

*Philosophy of Holocaust*

# Philosophy of Holocaust

Fazel Gheybi

*English Translation by Payman Akhlaghi*

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Philosophers of the past spoke in a language too complicated for most people to understand. Perhaps, it was for this reason, that the ancient Greeks saved a place for the philosophers next to gods on Mount Olympus. In recent times, however, the definition of philosophy, and our expectations thereof, have undergone a

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change, as more individuals widely identified as philosophers appear in print and on TV screens to talk about ordinary issues of daily life, from the challenges of democracy, to the raising of children, or the role of the Internet.

This phenomenon, that has emerged quietly, is a significant turn in the history of humankind. Though in line with actualizing Plato's dream, who said that humanity would not attain happiness unless either philosophers ruled the world, or the rulers turn to philosophy. Although the increasing involvement of some of the swiftest minds and most informed intellects in solving an array of humanity's minor and major problems has been limited, it has helped many of humankind's oldest desires to come to fruition at an astonishing rate, over the mere span of two or three decades.

This has raised hopes that after the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when heinous crimes and most horrifying massacres were carried

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out under the reign of infernal regimes, it will become possible in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to realize humankind's long-standing longing for liberty, democracy and welfare for all.

Such optimism stems from the fact that progressive humanity today has no doubt that prosperity may never be achieved without democracy and freedom, and that conflicts of any kind, whether racial, religious or class-related, would be impediments to progress. We can no more find an intellectual person of a sound mind who would defend Fascism, Communism, or Imperialism, as the road to happiness. Humanity has come a long way since half a century ago, when Hannah Arendt described these ideologies as "The Three Pillars of Hell" [1].

Could this spring time of freedom, this harbinger of a heaven before us, be in some way the outcome of the hell through which humanity suffered during

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the 20<sup>th</sup> century? Sadly, the answer is affirmative.

On the other hand, would it be any exaggeration to say that the three aforementioned regimes were "hellish"? After all, did not hundreds of millions of the supporters of fascistie and communist regimes, believe, on the contrary, that these regimes were the fulfillment of heaven on earth; and worship their leaders like gods?

Only after the collapse of these systems did everyone realize that Fascism, Stalinism, Pol Potism, etc., [2], were not only lethal for non-conformist thinkers, but also they were preparing a true hell for the world's entire population. And, before they were shattered, they had managed to sacrifice millions of lives for the sake of their ideologies. In a way, they fulfilled Dostoevsky's prophecy: "If God is not there, everything is permitted."

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It was after the defeat of Nazism that the gates of the death camps, the gas chambers, and the human furnaces were opened and the world came to realize that the Holocaust had been a much darker and more miserable experience than the hell of religious scriptures, or Dante's *Inferno*. At least the punishment in hell is in proportion to the committed sin,—while throughout the Holocaust, it was innocents - young and old, man and woman, adult and child - who were indifferently tortured and murdered. The spectacle of the previously unimaginable crime and cruelty of the Holocaust showed the world how 'man can be a wolf to man'. Oh, let us not defame the wolf! These criminals did not consider the murder of millions of women and men, young and old, to be a crime, but, on the contrary they deemed it a requirement for progress.

[3]

Not only did they not have a feeling of regret for these massacres, but

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with shocking calm, they took pride in the order and discipline which had enabled them to carry forward such a cause, in a short period of time, while engaged in the war.

Both before and after the Holocaust, millions of innocent lives were lost in Gulags, in Cambodian death camps, in China and in African civil wars. But what made the Holocaust a unparalleled tragedy in the history of humankind, was the annihilation of half of the 12 million, the fact that the Nazis had confiscated the wealth and properties of the Jews years before, and because Hitler's regime, engaged in war with the Soviet Union, had to bear heavy expense for the transport and annihilation of millions of Jews from all over Europe. This meant that at times, they had to divert even military trains otherwise reserved for carrying soldiers to the frontiers, for this purpose.

There can be no dispute over how many millions of Jews were murdered

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and destroyed, or whether the murderers participated in these crimes out of blind obedience, a foolish sense of duty, or even under duress. The important thing is that in one of the most developed countries of the world, with a people endowed with a rich culture, who like to think of their country as "the land of poets and philosophers", one group of people, without any benefit, brought annihilation upon another group. Such a scenario drove Hannah Arendt to write:

"It really was as if the abyss had opened. Before that, the assumption was that we could compensate for the crime and restore justice. But not this time. This should have never happened and we will always be engaged with this drama." [4]

Hannah Arendt is the first philosopher to research this subject, and to speak about the motivations of the murderers who, in cold blood, sent millions to the gas chambers. She



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noticed that these crimes had been carried out by a new type of criminals, in a pattern of behavior unprecedented throughout history. These criminals, whose crimes would render us stunned and speechless, as she put it, should be called "bureaucratic criminals." Not only did they not suffer from psychological pathologies, but they lacked the common incentives of ordinary criminals, such as hatred, greed, the desire for fame, or even vengeance. [5]

Hence, Arendt referred to them as "criminals without a motive." [6] They are infinitely more dangerous than the ordinary criminals, to the extent that there is no provision in the criminal law for appropriate punishments for their kind. That is because they basically have no feeling of regret for their crimes, which would enable them to be re-educated. The world hasn't forgotten Eichmann in the Jerusalem courthouse, when he stated

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that he felt no remorse over his crimes, because he considers a feeling of remorse as a childish feeling. [7]

Thus Arendt wrote, "A radical evil is one which should not have happened, and, once having happened it is impossible to reconcile with. It is a destiny that one cannot be reconciled to and cannot be aside with silence. It is a crime that no one is able to accept responsibility for because its consequences are not predictable and there can be no punishment to fit it [8]

Evil takes roots in an individual when he evades responsibility, and this becomes possible when his relationship with his social environment is disturbed. To give meaning to his life, an irresponsible person becomes dependent on an ideology, crawls under the umbrella of a despot, and believes in a necessity which basically has no relation to his life. Anti-Semitism had turned into a "necessity" for the Nazis, because it

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gave meaning to their lives. They had been indoctrinated with the idea that Jews were the biggest obstacle on Germany's road to progress, and their 'final solution' was the only way by which the country could achieve the position it deserved in the world.

Hannah Arendt demonstrates that anti-Semitic sentiments, strong as they were, could not have led in and by themselves—to such crimes, and that the establishment of the gas chambers became possible only after the Nazi propaganda was perceived as an unavoidable necessity. Hence, no voice of protest rose anywhere in the German society.

Some have claimed that Hitler's regime, the Holocaust in particular, was an "operating accident" in human history. But a look at the socio-cultural path of European history would suffice to show us that the Holocaust was to great extent, the unavoidable result of a certain historical trend. We know that the

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thinkers of the Enlightenment criticized religions and rejected the bases of religious belief. Most importantly, at the climax of the Enlightenment, such philosophers as Immanuel Kant demonstrated that morality did not have religious roots. Instead, it was dependent on social life that in various communities and in different times has been going through change. Therefore, European intellectuals called for reason not faith to be the guide of conscience and moral behavior.

This was a fundamental blow to religious faith, and it caused a vast stratum of 19<sup>th</sup> century Europeans, from the lower classes to the elites of society, to become alienated from religion. The assumption was that a mature human being could distinguish good from evil by relying on his or her own intellect. It is sufficient to free oneself of superstitions and religious beliefs to let reason and conscience blossom, with no need for

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any authority to rule over his/her will and behavior.

But this seemingly reasonable and logical demand was disastrous! For, while in previous eras, evil men did wrong, to a more or less extent, despite fears of punishment in an afterlife, the result of this new approach to morality was that a new wave of criminals emerged who would not shun committing any crime, because their intellect dictated the approval of their behavior!

Within the framework of this transformation, not only did anti-Judaism, which until then had seemed to have religious roots, not disappear, but instead, the way was cleared for anti-Semitism. Whereas "anti-Judaism" had been of a religious nature, the new "anti-Semitism" had a racial aspect to it. It was enforced by those who considered themselves "intellectuals" and devoid of any religious bias. During the nineteenth century, in most of Europe, anti-

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Judaism was replaced by the anti-Semitism. But in Germany, the two attitudes increasingly reinforced each other to such an extent that during 1873 to 1900 alone, more than 500 books were published on this subject.

[9]

Another factor that reinforced anti-Semitism in Germany, and which led to the Holocaust, was the anti-Judaism of some of the greatest thinkers and artists of that country. Except for one or two such as Friedrich W. Nietzsche, almost everyone, from Kant and Hegel to Martin Luther and Richard Wagner, were against Judaism. Hence, whereas the true reason behind anti-Semitism in other countries was social jealousy, and thus was rather more widely spread among the commoners than the elite, anti-Semitism in Germany had a surprising presence in the gatherings of its prominent figures, and it was viewed as a sign of German patriotism and intellectualism.

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All these factors had also been present, more or less, in other European countries. But it was the formation of a new class in 20<sup>th</sup> century Europe, which became the most important ground for establishing a regime that would annihilate millions without public protests taking place. This was the class that consisted of villagers who had flooded cities in search of work. Uprooted from their habitats, they had lost their old cultural identity, and were in need of a new identity. Thus, they were readily attracted to the kind of propaganda which promised a heaven, and which was able to replace their old religious beliefs.

In this regard, Arendt wrote, "History books describe dictators as some 'generals' who conquered lands, whereas, in fact, they all emerge from within society and respond to the urgent needs of people who have lost their ability to think and to act for themselves, and who want someone else

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do it for them; people who, instead of taking risks for freedom, accompany tyrants and oppressors, only to claim later that they had no other choice. But even in the harshest of situations, there is always a way to avoid blind following and that is - not to follow! Everyone can refer to his/her own conscience and say "I will not collaborate" and separate himself. For this reason, a person can avoid saying "we" and learn to say "I"; meaning that each individual perceives things on his/her own. Such individuals can be found among all layers of society. [10]

Ultimately, totalitarian regimes became possible because they were promising the end of the world and the opening of the gates of heaven. They asked their followers to sacrifice today for such a tomorrow, and not only allowed the use any means to attain such a tomorrow, but deemed it necessary.



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As Arendt discovered, this vast class of new city dwellers was an outcome of the Industrial Revolution and did not exist before that point in history. That was why the totalitarian regimes that were built upon this class fundamentally differed from the despots of the past. Today, such a class may also be observed in many cities across the world, from Iran to China, Venezuela and Egypt.

To understand how the Holocaust became possible, we would need to closely examine new characteristics of the Nazi regime. The Holocaust, as Arendt emphasized, became possible only through a regime which was the embodiment of hell on earth. She cautions though, that we shouldn't confuse every despotic regime with Totalitarianism. We all have some idea of the bestiality which reigned in the death camps of Nazi Germany. But German Fascism had a doppelganger, too, a comparison which could help us

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better understand what Arendt meant by "hell".

Evidently, in the years after 1938, estimated averages of about two million people were held at a time at the Stalinist Gulags. The aim of the Gulags, as opposed to the Nazi death camps, was not to annihilate the prisoners. Rather, the primary goal was to kill the human spirit within the prisoners, so that they could be put to hard work like creatures without a will. That's why Arendt refers to this system, in comparison to Nazi Germany, as the "introduction to hell". [11]

To that end, it was the common practice at these labor camps to have the political prisoners lined up every morning, to be insulted first by common prisoners consisting of murderers, thieves and the like. Next, the head of the Gulag would address the common prisoners with the following message:

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"You might have committed murder or theft, but you're still Russians, while these traitors have betrayed Russia. They are anti-revolutionaries, and our common enemies, and their crime is irredeemable. You should watch them carefully, and they have to obey you!" [12]

Repeating this scene, encouraging the common criminals to harass the political prisoners, openly stealing their daily ration was meant to destroy the human dignity and rights of the innocents on a daily basis. As Hannah Arendt has carefully described, hard labor, limited sleeping spaces, inadequate nutrition, and an utter lack of hygienic facilities, which were deliberately planned, resulted every year in the death of at least one fifth of the prisoners, until 1956, when the Gulag colonies were finally closed down.

By the end of the WWII, when the crimes of the death camps in Nazi Germany were revealed, although the

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Gulag tragedy in the communist countries were not yet known, only few believed in an idealistic future for humanity, even though not long beforehand, European intelligentsia had been busy debating how to realize on earth what religions had promised in heaven.

All the 19<sup>th</sup> century philosophers proclaimed the rule of intellect and humanity, and one after another kept giving out blueprints of an ideal world. From Hegel to Marx, from Kant to Nietzsche, Europe's pioneering intellectuals deemed human history to be on—an evolutionary path, one that had always been undergoing constant growth and progress. But now, with the savagery—displayed by humankind in the Holocaust, the idealistic palaces of the past had crumbled. The Holocaust surely went beyond the imagination of the common man, but also beyond the mental capacity of great thinkers. And it toppled the image and design of the

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future of humanity that philosophy had drawn.

The emergence of totalitarian regimes on shoulders of people with a relatively high intelligence, who were well-informed, and who appreciated the arts, demonstrated the phenomenon that a human being could easily deceive his intellect, and force his feelings to kneel before idols; to commit crimes in the service of ideologies and send millions of his species to the slaughterhouse, just to garner a minimum degree of social acceptance.

The savagery of Fascism had a shocking impact on philosophical thought, because it wiped away the long-standing belief in the progressive evolution of history.. Now the traditional wars between two countries had given way to a world war that involved tens of countries. Thus, thinkers were led to ponder the possible dimensions of a third world war. They wondered whether the result of all that enlightenment and

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philanthropic thought had to be such a downfall into the abyss of savagery.

From this point of view, the massacre of millions of people in civilized Europe, on the mere basis of ethnic associations, religious or political beliefs, color of the skin, or even a certain illness or disease, bore a frightening consequence. Faced with the immensity of these crimes, humanitarian thinkers began to ask whether the more advanced the culture and learning, the greater the expected crimes? After Jews, Communists, gypsies, blacks and Slavs, whose turn would it be next, to be sacrificed at the altar of power-thirsty dreams?

Considering this horrifying turn in human history, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer co-authors of, "Eclipse of Reason" start the book with the following sentence: "The Enlightened men tried to enable humankind to overcome their fear and in this way achieve mastery of the world, but the enlightened world has completely sunk

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into the darkness of misery. Enlightenment should have ended dogmatic belief and removed vain imaginings through science.[13]. "Our duty in this book is to respond to this question as to why (as a result of enlightenment) humankind, instead of entering a truly human era, has fallen into a kind of savagery" [14] (1947)

Horkheimer and Adorno identified a one directional dependence on reason as a cause for humanity's darkness. They justly deemed the Holocaust as a departure from civilized behavior, and a halt in the developmental history of human evolution. Furthermore, they were so disillusioned with emotion, as well as thought, that Adorno wrote, "To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. After the gas chambers philosophy has no meaning." [15]

Fortunately, soon after, most mid-twentieth century philosophers, instead of drowning in the hopelessness and stagnation of

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despair, placed an exalted aim before humanity, which could be described as follows:

**Auschwitz must not be repeated again!**

Adorno wrote that the disaster of Auschwitz was not imaginable at the heart of "civilized Europe"; yet it did take place. Thus, not only can we not deny the possibility that it could be repeated if effective measures are not considered, we must also acknowledge that it will surely be repeated. He wrote:

"It happened, and it could happen again. That's our main point." [16]

Elsewhere, he declared:

"Hitler caused humanity to add another command to the 10 commandments;. Thou shalt act as such that Auschwitz may never and nowhere be repeated!" [17]

At Auschwitz, the largest number of victims were Jews. But Gypsies,



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Communists and handicapped people, were [also] annihilated with the same cruelty. Adorno warns that in the future, genocide could aim at a different target, as it had done in the past, when at the height of WWI, more than two million Armenians, Assyrians and Greeks were massacred in genocides carried out by the Young Turks in the Turkish Ottoman Empire.

Genocide is especially cruel, in that the victims don't have the slightest possibility to either defend themselves or have their cries heard by the world. That was why Adorno called for the implementation of fundamental and unprecedented measures to prevent another Holocaust. Those would include striving to raise a new race of human beings from the early days of childhood. He wrote,

"The first thing to consider in education is that Auschwitz must not be repeated." [18]

Hence, he urges education to be based on two main pillars; one of

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which is independent thinking and the other is an expression of a feeling that goes beyond mere "sympathy". Ancient Greeks called this feeling "**empathy**", and we might explain it as being able to place ourselves in another person's shoes. Empathy leads to closeness and kindness, because it endows us with a sense of security. Through empathy, a human being also becomes aware of his/her own feelings

"Education after Auschwitz must be based on de-barbarization of human beings. The barbarism that was demonstrated in Auschwitz is the result of the lack of human love and warmth; it is coldness, the inability to understand the suffering of others. The inability, to place oneself in another person's condition and in different situations. In other words: Barbarism is the inability to empathize." [19]

Another factor in this situation is that to the same extent that a lack of cultural roots in industrial societies

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provides the grounds for the rise of totalitarian ideologies, an authoritarian education that could effectively produce Neo-Nazis

We should also emphasize another fundamental point. The critique of absolute rationalism, as put forward by the philosophers of the second half of the twentieth century, was not meant as a denial of the importance of reason. On the contrary, Adorno and others stated the progress of humanity towards adulthood should be based on two foundations: **Critical Thinking** and **Human Empathy**.

The power of reason prevents the emergence of violent and aggressive behavior, even as it keeps out "thoughtlessness". Thoughtlessness, recalling what Arendt demonstrated in the case of Eichmann, opens the space to crimes. As Adorno wrote;

"One who thinks wouldn't get violent." [20]

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When Adorno's hopes are fulfilled, the enlightenment era in Europe would have a befitting future and human endeavour in building a foundation for modern societies, based on love for humanity, would come to fruition. But arriving at philanthropic intellectualism is no simple task, either for an individual, or for societies that have a mediaeval nature and are at that stage of growth. Adorno calls this period the stage of adolescence and expresses that the growth to adulthood (maturity), both in human and societies is very critical and painful. He writes:

"To attain maturity and responsible behavior, humankind has to pass through a frightening stage. Every child experiences this stage at the time of adolescence. He/she must tolerate deep injuries until he will be able to attain the characteristics of adulthood." [21]

In Arendt's view, the Holocaust from the social and political aspect also

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showed us that no God determines human history. It is humankind who could make society a great place, in which to live a worthwhile life, or make a hell out of it.

He said, a person may keep his body healthy by proper nutrition and exercise, and lead an effective, useful life; or on the contrary, he may mistreat it badly, say, by abusing drugs. Likewise, humankind could improve its environment; or—could do the opposite, and allow evil and savagery into the arena. Therefore, whether the human society follows a path of progressive evolution, or of downfall, it is a choice within the reach of humankind's free will and capabilities.

Indeed, if we look back at the road we have traveled ever since the Holocaust, the farther we have come from it, the better we can appreciate the larger historic significance of that blind genocide and unparalleled bestiality. The Holocaust was a shock

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that allowed humanity to repair the moral rift which had been caused by the Enlightenment some two centuries earlier. In a sense, the Holocaust was a turning point of the era of humanity's adulthood. The human being, who by denying the story of creation, and rejecting his ancient beliefs, had immersed himself into a deep crisis, henceforth became aware shed empty ideals, and began to think realistically about building his society on a foundation that was so solid and good that the repetition of such a disaster would be prevented. He began to ponder how to end racial, religious and class differences, and how to secure democracy in order to change human society, in every way, into a fitting place worthy of a happy prosperous life.

A glance through the countries that are still passing through the painful stage of adolescence show us clearly that there is no short cut from mediaeval conditions to democracy and

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modernism. Enlightenment was a significant, epoch-making period, during which European societies, guided by their pioneering minds, stepped onto a dangerous, slippery road. At the outset of the journey, they couldn't have even hoped for a happy ending. They set out on this path bravely, and they could never have imagined that rejecting ancient beliefs would place humanity at the edge of a cliff, nor that it would lead to a road at the end of which the perpetrators of the Holocaust would descend into the abyss of savagery.

Those thinkers, who learned responsibly from the experiences of the century that had led to the Holocaust, managed to place an ending period to humanity's intellectual and ethical crisis, as they indelibly established certain values in civilized societies. That the life of an individual human being is sacred, and it ought not to be ever sacrificed for other sanctities, regardless of

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any justification. That individual and social violence, in all forms and to any end, is wrong. That democracy and human liberties are not[only] privileges or gifts of providence, but rather, they are among the undeniable rights of every human being, whatever his or her ethnic, national, class or religious origins.

Before the Holocaust, these values had only had played a role in the mirror of human aspirations] but it was after the Holocaust that a large group of people in advanced societies made serious efforts to bring them about. Indeed, we may dare claim, that as an outcome of such efforts, the possibility of a war between members of the European Union does no longer exist.

We can take pride in the fact that human beings in the East and the West were able to peacefully dismantle the Communist system, which had become the largest and the most heavily armed empire in history, and to give a new



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light to the dawn of spreading democracy. In South Africa, following much bloodshed, it became possible to wisely let go of contempt and hatred, and step toward mass reconciliation. The starting point of such indelible achievements was the shock that civilized humanity received from the Holocaust.

And finally, Hegel was the first philosopher of the modern period who tried to find logic behind historical changes, and as such, developed a philosophy of history. He said that if we see the God's fingerprint in creation's phenomena, why don't we consider that God's will is operating in human being and his/her deeds? And if we do that, we should then accept that history is driven by a divine will.

In some people's view the crimes of the Holocaust were so colossal, and the innocence of its victims so immense, that it was as if God had forgotten them. But if Hegel could

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have seen the history of positive transformations over the half century since the Holocaust, perhaps he would have concluded that it was God who willed to create a turning point in the history of human kind by the Holocaust and its victims!

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- [1] Hannah Arendt, *For love of the World*, Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, 2. Edition, 2004, Yale University Press, s.200
- [2] The „Stone Age communism“ under Pol Pot in Cambodscha (1975-79), under which one third of the six million citizen died.
- [3] Arendt, Hannah. "Total Domination" A World of Ideas: Essential Readings for College Writers. 7th ed. New York: Bedford/St. Martins, 2006. S.88
- [4] TV interview with Günter Gaus, 1964
- [5] Hannah Arendt in a radio interview with Joachim Fest, 1964.
- [6]>[5]
- [7]>[5]
- [8] „Book of Thoughts“, *Denktagebuch*. 1950-1973, Piper Verlag, 2002, Bd.1, S. 7.
- [9] The Vidal Sassoon International Center for the Study of Anti-Semitism: „Judenfrage“
- [10]>[5]
- [11] Arendt, Hannah, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Subject: Totalitarianism; Imperialism; Antisemitism, Cleveland, World Pub. Co., 1958, S.669
- [12] Achim Kilian, *Die Häftlinge in den sowjetischen Speziallagern der Jahre 1945-1950*. S.13
- [13] M. Horkheimer, Th. Adorno: *ECLIPSE OF REASON*. New York, Oxford University Press, 1947
- [14] Ibid.

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[15] Holocaust, Erziehung und Unterricht, Prof. Dr. Ido Abram; Amsterdam. 1988

[16] Ibid.

[17] Adorno, Theodor, Negative Dialektik, Original text is copyright © 1997 by Suhrkamp Verlag. English translation 2001 Dennis Redmond, s.358

[18]>[15]

[19]>[15]

[20] The report by the joint TV of Germany and France, October 18<sup>th</sup>, 1999, honoring the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Adorno's passing.

[21] >[13] S. 56.

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Dedicated to Shirindokht  
Daghighian  
for Her Valuable Philosophical  
Works

این متن را تقدیم می‌کنم به  
شیرین‌دخت دقیقیان  
به سپاس از آثار فلسفی ارزشمند او

*Philosophy of Holocaust*

Some contemporary Philosophers (pictured on the cover):

**Hannah Arendt (1906-1975)**

**Walter Benjamin (1892-1940)**

**Max Horkheimer (1895-1973)**

**Georg Lukács (1885-1971)**

**Simone Veil (1927)**

**Herbert Marcuse (1898-1979)**

**Jacques Derrida (1930-2004)**

**Erich Fromm (1900-1980)**

**Leo Strauss (1899-1973)**

**Theodor W. Adorno (1903-1969)**

**Hilary Whitehall Putnam (1926)**

**Thomas Nagel (1937)**

**Hans Reichenbach (1891-1953)**

**Emil Ludwig Fackenheim (1916-2003)**

**Ernst Bloch (1885-1977)**

**Karl Raimund Popper (1902-1994)**

**Ayn Rand (1905-1982)**

**Avram Noam Chomsky (1928)**

**Emmanuel Levinas (1905-1996)**

**Margarete Susman (1872-1966)**