

The banality of evil in Jasenovac

The notion of the “banality of evil” was developed by Hannah Arendt, who concluded based on Adolf Eichmann’s trial that war criminals, such as Eichmann, should not be seen as exceptions, monsters or perverse sadists. She exposes Eichmann as ordinary—“people like Eichmann were and are extremely and terribly normal,” in many cases government bureaucrats, “ordinary people” with no obvious psychopathic or other psychopathological tendencies. If they were “madmen,” it would be easier to explain what they had done. Such men were also in Jasenovac—Dragutin Pudić-Paraliza, Drago Gašparović Bonzo and Ante Vrban committed horrible crimes, and still witnesses describe moments when they were “normal,” even showing empathy for the victims or helping them to survive. Ilija Jakovljević describes how the multiple murderer Nikola Gagro would let prisoners drink “as much wine, *šljivovica* and cognac as you liked,” how he “liked people who enjoyed food and drink,” how he would gladly “sit down and sip wine” with distinguished prisoners.¹

Hannah Arendt’s thesis is that Eichmann was really just an average person who committed crimes driven primarily by the desire to professionally carry out his duties, not by ideology or politics. Banality in this context is not the fact that Eichmann’s actions were ordinary, but that there is potentially an Eichmann hiding inside all of us, that his actions were driven by a kind of stupidity and blind obedience to authority. Arendt also cites Eichmann himself, who refused to take responsibility for his crimes because he was “just doing his job, that is, following orders.” The same can be said, more or less, about the war criminals of Jasenovac.

It would be too simplistic to call these perpetrators “madmen” because the motives for their crimes do not mainly originate in the opposite of reason.

¹ Jakovljević, *Konklogor na Savi*, 38; Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*.