

Eichman – His Life and Crimes by David Cesarani. William Heinemann 2004.

Adolf Eichman is in many ways the iconic Nazi murderer of the Second World War: a diligent and rather ordinary man who rose through the Nazi hierarchy of genocide to a position where the life and death of tens of thousands resided in his hands.

For many the image of Eichman is the man in the glass booth on trial in Jerusalem for his war crimes against Jews, immortalised by the late Hannah Arendt as the 'banality of evil'. Yet, as David Cesarani demonstrates the total picture is much more complex.

Cesarani tells the story of Eichman's life in meticulous detail, at the same time explaining and describing the world events and national upheavals which were to play a part in his adult career. He explains the interest that Eichman showed in Jews and Judaism and suggests that in his early stages of work for the SS he was not by any means as fervent an anti-Semite as he later became.

At the same time as telling the Eichman story, Cesarani details the development of the persecution of Jews by the Nazi regime, and particularly the development of the process of systematic genocide, which he suggests was by no means the pre-planned conclusion that it seems to be today.

Cesarani also explains the dynamic of the Eichman trial, the tensions between the participants, the motive of the Israeli government in putting Eichman on trial, and the trial's impact throughout the world. He also critiques very convincingly the way Hannah Arendt misunderstood Eichman and in so doing created an image which he demonstrates has served to cloud some of the reality of what Eichman did and who he really was.

David Cesarani is to be congratulated for having written what must be the definitive biography of Adolf Eichman, as well as adding fresh perspectives on a period that has been so extensively covered elsewhere.

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