

What Hannah Arendt saw in Hitler's Germany, we can see in Trump's America



Author and philosopher Hannah Arendt was a Jewish survivor and chronicler of Nazi totalitarianism. (Bettmann Archive)



By Jackie Calmes
Columnist | [✕ Follow](#)

April 10, 2025 3 AM PT

As a descendant of German immigrants, from college on I devoured histories of the rise of fascism to grasp how the cultured and educated democracy of my great

grandparents could succumb so tragically. I never got it; I had an American's complacency that made Germans' complicity incomprehensible. Decades later, I do understand. Because it is happening here.

Comparing Hitler and the Nazis to Donald Trump and his MAGA movement is of course fraught. Trump's world war is a bloodless one over trade; his lawless roundups of migrants and domestic enemies aim to deport, not exterminate.

And yet the parallels are undeniable. That was dramatically clear this week when I participated in [a preview and discussion](#) of a documentary on the life of German American Hannah Arendt, the Jewish survivor and chronicler of Nazi totalitarianism. (The film, "Hannah Arendt: Facing Tyranny," will air on PBS on June 27.)

"The beginnings of her thinking run in direct parallel to the rise of Adolf Hitler," historian Lyndsey Stonebridge says in the film. Arendt's writings after she fled Germany in 1933 stand as a warning to her adopted country. At the end of her life, in President Nixon's time, she argued that in the United States "the greatest danger of tyranny is of course from the executive."

But her legacy is also a positive call to individual action and personal responsibility. She'd have applauded last weekend's anti-Trump protests by millions nationwide.

Her accounts of the factors behind Hitler's takeover are chillingly resonant. After World War I, a defeated Germany's populace felt economically cheated, alienated, distrustful of institutions — government, media, academia, business, political parties. Many Americans have similar, long-simmering grievances in the wake of globalization, Mideast wars, a worldwide financial collapse, pandemic and political polarization.

Along comes an amoral self-styled strongman who harnesses that unrest by employing lies and conspiracy theories. For Hitler, the enemies of the state were

actual communists and Jews; Trump's targets are purported communists — Democrats — and (in echoes of Hitler) “[vermin](#)” immigrants “[poisoning the blood of our country.](#)” In Arendt's account, totalitarianism arises when a political party, which typically restrains extremists in its midst, is replaced by a mass movement beholden to such a leader.

In the film, Roger Berkowitz, founder and director of the Hannah Arendt Center for Politics and the Humanities, notes that Hitler claimed to represent a majority but he did not. Sound familiar? Still, as Berkowitz explains, his coherent narrative of past grievance and future greatness persuaded many. He especially drew support from Germany's less educated and previously apathetic working class. Arendt theorized that Hitler gave people “the impression that they're not alone anymore,” that “they are part of something really big,” as German studies professor Barbara Hahn puts it in the film.

We know the phenomenon.

In Arendt's first major book, “The Origins of Totalitarianism,” she wrote, “The ideal subject was not the convinced Nazi but the people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction no longer existed. A most cherished virtue is loyalty to the leader.”

Just like this country's Republican Old Guard, Germany's conservative establishment initially thought it could control Hitler, so politicians and business leaders didn't ostracize or condemn him. But he played them, just as Trump has mastered Republican “leaders,” parlaying his popular appeal and political ruthlessness into total power.

Unchecked, Hitler quickly broke laws and the institutions he'd long attacked. Too familiar. Trump [wrote](#) on X last month: “He who saves his Country does not violate any Law.”

In “Origins,” Arendt held that “totalitarianism replaces all first-rate talent with

crackpots and fools, whose lack of intelligence and creativity is still the best guarantee of their loyalty.” The seasoned advisors who acted as guardrails in Trump 1.0 are gone, replaced in Trump 2.0 with inexperienced suck-ups, [conspiracists and fellow avengers](#) and [economic dopes](#): a whole Cabinet of crackpots. So it is that his national security team would get caught last month [discussing military plans](#) on an unsecure commercial channel (a violation of federal law), with a journalist inadvertently included.

With the connivance of the crackpots, Trump seeks to replace the rule of law with rule by man. Less than three months in, we are [seeing abductions](#) of legal residents by unidentified, masked agents and [deportations](#) without due process. “We don’t give our names,” a plainclothes man told the very-pregnant wife of Columbia graduate student Mahmoud Khalil during his March 8 arrest. The administration is revoking visas without notice or legal cause, with Secretary of State Marco Rubio boasting, “We’re looking every day for these lunatics” — meaning those whose speech and political thought don’t align with Trump’s.

Congress, with a Republican majority, is ceding its constitutional power, especially over federal spending and tariffs. Trump is curtailing media access to the White House. He has targeted universities, law firms and cultural institutions with punitive executive orders, and many have caved.

Federal judges are providing [some pushback](#) but coming under attack from the president and obeisant party leaders. “We can eliminate an entire district court,” House Speaker Mike Johnson [told](#) reporters last month. Meanwhile, the administration has [disregarded some judicial orders](#), and the conservative Supreme Court so far has mostly [shied away from a showdown](#).

What to do? That’s the question Arendt posed in her time.

“One of her main intellectual contributions was to renew the category of political action in response,” said Arendt scholar Ian Rhoad, who also participated in the documentary preview at American University.

After Hitler's 1933 power grab, "I felt responsibility," Arendt later told an interviewer. "I was no longer of the opinion that one can simply be a bystander." She harbored targeted Germans in her Berlin apartment and cataloged antisemitic acts for the record — until her own arrest and, ultimately, escape.

In a last speech before her death in 1975, Arendt warned that totalitarian governments try to rewrite or bury history to suit them. Americans must resist, she said, "for it was the greatness of this republic to give due account, for the sake of freedom, to the best in man and to the worst."

Now that's how to make America great again.

Jackie Calmes

Jackie Calmes is an opinion..... columnist for the Los Angeles Times in Washington, D.C.