

# Arendt in Dark Times

*By Anne Schwarz*

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**As 2025 marks the fiftieth anniversary of Hannah Arendt's death, a new book offers a fresh perspective on a little-known yet pivotal period in the philosopher's life and work.**

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Reviewed: Marina Touilliez, *Parias: Hannah Arendt et la "tribu" en France (1933-1941)*, Paris, L'échappée, 2024, 512 pp., €24, ISBN 9782373091533.

The period Hannah Arendt spent in France—from 1933, when she went into exile following the National Socialist Party's rise to power in Germany, to 1941, when she obtained her visa for the United States—can undoubtedly be described as “dark times,” to use Bertolt Brecht's famous phrase.

History knows many periods of dark times in which the public realm has been obscured and the world become so dubious that people have ceased to ask any more of politics than that it show due consideration for their vital interests and personal liberty.<sup>1</sup>

And yet, for Arendt, a particular form of humanity can emerge in such moments—a sense of solidarity unique to persecuted peoples and individuals, “a warmth of human relationships” that makes these “dark times” bearable.

These reflections, drawn from the address Arendt delivered in Hamburg in 1959 on the occasion of the Lessing Prize ceremony, illustrate some of the central themes of Marina Touilliez's book *Parias: Hannah Arendt et la "tribu" en France (1933-1941)* (Pariahs: Hannah Arendt and the “tribe” in France (1933-1941)).

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<sup>1</sup> Hannah Arendt, “On Humanity in Dark Times: Thoughts about Lessing,” in *Men in Dark Times*, New York, Harvest Books, 1970, p. 11.

The book does not deal with political theory as such, but shows how the years Arendt spent in France profoundly shaped her later thought. Touilliez puts forward the thesis that, for Arendt, friendship served as a foundation to face the hardships of exile. Hence the book's significant focus on the members of the "tribe," Arendt's circle of friends in Paris. These other refugees, "pariahs" like her, were mostly German—Jews, intellectuals, political opponents of the Nazis.

## **From Student to Activist**

To fully convey the shock Arendt experienced on arriving in France, Touilliez begins by describing the young woman she was in the early 1930s: her unique personality, her known first loves, the friendships she cultivated during her philosophy studies, her promising academic career, and, most importantly, her intellectual journey—from her initial apolitical stance to her clandestine political activism on the eve of her departure for France. Arendt's discovery of the Jewish question was decisive in this evolution. She first confronted this question at the level of ideas, when she worked on her habilitation thesis on Rahel Varnhagen, a German woman writer who had hosted a famous salon during the Romantic era.

A second encounter—not literary, but personal—with the Zionist leader Kurt Blumenfeld also contributed to her awareness of her Jewish identity. Like many German Jews at the time, Arendt had grown up in a secular environment. Yet, the violence that targeted Jews from the beginning of the Nazi regime ultimately served as a catalyst for her: "From that moment on, I felt responsible. That is, I was no longer of the opinion that one can simply be a bystander" (p. 64). Accordingly, she helped smuggle political opponents out of the country and gathered documents—evidence of anti-Semitism in civil society—on behalf of Blumenfeld's organization. The real trauma, however, occurred when she saw the intellectual community, including some of her friends and acquaintances, rally behind Hitler. Faced with imminent danger, she realized she had no choice but to flee Germany.

To many exiles at the time, France was the land of hope and promise. Yet, what drove Arendt's decision to settle in Paris was not so much the City of Lights's legendary standing in the arts and letters, but the country's reputation as the home of human rights, and even more so that of the Dreyfusards. Paris had been a "German

literary capital”<sup>2</sup> in the early nineteenth century, in particular with Ludwig Börne and Heinrich Heine, and was so again in the 1930s, with Walter Benjamin, Siegfried Kracauer, and Joseph Roth, to name but a few. Arendt, however, diverged from this tradition of German thinkers who had come to the French capital to escape the political repression raging in their own country.

Unlike these thinkers, Arendt did not write about her experience in Paris, nor did she analyze the situation in her home country through descriptions of her host country. Here too, it was the Jewish question that guided the choices she made. She kept some distance from the French intellectual circles frequented by her first husband, Günther Stern, preferring political action instead. Although critical of Zionism, she became involved in hosting and training young Jews who were planning to emigrate to Palestine. She was now convinced that Jewish assimilation had failed. The situation in Germany had shattered the illusion of the assimilationist model based on the ideal of *Bildung*, the process of human education and schooling advocated by Wilhelm von Humboldt at the turn of the eighteenth century. The assimilated Jews of France, fearing the rise in anti-Semitism, had refrained from condemning the Hitler regime and avoided calling for an open-door policy towards foreign Jews. Arendt’s struggle against Nazism relied instead on international Jewish solidarity.

## The “Tribe”: Friendship in “Dark Times”

The early days in Paris were difficult. Arendt experienced the precariousness and humiliation of social decline: Moving with Günther Stern from one squalid room to another, struggling to make ends meet (whether through refugee aid or through menial jobs below her qualifications), not to mention dealing with the bureaucracy. Exile exacerbated tensions with her husband, who ended up leaving France (alone) for the United States in 1936. And yet, despite all this, some encounters brought joy to her life.

Alongside the Jewish question, friendship was a central theme of Arendt’s Parisian years. As Martine Leibovici noted in her preface, Touilliez’s book could have been titled “10 Rue Dombasle.” This was the address in the fifteenth arrondissement

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<sup>2</sup> Michel Espagne, “Les capitales littéraires allemandes,” in Christophe Charle and Daniel Roche (eds), *Capitales culturelles, capitales symboliques: Paris et les expériences européennes (XVIII<sup>e</sup>-XX<sup>e</sup> siècles)*, Paris, Éditions de la Sorbonne, 2002, p. 332.

where Arendt lived with Heinrich Blücher, her second husband whom she had met in Paris. It was there that the “tribe,” as they called it, constituted itself. This tribe included the doctor Fritz Frankel, who treated the poor in Berlin and Paris; the pediatrician Rudolf Neumann and his wife Franziska; the Heinemann sisters; the journalist Arthur Koestler; the writer Walter Benjamin; and the young Ekstein couple. Then there were those who gravitated around them: the loved ones; Dora Benjamin; Lisa Fittko; friends, such as the bookseller Adrienne Monnier; the young Lotte Sempel, born in a wealthy German family; the lawyer Erich Cohn-Bendit; the “degenerate artist” Carl Heindenreich; Chanan Klenbort, who had grown up in a Polish *shtetl*; the doctor Minna Flake... The “tribe” embodied the “warmth of human relationships” born of friendship in inhuman times. And we know the importance Arendt attached to the concept of friendship, considered by some to be the “matrix of her political thought.”<sup>3</sup>

## **“Pariahs”: From Precariousness to the Hunt for Exiles in France**

One of the strengths of the book is precisely the broadened focus on these various personalities and the light it sheds on the fate of exiles in France in the 1930s. Touilliez reconstructs the tragic trajectories of many of these figures, even if this means momentarily diverting the reader’s attention from Arendt’s life. From 1938 onwards, these men and women—“*les bannis de Hitler*” (Hitler’s exiles), to use Gilbert Badia’s formula<sup>4</sup>—were subject to increasingly harsh policies towards foreigners, who were classified as “desirable,” “suspicious,” or “undesirable” —with the latter destined for incarceration in internment camps. Following the outbreak of war, the internment policy intensified and changed in nature: The aim was no longer to control the influx of foreigners, but to enforce their exclusion. Citizens of countries hostile to France were now considered “enemy subjects.” Many were arrested on the grounds that they posed a threat to national security—including members of the “tribe,” who were all anti-fascist and very often Jewish. International Brigade fighters and Jews were thus incarcerated alongside staunch Nazis in the internment camps. Drawing on numerous

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<sup>3</sup> Enzo Traverso, “Dark times: Judéité et politique chez Hannah Arendt,” *Revue française de science politique*, 2009/5, Vol. 59, pp. 895-914.

<sup>4</sup> Gilbert Badia (ed.), *Les bannis de Hitler: accueil et lutte des exilés allemands en France, 1933-1939*, Paris, Presses universitaires de Vincennes, 1984.

eyewitness accounts, some of which have never been published before, Touilliez's book describes the profound misery of the prisoners, the displacement from one camp to another, the despair caused by separations, the feeling of being trapped, the fear of being handed over to the Germans, and the numerous escapes to evade death. We follow the various members of the "tribe" on their journey of survival; we witness their reunion in a small village in the Southwest, their final escape from France, and their ultimate separation. France, which had welcomed these "pariahs" from Nazi Germany, had ended up turning them into rightless people and social outcasts.

Arendt transformed the experience of being a "pariah" into a political concept. Pariahs, she argued, were proud of their condition, despite being deprived of their rights, their nationality, their property, and despite being rendered invisible in the public sphere. This condition was for them a source of resistance against the established order and the injustices of their time. In her address on Lessing, Arendt identified with these pariahs who sought, through their writings, to resist "the weird irreality of this worldlessness (...) by seeking to the limits of their ability to understand even inhumanity and the intellectual and political monstrosities of a time out of joint."<sup>5</sup>

Touilliez's book not only sheds new light on a chapter of Arendt's life, but also helps to restore the memory of those who were exiled in France between the end of the Third Republic and the Vichy regime. It also resonates with our current moment, as contemporary French discourses on foreigners curiously echo those of the 1930s, from which the term "replacement" is clearly borrowed.

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<sup>5</sup> Arendt, *Vies politiques*, *op. cit.*, p. 17.