguments for and against Arendt's positions recur between the fifteen reviews?

Chapter 6 presents fragments of the pragma-dialectical analyses and evaluations of the individual reviews. It identifies procedural problems in the historians' discussion of Arendt's book, and also discusses how some participants attempt to counteract these problems. Chapter 6 answers the questions:

- Are there procedural problems in the fifteen reviews that can be related to the problematic character of the discussion?
- How do discussants attempt to counteract problems in the discussion?

Chapter 7 finally ties together the results of the general historical analysis of the Arendt-controversy and the specific pragma-dialectical analyses and evaluations of the contributions of fifteen historians to this discussion. It discusses the three main procedural problems that it has identified in these historians' discussion of Arendt's book. It also presents three important starting points for the historiography of the Arendt-controversy, on the basis of these research results.