

## CHAPTER IX

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# WANNSEE

## TOWARD THE “FINAL SOLUTION”

The German defeat at Moscow, including the difficult retreat which continued through mid-February 1942, was a major turning point in the history of both the Third Reich and the Second World War. It ended an unbroken string of stunning political, diplomatic, and military victories for the führer and his acolytes. The fiasco of Typhoon robbed them of their overconfidence. As charismatic leader of the predatory Behemoth, Hitler needed success abroad to keep refueling the legitimacy of his office and regime at home. Certain that a no-win war would spell the end of the Nazi project, he was not about to seek a negotiated settlement. Not too surprisingly, no one inside Germany pressed him to do so. The generals in particular were quiescent, largely because they were awed by the effectiveness of Hitler's peremptory order to stand and fight, which was thought to have prevented a strategic withdrawal from turning into a headlong rout. Besides, not only was Hitler incapable of contemplating a face-saving compromise, but the state of international politics was such as to preclude it.

As of the winter of 1941–42, the führer was entrapped in a war that could neither be won militarily nor terminated politically. Of course, he and his associates hoped against hope that Germany might still be able to seize back the initiative in 1942 by attacking in the direction of Stalingrad and capturing the Caucasus, rich in desperately needed oil. At the same time, Hitler feared that the military situation might have become irreversible and that Barbarossa, the pivot of his overall project, had miscarried, and for good. His despondency became so intense that it began to color both his private and public discourse. After repeatedly invoking the help of God, Hitler even lashed out at the German people, insisting that it deserved to “disappear” if it could not “preserve” itself. But above all he stepped up his malediction of the Jews.

Whereas in the fall Hitler and his generals had taken the great gamble of trying to storm Moscow in a supreme effort to salvage Barbarossa, so now they set about steeling Germany for a drawn-out war that they suspected could not be won. Once again, the Nazi elite and its faithful collaborators took a fatal turn, this time less by free choice than out of dire necessity. With their overweening presumption exacerbated by rage, their bipolar view of the world became more frenzied. Hitler caught and expressed the incipient apocalyptic mood when in late 1941 he twice declared the issue to have become one of "*Sein oder Nichtsein.*"

Hitler had no intention of seeking a strategic surrender to cut Germany's losses and Europe's suffering. Instead, he meant to fight it out to the bitter end, if need be by pulling much of Europe down with the Third Reich. As always, Hitler had no difficulty persuading the best of Germany's power elite to back this preposterous military stand. Meanwhile, he gave the SS free rein to intensify their ideological crusade and to vent their spleen for the affront to their self-esteem. The mix of rational-bureaucratic and fanatical impulses, so characteristic of the Nazi project, was certain to become ever more lethal and insidious.

To fortify the Behemoth for a reckless all-or-nothing struggle meant taking a series of interrelated steps, all of which exacerbated the totalization and increasing brutality of war. The shift from blitz warfare to a war of endurance called for full economic mobilization. Given the Reich's grave deficiency in critical foods, raw materials, and manpower, this called for the intensified exploitation of all conquered and German-dominated territories. The occupied east was in double jeopardy, since vast German armies there would also have to live off the land. The extraction of economic surplus called for ever tougher occupation policies, partly in order to contain growing resistance to conscription for forced labor at either local work sites or within the Reich.

This hardening of the German war effort would have the most catastrophic consequences in the east, where it would feed the fury of the Wehrmacht and the SS, already intensified by the stubborn and unexpected resistance of the Red Army. Unlike the political class of France's Third Republic, which Berlin proposed to break without utterly destroying it and its homeland, the Soviet elite was marked for extinction and its country for conquest and dismemberment. Not torn by internecine power struggles, Russia's political class meant to hold fast against overwhelming odds and at any cost. By yielding space and sacrificing men, Stalin and his inner circle sought to gain the time needed to raise new divisions, to relocate industries and skilled work-

ers inland, to fortify major cities, to organize a *levée en masse*, and to unleash partisan warfare. No less resolute than Hitler, by November 6, 1941, Stalin had proclaimed that "if the German invaders, . . . these people without honor and conscience, [and] with the morality of animals, . . . want a war of extermination, . . . they shall have it."

In Nazi eyes this determination to fight to the last was the crowning crime of the Soviets and of bolshevism. As Himmler is reported to have told his SS leaders in mid-1942, in all previous campaigns Germany's enemies had had the good sense and decency to yield to superior force, largely because of their "age-old and civilized . . . west European refinement." In the battle of France, enemy units surrendered as soon as they were forewarned "that all further resistance would be senseless." Of course, "we SS men" moved into Russia without delusions. But until this last winter too many Germans had failed to realize that "Russian commissars and unconditional Bolsheviks are thoroughly permeated with a brutal will power, a beastlike tenacity which makes them fight to the finish and which has nothing to do with human logic or duty but . . . is a drive common to all animals." Indeed, the Bolsheviks were such "dehumanized beasts" that when "encircled and without food they resort to slaughtering some of their own comrades in order to hold out longer," a behavior bordering on "cannibalism." In what was a "war of annihilation [*Vernichtungskampf*]," two "races and peoples" were locked in "unconditional" combat: on the one side "this brute matter, this mass, these primeval men, or better these subhumans [*Untermenschen*], led by commissars"; on the other, "we Germans, still saddled with a Christian mentality which, however, no longer tolerates the suffering of Christian martyrs or fanatics." Naturally, the SS leaders elected to be "the [principal] carriers of this fight against the commissars." Following the "brutal struggle of this last winter . . . there can be no capitulation, no peace or armistice, but only either Russia's destruction [*Vernichtung*] or our own."

The first step in bracing the Behemoth for all-out war, which Napoleon had once called "the business of barbarians," was a change in military leadership. As noted above, when von Brauchitsch stepped down, Hitler became his own commander in chief. This was an essentially symbolic but telling act, since the *führer* had long since taken charge. As if to remove any vestige of vacillation, he replaced the three principal field commanders in the east with generals of proven Nazi sympathies: Field Marshal Walter von Reichenau replaced von Rundstedt, Field Marshal Günther von Kluge replaced von Bock, and General George von Küchler replaced von Leeb. Quite a few divisional officers were displaced as well. But since the old team

had not exactly opposed the dehumanization of warfare, these personnel changes were more in the nature of a mutation than a purge. With one exception, the officers who were imputed to have bungled Operation Typhoon were cashiered or resigned. They were neither arrested and tried, nor executed. Characteristically, von Rundstedt and Guderian were relieved of their commands without being dishonored, and their eclipse was temporary.

Germany's military caste eagerly faced the challenges presented by the disastrous conditions and enormous obstacles on the eastern front. If senior generals were fiercely determined to persevere, middle and lower level officers were even more so. Up and down the command hierarchy there was an iron resolve to keep the troops fighting regardless of casualties, physical hardships, and mental strains. As a privileged collaborator and beneficiary of the regime, the officer corps almost naturally slipped into preaching the Nazi decalogue to justify the worst excesses to themselves and to others. True, from 1914 to 1918, during the first major phase of the Thirty Years War of the twentieth century, German officers also had used defamatory slogans to incite their men to lay down their lives for what was proclaimed to be a noble cause. But at the time they had not portrayed the soldiers in the opposing trenches as subhumans, nor had they traduced their leaders as infidels to be slain. As of the winter of 1941–42, the worsening battle conditions and the execration of "Judeobolshevism" fomented a peculiar soldierly callousness coupled with a distinct indifference to the torment of civilians, especially of Jews. Fitting the Wehrmacht to fight an increasingly reckless and futile war, its officers made it a shield for the rampant expansion of the fatal SS state within the Behemoth, and also used its needs to justify that expansion. For in order to muster the resources and command the obedience for this barbarous conflict, there was need for ever more coercion throughout German-occupied Europe.

The forced shift from blitz warfare to a protracted and grinding war of position necessitated a radical reorganization of the Reich's economy. The logic of the blitzkrieg had never been purely military and strategic. In addition to conforming with nazism's pretense of dynamic energy, the idea of lightning campaigns had suited Hitler's diplomatic and political strategem. Although he had speeded rearmament during the 1930s, stealing a march on the other major powers, he had done so without converting to a full war economy. After achieving a comparative advantage in arms output, both quantitative and qualitative, the führer set out to defeat his foreign enemies, one by one, in a succession of quick campaigns. All along, he sought and

raced to avoid a war of endurance, because he knew that even with all-out mobilization—a prospect he abhorred—Germany would be at a disadvantage. Barbarossa was conceived and launched in this same spirit. The conquering armies, apart from living off the land, were instructed to exploit instantly and maximally the occupied territories with a view to making possible the continuation of the war without a full-scale conversion of the German economy. From the outset the stress was on despoiling Russia of cereals, oil seeds, and industrial raw materials, notably petroleum, for shipment back home.

On July 27, 1941, Göring issued orders for the management and ruthless despoliation of “the newly occupied eastern territories.” For the time being, collective farms were to be maintained to guarantee “maximum production . . . in the interest of the German war economy.” As for Soviet Russia’s oil industry, because of “its supreme importance for the German Wehrmacht and economy,” it would be taken over and operated by German firms, following guidelines set by the Kontinentale Öl A. G., the oil consortium of the Four-Year Plan. In the long run, not Bolshevik collectivism but government-directed private enterprise would guarantee maximum efficiency in territories to be exploited along colonial lines. In the short run, however, since production for war had “absolute priority,” there would be no “abrupt changes in the economic system” in the Russian territories. During this transitional period the “most important industrial and commercial establishments will be run by German entrepreneurs, acting as individual trustees.” But Göring made a point of stressing that “this trustee system, under strict state supervision, does not constitute the final solution [*Endlösung*].”

Four days later, on July 31, General Georg Thomas, chief of the Economic and Armament Bureau of the Supreme Command, presided over a conference of his senior staff concerned with the eastern territories. Having made overly optimistic assumptions about the speed of military operations, the bureau had thought rather too much in terms of “political economy.” Under present circumstances, however, its “principal assignment” was to solve “short-term problems.” In the east, while Alfred Rosenberg was charged with working “for the future,” for the time being Göring was “exclusively interested in oil and cereals.” General Thomas stressed that the primary task was “to provision the field armies and Germany,” which might entail starvation in certain territories, especially since the local “intelligentsia has been slain” and Berlin would be in “no position” to administer all of them. Unless “Russia runs out of reserves and the Russian state breaks down,” it might take a long time to capture the Caucasus and the lower Volga. In the meantime, the staff earmarked

for regions whose seizure was delayed should be given other assignments. Long-term political considerations, Thomas insisted, would have to give way to pressing economic needs. Accordingly, there would be “no restoration of private enterprise,” except in the territories taken by Russia under the Nazi-Soviet Pact. The assembled officials agreed that petroleum would be used “in the first instance to cover German needs”; that “raw materials will be carried off ruthlessly” and that “Jews will be lodged in barracks [*kaserniert*] and put to work in closed labor columns.”

Mounting tensions soon developed between supplying, on the one hand, the field armies and local populations and, on the other, the home front. On November 6 the southern military command, in agreement with the Economic Inspectorate, insisted that “provisioning of the troops should take precedence over provisioning of the *Heimat*.” There were economic and security reasons for feeding the native work force, but the rest of the population might have to be starved in order to extract surpluses for shipment to the fatherland. Two days later, on November 8, Göring presided over a high-level conference to set “the general principles of economic policy for the newly occupied eastern territories.” By now the chief injunction was unequivocal: “For the duration the needs of the war economy will be the supreme law of all economic activity, . . . with emphasis on the production of food and raw materials.” The local standard of living must be kept to a minimum in order to extract low-cost surpluses for “the Reich and other European countries,” and also for reasons of war financing. While stockpiles of cereals should be secured, no effort should be spared to procure “maximum grain surpluses” for 1943, which meant concentrating on the harvest of 1942. Equally vigorous measures were called for to relieve the meat shortage in the Reich. As for the provisioning of the local urban populations, it could be no more than minimal. For the time being, “nothing at all can be done for the big cities (Moscow, Leningrad, and Kiev), the resulting consequences being hard but unavoidable.” In the nonagrarian sector the emphasis should be on obtaining first oil, then manganese, followed by coal, iron, and timber.

Meanwhile, Göring had issued instructions for the exploitation of Soviet labor. In the operational zones it was to be used “in the construction of roads, rail lines, and airports; in the removal of rubble; and in the clearance of mines.” Most “construction battalions” of the Wehrmacht should be dissolved and their skilled labor sent to work in armaments plants, since there were enough Russians “to dig ditches and crush stones.” Use should also be made of Soviet prisoners of war, to be selected with an eye to their reliability. Some

of them, together with "free Russian workers," could be sent to work in the Reich.

Even before the start of Barbarossa, General Thomas as well as Fritz Todt, Reich minister of arms and ammunition, had questioned the wisdom of not converting to full war production. As of the early fall of 1941, the economy was hard-pressed to make good the unanticipated material needs and losses on the eastern front, the principal impediment being the shortage of manpower and raw materials. Even so, Hitler continued to resist a changeover. He still preferred to strain the limited war economy, to use up existing stocks, and to cling to the hope of relieving shortages by despoiling the rest of the Continent, in particular eastern Europe and most especially the Soviet Union.

But immediately following the halt before Moscow and the American entry into the war, the führer conceded the need for at least some changes in the Reich's economy. Finally, on January 10, 1942, he signed the directive "Armament 1942," which called for a switch to an all-out war economy. It prescribed a radical reordering of priorities, involving the sharp cutback of consumer production in the interest of rapid and massive increases in the output of weapons, munitions, and other military essentials. Against the somber background of continuing reverses on the eastern front, the appropriate officials and agencies rushed to reorganize the economy for a protracted, grueling, and draining war. The new exigencies and priorities called for a review of the proper place and relationship not only of the armed forces and the private sector, but also of the SS, which was about to play an expanding economic role of its own.

On January 20 and 21, 1942, leading armaments officials met in Berlin to set the new guidelines for the rationalization of the war economy. Significantly, this meeting took place the same day and in the same city as the Wannsee Conference, summoned to expedite the solution of the "Jewish problem." Even though these two conclaves proceeded independent of each other, their participants moved in the same political and bureaucratic circles and they acted from shared premises and in response to similar circumstances.

At the armaments conference, General Thomas set forth the context and rationale for converting to a full-scale mobilization for war. He assured the assembled officials that although he fully understood their being "weighed down with worry" he was also certain that they would do their utmost to "serve the fatherland in this critical moment." The conflict had entered a new phase, and "the longer it lasts, the more taxing the war effort and its attendant complications will

become.” While the Wehrmacht was equal to any task on the military front, there was need for “comprehensive measures on the economic front to keep up with Anglo-American economic and arms production.” General Thomas conceded that until recently, in anticipation of a swift victory over the Soviets, the stress had been on bolstering the air force and navy. But this expectation had been defeated by “the early winter in Russia, the tenacity of the Russian soldier, and the surprising performance of Russia’s armaments industry,” with the result that the Wehrmacht had suffered “unexpectedly high material losses.” As things stood, it would take “another campaign to completely smash and once for all dispose of the Bolshevik army.” General Thomas announced the führer’s decision to give first priority to the needs of the army, ahead of the other two services, along with the production of oil and coal.

Both General Thomas and Fritz Todt took it for granted that big industry and agriculture would remain the essential motor of the new war economy. Indeed, there was every reason to continue trusting the stewardship of the economy to the established industrial and agrarian magnates and managers, who with rare exceptions eagerly served and abetted what might be called the Nazi warfare and conquest state. In this critical moment the economic elites were no less ready and willing to go to unconscionable extremes than the military and civil-service elites. In fact, among industrialists and agrarians there were no dissidents comparable to von Rundstedt and Guderian, perhaps because their economic autonomy was unimpaired and their businesses continued to prosper. Disinclined to dispute their expertise, Hitler was loath to cashier any of the field marshals of organized capitalism. Just as the generals of the army readily went along with the barbarization of warfare, so the captains of industry and agriculture agreed that slave and prisoner labor be harnessed for war production.

There is no denying the Third Reich’s escalating shortage of labor. Germany simply lacked the manpower to sustain a protracted war for European hegemony. In the winter of 1941–42 Berlin faced a rising demand for both soldiers and workers. The Wehrmacht had to make good its losses in the east while preparing for a two-front war. Additional conscripts could only be drawn from the workforce, notably from the ranks of industrial labor essential for war production, in large part because the regime was ideologically predisposed against mobilizing women to work in factories. Faced with this dilemma, the Nazi authorities increasingly pressed into service non-German labor to man their hard-pressed war economy.

There were three principal sources of alternate labor: prisoners of war, foreign civilian workers, and the working slaves in concentration

camps and ghettos. Following Marshal Pétain's strategic surrender, Germany held over 1 million French POWs. At first, of those who were put to work, most were employed in agriculture. Over time, however, ever larger numbers were shifted into industry to meet the urgent need for skilled manpower. Even though the Soviet Union was never defeated, no less than 5 million of its citizens were taken captive by the Germans. Unlike the French prisoners, they were mistreated mercilessly: well over 50 percent of them were murdered or left to die of starvation, disease, and exhaustion. In addition, to relieve their acute labor shortage, the Germans began to impress Soviet prisoners for hard labor. During the first half of 1942, which saw a considerable leap in armaments production, 200,000 skilled hands were selected from among them for work in the Reich, principally in mines. This captive Soviet work force almost doubled within a year and reached close to 750,000 in mid-1944.

As for foreign civilian workers, Berlin recruited them throughout occupied Europe. At first, scores of them rushed to the Reich voluntarily, driven there by unemployment in their own countries. Some 100,000 Poles went to Germany before the end of 1939. Between May 1940 and October 1941 another 300,000 foreigners came to work in German industry, most of them from western Europe. Soon it became clear, however, that voluntary foreign labor and the use of prisoners of war would be insufficient. Under mounting coercion 1.6 million foreign workers came to the Reich during the next six months, and their total rose to 3 million before the end of 1942. This transfusion of cheap foreign labor was far from negligible, since in 1942 it accounted for most of the expansion of the German work force and replaced the workers conscripted into the Wehrmacht. By mid-1943 an additional 800,000 foreigners were working in Germany, most of them having been taken there against their will. All told, and as we shall see in the next chapter, between 1940 and 1945 over 7 million foreign workers toiled in Germany. In 1944 they made up over 25 percent of the work force in the armaments industry, which meant that every fourth tank, truck, or case of munitions was produced by them.

Throughout these years the proportion of *Ostarbeiter*, or workers from eastern Europe, in the foreign labor force kept rising. At Albert Speer's suggestion, on March 21, 1942, Hitler appointed the gauleiter of Thuringia, Fritz Sauckel, general plenipotentiary for labor, responsible to Göring. Within a month Sauckel circulated a statement insisting that "the occupied eastern territories are [Europe's] greatest reservoir" for foreign labor. In particular, labor would have to be procured from the "conquered Soviet territories . . . if need be by

impressment." Sauckel estimated that the occupied countries of western Europe could provide only "one-quarter of the total requirement of foreign workmen." Eventually, at least 75 percent of all foreign workers in Germany, not counting working prisoners of war, were levied in the eastern occupied territories, among them well over 1 million Poles.

The concentration camps and ghettos became the third source of forced labor, and will also be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter. Meanwhile, it is worth noting that the camps were of practically no economic importance until well after the outbreak of war, when the inmate population increased rapidly. But almost from the start top leaders of the SS contemplated exploiting the labor of their victims to expand their own political and economic reach. Himmler in particular proposed to gear the camps to help supply and provision the expanding *Waffen-SS*, his other lever of influence and power. To this end the SS set up the German Equipment Works. But since Himmler and his associates expected the wars of conquest to be won in no time, they envisaged using camp labor above all to expedite the architectural exaltation of the Thousand-Year Reich. With this in mind, and with a view to fostering their financial autonomy, they chartered the German Earth and Stone Works to produce granite for the construction of monumental public buildings as well as of stately SS headquarters and German outposts in the east. The inmates of concentration camps were to serve as forced miners and masons for this brazen project. By late 1941 the SS had contributed over 10,000 forced laborers to the Reich's work force, having abandoned their own construction program in July.

With the changeover to concerted industrial mobilization in early 1942, the SS resolved to enlarge their slave-labor force with a view to serving the war effort. As the Third Reich braced for a long war, the SS had two alternatives: they could continue to use this manpower to build and run their own factories or they could hire it out to firms in the private sector. The SS and big business soon agreed on the expediency and profitability of locating private plants near or inside concentration camps, to be enlarged or set up for this purpose. The reservoir of camp labor could also be tapped for mining and construction workers.

Shortly after Sauckel became labor boss of the war economy, SS General Oswald Pohl was appointed to head the newly created Central Economic and Administrative Office (WVHA) within the SS, which was to rival Reinhard Heydrich's Reich Central Security Office (RSHA) in importance. He was charged with coordinating the use

and deployment of concentration-camp labor. In agreement with Himmler, in a charter memorandum parallel to Sauckel's, on April 30, 1942, Pohl stressed that the war had "radically changed" the purpose of the camps: whereas heretofore their principal mission had been political, with emphasis on "security, [re]education, and prevention," hereafter it would be economic. He vowed to "give first priority to mobilizing the full working capacity of the inmates for war—for the increase of armaments—until later, when it will be used for peacetime undertakings." In time, Pohl became the economic tsar of the sprawling SS establishment and, as such, a powerful force in the German economy.

Of course, there was an intense contradiction between exploiting captive labor "rationally" and optimally for war production and hyperexploiting and scourging it for political reasons. In this regard Pohl and Heydrich worked at cross-purposes, with Himmler supporting both simultaneously. The two pursued clashing objectives, and their cooperation was marred by personal rivalries and bureaucratic squabbles. But whatever their differences, both Pohl and Heydrich considered their captives in instrumental terms dictated by the conflicting exigencies of simultaneously maximizing war production and implementing the Nazi warrant for destruction. This same antithesis informed Nazi Germany's deadly practices in the Jewish ghettos.

The intense radicalization of Jewish policy coincided with and was fueled by the breakdown of the eastern campaign and of the sense of invulnerability of the Nazi regime, now embarked on a reckless struggle for *Sein oder Nichtsein*. As we saw, even the military shortfalls of the late summer and fall of 1941, which preceded this radical turn, conditioned and fired the transgressions of the Wehrmacht and the savageries of the Einsatzgruppen. Now that their military undertaking had come to a perilous impasse, the Nazi leaders not only steeled their armed forces, economy, and party state for a war to the finish; they also intensified their murderous crusade against "Judeobolshevism," and increasingly directed it against the Jews. Since the key cities and cadres of bolshevism remained out of reach, the political soldiers of the Third Reich increasingly struck out at a purported member of the "common enemy" who was close at hand and defenseless—the Jew. Throughout, however, the Nazi leaders continued to portray their battle on the eastern front as a death struggle against the protean Bolshevik peril, not least because they felt that the appeals of antibolshevism were much more effective than the appeals of anti-Semitism, both at home and especially abroad. Until the inglorious defeat at

Stalingrad, Nazi propaganda also execrated the twin evil of "Judeobolshevism," but thereafter it increasingly anathematized bolshevism *tout court*.

The Wannsee Conference, which met to work out a comprehensive and definitive solution of the "Jewish problem," was held on January 20, 1942, when the Nazi leaders were facing up to their bitter predicament in the eastern theater of war. The resolve to systematize and coordinate the treatment of the "Jewish question" thus coincided with the resolve to steel the Behemoth for an unanticipated and grueling *guerre à mort*. But not surprisingly, the origins and objectives of this Wannsee meeting were singularly complicated and circuitous.

The first step toward the Wannsee Conference was taken by neither Hitler nor Himmler, but by Göring and Heydrich, under very different circumstances and with very different intentions than those which eventually prevailed during the conference itself. While apparently Heydrich instructed Eichmann to draft the letter of July 31, 1941, which was addressed to Heydrich and eventually warranted the conference, it was initiated and signed by Göring. By this time Hitler's respect for Göring had cooled. But by making him Germany's only Reich marshal the führer had validated his unique standing in the Nazi hierarchy and indulged his boundless vanity. Despite his executive failings, Göring wielded great power as head of the Four-Year Plan, go-between with the business establishment, and nominal commander in chief of the Luftwaffe. Once before, he had taken a hand in the "Jewish question." At Hitler's behest and with Heydrich's assistance, in late 1938 Göring had seized on the unintended aftereffects of Crystal Night to force the Aryanization of the economy and the flight of Jews from Germany. On January 24, 1939, he had instructed Heydrich to set up a Reich Bureau for Jewish Emigration within the Interior Ministry. With delegates from all interested government departments, this agency was empowered to take financial and diplomatic measures to speed the Jewish exodus. Within four months Heydrich's office expedited the departure of 34,040 Jews from the Old Reich and 34,320 Jews from Austria. By October 1941 the number of Jews remaining within the boundaries of pre-1938 Germany was down to 163,692, most of them concentrated in big cities.

The Göring-Heydrich letter of July 31, 1941, explicitly referred back to the letter of two and a half years ago ordering the establishment of the special emigration office. In the meantime, the situation had changed radically. By the beginning of the war, Germany's Jewish population had been greatly reduced by emigration and expulsion, but since then the outside world had all but blocked the exodus and the Third Reich had acquired millions of Jews through foreign expan-

sion. Under the circumstances, with voluntary and forced emigration foreclosed, between September 1939 and June 1941 the Nazis put into effect a policy of forced evacuation and resettlement. Determined to make Germany and its newly incorporated territories *judenfrei*, they began to relocate and confine their millions of unwanted Jews to a large reserve and to ghettos in conquered eastern territories, notably in the General Government of Poland—pending their wholesale transport to Madagascar. But with England set against Germany's continental hegemony and in control of the seas, Madagascar or other overseas reservations, including Palestine, were out of reach.

The invasion of the Soviet Union gave the idea of a territorial solution a new lease on life. After conquering the eastern *Lebensraum* along with additional Jews, the Reich would banish European Jewry to vast lands deep in Russia, east of the Urals. At the time that Göring instructed Heydrich to draft the letter signed on July 31, 1941, a quick and decisive defeat of Soviet Russia was still taken for granted. To be sure, by late that month the Einsatzgruppen were already launched on their politically inspired massacres. But as we saw, these killings were at first an expression of the general fury of Barbarossa rather than part of a systematic drive against the Jews. Besides, in the second half of July Hitler and his closest associates were making plans to place the Soviet territories conquered by the Wehrmacht under civil administration. To the extent that the Göring-Heydrich initiative was part of this project for imperial domination and exploitation, it was in line with the führer's will and a reflection of Nazi hubris.

What, then, did Göring write to Heydrich? The full text of the letter of July 31, 1941, must be quoted.

This is to supplement the assignment given to you in the decree of January 24, 1939, to solve the Jewish question by emigration or evacuation under the most favorable conditions possible given present circumstances. I hereby charge you to make all the necessary administrative, practical, and financial preparations for a *Gesamtlösung* [total/complete/comprehensive solution] of the Jewish question throughout Germany's European sphere of influence.

Insofar as these preparations will touch on the jurisdiction of other government agencies, these are to be asked to collaborate.

I further commission you to submit to me, before long, a master plan of the administrative, practical, and financial measures that need to be taken *zur Durchführung* [to carry out] the sought-after *Endlösung* [final/definitive solution] of the Jewish question.

There is nothing in these instructions, either explicit or implicit, to indicate that by directing Heydrich to prepare an overall and defini-

tive solution—a final solution—of the “Jewish problem,” Göring was asking him to prepare for the immediate or eventual mass murder of Jews. Both text and context suggest that he was ordering Heydrich to reactivate and reorganize the special bureau established in January 1939 so that it could handle a vastly enlarged “Jewish problem” under vastly changed circumstances. Of course, as chief of the regular and SS Security Police, SS Gruppenführer (Major General) Heydrich was in command of the Einsatzgruppen. But with the end of military operations he would also and above all become Himmler’s commissioner plenipotentiary for the establishment and operation of the SS state throughout the newly acquired eastern *Lebensraum*. Göring addressed Heydrich not so much as commander of the provisional action commandos but as a leading political official in the nascent imperial administration of the would-be Thousand-Year Reich, in which the place of the Jews remained to be determined. Needless to say, the reverses of Barbarossa radically changed the context in which Göring’s orders would be discussed, elaborated, and implemented.

Starting in the fall of 1941, the conditions of the Jews in German Germany went from bad to worse. Thus far, the wearing of the Jewish badge had been introduced only in the conquered eastern territories: in the Warthegau and the General Government in late 1939, and in the Baltic states in early July 1941. Now, as of September 21, 1941, all Jews over six years of age in Germany—including Austria and the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia—were required to display on the left upper front of their outer garment a six-pointed yellow star bordered in black with *Jude* inscribed in black in its center. Hereafter, Jews needed special permission to leave their neighborhood and to use public transport. They were also deprived of telephones and forbidden to buy newspapers. Their rations were cut as well. These additional restrictions were followed by a decree formalizing a policy that may be said to have come into effect with the start of Barbarossa: on October 23, 1941, in the name of Himmler, the Gestapo chief Heinrich Müller prohibited Jews from leaving Germany.

As if to compensate for this ban on emigration, which marked a major watershed in policy, the police and security offices made plans for the forced removal of Jews from the Greater Reich to the east. Admittedly, the Nazis were not novices at expulsion, deportation, or evacuation. Between 1938 and mid-1941 they had herded Polish Jews resident in Germany across the Polish border; they had driven Polish Jews from the General Government over the Nazi-Soviet demarcation line; they had deported Jews from Vienna and Stettin to Lublin; they had evicted Jews from Baden and the Rhineland to unoccupied

France; and they had expelled Jews from Luxembourg to both parts of France as well as to Portugal and Spain. But these ejections had had no murderous intent, either direct or indirect. They were part of a deliberate campaign to hound or simply throw the Jews out of Germany at a time when throughout Europe material conditions were still tolerable. All this changed with the refusal of the British Empire and the Soviet Union to capitulate: emigration was all but foreclosed and the scourge of war began to ravage eastern Europe, the designated dumping ground for the Jews from Greater Germany. In addition and almost simultaneously, for both economic and punitive reasons the Nazis began to consider the Jews as a pool of expendable labor.

On September 18, 1941, Himmler notified SS General Artur Greiser, gauleiter and Reich governor of the Warthegau, that "the führer wanted the Old Reich and the Protectorate emptied and disencumbered of Jews" and that this should be done by "moving them from west to east as soon as possible." Himmler promised to try his best to "transport . . . [these Jews] before the end of this year." At first, they would be taken to "the eastern territories that two years ago were newly incorporated into the Reich, only to be banished farther east next spring." Himmler intended to "send about 60,000 [of these] Jews . . . into the ghetto of Litzmannstadt [Łódź] . . . which [could] barely accommodate them." He also proposed to deport Jews from Greater Germany to ghettos in cities in Belorussia, Latvia, and Lithuania. SS General Kurt Daluge, chief of the regular police under Himmler, issued the necessary deportation orders on October 14 and 24, 1941. No doubt Heydrich was closely associated with these moves, since security and police agents organized the convoys and rounded up the deportees.

Between mid-October and mid-November, twenty-one transports left Greater Germany for Łódź. This city's by now overcrowded and starving ghetto was thus burdened with 20,000 additional charges, 331 of them from Luxembourg. Another 50,000 Jews were scheduled for removal to Minsk, Riga, and Kovno. But because of transport problems occasioned by the difficult military situation in the east, no more than 30,000 of these were actually sent, all but 6,000 or 7,000 of them to Riga.

Most of these deportees came from big cities, which also served as collection centers: Berlin, Vienna, and Prague, as well as Cologne, Frankfurt, Munich, Nuremberg, Hamburg, Düsseldorf, Würzburg, and Dortmund. Many of them were wellborn, university-educated, ultra-assimilated, and unreligious, which compounded the difficulties of their adjustment to the unfamiliar and impoverished world of the

eastern ghettos. By the time they got out of the train, they were shaken by the physical and mental torment of their roundup and journey. In the ghettos material conditions—housing, food, fuel, health services—became worse and worse, with particularly dire consequences for the aged and infirm, whose mortality rate soared. Over half of the newcomers to Łódź were over fifty years old, 1,400 of them seventy or over.

Back in the Reich the authorities made no effort to conceal this newest escalation in the persecution of the ever shrinking Jewish minority. German citizens were as unconcerned about the Jew next door being branded with the yellow star as they were indifferent to 50,000 Jews being deported or disappearing from their neighborhoods. Indeed, the vast majority of Germans remained apathetic and passive not out of blindness or fear but because of more pressing and private concerns. By the late fall and early winter of 1941, there were mounting apprehensions about the troubles on the eastern front and their likely impact on the homeland. The growing losses and privations of war prompted absorption with personal and family affairs and certain excesses on both the battlefield and the home front doubtless seemed a necessary but small price to pay for a righteous cause.

But over and above the indifference of the masses, there was still and always that of the classes. Rather than remonstrate, the elites and notables of the civil service, the armed forces, the churches, the academies, and the business world continued to acquiesce with their silence. Neither the masses nor the classes actively urged or supported these latest anti-Semitic indignities and outrages. Instead, desensitized by latent Judeophobia and inured by the rigors and imperatives of total war, they simply ignored them. Besides, to the extent that Germans were troubled by the Jewish persecution, they may have been relieved by its being removed from their backyard to be eclipsed and absorbed by Barbarossa. Not that they knew it, but the first German Jews to be massacred were slaughtered in the genocidal murders of Kovno and Riga in late November. In any event, in forging their total solution of the “Jewish problem,” Hitler and his inner circle had a free hand, except for the internecine feuds of the regime and the constraints of an irretrievable absolute war.

The führer’s anti-Semitism was dangerous less because it was comprehensive and unchanging than because it was singularly malleable and protean. Tirades against the Jews bolstered his credibility with the faithful by papering over the incoherence not only of his diagnosis of Europe’s general crisis but also of his self-assigned mission to resolve it in Germany’s favor. Characteristically, in his prophetic

discourse Hitler struck distinctly apocalyptic notes whenever he ran into imagined or real obstacles. As of the late fall of 1941, this tone became more pronounced and consistent. At the same time, there was a metastasis in his execration of the ever diabolical Jew, which went hand in hand with a doctrinal mutation. Whereas heretofore Hitler had fulminated against "the Jew" as the all-powerful and insidious core of the "common enemy," he now reviled him for his wretchedness and fixed on him as the chosen expiatory victim.

As we saw, it was on January 30, 1939, that the führer had first prophesied that another world conflict would "result not in the Bolshevization of the world and with it the victory of the Jews, but in the annihilation of the Jewish race in Europe." At the time, in what was an open address to the new Reichstag, he had still invoked the vast reach of the supposed Jewish world conspiracy as he sought to cow the Western Powers into helping him expatriate German Jews and into continuing their diplomacy of appeasement. He did not repeat this prophecy until January 30, 1941, exactly two years later, when he again spoke to the Reichstag. On this occasion, Hitler used it not only to stir the faithful, but also once more to pressure England to yield Europe to the Reich. He warned Germany's enemies not to make light of his prophecy of the dire consequences for the Jews should they be allowed once again to drive the world into a general war. By now even the Allies should "recognize that they have a greater enemy at home . . . and join us in a common front . . . against the Jewish international bent on exploiting and corrupting the nations."

Once Hitler was locked into the two-front war and bogged down in Russia, his verbal attacks on the Jews became more categorical and frequent. On October 25, 1941, with Himmler and Heydrich at his dinner table, he asserted sententiously:

At the Reichstag I prophesied to Jewry that if war were not avoided the Jew would disappear from Europe. This race of criminals has on its conscience the two million dead of the Great War, and by now hundreds of thousands of additional ones. Let no one tell me: for all that we cannot drive them into the [eastern] marshlands! Who worries about our people? Actually, it helps us to have the horror of our exterminating Jewry precede us [into the east(?)]. The attempt to found a Jewish state will fail.

In this same monologue the führer ranted about bolshevism wading deeper in blood than tsarism, presumably to justify liquidating the former.

Within two weeks, on November 9, 1941, in his yearly speech to the party old guard in Munich's Löwenbräukeller, Hitler stressed that even the previous year, when he had spoken to them in "the glow of recent victories," he had been weighed down by the certainty that ultimately the "international Jew" had instigated this war. Having prevented this enemy from realizing his "Jewish-Marxist objectives" in Germany, the Nazis now faced him abroad. At first, the Jews had managed to make Poland, France, Belgium, Holland, Norway, and, chiefly, England their pawn. With time, however, "nothing was more natural" than for the Reich to confront the Soviet Union, "which was most clearly dominated by the Jewish spirit . . . and certainly was the greatest servant of Jewry." Hitler credited the Nazis with having been the first to grasp that after the "liquidation of the entire national intelligentsia" all that remained in Russia was "a mindless, forcibly proletarianized subhumanity, . . . kept down by a huge organization of Jewish commissars." Even Stalin was an "instrument in the hands of this ascendant Jewry." To be sure, he appeared "on stage, in front of the curtain, but Koganovich stood immediately behind him."

Only after he had once again conflated Judaism and bolshevism did Hitler turn to the difficult eastern campaign, which he now portrayed as "a struggle for *Sein oder Nichtsein* not just for Germany but for all of Europe." The Third Reich and its many allies shared a "common European consciousness" in their joint battle against "the Mongolian state of a second Genghis Khan." But these were so many diversionary rhetorical flights before the führer finally broached the painful subject of Leningrad. At first sight, he said, the Wehrmacht appeared to be on the defensive. In actual fact, it held the original capital of bolshevism in its grip. Being trapped and surrounded, the enemy "will starve . . . and Leningrad . . . [will] fall into our hands." Putting a bold face on things, Hitler disclaimed any interest in the city or in the prestige attaching to its capture. What mattered was "the annihilation of Leningrad's industrial center," and should the Soviets really "enjoy blowing up their own cities," they would save the Wehrmacht "quite a bit of work." At any rate, even with the Red Army driven by "fear and insane animalistic fanaticism," it could not recover from the loss of 3.6 million prisoners and 8-to-10 million killed and wounded.

While on this occasion Hitler did not repeat his dark prophecy about the annihilation of the Jews, within a week, in the November 16 issue of the official weekly *Das Reich*, Goebbels referred to it, maintaining that it was being "fulfilled . . . at this very moment." In this same spirit, in *Der Stürmer* of December 25 Streicher declared that he saw no solution other than the "extermination" (*Ausrottung*)

of the “[Jewish] people, whose father is the devil,” if the “curse of God, lodged in its blood” was to be exorcised. Three days later, at his headquarters, the führer defended Streicher against some of his detractors, insisting that he was irreplaceable. Although he conceded that “in some respects Streicher is mad,” Hitler asserted that “the Jew is much meaner, bloodthirstier, and more satanic” even than Streicher portrayed him in *Der Stürmer*.

In his New Year’s message of January 1, 1942, Hitler once again invoked his prophecy about the perdition of the Jews. Significantly, this time it was embedded in a furious tirade against Churchill and Roosevelt for selling out to Stalin and bolshevism.

[It] is difficult to imagine the horrible calamity that would sweep over Germany and all of Europe in the event of a victory of Jewish bolshevism in alliance with Churchill and Roosevelt. Because: Churchill and Roosevelt [plan to] hand over Europe to Stalin! . . . The Bolshevik monster to which they want to surrender the European nations in turn will subvert them and their peoples. *In any event, the Jew will not exterminate the peoples of Europe, but will be the victim of his own plot.* Great Britain and the U.S.A. cannot use bolshevism to destroy Europe, in as much as their own people will sooner or later fall victim to this pest. [Italics mine]

The fact that the sinister malediction of the Jews was inserted in such an implausible denunciation of the Allies meant that few serious people in or out of Germany would pay much attention to it. Hitler was hardly in an exultant mood and closed his message on a decidedly somber note. After conceding that the eastern campaign was stalled, he declared that “the coming year will make enormous demands” on combatants and civilians alike. As if to stress the gravity of the moment, he implored the “Almighty to give Germany and her soldiers the strength” to persevere and to make 1942 the year of decision “for the salvation of our people and the nations allied with us.”

Hitler sounded no less embattled in his New Year’s proclamation to the armed forces. Of course, he made a particular point of commending the men of the Wehrmacht and the Waffen-SS for having driven back the allegedly aggressive Soviets “over 1,000 kilometers beyond their own borders.” But then, in the same breath, the führer had to summon his troops to continue giving their best in an eastern campaign that was far from won.

During the winter of 1941–42 the [enemy’s] effort to turn the tide and advance against us must and will fail! On the contrary, once all

the preparations are completed, in 1942 we will again seize and pound the Jewish-capitalist and Bolshevik enemy of humanity until his will to destroy the world is broken.

Hitler called for a lasting victory so as to prevent “a bunch of self-seeking Anglo-Saxon and Jewish conspirators” from throwing Germany into a “war for *Sein oder Nichtsein*” every twenty-five years.

On January 6, 1942, over lunch, the führer once again held forth on the responsibility of the Jews for the crisis.

This war will bring about the greatest world upheaval, even if not entirely in line with our wishes. The Jews have been all-influential; they do not care a damn for Britain’s fate either. A man like Hore-Belisha [England’s secretary of war, 1937–40], who grew up in a ghetto, cannot become attached to English history!

At this point Hitler is reported to have expressed a train of thought full of grave implications:

Experience shows that following every catastrophe there is a search for a scapegoat. Probably the Jew will also be set upon in England. But let us hope that we will not end up as the international executioner!

Within a week, during the night of January 12–13, Hitler renewed his off-the-record diatribe against the British and their supposed manipulation by Jews. Clutching at straws, he voiced his “holy conviction” that the fall of Singapore presaged the downfall of Churchill.

The Jews alone are interested in the [continuation of the war]. But the longer the war lasts, the more hardened people will become. The Jews are the dumbest of chosen people: for God’s sake, they should never have instigated this war. *They will disappear from Europe*. All that because of a few fools. Imagine, a Moroccan Jew becoming minister of war in England! [Italics mine]

With his retaliatory venom at a boil, Hitler became increasingly contemptuous of the Jews he had hitherto seen as awesome, if accursed.

The Wannsee Conference finally convened under circumstances radically different from those that had conditioned the formulation of the original Göring-Heydrich letter. At the time it was written, in late July 1941, the Nazi leaders still felt assured of a quick and easy victory over the Soviet Union. As we saw, it was not until mid-September that wounded pride replaced overweening confidence as the primary fuel

of the Nazis' fury. Militarily stymied, and with a diplomatic compromise unthinkable, those who governed the Reich resolved to stay the course, regardless of consequences and costs. In the east both the military campaign and the ungodly crusade became even more savage than originally planned, while throughout German-occupied Europe the Nazis kept tightening their barbarous shackles. At the same time, forced into a war of position and faced with an ineluctable shortage of men and raw materials, they switched to a war economy programmed to commandeer resources from all over the German-dominated Continent. Recourse to deported and forced labor was intended not only to benefit the economy of the Old Reich but also to tighten the hold of the SS over the conquered and occupied territories.

This extreme hypertrophy of the Nazi warfare and conquest state was the essential precondition for the radicalization of the torment of the Jews. As we have seen, as long as the military drive fared well, except for the pogromlike assaults of the first weeks, the violence wreaked on Jews was part of the general, ideologically driven violence of Barbarossa, which was also directed against Bolsheviks, commissars, and partisans. It did not take on a unique character until the military frustrations of the late summer and fall, when the Einsatzgruppen systematized the victimization of Soviet Jews and the RSHA rushed the ghettoization of Polish Jews. That was also the time of the stepped-up drive against the Jews of Greater Germany in the form of the introduction of the yellow star, the ban on emigration, and the deportations to eastern ghettos.

Of course, the impasse of Barbarossa was neither the only nor a sufficient cause for this hypertrophy of the Behemoth and of its anti-Semitic rage. There is no denying the relative autonomy and irrepressible force of the Nazi *Weltanschauung*, which had a fixed canon and ritual. But except for the old fighters and true believers, anti-Semitism occupied neither a prominent nor an unchanging place in this ideological constellation. It could recede or drop from view, only to resurface under new conditions, with different emphases, and for different purposes. Beginning with the boycott of April 1933, vast dissimilarities had marked each of the major attacks on the Jews. In any case, with the invasion of Russia Hitler forgot about using dramatic anti-Semitic outbursts at home to momentarily pacify his zealots and to periodically redynamize his regime. While the drive against the Jews moved abroad with the conquest of Poland, it did not take an irreversible turn toward systematic mass killing until the breakdown of Barbarossa in the fall of 1941. This development marked a fundamental change not only in the precept of Nazi anti-Semitism but

also in the practice of Nazi Germany's "holy war." No doubt the ideologically grounded cathexis of Jew-hatred contributed to this fatal change. But the Nazis' rising fury against the Jews sprang from the mediated encounter between an enduring *ideological* impulse, itself highly tractable, and a totally unanticipated and intractable historical conjunction of events. Hereafter, Hitler and his closest political accomplices shaped and used anti-Semitism as part of their response to the grave imperilment of the Nazi project, abroad as well as at home. They licensed, perhaps even ordered, the vengeful torment of the Jews, which was put into effect by a combination of commands from on high and local initiatives.

This, then, was the historical context in which Heydrich set about implementing the order that had been conceived under such radically different conditions. Ever since the start of Barbarossa, of course, Heydrich had been in charge of the Einsatzgruppen on the eastern front. He also helped expedite the deportation of Jews from Old Germany. Finally, on November 29, 1941, Heydrich sent invitations to a number of government and SS officials for a meeting to work out a coordinated plan for the solution of the "Jewish problem," now that Jews from the Reich were being banished to the east, where conditions were tempestuous and chaotic. If Heydrich spoke of a "total" or "final" solution in this summons, he certainly did not spell out what he or his superiors understood by this term. The conference was to be held on December 9 in Berlin, at the headquarters of the International Criminal Police Commission at Grosser Wannsee 56-8.

At the last moment this meeting was put off for six weeks, until January 20, 1942. The reasons for this rescheduling remain unclear. Heydrich claimed that on the original date at least one of the invited officials, SS Major Dr. Rudolf Lange, was unable to attend because as security chief for Latvia he was busy supervising the execution of Jews in Riga. By itself, however, this explanation seems insufficient and implausible, especially since the press of business of a subaltern in the field, always eager to consult with superiors in the imperial capital, would not justify such a long postponement. More likely, Heydrich temporized, or was ordered to do so, because the weeks from early December through mid-January marked Nazi Germany's most critical and ill-fated juncture: the defeat west of Moscow and the Soviet counteroffensive; Pearl Harbor and America's entry into the war; the shift to a war of position and full war mobilization; the loss of initiative, of surprise, and of the appearance of invulnerability.

It is most unlikely that once they did convene in Wannsee the assembled state and party functionaries were unaware that Germany

and the Nazi regime had reached a dangerous turning point, with hard times ahead. This is not to say that they understood the full gravity of the situation, as did many of the highest civil and military leaders, none of whom were present. With Himmler absent, Heydrich chaired the meeting. The other fourteen participants were officials of Heydrich's subordinate rank, or lower. As the objective was to coordinate the solution of the "Jewish problem," there were delegates from both spheres of the dual state. There were three functionaries from traditional ministries, all of them party members or declared Nazi sympathizers: Dr. Wilhelm Stuckart, state secretary for legal affairs in the Interior Ministry; Dr. Roland Freisler, state secretary and second-ranking official in the Justice Ministry; and Martin Luther, deputy state secretary and close associate of von Ribbentrop in the Foreign Office. An additional four participants came from Nazi-created state administrations: Gauleiter Dr. Alfred Meyer and Dr. Georg Leibbrandt, state secretaries in the Ministry for the Occupied Eastern Territories; Dr. Josef Bühler, state secretary and first adjunct to Dr. Hans Frank in the General Government; and Erich Neumann, state secretary in the Office of the Four-Year Plan. One delegate may be said to have come from the nerve center of the dual state: Ministerial Director Wilhelm Kritzingner, sitting in for Dr. Hans Heinrich Lammer, chief of the Reich Chancellery, who had frequent access to Hitler.

The remaining six delegates, all of them SS officers, spoke for the party side of the state: SS Colonel Dr. Gerhard Klopfer, chief of the Third (political) Division of the Party Chancellery, headed by Martin Bormann; SS General Otto Hofmann, director of the Bureau of Race and Resettlement in the Reich Central Security Office (RSHA); SS Major General Heinrich Müller, head of Section IV (Gestapo) of RSHA; SS Lieutenant Colonel Adolf Eichmann, chief of Division B-4 (Evacuation and Jews), also Section IV; SS Colonel Dr. Karl Schön-garth, commander of the Security Police and Security Service in the General Government; and SS Major Dr. Rudolf Lange, commander of the Security Police and Security Service in Latvia, who also represented his superior, the security chief of Reichkommissariat Ostland.

Eight of the fifteen participants at Wannsee, including three of the SS leaders, were university graduates. Without exception, all fifteen were versed in the "Jewish question," each from his own specialized perspective. Moreover, all must have known about the worsening plight of the Jews throughout the eastern territories, including Poland. How many of them were informed about the anti-Jewish ravages of the Einsatzgruppen and the regular SS is unclear. But at the very least, Heydrich, Lange, Bühler, and more than likely Stuckart, had

firsthand information which they had no reason to keep to themselves. This is not to say that for any of these officials, even Heydrich, the massacres outside Kiev and Riga were necessarily rehearsals for a "final solution" of liquidation to be systematized and streamlined at Wannsee. Even so, there could be no doubt for any of them that they were assembled to increase, not alleviate, the torment of the Jews.

Hans Frank had assigned Bühler to represent the General Government at Wannsee, and apparently had sent him to Berlin for a preliminary briefing. On December 16, 1941, while the conference was on hold, Frank addressed the top members of his administration in Cracow. On this occasion he expressed ideas which were probably widespread in the higher political echelons in the east and reflected his deputy's report on the temper in the capital. Frank's own words must be quoted *in extenso*.

Let me tell you quite frankly: in one way or another we will have to finish with the Jews. The führer once expressed it as follows: should Jewry once again succeed in inciting a world war, the bloodletting could not be limited to the peoples they drove to war but the Jews [themselves] would be done for in Europe. . . . As an old-time National Socialist I must say that if the Jewish tribe survives the war in Europe while we sacrifice our blood for the preservation of Europe, this war will be but a partial success. Basically, I must presume, therefore, that the Jews will disappear. They must go away. To that end I have started negotiations to expel them to the east. In January this issue will be discussed at a major conference in Berlin, to which I am sending State Secretary Dr. Bühler. . . . In any case, there will be a great Jewish migration.

But what is to become of the Jews? Do you think that they will be settled in villages in the conquered eastern territories? In Berlin we have been told not to complicate matters: since neither these territories [nor our own] have any use for them [i.e., the Jews], we should liquidate them ourselves! Gentlemen, I must ask you to remain unmoved by pleas for pity. We must annihilate the Jews wherever we encounter them and wherever possible, in order to maintain the overall mastery of the Reich here. . . . Anyhow, we must find a way [other than a legal one] to achieve this goal, and I am perplexed as to how to proceed.

For us the Jews are also exceptionally damaging because they are being such gluttons. There are an estimated 2.5 million Jews in the General Government, perhaps . . . [even as many] as 3.5 million. These 3.5 million Jews, we cannot shoot them, nor can we poison them. Even so, we can take steps which in some way or other will pave the way

for [their] destruction, notably in connection with the grand measures to be discussed in the Reich. The General Government must become just as *judenfrei* as the Reich.

Unlike before, Governor-General Frank was no longer satisfied with keeping his captive province from becoming the main dumping ground for unwanted Jews from farther west. He now saw an opportunity to rid it of its own Jews—whose numbers he exaggerated greatly—by either expelling them eastward or doing away with them in other ways. Incidentally, if Frank knew about the setbacks in Russia, as he must have, he did not mention them. Instead, he spoke of exploiting both the Ukrainians and the Poles, and playing them off against each other, in the interest of making the General Government the essential bridgehead for the control of the vast spaces being conquered in the east.

Apparently, Eichmann, the lowest-ranking official at Wannsee, took the minutes which, after review by Heydrich, became the official “protocol” of the proceedings. Naturally, this text reveals nothing about the private conversations of the participants before and after the meeting. It also makes it appear as if during the deliberations they never so much as mentioned the serious military crisis which just then preoccupied the top leadership. Even so, this crisis must have cast a wide shadow over the conference.

On January 20, 1942, in his opening statement at Wannsee, Heydrich noted that Reichsmarschall Göring had charged him “with preparing the *Endlösung* [final/definitive solution] of the Jewish question in Europe,” and that he had summoned this meeting to “clarify some of the fundamental issues.” Göring’s request for a draft proposal for the necessary “administrative, practical, and financial” arrangements called for prior consultation with all interested government agencies. Having established the source of his authority, Heydrich went on to claim that “without regard for geographic boundaries” in the main Himmler and he himself were responsible for the “implementation of the final solution.”

Before turning to what needed to be done, Heydrich reviewed what had been achieved since 1933. After being deemancipated and subjected to restrictions within Germany, the Jews had been urged and pushed to emigrate. Eventually, in January 1939, Göring had ordered him, Heydrich, to set up and direct a special emigration office to speed and organize the extrusion of Jews “by legal means.” There being no other solution, this office proceeded to force emigration in the face of both domestic and foreign obstacles. All told, and despite numer-

ous stumbling blocks, between January 30, 1933, and October 31, 1941, some 537,000 Jews had left the Old Reich, Austria, and the Protectorate. In the meantime, however, “in view of the risks of emigration in wartime and considering the [new] possibilities in the east,” Himmler had forbidden all further emigration. Then Heydrich came to the core of the agenda.

To take the place of emigration, and with the prior approval of the führer, the evacuation of the Jews to the East has become another possible solution.

Although both courses of action [emigration and evacuation] must, of course, be considered as nothing more than [so many] temporary expedients, they do help to provide practical experience which should be of great importance in view of the coming *Endlösung* of the Jewish question.

Needless to say, as it stands, and considering later developments, this statement was full of “warnings, and portents and evils imminent.” But from the protocol it is not clear whether or not Heydrich amplified his proposition by discussing the disastrous plight of eastern ghettos like Riga and Łódź, which was being aggravated by the arrival of Jewish deportees from Germany. Did he himself have a clear idea of what he meant by *Endlösung*? Did he use coded language, confident of being understood by the assembled initiates?

Heydrich was, in any case, breaking altogether new ground. Until this day, the Nazi persecution of the Jews had been confined to the Jews of Germany, Austria, and the Protectorate, as well as of the territories conquered—and still to be conquered—in the east. Now, however, Heydrich broadened the range, in that he meant his projected *Endlösung* to apply to all of Europe. He circulated a table listing the Jewish populations of the entire Continent as well as of England and Ireland, for a total of over 11 million Jews. He claimed that this figure was on the low side, the count of Jews being based on confessional rather than “racial” criteria in many countries. To implement the *Endlösung*, Heydrich proposed “to comb Europe from west to east,” beginning with German lands.

Heydrich envisaged that “under proper direction . . . and in an appropriate manner” the Jews would be put to work in the east. His idea was to form the Jews who were fit to work into “large labor columns, separated by sex,” to be marched to the eastern territories, where they would build roads. Doubtless a great many Jews “will fall by the wayside from natural exhaustion.” In turn, however, the “surviving remnant” would certainly consist of the “toughest” elements.

In as much as the members of this residue would be the product of "natural selection," they would have "to be dealt with appropriately, [for] upon being freed they will constitute the embryo for the reconstruction of Jewish life (see the lessons of history)."

The idea was to make a clear distinction between Jews fit for hard labor and those unfit for it, with the expectation that many of those declared fit would be marked for early death by virtue of being unsuited for backbreaking work. It may well be that not only the vengeful fury against the Jews but also the straitened logistics of Barbarossa prompted Heydrich to propose the use of expendable slave labor for road and railway construction in the east. In any case, here was a program of extermination through forced labor, with an ominous but generic reference to an "appropriate" treatment for those managing to bear up.

Apparently, the unfit—children, many women, the infirm, the elderly—were to be evacuated "to so-called transit ghettos, for transportation further east from there." Heydrich saw a need to divide all potential evacuees into different categories and allow for exceptions. The Nuremberg Laws would be the basis of this projected operation. Certain half-Jews would be given a choice between, on the one hand, sterilization and staying in Germany, and, on the other, deportation. Jews over sixty-five years of age "would not be evacuated but sent to a ghetto for the aged," most likely to Theresienstadt, along with badly wounded and heavily decorated Jewish war veterans. As for the timing of each major evacuation, "it will largely depend on military developments."

According to the protocol, not a single voice was raised to protest even the most egregious and unconscionable provisions of Heydrich's proposal. Almost certainly moved by a shared outlook rather than a common fear, those officials who did speak out did so in the treacherous spirit of bureaucratic rationality. Martin Luther of the Foreign Office noted that while there might be difficulties in removing Jews from the "northern [Scandinavian] countries," where they were rare in any case, he foresaw none for "southeastern and western Europe." To avoid "endless red tape," Wilhelm Stuckart of the Interior Ministry recommended that the sterilization of half-Jews be made not voluntary but compulsory. Erich Neumann of the Four-Year Plan urged that Jews "working in vital war industries not be evacuated until replacements were found," to which Heydrich agreed. For his part, Josef Bühler, Hans Frank's emissary, asked that "the final solution of this question" begin in the General Government, which could guarantee that there would be no local transportation and economic difficulties.

Jews should be removed as rapidly as possible from the territories of the General Government, in particular because as carriers of disease they are a great danger to society at large and as incorrigible black marketeers they are undermining the economy of the country. Besides, of the 2.5 million Jews, the majority was unfit for work.

Bühler concluded with the plea “that in this territory the Jewish question be solved as quickly as possible.” Apparently, Bühler, along with Alfred Meyer of the Ministry for the Occupied Eastern Territories, took the lead in the closing discussion of “different types of possible solutions” (*die verschiedenen Arten der Lösungsmöglichkeiten*). Both advocated “the immediate implementation of certain preparatory measures in the affected territories, care being taken not to disquiet the [local] populations.” Given their responsibilities, Bühler and Meyer were mainly concerned with the eastern territories.

There was nothing definitive about the Wannsee Conference, nor could there be. Whatever its origin, it was held at an unexpectedly trying moment in the history of the Third Reich. War policy was in extreme flux, and so was Jewish policy. At the same time that Nazi Germany’s leaders decided to go to any length in pursuit of the war against the Soviets, they resolved to step up the war against the Jews. With emigration to European countries and Madagascar foreclosed, they fixed upon the east as holding the key to victory over not only their military enemies but also the Jews. For them, the two campaigns were closely and fatally intertwined. For a while some Nazis continued to look to the defeat of the Soviet Union to provide space for the resettlement of Jews deep in the interior of Russia. Paradoxically, in this perspective military victory was the precondition for Jewish survival. To be sure, the Jews would in that case have suffered cruelly and disproportionately while the war lasted. Still, victory would have kept open the historical possibility of a significant remnant of Jews enduring, if only to be ghettoized in a distant reserve, or to be used as a pawn in bargaining for a negotiated settlement with the Western Powers. In fact, the faster and easier the victory, the larger this remnant and the better the chances for contingent survival would doubtless have been. Conversely, the longer and harder the fighting and the more ineluctable the defeat, the more catastrophic the consequences for the Jews. Such was, after all, Hitler’s grimly insistent private and public prophecy.

On January 25, 1942, five days after the Wannsee Conference, Hitler held forth bluntly in the presence of Himmler and Lammers.

The Jew must get out of Europe. Otherwise we will get no European understanding. The world over he is the chief agitator against us. . . . All I say is that he must go away. If, in the process, he is bruised, I can't help it. If he does not leave voluntarily, I see no solution other than extermination.

Of course, by this time emigration had long since come to a halt. Besides, the issue was no longer simply to make Old Germany *judenfrei* but to settle accounts with the Jews of all German-occupied and controlled territories. In this same diatribe Hitler wondered "why I should see a Jew in a different light than a Russian prisoner [of war]." He declined all responsibility for "the many [Russians] who are dying in prison camps." Instead, he blamed the Jews for "having driven us into this situation," and once again asked, rhetorically, "why the Jews incited this war."

Two days later, on January 27, in another monologue at his Wolf's Lair headquarters in East Prussia, Hitler reiterated that "the Jew has to disappear from Europe," including from Switzerland and Sweden. On this occasion he said nothing about extermination, limiting himself to declaring that "it would be best if [the Jews] went to Russia." At any rate, he had "no pity" for them.

The führer's ferociously destructive posture must have become known to ever larger circles of senior officials. A considerable number of party, government, and military leaders themselves heard Hitler soliloquize in the dining hall or sitting room of his headquarters. In turn, they must have shared their privileged information and impressions with many of their associates, as well as with connections in the business, social, and cultural world. Besides, Hitler made no secret of his anti-Jewish fury, since he spoke his mind in public.

On January 30, 1942, he addressed a rally in Berlin's Palace of Sports. The führer made a special point of berating the British for rejecting his efforts to reach an accommodation. He maintained that if not for this English bullheadedness, it would take little additional effort and time to finish off the Soviets. With his back to the wall, Hitler struck out at the Jews.

We fully realize that the war can only end either with the extermination of the Aryan peoples or the disappearance of the Jews from Europe. While I guard myself against making rash prophecies, on September 1, 1939, I declared in the German Reichstag that this war would not end, as the Jews suppose, with the extermination of the European-Aryan peoples, but with the destruction of Jewry. For the

first time the ancient Jewish maxim will be put in practice: “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.”

Certain that anti-Semitism would spread with the protraction of the war, Hitler predicted that “the hour would come when the most evil world enemy of all time will be put out of action for at least a thousand years.”

In less than a month, on February 24, 1942, he returned to this same theme in his yearly message marking the foundation of the Nazi Party in Munich. Hitler told the *alte Kämpfer* that now, unlike at the start of their struggle, they were “no longer alone in fighting the [unholy] alliance of Jewish capitalism and communism, . . . the ideas of the National Socialist and Fascist revolutions [having] conquered great and powerful states.” It was in keeping with the nature of the audience and setting in Munich for the führer to slight the military aspects of the war, which just then consumed him, in order to stress its messianic side.

. . . my prophecy will be fulfilled: this war will not destroy Aryan humanity, but will exterminate the Jew. Such will be the ultimate outcome of this conflict, whatever its repercussions and no matter how long it lasts.

The world simply could not be at peace until after “the liquidation of this parasite.”

In the meantime, Hitler kept reiterating his animus in private. During the night of February 3–4 he asserted that after many false starts in the persecution of Jews through the centuries, “this time they will disappear from Europe.” On February 17, in the presence of Himmler, the führer charged that just as the Jews had once used Christianity to subvert the natural order of things, in which “the fittest rule,” not the meek, so now they had recourse to bolshevism to advance their world conspiracy. Clearly, “the more thoroughly the Jews are thrown out, the faster this danger will be removed.” According to Goebbels, in mid-February Hitler also spoke to him about the need to be unsparing with the Jews.

There is no room for sentimentality. The Jews deserve the catastrophe in which they are caught up today. They will experience their own destruction along with the destruction of our [other] enemies. We must hasten this process impassively, and in so doing render an inestimable service to humanity, which has suffered at the hands of Jewry for thousands of years.

If the propaganda minister is to be believed, Hitler told him that "this unequivocal hostility to the Jews will also have to be beaten into the heads of the recalcitrants among our own people."

At about this same time, on February 22, Hitler credited Streicher for conspicuously branding the Jews, making it impossible for them to hide. In the presence of Himmler, he said that this identification and isolation of the Jew would result in "one of the greatest revolutions in world history." Not unlike "Pasteur and Koch," Nazi Germany would have to fight a "bacillus," the Jew being "the cause of innumerable diseases which . . . would also have ravaged Japan if it had continued to be open to him." At any rate, Germany "will pull through if we eliminate the Jew."

His public vilification of the Jews continued. On March 15, 1942, which was Martyrs' Day, Hitler traduced the "Jewish wire-pullers for their worldwide conspiracy to unite democracy and bolshevism in a common drive for the destruction of Europe." Six weeks later, on April 26, in a speech to the Reichstag, the führer castigated the Jews for having been the "hidden force that goaded" the British into both world wars. The Jews, he said, had masterminded the defeat, revolution, and diplomatic calamity of 1918-19. Between the wars it was they who had become the chief "carriers of the Bolshevik infection . . . and the warmongers in the plutocracies." At present, Germany's soldiers were "suffering the most palpable consequences of this warmongering" in Russia, whose "dictatorship is purely Jewish."

In the Reichstag Hitler claimed to speak with "the feelings of a man who had just won the most difficult battle of his life in the service of a holy cause." The battle of this past winter had been won not in some "ordinary war" but in the struggle against bolshevism. National Socialists were particularly well placed to "understand the theoretical principles and gruesome . . . objectives of this world pest." Bolshevism was not a proletarian regime but a Jewish dictatorship bent on "exterminating the national leadership and intelligentsia" of peoples the world over. While in Russia bolshevism was the "pliable product of this Jewish infection" elsewhere the preconditions for this same subversion were being created by "democratic capitalism," which the Jews were pushing toward the same abyss. At any rate, the world was now divided into two camps. The enemy side had two major constituents: "the men of democracy, the heart of Jewish capitalism, with their ballast of tarnished political theories, parliamentary corruption, antiquated civil societies, Jewish brain trusts, newspapers, stock markets, and banks . . . ; and allied with them the Bolshevik state, that is to say that mass of animalized (*vertiert*) humanity over which the

Jews are cracking their bloody whip.” As for the Axis side, it consisted of “the peoples fighting for their freedom and independence, as well as the daily bread of humanity.” In conclusion Hitler affirmed that the world conflict between these two camps “will be decided on the battlefields of eastern Europe.”

At the Wannsee Conference the switches were set for the deportation of Jews from German-occupied Europe west of the Warthegau to the ghettos and transit camps east of that line. The result would be not only the overcrowding of ghettos but also the concentration of all Jews in the most ill-starred lands of the Continent. Europe’s Jews risked being trapped in the most politically tyrannized, economically wasted, and militarily vulnerable zone of German-occupied Europe. The Jews would have been gravely imperiled in this precarious region even without having violence deliberately done to them during and after their roundup and deportation in overcrowded railway cars. The idea was to use their evacuation and resettlement to decimate them, but not without concurrently exploiting their labor for the war effort. The result was a chronic but not irreconcilable tension between liquidation and productivity. Although Heydrich proposed to impress Jews for road-building, he put decimation through forced labor ahead of economic output. Although he had received his original charge from the head of the Four-Year Plan, Heydrich was a fanatic Nazi executioner, and was not about to give first or high priority to channeling workers into the concentration-camp economy.

But Himmler, his immediate superior and overall head of the incipient “Final Solution,” had a more far-reaching view of the function and place of the security services in the regime. He had long since resolved to make the SS into the principal political shield of the Nazi regime, hopefully to become one of the two supporting pillars, along with the Wehrmacht, of the Third Reich’s dual state. To that end, just as in 1938 with the war in the offing he had conceived and founded the Waffen-SS with a view to enlarging and securing the place of the general SS, he now proposed to harness the labor of an expanding concentration-camp system for the war economy of the embattled Behemoth. To be sure, Himmler was not at Wannsee and he seems not to have alerted Heydrich to this new turn before January 20. But within less than a week after Wannsee, on January 26, 1942, he sent a wire to SS Major General Richard Glücks, chief inspector of concentration camps, prefiguring a radical change in the population as well as the purpose of the camps.

Since no Russian prisoners of war can be expected in the near future, I will send many of the Jews and Jewesses to be evacuated from Germany to the camps. Prepare the concentration camps to take in 100,000 Jewish men and 50,000 Jewish women next month. In the coming weeks the concentration camps will receive great economic contracts and assignments. SS Major General Pohl will provide you with necessary details.

By instructing Glücks to follow Pohl's orders, Himmler signaled the rising importance of the newly chartered Central Economic and Administrative Office (WVHA) within the SS. Paradoxically, Himmler's telegram did not distinguish between Jews fit and unfit for work, nor did it hint at any hoped-for decimation. There was either a hidden agenda or, more likely, the process of "selection" was to grow out of the iron exigencies of concentration camps and ghettos, which became total institutions of forced dehumanization, exploitation, and liquidation.

Hereafter, Himmler directed a twofold policy through the WVHA and the RSHA. Pohl's WVHA was charged with raising the largest possible Jewish labor force for hyperexploitation, either within concentration camps and ghettos or in private industry outside. Of course, Jewish workers would be mercilessly expended by deliberate mistreatment, which included overexposing them to the vicissitudes of wartime shortages. Notwithstanding its built-in deadliness, Pohl's massing of Jewish labor—along with non-Jewish workers from all over Europe—was grounded in the logic and purpose of expediting the forced-draft industrial production necessitated by the failure of Barbarossa and its military sequels.

Simultaneously, Heydrich's RSHA undertook to make all but Slavic Europe *judenfrei* "by combing it [of Jews] from west to east." For the moment these Jews, many of them highly assimilated and acculturated, were to be sent to the occupied eastern territories to be crammed into ghettos as well as concentration, labor, and transit camps, pending resettlement farther east. Although Heydrich meant to use some of these Jews to build roads, perhaps even strategic ones, he did not consider such makeshift construction work a significant contribution to systematic economic mobilization for a protracted all-out war. For him, the ideological warrior and policeman, the economic imperative counted for little. Heydrich saw above all the punitive side of forced and slave labor.

After Wannsee, Pohl and Heydrich were pulling the emerging "Final Solution" in opposite directions, or at any rate pressing it

ahead along different roads and at different speeds. But since Himmler kept a tight rein on both of them, they were not about to pull apart. Though fired by a shared anti-Semitic fury, the drive against the Jews was not uniformly exterminationist. It was an admixture of the hyperexploitation of Jewish labor for the war effort and the fixed determination to remove the Jews from Europe, if need be by rank liquidation. At first, the blend of hyperexploitation and annihilation varied according to time, place, and circumstance. But with the irretrievable impasse and defeat of the eastern campaign, this blend became ever more lethal. Meanwhile, it is highly revealing that by March 27, 1942, Goebbels noted that Hitler's prophecy concerning the punishment of the Jews "for having instigated a new world war is beginning to be fulfilled in a most ghastly fashion," insisting that "once again the führer is the dauntless advocate of a radical course."