

Chapter 4

The Wannsee Conference (1984) and its West German Reception

Germans have finally made such a film themselves – after shamefully leaving making ‘Holocaust’ up to the foreigners. – Rolf Hochhuth, December 27, 1984 in *Die Weltwoche*¹

On December 17, 1984, *Der Spiegel* published a negative review of *The Wannsee Conference*, which was slated to premiere on ARD two days later. The review, penned by the journalist and historian Heinz Höhne, repeatedly asserted that the film contained “fantastical” elements and characterized Paul Mommertz as a hysterical figure, fitting Frank Biess’s analysis of West German anxieties about an “emotionalization” of Holocaust memory in the wake of NBC’s 1979 miniseries.² Titled “Eine Falle der Betroffenheit” [A trap of affectedness], the article’s title directly quoted from a correspondence between Mommertz and the historical advisor Shlomo Aronson during a dispute over the screenplay. Höhne alleged that Institute for Contemporary History staff “warned” Mommertz about the danger of creating a “horror piece” on the Wannsee Conference.³ Höhne claimed that “historians” had concluded that Wannsee was relatively unimportant and merely about deportations to the East, while Mommertz (and the film) were overly emotional and moralistic, and that the film exaggerated the Wannsee Conference’s importance. His review portrayed Mommertz as a prima donna screenwriter who refused to listen to the sober, factual assessments of Aronson and the historians at the IfZ. “This is not the Wannsee Conference as the historians know it. It is the Wannsee Conference a la Paul Mommertz.”⁴ Höhne, respected for his bestselling history of the SS, claimed that the source material for a film on the conference, let alone an academic work, was too thin: “It is no coincidence that most historical writing on the Holocaust only has room for a few paragraphs on the Wannsee Conference.”⁵ Considering Joseph Wulf’s prior efforts in the 1960s and early 1970s to convert the Wannsee villa into a research center and memorial site, as well as the avalanche of publications on the conference only half a decade later (even if one takes into account the new material made available by opened Soviet ar-

1 Rolf Hochhuth, “Die Unmöglichkeit der Sühne,” *Die Weltwoche*, December 27, 1984. A condensed, earlier version of this chapter has been published: Johnson, “I Am a Historian as Well.”

2 Biess, *Republik der Angst*, 332–342.

3 Höhne, “Eine Falle der Betroffenheit.”

4 Höhne, “Eine Falle der Betroffenheit.”

5 Höhne, “Eine Falle der Betroffenheit.”

chives as well as new historiographical angles since the 1980s) this is strange argument. The city of Berlin only fulfilled Joseph Wulf's wishes for a memorial and educational center over a decade after his 1974 suicide.⁶ More troubling is Höhne's characterization of the Wannsee Protocol itself. Although he does not outright deny its authenticity, he gives *Spiegel* readers reason to doubt its utility as a source: "Even the protocol, today recognized as an authentic document, seemed fishy to historians for a long time, it's a strange paper in terms of form: no letterhead, no date, no signature."⁷ Höhne did not have problems with filmic depictions of the Holocaust in general; he praised NBC's *Holocaust* miniseries, lauding its success and claiming it succeeded where historians had failed at raising public awareness about the Holocaust.⁸

Höhne's claims about both the conference's purpose and the protocol contradicted his earlier work. In his history of the SS, *The Order of the Death's Head*, Höhne discusses the conference in two sentences, arguing that after Wannsee, "Eichmann had only one aim in life – to be death's most reliable and indefatigable collector and transport agent." If this were the case, the conference certainly could not have only been about deportation. In this passage, he cites Raul Hilberg's account of the conference in his *The Destruction of the European Jews*, which also served as a starting point for Mommertz's screenplay.⁹ In stark opposition to Höhne's overly charitable interpretation of the protocol in his review, Hilberg's account makes it clear that Heydrich and others talked about killing, not merely deportation. Hilberg addresses the protocol's language as well: the euphemisms in the protocol were indeed euphemisms for mass killing, they "[created] a myth" among German officials; "[t]hese terms were not the product of naïveté; they were convenient tools of psychological repression."¹⁰ In other words, this type of language, which referred to deportation, allowed perpetrators to deny what was really happening – it provided both plausible deniability and eased their psychological burdens. In later statements, Höhne also criticised what he

6 Katie Digan, *Places of Memory: The Case of the House of the Wannsee Conference* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 29–38, and Steven Lehrer, *Wannsee House and the Holocaust* (Jefferson, N.C: McFarland & Company, 2000). For a discussion of historiographical developments around the Wannsee Conference and the Holocaust, including Soviet archives, see Roseman, *The Wannsee Conference and the Final Solution: A Reconsideration*, 6–7.

7 Höhne, "Eine Falle der Betroffenheit."

8 Höhne, "Schwarzer Freitag für die Historiker," *Der Spiegel*, January 21, 1979, <https://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-40350862.html>.

9 Höhne, *The Order of the Death's Head: The Story of Hitler's SS* (London: Penguin Books, 2000), 391–392.

10 Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1961), 265–266.

saw as the German press' tendency to overstate Heydrich's importance. While this specific criticism is not present in his review, it may help explain his position.¹¹

It is important to keep in mind the broader context of Höhne's review. His history of the SS, *The Order of the Death's Head*, received wide acclaim; it offered a "differentiated" view of the SS in contrast with earlier depictions that rely on its wartime reputation as an organization filled with criminals and sadists.¹² However, contemporary historians have criticized Höhne for uncritically reproducing statements by Waffen-SS veterans in his work.¹³ Andreas Eichmüller shows that Joseph Wulf had previously been assigned to write the *Spiegel* article series which later became *The Order of the Death's Head*, but Höhne replaced him – Wulf strongly criticized the finished series.¹⁴ Additionally, Höhne had written a 1974 documentary for Westdeutscher Rundfunk (WDR) about the Waffen-SS titled *Männer unter dem Totenkopf*. This documentary praised the Waffen-SS as an elite military organization and attempted to separate the Waffen-SS from the SS as a whole in order to distance Waffen-SS veterans from Nazi crimes. It strongly relied on testimonies from Waffen-SS veterans, including from *Stern-TV* producer Wolfgang Venohr, who collaborated with Höhne on the documentary.¹⁵ Recent research has also revealed that many early *Spiegel* reporters and editors had previously worked in the SS, SD, Abwehr, and Propaganda Ministry. Although Höhne was not an SS member himself, he was part of a wider institutional culture that employed former members of Nazi intelligence and propaganda units in the 1950s and 1960s. This is not to accuse *Der Spiegel* of being a secret Nazi organization, but, as media historian Lutz Hachmeister has stated, to explore "discrepancy" between the magazine's anti-establishment, antifascist image and the pasts of its early employees, as well as the "double standard" displayed by *Der Spiegel*

11 Heinz Höhne, "Hochgekochte Legenden," *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, November 20, 2002.

12 Eichmüller, "Auf das Typische kommt es an," 290.

13 Karsten Wilke, *Die "Hilfsgemeinschaft auf Gegenseitigkeit" (HIAG) 1950 - 1990. Veteranen der Waffen-SS in der Bundesrepublik* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2011), 387–388. See also Jan Erik Schulte, "Namen sind Nachrichten: Journalismus und NS-Täterforschung in der frühen Bundesrepublik Deutschland," in *Public History: Öffentliche Darstellungen des Nationalsozialismus jenseits der Geschichtswissenschaft*, ed. Frank Bösch and Constantin Gschler (Frankfurt; New York: Campus, 2009), 24–51, 43–48.

14 Eichmüller, "Auf das Typische kommt es an," 294, footnote 19.

15 Eichmüller, "Auf das Typische kommt es an," 294.

when exposing the Nazi pasts of various prominent members of West German society.¹⁶

Der Spiegel granted Mommertz the opportunity to respond to Höhne's review at length in its January 1985 issue. Here, he argued that he had worked as a historian and that Höhne had demonstrated ignorance about Wannsee.¹⁷ Mommertz's argument in this piece is based on earlier documents which outline the film's historiographical position and Mommertz's justification for depicting open discussion of killing methods at Wannsee.

1 Promotional Material in the German-Speaking World

Before its December 19, 1984 premiere, BR and ARD engaged in a muted promotional campaign for the film which included press releases, promotional photos, an accompanying booklet, and a short documentary on the film.¹⁸ In an interview, Mommertz expressed bitter disappointment with what he characterized as a lackluster promotional campaign and unwillingness to defend the film on BR's part: "The film was simply broadcasted and wasn't really understood in Germany; it was a flop. It aroused aggression, the critics said: 'that can't be true, there was no such thing, that is fantasy.' And so [the film] was on the air and Bayerischer Rundfunk did not take a stand, defended nothing, it just went on with its daily routine."¹⁹

As with their previous film, *Reinhard Heydrich – Manager of Terror*, Heinz Schirk and Paul Mommertz received promotional coverage from the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. An early promotional blurb for the film, published in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* on February 11, 1984, provided important background information on the production. It notes that pre-production had lasted two years due to Mommertz's research and named January 1985 as its premiere date, likely meant to coincide with the 42nd anniversary of the Wannsee Conference. The blurb quotes executive producer Siegfried Glökler on the film's unique approach: "We are trying every-

16 See Lutz Hachmeister, "Ein deutsches Nachrichtenmagazin - Der frühe 'Spiegel' und sein NS-Personal," in *Die Herren Journalisten. Die Elite der deutschen Presse nach 1945*, ed. Friedemann Siering and Lutz Hachmeister, (Munich: C.H.Beck Verlag, 2002), 117–118.

17 Interview with Paul Mommertz, November 16, 2018, 21:33–23:47; Mommertz, "Völlig unrealistisch und lebensfremd," *Der Spiegel*, December 31, 1984, <http://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-13511955.html>.

18 *Die Wannsee-Konferenz: Werkstattnotizen zum gleichnamigen Fernsehfilm des Bayerischen Rundfunks*, directed by Heinz Steike, 1984, in Joseph Wulf Mediothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin.

19 Interview with Paul Mommertz, November 16, 2018, 16:17–19:24.

thing to avoid what could come across as Third Reich sensationalism; we show the proceedings as they took place, realistically in the original length [of time].”²⁰ Nevertheless, the piece also gives off the impression that the decision to shift to genocide from isolated mass killings was made at Wannsee. The blurb states that the film illustrates the complicity of all conference participants and their respective agencies; that “the decision about the ‘Final Solution’ was by no means a secret SS plot.” It also notes that the actors were cast to resemble their real-life counterparts and “bring color” to the program, but only names the following participants: Heydrich, Eichmann, Bühler, and Lange. The rest of the cast is listed, but those participants they portray remain nameless.²¹ Most importantly, this short piece also notes the incongruity of the meeting with its purpose: “The men who sat together at the time seemed like a casual, relaxed group, they chatted with each other, they picked on each other, and finally the whole thing dissolved into a cocktail party.” One might have thought that this was just some ordinary story, according to Glökler, “but here it was about eleven million helpless people.”²²

A *Süddeutsche Zeitung* piece published on the day of the film’s premiere at first promotes the film but then undercuts it by concluding with a paragraph on Höhne’s negative review. Titled “Criminals Behind the Keyhole,” this piece quotes at length from a since-vanished accompanying promotional document drawn up by BR which emphasizes the film’s voyeuristic “you are there” approach and its debt to Arendt’s “banality of evil” thesis. These explanatory notes from BR could have better contextualized the film but seem to have received little critical attention. They illustrate the film’s central themes, such as a concern with euphemistic, bureaucratic, yet brutal language and the transformation of the German mass murder campaign into a supposedly modern, clinical process:

The inhuman language easily passes over the participants’ lips: They “clean up,” “tidy up,” “work away,” “make Jew-free,” “bring about the possible final solution.” It is no longer a question of if, but only of how. Jewry becomes a statistical quantity, the Holocaust a filing process, genocide a transport problem. A group of quite normal-looking people triggers an extermination action unique in history: the “administered,” “orderly,” “decent” genocide. The discrepancy between the averageness of the perpetrators and the enormity of the act makes the film a shocking experience.²³

20 “Dreh-Spiegel,” *Süddeutsche Zeitung* Nr. 35, February 11/12, 1984, 19.

21 “Dreh-Spiegel,” 19.

22 “Dreh-Spiegel,” 19.

23 “Verbrecher hinter dem Schlüsselloch,” *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, December 19, 1984.

This preview quotes Mommertz, who says that the film provides viewers with a “keyhole perspective” that was “as authentic as possible.” The piece also claims that the film allows the viewer to become a “witness in front of the television screen.”²⁴

In its final paragraph, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*’s promotion piece for the film turns to Höhne’s review, which deflates its initial enthusiasm. It notes Höhne’s assertions about the filmmakers’ “reckless” interpretation of “meager source material” and reproduces his claim that historians recognized the Wannsee Conference as being only about the deportation of Jews to the East, not their murder. The article’s final sentence, thanks to Höhne, repeats now-discredited claims about the civilian participants – namely, that Heydrich’s euphemistic language confused them about the meeting’s purpose.²⁵ This latter assertion – that the participants did not know what Heydrich and the SS were actually doing with the deported Jews – simply repeats strategies used by several Wannsee Conference attendees during their interrogations by Allied investigators. In an interview conducted by Mommertz himself, Robert Kempner, the Nuremberg Trial prosecutor whose team discovered the Wannsee Protocol in the files of the German Foreign Office and the interrogator of several Wannsee Conference participants, describes how these men used this exact defense strategy.²⁶ Their alleged ignorance of the conference’s true purpose also contradicts Höhne’s other claim: namely, that the conference was only concerned with deportation, not murder. Furthermore, only an exceedingly charitable reading of the protocol, which takes the protocol’s language so literally as to ignore its murderous implications, could lead to such a conclusion. If the civilian participants were confused about the meeting’s subject matter, attendees like Bühler would not have stressed the need to clear Jews who were “unable to work” out of the General Government “as quickly as possible.”²⁷ The conference would not have devoted discussion to eliminating the “germ cell” of Jews surviving forced labor programs or to the “various possible kinds of solution.”²⁸ This claim simply served to maintain the innocence of wider German society, and instead place blame for the Holocaust at the feet of a few radicals within

24 “Verbrecher hinter dem Schlüsselloch,” 31.

25 “Verbrecher hinter dem Schlüsselloch,” 31.

26 Paul Mommertz, “Interview mit Professor R.M.W. Kempner” in Ordner 2, “Historische Vorarbeit zum Drehbuch,” Kapitel 1200 “Eichmann (Robert Kempner, Prozess Jerusalem),” Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Mediothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin, 2–5.

27 “Appendix: The protocol” in Roseman, *The Wannsee Conference and the Final Solution: A Reconsideration*, 111–120, 120.

28 “Appendix: The protocol” in Roseman, *The Wannsee Conference*, 120.

the SS. This need to absolve these attendees and their agencies from culpability serves as one of the pillars of Höhne's arguments against the film, as well as those from other German critics following his lead, but has since been thoroughly discredited by historians. Nevertheless, similar to the "clean Wehrmacht" myth, the notion that the Holocaust was perpetrated by a handful of fanatics within the SS was still widely accepted in West Germany during the 1980s.

In a puzzling move, BR did not air its accompanying documentary on the film until 9:55 pm on December 20, over 24 hours after *The Wannsee Conference's* premiere.²⁹ This documentary, directed by Heinz Steike and titled *Wannseekonferenz: Werkstattnotizen* [Wannsee Conference: studio notes], contained clips from the film, an interview with network coordinator Norbert Bittmann (reading a script written by Mommertz, contained in the Mommertz archive and cited in this chapter; places where Bittmann deviated from the script are marked), and the abovementioned interview with Robert Kempner.³⁰ The Bittmann interview first provides an overview of the production's history, recounting the story of Manfred Korytowski's visit to Yad Vashem and coming across a facsimile of the Wannsee Protocol. He remarks that previous depictions of the Holocaust only concerned themselves with the Holocaust's "implementation" (*Durchführung*), but that *The Wannsee Conference* is the first production concerned with its "organizational leadership" (*Organisationsspitze*).³¹ Mommertz's script for Bittmann argues that the production team had been able to "close important information gaps and simultaneously encourage a broader public to deal with a topic that, whether we want it to or not, remains a burden to us."³² Bittmann lists the script's main sources, including the Wannsee Protocol, Nuremberg Trial interrogation transcripts, Nazi personnel files, and claims that the production team went through "hundreds" of documents that "have a direct or indirect relationship to the Wannsee Conference." This section of the interview makes clear that the protocol was not a verbatim transcript of the meeting, but instead documented the subject matter discussed.³³ In one of the most important sections of the program, Mommertz dis-

29 See Paul Mommertz, "Wannseekonferenz: Werkstattnotizen," in Ordner 2, "Historische Vorarbeit zum Drehbuch," Kapitel 1200 "Eichmann (Robert Kempner, Prozess Jerusalem)," Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Mediothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin, 1; Birgit Weidinger, "Hackenschlagen," *Süddeutsche Zeitung* Nr. 295, December 21, 1984, 32.

30 The documentary forms part of the film's paratext. For more on paratexts and their importance for analyzing historical television, see Weeks, *History by HBO*, 122–133.

31 Mommertz, "Wannseekonferenz: Werkstattnotizen," 1.

32 Mommertz, "Wannseekonferenz: Werkstattnotizen," 1. In the actual broadcast, Bittmann left out the word "important" (*wichtig*).

33 Mommertz, "Wannseekonferenz: Werkstattnotizen," 2.

cusses the basis and his reasoning for transforming history into dramatized dialogue for the medium of film. After a discussion of the different groups present at the conference, Mommertz uses his documentary script to defend the practice of creating historical drama:

As always when dealing with historical material, a part is of course left to the author's imagination and fantasy. It is helpful if, as in our case, he can still bring in his own experiences from the depicted time period. And he will be able to be most certain of his cause if, after all, all the elements fit together just so and not otherwise. Apart from that, he will be able to refer to Aristotle, who said (in his *Poetics*): "The artistic depiction of history is more scientific than the so-called exact one!"³⁴

In the actual broadcast, Bittmann does not mention Aristotle, instead saying that some of Eichmann's statements at his trial permitted the filmmakers to depict certain events in the film.³⁵ This claim is also present in the script and contained within a note typed onto the page with Mommertz's typewriter.³⁶ In this passage, Mommertz notes that fictionalization is inevitable when writing historical films, arguing that said fictionalization enables writers to explore truths that a mass of historical details alone cannot accomplish. Nevertheless, this section also argues that the film had to be as close to the truth as possible; he refers to the fictionalization present as a "remnant" (*ein Rest*). Although his claim about artistic depictions of history being "more scientific" than academic writing is certainly an exaggeration, it exemplifies a key component of historical screenwriting. Historian and screenwriter Bruno Ramirez, for example, identifies a "fictional turn" in many historical films "whereby research-generated knowledge gets transformed into filmic narration" and that this turn most often occurs during screenwriting.³⁷ For him, fictionalization can serve "as a narrative device in the service of the most expressive art form in ways that may enrich a portrayal of the past while at the same time enhance its understanding."³⁸ Ramirez is not naïve, he is well aware of the ways fictionalization has falsified history and disseminated wildly misleading messages via film. He contends that the "taboo" about fictionalization misses the point. Much like Mommertz (and later, Loring Mandel), he claims that the real test of whether or not fictionalization is appropriate is "one of plausibility versus ascertained factuality."³⁹ This is not a half-baked "postmodern" idea which

34 Mommertz, "Wannseekonferenz: Werkstattnotizen," 3.

35 *Die Wannsee-Konferenz: Werkstattnotizen zum gleichnamigen Fernsehfilm des Bayerischen Rundfunks*.

36 Mommertz, "Wannseekonferenz: Werkstattnotizen," 3.

37 Ramirez, *Inside the Historical Film*, 10.

38 Ramirez, *Inside the Historical Film*, 9.

39 Ramirez, *Inside the Historical Film*, 43.

claims that history is an arbitrary matter of opinion and that truth is a myth, but rather one that argues for fictionalization within a set of (admittedly sometimes murkily-defined) rules. In most instances where Mommertz fictionalizes, he justifies it by pointing to a historical source where a character is expressing a similar thought or opinion. There is little that could be misconstrued as “fantasy” here apart from minor instances like Stuckart’s decision to quit, Lange’s dog, the Jenny Cozzi plotline, or the presence of a female secretary at the meeting.

Wannseekonferenz: Werkstattnotizen continues with a brief discussion of emotions raised by the film’s subject matter: an imperative aspect considering negative German reviews of the film which would accuse the filmmakers of bias, a lack of objectivity, emotionality, and of demonizing the Wannsee Conference participants. The script of this section reads:

One cannot think of the Holocaust without anger. On the other hand, the obligation to take a documentary approach forbade us from coloring the events with subjective anger. However, a rather unpleasant circumstance leads out of this dilemma. You only have to portray what was – and no spiteful denunciation would be able to reveal something more frightening. Without thinking twice about it, what exposes itself here is above all the inhuman discrepancy between what [the conference] is all about and the way one *deals with it*. Namely, in the complete absence of imagination, empathy, sensitivity, and not to mention compassion.⁴⁰

In the broadcast version, Bittmann replaced the word “wrath” (*Zorn*) with “affect-edness” (*Betroffenheit*). Here, Mommertz preemptively defends the film against future charges of irrationality and of violating the norms of “cool conduct.”⁴¹ For him, the “discrepancy” between what the conference was about and how it was conducted is “frightening” enough without having to resort to filmic tricks to make the attendees seem demonic or stereotyped movie villains. He further emphasizes that the purpose of the film was to revisit a historical event which was “an event that one can only think of with anger for all time. And all the more so because all of the high-ranking perpetrators were not ready to admit their responsibility. Whereas [West German] postwar policy was all too willing to reward this otherwise not so untypical flight from responsibility.”⁴² Here, *The Wannsee Conference* was treading on dangerous ground; it was one thing to discuss the crimes of a handful of high-ranking SS and SD officials, it was quite another to implicate ostensibly apolitical government agencies which had survived in the

40 Mommertz, “Wannseekonferenz: Werkstattnotizen,” 4.

41 See Helmut Lethen, *Cool Conduct: The Culture of Distance in Weimar Germany*, trans. Don Re-neau (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

42 Mommertz, “Wannseekonferenz: Werkstattnotizen,” 5.

democratic West German government and to implicate said government by emphasizing the fact that several Wannsee attendees had escaped justice and lived comfortable bourgeois lives in the postwar era, including a few that were still living at the time of the film's production.⁴³ It was also dangerous to implicate Germany's educated professionals, a class which the Wannsee Conference participants belonged to.

The final cut of *Werkstattnotizen* includes the above passage but amends it in order to clarify the film's argument and purpose and to discuss the implications of Wannsee for contemporary society. Bittmann is clearly still reading from a script, so it can be assumed that Mommertz also wrote these lines, as the script available in the Mommertz archive contains both his handwritten and typewritten emendations. Some earlier drafts of this passage are present in the archival script, but the final, broadcasted version is worth quoting in full:

The truly shocking thing is the distance of such desk murderers [*Schreibtischtäter*] from a reality that simply disappears behind papers, paragraphs, competencies, and intrigues. A phenomenon that is certainly not bound to a specific time. The functioning of administrative measures in the hierarchies of large apparatuses is often based precisely on the fact that the people affected [by them] are simply ignored, forgotten, because only effectiveness counts and nothing but effectiveness.⁴⁴

Here, the interview clearly underscores the filmmakers' focus on desk murderers, emphasizing their intellectual debt to Hannah Arendt. Beginning in the 1990s and early 2000s, historians reframed the *Schreibtischtäter* concept; Bettina Stangneth and David Cesarani convincingly refuted Arendt's thesis when applied to Eichmann. Cesarani's biography demolishes the idea that Eichmann worked as a mere secretary, and Stangneth's biography is devoted to refuting the idea of Eichmann as a simple "desk murderer." Both claim that Arendt was duped by Eichmann's testimony in Jerusalem, which was designed to make him look as unimportant as possible.⁴⁵ However, the image of the *Schreibtischtäter* combined with Arendt's "banality of evil" concept remains powerful in the popular imagination and has become shorthand for modern, bureaucratic evil.⁴⁶ The final interview

⁴³ For a discussion of still-living Wannsee Conference participants and their potential impact on the film, see the previous chapter.

⁴⁴ *Die Wannsee-Konferenz: Werkstattnotizen zum gleichnamigen Fernsehfilm des Bayerischen Rundfunks*.

⁴⁵ Stangneth, *Eichmann Before Jerusalem*, xxii-xxc; Cesarani, *Eichmann*, 114–116. Stangneth's book extensively relies on sources unavailable to Arendt, such as the transcripts of the Sassen tapes.

⁴⁶ See Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, (New York, N.Y.: Penguin Classics, 2010); Stangneth, *Eichmann Before Jerusalem*; Cesarani, *Eichmann*, (London:

question is not present in the script. Here, the interviewer asks Bittmann about historical guilt. His answer makes clear that the filmmakers were not only concerned with raising awareness about the Wannsee Conference, but also with providing viewers with a message about the dark potential contained within modern society as well as in bureaucratic organizational structures in general:

To demonstrate this classically typical appearance of the younger generation with an especially grave example was a particularly important motivation for the film's production, beyond all so-called coming to terms with the past [*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*]. Here we also see its special topicality. Each one of us has to constantly monitor which processes we allow ourselves to be absorbed into with our functions [within such processes] we also assume responsibility. With this responsibility often comes culpability. And if one waits too long to extricate oneself, it is usually already too late.⁴⁷

Last and most importantly, *Werkstattnotizen* concludes with a statement from Robert Kempner in order to clearly state that most Wannsee Conference attendees escaped justice: “[the] Wannsee Conference, the organization of the largest mass murder in modern history on the one hand, criminally speaking, a fiasco. But law is not always about justice.”⁴⁸

The film's promotional material, although dissatisfactory to Mommertz, certainly provides a window into the ideas behind the film, albeit in retrospect. ARD and BR's decision to air *Werkstattnotizen* a full day after the film's premiere is puzzling, as is its timeslot on a weeknight before Christmas. A cursory glance at the photocopied marketing material contained in the Joseph Wulf Mediothek confirms Mommertz's feelings about the networks' muted PR efforts in West Germany. There is much more material for the film's international marketing campaign – which was done independently of ARD, ORF, and BR – in the collection. This material more forcefully advocates for the film as an important project raising awareness about the Wannsee Conference. Although little documentation exists confirming reluctance or half-heartedness regarding the film on the part of BR, ORF, and ARD, the muted public relations campaign in German-speaking countries is revelatory in itself. Confronted with little network enthusiasm and a scathing review in *Der Spiegel* two days before its premiere, *The Wannsee Conference* and its creators faced an uphill battle.

Vintage Books, 2005); Dirk Rose and Dirk van Laak, eds., *Schreibtischtäter: Begriff - Geschichte - Typologie*, (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2018).

⁴⁷ *Die Wannsee-Konferenz: Werkstattnotizen zum gleichnamigen Fernsehfilm des Bayerischen Rundfunks*.

⁴⁸ Mommertz, “Interview mit Professor R.M.W. Kempner,” 7.

2 Premiere

On Wednesday, December 19, 1984 at 8:15 pm, *The Wannsee Conference* premiered on ARD. In an interview, Paul Mommertz referred to the production team's desire to give the film's dialogue a quick tempo, "it has to go by very quickly, like an American slapstick comedy."⁴⁹ Besides the filmic implications of this comment, it seems in poor taste to portray the Wannsee Conference in the vein of a slapstick comedy. In addition to the film's tempo, the dialogue itself, which is densely packed with historical information, Nazi vocabulary, and institutional jargon, proved confusing to viewers. This was by design and Mommertz directly addressed this concern in *Wannseekonferenz: Werkstattnotizen*, arguing that "authenticity" trumped making the historical information easily digestible. For him, this type of realism was one of the film's strengths:

. . . we have relied entirely on the impact of authenticity. This means, for example, that whenever the understanding of the viewer could not be assumed, we preferred to demand that he listen to a few passages that were difficult to understand and that were authentic, rather than a few understandable ones that could have sounded like didactic school radio programs.⁵⁰

Here, Mommertz argues against the common idea of "translating" history to wider audiences in a fashion that inevitably simplifies it; that is, to make it as understandable as possible to as large of an audience as possible. A similar approach of throwing viewers into the deep end of the pool and letting them find their way among the layers of language and institutional power dynamics was central to the production team's goals for *Conspiracy*.⁵¹ This use of language – and other ways of eschewing exposition – was also a key aspect of HBO's television output during the period in which *Conspiracy* aired. This trend, largely spearheaded by David Simon in series like *The Wire*, exemplifies, for television scholar Ryan Twomey, "a curated, rather than completely mimetic representation of everyday speech."⁵² Paul Mommertz advocated for his dialogue choices in a similar fashion, also noting his experience growing up around Nazi functionaries in Aachen.⁵³ In this passage from *Werkstattnotizen*, and throughout production

49 Interview with Paul Mommertz, November 16, 2018, 24:01–26:37.

50 Mommertz, "Wannseekonferenz: Werkstattnotizen," 5.

51 Johnson, "A Classroom History Lesson Is Not Going to Work," 185, 192–193.

52 For a discussion of *The Wire* and dense institutional-driven dialogue, see Ryan Twomey, *Examining The Wire: Authenticity and Curated Realism* (Cham: Palgrave Pivot, 2020) 26; Christopher Hanson, "A Man Must Have a Code": The Many Languages of *The Wire*," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 29, no. 3 (May 1, 2012): 203–212.

53 Interview with Paul Mommertz, Munich, October 19, 2019, 01:04–10:48.

material and interviews, he strongly advocates for a depiction of history that is faithful to the way Germans actually spoke during the 1930s and 1940s instead of one using dialogue that, while clearer to the mythical “average viewer,” would eschew complexity and prevent the audience from thinking about and interpreting the strange yet familiar language coming from their television.

The Wannsee Conference begins with a shot of the Wannsee villa guarded by Berlin *Schutzpolizei* as the camera pans over the officials’ parked automobiles. In keeping with Mommertz and Schirk’s desire for the film to have the tempo of an “American comedy,” everything moves quickly, actors practically shout out their lines in some instances; the dialogue contains an overwhelming amount of historical information. The partylike atmosphere and nearly constant laughing and bad jokes camouflage the meeting’s true purpose – here, Mommertz lures the audience into a false sense of security.

The first section of the film, which depicts the arrival of conference attendees and introduces several characters, clues the audience in about the meeting’s true purpose (providing they have prior historical knowledge). A clearly drunk Lange immediately starts alluding to the gassing trucks used as an intermediary stage between mass shootings and permanent gas chamber facilities; Eichmann instructs him to pull himself together. Eichmann and Müller discuss the byzantine SS rank names with two switchboard operators; this scene is meant to demonstrate that the Wannsee villa was used by the SS in general and was not just a one-off site for the meeting. Nevertheless, this depiction also has to do with the mistaken idea that the villa was also Interpol’s headquarters.⁵⁴ A calendar reading “20 January” looms in the background over Eichmann and the switchboard operators. The film immediately launches into a discussion of the question of *Mischlinge* and mixed marriages, with Stuckart struggling to make the convoluted racial laws comprehensible to the female secretary, who willingly takes notes during the meeting and serves as both a stand-in for the audience’s questions and as someone Heydrich can flirt with. During this scene (see Figure 4.1), Müller and Stuckart talk to each other near a window; the lighting provides the whole scene with a sinister atmosphere and emphasizes unequal power relations between the two men at the conference, with the Gestapo chief remaining in the shadows, while Stuckart is closer to the window.

The secretary, who functions as an audience stand-in by asking Heydrich and other participants to clarify some of the more arcane bureaucratic language (*Amtssprache*), as well as the switchboard operators, brings a female presence into a series of films and television series that are overwhelmingly male. This

54 Tuchel, *Am Grossen Wannsee*, 56–58, 114.



Figure 4.1: Müller (Friedrich G. Beckhaus) and Stuckart (Peter Fitz) converse in the shadows. *Die Wannseekonferenz*. Bayerischer Rundfunk (BR), Infafilm, Österreichischer Rundfunk (ORF), 1984.

film uses women as pedagogical devices in a sexist manner (the women are inevitably doe-eyed and ignorant, the secretary flirts with Heydrich throughout the film and agrees to come work for him in Prague) and asks the experts to explain things like the Nuremberg laws and SS ranks as a plot device to help the audience. The script even refers to the (nameless) secretary as “a tall Nordic beauty,” who is of course blonde.⁵⁵ Holocaust films, in general, shy away from depicting female perpetrators. This film prefigures later points made by Wendy Lower, who noted that the women who worked for the SS and SD who “kept the mass murder machinery functioning,” were young, just like the men in the organization.⁵⁶ Lower underscores the importance of secretaries and telephone operators to this machinery: “Besides the nurses, the largest contributors to the day-to-day operations of Hitler’s genocidal war were the German secretaries and office aides, such as the file clerks and telephone operators working in state and private concerns in the East.”⁵⁷ Lower also notes that SS secretaries “were not ordinary office workers,” but women who “could fully envision themselves as members of an emerg-

⁵⁵ Paul Mommertz, *Die Wannseekonferenz*, Drehbuch von Paul Mommertz, 1983, Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Mediothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin, 9.

⁵⁶ Wendy Lower, *Hitler’s Furies: German Women in the Nazi Killing Fields*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013), 15.

⁵⁷ Lower, *Hitler’s Furies*, 53.

ing elite.”⁵⁸ Even though its depiction of such figures through the character of the secretary unfortunately relies on gender stereotypes, this inclusion makes *The Wannsee Conference* rare among Holocaust films, which, apart from prominent exceptions like *The Reader* (2008) or exploitation films like *Ilsa, She Wolf of the SS* (1975), generally refrain from depicting female complicity in the Holocaust – and when they do, they invariably depict female concentration camp guards, not female desk murderers (*Schreibtischtäterinnen*).

The film begins with a loud, boisterous, partylike atmosphere. It initially seems like all the attendees are familiar with one another and that they are all buddies. Because most characters are referred to by rank, not name, it is harder to determine just who is speaking; individuals become avatars of their respective agencies. Thus, some attendees, like Schöngarth or Neumann, fade into the background. Once Heydrich arrives, he interrupts this chummy atmosphere when he calls all of the SS attendees (except Stuckart, who represents the Ministry of the Interior even though he also wears an SS uniform in this film) into a side room in order to brief them about the impending meeting. This scene illustrates Heydrich’s busy schedule and his close working relationship with Heinrich Himmler, who calls both before and after the meeting. A photograph of Himmler looms in the background, much like in similar scenes from *Reinhard Heydrich – Manager of Terror*. Lange briefs Heydrich on recent *Einsatzgruppen* activities and shows a map of Europe depicting “Jew-free” countries. The map (Figure 4.2) lists the numbers of dead and depicts coffins in the countries where *Einsatzgruppen* have been committing mass shootings. In this sequence, Lange shows a historical source (discussed in Chapter 3) on screen. The corresponding script page contains stage directions for how this source was to be used – and understood:

One can see the three Baltic countries, plus White Ruthenia and a stretch of land in the northwestern Soviet Union going as far as Petersburg/Leningrad.

In each of these five areas nothing more than the capitals are shown – Reval [Tallinn], Riga, Kovno, Minsk, and Krasnogvardeysky near Leningrad – the number of executed in the respective area and a coffin next to each number for graphic clarification.

Heydrich’s index finger with the SS ring points to Minsk, the coffin next to it, and the number next to it.⁵⁹

This visual representation of historical sources illustrates the film’s intended authentic aura but also follows a longer tradition of Holocaust film and television

⁵⁸ Lower, *Hitler’s Furies*, 60.

⁵⁹ Mommertz, *Die Wannseekonferenz*, Drehbuch, 29.



Figure 4.2: Lange presents the map of *Einsatzgruppen* activities. *Die Wannseekonferenz*. Bayerischer Rundfunk (BR), Infafilm, Österreichischer Rundfunk (ORF), 1984.

also seen in NBC's *Holocaust*; later productions would also use this technique. Note that *War and Remembrance* showed photocopies of the actual Wannsee Protocol on screen and *Conspiracy* would also show similar maps and the population statistical tables from the protocol.

Directly referencing Shlomo Aronson's points about the meeting's purpose,⁶⁰ Heydrich explains the day's tasks to his subordinates after Lange rants about *Gauleiter* Wilhelm Kube:

We have leftover personnel from the previous administration and government. Bureaucrats, conformists, careerists. Also former anti-democrats: Old-school conservatives, *völkisch* romantics, wackos. We must harness these insecure cantonists and half-hearted party comrades, bring them up to speed, force them into joint responsibility. Or let them stumble into it.⁶¹

This line of Heydrich's underscores both Aronson's and Mommertz's arguments about the meeting's purpose: not only was it meant to coordinate genocidal policy, it was also meant to end token opposition from the various ministries and bring them into complicity and "joint responsibility," whether willingly or not. After this pre-meeting, the SS members enter the conference room and take seats

⁶⁰ Letter from Shlomo Aronson to Manfred Korytowski, April 24, 1983, Private Archive Paul Mommertz, Munich, 2.

⁶¹ Mommertz, *Die Wannseekonferenz*, Drehbuch, 33.

directly across from the representatives of civilian ministries and the Party leaders of occupied territories, beginning the conference.

The conference sequence opens with a presentation from Heydrich about the Jewish Problem, the Jewish population of Europe, and previous anti-Jewish measures up until the time of the meeting. Initially, it seems that the attendees are largely in agreement with Heydrich; there is little pushback, though it is clear that Heydrich has no patience for what he sees as irrelevant civilian opinions, such as those of Bühler. Throughout this section, Heydrich struts around the table (he cannot stand still). The script notes that Heydrich is to stick to bureaucratic language at the beginning: "Now, when the viewer is hopefully still relatively fresh and interested, we will begin with a deliberate emphasis on the official bureaucratic language and procedure, to the extent that the discrepancy between form and content play out here."⁶² Before a large map of Europe, he discusses the Jewish populations of various countries. In this sequence, during the longest individual speech in the film, Heydrich uses the same population figures found in the protocol. The script notes that the dialogue here "at least gives the later-born viewer a concept of the expansion of [Nazi Germany's] power [over occupied Europe] that is no longer clear to everyone."⁶³

Heydrich addresses the problems of coordinating the so-called "Final Solution": "Gentlemen, you see, the problems are not so simple. Especially not when competencies collide. It is therefore crucial that clarity be created on the question of leadership here and now."⁶⁴ This is where the mask comes off, so to speak. The SS and Nazi Party officials in the room "look satisfied to triumphant, the others surprised or depressed."⁶⁵ The film reinforces the group dynamics present in the script with a shot of the SS at one side of the table, then another shot of the other side of the table with civilians and other Party officials. During this first third of the conference, many of Heydrich's statements, such as, "In the course of the practical implementation of the Final Solution, Europe will be combed from west to east,"⁶⁶ are direct quotes from the protocol. He concludes his presentation with one of the most damning passages of the protocol, which alludes to programs like extermination through labor and, of course, leaves out what would happen to the Jews who were unfit for manual labor, such as the old, infirm, young, and pregnant:

62 Mommertz, *Die Wannseekonferenz*, Drehbuch, 39.

63 Mommertz, *Die Wannseekonferenz*, Drehbuch, 56.

64 Mommertz, *Die Wannseekonferenz*, Drehbuch, 44 A.

65 Mommertz, *Die Wannseekonferenz*, Drehbuch, 45.

66 Mommertz, *Die Wannseekonferenz*, Drehbuch, 61.

We will, in the course of the Final Solution, put the Jew to work in the East under appropriate leadership. We will lead him into these areas in large, single-sex columns, on foot, of course, building roads . . . Of course, a large part of these Jews will be eliminated through natural causes. Any remnant, that is, the most resistant part, will have to be treated accordingly.⁶⁷

From the beginning of this sequence, the film portrays the creation of the protocol, with Heydrich ordering the secretary to not write a verbatim transcript; Eichmann asks her to strike various statements from the record during the course of the meeting. The script provides stage directions for this point: “Again and again during the conference, Eichmann and the secretary, whispering across corners, gesticulating, even passing the stenogram back and forth, communicate about the protocol, which is obviously written as a factual and not a verbatim record.”⁶⁸ Echoing Arendt’s characterization of Eichmann as a detail-obsessed bureaucrat, Eichmann briefly presents on the transportation issue. He is concerned with timetables, cost-efficiency, and speed.⁶⁹ Lange, in contrast, is portrayed as a menacing yet clownlike figure: he talks about his experience leading an *Einsatzgruppe* but falls asleep during Heydrich’s presentation and constantly deals with his barking German shepherd, Hasso. Clearly intended for comic relief, this character trait falls flat and appears dated.

The second section of the conference sequence concerns the Foreign Ministry, Martin Luther, and the issue of Jews in allied or occupied nations. This section largely follows the protocol and discusses the willingness of Axis or occupied nations to support the coming European-wide “Final Solution.” In one part, they discuss how France will pose little difficulties and give up its Jews easily:

LUTHER: No more resistance from military commanders, ambassadors or the French.

KRITZINGER: But they have no knowledge there of the nature of the Final Solution measures.

LUTHER: But from where.

EICHMANN: There is talk of deportation, evacuation, dispatch to labor in the East.

HEYDRICH: Those are the language rules.

Agreement, knocking [on the table, in applause].⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Mommertz, *Die Wannseekonferenz*, Drehbuch, 68–69.

⁶⁸ Mommertz, *Die Wannseekonferenz*, Drehbuch, 38.

⁶⁹ Mommertz, *Die Wannseekonferenz*, Drehbuch, 63–65.

⁷⁰ Mommertz, *Die Wannseekonferenz*, Drehbuch, 82–83.

This passage also illustrates the film's tone once Heydrich and Eichmann have finished their presentations. Participants talk over one another and quickly retort each other. In this short section, four people are speaking at once. Throughout the film, the men rap their knuckles on the table to indicate applause. During the section on non-German Jews, the men discuss problems posed by their Italian ally using the case of Jenny Cozzi, the widow of an Italian army officer, to illustrate the difficulties. The Italian government protested on her behalf, but Eichmann sent her to a concentration camp in Riga. Here, Mommertz clearly engaged in fictionalization since this case actually occurred in late 1942 and throughout 1943.⁷¹ The men's reaction to how they solved the Cozzi case illustrates the calculating, cynical brutality the filmmakers wished to depict on screen:

EICHMANN: I have given orders regarding that. Cozzi stays.

LANGE: Order completed.

(Laughter).⁷²

The third and final "chapter" of the conference sequence concerns Stuckart and the question of mixed marriages. Mommertz's informational insert (discussed in Chapter 3), where he justifies his characterization of Stuckart, is in this section of the screenplay. At this point of the film, Stuckart (Peter Fitz), who is sweating, sick with the flu and a bit tipsy after drinking cognac, appears agitated and loses his composure at several points – not to the same degree as Colin Firth's performance in *Conspiracy*, but certainly more than any other character in *The Wannsee Conference*. Gerhard Klopfer and Stuckart argue with each other a bit in this section – perhaps this is the origin of their heated, rancorous argument in *Conspiracy*.⁷³ Throughout this section, when Stuckart defends the Nuremberg Laws against what he sees as arbitrary classifications of *Mischlinge* and when he advocates their mass sterilization instead of "evacuation," the other attendees laugh at him.⁷⁴ Although not as extreme as Höhne's characterization (Stuckart is no "half-resistance fighter," he wears his new SS uniform with pride), the Stuckart of *The Wannsee Conference* is, along with Kritzinger, sidelined by the SS and Nazi Party representatives; he is depicted as a man from a different time who has no place

71 See *The Nizkor Project*, The Trial of Adolf Eichmann, Session 30, <http://nizkor.com/hweb/people/e/eichmann-adolf/transcripts/Sessions/Session-030-07.html>, Accessed December 12, 2020.

72 Mommertz, *Die Wannseekonferenz*, Drehbuch, 94–95.

73 Mommertz, *Die Wannseekonferenz*, Drehbuch, 106–107.

74 For a discussion of Stuckart's arguments at Wannsee, see Roseman, *The Wannsee Conference*, 101–105.

in the new Nazi order – which contradicts his biography. Stuckart was a key figure in Nazi legal theory and policy and, as Hans-Christian Jasch has stated, “it was with enthusiasm that the ambitious Stuckart lent his considerable legal skills to the criminal Nazi regime, actively creating a framework for atrocities by means of legislative measures that rationalized and legitimized them.”⁷⁵ The film similarly depicts Kritzinger (Franz Rudnick) as an old-fashioned bureaucrat from the pre-Nazi era unprepared for the new realities of the younger, “uncompromising generation” represented by the RSHA and SD.⁷⁶ This representation agrees with most historiographical depictions of Kritzinger.⁷⁷ Whenever he questions Heydrich’s plans and why the Reich Chancellery has not been included or informed in them, Heydrich and the SS either stare him down or verbally dismiss him (see Figure 4.3). Kritzinger appears flustered and confused. Sometimes stammering, he constantly fiddles with his eyeglasses and shuffles papers. He often reacts to attendees’ more radical statements with a shocked expression, emphasising his unpreparedness and irrelevance. His position at the end of the table both



Figure 4.3: The SS, with Heydrich (Dietrich Mattausch) in the foreground, eye Kritzinger skeptically. *Die Wannseekonferenz*. Bayerischer Rundfunk (BR), Infafilm, Österreichischer Rundfunk (ORF), 1984.

⁷⁵ Hans-Christian Jasch, “Wilhelm Stuckart (1902–1953), Reich Interior Ministry: ‘A Legal Pedant’” in *The Participants*, ed. Jasch and Kreutzmüller, 312.

⁷⁶ See Michael Wildt, *Generation des Unbedingten. Das Führungskorps des Reichssicherheitshauptamtes*. (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2003)

⁷⁷ Stefan Paul-Jacobs and Lore Kleiber, “Friedrich Wilhelm Kritzinger, Reich-Chancellery: A Prussian Civil Servant under the Nazi Regime” in *The Participants*, eds. Jasch and Kreutzmüller, 207–223, 207.

figuratively and literally illustrates Heydrich painting him into a corner, emphasizing the Reich Chancellery's difficult position in relation to the RSHA.⁷⁸

Kritzinger asks Heydrich about how they plan to kill 11 million Jews via mass shooting, especially during wartime. Heydrich responds with:

HEYDRICH: There are other methods.

MÜLLER: More elegant ones.

HEYDRICH: More humane ones. Read Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, page seven hundred and seventy-two in the first edition. And, gentlemen, learn to take the Führer at his word!⁷⁹

A befuddled Kritzinger stays behind with Stuckart as everyone else leaves the conference room and asks him what Heydrich meant. He responds with details about Hitler's wishes:

STUCKART (agonized): The evidence is piling up. He says it would be better to just put the members of the Hebrew people under poison gas.

KRITZINGER: Gas?

STUCKART (nods).⁸⁰

The film's focus on Hitler's decision-making, as well as the section on *Mein Kampf*, clearly advocate an intentionalist view of how the Holocaust unfolded.⁸¹ As in *Manager of Terror*, Hitler looms in the background during the conference. When Kritzinger speaks, he is often shown with a large bust of Hitler directly behind him (Figure 4.4). This passage on *Mein Kampf* proved to be controversial. In his review, Höhne alleged that no such passage even existed.⁸² Mommertz's research files contain a photocopy of the *Mein Kampf* passage in question, underlined by Mommertz and located on page 772 of the complete edition (both volumes) published in 1939, not the "first edition" as noted in the script.⁸³ The

⁷⁸ Roseman, *The Wannsee Conference*, 93–95.

⁷⁹ Mommertz, *Die Wannseekonferenz*, Drehbuch, 125.

⁸⁰ Paul Mommertz, *Die Wannseekonferenz*, Drehbuch von Paul Mommertz, 1983, Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Mediothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin, 125–126.

⁸¹ For a discussion of intentionalism, see Charles S. Maier. *The Unmasterable Past: History, Holocaust, and German National Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988). Chapter 3, "A Holocaust like the Others? Problems of Comparative History."

⁸² Höhne, "Eine Falle der Betroffenheit."

⁸³ Paul Mommertz, Photocopy of *Mein Kampf* Pages "Auswahl aus Texten zur 'Genesis' des Holocaust und der Wannseekonferenz", in Ordner 2, "Historische Vorarbeit zum Drehbuch," Kapitel 1600 "Dokumente NS-Rassenpolitik," Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Mediothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin.



Figure 4.4: A bust of Hitler looms over Kritzinger (Franz Rudnick). *Die Wannseekonferenz*. Bayerischer Rundfunk (BR), Infafilm, Österreichischer Rundfunk (ORF), 1984.

passage, contained in the fifteenth chapter of the second volume, is contained within a section on World War I and Marxism. It advocated taking Jews as hostages and killing them with poison gas:

If at the beginning of and during the war, twelve or fifteen thousand of these Hebrew subverters of the people had been put under poison gas in the same way as hundreds of thousands of our very best German workers from all classes and professions had to endure in the field, then the sacrifice of millions at the front would not have been in vain.⁸⁴

A handwritten note at the bottom of the photocopied page reads “a possibility becomes visible.”⁸⁵ The critical edition of *Mein Kampf* contains extensive commentary on this passage. The critical edition’s commentary notes that Hitler expressed a desire to “physically exterminate” the Jews in numerous instances, including a speech at the Munich Bürgerbräukeller on July 6, 1920. The commentary continues, pointing out that such eliminationist rhetoric was common during the early years of the Nazi movement. Nevertheless, the editors concur with contemporary historians, who argue that this passage in *Mein Kampf* does not constitute a direct line between Hitler’s early writings and the “Final Solution,” instead arguing that it was a gradual process.⁸⁶ Contemporary historians, when discussing Hitler’s

⁸⁴ Adolf Hitler, *Hitler, Mein Kampf: Eine kritische Edition*, ed. Christian Hartmann et al., 2 vols. (Munich: Institut für Zeitgeschichte München - Berlin IfZ, 2017), 2:1719.

⁸⁵ Mommertz, Photocopy of *Mein Kampf* Pages.

⁸⁶ Hartmann et al., *Hitler, Mein Kampf* 2:1718, note 73.

genocidal ideas and aims, generally refer to Hitler's January 30, 1939 "prophecy" during a speech before the Reichstag, in which he stated that the Second World War (inevitably caused by the Jews in his thinking) would mean the "annihilation of the Jewish race in Europe."⁸⁷ Mommertz's focus on the *Mein Kampf* passage is the clearest indication of an intentionalist historiographical position; this position can falter when reading concrete policy goals into Hitler's rhetoric. For historian Richard Evans, Hitler "set the parameters; subordinates were left to fill in the details. When they acted on their own initiative, it was always within the bounds of the ideology he had created."⁸⁸ It is this aspect where *The Wannsee Conference* differs the most from *Conspiracy* in a historiographical – not filmic – sense. However, an intentionalist position is not per se inferior to a functionalist one. Most contemporary historians tend to adopt a mix of both positions, with Dan Stone recently arguing that the field needs to "return to ideology" as an explanatory factor.⁸⁹

After most of the attendees have left the villa, Heydrich, Müller, and Eichmann retire to a nearby room to enjoy cigarettes and cognac, but Heydrich only takes one long drag before putting out his cigarette and putting on his overcoat – there is much work to be done. Heydrich gives Eichmann further instructions regarding the protocol, emphasizing the film's intertextuality – showing viewers how this primary source was created:

HEYDRICH: We need thirty protocols, Eichmann. Deliver your draft to me this afternoon.

EICHMANN: Yes sir, Obergruppenführer.

HEYDRICH: As clearly as necessary and as vaguely as possible.

EICHMANN: Permission to ask a question, sir: What should be clear?

HEYDRICH: Consent to our leadership. That is the main thing.⁹⁰

⁸⁷ Adolf Hitler, quoted in Cesarani, *Final Solution*, 222. For more on Hitler's "prophecy," see Cesarani, *Final Solution*, 221–222; Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews, Volume 2, 1939–1945: The Years of Extermination*, (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008), 273. Cesarani claims that the speech was "prophetic but not programmatic," while Friedländer places much more emphasis on it, repeatedly referring to the "prophecy" throughout *The Years of Extermination*. Hitler did repeat his "prophecy" throughout the war in various speeches and statements. Friedländer probably stands as the best representative of a contemporary "qualified intentionalist" position.

⁸⁸ Evans, *Hitler's People*, 101.

⁸⁹ Stone, *The Holocaust*, xix–xx. See also Evans, *Hitler's People*, 6.

⁹⁰ Mommertz, *Die Wannseekonferenz*, 129.

Eichmann also expresses relief at how smoothly the day's proceedings ran. He tells Heydrich that he has "a Pilate-like feeling of satisfaction" after seeing how the members of the Party and civilian ministries agreed with the RSHA and SS taking the lead on anti-Jewish policy.⁹¹ This line is a direct reference to statements made by Eichmann at his trial; Hannah Arendt even titles her chapter on Wannsee in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* "The Wannsee Conference, or Pontius Pilate."⁹² This corresponds with the film's depiction of Eichmann overall, which leans heavily on Arendt's depiction, as noted above during the discussion of the accompanying *Werkstattnotizen* documentary. In her chapter on Wannsee, Arendt characterizes Eichmann as "secretary of the meeting" and generally downplays his importance.⁹³ Arendt notes that "the most potent factor in the soothing of his own conscience was the simple fact that he could see no one, no one at all, who was actually against the Final Solution."⁹⁴

The film concludes with Heydrich exiting the villa and briefly chatting with Lange, who is playing with his dog and a stick near the porte-cochère. Lange discusses how he uses his German shepherd to hunt Jews in hiding, and holding the stick above his dog, laughs as the frame freezes and a single, low piano tone clangs – the only music present in the film. The Lange in this film is the closest thing the movie has to a villain, he is constantly drunkenly stumbling, jokes about murdering Jews, and even falls asleep at the table. This version of Lange is a gangster in uniform, a remnant of earlier depictions of Holocaust perpetrators as sadists and criminals. He was present at Wannsee because he had firsthand experience of mass killing – to reduce him to a figure of comic relief is wide of the mark.

In contrast with *Conspiracy*, *The Wannsee Conference* remains focused on the conference room and the indoor winter garden right next to it. With the exception of the very beginning and end of the film, characters do not move between rooms, although the larger villa is sometimes alluded to, most notably with the switchboard operators and the constant presence of SS orderlies providing drinks. The film is mostly shot at eye-level, with particular attention being paid to where each character is looking in order to provide visual consistency and continuity.⁹⁵ One is struck as well by how quickly paced the film is, it really does have the quick, wisecracking dialogue tempo of mid-century American comedies, particularly those directed by Billy Wilder.

⁹¹ Paul Mommertz, *Die Wannseekonferenz*, Drehbuch, 130.

⁹² Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*.

⁹³ Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 114.

⁹⁴ Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 116.

⁹⁵ This is known as the 180° rule "crossing the line" and is a cinematographic problem associated with making sure visual axes are consistent. See Interview with Heinz Schirck, April 5, 2019, 37:54–40:22.

The international release of the film includes an English-language voiceover, which sets the scene but also undermines Mommertz's above-mentioned strategy of letting the viewer figure things out. The English subtitles generally correspond to the German original but often leave out important details for the purpose of clarity, for example "SD" is translated as "SS."⁹⁶ The English-language credit sequence lists Heydrich, Eichmann, Freisler, and Stuckart's fates, but does not address any other participants.

The Wannsee Conference offers a unique view of genocide and history. Especially for a film produced for German public television, known today for its conservatism and prioritizing of a "murder of the week" drama series (like *Tatort*), it is a daring experiment in form by depicting a historical meeting in real time, devoid of music, and in a strict documentary-like fashion, even if media scholar Axel Bangert argues that it "shows a rather typical emphasis on historical accuracy and observational distance in the depiction of the Nazi elite."⁹⁷ One particularly egregious example of the intersection of conventional West German television and historical amnesia was the crime drama *Derrick*, whose star was a Waffen-SS veteran, specifically of the 3rd SS Panzer Division "Death's Head," which was notorious for war crimes.⁹⁸ West German public television, however, in the 1980s did air experimental programming. For example, Bavaria Film, the production company behind *Manager of Terror*, produced Rainer Werner Fassbinder's highly experimental 14-part miniseries adaptation of Alfred Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz* in collaboration with public television broadcaster WDR. *Berlin Alexanderplatz* prefigures later, more novelistic television storytelling practices popular in the United States during the early 2000s – each episode is more like the chapter of a novel than traditional episodic television. 1977 also saw the release of two prominent West German productions depicting Nazi criminals, the documentary *Hitler: A Career*, directed and penned by the historian Joachim Fest, and Theodor Kotulla's *Death is My Trade*, a fictionalized biography of Auschwitz commandant Rudolf Höss. These earlier West German productions predate NBC's miniseries *Holocaust*, complicating conventional narratives about it being responsible for a shift in West German attitudes towards the Nazi era.⁹⁹ *The Wannsee Conference* fits within this rubric – although German public television at the time

⁹⁶ Because of this issue, any translations of the film's dialogue are my own.

⁹⁷ Bangert, *The Nazi Past in Contemporary German Film*, 58.

⁹⁸ Kater, *After the Nazis*, 189. See also Haass, *Herbert Reinecker: NS-Propagandist und bundesdeutscher Erfolgsautor*.

⁹⁹ For two fantastic summaries of *Holocaust* and West German memory culture, see the chapters devoted to the series and its reception in Frank Bösch, *Zeitenwende 1979: Als die Welt von heute begann* (Munich: Beck C. H., 2019); Biess, *Republik der Angst*.

could be conservative politically, especially when it came to historical productions, this did not necessarily mean it was conservative artistically. The film does not forgive inattentive viewers; many lines of dialogue are rife with historical information and it is sometimes difficult to differentiate among the fifteen Nazi functionaries sitting around the table. With its intentionalist historiographical position nevertheless informed by functionalist historiography, such as that from Raul Hilberg and Christopher Browning, the film is a synthesis of Holocaust historiography from the early 1980s. In contrast with *Manager of Terror*, the film largely refrains from psychoanalyzing its characters; this is limited to highlighting personality traits instead of explaining *why* the men of Wannsee did what they did. The film succeeds admirably at depicting the incongruity of the meeting's setting with its subject matter, attendees constantly use "elegant" as an adjective, either to describe their surroundings or to cynically refer to deportation and killing procedures. Unfortunately for its filmmakers, *The Wannsee Conference* proved to be too experimental for the West German press.

3 The *Spiegel* Debate and Reception in West Germany

After Höhne's negative review in *Der Spiegel*, other West German publications tended to repeat his criticism, with a handful of exceptions. In his published rebuttal to Höhne's review, Mommertz defended the film and himself against charges of sensationalizing and falsifying history. Titled "Totally unrealistic and out of touch," this piece, published in *Der Spiegel*'s first 1985 issue, reiterates justifications for Mommertz's depiction of the conference as outlined in the previous chapter, sometimes word for word.¹⁰⁰ Mommertz opens the piece by noting that Höhne used a sentence from Eichmann, commonly cited by those who downplayed or denied the Holocaust, in order to claim that Heydrich's language hoodwinked the conference attendees, who simply believed that the conference was about deportation. He refutes this assertion by noting that during his trial, Eichmann admitted that "various killing methods" were discussed at Wannsee.¹⁰¹ Mommertz directly accuses Höhne of utilizing "apologetical" argumentation methods common on the far-right and noted that *Einsatzgruppen* reports about mass shootings widely circulated within the German government; this was proof that attendees knew about the murder campaign and could not convincingly

100 Mommertz, "Völlig unrealistisch und lebensfremd."

101 Mommertz, "Völlig unrealistisch und lebensfremd."

claim ignorance: “all knew about the mass shootings in the East.”¹⁰² Mommertz continues his rebuttal by discussing what each Wannsee attendee would have known at the time of the conference. In his key passage, Mommertz fires a shot across Höhne’s bow, arguing that the idea of agreed-upon language rules would have been absurd:

It is simply inconceivable that men of this magnitude, organizational ability, and vast partial responsibility with respect to the looming debacle in Africa and Stalingrad should not have posed the question of how to deal technically with such an enormous problem as the Europe-wide “Final Solution.” It is completely unrealistic and out of touch with life to assume that Heydrich had agreed upon or assumed that he had agreed upon a set of language rules with the majority of the conference participants, with the help of which one could have talked past some, after all, not stupid people for ninety minutes. Why should he? He needed their knowledge!¹⁰³

Here, Mommertz emphasizes the fact that those attending the conference were not stupid and, if Heydrich had insisted on using the euphemistic language contained in the protocol, they would have seen through it. With the last line, he reiterates arguments discussed in the previous chapter, where he argues that one purpose of the conference was to make civilian government ministries complicit by both ensuring their knowledge of the genocide and by their own actions in support of SS operations. This argument echoes the interpretation of Wannsee offered by Raul Hilberg (as well as later historians), which notes that Heydrich, as ordered by Göring, “was to act in co-operation with other agencies which had jurisdiction in these matters,” which meant agencies responsible for issues like mixed marriages, the labor question, and Jews living outside of the Reich. Hilberg notes that the conference was meant to cut through red tape and settle questions of which agencies held authority over Jews; previously, Heydrich had encountered pushback from various ministries and agencies, and Wannsee was meant to streamline anti-Jewish policy.¹⁰⁴ Mommertz ends his piece with a parting shot, emphasizing his years of research:

Finally, Mr. Höhne calls the sources for the Wannsee Conference meager. I have six folders with original documents from the conference and its context. I am a historian too. Perhaps it is conceivable that after 14 months of special study in a particular subject area, one historian is a little ahead of other historians.¹⁰⁵

102 Mommertz, “Völlig unrealistisch und lebensfremd.”

103 Mommertz, “Völlig unrealistisch und lebensfremd.”

104 Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, 1st edition, 263.

105 Mommertz, “Völlig unrealistisch und lebensfremd.”

Here, Mommertz rejects the false dichotomy between historians and filmmakers; that history solely belongs to those who write books. Arguing against a journalist and popular historian, he rejects the idea that history solely belongs to those who write prose history; for him, this is a form of gatekeeping. Here, he prefigures later work by Robert Rosenstone, Robert Toplin, Thomas Cauvin, Rebecca Weeks, Bruno Ramirez, and Barry Langford, who all argue that filmmakers can act as historians when creating historical films. Arguing that filmmakers simply translate the work of historians is difficult to maintain when one notes that Mommertz had no historical monographs on Wannsee to consult, only smaller sections of publications and the then-available primary sources. Nevertheless, this rebuttal ignored one aspect of the production which Höhne's review did discuss: Mommertz's feud with Shlomo Aronson.

At some point during early 1984, Shlomo Aronson let producer Manfred Korytowski know that he was unhappy with the direction the film was taking and that the film "did not correspond to the historical facts."¹⁰⁶ Aronson's negative verdict is discussed in a draft of a March 26, 1984 letter from Mommertz, which was written after filming had been completed. Earlier correspondence from Aronson, discussed in the previous chapter, expresses some reservations about particular aspects of the film, but nothing indicated that he was disappointed with the way the script was going. This bitter letter from Mommertz expresses deep dismay, alleging that Aronson did not make his problems with the final screenplay draft known before filming began. Mommertz claims that he "took [Aronson's] whole wish list into consideration" when writing the screenplay.¹⁰⁷ Höhne had access to this letter and discussed it in his review (Höhne's review borrows its title from one of Mommertz's statements in this letter), but characterized the spat as one caused by Mommertz mischaracterizing Stuckart as a "half-resistance fighter," which "enraged" Aronson when he watched a cut of the film in March 1984. He also described a situation where Aronson wanted to distance himself from the film but was eventually convinced to remain associated with the production.¹⁰⁸ Mommertz's letter discusses Aronson's issues with Stuckart's characterization, pointing to the section of the screenplay which outlined Mommertz's justification for portraying Stuckart holding positions actually held by his subordinate Bernhard Lös-

106 Paul Mommertz, Draft of Letter to Shlomo Aronson, March 26, 1984, in Ordner 0, "Korrespondenz von Kampe und Mommertz," Section "Korrespondenz Paul Mommertz mit Shlomo Aronson," Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Mediothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin, 1.

107 Mommertz, Draft of Letter to Aronson, 1.

108 Höhne, "Eine Falle der Betroffenheit."

ener, even noting that he included this tidbit “thinking of [Aronson].”¹⁰⁹ This section of the screenplay is discussed further in Chapter 3, and shows that Mommertz was aware that he had to exercise caution with this characterization in order to prevent mistaken impressions or identification with Stuckart. Nevertheless, the film does make Stuckart appear weak-minded and less of a convinced Nazi than he actually was. This is exemplified by Stuckart’s comment about wanting to be transferred to the Eastern Front rather than to continue to be responsible for Jewish issues. Mommertz’s letter also charges Aronson with pedantism and a lack of understanding for the needs of a film, as opposed to a historical monograph: “Of course I couldn’t add in all of the nuances, otherwise I would have had to write a script with footnotes, so to speak. I also could not go into more detail, otherwise I would have overwhelmed the historically unprejudiced standard viewer.”¹¹⁰ He continues, “Of all those who have made the film and seen it thus far, none has felt that Stuckart was idealized.”¹¹¹ He then describes the special problems faced by filmed history and justified the film’s refusal to refer to every participant by name in the film, arguing that it would have resulted in lawsuits and an endless amount of “trivialities” (*Nebensächlichkeiten*): “We name the office, but we also name the rank. This signals to everyone that the typical is meant. The ministry, the office, the agency, the house policy are speaking.”¹¹² Clearly insulted by Aronson’s misgivings, Mommertz again references his historical training, saying “I am also a historian – not a stupid frivolous film guy – and I also claim the right to my historical interpretation, like you do.”¹¹³

Mommertz’s letter continues and increases in rancor, but one section nicely sums up the aims of the production, claiming that *The Wannsee Conference* “reconciles the requirements of historical fidelity, dramaturgy and didactics.”¹¹⁴ He notes that while minor errors are “unavoidable,” the film is “far removed from hermetic academicism as well as kitschy soap operas.”¹¹⁵ In his most spirited defense of the film, which Höhne would use to characterize Mommertz as hysterical, Mommertz argues that the film does something new; it “shakes up” the viewer: “We show like never before this gruesome discrepancy of cold-faced, cynical, even thoughtless frivolity and the Holocaust! We JOLT [the viewer]! We lead

109 Mommertz, Draft of Letter to Aronson, 2;

110 Mommertz, Draft of Letter to Aronson, 2.

111 Mommertz, Draft of Letter to Aronson, 2.

112 Mommertz, Draft of Letter to Shlomo Aronson, 3–4.

113 Mommertz, Draft of Letter to Shlomo Aronson, 6.

114 Mommertz, Draft of Letter to Shlomo Aronson, 6.

115 Mommertz, Draft of Letter to Shlomo Aronson, 6.

the viewer into our trap, the trap of affectedness!”¹¹⁶ The final page of the letter does veer into self-pity which comes across as an egoistic misfire in light of its Israeli recipient. Mommertz refers to himself as a “German author who since ‘45 has been in constant traumatic confrontation with Auschwitz.”¹¹⁷ The letter is also signed with one of Mommertz’s aphorisms about the Holocaust, which he often repeated in various forms throughout interviews and correspondence: “Holocaust. One can’t get old enough to get shocked enough as one would have to be.”¹¹⁸ Finally, the letter calls their dispute essentially hairsplitting among historians and a distraction from larger issues. Mommertz makes a political argument for the film. Mommertz claims first that the film is a “political issue” (*Politikum*) and then says that Aronson is unwittingly playing into the hands of the far right. The letter ends with an argument and appeal to Aronson that is alternately convincing and self-serving, yet it illustrates fundamental tensions within a production team composed of filmmakers and historians, of Germans and Israelis:

Do you really want to be responsible for the fact that certain people can gloatingly say: ‘Well, there you go! It’s all nonsense! Even the professor from Israel confirms it! So there you see again what to think of the coming to terms with the past [*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*] of our damned atonement-obsessed Germans! Nothing!’ You would have the applause from the wrong side, namely the neo-Nazis, and I would have the rotten eggs from the wrong side, namely you! Are we really supposed to offer such a spectacle to the unteachable, are we supposed to score such own goals, to perform such a double suicide? That would not even be allowed if you had really serious objections. And I can’t imagine you want to take the chance.¹¹⁹

Although Mommertz’s letter was sometimes reckless in terms of its language (his rage is palpable), Aronson, rather than distance himself from the film (as he initially wished), actually sent a conciliatory letter to Mommertz praising the film and his work, though Hühne later interpreted this letter as Aronson’s desire to turn down the argument’s heat. He called the film “a very impressive accomplishment in general” and that his misgivings were limited to two instances: the portrayal of Eichmann’s excessive reliance on his statements under interrogation and while on trial, and that Mommertz lacked evidence for Stuckart wanting to leave his post and fight at the front because of the Wannsee Conference specifically.¹²⁰ It is unclear if this statement was an attempt to calm Mommertz down or

¹¹⁶ Mommertz, Draft of Letter to Shlomo Aronson, 6.

¹¹⁷ Mommertz, Draft of Letter to Shlomo Aronson, 6–7.

¹¹⁸ Mommertz, Draft of Letter to Shlomo Aronson, 7.

¹¹⁹ Mommertz, Draft of Letter to Aronson, 7.

¹²⁰ Shlomo Aronson, Letter to Paul Mommertz, April 11, 1984, Private Archive Paul Mommertz, Munich, 1–2.

an honest assessment on Aronson's part. As a suggestion for improving this aspect of the film (which was ignored for the most part – see the comments above about the credit sequence for the American release), Aronson advocated showing real photos of the conference participants alongside photos of the actors at both the beginning and end of the film, with text emphasizing that Stuckart did not go to the front and remained in the Interior Ministry.¹²¹ Aronson also granted several interviews promoting the film, particularly for the American press.¹²² Still, Mommertz has noted that their personal relationship soured after this exchange and they never contacted each other again.¹²³ In this respect, Höhne's review, while correctly reporting on their exchange, mischaracterized Aronson's position.

In an undated essay (likely 1984-1985) located in the Mommertz collection, Mommertz expands on his response to Höhne and defends Aronson against assertions made in Höhne's review:

One more sentence on Professor Aronson, who I appreciate no less than Heinz Höhne does. Yes, there were differences. They were also quite natural. They always stemmed from the tension between history and the necessities of dramaturgy. The only unusual thing is that Höhne quickly destroys Aronson's compliment on a "very impressive achievement" with the interpretation that Aronson was only trying to buy peace of mind from the TV business' use of history.¹²⁴

Mommertz also responds to Höhne's allegation that IfZ staff warned Mommertz against writing a "creepy" film about Wannsee: "Such a warning is not known to me. In view of my earlier scripts on contemporary historical topics, such a warning would not have been necessary."¹²⁵ Mommertz also questions Höhne's assertions about the protocol itself, asking why he felt the need to cast doubt upon its authenticity and why he claimed that Robert Kempner doubted its authenticity.¹²⁶ It is unclear whether this essay was even sent to *Der Spiegel* or if it served as further argument, post factum, to bolster Mommertz's already-published rebuttal. In any case, it remained in the archival collection and was never published in any form. One source indicates that the version published in *Der Spiegel* was a shorter

121 Aronson, Letter to Paul Mommertz, April 11, 1984, 3.

122 See R. Jill Bradshaw, "Israeli Professor at UCLA Lends Expertise to German Film," *L.A. Reader*, February 26, 1987.

123 Interview with Paul Mommertz, November 16, 2018, 43:58–45:23.

124 Paul Mommertz, "Weitere Stellungnahmen zur SPIEGEL-Kritik von Heinz Höhne an meinem Drehbuch" in Ordner 1, "Dokumentation zum Film," Kapitel 300 "Der Autor," Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Mediothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin, 1.

125 Mommertz, "Weitere Stellungnahmen zur SPIEGEL-Kritik," 1–2.

126 Mommertz, "Weitere Stellungnahmen zur SPIEGEL-Kritik," 2.

version of a longer rebuttal, so it is indeed possible that these pages belong to that longer, unpublished material.¹²⁷

By casting doubt on the Wannsee Protocol's provenance, Höhne was – whether intentionally or not – legitimizing viewpoints common among Holocaust deniers in the pages of West Germany's flagship periodical. The historian Christian Mentel has documented the origins and methods behind denialist attempts to discredit the Wannsee Protocol, including the claim about the document not having the appropriate letterhead and file number.¹²⁸ Mentel has also noted that the notorious Holocaust denier David Irving claimed that the conference was merely about organizing deportations.¹²⁹ Later in the 1980s, the right-wing historian Ernst Nolte would also cast doubt on the protocol's authenticity, even going so far as to question whether or not the Wannsee Conference even took place, a contention which was still present in the revised 1997 edition of his book *Der europäische Bürgerkrieg*, where he asserts in an endnote that Heydrich may not have even been present and that historians had abandoned their objectivity by supposedly uncritically accepting Wannsee as fact.¹³⁰ In her influential *Denying the Holocaust*, the American historian Deborah Lipstadt traced how conservative historians like Nolte helped denialist viewpoints enter supposedly respectable historiography, arguing that Nolte and historians with similar arguments “are not crypto-deniers, but the results of their work are the same: the blurring of boundaries between fact and fiction and between persecuted and persecutor.”¹³¹ It is ironic that Höhne accused Mommertz of unethically blending fact and fiction while simultaneously alluding to revisionist and denialist claims about Wannsee, thereby giving their dangerous ideas access to *Spiegel's* vast audience.

Mommertz was not the only member of the production team to react to Heinz Höhne's review. On January 16, 1985, producer Manfred Korytowski sent a scathing letter directly to Höhne. In contrast with Mommertz's response, this letter is addressed to Höhne personally and was not meant for publication.¹³² Kory-

127 Manfred Korytowski, Letter to Heinz Höhne, January 16, 1985, in Ordner 1, “Dokumentation zum Film,” Kapitel 200 “Der Produzent,” Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Mediothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin, 1.

128 Christian Mentel, “Das Protokoll der Wannsee-Konferenz. Überlieferung, Veröffentlichung und revisionistische Infragestellung,” in Kampe and Klein, *Die Wannsee-Konferenz*, 130–131.

129 Mentel, “Das Protokoll der Wannsee-Konferenz,” 132–133.

130 Ernst Nolte, *Der europäische Bürgerkrieg 1917–1945: Nationalsozialismus und Bolschewismus*, 5th edition, September 1997 (Munich: F. A. Herbig Verlagsbuchhandlung GmbH, 1997), 470. See endnote 26, pages 541–542.

131 Deborah Lipstadt, *Denying the Holocaust: The Growing Assault on Truth and Memory*, (New York: Penguin, 1994), 214–215.

132 Korytowski, Letter to Heinz Höhne, 1.

towksi began the letter expressing deep disappointment with Höhne: “I now read your review after coming back from a long trip. It is, as the screenwriter has already addressed, either beside the point, wrong, or dangerous in all points – dangerous because it puts grist on the mills of the eternal reactionaries and the unteachable, whose embarrassing applause you are now certain to receive. But that is your problem.”¹³³ Korytowski expressed puzzlement regarding Höhne’s characterization of Aronson’s behavior, arguing that if Aronson wanted to distance himself from the film, he would not have agreed to be credited as its historical advisor: “[This is] a strange kind of distancing. Who is the ‘fantasist’ now? In any case, this example is typical of your speculations.” Immediately following this jab, Korytowski described his own goals for the film:

My intention with the film about the Wannsee Conference was to make people aware of three things – without showing concentration camp atrocities again: First, that not only the small concentration camp henchmen, who have always been shown, were involved in the Holocaust, but also Hitler’s high-level staff. Secondly, I wanted to provide a first insight into what happened in the Holocaust’s command centers. Thirdly, and most importantly, the film was intended to show how desk murderers look, behave, and talk when they organize the annihilation of an entire people.¹³⁴

He accused Höhne of ignoring the film’s goals and alleged the following:

Instead of communicating this fact as important information . . . you show yourself completely unmoved and throw yourself with the greatest eagerness into pedantic censoriousness. You unsuccessfully try to cast yourself as an expert on the Wannsee Conference – and well-behaved German critics are abandoning their own judgement by the dozen and blindly rely on the supposed authority from Hamburg.¹³⁵

He also charged Höhne with “delivering ammunition” to Holocaust deniers and other traditionalist conservatives, then speculates about the true motivations behind Höhne’s review: “The so-called better circles of that era had a grace period in the television medium up until now. My film has put an end to that. I guess you cannot forgive such a thing. Perhaps that is the real explanation for the irritated reactions in the editorial offices. One doesn’t like to see what we might be capable of.”¹³⁶

On the last page of his letter, he turns to his more personal reasons for writing Höhne and speaks as a Jewish man who grew up as a refugee from Hitler’s Germany. Societal and personal wounds were still raw and Korytowski responded

¹³³ Korytowski, Letter to Heinz Höhne, 1.

¹³⁴ Korytowski, Letter to Heinz Höhne, 2.

¹³⁵ Korytowski, Letter to Heinz Höhne, 2–3.

¹³⁶ Korytowski, Letter to Heinz Höhne, 3.

to Höhne as a man deeply affected by the murder of his family members and fellow Jews. The end to his letter is worth quoting in full:

I myself am Jewish and a victim of racial persecution. I lost my family members in the Holocaust. It would be an insult not only to these victims if I were to make a sloppy film about the events that led to their death. The subject is too serious for that, Mr. Höhne! I seriously ask myself if my decision to return to Germany, the country of my birth, where the memory of terrible truths, the confrontation of them, and the shame about them hides behind unqualified dogmatism, was the correct one.¹³⁷

In addition to Korytowski's letter, the Mommertz collection contains two letters sent to *Der Spiegel* founder Rudolf Augstein by readers in support of the film. One was penned by the translator Liselotte Julius, who identified herself as a Holocaust survivor (she claims that she only survived due to falsified papers claiming she was only half-Jewish) and claimed that Höhne's "tone betrays an almost unbearable degree of schoolmasterliness and know-it-allism" and charged him with dishonesty and sloppy historical work: "Is the inability to mourn replaced by the typically German capability of creating a mountain of refuge out of scientific and pseudo-scientific arguments, behind whose protective walls one can confidently stand up straight and right oneself?"¹³⁸

Julius further charged that Höhne's review was an exercise in journalistic "execution" of Mommertz: "there is no question in my mind that a double execution has taken place here – namely of a subject, the thematization of an important part of contemporary history, and of a person, namely the [screen]writer."¹³⁹ She described an event from her youth in Berlin during early 1942 and claimed that her father, through an acquaintance in the Wilmersdorf police, had heard that "they are killing all of them (the Jews), systematically" and that the same police officer told her father that this decision "was decided at a meeting of high-level functionaries at Wannsee."¹⁴⁰ Julius concluded her letter by stating that, to her disappointment, the NBC miniseries *Holocaust* did more to "shock" audiences than decades of documentaries offered by the German media.¹⁴¹

A letter from Herbert Zeibig, living in Bergisch Gladbach near Cologne, also expressed disappointment and anger towards Höhne's review, but argued from a more distanced, academic point of view. Zeibig claimed that "according to Egon

137 Korytowski, Letter to Heinz Höhne, 3.

138 Liselotte Julius, Letter to Rudolf Augstein, December 23, 1984, in Order 1, "Dokumentation zum Film," Kapitel 300, "Der Autor," Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Mediothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin, 1.

139 Julius, Letter to Rudolf Augstein, December 23, 1984, 1.

140 Julius, Letter to Rudolf Augstein, 1–2.

141 Julius, Letter to Rudolf Augstein, 2.

Friedell, historical writing is the philosophy of past events. My view is that this also includes the portrayal of history [on film]”¹⁴² Zeibig questioned Höhne’s use of Eichmann as a source and dismissed his reservations about the protocol’s authenticity, arguing that they were “meaningless.” He ends the letter with an execution of his own, to use Julius’s terminology: “Höhne has done a disservice to Germany and its citizens, who are striving to understand history; for the subject of the ‘Wannsee Conference’ was one we had to catch up on.”¹⁴³ Two of these letters illustrate the reaction of two Jewish people (Korytowski and Julius) to what they identified as German evasiveness about Nazi crimes that shaded into apologia and provided intellectual cover for Holocaust deniers. Their anger towards Höhne and *Der Spiegel* is palpable and serves as an indication of the contested arena of West German memory of the Holocaust and World War II during the 1980s: there was no “German response” to the Holocaust; but German *responses*, which included those from German Jews. Average Germans watched *The Wannsee Conference* and responded to it with letters to *Der Spiegel* and to the production team. So instead of a conversation solely between filmmakers and historians, the audience also contributed to the debate about *The Wannsee Conference*.

The Mommertz archival collection also includes a series of letters from viewers expressing contemptuous disdain.¹⁴⁴ These responses included letters from still-living Nazis. Prominent West German politicians wrote positive letters, including the conservative Bavarian Minister President Franz Josef Strauss, who promised to make the Bavarian *Landeszentrale für politische Bildungsarbeit* aware of the film but noted that it would depend on if the film was “didactically appropriate.”¹⁴⁵ It is unclear if the *Landeszentrale* ultimately included the film in its program. Jürgen Böddrich, a social democratic member of the Bavarian Landtag (SPD), sent Mommertz a similar letter, stating that “[t]he exposure of so-called ‘high carat people’ [i.e., highly respected persons] in their inhumanity has con-

142 Herbert Zeibig, Letter to Rudolf Augstein, December 30, 1984, in Ordner 1, “Dokumentation zum Film,” Kapitel 300, “Der Autor,” Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Mediothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin, 1.

143 Zeibig, Letter to Rudolf Augstein, 1–2.

144 A note at the beginning of the archival folder states that the letters contained within are “a few typical examples” but that many letters that would be worth citing are not contained due to legal reasons. This note also claims that other negative letters threatened the filmmakers with assault or even murder. Ordner 1. “Dokumentation zum Film,” Kapitel 700, “Zuschauerpost (Auswahl),” Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Mediothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin.

145 Franz Josef Strauss, Letter to Manfred Korytowski, March 25, 1985, in Ordner 1, “Dokumentation zum Film,” Kapitel 700, “Zuschauerpost (Auswahl),” Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Mediothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin, 1–2.

vinced me very much. For this taboo violation, I am very grateful to you and I also hope that you will continue to not let anyone intimidate you.”¹⁴⁶ Alexander Böker, a Wehrmacht veteran living in Bad Homburg, praised the film for its depiction of the mentality and “idealism” of the SS: “these people were really like that.” He addressed the film’s negative reception in the press: “If contemporary history is not yet ready for your film, history will honor its objectivity.”¹⁴⁷ One viewer from Schleswig-Holstein praised the film, but expressed disappointment that it “wasn’t better advertised” because he only saw the film by happenstance.¹⁴⁸ Another viewer and friend of Korytowski’s, Charles “Chuck” Kerremans, sent Korytowski (“Mannie”) a letter praising the film for its depiction of Nazi bureaucrats: “Horrible, these philistines [*Spießler*] in uniform, between their dog, their cognac, and the accommodating sexy secretary, at a ‘retreat’ like we expect today from industry bigwigs, discussing a topic such as waste disposal or the like, [with a tone] somewhere between fun and business!”¹⁴⁹ The most extensive positive letter in the archival collection is from the film producer Michael Pakleppa of Westwind Productions. Pakleppa praised the filmmakers for their artistic achievements and makes a point similar to Chuck Kerremans, arguing that the film portrayed a type of grotesque meeting undoubtedly common throughout the modern world. For him, the film “succeeded in a pushing for a reflection on the latent fascism within us, which for me is without precedent.”¹⁵⁰ Pakleppa also attacked what he saw as unfair criticism in the press, arguing that those who like Höhne, who, for him, nitpicked the film, were at the “same spiritual level” as Holocaust deniers.¹⁵¹ Of course, this is hyperbole, but the reaction against Höhne

146 Jürgen Böddrich, Letter to Paul Mommertz, January 15, 1985, in Ordner 1, “Dokumentation zum Film,” Kapitel 700, “Zuschauerpost (Auswahl),” Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Mediothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin, 1.

147 Alexander Böker, Letter to Paul Mommertz, December 22, 1984, in Ordner 1, “Dokumentation zum Film,” Kapitel 700, “Zuschauerpost (Auswahl),” Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Mediothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin, 1.

148 Ferdinand von Stumm, Postcard to NDR December 20, 1984, in Ordner 1, “Dokumentation zum Film,” Kapitel 700, “Zuschauerpost (Auswahl),” Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Mediothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin, 1.

149 Charles “Chuck” Kerremans, Letter to Manfred Korytowski, December 20, 1984, in Ordner 1, “Dokumentation zum Film,” Kapitel 700, “Zuschauerpost (Auswahl),” Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Mediothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin, 1.

150 Michael Pakleppa, Letter to Manfred Korytowski, January 23, 1985, in Ordner 1, “Dokumentation zum Film,” Kapitel 700, “Zuschauerpost (Auswahl),” Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Mediothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin, 1.

151 Pakleppa, Letter to Manfred Korytowski, 2–3.

here also illustrates how common denialist or “revisionist” arguments were in 1980s West Germany.

Negative letters included hate mail from Holocaust deniers and unabashed Nazis. Their combative, threatening tone also helps place Mommertz’s and Korytowski’s strongly-worded responses to Höhne’s review in context. One postcard called the film “the most disgusting kind of propaganda” and claimed that the real Wannsee Protocol had never been published.¹⁵² Another postcard, sent directly to Mommertz, called him a “useful Bolshevik idiot,” a “demagogue” and claimed the film was a complete lie.¹⁵³ One shrill letter from an individual in Frankfurt, sent to Infafilm before the *The Wannsee Conference* aired (the letter was in response to the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* piece on the film from February 1984) attacked the production team, accusing them of falsifying history and alleging that Germans did not kill Jews, but “Khazars” (a common antisemitic conspiracy theory). The author notably follows a similar line of argument later found in Höhne’s review, namely that the “Final Solution” discussed at Wannsee only meant deportation. The letter continues with usual denialist arguments and concludes by stating that the Holocaust could not have even happened.¹⁵⁴ Another letter casts doubt on whether the conference took place and then whines about German television focusing on “topic number 1,” that is, the Holocaust.¹⁵⁵ In a letter sent to Mommertz a full year after the film’s premiere, a woman rants about German victimhood and claims that the “true history” will one day be brought to light, complaining that “forty years after the end of the Second World War, there are still anti-German television productions, the propaganda of lies is running at full speed, the German people are threatened by a terror of opinion that is unprecedented in history.”¹⁵⁶

152 Postcard sent to ARD, undated. in Ordner 1, “Dokumentation zum Film,” Kapitel 700, “Zuschauerpost (Auswahl),” Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Mediothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin, 1.

153 Jörg Reinhard, Letter to Paul Mommertz, postmarked December 28, 1984. in Ordner 1, “Dokumentation zum Film,” Kapitel 700, “Zuschauerpost (Auswahl),” Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Mediothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin, 1.

154 Rüdiger Roth, Letter to WDR, December 20, 1984, in Ordner 1, “Dokumentation zum Film,” Kapitel 700, “Zuschauerpost (Auswahl),” Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Mediothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin, 1–2.

155 R. Kerkovius, Letter to INFAFILM GmbH, February 29, 1984, in Ordner 1, “Dokumentation zum Film,” Kapitel 700, “Zuschauerpost (Auswahl),” Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Mediothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin, 1–2.

156 Hildegard Krause, Letter to Paul Mommertz, January 24, 1985. in Ordner 1, “Dokumentation zum Film,” Kapitel 700, “Zuschauerpost (Auswahl),” Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Mediothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin, 1.

Most curious is the chilling, disturbing letter sent to Mommertz by a Dutch Waffen-SS veteran living near Hamburg. This letter praises the film, but in a very different manner than other audience letters. The writer, John Bolck, who wrote the letter by hand and completely in capital letters, lauds the film for depicting what he saw as the great achievements of the SS: “Finally, the snappy tone, the superb uniform, the comradely atmosphere, the ardent and unshakable conviction to fight for the Reich, Germanness above everything, it was not to be compared with the rotten time in which we live today, where left-wing elements contaminate life and destroy Germany!”¹⁵⁷ He went on to praise the acting: “The actors were eager, and one would almost believe that some of them had once even had the honor of having been in the SS. The Obergruppenführer Heydrich was a knockout, as superior, as serene, as R. Heydrich had once been.”¹⁵⁸ He continued with his misplaced praise, claiming that the film showed things as they were:

. . . it was the highest thing, to be allowed to experience the unfortunately extinct world again! Without ridiculous re-education hypocrisy, without socialist babble, without everything from the left, nothing red, nothing green, no third world, no rock and pop, but only and totally our SS. And its completely beautiful simplicity on the one hand, its unmatched effectiveness on the other!¹⁵⁹

The writer expressed wishes for Bayerischer Rundfunk to create more films about “SS topics” including Skorzeny’s rescue of Mussolini, the Malmedy Massacre, and the “true story” about the July 1944 massacre at Oradour-sur-Glane.¹⁶⁰ Finally, and most chillingly, he says that if he lived in Munich, he would gladly “advise [Mommertz] on SS matters” for future film projects. He thanked Mommertz again and signed the letter in the name of the SS.¹⁶¹

ARD continued to receive letters when they aired the film in subsequent years. One letter from 1992 alleges that the Wannsee Protocol was a fake document created by the Allies, a common denialist claim. It also uses the exact claims about the document’s supposed dubiousness disseminated in Höhne’s review: “[the protocol] bears no file number, no signature, no handwritten notations, no other evidence, no header, and is written on a paper format not commonly used

¹⁵⁷ John T. Bolck, Letter to Paul Mommertz, December 20, 1984, in Ordner 1, “Dokumentation zum Film,” Kapitel 700, “Zuschauerpost (Auswahl),” Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Mediothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin, 1.

¹⁵⁸ John T. Bolck, Letter to Paul Mommertz, 1.

¹⁵⁹ Bolck, Letter to Paul Mommertz, 1–2.

¹⁶⁰ Bolck, Letter to Paul Mommertz, 3.

¹⁶¹ Bolck, Letter to Paul Mommertz, 4.

in Germany (not a DIN standard!)”¹⁶² This same letter claims that the Wannsee Protocol, and by extension the film, are meant for the purpose of defaming Germans for eternity.¹⁶³ Another letter from 1992 engages in similar denialist arguments, but claims that the conference could not have taken place because the 1957 and 1963 editions of the *Brockhaus* encyclopedia fail to mention the conference in their entries on the Wannsee lake.¹⁶⁴

This small, curated selection of audience letters nevertheless illustrates the political climate in which *The Wannsee Conference* premiered. A small group of people, some of whom were on the political left, some of whom were either Holocaust survivors or the children of Holocaust survivors, and some of whom were ordinary Germans advocated for films and other forms of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* within a wider society that was either indifferent, or actively opposed, to those efforts. The shrill, threatening letters from denialists and old Nazis also illustrate the climate at the time – it is little wonder that the filmmakers were afraid of lawsuits if they named all of the Wannsee participants in the film, especially considering that three of the participants were still alive during the film’s pre-production – Gerhard Klopfer would survive until 1987 and his obituary praised him as a man “who passed away after a fulfilled life in the service of all those in his sphere of influence.”¹⁶⁵ A society where such an obituary could be printed for a Wannsee Conference participant like Klopfer is certainly one where filmmakers working for public television, like Korytowski, Schirk, and Mommert, would feel the need to exercise caution and underscores the fact that, in this climate, such a film was genuinely provocative.

Further West German journalistic reception tended to follow Höhne’s lead without making any original points. In general, these reviews charged the film with inaccuracy, demonization, engaging in stereotypes, and implied a hidden, unexplained motive on the part of the filmmakers, as if the film was some sort of stealth propaganda piece. In his review for the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, Karl-Ludwig Baader criticized the film for not depicting its characters in a more differentiated manner and wished for a round of experts discussing the film or

¹⁶² Dietrich K. Mauss, Letter to ARD, postmarked January 20, 1992. in Ordner 1, “Dokumentation zum Film,” Kapitel 700, “Zuschauerpost (Auswahl),” Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Mediothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin, 1.

¹⁶³ Mauss, Letter to ARD, 1.

¹⁶⁴ Rüdiger Weckherlin, Letter to ARD, February 19, 1992, in Ordner 1, “Dokumentation zum Film,” Kapitel 700, “Zuschauerpost (Auswahl),” Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Mediothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin, 1.

¹⁶⁵ Südwest-Presse, February 2, 1987, quoted in Markus Heckmann, “Gerhard Klopfer, Nazi Party Chancellor - A Nationalist Ideologue and a Respectable West German,” in *The Participants: The Men of the Wannsee Conference*, (Oxford: New York: Berghahn Books, 2017), 189–206, 189.

for the film to be interrupted by said experts in order to give it a “documentary-like” character. Baader’s verdict was that the film only provided an “illusion” of authenticity and “satisfies sensational interest.”¹⁶⁶ Here, Baader retreats behind a call for more “documentary-like” productions without acknowledging the limitations of the genre. In its front-page editorial review, *Süddeutsche Zeitung* referenced the Hitler diaries hoax – a media scandal which had engulfed the *Stern* magazine – asking if that scandal had not meant that Germans should treat their Nazi past with more sobermindedness and implying that the film’s approach was the opposite of that ideal. This review ascribes sinister motives to the filmmakers and implies that they should have left the subject of Wannsee alone. It also utilizes by now shopworn arguments about mass media destroying the potential for “real” history:

There must be more than just aesthetic, dramaturgical objections here. Television grossly abuses its genuine suggestive power when, once again incoherently opening the box of horrors, it feigns historical authenticity: that’s how it was, Heydrich was such a blonde, Eichmann so powerful, so barked the German shepherd – basta! Your German television! Which historian, which serious explainer actually still has a chance against the speculative use of history, against the magic of millimeter-precise falsification?¹⁶⁷

In her review of the film, on page 32 of the same issue of *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, the in-house film critic Birgit Weidinger, who had given *Manager of Terror* a more positive review, echoed the opinion of the front page piece. She did express disappointment that the accompanying documentary *Werkstattnotizen* only aired a day after the film’s premiere, but her review was also tinged with a skepticism bordering on puritanism about the subject matter: “A ‘play’ about the Wannsee Conference – can something like that ever go well?”¹⁶⁸ She charged that the film only propagated simple stereotypes of Nazis and remained a surface-level exploration of the topic: “The mixture of fiction and facts presented here could only achieve artificial effect, remained unsatisfactory and unbelievable also because their motivation was not explained, because they acted so tensely.”¹⁶⁹ A reader, Werner Glöggler of Ismaning, sent a letter in response to these reviews which was printed in the January 5, 1985 edition of *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. Glöggler praised the film and stated that it was necessary for future generations to be aware of Wannsee, and that remembrance of the Holocaust should not be rele-

¹⁶⁶ Karl-Ludwig Baader, “Eiskalter Engel in der Herrenrunde,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, December 21, 1984.

¹⁶⁷ “Das Streiflicht,” *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, December 21, 1984.

¹⁶⁸ Birgit Weidinger, “Hackenschlagen,” *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, December 21, 1984, 32.

¹⁶⁹ Weidinger, “Hackenschlagen,” 32.

gated to official days of mourning. He argued that the negative front-page review in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* was “callous, out of place, and also inaccurate in its critical message.”¹⁷⁰ R. Kerkovius, the Holocaust denier who had written a shrill letter to Infafilm in early 1984, also sent Werner Glöggl a threatening letter after Glöggl’s letter to the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* had been published.¹⁷¹ Although most West German reviews of the film were negative, there were a few exceptions. The film critic for the *Nürnberger Zeitung* praised the film for its portrayal of “cold-bloodedness” and its political message.¹⁷²

Robert Kempner, whom Mommertz had interviewed for the accompanying documentary *Werkstattnotizen*, wrote a letter in response to the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*’s front-page review. He praised *The Wannsee Conference* for its historical accuracy but criticized its tone and portrayal of the conference as having a party-like atmosphere, as well as its lack of a historical introduction. He reiterated that the protocol, which he had discovered, was an authentic document and that the film handled it appropriately. Nevertheless, Kempner had serious problems with the film’s portrayal of the conference atmosphere, arguing that it was nonsensical and confusing to viewers:

Based on my precise knowledge, I can state that the facts presented in the television program are based on truth, with few exceptions. What is nonsensical, however, is the way they are presented in a kind of pub regulars’ table milieu [*Stammtischmilieu*] with drinking, lazy jokes and flirtations with a non-existent secretary. Kitschy. It created a jumble with which listeners could hardly cope.¹⁷³

Mommertz responded to Kempner with a letter to the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, noting that the only people in the film operating at the level of the “pub regulars’ table” were those characters representing the Nazi Party and notes that this depiction is supported by the behavior of Nazi Party officials at similar conferences, such as the one held by Göring after the pogroms of November 9, 1938, popularly known as *Kristallnacht*. He also defends the secretary character, arguing that it was based on Eichmann’s statements. Mommertz brazenly mentions that while Kempner had memories of the time, he was in exile while Mommertz was living in Ger-

170 Werner Glöggl, “Wen es dabei nicht schauderte,” *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, January 5, 1985.

171 R. Kerkovius, Letter to W. Glöggl, January 24, 1985, in Ordner 1, “Dokumentation zum Film,” Kapitel 700, “Zuschauerpost (Auswahl),” Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Mediothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin, 1–2.

172 Rosch, “Beklemmend,” *Nürnberger Zeitung*, December 21, 1984.

173 Robert W. Kempner, “Unsinnige Darstellung im Stammtisch-Milieu,” *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, January 5, 1985.

many actually experiencing Nazi actions firsthand.¹⁷⁴ Kempner wrote Mommertz a personal letter assuaging his concerns, saying that his letter was intended to “strengthen [Mommertz’s] position” vis-a-vis the critiques that cast doubt on the murderous nature or even authenticity of the Wannsee Protocol; he ended the letter with “[y]ou can be very pleased with your work!”¹⁷⁵

Despite negative reactions from journalists, Paul Mommertz won the 1985 DAG (German Salaried Employees’ Union) Television Prize, as well as the Grimme-Preis. In his acceptance speech for the DAG Television Prize, Mommertz recounted the film’s negative reception in the press and his public defenses of the film. In this speech, which leans on Korytowski’s letter to Höhne, he posited that the film’s negative reception was perhaps due to its attack on the German educated middle class establishment, of which most of the conference attendees were members:

The educated classes thus had – apart from the Nuremberg trials of the Allies and some of Hochhut’s [sic] work – a grace period. The film about the Wannsee Conference broke with this taboo in an exemplary, irrefutable, and brutal way. One does not forgive that. And here lies probably the real explanation for the angry, vicious, spiteful criticism that film and its author attracted.¹⁷⁶

He concluded his speech by addressing the Wannsee Conference’s relevance for contemporary German society, arguing that similar meetings were going on around the world:

Are not lively fellows from next door conferring at this very moment in the committees of management, industries, and armies ruling over the property, health, and lives of millions? Of course they do not want that which they make possible. But they make possible what we do not want. Do we protest? Do we remain silent? Do we join in? The topicality of the Wannsee Conference! Discussed by whom? By no one. *Das Boot* is more important.¹⁷⁷

In this speech, Mommertz argues that the negative reaction to the film was because it implicated the German educated establishment in the Holocaust; his film

174 Paul Mommertz, “Oft analysiertes Gruppenverhalten,” *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, January 31, 1985.

175 Robert W. Kempner, Letter to Paul Mommertz, February 4, 1985, in Ordner 1, “Dokumentation zum Film,” Kapitel 600, “Presse BRD: Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Mediothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin, 1.”

176 Paul Mommertz, “DIE WANNSEERKONFERENZ: Von der Abwehr einer historischen Information durch Filmkritik,” in Festschrift zum DAG-Fernsehpreis, April 20, 1985, in Ordner 1 “Dokumentation zum Film,” Kapitel 300, “Der Autor,” Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Mediothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin, 42.

177 Mommertz, “DIE WANNSEERKONFERENZ: Von der Abwehr einer historischen Information durch Filmkritik,” 44.

was an act of cultural criticism. To sum up his argument, an old saying from the American South proves useful: a hit dog will holler. He also drew a comparison between his film and the miniseries *Das Boot*, arguing that those who disliked his film would rather discuss an apologetic series about a U-Boat crew.

The playwright and critic Rolf Hochhuth, most famous for his classic 1963 drama *The Deputy*, which depicts the efforts of SS officer Kurt Gerstein to inform the Vatican about the Holocaust, also weighed in with a review in the Swiss weekly *Die Weltwoche*.¹⁷⁸ Titled “The Impossibility of Atonement,” Hochhuth’s review is the most prominent positive review of the film in German. He sharply criticizes Höhne’s assertions about the protocol, arguing that anyone attending had damned himself and knew exactly what “Final Solution” meant after years of Hitler’s “prophecies.” The bulk of the review concerns itself with refuting Höhne and proving that the conference attendees knew about mass murder and could not convincingly have claimed ignorance. Hochhuth then turns to the film’s goals and makes a powerful argument about the impossibility of “coming to terms” with Germany’s dark past:

Whoever watched this film as a German – the unteachable Nazis switched the TV off anyway – belongs to those who have *known* since the end of the war that what this film tried to “come to terms with” is *true*: a word that can only be printed in quotation marks in view of the monstrosity. There is no coming to terms with the past [*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*], it is *nefarious* to talk about survivors and accomplices being able to “come to terms” with what was done to murdered people. [Karl] Jaspers was right when he said in 1945, “It is our fault that we are still alive!”¹⁷⁹

Hochhuth continues, with his only comments on the film noting that it had reached the level of *Holocaust* and that such films must be made:

This film was a renewed reminder of that. This must always happen again. Not only in Germany. But everywhere where antisemites and those who hate minorities live. Pre-Christmas days are exactly the right time for such broadcasts. Germans have finally made such a film themselves – after shamefully leaving making ‘Holocaust’ up to the foreigners.

Hochhuth’s review stands out among the others for its attention to the wider societal issues at stake. His paradoxical argument that coming to terms with the past is impossible, but we still have to attempt to do so, underscores the fact that Germany’s oft-lauded, oft-derided culture of memory was never uncontested, never

¹⁷⁸ West German reception of Hochhuth’s play, *The Deputy*, was initially censorious; international intellectuals tended to praise it, similar to the reception of *The Wannsee Conference*. See Kater, *After the Nazis*, 179.

¹⁷⁹ Hochhuth, “Die Unmöglichkeit der Sühne.”

inevitable, but it was no accident of history either. In West Germany, the “vestiges of National Socialism and the Third Reich had to be defeated year by year, so as to strengthen democracy. That this was possible was in great part owing to efforts made, often pioneered, in the area of culture.”¹⁸⁰ These efforts were largely the result of the work of outsiders who went against the grain of West German society, which preferred silence and moving on.¹⁸¹ This memory work was never uniform; the people doing it came from a variety of backgrounds, but one strand connects them: they were working outside of – or came from outside – the mainstream; they did not always produce work that would appeal to the average German. This is an important lesson for public history professionals and educators: not every historical project or work of historical memory has to appeal to the widest possible number of people possible at the time of its release. Whether outsiders like Korytowski, who, while a prominent film producer, still was an outsider by virtue of his background as a Jewish exile, or Mommertz, who, as a playwright and screenwriter almost exclusively concerned with the Holocaust was a de facto outsider with respect to mainstream German television writing, these people kept the memory of the Holocaust alive in a society that was reluctant to. In the words of historian Michael Kater,: “If there were checks and balances in the West German democracy, culture was a check.”¹⁸²

The West German reception of *The Wannsee Conference* was fundamentally poisoned from the start by Höhne’s negative review in *Der Spiegel*. Most critics in prominent newspapers followed his lead, thereby repeating his assertions about the conference and the protocol. Many of these reviews were tinged by a fundamental skepticism towards depicting the Holocaust or history in general on film and relied on a pedantic definition of accuracy, implying that the depiction of Nazi perpetrators speaking as Nazis did amounted to overblown demonization. When one notes the influence of Holocaust survivors on the production and the vehement West German critical reaction, the situation appears as a farcical rehash of the all-too-familiar postwar conservative discourse around representations of the Holocaust: West German conservatives characterized Jewish voices (and those of their allies) as unobjective, undifferentiated, sensationalist, and accused them of using mass media to “trick” ostensibly innocent and passive German audiences, whereas these critics cited nameless German historians to represent “objectivity,” sober-mindedness, and “the facts,” which they set up as

180 Kater, *After the Nazis*, 381–382.

181 With the term “outsider,” I follow Peter Gay’s use of the term, thereby implicitly also arguing that these individuals followed the pluralistic intellectual heritage of the Weimar Republic: Peter Gay, *Weimar Culture: The Outsider as Insider* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001).

182 Kater, *After the Nazis*, 381–382.

diametrically opposed to emotional, non-academic, and amateurish efforts to remember the Holocaust.¹⁸³ Nevertheless, it is important to also recognise that in spite of the film's initial negative reception in the press, the West German television community embraced the film as evidenced by its awards and subsequent re-airings. There was no uniformly negative West German attitude towards the film, but rather a *journalistic* rejection of it. Chastened by these critiques, the film's producers undertook a stronger PR campaign for the film in the United States.

4 Reception in the United States

Having learned from their negative experiences with the West German press, the film's producers prepared a PR campaign for the film's American premiere. The film had already won prizes in Japan and Brazil, but it first premiered in American theaters in January 1987 in Los Angeles. Some promotional material drew attention to Korytowski's Jewish background and Israeli citizenship. This material, which largely conformed to the historical consensus on the Wannsee Conference, included some dubious claims that are not borne out by any of the archival research material or historiography, such as a claim that a participant "came to Berlin on a shopping trip" or that "[m]ost [of the participants] could not have cared less about the Jewish Question."¹⁸⁴ This document also claims that Korytowski had attempted to interview surviving Wannsee participants, including the (unnamed) female secretary.¹⁸⁵ Korytowski sat for numerous interviews with American and Canadian publications. One interview for *The Forward*, conducted by Masha Leon, is quite extensive and was published alongside a positive review of

¹⁸³ For a detailed discussion of this dynamic, see Nicolas Berg, *The Holocaust and The West German Historians: Historical Interpretation and Autobiographical Memory*, trans. Joel Golb, (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2014) and Anna Corsten, *Unbequeme Erinnerung: Emigrierte Historiker in der westdeutschen und US-amerikanischen NS- und Holocaust-Forschung, 1945–1998*, (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2023). See also Bartov, *Murder in Our Midst*, 121: "while German memory got its due, often via the most respectable academic circles and most gifted artists, Jewish memory was condemned by both German and non-German, often also Jewish, scholars as constituting a sentimental, mythical obstruction to the understanding of the past."

¹⁸⁴ "Background Information on 'The Wannsee Conference' and Manfred Korytowski, Producer," in Ordner 1 "Dokumentation zum Film," Kapitel 200, "Der Produzent" Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Mediothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin, 1–2.

¹⁸⁵ "Background Information on 'The Wannsee Conference' and Manfred Korytowski, Producer, 2.

the film. This review draws parallels between *The Wannsee Conference* and Claude Lanzmann's landmark documentary *Shoah*, but Korytowski makes sure to get the following message across:

I also want to make clear that the difference between *Shoah* and *The Wannsee Conference* because in all these films, *Shoah*, *Holocaust*, these are films about the victims. Not the *doers* – This is the first film about the perpetrators . . . a history of the perpetrators, those who set the actions and events into motion.¹⁸⁶

Korytowski also wanted to note the film's original context: "The main thing is that as a Jew in Germany I made the film in Germany for Germans . . . I must underscore this – a film by a Jew in Germany produced for Germany."¹⁸⁷ This was an important point when being interviewed for American Jewish publications, who would watch the film in very different cultural context.

The film's American distributor, Rearguard Pictures, advertised the film with the following tagline:

On Tuesday, January 20, 1942, at a house in the quiet Berlin suburb of Wannsee, a meeting was held. Fourteen key representatives of the SS, the Nazi party and the government bureaucracy attended at the invitation of Reinhard Heydrich, head of the Security Police and Secret Service. The Meeting lasted eighty-five minutes. There was only one item on the agenda: The Final Solution.¹⁸⁸

This tagline, similar to marketing material for *Conspiracy*, could potentially mislead audiences into thinking that the decision to murder all of Europe's Jews was made at Wannsee, instead of its coordination and details of its implementation. At the film's Los Angeles premiere, the Holocaust historian Deborah Lipstadt delivered remarks that praised the film's "strong impact."¹⁸⁹ American premieres tended to be associated with Jewish community organizations in Los Angeles and New York, Jewish publications such as *The Forward* also featured articles and reviews of the film. In contrast with its German reception, American critics were almost unanimous in their praise. The film did receive mainstream critical attention. In his review for *The New York Times*, film critic Vincent Canby stated that

¹⁸⁶ Masha Leon, "A Conversation with Manfred Korytowski," *Forward*, December 4, 1987, 31. Photocopy contained in GHWK archival folder on Korytowski cited above.

¹⁸⁷ Leon, "A Conversation with Manfred Korytowski," 27.

¹⁸⁸ Advertisement in *The Jewish Week*, November 1987, in Ordner 1 "Dokumentation zum Film," Kapitel 400, "Preise, Premiere, Festivals," Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Mediothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin, 1.

¹⁸⁹ Ekkehard Klaus, Letter to Manfred Korytowski, February 11, 1987, in Ordner 1 "Dokumentation zum Film," Kapitel 400, "Preise, Premiere, Festivals," Bestand Paul Mommertz, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin, 1.

The Wannsee Conference was “unlike any other Holocaust film I’ve ever seen” and that “[i]t has the slightly unreal, breathless pacing of a Broadway comedy about a convention of soft-drink bottlers considering new distribution procedures.”¹⁹⁰ Canby humorously described Stuckart as “the sort of fellow who prompts groans at such meetings for being tiresome about small details” and praised Schirk’s camerawork, saying that its “movements are those of a restless, impotent ghost who sees all and can do nothing.”¹⁹¹ He also stated that Schirk and Mommertz were “clearly intentionalists” and that the fact that it was hard to identify individual characters apart from Heydrich and Eichmann was “maddening in a film so provocative that it sends one back to the history books in an attempt to find out who said what to whom.”¹⁹² Canby strongly recommended the film, noting that it, in contrast with assertions leveled by German critics, “avoids any ‘You Are There’ portentousness. In being so seemingly breezy, it finds a voice for dealing with matters that are, after all, not unspeakable. This is the film’s sorrowful accomplishment.”¹⁹³ Another *New York Times* feature on the film discussed its historical background. This feature discusses the Wannsee villa, which was declared a memorial and educational site around the same time the film premiered in New York, and quotes Korytowski saying he intended for the film to have an explicitly educative mission: “[m]y intention was to make a record for the future, a document for young people in Germany.”¹⁹⁴

The most valuable critical reaction to the film from the United States is a review Raul Hilberg wrote for *The New York Times*. In an article titled “Is It History, Or Is It Drama?”, Hilberg discussed the film from his vantage point as a historian: “When I walked into the movie theater to see ‘The Wannsee Conference,’ I did so with some trepidation. Vincent Canby’s review . . . had prepared me for an unusual experience.”¹⁹⁵ Hilberg knew that the protocol was no “verbatim record of the meeting” and that the dialogue would inevitably be fictionalized. He argues that films about history involve difficult choices and criticizes the film in a manner similar to Robert Kempner, focusing in particular on the film’s quick pace and dense dialogue:

190 Vincent Canby, “Film: Holocaust’s Birth, ‘Wannsee Conference,’” *New York Times*, November 18, 1987, <https://www.nytimes.com/1987/11/18/movies/film-holocaust-s-birth-wannsee-conference.html>.

191 Canby, “Film: Holocaust’s Birth.”

192 Canby, “Film: Holocaust’s Birth.”

193 Canby, “Film: Holocaust’s Birth.”

194 Serge Schmemann, “FILM; 85 Minutes That Scarred History,” *New York Times*, November 22, 1987, <https://www.nytimes.com/1987/11/22/movies/film-85-minutes-that-scarred-history.html>.

195 Raul Hilberg, “Is It History, Or Is It Drama?,” *The New York Times*, December 13, 1987, <https://www.nytimes.com/1987/12/13/arts/is-it-history-or-is-it-drama.html>.

In the film much historical background material is folded into the conference in that questions and answers are interpolated, if need be by having the participants interrupt each other. Silence is cast aside for sound, such as a dog barking outside or some loud hand-slapping on the table. Tension is heightened with arguments that at times become personal. Too many people speak, too many speak too soon, and too many questions are asked by speakers. The result is a crowded hour and a half, in which a multiplicity of facts is brought out, sometimes in inappropriate ways.¹⁹⁶

Hilberg's critique here does have some merit; although the fast dialogue and jargon is good for simulating the historical atmosphere, its pace leaves the audience with little breathing room and time to process the information – room for quiet moments between people and extended periods of silence are one of the ways *Conspiracy* improves upon its predecessor. He also criticized the film's depiction of Heydrich, who "is portrayed here as having been more genial than he had to be, more generous and forgiving to his challengers and less in command of the situation than he really was. One must not forget that he was the host at the peak of his power, and that this gathering was his show."¹⁹⁷ For Hilberg, the film's depiction of Stuckart was also problematic, arguing that "[w]ere Stuckart alive today, such a portrait would have had his full approval."¹⁹⁸ In his summary of the film, Hilberg does not denounce it, but critically assesses it as an experiment in historical filmmaking: "The makers of 'the Wannsee Conference' did not cling to the structure and chronology of the historical record. They made a hybrid film. Yet they approached the subject seriously and left us a fascinating experiment."¹⁹⁹ Hilberg's review falters in one respect – he did not know the extent to which the filmmakers also had conducted historical research, and although there are several instances of deliberate chronological errors in the film (see the example of Jenny Cozzi), other aspects of his critique can be chalked up to differences of historical interpretation and the fact that the production team was hamstrung by the needs of dramatic film as opposed to a monograph. However, Hilberg's critique about the fast-paced dialogue and little breathing room for the audience, as well as his observations about Stuckart and Heydrich, hold up upon scrutiny, though the script makes clear that Heydrich's "geniality," to use Hilberg's term, is a deceptive farce.

Raul Hilberg also discussed *The Wannsee Conference* in his memoir *The Politics of Memory*. He places the film at the beginning of a discussion of (all female) historians he disliked because of "questionable practices." In this chapter, Hilberg states

¹⁹⁶ Hilberg, "Is It History, Or Is It Drama?"

¹⁹⁷ Hilberg, "Is It History, Or Is It Drama?"

¹⁹⁸ Hilberg, "Is It History, Or Is It Drama?"

¹⁹⁹ Hilberg, "Is It History, Or Is It Drama?"

that while he appreciates those who write fiction, he considers fictionalization something that “give[s] me discomfort,” citing *The Wannsee Conference* as a “serious film” whose creators “took liberties with the facts.” He then summarizes his *New York Times* review, stating “I do not know whether my comments destroyed any chance of a meaningful distribution of *The Wannsee Conference*, but I certainly fired on the makers of the film, giving them no quarter.”²⁰⁰ Hilberg’s juxtaposition of fiction, particularly film, with the “distortions” of the female scholars Nora Levin, Lucy Dawidowicz, and Hannah Arendt (of course, like all historians, some of their work was indeed flawed; Hilberg had legitimate grievances towards Arendt in particular) points to an association of art and film with “soft” scholarship and femininity, and “real history” with masculine hardness.²⁰¹

In a 1987 interview with National Public Radio’s (NPR) *All Things Considered*, the historian Christopher Browning reviewed *The Wannsee Conference*. Browning praised the film but was critical of its portrayal of the conference’s atmosphere: “that . . . relaxed atmosphere, an unofficial, informal kind of atmosphere, is different, I think, than how the filmmaker portrayed it, which is all of these men sitting around the table and pounding the table and laughing and telling jokes. I think he took it too far. Given what they are talking about, it could have been indeed informal, but to present it as kind of a belly laugh a minute, I think was off the mark.”²⁰² Browning also noticed that Mommertz had compressed a vast amount of material from 1941 and early 1942 into the film to fill in the gaps in the Wannsee Protocol, but noted that this was “relatively honest” as a “reasonable artistic-historical creation.” The show host also pointed out the film’s negative West German reception, arguing that it was evidence of myths about the Holocaust being difficult to debunk.²⁰³

Other prominent American publications discussed *The Wannsee Conference*, offering near-universal praise.²⁰⁴ Although the filmmakers faced an uphill battle after negative press in West Germany, they found success and acclaim abroad,

200 Raul Hilberg, *The Politics of Memory: The Journey of a Holocaust Historian* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2002), 139–140.

201 See Doris L. Bergen, “‘Vieles bleibt ungesagt’. Frauen in Leben und Werk Raul Hilbergs,” in *Raul Hilberg und die Holocaust-Historiographie*, ed. René Schlott, (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2019), 143–160.

202 Pacific Lutheran University Archives and Special Collections, Christopher R. Browning Papers, 1967–2015, OPV RG 6.4.2, Series 12: Audio and Visual Materials, 11.2 *All Things Considered* (Side B), 1987.

203 Christopher R. Browning Papers, *All Things Considered*.

204 For an extensive collection of press clippings, see Ordner 1 “Dokumentation zum Film,” Kapitel 800, “Presse Ausland,” Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Mediothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin.

vindicating their efforts. For the purposes of this study, one individual's reception of the film stands out. The film editor Peter Zinner, best known for his work on *The Godfather* and *The Deer Hunter*, was a Jewish refugee from Vienna who had emigrated to the United States during the 1930s and ended up as a cab driver in Los Angeles before beginning his film career. Zinner, who had also edited the miniseries *War and Remembrance*, watched *The Wannsee Conference* on VHS during the mid-1990s before showing it to his friend, director Frank Pierson. According to screenwriter Loring Mandel, it "didn't move [Pierson] to tears, but moved him to anger."²⁰⁵ Recreating the Wannsee Conference quickly became a passion project of Pierson and Zinner, and subsequently would result in the HBO film *Conspiracy*. Loring Mandel also stated that Zinner's personal background was a driving force for the project; *The Wannsee Conference* impacted him: "As far as Peter Zinner, I think – as an Austrian exile, it absolutely influenced everything about what he did. He was very successful as a film editor, but apparently his life experiences in Austria during the war weighed on him and he wanted to do something about it."²⁰⁶ The next chapters will now turn to just what doing "something about it" entailed for Zinner, Pierson, and Mandel.

²⁰⁵ Alexander Tang, "A Conversation with Loring Mandel." *The Harvard Crimson*. November 12, 2013, <http://www.thecrimson.com/article/2013/11/12/interview-loringmandel/> (accessed November 12, 2019)

²⁰⁶ Interview with Loring Mandel, Somers, New York, March 14, 2018. 1:06:43–1:08:56.