



It was in this villa in the Berlin suburb of Wannsee that one of history's most infamous conferences was staged

# THE WANNSEE CONFERENCE

Seventy years ago this month, German officials convened for a meeting that is widely regarded as the point that the policy of genocide was arrived at. But, asks **Roger Moorhouse**, is the Wannsee Conference really the 'smoking gun' of Nazi Holocaust planning?

**O**N 20 JANUARY 1942, 15 Nazi officials met in an elegant villa in Wannsee, to the west of Berlin, to discuss genocide. It was not a disagreeable meeting, lasting only around 90 minutes or so followed by a buffet lunch, but it has gone down in history as one of the lowest points to which humanity has stooped.

The convenor of the conference was Reinhard Heydrich, the archetypal Nazi 'superman', Himmler's deputy in the SS and the head of the Reich Security Main Office (RSHA). Heydrich was assisted by Adolf Eichmann, the desk-bound perpetrator whose trial in 1961 would spawn the political theorist Hannah Arendt's memorable phrase about "the banality of evil". Heydrich had assembled a dozen or so other representatives of the main ministries and organisations of the

Third Reich, including the SS, Foreign Ministry, Interior Ministry and Gestapo. Most of those present were comparative unknowns: they were not generally the ministers themselves, but their lieutenants; senior civil servants, the mandarins of the Nazi state. This was no Nazi rabble, therefore. Eight of those present had a doctorate, most of them in law.

## Simplistic interpretation

In the public mind, the Wannsee Conference is often perceived as the 'smoking gun' in Nazi Holocaust planning: a rare event when senior Nazis openly discussed their plans for the 'Final Solution of the Jewish Question', thereby providing the organisational and logistical basis upon which the Holocaust was constructed. Yet, such an interpretation is too simplistic. On its 70th anniversary, it is fitting to examine what the Wannsee Conference was, what it wasn't, and why it is still important.

There are a number of aspects that

argue against the Wannsee Conference being interpreted simply as the 'kick-off' meeting for the Holocaust. For one thing, the Holocaust was already under way by the time the conference was convened early in 1942.

The invasion of the Soviet Union the previous summer had seen a systematic targeting of Jewish civilians, while the deportation and execution of Reich Jews had begun in the autumn of 1941. Also, it is hard to see Wannsee serving any logistical purpose in planning the Holocaust when no representative of German Railways – the organisation most intimately involved with the logistics of the genocide – was present in the room.

And, if it was as important to the Holocaust as is often assumed, it seems strange that Wannsee was accorded only a 90-minute meeting, with a handful of civil servants – and that it produced a written protocol, drawn up subsequently by Eichmann and sent to all participants, of only 15 pages.

That protocol (a copy of which was found by American investigators in 1946) is also perplexingly vague for a document of such supposed importance. Of course, its wording was sanitised at Heydrich's insistence, but it is still notable that, though it addresses the issues of deportation and of mixed-race Jews, it makes no mention of the gas chambers then being developed, or any of the death



Reinhard Heydrich, Himmler's deputy in the SS and archetypal Nazi 'superman'

camps that would come into operation later that year. Instead, it makes only a single oblique reference to “preparatory activities” and refers to Jews dying off from “natural diminution”, through being used as forced labour, with the remnant being “treated accordingly”.

Whatever it did, then, Wannsee was clearly not intended to provide the blueprint for the Holocaust.

So, what was the Wannsee Conference for? The constellation of those present, with all organisations and ministries represented, gives a clue as to its primary purpose. The conference was mainly concerned with pushing through a key policy against the background of endemic administrative infighting within the Third Reich, where rival agencies often competed in a quasi-Darwinian struggle to gain favour and status.

Before his audience at Wannsee, therefore, Heydrich was careful to set out his bona fides as the prime mover in the development of Nazi policy towards the Jews, and cowed his potential rivals into acquiescing to his overlordship on the matter.

In addition, he was anxious to bind those present, and by extension their departments and organisations, into the new arrangement, to establish common complicity and prevent later backsliding. In his invitation to the conference, Heydrich had given the purpose of the meeting as that of establishing “a common position among the central authorities” with regard to the final solution of the Jewish question. That position, as Heydrich saw it, was that they would be working together, but that he was in charge. He was attempting, as Eichmann would later suggest at his trial, to “nail down” the mandarins.

Contrary to the assumptions of many, therefore, the Wannsee Conference did not mark the point at which the policy of genocide was arrived at – that, it seems, had occurred some weeks earlier. Neither was it intended to inform those present of a newly decided policy, for few in the room would have been surprised by what Heydrich had to say. Rather, it appears that Wannsee was as much about administrative squabbling within the Third Reich as it was about the Holocaust. It represented Heydrich seeking to exercise his control over a vitally important policy area and

ensuring that none of those present could later claim that they had understood things differently.

Why, then, is Wannsee still important? For one thing, it was symptomatic of the pervasive culture of administrative conflict within the Third Reich. The conference did not decisively cut the Gordian Knot of inter-agency wrangling, as Eichmann would later testify in Jerusalem. However, it certainly established Heydrich as one of the most radical and most dynamic players – until his assassination later that year – at the head of events. In that respect, alone, it was to be of profound significance.

## It is the closest the Nazis came to setting down their intentions for the Holocaust in writing

Most importantly, however, the Wannsee Protocol is the closest the Nazis came to setting down their intentions for the Holocaust in writing, and those intentions were of a chilling magnitude. Of the 11 million Jews in Europe in 1942, half were in countries beyond German control, yet they were included in Heydrich’s reckoning nonetheless.

Moreover, though it was itself only a snapshot in the evolving policy of the Third Reich towards European Jewry, Wannsee nonetheless reflected something of a step-change, from the rather haphazard and ad hoc deportations and massacres of late 1941, to the clear programme of extermination that would follow.

As such, though our precise understanding of its significance might shift, the Wannsee Conference fully deserves its place among the very darkest chapters of human history. **H**

**Roger Moorhouse** is the author of *Berlin at War: Life and Death in Hitler’s Capital, 1939–45* (Vintage, 2011)

### JOURNEYS

#### Books

- ▶ **The Villa, The Lake, The Meeting: Wannsee and the Final Solution** by Mark Roseman (Penguin, 2002)
- ▶ **Hitler’s Hangman: The Life of Reinhard Heydrich** by Robert Gerwarth (Yale University Press, 2011)
- ▶ **The Origins of the Final Solution** by Christopher Browning (Arrow, 2005)

## Key players at the Wannsee Conference

The administrator who played a central role in the annihilation of the Jews

### Adolf Eichmann



An early member of the SS, who had served in Dachau concentration camp, Eichmann was a gifted administrator who rose to prominence within IV-B4 (Jewish Affairs) of Heydrich’s RSHA. Responsible for the Wannsee Protocol and the deportation of the

Hungarian Jews, he was prominent in planning and executing the Holocaust. After escaping to Argentina in 1950, Eichmann was captured by Israeli agents and taken to Jerusalem, where he was tried and executed in 1962.

The diplomat who persuaded Germany’s allies to hand over their Jewish populations

### Martin Luther



A protégé of foreign minister Joachim von Ribbentrop, Luther served as a junior diplomat, before representing the Foreign Ministry at the Wannsee Conference. Later active in persuading countries allied to Germany to surrender their Jews for

deportation, he conspired against Ribbentrop in 1943 and was sent to Sachsenhausen concentration camp, where he remained until the end of the war, dying shortly afterwards. It was Luther’s copy of the Wannsee Protocol that was discovered by American investigators in 1946 – the only copy to have survived.

The lawyer who co-wrote Germany’s anti-Semitic laws

### Wilhelm Stuckart



With a doctorate in law, Stuckart had served as a Nazi party lawyer before being appointed as a state secretary in the Reich Interior Ministry. After coming to prominence as the primary author of the anti-Semitic Nuremberg Laws of 1935, Stuckart attended the Wannsee

Conference, where he advocated the forced sterilisation of mixed-race Jews. Arrested at the end of the war, he was tried in 1948, being sentenced to time served and released. He died in a road accident in 1953.