

The Role of the Wannsee Conference in the Final Solution.

Introduction

This essay argues that the extermination of Jews in Europe began much earlier during the Second World War than is currently acknowledged. The primary source analysed is the English translation of the Wannsee Conference minutes,¹ recorded on 20 January 1942 in Berlin.

Some historians, such as Christian Gerlach, cite the meeting as significant evidence that the Nazi regime's policy of completely eradicating all Jews in Europe, known as the Final Solution, was in the process of being implemented after the meeting.

However, this essay contends that the meeting was an escalation of a long-standing policy rather than a new initiative. To explore this, the essay examines the minutes as the primary source, analysing the language and tone used by attendees to conceal the true extent of the mass murders already carried out and the planned expansion of their activities. Secondary sources will be used to place the meeting within the broader context of Nazi policies and plans, and to analyse the language employed to sanitise its intended extension of previous mass murders, primarily targeting Jews but also other ethnic groups. This enables a balanced investigation of both intention and implementation, assessing whether Wannsee marked a decisive turning point or simply formalised events already in motion. By comparing the minutes with earlier actions, this essay challenges the interpretation that genocide began as a single, clearly defined event in January 1942. This facilitates an examination of both aims and actions, questioning whether Wannsee was a pivotal moment or merely a coordination of ongoing processes.

Background to the Primary Source

The meeting was called by SS-Obergruppenführer Reinhard Heydrich², who served as the Chief of the Security Police and the SD in the Third Reich. SS-Obergruppenführer Adolf Eichmann³, from the Reich Security Main Office, took the minutes of the meeting, which raised concerns about their accuracy and the use of bureaucratic language. The meeting took place in the third year of the war, seven months after Operation Barbarossa⁴. Heydrich explained in the bureaucratic language employed at the meeting, according to Eichmann's minutes, that the meeting was 'convened to clarify fundamental questions'.⁵ Most of these concerned the transportation of the Jews and the logistics of carrying out this task. A significant portion of the meeting was also

¹ 'English Translation of the Wannsee Conference Protocol', Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz (2020) <<https://www.ghwk.de/en/conference/protocol-and-documents>> [02 December 2025]

² Susan Ratcliffe, 'Reinhard Heydrich (1904–42)', 6th ed., preprint, Oxford University Press, 2018.

³ Rebecca Wittmann, 'Eichmann Revisited: The Motivations of a Mass Murderer', *German Studies Review*, 95.1 (2012), pp. 135–44.

⁴ Sean M Judge, 'The Russo–German War, 1941–45', in *"Who Has the Puck?"*, Strategic Initiative in Modern, Conventional War (Air University Press, 2009) <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep13942.8>>.

⁵ English Translation of the Wannsee Conference Protocol, 2020, p.2.

dedicated to discussions on the treatment of individuals with mixed Jewish and non-Jewish ancestry, whom the Nazis termed Mischlinge.⁶

Language and Euphemism in the Wannsee Conference Minutes

The wording and euphemisms recorded in the minutes reveal how deliberately vague the language was. As Sir Paul Lever notes,

The record of the Wannsee Conference of January 1942, had it been available to Allied analysts at the time, would, because of circuitous and ambiguous language in which it was drafted, have left plenty of room for speculation about exactly what was envisaged by the administrative programme under discussion there.⁷

Much of the intended message is hidden behind phrases such as ‘evacuation to the East,’⁸ which, in Nazi terminology, referred to the deportation of Jews to ghettos and ultimately to their deaths. Another phrase, ‘natural reduction’,⁹ described the expectation that many would die through forced labour, disease, and starvation. Although these terms seem neutral, their meaning within Nazi administrative language was far from innocent.

The minutes thus reveal that the meeting was framed as a technical discussion of planning and procedures, along with the fate of the Mischlinge. At the same time, the true aim of coordinating the destruction of Europe’s Jews was concealed beneath this carefully coded language.

The minutes also show us that the SS under Heydrich was granted full authority to execute the plan of mass murder, which, for some attendees, might have implied that if Germany lost the War, Heydrich and the SS could be held responsible, as Christian Gerlach pointed out.

Heydrich’s ultimate authority had been recognised, explicitly so by Buhler, implicitly by the others. That should hardly be surprising. If the term “Final Solution” were now to be equated with “murder,” who would have been in a position to dispute his responsibility? Who would have wanted to? In fact, some officials were quite pleased to be able to act as if they could wash their hands of the matter.¹⁰

This illustrates how the language used in the minutes not only outlined the plan itself but also suggested that responsibility for it was already taking shape within the

⁶ English Translation of the Wannsee Conference Protocol, 2020, pp. 10-14.

⁷ Paul Lever, *The Oxford Handbook of War*, (Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 235.

⁸ English Translation of the Wannsee Conference Protocol, 2020, p.5.

⁹ Ibid. p.7.

¹⁰ Christian Gerlach, ‘The Wannsee Conference, the Fate of German Jews, and Hitler’s Decision in Principle to Exterminate All European Jews’, *The Journal of Modern History*, 70.4 (1998), pp. 759–812, doi:10.1086/235167.

bureaucracy of the Nazi regime. Additionally, the minutes include figures for the Jewish populations of each occupied country. The use of bureaucratic terminology, such as 'consideration'¹¹ regarding the fate of approximately eleven million Jews, further exemplifies Nazi language aimed at disguising their plans of mass murder.

Mass murder before the Wannsee Conference

Although the persecution of Jews by the Nazi regime began long before the Second World War, the systematic mass killing of Jewish communities began shortly after the German invasion of the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941. Behind the advancing German armies came the 'Einsatzgruppen'¹², who conducted mass shootings. One of the first large-scale atrocities took place at Babi Yar, where 33,771 Jewish men, women, and children were shot between 29 and 30 September 1941 and buried in a ravine. Drawing on the same pattern of euphemistic language later seen in the Wannsee minutes, SS General Friedrich Jeckeln, who organised these shootings in the region, referred to the killing method as 'Sardinenpackung'¹³ or 'sardine-packing'. This shows that coded language was already being used to conceal their actions before January 1942, supporting the view that Wannsee represented an escalation of the long-term aim of the Nazi regime of the Jewish question. This helps explain why the Wannsee Conference did not introduce a new policy but instead served as an opportunity to coordinate and clarify among different ministries. It reinforced existing practices and ensured that the machinery of deportation, labour, and extermination would operate with greater efficiency and unity.

Escalation of the Final Solution before the Wannsee Conference.

The Nazi ideology for the eradication of all Jews can be traced back to 1919, according to Hadassah Davis.

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.¹⁴

This shows that the genocidal intent to liquidate the Jews existed long before the Nazi's came to power and suggests that the Final Solution was not a sudden development but a long-term escalation of Hitler's ideology.

¹¹ English Translation of the Wannsee Conference Protocol, 2020, p.5.

¹² Karel C Berkhoff, "'The Corpses in the Ravine Were Women, Men, and Children': Written Testimonies from 1941 on the Babi Yar Massacre', *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, 29.2 (2015), pp. 251–74, doi:10.1093/hgs/dcv030.

¹³ Richard L Rubenstein, John K Roth, and Aberystwyth former location. United Theological College, *Approaches to Auschwitz: The Legacy of the Holocaust* (SCM Press, 1987).

¹⁴ Hadassah Davis, 'WHAT WAS THE ROLE OF THE WANNSEE CONFERENCE IN THE FINAL SOLUTION?', *European Judaism: A Journal for the New Europe*, 32.2 (1999), pp. 26–36 <<http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/stable/43740629>>.

The enactment of this ideology into policy started when Hitler became chancellor in 1933, Kurt Grossman wrote:

We find that the general liquidation of the Jews was a slow but steady process. We must go back at least to April 1, 1933, the Jewish Boycott Day. Jews were then prohibited from acting professionally, as lawyers, medical doctors, or dentists.¹⁵

We then observe a further escalation of policies with the enactment of the Nuremberg Laws¹⁶ in September 1935. The Nazi government formally stripped Jewish people of German citizenship and also prohibited relationships between Jews and non-Jewish Germans. This marked a significant turning point as it legalised the persecution of Jews into law.

In November 1938, Kristallnacht¹⁷ occurred, during which Jewish businesses were attacked, and thirty thousand Jews were sent to concentration camps.

With the outbreak of war in 1939, exclusion policies shifted towards containment. Jews were deported eastwards into ghettos, enduring forced labour, starvation, and, for the majority, death. This then escalated to outright mass murder, as previously outlined in this essay, following the invasion of the Soviet Union; all of these events occurred before the Wannsee Conference.

Conclusion

The Wannsee Conference should not be viewed as the beginning of the Final Solution but rather as a further intensification in an ongoing extermination process. As shown by the conference minutes, bureaucratic language and euphemisms such as “evacuation to the East” and “natural reduction” were used to mask the accurate scale of the mass murder programme. When the language is seen in the context of earlier Nazi policies, which included legal discrimination and social exclusion, and the mass shootings by the Einsatzgruppen following the invasion of the Soviet Union, it becomes clear that systematic mass killings started before January 1942. The ideology aimed at eliminating the Jews can be traced back to Hitler’s early anti-Semitic beliefs and writings, as well as the policies enacted throughout the 1930s. Therefore, the Wannsee Conference did not mark the onset of the Final Solution but rather the escalation of a long-standing programme to eradicate the Jewish people. Its real significance lay in coordinating genocide at the government and party levels, uniting different ministries to ensure the efficient execution of ongoing policies. In this way, Wannsee symbolised not the origin of mass murder but the point at which the Nazi state fully committed to the organised, industrial destruction of European Jewry.

¹⁵ Kurt R Grossmann, ‘The Final Solution’, *The Antioch Review*, 15.1 (1955), p. 56, doi:10.2307/4609769.

¹⁶ Jaap van Ginneken, ‘1933-1939: Exile and Mass Politics’, in *Kurt Baschwitz* (Amsterdam University Press, 2018), pp. 169–94, doi:10.2307/j.ctt1zxxgf.10.

¹⁷ Richard N Lutjens, ‘Submerging’, in *Submerged on the Surface*, *The Not-So-Hidden Jews of Nazi Berlin, 1941-1945* (Berghahn Books, 2019), pp. 29–74, doi:10.2307/j.ctvvb7n02.7.

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