

The Conference: A haunting, disturbingly topical film about the Nazis' "Final Solution to the Jewish Question"

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Directed by Matti Geschonneck; screenplay by Magnus Vattrodt and Paul Mommertz

To mark the 80th anniversary of the infamous Wannsee conference of January 20, 1942, at which leading Nazis and ministers planned the extermination of Europe's Jewish population, *The Conference* was shown on the German television channel, ZDF on January 24. The film, directed by Matti Geschonneck, can also be viewed in German online.

Geschonneck's film, shot on location, focuses almost exclusively on the 90-minute meeting in the Villa am Wannsee near Berlin. Here, on a Saturday morning, leading figures of the Nazi regime gathered at the invitation of Reinhard Heydrich (Philipp Hochmair), the head of the Reich Security Office (RSHA) of the SS for a "discussion followed by breakfast." The meeting had one item on the agenda: "The Final Solution of the Jewish Question." Heydrich had been assigned to play the leading role in the "Final Solution." In addition to Heydrich, the participants were:

- Adolf Eichmann (Johannes Allmayer), SS-lieutenant colonel and minute-taker of the meeting
- Heinrich Müller (Jakob Diehl), SS-squad leader and head of the Gestapo
- Martin Luther (Simon Schwarz), Undersecretary of State in the Foreign Office
- Josef Bühler (Sascha Nathan), State Secretary in the Office of the Governor General of occupied Poland, Hans Frank
- Roland Freisler (Arnd Klawitter), State Secretary in the Reich Ministry of Justice and later President of the People's Court (about one year later Freisler sentenced Hans and Sophie Scholl from the resistance group White Rose to death)
- Gerhard Klopfer (Fabian Busch), Ministerial Director in the NSDAP Chancellery
- Friedrich Wilhelm Kritzinger (Thomas Loibl), Ministerial Director in the Reich Chancellery
- Rudolf Lange (Frederic Linkeman), SS-Sturmbannführer and Commander of the Security Police and SD in Latvia
- Otto Hofmann (Markus Schleinzer), Chief of the SS Race and Settlement Main Office
- Georg Leibbrandt (Rafael Stachowiak) and Alfred Meyer (Peter Jordan), both from the Reich Ministry for the Occupied Eastern Territories

- Erich Neumann (Matthias Bundschuh), State Secretary in the Office of the Commissioner for the Four-Year Plan

- Karl Eberhard Schöngarth (Maximilian Brückner), Commander of the Security Police and Security Service in the General Governorate for the Occupied Polish Region

- Wilhelm Stuckart (Godehard Giese), co-author of the Nuremberg Race Laws and then State Secretary in the Reich Interior Ministry.

In the film's opening sequence, we see the final minutes of preparations for the meeting. Various documents, including a list totaling 11 million Jews in Europe compiled by Eichmann, are arranged on the table for each participant. Salmon canapés, cognac and coffee are provided for refreshment.

Heydrich conducts preliminary talks with Martin Luther, the Undersecretary of State at the Foreign Office, followed by Rudolf Lange, Schöngarth and Gestapo chief Müller. Heydrich asks Eichmann in the meantime to "go and entertain these gentlemen with some stories from the East."

Besides Eichmann and Müller, it is Luther from the Foreign Office who is most informed of the RSHA's plans and preparations for the extermination of the Jews. Before the meeting begins, Luther assures Heydrich of "complete access" to Jews of "all nationalities" in Europe. "The time for restraint is over."

In Heydrich's office overlooking the lake, Schöngarth and Lange report from the Eastern Front, where the Nazis have shot hundreds of thousands of Jews in mass graves in the months following the invasion of the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941. Lange declares that "Estonia is free of Jews" [*judenfrei*]. Latvia and Lithuania were also "free of Jews" except for working Jews" [*Arbeitsjuden*].

By the time of the Wannsee Conference, the Nazis, with the help of local fascist collaborators, had already murdered 537,000 Soviet Jews. Heydrich informs his SS colleagues that the state secretaries are made of less stern stuff than the SS. But: "The gentlemen should know what they are about to be participating in, that helps close the ranks." It was only a "question of dosage."

The meeting itself revolves primarily around two issues: firstly, Heydrich wants to ensure that all the state authorities involved agreed with the plans for industrialized mass murder and recognize the main role played by his authority—the Reich Security Office. In chilling manner, the film features a sinister display of bickering

between state secretaries sensing that their ministerial powers are under threat. Bühler's main concern is that the two million Jews in the General Governorate for the Occupied Polish Region be the first to be deported and murdered.

What exactly is to happen to the Jews is not clearly stated at any point. This too is historically correct. The Wannsee Conference minutes only refer to the "evacuation" of the Jews "to the East." The other, even more ominous term used several times by the conference participants to refer to the mass murder is the "working away" [*wegarbeiten*] of the Jews.

The second and by far longest part of the session dealt with the so-called "Mischlingsfrage." According to the Nuremberg Race Laws introduced in 1935, people could be classified as a "half-Jew" or "quarter-Jew" if, for example, a German citizen had a Jewish parent, or one Jewish grandparent. Stuckart helped draw up these laws and insists at the meeting that such "Mischlinge" [derogatory for people of supposedly "mixed race"] be exempted from deportations, proposing instead their mass forced sterilization.

Like several other secretaries of state, Stuckart was primarily concerned that the mass deportation of Jews from the German Reich would lead to "unrest," "irritation and enquiries" among the population. At one point Stuckart says that the mass deportations of these approximately 70,000 citizens could lead to "chaos, and chaos breeds resistance."

No one at the conference expresses any fundamental objections to the mass murder. Erich Neumann, State Secretary in Göring's Office for the Four-Year Plan, repeatedly stresses that skilled Jewish workers in Germany must be exempt from the deportations in order not to endanger the economy. Nor should Jewish labor in the East simply be wasted. Heydrich reassures him: the criterion of "Jews capable of work" and "Jews not capable of work" would play a greater role from now on. Jews "capable of work" would be exploited to advance the war economy before they too were "added to the Final Solution."

At another point, state secretaries express their concern that the mass transport of Jews in the middle of the war could jeopardize the war effort. Heydrich counters: "The war is not an obstacle but an opportunity," because things can now be done and achieved that would be impossible under peacetime conditions.

State Secretary Kritzinger is somewhat disturbed by reports from the East and raises the effects of mass shootings on the morale of "our German soldiers." Toward the end of the meeting, he calculates that, on the basis of the shooting of over 33,000 Jews in the Babi Yar ravine near Kiev, carried out "under ideal conditions" within three days, the mass "working away" of all 11 million European Jews would take over 450 days non-stop.

Heydrich is sympathetic. Even Heinrich Himmler acknowledged he had been affected when he witnessed such mass shootings and immediately requested "more humane" methods of mass murder—i.e., "more humane" for the mass murderers. Since then, Heydrich continues, new methods had been developed on the basis of the "findings" from the Nazi T4 euthanasia program, which used gas to murder 70,000 physically handicapped and mentally ill people.

In Auschwitz, Heydrich continues, Rudolf Höss has conducted

"promising experiments" with Zyklon B on Russian prisoners of war, and it could be assumed that in the near future thousands of people a day could be "worked away" in the Auschwitz camp alone. Reassured, Kritzinger leaves the villa at the end of the conference and hurries to the next meeting, where the "restructuring of the post office" is on the agenda.

The only participants at the Wannsee Conference to face retribution for their crimes were Bühler, Schöngarth and Eichmann, who was sentenced to death in Israel in 1961 and executed in 1962 after he had continued for a number of years after the war to cultivate a Nazi milieu in exile in Argentina. Several of those attending the meeting in Wannsee were actually able to continue their careers undisturbed in the post-war Federal Republic, including Georg Leibbrandt, who became an advisor to the Adenauer government.

Screenwriters Magnus Vattrodt and Paul Mommertz wrote the script for *The Conference* based on the only surviving transcript—all other copies were destroyed because the meeting had never officially taken place—together with extensive historical research.

The film dispenses with music and relies entirely on a mobile camera to chart the interaction of an outstanding cast of players. The director Matti Geschonneck is the son of the famous East German actor Erwin Geschonneck, who survived several concentration camps. Geschonneck is said to have told his actors not to play Nazis and told Deutschlandfunk that the film should convey the "character of a board meeting."

It is precisely this approach and atmosphere that make the film so disturbing and topical: not only does Geschonneck show the "banality" of the crimes of fascism—at least from the point of view of the Nazis. In doing so, he also conveys, whether consciously or not, an impression of the milieu and climate that must be prevailing today at the highest levels of governments, major corporations and banks, where the fate of millions, for instance through mass death due to COVID-19, or a war in Ukraine are being discussed "as an opportunity" in an entirely cold-blooded manner.

In an understated, and thereby all the more terrifying manner, *The Conference* shows what it looks like and what it leads to when the ruling class and forces of political reaction dominate and determine political events. For that reason alone, it deserves a wide audience.



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