

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 358

“The Wannsee Conference”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

The failure of Operation Barbarossa forced Hitler and the Nazi Party to put their grand plan for colonizing the Soviet Union on hold.

In its place, the Nazis began one of the most terrible crimes in human history.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 358. The Wannsee Conference.

Regular listeners to this podcast already know that the first people imprisoned in concentration camps by the Nazi SS were Communists and socialists; only later did the Nazis begin incarcerating Jewish and Roma people in them. They also know that after the invasion of the Soviet Union began, the first people the Nazis ordered to be shot on sight were commissars, Communists, and partisans. Within a matter of weeks, the definitions of “Communist” and “partisan” were expanded until they included any Jewish person, babies and old women included. In the Nazi vocabulary, *Jewish* and *Bolshevik* were virtually synonyms. As we’ve seen in the past, the German military has always had a serious fear and loathing of partisans.

As the German Army advanced deeper into the Soviet Union, thousands of partisans took up guerilla warfare in the German-occupied portions of the country. Many of these partisans were Jewish people who had fled the German murder squads. Soon the Germans regarded Jewish and partisan as also synonymous.

I suppose I should put up a trigger warning here, because we are going to be talking about some very difficult topics today. I confess I find this material difficult myself to read about, think about, write about, or speak about. We’re going to talk about how the Nazis used poison gas to eliminate people, and as was the case with shootings and concentration camps, the first victims to be murdered by gassing were not Jewish. In this instance, the first were the sick and disabled.

We talked about eugenics in episode 248. I hasten to point out that the word “eugenics” is not synonymous with “murdering disabled people.” Eugenics is an umbrella term that covers a wide range of policies. It is a complicated subject, and I refer you back to that episode where I made an effort to explore the different shades of eugenics.

I did talk in that episode about the policy of forced sterilization of people deemed mentally unfit. In the United States of the 1920s, many states enacted those laws and enforced them, based on “science” that was later thoroughly debunked. The United States Supreme Court upheld the power of the states to impose forced sterilization.

In those long-ago days of the 1920s, Germany was not a nation notable for its enthusiasm over eugenics. Germany had its eugenics activists, as did many other countries, but there was no forced sterilization law. Not until 1933, shortly after Adolf Hitler became chancellor. From 1933 through 1939, when the war began, the Nazi government forced sterilization on an estimated 360,000 Germans.

As early as 1935, Hitler is known to have expressed privately his opinion that incurably ill or disabled people should be put to death. He lamented that public opposition would make such a policy impossible, but added that in the event of a war, well, that would be different.

In the spring of 1939, a man in Leipzig, who was the father of an infant son with severe disabilities, wrote a letter to Hitler requesting permission to euthanize the child. Hitler sent his personal physician, Dr. Karl Brandt, to Leipzig to observe the child for himself and consult with the family pediatrician. Brandt endorsed the idea and Hitler gave his permission for the killing.

This led Hitler and Brandt to create a committee of experts to evaluate similar cases, a committee with the deliberately vague name, “Reich Committee for the Scientific Registration of Major Genetic and Congenital Suffering.” In August 1939, just before the war, the German Interior Ministry ordered all German physicians and midwives to report children born with physical deformities. In September, the ministry ordered all German health care facilities to submit lists of patients with mental illness or disability or epilepsy. The ministry followed up with detailed questionnaires on each patient’s particulars.

In October, Hitler signed an order authorizing the killing of people with incurable illnesses. He backdated the order to September 1, probably to create the implication that it was the war that forced the decision on him.

The first of these killings were conducted in the parts of Poland annexed by Germany, and both ethnic Poles and ethnic Germans were among the victims. The killings were administered by the SS, on the grounds that Hitler had put Heinrich Himmler, the head of the SS, in charge of German racial policy. The SS at first simply had the victims shot; later a more sophisticated program emerged in a former Polish Army bunker repurposed as a gas chamber. The victims were led inside and the bunker flooded with carbon monoxide. In early 1940, the SS murderers

began using a modified van as a mobile killing center. The victims were put into an airtight chamber in the back and then killed with the carbon monoxide produced by the van's engine. This method had the convenience of bringing the gas chamber to the victims, rather than the other way around. The SS killed about ten thousand people in this manner by spring of 1940.

In the rest of Germany, a bureaucracy was created for the same purpose, though this was a closely guarded secret. The victims were adults in mental hospitals and children under three suspected of having "serious hereditary diseases." By this they meant physical deformities, Down syndrome, and mental retardation. Parents who resisted giving up their disabled child were threatened with being declared unfit parents, which would lead to the loss of custody of all their children.

Victims were taken to one of six killing centers across Germany. Parents and family were typically told their loved ones were being taken to a special facility for assessment and treatment. The victims were transported in vehicles dubbed "charitable ambulances," and if there is a more cynical Nazi euphemism than that, I haven't heard it yet. These "ambulances" were staffed by SS officers who wore white coats to preserve the illusion that this was a medical program. Once the ambulance reached the facility, children were killed by lethal injection; adults in gas chambers disguised as showers. Carbon monoxide was delivered through the shower heads.

Family members would then be informed that their loved one died of pneumonia or some such thing while in state custody. The German government employed doctors whose full time jobs were the completion of falsified death certificates in support of the government's claims. The remains of the victims were cremated and families given ashes they were told were of their loved one. In fact, the cremations were done *en masse* and the families actually received a mixture of ashes from a large number of victims.

Despite the tight secrecy, rumors began to circulate, once these families compared notes and discovered that no one's loved ones ever seemed to return from these "special assessments." Unrest began to grow and Catholic and Protestant clergy began speaking out, forcing Hitler's government to suspend the program in 1943, although some local officials continued to conduct these killings until the end of the war, or occasionally even longer. This public outcry represents the most notable case of the German public protesting a Nazi policy; perhaps the only case in which public pressure forced the Nazi government to become more moderate.

By the end of the war, an estimated 200,000 people in the Reich and an additional 100,000 in occupied countries were murdered under this program of so-called mercy killings of the ill and disabled. The program gave the SS valuable experience in mass murder. It is no coincidence that when the mass murder of Jewish people began, the SS used the same methods, the same facilities, and in many cases employed the same people to operate them.

Are you finding this difficult to listen to? Don't blame yourself; this is a difficult story. It pains me to tell it, but it needs to be told. We need to remember. The worst thing we could do to the victims of these crimes would be to forget them.

Feel free to take a break for a while, if you need it, because this story is just getting started.

[music: Beethoven, *Symphony No. 5 in C minor*]

If you think back to before the war again, I described to you the irony of the Nazi policy toward Jewish people in Germany. First, the Nazis imposed rules to force Jewish people who were not German citizens out of Germany. Then the Nazis retroactively revoked the naturalizations of the Jewish people who had immigrated to Germany since the First World War, turning them into noncitizens.

There still remained in Germany hundreds of thousands of Jewish people who were born in Germany. Most came from families that had lived in Germany for generations and who thought of themselves as Germans. Over the course of 1933-1939, Hitler's government gradually enacted laws to regulate the daily lives of Jewish people; for example, to bar Jewish people from certain jobs or professional licenses, or from attending universities, to deny Jewish children the right to go to school, even to deny Jewish people access to public transport or libraries or theatres. The Nazi goal was to make life in Germany unbearable for Jewish people and force them to emigrate. Then hit them with so many taxes and fees that they left the country penniless.

I want to emphasize once again that a person's beliefs or conduct had nothing to do with their persecution. The Nazis persecuted Orthodox Jewish people who observed *kashrut* and ate off glass plates. The Nazis persecuted barely observant Jewish people who maybe showed up at synagogue on Yom Kippur but looked and acted just like their gentile neighbors the rest of the year. The Nazis persecuted Jewish agnostics who had never darkened a synagogue door. The Nazis persecuted formerly Jewish people who had converted to Lutheranism or Catholicism or some other Christian sect and now worshiped in the same churches as any other German. The Nazis behaved this way because for them, you were Jewish if your grandparents were Jewish. Your beliefs or your way of living were irrelevant.

I keep hammering this point because in our time when people with fringe political or personal beliefs experience mild inconveniences because of them, they often compare themselves to Jewish people in Nazi Germany. For a long time, I had trouble understanding why anyone would think that; then I realized that they thought Jewish people were persecuted because of their personal beliefs, hence the analogy. The most generous thing I can think to say of such people is that they badly need to listen to this podcast.

Okay, editorial over. As I was saying, Nazi policy before the war was to force Jewish people to leave Germany, to emigrate. And it largely worked. The Jewish population of Germany was about half a million, give or take, when Hitler became chancellor. Six years later, the number in

that same territory was down to 150,000 or so, mostly older people. But here's the irony, if that's the right word. Over this same period, Hitler's policies led to the incorporation of first Austria and then the Sudetenland into the Reich. These places also had Jewish populations; once they were absorbed into the Reich, the new, larger Germany's Jewish population was almost back to what it was before the Nazis got started.

Given time, those people no doubt could have been forced out the country as well. But the war came first. Jewish emigrants always had difficulty finding a country that would accept them; once the war began, effectively no one was accepting German immigrants anymore.

More than that, speaking demographically, the defeat and occupation of Poland added about two million new Jewish residents into the population of the Reich, including the General Government. This was four times as many Jewish people as when Hitler first became chancellor. No normal person would consider this a problem, but a Nazi would.

With the outbreak of the war, the Hitler government moved on from merely pressuring Jewish people to emigrate to forced relocations. All Jewish people from other parts of occupied Poland, especially the cities of Warsaw and Łódź, both of which had large Jewish communities, were to be moved into the Lublin district of the General Government. But this solution proved unsatisfying to the Nazis. The proposed territory was not big enough to accommodate all the people the Nazis wanted to send there, and Hans Frank, the Governor-General of the General Government, began to complain when the SS began forcing hundreds of thousands of Jewish people onto his turf.

Besides, simply moving Jewish people from one part of the former Poland to another part didn't seem like much of an accomplishment. What was even the point?

That was the opinion of an SS officer named Adolf Eichmann. Following the *Anschluss*, Eichmann was put in charge of facilitating Jewish emigration from Austria. The SS approved of his work, and in late 1939, Reinhard Heydrich put Eichmann in charge of deportations into Poland. Eichmann managed to deport a few thousand Jewish people from Austria and occupied Czech lands before suspending the program as inadequate.

In January 1940, during the period when relations between Germany and the Soviet Union were relatively friendly, Eichmann proposed that Germany's unwanted Jewish population be deported to the USSR. After all, the Soviet government had its own Jewish relocation project going; Moscow had created an autonomous Jewish resettlement zone in Siberia, along the Chinese border, and was encouraging Jewish people to migrate there. It was conceived as the Soviet answer to Zionism. In other words, the USSR had what Germany lacked; a space in which to resettle Jewish people. German diplomats raised with the Soviet government the possibility of accepting Jewish settlers from the Reich, but the Soviets weren't interested.

I've already told you about the Madagascar plan; that is, the proposal to deport all Jewish people in Europe to Madagascar, an idea that had been bouncing around among the Nazis for more than a decade; mostly in jest, as there was no feasible way to accomplish this. After the Fall of France, in June 1940, the idea came up again. Madagascar was a French colonial possession, and it would have been possible to demand French cooperation in the Madagascar plan as part of the peace settlement, but once it became clear that the British intended to fight on, the presence of the Royal Navy put Madagascar out of reach for the foreseeable future.

For the Nazis, that meant that the Final Solution to the Jewish question, as they called it, had to be put off. Please note that at this moment, "Final Solution" meant to the Nazis the expulsion of all Jewish people from lands controlled by the Reich. That was the long-range goal, but until that could be arranged, the Nazis needed some kind of temporary program.

No one person came up with the answer; the administrators of the General Government developed it gradually over the first year of the occupation. The cities of Warsaw and Łódź both had large Jewish populations. Why not simply intern them where they already were. In both cities, Jewish ghettos were created.

The word *ghetto* is Italian in origin. It originally referred to the Jewish neighborhood of Venice in Renaissance times. Jewish residents of Venice were required to live in the Ghetto, in segregation from the rest of the population. By the beginning of the twentieth century, *ghetto* had become a generic term describing a crowded urban neighborhood populated by members of a minority group. It still carries that meaning in our time; in the United States it carries more specific and racially charged implications.

The Nazis revived the older meaning and the older practice of the Venetian Ghetto: neighborhoods in each of the two cities were designated as Jewish ghettos. Non-Jewish residents were forced to move out; Jewish residents from other parts of the city were forced to move in; any property they owned outside the ghetto was confiscated. These ghettos were then walled off from the rest of the city. Jewish people were not permitted to leave the ghettos without permission and to wear yellow stars for easy identification. Any Jewish person caught outside the ghetto without permission was subject to execution.

These ghettos essentially became urban concentration camps, although I should point out that the Germans designated more than a thousand ghettos in the General Government; some of them were small towns or rural villages controlled by no more than a checkpoint.

Perhaps a better term for them would be labor camps, as the Nazis hoped to take advantage of Jewish labor to replace Germans mobilized for war. The ghettos were run by a Jewish council, known as a *Judenrat* in German. Members of the *Judenrat* were typically prominent people in the Jewish community; their responsibility was to serve as intermediaries between the Germans and residents of the ghetto. They would strive to keep the ghetto quiet, to avoid Nazi reprisals,

and to plead to the Germans on behalf of the residents. Some ghettos had Jewish police forces to maintain order and prevent escape attempts.

In big cities, the ghettos were walled off. In Warsaw, an important trolley line ran straight through the ghetto; rather than relocate the tracks, the Germans chose to keep the line in operation and build fences on either side of the street to keep ghetto residents away. It is said that people would ride down the trolley as a Sunday afternoon excursion, so they could gawk at the ghetto and its residents.

In 1943, the famous German publisher of travel guides, Baedeker, put out a travel guide for German tourists visiting the General Government. It has been called “one of the most extraordinary documents in the history of travel literature and the Second World War.” Even as deportations and mass murder were underway, an effort was made to make the General Government appear normal. Readers were offered suggested tours, sites to visit, advice on prices and accommodations, and practical tips such as “For longer distances and during night-time driving it is recommended that you bring a gun with you.”

The ghettos were tightly packed and impoverished. Disease and starvation were common, the death rates high. The Nazis did not regard these problems as any concern of theirs.

As the ghettos were being established, Heinrich Himmler turned his attention to creating concentration camps in Poland. A notable one was converted from a Polish Army barracks near the city of Kraków, near the town of Oswiecim, as the Poles called it. As part of the German plan to Germanize the region, towns and villages were now referred to by their German names; in this case, Auschwitz. The first inmates at Auschwitz were Polish political prisoners. By autumn of 1940, Jewish people from the ghettos were being rounded up and sent to internment in Auschwitz. In November 1940, the Polish prisoners at Auschwitz were executed; meanwhile, the German industrial firm IG Farben was examining the prospects of using the Jewish prisoners at Auschwitz as slave labor.

That was the situation when Germany invaded Russia in 1941 and turned everything on its head.

[music: Schoenberg, *String Quartet No. 2*]

I’ve already put you through the story of Operation Barbarossa, so I won’t attempt to summarize it here. Likewise, I already spent an entire episode focused on Hermann Göring’s Green Folder, which had to do with German plans for the economic exploitation of captured Soviet territory.

Why Hermann Göring? Because Göring was in charge of German economic development. Had the invasion of the USSR played out as intended, once the Red Army was destroyed and the USSR occupied all the way to the Urals and the Caucasus, Göring would have been in charge of its economic exploitation. This would have made him a very big man. Well, a bigger one.

Alas for Hermann Göring's career as a Nazi, that didn't happen. The plans for the economic exploitation of the occupied territories would have to be shelved for the time being.

On the other hand, Heinrich Himmler's career as a Nazi and as chief of the SS, was looking brighter than ever. Himmler's SS was basically in charge of administering the laws and regulations dealing with Jewish people in the Reich, the General Government, and the occupied countries in the west and the Balkans. Göring was in charge of the economic redevelopment of the Soviet Union; Himmler and Heydrich asked for and received Göring's approval to deal with Jewish people in the occupied lands. As the Wehrmacht advanced east, so did the SS.

Himmler was behind the series of decisions to expand the Commissar Order to cover all captured Jewish men, and later Jewish women and children. These decisions were made within a matter of weeks after the invasion began.

Hitler had four goals in mind for the Soviet Union. First, destroy Communism. Second, the Hunger Plan, diverting Soviet food production to feed Germans and allowing Soviet citizens to starve, except for the ones who directly produced the food. Third, the Final Solution, which at this time meant the forced relocation of all Europe's Jewish population beyond the Urals and into Siberia. Fourth, German colonization of the newly conquered lands.

The Wehrmacht was supposed to have crushed the Red Army and eliminated Soviet resistance by the end of 1941. That had failed. The Axis had suffered around a million casualties—dead, wounded, missing, captured—and the Red Army around three million. And yet by December, the Red Army had not disintegrated as expected. To the contrary, the Wehrmacht faced a larger Red Army in December than it had in June. Larger, and better organized and better led.

Did Hitler realize by early 1942 that the failure of Operation Barbarossa meant the war was lost? The testimony of those who knew him is inconsistent on this point. Some say he knew, others insist he went into 1942 convinced the war could still be won.

Still, the failure of the 1941 offensive meant none of the four goals had been accomplished. Destroy Communism? The Commissar Order was intended to destroy the Communist Party, but the Party survived, despite untold thousands of killings. The higher ranking Party officials didn't wait around to be killed; they fled the German advance and lived on behind the front lines.

The Hunger Plan? The Hunger Plan proved impossible to impose in practice. The Soviet government had successfully confiscated Ukrainian grain and starved the populace back in 1932 and 1933, but the Communists had committed Party members in every town and village zealously following Moscow's orders. They knew where the stores were kept and they knew everyone's business.

The German occupation forces had nothing similar. They were not able to keep track of every farm and every collective and every grain of wheat. Göring did order the Wehrmacht to live off

the land; the Army confiscated foodstuffs and let the local people starve, but this was just bog standard pillage, such as every army since ancient times has engaged in.

Many people think of fascism as an organized and capable system. Fascists may be bad, but they get things done, or so the thinking goes. Certainly fascist propaganda strove to convey that image, and it's the one form of fascist propaganda that survives in our time. But ruthlessness and cruelty do not guarantee efficiency. A person, an organization, a nation can be cruel and ruthless in the service of goals that are pointless, contradictory, or even self-destructive. Sometimes I wonder what darkness lies in the minds of those who see cruelty and assume efficiency.

There I go editorializing again.

What about the Final Solution? The deportation of Jewish people to Siberia couldn't begin until Soviet resistance ended. Similarly, the German settlers Hitler envisioned remaking the land couldn't be brought into a war zone.

So the failure of Operation Barbarossa meant none of Hitler's goals were achievable.

Back in the early years of the podcast, when we were talking about Imperial Russia, Russia had the largest Jewish population of any nation in the world, but Jewish people could not live anywhere they pleased; they were restricted to a region of western Russia called the Pale of Settlement. If you look at a map of the Pale, you can see that its territory roughly included Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Belarus, Bessarabia, and Ukraine.

Or to put it another way, the lands included in the Pale of Settlement in 1901 match pretty closely to the lands occupied by the German Army in 1941.

Germany now controlled what in the days of old Imperial Russia was called the "Pale of Settlement." In 1941, the Jewish population of this region ran to perhaps 3.5 million. Add to that figure the two million or so Jewish residents of the General Government, and you reach a startling conclusion. The German Reich, plus territories occupied and administered by Germany now collectively have a Jewish population approaching six million. Or to put it another way, the Reich now rules over more Jewish people than any other nation on Earth. More than the United States, which now ranks second. More in fact than any nation in world history, with the sole exception of Imperial Russia, and the prospects of deporting them out of Reich-controlled lands remained as remote as ever.

To Hitler, to the Nazi leadership, this situation was verging on intolerable.

Hitler's goals were unfulfilled. The Wehrmacht had failed to defeat the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, one thing the Wehrmacht and the German administration in Russia did very well was mass murder. There was the Commissar Order, which required the killings of commissars and Party members, quickly broadened to include anyone who was Jewish. Behind the front lines there operated four *Einsatzgruppen*, which I told you about in episode 347. These were basically

death squads meant to seek out and kill the same groups of people: commissars, Party members, Jewish people.

The Germans even experimented with mass shootings of Jewish people, under the guise of relocation, including some 33,000 in Kiev in September.

The Baltic States were a special case. The Soviet Union had only annexed them a year before Barbarossa; afterward, the Communists killed tens of thousands of political opponents in those countries and imprisoned or deported to Siberia tens of thousands more. When the Wehrmacht marched in, Lithuanians and Latvians and Estonians saw them as liberators. But not Jewish Estonians, of whom there were a few, or Jewish Latvians, of whom there were some, or Jewish Lithuanians, of whom there were many. For them, the arrival of German soldiers was detested and feared.

Their non-Jewish neighbors were not pleased by their reaction. That Jewish people seemed to prefer rule from Moscow to liberation seemed to confirm everything the Nazis said about Bolshevism being a front for a Jewish conspiracy. They turned on their Jewish neighbors, violently. The Germans found all they needed to do was stand back and let the violence unfold. Sometimes they cheered it on, as the local people did the work of the *Einsatzgruppen* for them.

Millions of Russian POWs were beaten, tortured, starved, or shot in 1941. By the end of the year, the Nazis were experimenting with their mobile gas vans again, bringing them to the camps to murder Soviet POWs. They also tried shipping tens of thousands of prisoners to the gas chambers in Poland and killing them there.

The rationale for all these murders was to reduce the number of mouths to feed, to save the food for Germans. Especially the mouths of those who offered the Reich nothing in return for the food they ate. That included POWs, except for the few who could be used for their labor. And in the Nazi calculus, the category of people who ate food and offered nothing in return also included Jewish people.

Sometime between September and November 1941, an idea emerged in the elite circles of the Nazi Party. No one can say who thought of it first. Heydrich maybe, or Himmler. Or perhaps the *Führer* himself. Maybe more than one of them. We can't say for certain, because the records don't exist. These people were careful about what they put to paper, Hitler more so than any of them. When they did put words to paper, they relied heavily on circumlocutions and euphemisms. Late in the war, many incriminating records were destroyed, to keep them out of Allied hands.

The idea that emerged was this: though the other goals of Operation Barbarossa remained out of reach, the Final Solution was perhaps achievable. Provided only that you redefine it. Relocation, deportation, expulsion were out of reach, but what about mass murder? There was already plenty

of mass murder going on in the occupied East, and the Germans were getting better at it all the time.

Jewish people held in concentration camps or in ghettos were starving and dying, though not fast enough to suit the Nazis, who now proposed the relocation of all Jewish people everywhere in Europe into such camps and ghettos, first for internment, then for elimination.

On November 29, 1941, Reinhard Heydrich invited senior officials from several German government ministries and agencies to a meeting to discuss the implementation of this plan. The meeting was originally scheduled for December 9, but the beginning of December saw dramatic developments: Marshal Zhukov's counteroffensive on December 5. Pearl Harbor on December 7. The German declaration of war on the United States on December 11. The meeting had to be postponed to January 20, 1942.

At the beginning of the new year, Germany found itself facing a remarkable coalition of enemies: the United Kingdom, the United States, and the Soviet Union; the world's two principal capitalist powers and the world's principal Communist power. These were nations that in most circumstances would be unwilling to give each other the time of day.

How do you account for this unlikely development? If you are a normal person, you would say that what unites these Allies is a joint detestation of Hitler, Nazism, and the foreign policy Germany has conducted since 1933, a policy based on lies, deceit, betrayal, and aggression that culminated in a second world war even bloodier than the first and plunged all Europe into violence and savagery. You would also note that the British declared war on Germany only after Germany ignored British warnings and attacked their ally Poland. You would note that it was Hitler who declared war on the Soviet Union and Hitler who declared war on the United States.

But if you are a Nazi, you see a Jewish conspiracy. Jewish plutocrats controlled the capitalist powers. Bolshevism was a Jewish construct. Now this Jewish conspiracy was throwing all of it together into a desperate campaign to utterly destroy Germany. To destroy Nazism. To destroy Adolf Hitler.

In that case, Hitler and Germany had every right to strike back with every means at their disposal. If the Wehrmacht could not reach the Jewish masters of the Kremlin, or of the City, or of Wall Street, well, there were millions of Jewish people the Wehrmacht *could* reach, were there not? Hitler began reminding everyone of the warning he had given in his speech of January 30, 1939, when war was looming, words that now rang prophetic: "the instigators of this bloody conflict will thus have to pay for it with their lives."

Heydrich's meeting was held in a charming villa owned by the SS that overlooked the Großer Wannsee, a lake adjacent to the Berlin suburb of Wannsee, and history knows it as the Wannsee Conference.

The Wannsee Conference is important to history not because here was the time and place when the decision was made to murder every Jewish person under Nazi rule. That decision had already been made; this conference is merely where the details were ironed out by lower level officials. But while documentation of how and when and by whom the original decision was made is lacking, a copy of the minutes of the Wannsee meeting survived the war and fell into the hands of American prosecutors at the Nuremberg war crimes trials, and so we have very good documentation of this particular meeting.

Reinhard Heydrich presided over the meeting; Adolf Eichmann took the minutes. Most of the attendees were civil servants from a number of key German government ministries. Many were lawyers; more than half of them held doctorates. The Foreign Office was represented by an undersecretary named Martin Luther, and no, I am not making this up. It was Luther's copy of the minutes that were eventually seized by the Americans.

Heydrich opened the meeting by asserting the jurisdiction of the SS and of himself personally. He presented statistics on the numbers of Jewish people in nations across Europe, including German-occupied nations, Axis allies, even Britain. He estimated the total at eleven million. They were to be shipped to the occupied territories in the East. Their numbers would be reduced, first by hard labor and starvation; those who survived that far would be "treated accordingly." Certain Jewish people, especially the elderly and educated and those who had served in the German Army in the last war would be sent to the model concentration camp at Theresienstadt in Bohemia, where they would be relatively well treated. This would be the camp which could be shown of to representatives of neutral nations or the Red Cross to demonstrate that Jewish internees were well cared for.

You might think that in a dictatorship there would be little to discuss. But even dictatorships have ministries and bureaucracies and legal issues. What about Jewish people married to Aryans? What about their families? What about the *Mischlinge*? Representatives from the General Government wanted to see the Jewish people under their administration "resettled" first. Resettlement. Yeah, that's the ticket. We'll call it resettlement.

On behalf of the Foreign Office, Martin Luther expressed concern that relocations of Jewish people from Norway or Denmark could not be hidden from the international community and might undermine Germany's diplomatic position. And what about Jewish people who held passports from friendly or neutral nations?

The Reichsbahn, the German railway system, was the largest employer in Germany after the German government and military. It would be tasked with moving all these people. Arrangements would be made for the tickets for them and their guards to be paid out of Jewish funding sources. The Jewish passengers would ride in freight cars, but would pay the same fare as those who rode in coaches. The Wehrmacht worried about losing the use of these trains, which

were badly needed to rush supplies to the front, as well as losing the Jewish skilled labor working in the arms industry.

The conference lasted about ninety minutes. Afterward, the participants had lunch and drank brandy together as they chatted further and took in the villa's spectacular view of the lake, and it is perhaps here that you can say the Holocaust began. Not that Jewish people weren't already being murdered in large numbers by *Einsatzgruppen* and other forces seeking them out, but henceforth Jewish people would be rounded up and delivered to efficient industrial murder facilities, like Auschwitz. Some people speak of first, the Holocaust by bullets, and now, the Holocaust by gas.

By the end of 1942, some four million Jewish people from across Europe had been murdered, along with an estimated 40,000 Roma who soon were also included in the extermination campaign.

And let me say once again: Germany was a dictatorship, but it takes far more than one man to build and operate a system that murders on this scale. It took hundreds of thousands of ordinary people in all walks of life, from Nazi elites to soldiers and law enforcement, factory managers, corporate leaders, train drivers, camp guards, doctors, lawyers, engineers, scientists and more, to make the Holocaust a reality.

We'll have to stop here for today. I thank you for listening, and I'd especially like to thank Rich and Brayton for their kind donation, and thank you to Charles for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Rich and Brayton and Charles help cover the costs of making this show, which in turn keeps the podcast available free for everyone, so my thanks to them and to all of you who have pitched in and helped out. If you'd like to become a patron or make a donation, you are most welcome; just visit the website, historyofthetwentiethcentury.com and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons.

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And I hope you'll join me next week, here on the *History of the Twentieth Century*, as we look at the United States in the aftermath of the Pearl Harbor attack and take stock of the worst decision Franklin Roosevelt ever made in his long and storied tenure as President. That's next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. When I was a kid, and the Cold War was in full swing, my teachers liked to point to Soviet propaganda during the Second World War and note that Stalin and his

government framed the war as a patriotic duty, rather than a defense of Communism. They literally named the conflict “The Great Patriotic War,” and spoke of the “Motherland.” They did not speak so much of how the Nazis wanted to destroy Communism or how the Red Army was fighting to defend the workers and peasants against the capitalists who wanted to re-enslave them.

They could have, but they didn’t. The uncharitable explanation—and therefore the most popular during the Cold War—was that the Communist government of the Soviet Union knew full well that the Soviet public was at best indifferent to Soviet ideology, or at worst hostile to it, which would have made an ideological appeal ineffective.

No doubt this is true, but there’s an additional, more charitable, explanation that also played a role. Nazi propaganda framed the war against the USSR as a clash between two ideologies that could not coexist. For the government in Moscow also to speak of a war of ideologies would have been to endorse the Nazi point of view. Rather than depict Communism as an ideology that provokes attacks from other countries, Soviet propagandists found it more convenient to depict the USSR as merely an innocent country, minding its own business, until it was attacked without warning or provocation by a ruthless and aggressive Nazi state.

The Nazis also claimed that Bolshevism was merely a front for the international Jewish conspiracy, which meant that prioritizing the need to defend Bolshevism over the need to defend the homeland could be interpreted as an implicit admission that Bolshevism was a Jewish plot to undermine Germany, which was what the Nazis were saying.

Similarly, Soviet propaganda during and after the war called attention to Nazi atrocities, but avoided reference to the fact that the Nazi murder machinery existed first and foremost to kill Jewish people. The Soviets preferred to describe the victims as “peaceful citizens,” and elide their ethnic and religious identity.

The charitable interpretation is that to focus on Nazi killings of Jewish people could be interpreted as confirming that the Soviet government was primarily concerned about Jewish interests.

The uncharitable explanation is that the Nazis killed not only Jewish Soviet citizens, but also Jewish Poles, Jewish Hungarians, and Jewish people from a dozen other countries, which means that to emphasize the Jewish identity of the victims is to acknowledge that other nations and other peoples besides the Soviets were victims of Nazi brutality. On the other hand, if you disregard ethnicity and religion and focus on country of citizenship, then yes, you can say that the Nazis murdered nearly twenty million Soviet citizens, including Soviet POWs, and by that metric, many more innocent Soviet citizens were killed than citizens of any other country, thus framing the USSR as the country that suffered the most. In our time, the Russian government continues to interpret Nazi killings in that light.

Every life is equally sacred, and every murder is equally deplorable. Even so, you can't escape the fact that Nazi hostility toward Jewish people was uniquely intense and uniquely savage. Any attempt to deny that, or to sweep it under the rug and ignore it, merely obscures how uniquely evil Nazism was. And is.

[music: Closing War Theme]