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WHAT WAS THE ROLE OF THE WANNSEE CONFERENCE IN THE FINAL SOLUTION?

*Hadassah Davis**

Introduction

For many years, I, like most people who have perhaps heard of the Wannsee Conference but not studied it in any depth, believed that it was here that the Final Solution was agreed upon and its mechanics discussed and decided. It was only when I agreed to tackle this topic for this essay that I came to realise that the Wannsee Conference was not what I had thought. As I struggled to make sense of the differing positions of Dawidowicz (that the Final Solution had been centrally planned) to that of Broszat (that the Final Solution gradually evolved) I became aware that there was no agreement amongst scholars of how the Final Solution came about.

In January 1992 a conference entitled 'The Final Solution – Origins and Implementation' was held in London over three days, attended by scholars from throughout the world. The papers given at this conference were collated and published by David Cesarani in 1994 and covered most of the area for this essay, but with a caveat. Professor Shmuel Krakowski warned us all that, with *glasnost* and the new possibility of access to archives in the Soviet Union, all that we had just heard may well need to be modified in the near future. How prescient he was, for in May 1994 a television documentary explored Professor Gerald Fleming's uncovering of architects' plans for the building of Auschwitz. These plans show that a uniquely designed crematorium, capable of burning fifteen or more corpses at a time, had already been designed by October 1941, three months before the Wannsee Conference took place.¹

The Wannsee Conference

The Wannsee Conference was initially scheduled to be held on 9 December 1941. It had to be postponed to the 20 January 1942 because of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour.² This latter event had serious repercussions for Germany as it brought America into the war.

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The conference was initiated by SS *Obergruppenführer* Reinhard Heydrich, chief of the *Geheime Staatspolizei* (security police) with special responsibility for implementing Nazi policies against the Jews. Heydrich reported to *Reichsführer* SS Heinrich Himmler who reported to Reich Marshal Hermann Göring, second in command to Hitler. Heydrich was, therefore, a high-ranking officer in the Nazi structure.

Heydrich chaired the meeting, with SS *Obersturmbannführer* Eichmann taking the minutes. Thirteen other people were present, mainly second-level representatives of various state and Nazi party organisations. These included the Ministry of Justice, the Interior and Foreign Ministry, the Ministry for the Occupied Eastern Territories, Office of the Governor General, the Office of the Plenipotentiary for the Four-Year Plan, the Party Chancellery, the Reich Chancellery, the Race and Settlement Main Office, the Reich Security Main office and the Security Police and *Sicherheitsdienst* (SD).³

The meeting opened with Heydrich informing the assembled group of his new appointment by the Reich Marshal as Plenipotentiary for the Preparation of the Final Solution of the European Jewish Question, thereby establishing his full power in this matter. He established that the aim of the meeting was to ensure cooperation between all agencies in speeding up evacuation of Jews from the *Lebensraum* (living space) of the German people. Henceforward, transfer to the East was to be increased, despite the difficulties this caused the receiving authorities.⁴

There then followed an overview of Jewish emigration statistics and a reiteration of the order of 23 October 1941 prohibiting any further emigration of Jews.⁵

Next followed a table of statistics giving the numbers of Jews resident in all European countries, both those under Nazi control and those yet to become so, along with a crude breakdown of the occupations of Jews living in the European area of the USSR.⁶ There then followed Heydrich's confirmation that Jews were to be utilised for labour:

in large (labour) columns, with the sexes separated... during which a large proportion will no doubt drop out through natural reduction. The remnant that eventually remains will require suitable treatment; because it will without doubt represent the most [physically] resistant part, it consists of a natural selection that could, on its release, become the germ-cell of a new Jewish revival.⁷

The evacuation was to begin in the area of the Reich, including the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia because of 'the housing problem and other socio-political needs'.⁸ Evacuated Jews would initially be taken to transit ghettos before continuing their journey eastwards. Any Jews aged sixty-five years and over, Jews with severe war injuries and Jews holding the Iron Cross, First Class were not to be deported but to be sent to an old-age ghetto, perhaps

Theresienstadt.⁹ Individual countries were then examined to assess specific difficulties involved in deporting Jews from them.

Dr Bühler, Secretary of State for the General Government (covering German-occupied central and southern Poland) requested that the Final Solution both begin in his region and as quickly as possible. He and Dr Meyer, from the Reich Ministry for the Occupied Eastern Territories, were both of the opinion that:

certain preparatory work for the final solution should be carried out locally in the area concerned, but that, in doing so alarm among the population must be avoided.¹⁰

Finally, there was a long discussion about the treatment of those with *Mischlinge* status; who would be accorded Jewish status and therefore come under laws pertaining to Jews, i.e., evacuation east, and who would be accorded *Mischlinge* status, second degree, and be treated as Germans. A caveat to any *Mischlinge* being permitted to remain in the Reich was 'voluntary' sterilisation, it being assumed that a *Mischlinge* would prefer this to evacuation.

Heydrich brought the meeting to a close with a request that all the conference participants give him the necessary support to carry out the Final Solution.

The meeting lasted only ninety minutes and took place between noon and lunch-time.

The Final Solution – When and Where Was It Ordered?

For many years it was believed the Wannsee Conference was a crucial meeting where the Final Solution was decided upon. However, as the study of the Second World War, the Nazi regime and the Holocaust gathered apace, with more and more documents either being found or being released from security classification, so scholars began to question the importance of this conference. No clear overall pattern was yet emerging, but there was some evidence to suggest that the Final Solution had been planned much earlier than January 1942.

Lucy Dawidowicz argues that the Final Solution originated from Hitler and was an integral part of Hitler's policies from as early as 1919. She supports her thesis with extracts from his speeches. However, much of Hitler's language was esoteric, a point she herself grapples with, although she argues cogently and well that the audience would be left in no doubt as to Hitler's policies for the removal and elimination of the Jews.¹¹

Eberhard Jäckel also supports the view that Hitler was the prime and only instigator of the Holocaust. He mentions a letter dated 16 September 1919 in which Hitler wrote that the ultimate goal of anti-Semitism must unalterably be the elimination of the Jews altogether.¹² In volume one of *Mein Kampf*, writ-

ten in prison in 1924 and published the following year, Hitler gave full vent to anti-Jewish sentiments concluding:

There is no such thing as coming to an understanding with the Jews. It must be the hard-and-fast, 'Either-Or'.¹³

In the second volume of *Mein Kampf* published in 1926, Hitler wrote:

At the beginning of the war, or even during the war, if twelve or fifteen thousand of these Jews who were corrupting the nation had been forced to submit to poison gas, just as hundreds of thousands of our best German workers from every social stratum and from every trade and calling had to face it in the field, then the millions of sacrifices made at the front would not have been in vain. On the contrary, if twelve thousand of these malefactors had been eliminated in proper time, probably the lives of a million decent men, who would be of value to Germany in the future, would have been saved.¹⁴

This gives force to the argument that Hitler's (and therefore Nazi) policies, right from the outset, decreed that all Jewish life would be eliminated from within the Reich. Furthermore, it makes a very direct link between Hitler's desire to gas Jews as part of that process of elimination, and the actual mass gassing of Jews in the years 1942-45. Hitler had seen just how effective gassing could be, even in the open air of the trenches, during the First World War. He had himself been hospitalised following a gas attack in October 1918.¹⁵

On 24 January 1939 Field Marshal Göring instructed Heydrich to solve the Jewish question 'by means of emigration or evacuation in the most convenient way possible'.¹⁶ Six days later Hitler delivered a speech in Berlin declaring that in the event of war:

the result will not be the bolshevisation of the earth, and thus the victory of Jewry, but the annihilation of the Jewish race in Europe.¹⁷

All this would seem to support assertions that Hitler and his Nazi aides, from the outset, were planning to annihilate the Jewish people in territories under Reich control.

Not all scholars agree with this view. If, from the beginning, it had been an integral part of Hitler's policies to annihilate the Jews, why would he not have instigated this when he came to power in 1933?

Martin Broszat develops this question.¹⁸ Whilst not denying that Hitler both gave approval and is responsible for the Holocaust¹⁹ Broszat maintains that the killings were:

proposed and initiated by others as well, that they were not planned long in advance and initiated by a single secret order.²⁰

Broszat's thesis is that if it had been Hitler's intention to exterminate the Jews from as early as 1919, he would have started this programme earlier than

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the 1940s. In fact, Hitler's policies encouraged Jewish emigration right up to October 1941, when emigration was made illegal. By then few countries were taking refugees. Hitler's policy of extermination, therefore, evolved from his inability to get rid of Jews in any other way. There then evolved the killing apparatus, starting with the *Einsatzgruppen* in Russia, developing into the gas vans at Chelmno and then finally evolving into the gas chambers and multiple crematoria of the death camps.

Certainly there are inconsistencies in Nazi policies towards the Jews. Despite Hitler's writings in *Mein Kampf*, official Nazi policy during the 1930s was not genocide of the Jews but enforced emigration. In a letter from Göring to the Reich Minister of the Interior dated 24 January 1939 Göring wrote:

The emigration of the Jews from Germany is to be furthered by all possible means.²¹

The letter went on to specify how emigration could be speeded up by simplifying emigration procedure.

In May 1940 the Madagascar Plan was initiated whereby, following a proposed peace settlement with the British and a return of German colonies in Africa, Jews would be settled in Madagascar. At first glance this would seem to indicate that mass extermination of the Jews was not part of Nazi policies at this time. Yet Breitman, successfully in my opinion, argues for a different interpretation. Breitman suggests that the Madagascar Plan was a convenient political means of mollifying certain members of the Nazi hierarchy.²² Certainly the logistics of transporting millions of Jews from all over Europe to Madagascar would seem to mitigate against this being considered a serious plan. Breitman also argues that there was no intention of deporting the *Ostjuden* but only west European Jews, otherwise why would:

new concentration and labour camps designed to exploit Jewish labour under brutal conditions for some years

have been set up?²³

Finally, there was the testimony after the war of Viktor Brack of the *Führer* Chancellery that he and his co-workers had pushed the idea of the Madagascar plan as an alternative to genocide of the Jews, thereby allowing the American interrogator to confirm that the destruction of the Jews had already been planned prior to 1940.²⁴ Certainly, by December

1940 the Madagascar Plan was no longer an option, brought to an end by Germany's loss of air supremacy following the Battle of Britain.²⁵

Another area of confusion can be found in the work of the *Einsatzgruppen*.²⁶ It would seem that initially they were under orders to eliminate Jews in the Bolshevik state and party apparatus²⁷ and to encourage local

pogroms against Jews by the indigenous population.²⁸ Only later did they indiscriminately kill all Jews, men, women and children, it being left to the leaders of the individual *Einsatzgruppen* and *Einsatzkommandos* how far they were prepared to go.²⁹ When the *Einsatzgruppen* were set up for Operation Barbarossa (the German invasion of the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941) they numbered 3,000 men, far too few to kill all the Jews in Russia.³⁰ However, by the end of 1941 the *Einsatzgruppen* had been increased to 33,000 men with orders from Himmler to kill all Jews, old and young, men and women.³¹

A further letter to Heydrich from Göring dated 31 July 1941 (following up his letter of 24 January 1939) ordered Heydrich to submit promptly to Göring an overall plan:

of the preliminary organisational, practical and financial measures for the execution of the intended final solution (*Endlösung*) of the Jewish question.³²

This certainly indicates that something drastic was in preparation. One month later, on 1 August, Heydrich informed Himmler that:

in the future there will be no more Jews in the annexed eastern Territories.³³

Concurrently, in October 1941, the firm of Topf and Sons, based in Erfurt, was commissioned to build a further crematorium for Auschwitz/Birkenau. They had already supplied Auschwitz in the 1940s with three 'double' ovens capable of burning two bodies at the same time, thereby economising on fuel.³⁴ Now they were instructed to design something better. They came up with a new concept, five sets of three oven incinerators in a row linked to one chimney, capable of incinerating fifteen bodies at one time.³⁵

Also, in that same month, on 23 October 1941 Heinrich Müller, Chief of Gestapo, sent a letter to the Chief of the Security Police and SD for Belgium and France that no further emigration of Jews was permitted. However, the:

evacuation Aktionen will remain unaffected.³⁶

This was the second letter sent out stating that emigration was to cease. An earlier letter, sent out by Heydrich's office on 20 May 1941, had stated that Jews from France and Belgium were to be forbidden to emigrate to better allow German Jews to do so.³⁷ This earlier letter also contained a further reason for halting emigration from France and Belgium:

in view of the undoubtedly imminent final solution of the Jewish question.³⁸

This earlier letter of May clearly indicates that mass extermination of the Jews was in the planning stages. Yet on 21 July 1941 when Germany's campaign in Russia was going well and Hitler expected the war to be over within a few months, he hinted that Jews could be sent to Siberia, beyond the German

line, where Stalin could deal with them.³⁹ This may have been mooted for tactical reasons. If a defeated Russia had to cope with a large influx of destitute refugees it would further weaken their ability to recuperate. However, given Stalin's track record it can be assumed that he would have had little compunction in allowing the refugees to starve or freeze to death in Siberia, a fact of which Heydrich and Hitler would have been aware.

A further indication that annihilation of the Jews was centrally planned well before the Wannsee Conference took place was the testimony given after the war by SS *Obersturmbannführer* Rudolf Höss, *Commandant* of Auschwitz. He recalled that, whilst he could not remember the exact date, in the summer of 1941 he was suddenly ordered to Berlin by *Reichsführer* SS Himmler. Himmler told him that the *Führer* had ordered the Final Solution of the Jewish problem and that his own camp, Auschwitz, would play a major role in their extermination. Auschwitz was considered ideal being beside a railroad junction, yet isolated and easily camouflaged. Höss was told to liaise with Eichmann and report back on their plans.⁴⁰ Shortly after this meeting, said Höss, Eichmann came to Auschwitz. They discussed the order of countries that Jewish transports would come from and the methods of extermination. Shooting was considered impossible both because of the sheer numbers involved and the fact that the men would have to kill women and children:

which would burden the SS people very much.⁴¹

Gassing was deemed the only solution although producing carbon monoxide in the massive quantities needed was going to be difficult.

Eichmann was going to find out about some gas which would be easy to come by and which would not require a big apparatus.⁴²

Höss and Eichmann then searched around the neighbourhood of Auschwitz to determine the most suitable site for mass gassings. The site they found later became known as Birkenau 3.

It was situated a little out of the way, hidden by a little forest and was close to the railroad. The corpses were to be buried in a nearby field in wide, deep trenches. We calculated that with gas we could kill 800 Jews at one sitting.⁴³

Later, while Höss was away, his deputy at Auschwitz, *Hauptsturmführer* Fritsch, used Zyklon B on Russian prisoners of war. Zyklon B was already used in Auschwitz to kill mice. Following the success of this experimental use of Zyklon B it was decided, in discussion with Eichmann during his next visit, to use this gas to exterminate the Jews. Höss stated:

I cannot tell exactly when the extermination of Jews began, probably already in December 1941, maybe in January 1942.⁴⁴

That is, three months after Topf and Sons had designed their new crematorium capable of burning fifteen bodies in one go.

In fact the camp at Chelmno, sixty kilometres from Lodz and intended for the annihilation of the Jewish inmates of that ghetto, began gassing Jews on 8 December 1941 using mobile vans and carbon monoxide.⁴⁵ This was the same method, and presumably the same vans, used earlier in Germany's 'euthanasia' programme against the physically and mentally disabled. These early gassings, at both Auschwitz and Chelmno, took place fully one year before the Wannsee Conference.

Conclusion

The major problem when exploring the Wannsee Conference is that there is very little documentary evidence available. The programme of extermination was top secret, therefore as little as possible was committed to paper. Wherever possible oral instruction was given, especially at the higher military levels. Only a few surviving written documents exist as many were destroyed by the Germans towards the end of the war to cover up their actions. Of those that remain, many documents contain code names and terms that prevent a clear understanding of their contents. The Nazi personnel who survived and were sent to trial were not questioned by historians, but by interrogators whose agenda was to satisfy guilt. Therefore, historical questions were not asked, or not asked in sufficient detail to enable us to piece together completely the planning of the extermination process. After their trials they were executed, their knowledge dying with them.

It is, however, increasingly clear that the Wannsee Conference was not the place where any major decisions were taken about the annihilation of Europe's Jews.

It seems that Hitler had already envisaged a genocide of the Jews by 1939; if not even earlier, if we accept at face value his writings in *Mein Kampf*. Viktor Brack's testimony makes it clear that extermination of the Jews was already being planned by late 1940. The Madagascar Plan, Brack says, was never a serious option as far as his superiors were concerned. Certainly, it was no longer viable after the Battle of Britain in December 1940. With Germany at war with Britain, and later the USA, emigration was becoming less and less a feasible option, and was banned by the Reich in May 1941 and again in October 1941. Unable to send Jews out of the Reich as émigrés another solution was needed.

The massive increase of the *Einsatzgruppen* force, from 3,000 to 33,000 in the six-month period from June 1941 to December 1941 indicates that the

killing operations were becoming more intensive. Concurrently, Höss was informed in the summer of 1941 that his camp, Auschwitz, was to play a major role in the extermination of Jews. According to Höss, this extermination began in December 1941/January 1942, simultaneous to Chelmno's use of gas vans to kill Jews. In tandem with this extermination programme, Topf and Sons, having already built three 'double' ovens in Auschwitz, were commissioned in October 1941 to provide a new design of oven capable of incinerating fifteen bodies at once.

The evidence seems to suggest that genocide, whilst part of Hitler's writings and speeches from 1919 onwards, did not become the option of choice until late 1940. This was when emigration became impossible whilst simultaneously millions of Jews, following Germany's campaign in the East, came under Reich control. Certainly the killing apparatus, in the form of the *Einsatzgruppen*, experimental gassing of Jews and commissioning of a new crematorium, all in 1941, indicate that some central decision had been made during that year, or earlier in 1940, and that organised planning was now moving the pieces into place that would enable the mass killing of the majority of Europe's Jews.

1940 is the earliest dating so far in indicating that the Final Solution had been discussed by high-ranking Nazi leaders, certainly Hitler, Göring, Himmler, Heydrich and Eichmann. By 1941 the infrastructure was already in the process of being put into place, which suggests that the decision to annihilate the Jews must have been taken prior to 1941.

The Wannsee Conference in January 1942 was therefore not crucial to deciding the fate of Europe's Jews. It merely updated the participants in planning the removal of West European Jews to Eastern Europe, work camps and death. The infrastructure for mass killing had already been ordered and was being moved into place.

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Notes

1. BBC, Blueprints of Genocide, p.10.
2. *EJ*, Vol. 16, p. 264.
3. Arad et al., pp. 249-50.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 251.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 153-54. The reason given for this order during the Wannsee Conference was 'the dangers of emigration in war-time, and the possibilities in the East' (*ibid.*, p.252).
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 253-55.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 256.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 256.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 256.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 260-61.
11. Dawidowicz, pp. 193-202.
12. Jäckel in Marrus, p. 55.
13. Gilbert, p. 27.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 29.
15. Dawidowicz, p. 39.
16. Arad et al., p. 233.
17. Gilbert, p. 76.
18. I am reliant here on others' writings about Broszat's theories, having been unable to obtain an English translation (or even to ascertain whether one exists) of *Hitler und die Genesis der 'Endlösung'. Aus Anlass der Thesen von David Irving*.
19. Broszat's thesis was written as a refutation of David Irving's claim that the final solution was implemented without Hitler's knowledge or consent.
20. Jäckel in Marrus, p. 64.
21. Arad et al., p. 125.

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22. Breitman in Cesarani, p. 78.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid., pp. 79-80.
25. Browning in Cesarani, p. 137.
26. Prior to Operation Barbarossa, the German invasion of the Soviet Union, on 22 June 1941, the *Einsatzgruppen* were set up under the SS. Their purpose was to follow closely behind the *Wehrmacht* and dispose of those citizens thought to represent an immediate threat to the Reich. The *Einsatzgruppen* had been used successfully before this in the invasion of Poland in September 1939.
27. Cesarani, p. 10.
28. Browning in Cesarani, p. 138.
29. Streit in Cesarani, p. 106.
30. Browning in Cesarani, p. 138.
31. Ibid., p. 140.
32. Arad et al., p. 233.
33. Gilbert, p. 177.
34. BBC Blueprints of Genocide, p. 7.
35. Ibid., p. 10.
36. Arad et al., pp. 153-54.
37. German Jews not being forbidden to emigrate until 1 October 1941, Marrus, pp. 60-61.
38. Ibid. It is unclear why the second letter was necessary. Possibly there was some confusion over Heydrich's earlier order necessitating clarification.
39. Ibid., pp. 61-62.
40. Friedman, pp. 280-81.
41. Ibid., p. 281.
42. Ibid., p. 282.
43. Ibid.
44. Ibid., p. 283.
45. Dawidowicz, p. 175.