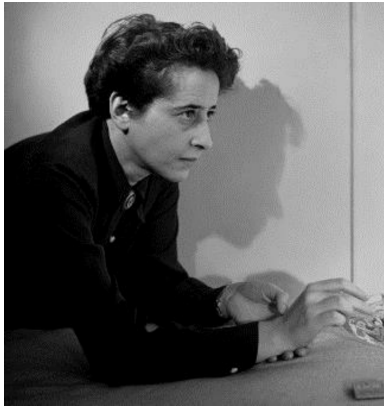


Hannah Arendt on Statelessness and the Refugee Problem (1951)

From: Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1979 [1st ed: 1951]), pp. 276-280.

Hannah Arendt was a Jewish refugee intellectual. She left Nazi Germany in 1933 and eventually escaped to the United States in 1950. Stripped of her German citizenship in 1937, she became a U.S. citizen the same year she arrived in the country.



[...] [S]tatelessness [is] the newest mass phenomenon in contemporary history, and the [...] ever-growing new people comprised of stateless persons [is] the most symptomatic group in contemporary politics. [...] [E]very political event since the end of the first World War inevitably added a new category to those who lived outside the pale of the law, [...]

[After World War II], refugees who had been forced out of their countries [...] were promptly denationalized by the victorious governments at home. To this group belong, in chronological order, millions of Russians, hundreds of thousands of Armenians, thousands of Hungarians, hundreds of thousands of Germans, and more than half a million Spaniards—to enumerate only the more important categories. The behavior of these governments may appear today to be the natural consequence of civil war; but at the time mass denationalizations were something entirely new and unforeseen. They presupposed a state structure which [...] would rather lose its citizens than harbor people with different views. [...]

No paradox of contemporary politics is filled with a more poignant irony than the discrepancy between the efforts of well-meaning idealists who stubbornly insist on regarding as “inalienable” those human rights, which are enjoyed only by cit-

izens of the most prosperous and civilized countries, and the situation of the rightless themselves. Their situation has deteriorated just as stubbornly, until the internment camp—prior to the Second World War the exception rather than the rule for the stateless—has become the routine solution for the problem of domicile of the “displaced persons.”

[...] Since non-totalitarian countries, in spite of their bad intentions inspired by the climate of war, generally have shied away from mass repatriations, the number of stateless people—twelve years after the end of the war—is larger than ever. [...] Worse still, the number of potentially stateless people is continually on the increase. Prior to the last war, only totalitarian or half-totalitarian dictatorships resorted to the weapon of denaturalization with regard to those who were citizens by birth; now we have reached the point where even free democracies, as, for instance, the United States, were seriously considering depriving native Americans who are Communists of their citizenship. The sinister aspect of these measures is that they are being considered in all innocence. Yet, one need only remember the extreme care of the Nazis, who insisted that all Jews of non-German nationality “should be deprived of their citizenship either prior to, or, at the latest, on the day of deportation” (for German Jews such a decree was not needed, because in the Third Reich there existed a law according to which all Jews who had left the territory—including, of course, those deported to a Polish camp—automatically lost their citizenship) in order to realize the true implications of statelessness.

The first great damage done to the nation-states as a result of the arrival of hundreds of thousands of stateless people was that the right of asylum, the only right that had ever figured as a symbol of the Rights of Man in the sphere of international relationships, was being abolished. Its long and sacred history dates back to the very beginnings of regulated political life. Since ancient times it has protected both the refugee and the land of refuge from situations in which people were forced to become outlaws through circumstances beyond their control. [...] But though the right of asylum continued to function in a world organized into nation-states and, in individual instances, even survived both World Wars, it was felt to be an anachronism and in conflict with the international rights of the state. [...]