

### The Wannsee Conference

At noon of 20 January 1942, a meeting of approximately 90 minutes took place in the dining room of the SD guesthouse.

Representatives of the SS, the NSDAP and various *Reich* ministries attended this meeting, which was convened by Reinhard Heydrich, Head of the Security Police and SD. The subject of the meeting was the “Final Solution of the Jewish Question”. Heydrich’s aim was to emphasise his leading role in the deportations and to involve important ministries and party departments in the preparations for the murder of the European Jews. The meeting was also designed to resolve conflicts between the German civil administration in the occupied territories in Poland and *Ostland* and the SS leaders in these territories. The conference was a confirmation that the SS had won the 1941 dispute between authorities regarding the responsibility for the “Solution of the Jewish Question”. The participants presented proposals and raised objections depending on the interests of the authorities they were representing, but overall they showed that they were willing to cooperate. In the process, the leading officials in the German state administration became accessories to and perpetrators of the crime.

### The Protocol of the Meeting

Adolf Eichmann, the Head of the section for “Jewish affairs” within the Gestapo, summed up the results of the meeting in a protocol. According to this document, Heydrich told those present that the deportation of all European Jews to Eastern Europe had begun on the basis of “prior authorisation” given by Hitler. He stressed that he alone had “overall control for organising the Final Solution of the Jewish Question”, irrespective of geographical boundaries. There was disagreement on whether to include so-called *Mischlinge* (persons with Christian and Jewish parents or grandparents) and Jewish partners in “mixed marriages” in the deportations. Heydrich’s fervent attempt to extend the deportation order to these persons was an assault on the competences of the Interior Ministry, which was represented by State Secretary Wilhelm Stuckart at the conference. As Heydrich did not reach an agreement on this matter and the decision had to be postponed to later meetings, Eichmann had to dedicate a disproportionately large amount of the protocol to these proposals. Whilst the final protocol of the conference only comprises 15 typed pages – including one and a half sides listing the participants and one side of statistics – four pages deal exclusively with these proposals on the deportation of *Mischlinge* and Jewish spouses. These radical proposals were therefore to remain on the agenda in the expectation that they could be implemented at a later date.

As this was a final protocol rather than a transcript, it only gives us hints about the actual proceedings and atmosphere of the conference. Adolf Eichmann was questioned in detail about the Wannsee Conference in connection with his trial in Jerusalem in 1960–61. He stressed that ministerial representatives had also spoken quite openly and with general agreement about the murder of the Jews. In addition, he said that he had had to rewrite the protocol several times until Heydrich was content with it. The text was to relay the formulations used in a less drastic form but the State Secretaries were also to be “implicated”, in other words made into accessories and perpetrators.

Eichmann stated that he had had to provide information for Heydrich’s introductory speech. This included the tabular overview of the number and distribution of Jews in Europe, the “approximately 11 million Jews”, who were “to be taken into consideration” “in the course of the Final Solution of the Jewish Question” (page 6 of the protocol). In August 1941, the *Reich* Association of Jews in Germany (*Reichsvereinigung*) under Gestapo control had been ordered to produce a statistical summary of the number of Jews, showing both total numbers and the proportion among the overall population of the individual countries. This summary was to include details of the definition of the term “Jew” and the legal status of the Jews in these countries. In its response, the *Reichsvereinigung* cited several publications, magazines and newspaper articles and declared: “The figures, in so far as possible taken from official documents but otherwise estimated, relate as a rule to *Glaubensjuden* (Jews according to religion) and therefore show minimum numbers.” There are some revealing differences between the data of the *Reichsvereinigung* and the resulting table produced by Eichmann. He had rounded up the figures for the General Government and Romania in accordance with the territorial expansion in summer 1941 in Galicia and Bessarabia.

He had greatly increased the *Reich* Association's figure of 3.02 million Jews in the USSR to 5 million (possibly for propaganda reasons). Eichmann had also corrected the *Reich* Association's figure of 135,000 Jews in the Netherlands, entering the figure of 160,800 by adding of the "*Mischlinge*". This underlines the attitude of the SS not to accept exemptions from deportation made for the *Reich*. No figures were given for Estonia, but in Eichmann's table the word "Jew free" (*judenfrei*) is put next to Estonia. All Estonian Jews who had not managed to escape had already fallen victim to the killing operations of *Einsatzgruppe A*. For France, Eichmann had obviously also included the Jews in the French colonies in North Africa. This table in the protocol of the Wannsee Conference thus expresses the threat of extermination faced by the European and North African Jews. Eichmann organised his figures into two sections. A: Those countries with Jews there already under German control. B: Those countries to be controlled in future; grouping together allied countries like Bulgaria, Finland, Italy, Croatia etc. with war enemies like England and neutral states like Portugal or Switzerland. Since April 1941 Serbia had been under German control and it was therefore wrongly attributed to section B. The actual threat is made apparent by the map showing the frontline and the parties to the war on the eve of 20 January 1942. This map was produced with the assistance of the Potsdam Research Institute for Military History using the maps of the General Staff of the Supreme Command of the *Wehrmacht*. It shows that the centres of Jewish life in Eastern and South-Eastern Europe were occupied by the Germans or controlled by regimes which were allied with Hitler. Eichmann's table of the numbers of Jews distinguishes between countries occupied by the *Wehrmacht* and allied or neutral countries that Germany planned to control. It also indicates that despite the failed invasion of England in 1940 and the turn in the course of the war in 1941–42 following the failure of the *Blitzkrieg* strategy in Russia, the National Socialist leadership still presumed that it would control the whole of Europe in the near future.

## Göring's Authorisation

The conference protocol indicates that prior to the meeting a decision in principle must have been taken at the highest level (Hitler and Himmler) to extend the mass deportation eventually followed by mass murder of Jews that had commenced in June 1941 in the Soviet Union. Heydrich's statements at Wannsee still included the option of a "territorial final solution" in Siberia after the expected military victory during the springtime offensive in 1942. Perhaps this applied to German and West European Jews and to the Jews in Poland, the majority of whom were still alive. However, only those able to carry out slave labour were expected to stay alive for a longer period. The Protocol thus reflects the actual situation and expectations in January 1942. Due to the failed campaign in the East and under the circumstances of the ongoing mass deportations the option of a "territorial solution" was finally abandoned. During spring and summer 1942 the "final solution" definitely turned into a comprehensive genocide of all European Jews.

The *Einsatzgruppen* of the *Reich* Security Main Office (RSHA) had been murdering Jews in the Soviet Union since the invasion of the country on 22 June 1941. Heydrich sought a written authorisation for this and for further plans, which would carry more weight than the task assigned to him by *Reichsfuehrer* SS Heinrich Himmler. On the evening of 31 July 1941 Heydrich presented Hermann Göring with a document for his signature, which had been produced in the RSHA. Göring had already put Heydrich in charge of forced emigrations in January 1939. Adolf Hitler had given Göring, his second in command in the National Socialist hierarchy, an extensive degree of power, which included the coordination of all anti-Jewish measures. Göring's signature authorised Heydrich to prepare a "total solution of the Jewish question in Europe" according to "the prevailing circumstances". Heydrich was to use this authorisation six months later once the term "total solution of the Jewish question" had become significantly more radical and meant genocide after previous deportation. Heydrich also used this document to legitimise his leading role in the "Final Solution of the Jewish Question" to other authorities and within the SS. Each participant invited to the Wannsee Conference by a circular letter of 29 November 1941 received a copy of this authorisation with the invitation. Five days after the Wannsee Conference, Heydrich sent additional copies to the regional commanders of the Security Police (Sipo), the SS Security Service (SD), the *Einsatzgruppen* and the SS Personnel Headquarters. His accompanying letter concluded with an indirect reference to the Wannsee Conference, stating "preparations have commenced". At the end of January 1942, Adolf Eichmann sent express letters to all relevant authorities in the German *Reich* with instructions to continue the deportation of Jews, which had started in October of the previous year. He now referred explicitly to the "start of the Final Solution". Eichmann gave a detailed list of the groups to be deported and named those who were to be initially exempt from deportation in accordance with the First Supplementary Decree to the *Reich* Citizenship Law. At this stage, Heydrich was thus unable to achieve his aim of extending the groups to be deported.

These instructions, which were based on the result of the discussions during the Wannsee Conference, marked the start of preparations for the systematic deportation of all European Jews. Eichmann chaired two follow-up conferences of “Jewish experts” from the various ministries on 6 March and 27 October 1942. These conferences discussed a “solution to the *Mischling* question” through sterilisation as well as legal formalities to introduce the compulsory divorce of “mixed marriages”. As Hitler had made no fundamental decision on this by the end of the war, the extremely radical measures planned were not initially implemented on *Reich* territory. The occupied Eastern territories did not have such reservations about non-Jewish relatives. Himmler personally forbade any such limited definition of the term “Jew” in these territories. Towards the end of the war, spouses in “mixed marriages” were ultimately also deported from *Reich* territory.

## The Conference Participants

The rank of the participants and the institutions that they represented can be seen on the chart located in the historical conference room. This shows that a document produced after the Wannsee Conference, which referred to a “meeting of State Secretaries”, correctly defined the nature of the conference. The State Secretaries implemented what had already been decided at a higher political level. It would therefore be incorrect to say that the murder of European Jews was decided at the Wannsee Conference. Nonetheless, the conference is of major historical significance as it provided the coordination necessary to extend the genocide to almost the whole of Europe. The conference represents the involvement of the entire German state administration in the genocide, which was implemented by a range of authorities. The 15 participants at the conference were among the elite of the National Socialist regime. Their biographies show that many had completed an academic education and had brilliant careers. Eight held doctorates. Most were from “good middleclass” homes. Some were staunch National Socialists but others had joined the party for opportunistic reasons. Their average age was just 43. The question is often asked as to what happened to the participants after the war. A third of them died before the end of the war or shortly afterwards. Reinhard Heydrich died a few months after the conference following an assassination attempt by Czech resistance fighters. Rudolf Lange and Alfred Meyer committed suicide in February and May 1945 respectively. Roland Freisler died during an air raid in February 1945 in the cellar of the *Volksgesichtshof* (People’s Court) that he headed. Martin Luther from the Foreign Office fell out of favour in 1943 on account of an intrigue against the Foreign Minister and was sent to the Sachsenhausen concentration camp. He died in a Berlin hospital in spring 1945 as a result of his imprisonment. It is probably only due to these circumstances that Luther’s copy of the conference protocol survived the war. The 16th of a total of 30 copies of the protocol was delivered to Luther after the conference. The files from his bureau in the Foreign Office in the centre of Berlin were collected during preparations for his trial. They were later deposited in a complex of buildings in Berlin-Lichterfelde on the edge of the city, where they escaped the systematic destruction of files before the end of the war. In 1947, the team of the American chief prosecutor found both files titled “Final Solution of the Jewish Question” from Luther’s office when preparing the Nuremberg trials against leading ministerial officials. Another third of the participants died in the post-war years. Wilhelm Kritzinger died in 1947, shortly after being released from Allied imprisonment for reasons of ill health. During the preparations for the “Wilhelmstrassen trial” in Nuremberg he had been confronted with his participation in the Wannsee Conference on account of the protocol that had just been discovered. Kritzinger – like Eichmann later – confirmed the authenticity of the protocol and that he had attended the conference. He described the murder of the Jews as a crime that he regretted. Erich Neumann also died at the beginning of 1948. Eberhard Schöngarth was executed in 1946 after being sentenced by a British military tribunal – not because of his part in the murder of Jews in Galicia, but because he had personally ordered the shooting of a British prisoner of war. Josef Bühler was sentenced to death in Cracow in 1948. Adolf Eichmann was executed in 1962 in Jerusalem. The final third of the conference participants were able to return to a good middle-class existence after the war, some as early as the end of the 1940s. Gerhard Klopfer and Georg Leibbrandt were released from prison in 1949. In 1962, a preliminary inquiry into Klopfer’s involvement in the Wannsee Conference was halted. A preliminary investigation into Leibbrandt’s involvement in the same matter was halted in 1950. The German courts did not consider themselves in the position to prove the personal guilt of these individuals. Like so many so-called “bureaucratic murderers” (*Schreibtischtäter*) they escaped punishment. Klopfer lived a peaceful life until 1987 and worked as a lawyer. Similarly, Leibbrandt was over 80 when he died in 1982. In 1948, Otto Hofmann was sentenced to 25 years imprisonment in the Nuremberg trials against the SS Race and Settlement Main Office. However, like many others he was pardoned and in 1954 he was released from the American prison for war criminals in Landsberg on Lech.

Hofmann worked as a clerk in Wuerttemberg until 1982, when he died aged 84. Following the Wilhelmstrassen Trial, Wilhelm Stuckart was released from prison in 1949 as his sentence of three years and ten months had been served by his previous time in prison.

A German denazification court classified him in 1950 as being only a "follower" of the Nazi regime – despite his responsibility for all anti-Jewish laws and decrees – and in 1952 fined him DM 500. He died in a car accident in 1953 at the age of 51.

It is unclear what happened to the Head of the Gestapo, Heinrich Müller. After the RSHA buildings in the centre of Berlin were bombed he moved his offices to the Wannsee villa for a while and was seen in the *Führer's* bunker at the end of April 1945. He has been reported missing without trace since the beginning of May 1945.

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[http://www.ghwk.de/engl/wannsee\\_conference.htm](http://www.ghwk.de/engl/wannsee_conference.htm)