

Seventy-five years since the Wannsee Conference

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Last Friday, January 20, marked the 75th anniversary of the notorious Wannsee Conference, in which 15 influential representatives of the Nazi regime discussed at a villa in the suburb of Berlin the organization and implementation of the so-called “final solution of the Jewish question.”

The meeting was called by Reinhard Heydrich, director of Reich Main Security Office (Reichssicherheitshaupt, RSHA). Among those invited were representatives of the General Government in Poland, the Foreign Office (Auswärtiges Amt), the Reichskanzlei (Reichschancellory), the Main Office for Questions of Race and Settlement, as well as a series of SS leaders.

The Wannsee Conference marked the beginning of a concerted effort of the German state, the army and big business to exterminate European Jews. Its central purpose was to establish the main principles for the implementation of the plan and coordinate all key agencies of the German state in this criminal endeavor. While no written order by Adolf Hitler was ever found, there is no question that he must have authorized the plan for the “final solution” and the conference itself, as was the case with every other step taken in the persecution and murder of European Jewry.

In July 1941, Reichsmarshal Hermann Göring officially made Reinhard Heydrich the man responsible for the “solution of the Jewish question.” After month-long preparations by Heydrich and his assistant, Adolf Eichmann, who had inspected early attempts to use gassing as a method of mass murder in the fall of 1941, the discussants at the Wannsee Villa agreed in a meeting of only about 90 minutes that the “removal” of the Jews from the “German Lebensraum” required their total annihilation. Much of the protocol of the discussion is devoted to a definition of who counts as a Jew and therefore needs to be murdered. Of central significance was the decision to murder not only the Eastern European Jews, generally considered by the Nazis to be inferior, but also the German Jews and what the Nazis termed “Mischlinge” (mixed-blood).

Europe, so the protocol stated, had to be “combed through from West to East,” and all the Jews were to be “evacuated to the East”—a euphemism for their planned annihilation. Those who were “fit for work” were to be spared temporarily to exploit them for the benefit of the German war effort. However, they too in the end were to be “treated accordingly”—another term, as Adolph Eichmann later admitted, for killing them. The targeted number of victims set at the conference was 11 million.

The main authority in organizing and planning this historically unprecedented mass murder was to rest with Heydrich’s Reich Main Security Office. Founded in 1939 to combat the Reich’s “internal and external enemies,” the RSHA comprised the elite SS organizations Security Service (SD) and the Security Police (SIPO) and was largely staffed with convinced Nazi academics, many of them trained doctors and lawyers.

The Wannsee conference, originally scheduled for December 9, 1941, took place amid a staggering crisis of the Nazi regime. Just a few weeks earlier, Nazi Germany had declared war on its main imperialist rival, the

United States, which, as the Nazi elites very well knew, had a technologically superior economy and army. In the war against the Soviet Union, the Wehrmacht found itself deadlocked before Moscow and Leningrad, facing increasing resistance from the Red Army and the Soviet population. With the economic crisis and food situation dramatically worsening in Germany itself, the regime was in the midst of a much-feared war “on two fronts,” and growing layers of the military were reckoning with the possibility of losing the world war.

Under these conditions, the Nazi leadership felt that it was both necessary and, for perhaps only a brief period of time, still possible to follow through with the extermination of European Jewry—an outcome of the war that Adolf Hitler had infamously announced in early 1939.

The conference did not mark the beginning of what has come to be called the Holocaust. German Jews had been progressively stripped of basic civil rights and politically persecuted by the Nazi regime since its assumption to power in 1933. In October 1938, the first mass deportation of Jews from Nazi Germany took place, targeting about 17,000 men, women and children with Polish citizenship. Following the Nazi invasion of Poland in September 1939, ghettos were built throughout occupied Eastern Europe, in which about three million Polish Jews lived under horrifying circumstances. In late 1939, thousands of Jews were killed in massacres by the Einsatzgruppe Woersch and in smaller massacres by the Wehrmacht in Poland. A systematic policy of starvation by the Nazi occupation authorities claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands of Polish Jews before the gas chambers were in operation.

The anti-Jewish policies reached a genocidal dimension with the Nazi assault on the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941. In the following months, a substantial portion of Soviet Jewry—residing in what is today Ukraine, Belarus, and the Baltics—was murdered in mass shootings that turned entire strips of land into graveyards. Among the most notorious atrocities of this period were the massacre of Kamenets-Podolsk (August 27-28, 1941, with around 24,000 dead), and of Babi Yar (September 29-30, 1941, with over 33,000 dead). Both took place in what is today Ukraine.

However, it is only after Wannsee that the mass gassing of millions of Jews in the extermination camps began. Over half of the six million Jews that were murdered in World War II were killed between March 1942 and March 1943. Almost two out of three million Polish Jews were murdered in 1942, most of them in the gas chambers of Auschwitz, Treblinka, Chełmno, Sobibór and Bełżec. Hundreds of thousands of Jews from countries like Greece, France, Yugoslavia, Slovakia and Bohemia were killed. As one of the last Jewish communities in Europe, some 400,000 Jews from Budapest were gassed in Auschwitz within just a few weeks in the summer of 1944.

Only a few of the participants of the Conference were ever held accountable and, if so, then usually not for their role in the Holocaust. Reinhard Heydrich was already assassinated in 1942; one died in the war; two others committed suicide; and two died briefly after the war. The SS leaders Eberhard Schöngarth and Josef Bühler were both sentenced to

death and executed for other crimes they committed. Adolf Eichmann was tried and sentenced to death in Israel in 1961-1962 after years of peaceful exile in Argentina.

Otto Hofmann, the representative of the Race and Settlement Main Office at Wannsee, was tried in Nuremberg and sentenced to 25 years in prison, but he was pardoned in 1954. The SS leader Wilhelm Stuckart, who was also one of the authors of the Nuremberg Laws, was sentenced in a postwar trial to less than four years in prison. In fact, however, he never served his sentence and was eventually classified by German officials as a mere “follower” of the regime. An unrepentant rightist, he resumed a successful political career in West Germany that was ended only by his death. Several other conference participants, like so many high-ranking Nazi war criminals, were never put behind bars.

Although decades have passed since the end of World War II and although literally thousands of volumes have been produced on various aspects of the Holocaust and Nazi Germany, these horrors today now raise even more questions than ever. For millions of workers and youth, the question—how was this possible?—has remained unanswered. Yet an even more troubling question has arisen recently: After all these horrors, how can the very forces who have historically been responsible for these crimes raise their heads once again throughout Europe and internationally?

In the Baltics, the Latvian and Estonian Waffen SS, which played a central role in murdering 90 percent of the region’s Jewish population, are now being celebrated as heroes by the ruling class. In Lithuania, streets and memorials are named after Nazi collaborators. Under the Ukrainian regime brought to power in the Western-backed coup in February 2014, forces like the far-right party Svoboda that stand in the tradition of the Ukrainian Nazi collaborators have been integrated into official political life, while any symbols relating to Communism and the struggle of the Red Army against fascism have been criminalized.

In Poland, which the Nazis turned into the center stage of the Holocaust, the right-wing government of the Law and Justice Party (PiS) has been encouraging anti-Semitic tendencies and historical revisionism, while integrating far-right paramilitary forces into the state apparatus.

Most disturbingly, in Germany itself there is a concerted effort underway by academics at the country’s most prestigious universities to falsify history in order to whitewash the horrendous crimes of German imperialism in the 20th century. Simultaneously, the German bourgeoisie is trying to reassert itself as a global power. Politicians from all bourgeois parties, including the so-called “Left Party,” are supporting not only a massive expansion of the military and the buildup of a police state, but also far-right policies against immigrants.

The question of how the crimes of the Nazi regime were possible is closely bound up with the question of why the far-right policies and parties now experience a renewed upsurge. The rise of fascist regimes in the interwar period cannot be understood outside the reaction of the bourgeoisie to the existential crisis it confronted and the threat posed to its rule by the first workers’ state in world history established in Russia in 1917.

It is a historical fact that the worst crimes in human history were perpetrated by a regime that had set at its main goal the destruction of Marxism as a political force. No one formulated this more clearly than Hitler himself. In a speech given before a select audience of the wealthy Hamburg business and political elites in 1926, Hitler declared that the destruction of Marxism—first and foremost in Germany itself—was the “question of fate” for Germany and the precondition for its “resurrection” and the rebuilding of a Reich. He declared: “It is on the basis of this recognition that the movement was once founded which I try to make great and bring to power (*emporzubringen*). Its task is very narrowly defined: the destruction and annihilation of the Marxist world view.”

The anti-Semitic and racist ideology of the Nazis was a particularly

sharp form of the ideological reaction against the rise of the socialist workers’ movement. Historically, the rise of modern political anti-Semitism was closely bound up with the reaction against first the French Revolution and then, above all, against the Russian Revolutions of 1905 and 1917. The Civil War of 1917-22 saw the bloodiest anti-Jewish pogroms hitherto recorded in history, carried out by Russian White troops, but also by Polish and particularly Ukrainian nationalists fighting against the workers’ state.

When the Nazis launched the war against the USSR in 1941 and escalated the anti-Jewish massacres in Eastern Europe, they could base themselves on the very nationalist forces in Eastern Europe that had fought Bolshevik Russia merely twenty years before. Once again, the ideological basis for the mobilization of these forces was the bogeyman of the “Jewish Bolshevik.”

It is therefore no coincidence that someone like Jörg Baberowski from Berlin’s Humboldt University, who stands at the forefront of the attempt to relativize the crimes of Nazi Germany, started his academic career with historical falsifications and denunciations of the October Revolution. Within just a few years, Baberowski went from attacking the Bolshevik regime as an essentially criminal enterprise, to relativizing the crimes of the Wehrmacht against the Soviet Union as a mere reaction forced upon it by the violence of the Red Army. In an article in early 2014, Baberowski even bluntly stated that Hitler was “not cruel” and that the revisionist historian Ernst Nolte, who in that very same article argued that the Jews themselves bore a responsibility for the Holocaust, “was historically right.”

If the rise of the far right in Europe after World War I was a response to the revolutionary movement of the working class throughout Europe and its seizure of power in Russia, the conscious encouragement of the far right by the bourgeoisie and the accompanying falsifications of history today have very much a preemptive character. Facing the most serious crisis of the world capitalist system since the 1930s and historically unprecedented levels of social inequality, the bourgeoisie is anticipating major revolutionary struggles of the working class throughout the world and seeks to overcome its crisis by resorting to war, fascism and dictatorship.



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