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Wannsee and the "Final Solution"

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Abstract

The Wannsee Conference of 20 January 1942 is one of the most famous moments in the Nazi decision-making process for the "Final Solution of the Jewish Question in Europe." This article addresses its place in that decision-making process, arguing that it should not be understood in terms of an "intentionalist" narrative in which the Nazi leadership always intended to murder the Jews. Rather, it was but one – albeit an important – step in the process that led the Nazis from murderous fantasy to the realisation of genocide in light of the fact that the Nazis' plans for a postwar victory were unlikely to materialise. By situating the Wannsee Conference in the broader decision-making process, and by looking at the ways in which the Holocaust developed immediately before and immediately after January 1942, the article shows that Wannsee, unquestionably important though it was, needs to be understood as part of a bigger picture of the Nazis' and their allies' rapidly shifting views on how to remove the Jews from Europe.[1]

Keywords: Wannsee Conference, "Final Solution," Holocaust, perpetrators, collaboration, historiography

It is very hard today to imagine the Wannsee Conference, for all that has been written and said about it, without picturing the men sitting round the table in the film *Conspiracy* (dir. Frank Pierson, 2001). One of the rare films

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[1] My thanks to Florin Lobonţ for organising the workshop at which this paper was first delivered.

of the historical reconstruction genre that captures the spirit of the Third Reich without sensationalising or resorting to cliché, it provides a chilling insight into the way in which the Nazi leadership functioned. In many ways, the film confirmed the most recent research, especially Mark Roseman's, which argued that Wannsee was not the moment when the Nazi leaders decided on the "Final Solution" but an important way-station in an ongoing process. Most important, it was an event at which the SS, represented by Reinhard Heydrich and Adolf Eichmann, set their stamp on the on-going genocidal process, insisting that their agency would be in control. And yet *Conspiracy* – perhaps forgivably, given that the film consists solely of a reconstruction of the meeting in the Wannsee villa, with little contextualisation – tends to reinforce the sense that Wannsee was a singular historical moment. What then was Wannsee's place in the unfolding of the "Final Solution"?

The autumn of 1941 is the crucial period for understanding the decision-making process that led to the "Final Solution." Although Himmler's initial aim had been to "comb" Europe from west to east (as Heydrich expressed it at Wannsee), in fact the mass murder of the Jews began in the east and then spread to the west. By the time the process of deporting Jews had started in Western Europe, the "Final Solution," as opposed to the local or regional "solutions" imposed on the Jews of the Soviet Union or Poland, was largely in place. In Central and Western Europe, the process did not see Jews murdered close to their homes but, in other respects, it echoed what had been started in Eastern Europe. For example, like the Jews of the ghettos in Poland, headed by their beleaguered Jewish councils, the Jewish councils in Vienna and elsewhere in Central and Western Europe "had no power of their own, they were authorities without power" (Rabinovici, 2011, p. 203).

By the spring of 1942 the Final Solution was in place. Before that point, the Einsatzgruppen had killed well over a million Jews in the Soviet Union; Jews from the Reich were deported to Riga in November 1941; the first mass killings by gas had begun at Chełmno and construction had started on the death camp at Bełżec in December 1941. On 23 October 1941, the Nazis forbade all emigration of Jews from occupied Europe and around the same time, the first experimental gassings of Soviet POWs took place at Auschwitz. Whatever the precise order of the decision making process, it is clear that by the end of 1941 the Nazis were working towards a comprehensive plan of mass murder (Friedländer, 1989, p. 26).

For all the detail that historians have added since – for example with respect to the creation of the Operation Reinhard camps, the link between the T4 euthanasia programme and the killing of the Jews or the role played by local planners in occupied Eastern Europe – it seems clear that the Nazis were turning localised mass killings into a continent-wide genocide by the end of 1941. The direction of travel was clear; following the initial success of Operation Barbarossa, Hitler gave the go ahead for the first deportations from the Reich and from the Protectorate, and Goering transferred his control over Jewish policies to Heydrich, in his 31 July 1941 authorisation, where he wrote: "I hereby charge you with making all necessary preparations in regard to organisational and financial matters for bringing about a total solution of the Jewish question in the German sphere of influence in Europe", a letter which was perhaps written to save face, as de facto recognition of the SS's unstoppable rise to prominence (Goering, 2013, p. 740; Browning, 2008, p 410)[2]. As Christopher Browning observes, one can show that "in the brief twelve day span between October 13 and October 25 plans to construct camps with gassing facilities emerged not only for Belzec but also for Chelmno, Riga, Mogilev, Birkenau, and possibly Sobibor; and moreover (with the probable exception of Birkenau) that Berlin was centrally involved and not merely reacting to local initiatives" (Browning, 2008, p. 413). Nowhere is this process clearer to see than in the infamous Wannsee Conference.

This meeting took place in a beautiful villa along the shores of the Wannsee just outside Berlin on 20 January 1942, having been postponed from 9 December 1941 because of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and the entry of the United States into the war. The fact that it was postponed indicates that Pearl Harbor was not the moment when Hitler took the decision to murder the Jews of Europe; the process, as we have seen, was already underway. Historians who stress the importance of the US's entry into the war for the "Final Solution" include Christian Gerlach (Gerlach, 1998); David Cesarini (Cesarini, 2016, pp. 447-449); Yitzhak Arad (Arad, 2018, p. 33). Chaired by Heydrich with his deputy, Eichmann taking the minutes, sitting around the conference table were fifteen senior officials representing most of Nazi Germany's important ministries and RSHA agencies (the Reichssicherheitshauptamt (RSHA) was the body created by

[2] Goering's note, Browning claims, "should be seen as the authorisation of a "feasibility study" and not the definitive order for the murder of European Jewry."

Himmler in September 1939 as the umbrella organisation for all the different police agencies (SS, SD, Kripo, Gestapo, Order Police, etc.) under his control. For details on the attendees, see Jasch, and Kreutzmüller, 2017). Saul Friedländer argued that at Wannsee, Heydrich presented the outline of the "Final Solution" to the invited representatives of various ministries and SS agencies and that the "establishment of extermination camps in the General Government in the following months eliminates any possible remaining doubt or vagueness about what was meant at Wannsee" (Friedländer, 1989, p. 27). His claim has since been backed up many times by historians who agree that the "main purpose of the Wannsee Conference … was to provide notice that the SS, under the leadership of Reinhard Heydrich and Heinrich Himmler, intended to organize deportations on a European-wide scale" (Fritzsche, 2008, p. 207).

Nevertheless, the precise role played by the Wannsee Conference remains disputed. Clearly it cannot have been the site where the "Final Solution" was decided upon, as historians sometimes used to claim; that makes no sense in the context of an "intentionalist" narrative which maintains that the Nazis had always intended to kill the Jews (why then would they have needed to hold the Wannsee meeting?) and it seems especially unlikely given that neither Himmler nor Hitler were present. Furthermore, as some of the SS representatives who had arrived fresh from the Baltic States were happy to confirm, they had already begun making "their" regions free of Jews (*judenrein*), Estonia and Latvia especially. It seems much more likely that the meeting was partly about coordination but primarily about stamping the SS's control over Jewish policy and creating a situation whereby other agencies, especially those belonging to the state (the civil service) rather than the Nazi Party, would be rendered complicit in the project. In the words of Mark Roseman, author of the standard work on the Wannsee Conference, the meeting "was part of a concerted, coordinated campaign by Himmler and Heydrich to assert their supremacy." The latter's "major aim" was "to achieve unity and common purpose among the participants, and above all to secure acceptance of the RSHA's leading role" (Roseman, 2003, p. 84). This explanation seems much more persuasive when one considers that the discussion was short on detail and focused more on general principles and grandiose aspirations (Rabinbach and Gilman, pp. 752-757) with the only detailed discussion being reserved for the "problem" of how to deal with different grades of *Mischlinge*, or "mixed-race" Jews

(Noakes, 1989, pp. 291-354; Teicher, 2020, pp. 199-200). This issue is important not only for what it reveals about the Nazis' understanding of "race," especially the way that racial identity was constructed and inherited, but because it shows how the non-Nazi Party agencies, such as the Ministry of Justice, became implicated in the decision-making process for genocide.

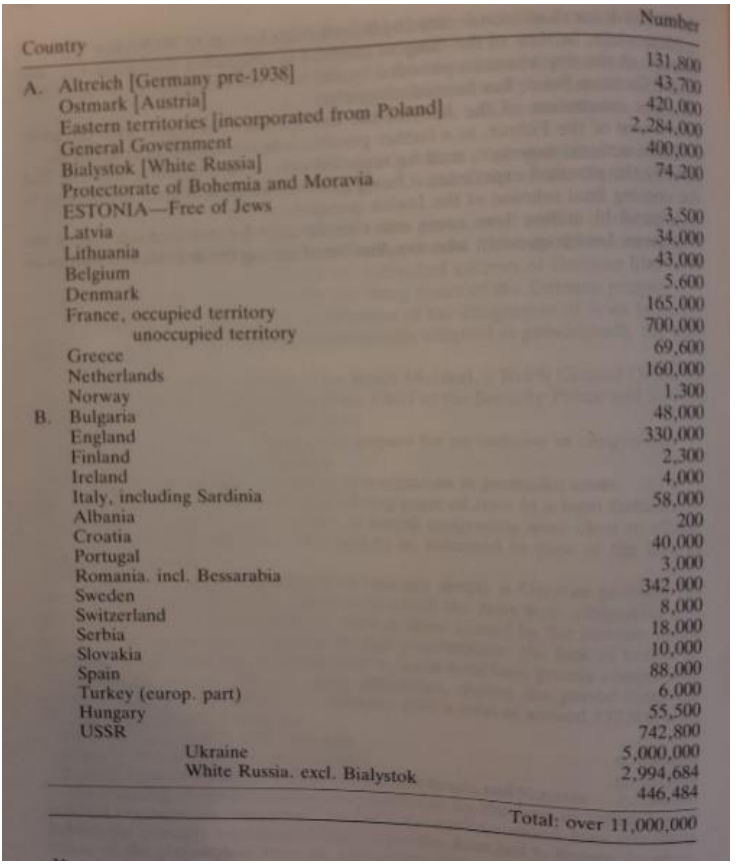
The reason why Wannsee was long thought of as the moment when the "Final Solution" was launched is largely serendipitous: the discovery of the one surviving copy of the record, or "protocol" of the meeting – which the recipients had been instructed to destroy – by Robert Kempner, a former German-Jewish lawyer and civil servant, in 1947, when he was working as US assistant chief counsel in the Nuremberg Trials. The document is, as Roseman says, "probably the closest the Nazis ever came to writing down their overall plan of genocide" (Roseman, 2003, p. 103). In that sense, the meeting did indeed mark a kind of turning point, from more or less ad hoc mass killings to the systematization of a process which ended in continent-wide genocide. If it was not where "the decision" was taken but more of an "echo" of a previously made decision, albeit one not yet communicated to most of the Third Reich's agencies and institutions, Wannsee did capture the midway point in the "transition from quasi-genocidal deportations to a clear programme of murder" (Roseman, 2003, p. 106); on Wannsee as an echo see Klein (Klein, 2013, pp. 182-201); see also Wolf for the argument that Heydrich's pronouncements about the use of Jewish labour made at Wannsee were not purely euphemistic but need to be taken seriously, given the RSHA's ambitions and the lack of sufficient Polish labour (Wolf, 2015, pp. 153-175).

That said, the protocol of the meeting talks about labour and deportation "to the east" after the war – that is to say, a plan for mass deportations of Jews but not yet for gas chambers. This was to change very rapidly in the following weeks as Birkenau took over from the Reinhard camps and the murder of the Jews of Europe as a whole rather than specific regions (notably the General Government) took shape. In other words, strictly according to the wording of the protocol, there was no call for systematic mass murder of all of Europe's Jews made at Wannsee. Nevertheless, the conversation catalysed the process, as it unfolded and developed over the coming weeks and months. As Peter Longerich notes, "the deportations from the rest of Europe, originally planned for the occupied Soviet

territories, were to be diverted to the extermination sites under construction in the General Government" (Longerich, 2010, p. 310).

However, it is questionable whether we should rely only on Eichmann's edited minutes. The table of Europe's Jews presented to the participants (see below) clearly indicates a desire to get rid of (one way or another) the Jews from everywhere in Europe: Axis countries, occupied countries, Allied countries and neutral countries to boot. Besides, for all the "debate" and the euphemisms, "the genocidal implications were totally and unmistakably clear" (Browning, 2004, p. 412). As Eichmann testified at Jerusalem, "these gentlemen were standing together, or sitting together, and were discussing the subject quite bluntly, quite differently from the language which I had to use later in the record. During the conversation they minced no words about it at all … they spoke about methods for killing, about liquidation, about extermination."[3]

[3] Eichmann's testimony, June 1961 (Hilberg, 1972, pp. 102-103), cited in Browning (2004, p. 413).



	Country	Number
A.	Altreich [Germany pre-1938]	131,800
	Ostmark [Austria]	43,700
	Eastern territories [incorporated from Poland]	420,000
	General Government	2,284,000
	Bialystok [White Russia]	400,000
	Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia	74,200
	ESTONIA—Free of Jews	
	Latvia	3,500
	Lithuania	34,000
	Belgium	43,000
	Denmark	5,600
	France, occupied territory	165,000
	unoccupied territory	700,000
	Greece	69,600
	Netherlands	160,000
	Norway	1,300
B.	Bulgaria	48,000
	England	330,000
	Finland	2,300
	Ireland	4,000
	Italy, including Sardinia	58,000
	Albania	200
	Croatia	40,000
	Portugal	3,000
	Romania. incl. Bessarabia	342,000
	Sweden	8,000
	Switzerland	18,000
	Serbia	10,000
	Slovakia	88,000
	Spain	6,000
	Turkey (europ. part)	55,500
	Hungary	742,800
	USSR	5,000,000
	Ukraine	2,994,684
	White Russia. excl. Bialystok	446,484
		Total: over 11,000,000

Wannsee is not just important as one of the key moments in the unfolding of the Nazis' genocidal mindset, however. When one pictures the fifteen leading Nazis sitting around the table in the sumptuous villa that Heydrich planned to claim for himself after the war – which we can easily do, thanks to the site now being a museum and thanks to several films having been shot there – it becomes clear that the optics and aesthetics of the meeting were equally significant. The meeting looks, in retrospect, like an exemplary scene in the Nazis' staging of their own myth as the master race. These smug, self-satisfied men, sure of their own superiority, discussed whilst being fed fine food and wine the intricacies of mass murder and the legal problems that arose from them. They laughed and joked, argued and fell into line – and the massive disjunction between their self-performance and the reality of what it all meant is devastating.

Let us return to the wider context. Whatever the precise timing, in the months after Wannsee the deportation trains started to roll across Europe. Until then, Jews had been shot in Eastern Europe in huge numbers, in Serbia as well as in the Soviet Union, they had been gassed in vans in Chełmno, and the Operation Reinhard camps were being readied to receive and kill the Jews of the General Government. Some Jews had been deported from Germany to Minsk, Riga, Izbica, and elsewhere, but not in very large numbers and not in a very systematic fashion. Now the Jews of the Protectorate, Slovakia, and Western Europe were targeted for deportation and murder, and they would be joined, soon after, by the Jews of Greece, Norway, Croatia and other countries. A separate but related case is that of Romania, important to mention here because the historiographical focus on Wannsee produces a German-centric narrative which, for all that Germans (including Austrians) were overwhelmingly the main perpetrators, does not capture the full reality of who was responsible for the Holocaust. After the vicious brutality of the Iaşi and Bucharest pogroms, the Antonescu regime in Romania embarked on systematic deportations to occupied Transnistria, if not to death camps in the Nazi fashion (because the Germans refused to take them in autumn 1941), then to death by massive neglect, abandonment to the elements, and large-scale massacres. In the case of Romania, one might even talk of the irrelevance of Wannsee.[4] Although Auschwitz was not, as popular memory has it, the place where the majority of the Holocaust's victims were killed, it became the killing centre for Jews from across Europe as well as the centre of a vast slave labour operation. Nevertheless, had it not been for the murder of the Jews of Hungary in spring 1944, more Jews would have been killed at Treblinka than at Auschwitz.

By the end of 1941, leading Nazis began to speak openly of what was now a continent-wide programme. On 15 November 1941, Himmler met Rosenberg; three days later, the latter told the German press that "[i]n the east some six million Jews still live, and this question can only be solved in a biological eradication of the entire Jewry of Europe" (Browning, p. 404). According to Goebbels, at a meeting on 12 December 1941 in his private apartment in Berlin, Hitler told the assembled Reichsleiter and Gauleiter (i.e. some of the regime's leading figures) that "The world war is here, the destruction of the Jews must be the inevitable consequence" (Browning, p.

[4] My thanks to Irina Năstasă-Matei for this point.

407). And Hans Frank, the Governor General, told his underlings on 16 December that "We must put an end to the Jews, that I want to say quite openly. … Gentlemen, I must ask you, arm yourselves against any thoughts of compassion. We must destroy the Jews, wherever we encounter them and wherever it is possible, in order to preserve the entire structure of the Reich" (Browning, pp. 408-409).

In this process, we see for the first time the vital role played by the cooperation of the Nazis' allies. In Eastern Europe, huge numbers of Ukrainians, Lithuanians and Latvians took part in the killing of Jews carried out by the Einsatzgruppen, as the Nazis rapidly created auxiliary police forces from the local populations. These Hiwis (*Hilfswillige*, or volunteers), as they were known, played an essential role in not only identifying Jews but in murdering them too. Many men from these countries went on to become camp guards, especially the infamous Trawniki men, named after the training camp where they were brought into the perpetrator fold (Black, 2011, pp. 1-99; Black, 2019, pp. 21-68). Over the year 1942, the number of locals in the occupied Soviet territories (Ukraine, Belarus and the Baltic States) recruited to work under the Order Police rose nearly tenfold, from 33,000 to about 300,000 (Bloxham, 2008, p. 155). A little later, faced with the choice of signing up or dying an agonising death through starvation in Nazi captivity, some 800,000 Russians joined the so-called Vlassov Army and fought on the side of the Wehrmacht, mostly as cannon-fodder. The auxiliaries, in the words of one historian, provided proof that with minimal German input, the Third Reich could realise its "destiny": the Trawniki men "not only served as foot soldiers of the Final Solution; they also represented prototypes for the enforcers of the world that the Nazis intended to construct" (Black, 2011, p. 45).

Western Europe, however, was not unimportant in this process. It is not simply the case that the killings began in the east and then spread to the west. Rather, the deportations of Jews from Western Europe were undertaken in the full knowledge of the killings in the east, while the latter were still ongoing. In other words, the decision-making process for the "final solution" was shaped by the occupation of Western Europe too. The postwar statement given by Eichmann's deputy Dieter Wisliceny, for example, indicates that Western Europe was always conceived of as part of the "final

solution" (Michman, 2006, pp. 205-2019).[5] Werner Best, formerly Heydrich's representative and legal adviser to the SS and then head of the SD in France between 1940 and 1942 before becoming German Commissioner in Denmark, remarked in March 1941 – the date is worth stressing – that "Germany's interest lies in progressively relieving all European countries from Jewry with a goal of completely Jew-free Europe" (Herbert, 2000, p. 146). The rapid intensification of the killings in Eastern Europe gave the green light to those in the occupied west who favoured radical action. Otto Abetz, for example, the German ambassador in Paris, argued to Himmler in September 1941 that lack of space for arrested Jews – in fact, a lack which the Nazis contrived – meant that the Jews should be transported from France to the east, a request to which Himmler eagerly agreed (Herbert, 2000, p. 149). There were, in other words, processes at work in the countries of occupied Western Europe which fed the radicalising dynamic of the unfolding "final solution," processes which paralleled and fed off those occurring in the "wild east."

In Western Europe, the extent of collaboration varied from country to country and depended on the nature of the occupation regime imposed locally by the Germans. In the Netherlands, where the penetration of the SS was deep, in a country with a topography which hardly facilitated hiding, and where the Jewish population was heavily concentrated in one city, Amsterdam, and there in a few districts, the death rate of 75% was far higher than in France, where the proportion of Jews killed was 25%. Yet in Marshal Pétain's Vichy, France had a regime which was not only collaborationist but eager to show its devotion to the Nazis' antisemitic agenda by taking the initiative on anti-Jewish legislation. In October 1940, Vichy introduced the first Statut des Juifs, defining in strict terms who was a Jew, and in spring 1941 it created the *Commissariat Général aux Questions Juives* (CGQJ) in order to deal with the "Jewish problem" in France. As Debórah Dwork and Robert Jan Van Pelt write:

> the Jews in France … both native-born and refugee, believed that French authorities would seek to safeguard them. France was the country of the Rights of Man, of asylum, of *liberté, égalité, fraternité*. Those were the founding

[5] Wisliceny was responsible for the deportation of Jews from Slovakia, Thessaloniki and Hungary and was tried and executed in Czechoslovakia in 1948 (Safrian, 2010).

> principles of the state. Jews who had fled to France from the Nazi regime elsewhere in Europe trusted in the national promise of protection. They were utterly betrayed. (Dwork & Van Pelt, 2002, p. 233)

Nevertheless, the Pétain regime baulked at deporting French citizens with the result that, when pressed to do so by the Germans in September 1942, as it had previously agreed to do, it held firm. Only a small percentage of the 75,000 Jews deported from France were French citizens, which hardly speaks well for the "country of asylum" but which does show that genocide is complex and that thinking of actors in terms of fixed roles cannot capture the fluid nature of such a complicated and shifting reality. Vichy contributed to the failure of the "Final Solution" in France as well as its initiation (Seibel, 2016, p. xv). The actions of the Vichy regime demonstrate that where legally-recognised states continued to function in Nazi Europe, they could both accede to and resist Nazi demands. They could also initiate the murder process themselves without being pressurised into doing so by the Germans.

For the victims of these murderous policies, which by the spring of 1942 had ensnared most of the European continent's Jewish communities, the result was disastrous. The precise path to genocide differed from country to country but in the end the outcome was the same. The Wannsee Conference was not where "the decision" for the "Final Solution" was taken but it was a step in the process of turning a fantasy designed to be implemented in the Nazis' dreamed-of postwar victory into horrifying reality in 1942.

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