

## Wannsee Conference

Meeting held at a lakeside villa in Wannsee, Berlin, on January 20, 1942, whose purpose was to discuss and coordinate the "Final Solution" to the "Jewish Problem"---the mass extermination of all European Jewry.

The Wannsee Conference was organized by Reinhard Heydrich, Heinrich HIMMLER'S deputy and head of the *Reichssicherheitshauptamt* (Reich Security Main Office, or RSHA). The attendees included the state secretaries of those German government offices that carried out Hitler's anti-Jewish policies, and some SS leaders. Adolf Eichmann, the director of Heydrich's Jewish office, was one of those included; he later wrote the conference report. At the meeting Heydrich announced that the official policy of the German government regarding the Jews would be total annihilation. The men invited to the meeting all knew about the Jewish policy; they were either involved in or directly aware of the murder of Jews already taking place across Europe. The question at hand was not whether to implement the policy, but *how* to implement it.

In July 1941 Hermann Goering had ordered Heydrich to coordinate a plan for the "Final Solution." Heydrich's Einsatzgruppen had been murdering Russian Jews by firing squad since the war against the Soviets broke out in 1941. However, this was not a suitable way to kill the Jews outside the war zone. Thus, Heydrich had to create something new. In November extermination camps in Chelmno and Belzec were already being built with facilities for murder by poison.

The Wannsee Conference was originally called for December 9, but was pushed off until January 20, 1942. Heydrich opened the conference with a long speech. He first repeated that he had authorization from Goering to coordinate the "Final Solution." Then he reviewed the Nazis' previous, temporary solution to the Jewish problem - the forced emigration of Jews from the areas under German control, until Himmler forbade any more emigration in the fall of 1941. Next, he announced the new policy that was taking the place of emigration: the "Final Solution." The program would begin with the "evacuation of the Jews to the East," a thinly veiled term for deportation of the Jews to camps. This phase would include all "11 million" Jews in Europe, even those living in countries not yet occupied by the Germans. However, the camp phase was only to be a temporary one, which would lead finally to the annihilation of all European Jewry. He allowed that the strong and healthy Jews would be used as laborers, but that most would not survive. Heydrich concluded his

speech by describing some of the specific problems facing the program, such as what to do with Jews in mixed marriages and their part-Jewish children. The attendees spent much time discussing this issue. Different possible solutions were mentioned, but nothing was decided, so the problems were discussed at two later conferences in March and October 1942.

The next part of the meeting was less structured. The attendees drank and discussed the general issues at hand. At some point, they got down to the business of suggesting various methods of mass destruction. At his war crimes trial in Jerusalem, Eichmann testified that "during the conversation, they minced no words about it at all. They spoke about methods of killing, about liquidation, about extermination." At that stage of the war, the Germans still had little experience in mass murder on such a large scale.

Heydrich closed the meeting with an appeal for cooperation among the participants. Afterwards, Heydrich seemed satisfied that all had gone according to plan, and that the government secretaries were in full agreement about what had to be done. Soon after the Wannsee Conference, the construction of the rest of the extermination camps began.