

HANNAH ARENDT'S AMERICAN EDUCATION

The writer's political ideal—citizens appearing before one another as equals, engaging in dialogue and debate—had a counterpart in her spirited gatherings on the Upper West Side.

By David Denby

August 10, 2026



By all accounts, Arendt was formidable, funny, sociable, and even flirtatious. Men like Dwight Macdonald and Randall Jarrell were drawn to her. Mary McCarthy became her closest American friend. Photograph from Hannah Arendt Bluecher Literary Trust / Art Resource



Save this story



Listen • 31 minutes

Hannah Arendt arrived in New York in May, 1941, stateless, broke, and far from fluent in English. A German Jew exiled first from Germany and then from France, she had crossed the Atlantic on a Portuguese refugee ship with her husband, Heinrich Blücher, a working-class former Communist street fighter and largely self-taught intellectual. She was thirty-four and he was forty-two. They had individually fled Germany after the Nazi seizure of power; they met in France in 1936, married four years later, and were soon interned in separate French camps. Both got out, and, with American help, obtained visas and made their way to Lisbon, where they waited for some months to set sail. Among Arendt's few possessions was a manuscript Walter Benjamin had given her of his "Theses on the Philosophy of History."

Arendt, Blücher, and Arendt's mother—who joined them a month later—initially occupied two small rooms off Riverside Drive, on West Ninety-fifth Street, in what amounted to a wartime boarding house. They had no kitchen of their own. For the next thirty-four years, apart from a period on Morningside Drive, Arendt lived in apartments between Ninety-fifth and 110th Streets, on the Upper West Side. Broadway, the neighborhood's grand boulevard, was lined with beauty salons, dry cleaners, shoe-repair stalls, and single-room-occupancy hotels. She travelled regularly but always returned to this patch of Manhattan. It was a good place to work. There was nothing else to do there.

Blücher, who eventually became a popular philosophy lecturer at Bard College, got a job shovelling chemicals in a New Jersey factory. His wife found her footing more swiftly. Within six months, she was writing a political column for the German-language Jewish weekly *Aufbau* ("Reconstruction"); her first installment endorsed the idea of an international Jewish army that could fight the Nazis. After the war, she spent two years as a senior editor at Schocken, where she prepared an edition of Kafka's diaries. Her decisive American experience, however, was social. She befriended some of New York's most literate people: Alfred Kazin, who knew his way around publishing and journalism and became devoted to her; the irrepressibly witty Randall Jarrell, who loved literature as a naturalist loves trees and read poetry to her for hours; and the hard-drinking, hard-arguing circle around *Partisan Review*, including Dwight Macdonald, with whom she later worked on plans for a new political journal. By all accounts, she was formidable, yet funny, sociable, even flirtatious. Men were drawn to her. Mary McCarthy later became her closest American friend.

As a young woman, Arendt had received the most advanced philosophical training then available in Germany. The writing of her twenties was exalted and often unfathomable to nonspecialists: heavy clouds drifting in ether, though capable of flashes of lightning. In New York, she increasingly wrote in English, relying on friends such as Jarrell to polish her prose; she also wrote some pieces in German and sometimes translated them herself. She was the real thing, a product of the classical humanism of German *Bildung*, with a sardonic sense of humor and a streak of defiance and perversity. She had little use for organized religion and disdained psychoanalysis. Among the New York intellectuals, she became a moral center, a Cassandra who was believed, at least about the dangers of modern politics. On her side, the gain was incalculable. Her American friends and editors enabled her transformation from a displaced intellectual to a world-famous writer.

Arendt's obsession in New York was the destruction of the European world she had left. National Socialism had murdered the Jews and laid waste to German civilization; Stalinism had regimented Soviet life through purges and camps. Several extraordinary Jewish writers had killed themselves during the war, among them Walter Benjamin and Stefan Zweig. In *Menorah Journal*, Arendt reviewed Zweig's fluently nostalgic memoir, "The World of Yesterday," with a mixture of sympathy and contempt: he had been blind to the reality around him and then victimized by it.

She did not publicly mourn her exile; self-dramatization could slip into bathos. The pressing matter was what she could do. The wartime mood among European and American intellectuals was hopeless, or, rather, in her estimation, helpless. "To yield to the mere process of disintegration has become an irresistible temptation, not only because it has assumed the spurious grandeur of 'historical necessity,' but also because everything outside it has begun to appear lifeless, bloodless, meaningless, and unreal." She would inject life, blood, and meaning into the discussion. In 1946, recalling Benjamin's death in the terrible year of 1940, she wrote to a friend, "In our time you have to hate murder a lot to escape the seductive power of suicide."

By the mid-nineteen-forties, she had begun analyzing the catastrophes that overtook Germany and the Soviet Union. Totalitarianism, she believed, broke completely with the political orders of the past. Traditional morality, the "rights of man," and the classical categories of democracy and autocracy—all this was beside the point for regimes whose leaders recognized no limits. The revolutions created by Nazi and Stalinist ideology, and enforced by terror, aimed to change reality itself.

Arendt wrote her book in pieces, much of it at a tiny desk wedged into a corner of her cramped West Ninety-fifth Street apartment. She published portions in magazines, including *Partisan Review*, and then assembled the work into three

sections—on antisemitism, imperialism, and totalitarianism. “The Origins of Totalitarianism,” as it was finally called, was thrillingly difficult, wide-ranging, and allusive—an amalgam of history, cultural criticism, and political theory. In writing it, Arendt had learned a great deal about the rhythm and weight of the English periodic sentence, and she used it to devastating effect. The final pages offered a physical and philosophical account of the concentration camps that was as disturbing in its implications as the newsreels shown in theatres at the war’s end. The camps destroyed the bodies and spirits of their inmates before murdering them; entire populations could be rendered superfluous through bureaucratized terror. “Origins” was completed in 1949, published in 1951, and soon regarded as a modern classic of political theory. It left readers with an uneasy question: Could a healthy politics flourish in an age suffused with mass propaganda and the adoration of dictators?

Kazin visited Arendt and Blücher in their second New York apartment, a “dark shadowy” place overlooking Morningside Park. A boarder was living with them. (Kazin heard the toilet flush.) In a memoir, he recalled Arendt entertaining friends in European style, serving “candies, candied fruits, cookies, ‘porto.’ ” Husband, wife, and guests plunged into furious arguments about the great thinkers. “Marx-Plato-Hegel-Heidegger-Kant-Kafka-Jaspers!” was Kazin’s wry encapsulation. More or less intact, Arendt and Blücher had landed. Her European mind was refined and eased into English. She benefitted from the American hunger for European culture. After “The Origins of Totalitarianism” got her on the cover of *The Saturday Review of Literature*, in 1951, she sent a letter to a German friend: “Did I write to you that a week ago I became a ‘cover girl’ and had to look at myself on all the newsstands?”

Beginning in 1949, Arendt returned repeatedly to Germany, but, in . . . an extraordinary 1964 interview on German TV, she said that she thought of herself not as a German but as a Jew. The young interviewer, Günter Gaus, asked what remained of Europe for her, and she answered,

“What remains is the language. . . . It is not the German language that went mad.” She could not be exiled from the poetry and prose of Goethe and Lessing, or from modern writers like Brecht, Benjamin, and Hermann Broch.

The not so hidden intent of a new German biography, Thomas Meyer’s “Hannah Arendt: A Life of the Mind” (Penguin Press; translated by Shelley Frisch), is to reclaim her as a German woman, writer, thinker, and publishing and academic phenomenon, not just an American one. Meyer, who teaches philosophy at the University of Munich and is a widely published writer, has assembled an enormous amount of information about Arendt’s family, education, German publishing career, and postwar celebrity. Arendt comes most fully alive, though, when Meyer lets her own extravagant, commanding voice carry the story forward.

“For me the question was somehow: Either I study philosophy or I drown myself,” Arendt said once, recalling herself at fourteen. The claim is believable. Growing up in Königsberg, the city of Kant, she always feared failing to understand something. Kant’s works stood in the library at home, and she read them in search of relief. At Königin-Luise-Schule, she studied Latin, Greek, and French but left before graduating. She later said that after a teacher had offended her—was it an antisemitic remark?—she led her classmates in boycotting the teacher’s classes, and was expelled. Still, in 1924 she enrolled at the University of Marburg, where students were flocking to Martin Heidegger’s lectures.

Heidegger was building on, and breaking with, his teacher Edmund Husserl, in an audacious attempt to push aside the customary problems of academic philosophy and return to “things themselves,” to existence as it is actually lived. Heidegger described human existence as *Dasein*, literally “being there.” We find ourselves thrust into a world already under way, surrounded by objects and people, carried irreversibly through time toward death. The danger was

surrendering to convention and commonplace opinion, becoming what others expected. “Everyone is the other, and no one is himself,” Heidegger wrote. Authentic existence required confronting one’s own death without evasion. Arendt, evidently depressed and convinced of life’s meaninglessness, found his teaching electrifying. He dug into Plato and other classical texts and pulled out vital new meanings. As she later wrote, “Heidegger never thinks ‘about’ something; he thinks something.”

He was thirty-five, married, and the father of two sons, a handsome man with a trim, slightly curled mustache and a piercing stare. Arendt was eighteen, with a gently molded chin and beautiful, yearning eyes. They began an affair. His letters to her were moony in a traditional German style. “The demonic has seized me,” he wrote. “The still, prayerlike folding of your loving hands and your gleaming forehead guarded it through womanly transfiguration.” (Heidegger could have written librettos for Wagner.) In a confessional sketch that she had written for Heidegger, she expressed an “unbending devotion to a single one.” Nevertheless, with Heidegger’s tender encouragement—had his wife become suspicious?—Arendt left Marburg for Heidelberg, where she wrote a dissertation on St. Augustine under Karl Jaspers. She continued meeting Heidegger during trips he made for another two years.

After completing her dissertation, she married a man she had met in one of Heidegger’s seminars in Marburg, Günther Stern, later known as Günther Anders. Her life had moved on, but her estimate of Heidegger had not: she never denied his intellectual power. In 1933, however, when Heidegger became rector of the University of Freiburg, he delivered a preposterous speech celebrating the new regime. Arendt was appalled by his embrace of the Hitler movement. When she later recalled the Nazi seizure of power, she said that the behavior of ordinary Germans had surprised her less than the “*fantastische*” ideas with which intellectuals greeted Hitler. Heidegger, the philosopher of authenticity and independent thought, had become one of them, surrendering

to vicious political cant.

Arendt left intellectual life to work directly for endangered Jews. Asked by a Zionist organization to document antisemitism in the records of clubs, professional associations, and the like, she began gathering evidence in the Prussian State Library. The police arrested her and held her for perhaps a week, after which she was mysteriously released. Decades later, she told Gaus that she had trusted the officer because “he had such an open, decent face.” A fiction? The playwright Jenny Lyn Bader accepts the challenge in her “Mrs. Stern Wanders the Prussian State Library,” which is being revived Off Broadway on September 12th. She creates an Arendt who flirts and reasons her way to the officer’s better nature. Whatever happened, Arendt didn’t linger. By October, 1933, she was in Paris.

There, she rejoined Stern, though their marriage had ended in all but name; they finally separated when he left for New York, in 1936. Arendt worked for Youth Aliyah, which sent Jewish refugee teen-agers, largely unemployable in France, to kibbutzim in Palestine. Many were in poor health. Arendt helped organize a camp outside Paris where the teen-agers were fed, restored to health, and taught agricultural and language skills. It was the closest she came to parenthood. According to Meyer, she helped save a hundred and twenty young people but did not speak publicly about the work until her conversation with Gaus decades later. Meyer reconstructs the bureaucratic and financial machinery behind the rescues, one of his book’s genuinely valuable contributions.

Meyer takes pains to recover the German continuities in Arendt’s life. He follows her to postwar Germany, where, as part of her work with Jewish Cultural Reconstruction, she tracked down “heirless” Jewish property, including books whose owners had been murdered; the volumes would be distributed chiefly among libraries and Jewish institutions in Israel, the United States, and

other countries. On one of those trips, in 1950, she sought out Heidegger in Freiburg, after nearly two decades of silence, and, though he was not terribly repentant, she more or less forgave him; a difficult friendship resumed.

Meyer's archival diligence enlarges the record of Arendt's life, but the letters and institutional records he draws on yield little of Arendt's volatile temperament, the intertwining of idea and action; nor does he offer more than minimal physical evocation of Arendt at the different stages of her life.

Elizabeth Young-Bruehl's 1982 biography, "Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World," remains indispensable as a commanding exposition of Arendt's ideas and a detailed, sensitive rendering of her emotional life. In Meyer's hands, the adventuress sometimes recedes into a functionary.

In the mid-nineteen-fifties, Arendt turned from the origins of political catastrophe to the conditions of political health. She had begun exploring how Marxism had yielded totalitarianism; the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, before Soviet troops crushed it, presented a striking example of people creating a political life for themselves. She abandoned the project, but some of its concerns entered "The Human Condition" (1958), a far-reaching inquiry into what she called the *vita activa*, the active life.

Arendt divided human activity into labor, the biological processes that sustain life; work, which creates objects and builds a durable human world; and action, the unpredictable business of people speaking and doing things together. Action interested her most. In the Greek city-state, citizens appeared before one another as equals, taking part in a common world and beginning things whose outcomes they could never entirely control. "Plurality," she wrote, "is the condition of human action because we are all the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live."

Modern society, she believed, had elevated labor and consumption while letting the public realm wither. With the rise of what she called “the social,” public life increasingly became about the administration of an enlarged household, managing production, welfare, and collective necessity. Yet freedom, in Arendt’s view, was something more demanding. It required people to act together in a public realm where each had a voice.

The United States, in its formative years, had briefly demonstrated how such action might survive beyond the ancient polis. According to the blunt John Adams, the American Revolution began before the war with Britain, in the people’s minds and hearts, and Arendt situated those shifts in American town councils where citizens had debated local affairs. The Revolution created spaces of public freedom, and the Constitution gave durable form to power, which Arendt understood as something generated when people acted in concert. In “On Revolution” (1963), she preferred the Americans, with their unglamorous work of founding institutions and distributing power, to the French, whose fiction of a single “general will” devolved into righteous cliques attempting to murder one another.

She fell in love with the Founding Fathers, the Federalist Papers, and constitutionalism. Yet her account of the American triumph also conveyed disappointment. Thomas Jefferson’s “pursuit of happiness” retained an older sense of “public happiness,” the pleasure of participating in town meetings, councils, and congresses. That meaning faded, however, and “the pursuit of happiness” had become the pursuit of riches and, eventually, consumerism as a way of life.

It wasn’t much to hold on to, but she continued to praise small, self-organized bodies: the citizens’ councils of the Hungarian Revolution; the organizing councils of the sixties’ civil-rights and antiwar movements in the U.S. In such bodies, citizens at least escaped the domination of mass media, which she

feared and loathed. She had an instinctive appreciation for order, civility, public debate. But, unlike many postwar conservatives, she did not seek a return to religion or traditional values. The world that sustained them had been shattered. Instead, she searched the wreckage for sources of personal and political integrity. “Since man contains within himself a partner from whom he can never win release,” she wrote, “he will be better off not to live in company with a murderer or a liar.”

Arendt's political ideal had a temperamental counterpart: she liked thought and friendship at close quarters, among people who could answer one another directly. In 1959, Arendt and Blücher bought a good apartment at West 109th Street and Riverside Drive. She had a river view and, for the first time, ample space to entertain her American and émigré circle. Norman Podhoretz, always concerned with “making it,” considered an invitation to her New Year’s Eve parties a definite score. Kazin, ever faithful, saw something almost needy in her friendships, which may have been tied to the losses she carried. In one of Arendt’s unpublished poems, she wrote, “Survival. / But how does one live with the dead? Say, / where is the sound of their company, / where are the gestures they once made?”

Those of us who want a direct sense of her physicality—and it’s hard not to as you read her—can’t do better than the video of the Gaus interview. In her late fifties, she’s very grand indeed, but at times almost friendly, with a ready, then readily withdrawn, smile. In her gruff, cigarette-scarred voice, she speaks slowly but implacably, rocking back and forth like a ship in treacherous seas. Emotion bursts out. “When one is attacked as a Jew,” she says, thumping the arm of her chair, “one must defend oneself as a Jew—not as a German, a world citizen, or a champion of human rights.” Gaus adroitly coaxes out personal recollections and moments of self-assessment, but she mocks as impossible the idea of confessing what’s “going on in my heart.”

Fiction could enter where Arendt refused, publicly, to go. In the extraordinary novel “An Admirable Woman,” first published four decades ago, the American author, theologian, and editor Arthur A. Cohen created an Arendt-like character who holds back nothing. The novel, reissued this fall, by McNally Editions, takes the form of a memoir by a German Jewish intellectual historian, exiled to New York. Erika Hertz, the Arendt character, describes her life in wild Berlin in the twenties and then in the early Nazi period and finally on the Upper West Side. She evokes an émigré’s painful social adjustments and shares her feelings about everything, especially about herself. Assessing her body, she praises her “glorious hair, full, rich, an immense head of hair, a whole field of auburn hair, reddish-brown like the trees of the Hudson Valley.” The prose is abundantly physical and sensual, which God knows Arendt’s was not. Cohen created a counter-text, a luscious version of Arendt’s unknown sentimental education.

Sometimes we get as much from just a trace. In one of the funniest of all American books, the 1954 novel “Pictures from an Institution,” Arendt’s great friend Randall Jarrell satirized a progressive college (basically Sarah Lawrence). After untold adventures, the Rosenbaums, an avant-garde Viennese composer and his opera-star wife, have arrived, with relief, at “Benton College.” When the subject of travel comes up, the husband says, “There is no need; wait, and they chase you all the way around the world”—a remark one can imagine either Arendt or Blücher making.

The gently rueful Rosenbaums spring from Jarrell’s transforming affection for his friends. A stormier version of the couple appears in Margarethe von Trotta’s intellectually alert film “Hannah Arendt” (2012), starring the great German actress Barbara Sukowa as Arendt and Axel Milberg as Blücher. Von Trotta’s portrait at first resembles Kazin’s—a sociable woman, in love with her husband, happy in America. Then all hell breaks loose, and Sukowa, eyes blazing, concludes the picture with a seven-minute defense of intellectual freedom

assembled from Arendt's words. It's one of cinema's great pieces of extended rhetoric.

What broke loose, of course, was the Eichmann controversy. At Arendt's request, this magazine sent her to Jerusalem in 1961 to cover the trial of the S.S. lieutenant colonel Adolf Eichmann, who had played a central role in organizing the mass murder of the Jews. Her account ran in five consecutive issues in February and March, 1963, then almost immediately was republished as a book, "Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil." She was widely attacked. Some of the attacks, both by organized Jewish groups and by individual writers, were more like hazing than criticism—vicious, personal, encompassing. Arendt, they insisted, was a self-hating Jew who blamed the Jews for their own destruction; she laundered Eichmann's guilt with the phrase "the banality of evil."

The actual text, which chronicles not just the trial but the workings of Eichmann's operation in country after country, is animated by a freezing derision of the man and obvious anguish, held in check, over what the S.S. accomplished. Eichmann was not, in conventional terms, stupid, but, as Arendt argues, he was incapable of *thinking*—that is, of allowing into consciousness any reality or viewpoint inconsistent with his loyalty to his job and to his superiors. A "terrifyingly normal" product of personal ambition and totalitarian organization, he scarcely had a self to violate. In that sense, his evil was banal. Arendt concluded that he should hang.

The sorest point in her reporting was the ten or so pages on the *Judenräte*, the councils (bad ones, this time) that the Nazis set up with Jewish community leaders, many of whom, according to Raul Hilberg's authoritative history "The Destruction of the European Jews" (1961), provided the Nazis with Jewish addresses, even property lists. The leaders were in an impossible position and perhaps thought that by coöperating they could save ten out of a hundred, or a

thousand out of ten thousand. None of us know how we would have behaved in the same situation. Arendt criticizes these men but never says that the Jews were responsible for their own destruction. She does claim that, without the councils' compliance, more would have survived.

"Eichmann in Jerusalem" is a brilliant book, hard-driving and factually rich, but written with an undisguised intellectual contempt that many found heartless. In *Commentary*, Podhoretz ended his review with anguished protest: "The Nazis destroyed a third of the Jewish people. In the name of all that is humane, will the remnant never let up on itself?" Like an Ibsen character, Arendt was too proud to simplify her ideas for easier understanding. She also rejected the melodramatic style that was becoming popular in discussions of the Holocaust, along with what she sensed was developing in Israel: a desire to turn the Holocaust into a kind of state religion that could justify aggression.

For a while, friends and colleagues walked away, including some of the New York group that had revered her; a few friendships never recovered. Mary McCarthy, who held fast, declared that the campaign against Arendt was "assuming the proportions of a pogrom," and told her that they could "enjoy guilt by association together."

Heinrich Blücher died in 1970, at seventy-one. "Between two people, sometimes, how rarely, a world grows," Arendt wrote to Heidegger of her and Blücher's love. "It is then one's homeland." She was bereft but surrounded by the friends who remained. Two of them proposed marriage—the political scientist and fellow German Jewish exile Hans J. Morgenthau, and W. H. Auden, who suggested that they could take care of each other. She refused a collaboration in misery. For the rest of her life, she continued to speak and write copiously about public affairs, not least the official mendacity that the Pentagon Papers and Watergate revealed.

By then, the question of whether Arendt belonged chiefly to German or American intellectual life mattered less than the interplay in her soul between the two. Her ways of thinking, her metaphysical longings, were mostly German, but her preoccupations after “Origins” were mostly American. Meyer understandably emphasizes that the German editions of “Origins” and “The Human Condition” differ from the English ones, though he never quite makes clear how extensive or significant the differences are. The career that had made her famous was unmistakably American. Her major books were commissioned, edited, and first published in the United States, often after taking shape in American magazines.

In her last years, she turned increasingly to the nature of thinking, willing, and judging; she wanted to write a book that would map the activities of the mind. She completed the sections on thinking and willing; the projected third section, on judgment, remained unwritten. On December 4, 1975, Hannah Arendt died in her apartment. She was sixty-nine years old. She had a heart attack while entertaining friends. (“Thinking” appeared posthumously in three installments in this magazine.)

More than three decades later, in March, 2007, the philosopher Jeremy Waldron published a piece in *The New York Review of Books* titled “What Would Hannah Say?” Waldron, who admired Arendt, was nevertheless skeptical of the “portentous and stricken tone” of her writings, and of her followers’ rote acquiescence. He deplored the common habit of summoning words from Arendt’s work to illuminate current crises. (In 2007, the current crisis was “the war on terror.”) Every circumstance is special, Waldron wrote, and we should make up our own minds, rather than rely on Arendt. Of course, he’s right, but the texts keep catching up to history, muscling into current events, more participant than ghost.

In “The Origins of Totalitarianism,” Arendt observes that bureaucratic

despotism hollows out legislatures: parliaments cease making laws, and executives rule by decree. She describes how inflation, unemployment, and the breakdown of stable classes leave masses uprooted, isolated, and possessed by a pervasive hatred of the existing world. A movement—not a party—organizes their discontent, offering fictitious total explanations for real and unresolved problems. At its center stands an infallible leader: his words cannot be questioned, and his lies are turned into a functioning reality. Members must accommodate themselves to its fictions, with varying mixtures of gullibility and cynicism; followers shown proof that the leader has lied may admire him all the more for his tactical cleverness. He and his cadre insult and dehumanize outsiders, who are then stripped of their rights, rendered stateless, and herded into internment camps.

The ultimate object of these fictions is disorientation, more than belief. By continually altering reality, a government can disable the faculties of judgment and action on which political freedom depends. In her last known interview, recorded for French television in 1973, Arendt returned to the subject of public lying. According to a transcript published after her death, here is what she said:

If everyone always lies to you, the consequence is not that you believe the lies, but that no one believes anything at all anymore—and rightly so, because lies, by their very nature, have to be changed, to be “re-lied,” so to speak. So a lying government which pursues different goals at different times has constantly to rewrite its own history. That means that the people are deprived not only of their capacity to act, but also of their capacity to think and to judge. And with such a people you can then do what you please. ♦