

Chapter 8

The Conference and Portraying Holocaust Perpetrators in the 2020s

One can dramatize everything – Alfred Meyer in *The Conference*

On January 18, 2022, German public television network ZDF premiered *The Conference*,¹ the third docudrama about Wannsee. Intended to coincide with the Wannsee Conference's eightieth anniversary, ZDF released the film via its online streaming platform accompanied by several documentary and educational offerings. It premiered on linear television on January 24, airing at 8:15 pm.² In contrast with its 1984 predecessor, *The Conference* received almost universal praise in the German-speaking press. But this reception was often colored by erroneous claims about the film's supposed originality, frequently ignoring the 1984 and 2001 films, except in cases where pieces acknowledged that *The Conference* was partially based on Paul Mommertz's script or when it was compared to *Conspiracy*. For the latter, German media articles tended to claim that *Conspiracy* was too "Hollywood" compared to this new, homegrown, allegedly more sober production. This chapter will trace the production history of *The Conference* considering these claims, examine the film's historical argument, and assess its place in transnational Holocaust memory in 2022. *The Conference* synthesizes perpetrator historiography since the mid-1990s and is an excellent example of depicting this historiography visually. Departing from its two predecessors, this film depicts a Wannsee where every participant enthusiastically supported the shift to genocide. *The Conference* also differs from its predecessors in its depiction of the Reich Security Main Office (RSHA) as the driving force behind the conference and in its characterizations of RSHA-affiliated attendees. Furthermore, it manages to avoid problematic depictions of Wilhelm Stuckart and Gerhard Klopfer which color its predecessors. However, this film is not without its faults; its depiction of Eichmann largely adheres to Hannah Arendt's portrayal of Eichmann as an unideological desk-bound murderer, and certain filmmaking decisions, particularly towards the end, seem too self-referential. Nevertheless, *The Conference* remains

1 The film's German-language title is *Die Wannseekonferenz* but will be referred to here by its English-language translation to avoid confusing it with its 1984 predecessor.

2 "Premiere des ZDF-Films 'Die Wannseekonferenz' in Berlin: ZDF Presseportal," accessed June 24, 2022, <https://presseportal.zdf.de/pressemitteilung/mitteilung/premiere-des-zdf-films-die-wannseekonferenz-in-berlin/seite/11/>.

important simply because it is a German-language film about Wannsee which manages to both include recent perpetrator research but also put forth an argument about the dangers of fascism and racism in the wake of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) party entering the Bundestag and in the aftermath of far-right extremist mass shootings in Halle and Hanau during 2019 and 2020. This chapter will also discuss more minor artistic depictions of Wannsee since *Conspiracy* aired in 2001. Apart from the 2017 film *The Man with the Iron Heart*, each example uses Wannsee as part of an argument about the resurgence of the far-right around the globe post-2016. Each is an argument about the dangers of far-right politics, prejudice, and unchecked power grabs when both ideologues and criminals gain control.

1 *Conspiracy's* filmic legacy and Wannsee post-2016

Before turning to *The Conference*, it is important to note three film and television productions which addressed *Conspiracy*. The first, Laurence Rees's 2005 BBC documentary *Auschwitz, the Nazis, and the Final Solution*, contains a dramatized re-enactment of Wannsee. The second is the 2017 Heydrich biopic *The Man with the Iron Heart*, which contains a scene depicting Wannsee.³ The third production is the 2019 BBC miniseries *Years and Years*, which portrays a dystopian imagined future in which the United Kingdom is ruled by a genocidal fascist dictatorship. *Years and Years* obliquely references *Conspiracy* through cinematography, set design, and depiction of a genocidal meeting as something disarmingly "normal." It also reproduces the film's political argument about how fascist governments speak when no one else is listening.

The Wannsee Conference villa has also been present in Jewish and Israeli filmmaking, but, as film scholar and film historian Tobias Ebbrecht-Hartmann has noted, as more of an icon, usually referenced obliquely or with exterior shots of the villa.⁴ It appears menacingly in films like *Walk on Water* (2004) or in the 2020 Netflix miniseries *Unorthodox*, a drama about an Orthodox Jewish woman, Esther Shapiro, who flees her conservative Brooklyn community for a freer life in Berlin and which contains a scene along the same lines, where Esther swims in Wannsee with the villa in the background. Ebbrecht-Hartmann notes that this view of the villa – in the background from across the lake – has been present in

³ In some countries, this film is titled *HHhH*, which is an acronym meaning "Himmlers Hirn heißt Heydrich," or "Heydrich is Himmler's brain."

⁴ Ebbrecht-Hartmann, "Symbolort und Ikone." See also, Ebbrecht-Hartmann, "Das Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz," 132–136.

Jewish film history since outtakes from Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*; this view "from the water" juxtaposes crime and beauty.⁵

Laurence Rees's 2005 documentary series *Auschwitz, the Nazis, and the Final Solution* contains a reenactment of the Wannsee Conference in its second episode, "Orders and Initiatives," which focuses on "orders from the top and initiatives from below," emphasizing a perspective which synthesizes intentionalist and functionalist historiography. The documentary, a mix of archival footage, interviews, reenactment footage, and CGI reconstructions, is easily the most detailed English-language series on Holocaust history; it is notable for its multiperspectival focus on perpetrators, victims, and bystanders. In Rees's companion book of the same title, he argues that Wannsee does not "[deserve] its place in popular culture," correctly pointing out that "it was a second-tier implementation meeting, part of a process of widening out knowledge of an extermination process that had already been decided upon somewhere else."⁶ *Auschwitz, the Nazis, and the Final Solution* discusses the decision-making process at length, including Hitler's "prophecy," a speech from Hans Frank in late 1941, and Wannsee itself. The brief scene depicting Wannsee contains German dialogue which is not always subtitled. Rees narrates during the scene, noting emphasizing the use of the euphemism "Final Solution" at the meeting – also key because it is in his series' title. The scene begins with Heydrich introducing Lange, saying that he had "gained extensive practical experience" in mass murder; other sections include direct quotes from the Wannsee Protocol. Rees's narration states that the meeting was about coordination and the SS asserting its dominance over the murder program. The scene clearly echoes *Conspiracy*, with cold lighting, close-ups of the participants, and camera angles placed directly at the table (see Figure 8.1). The set decoration also recalls the previous drama, with its opulent table full of glassware and reconstructed winter garden in the background. Although a small part of a much larger docuseries, the sequence in "Orders and Initiatives" is pivotal – through this scene, viewers gain insight into the origins of the Nazi euphemism seen in the series' title.

The Man with the Iron Heart, a French-Belgian co-production shot in Hungary and the Czech Republic, directed by Cédric Jimenez and produced by Harvey Weinstein, is a film split into two parts: The first half focuses on Reinhard Heydrich's life and the second half on Operation Anthropoid, the SOE mission which resulted in his assassination. In a strange bit of serendipity, *The Man with the*

⁵ Ebbrecht-Hartmann, "Das Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz," 113–116.

⁶ Laurence Rees, *Auschwitz: The Nazis & The "Final Solution,"* (London: BBC Books, 2005), 118–119.



Figure 8.1: The Wannsee Conference in. *Auschwitz, The Nazis, and the “Final Solution.”* British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), KCET, 2005.

Iron Heart premiered about a year after *Anthropoid* (2016), a film solely focused on the mission to kill Heydrich and told through the eyes of Czechoslovak commandos Jozef Gabčík and Jan Kubiš. Although *Anthropoid* refrains from depicting Heydrich as anything but a target, the film remains superior to *The Man with the Iron Heart*, which largely retreads old ground covered by films like *Reinhard Heydrich: Manager of Terror*. *The Man with the Iron Heart* is further handicapped by only devoting half of its two-hour runtime to its depiction of Heydrich; it really is two films in one. Curiously, Bleecker Street, *Anthropoid*’s US distributor, published a series of online articles both on Heydrich as a historical and filmic figure. One of these pieces outlines the shifting depictions of Heydrich in film history since the 1940s, tracing the evolution of portrayals from “monster” in *Hitler’s Madman* (1943) and “public enemy” in *Hangmen also Die!* (1943) to *Conspiracy*, which quotes from several promotional articles on that film, placing it alongside earlier Hollywood classics and situating *Anthropoid* in this longer film history.⁷ *The Man with the Iron Heart* – in contrast with its ostensible source text, Laurent Binet’s acclaimed novel *HHhH* – is not nearly as open about its intervention in an existing cultural discourse.

⁷ Peter Bowen, “Reinhard Heydrich in Film,” Bleecker Street, accessed June 24, 2022, <https://bleeckerstreetmedia.com/editorial/Reinhard-Heydrich-in-Film>. Undated.

Indeed, the strangest thing about *The Man with the Iron Heart* is its distance from and apparent disregard for its source material. Laurent Binet's novel *HHhH* is a masterful example of postmodern fiction, focusing on the author's ethical and artistic dilemma caused by trying to write a novelization of Operation Anthropoid. It is much more of a meditation on the complexities of turning history into art than it is a straightforward historical narrative. Composed of short chapters, *HHhH* includes a detailed discussion of the author's impressions of both HBO's *Fatherland* and *Conspiracy*. For his chapter on *Fatherland*, Binet discusses the Wannsee Conference at length:

In this fiction, the Wannsee Conference is in some way *the* crucial moment of the Final Solution. Now, it's true that the decision wasn't made at Wannsee. And it's also true that Heydrich's *Einsatzgruppen* had already killed hundreds of thousands of Jews on the Eastern Front. But it was at Wannsee that the genocide was rubber-stamped . . . As in all meetings, the only decisions that are really made are those decided beforehand.⁸

In an early chapter discussing *Conspiracy*, Binet discusses Kenneth Branagh's performance alongside those in *Hangman Also Die!* and, according to Binet, even in a small scene of *The Great Dictator*:

Kenneth Branagh's portrayal of Heydrich is quite clever: he manages to combine great affability with brusque authoritarianism, which makes his character highly disturbing. I don't know how accurate it is – I have not read anywhere that the real Heydrich knew how to show kindness, whether real or faked.⁹

Binet is credited as the film's screenwriter alongside David Farr and Audrey Diwan. The writers were certainly aware of the novel's discussion of Wannsee, *Conspiracy*, and *Fatherland*. *The Man with the Iron Heart* depicts Heydrich (played by Jason Clarke) as an opportunistic, tortured sociopath in ways that do not seem too far from Dietrich Mattausch's performance in *Manager of Terror*. However, the performance also leans too far into scenery-chewing: If Branagh's Heydrich is supposedly too theatrical, too "Shakespearean," or too much of a Hollywood villain, Jason Clarke's performance is overdone by any measure. The film's depiction of the Wannsee Conference begins with a shot of a snow-covered villa (Figure 8.2), which appears much more monumental than the actual Wannsee villa (more embarrassing: the intertitle misspells Wannsee as "Wansee"), and is intercut with scenes of Heydrich playing the violin or playing with his children in Prague while his wife Lina (Rosamund Pike) stands around looking bored,

⁸ Laurent Binet, *HHhH*, trans. Sam Taylor (London: Vintage, 2013), chap. 160. Binet's novel eschews page numbers, so the chapters are cited here.

⁹ Binet, *HHhH*, chap. 7.

while he puts on his uniform and leaves his castle on the way to his encounter with Gabčík and Kubiš. These scenes are reminiscent of earlier drafts of the *Conspiracy* script, which at one point was supposed to end with Heydrich's assassination (an ending abandoned once HBO officially dropped *Complicity*).



Figure 8.2: The Wannsee villa in *The Man with the Iron Heart*. Location likely on the outskirts of Budapest. HHHH. FilmNation Entertainment, Echo Lake Entertainment, Lantern Entertainment, 2017.

The Wannsee scene opens with Heydrich discussing the “wider issues of methodology and the timescale of the cleansing” while mentioning bureaucratic hurdles. Curiously, the scene shows a fictional cover sheet for the Wannsee Protocol which is then passed around the table (see Figure 8.3). This is a bizarre filmmaking decision since the scene is supposed to depict the meeting that the protocol recorded. Heydrich then mentions exceptions to the deportation plans and his intent to review them, specifically Jewish recipients of the Iron Cross and so-called *Mischlinge*. The mise-en-scène here strongly echoes *Conspiracy*, with the camera pulling back from a close-up shot of Heydrich to reveal the Wannsee attendees sitting around an oval table, shuffling papers, and smoking, although everyone sticks to drinking water here. The participants remain unnamed but appear in several close-up shots. Heydrich states that “the *Einsatzgruppen* are already working at maximum efficiency” and that the coming “Final Solution” requires “a more systematic approach.” According to the film’s IMDb page, the only Wannsee attendees named in the cast are Heinrich Müller and Adolf Eichmann.¹⁰ The rest remain nameless.

¹⁰ HHHH, (FilmNation Entertainment, Echo Lake Entertainment, Lantern Entertainment, 2017). See https://www.imdb.com/title/tt3296908/?ref_=nv_sr_srgs_0.

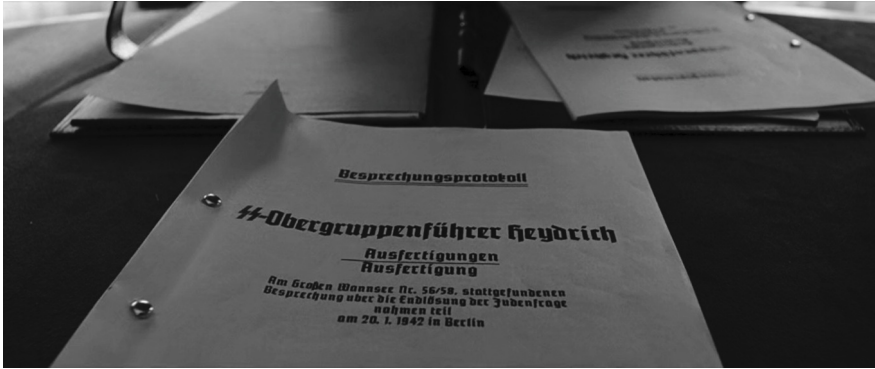


Figure 8.3: The fictionalized Wannsee Protocol in *The Man with the Iron Heart*. HHhH. FilmNation Entertainment, Echo Lake Entertainment, Lantern Entertainment, 2017.

The Man with the Iron Heart simply fails to live up to the standards set by *The Wannsee Conference* and *Conspiracy*, and apart from the camerawork and production design, is closer to the portrayal of Wannsee seen in early television depictions of the conference like *Engineer of Death* and *Holocaust*. Unlike Binet's novel, *The Man with the Iron Heart* is unable to portray the conference in a nuanced, thoughtful manner. The film makes the conference a key scene intercut with the attempt on Heydrich's life, the film's halfway point both literally and dramatically. Instead, it manages to exaggerate the villa's size and location, sloppily include shots of Heydrich handing out the protocol before it has even been written, and even manages to misspell Wannsee. In short, *The Man with the Iron Heart*, the only theatrical film considered for this study, manages to fulfill all the negative stereotypes applied to both television and Hollywood films. For a European co-production based on an award-winning French novel, one would have expected the film to aim for a higher standard.

The 2019 BBC/HBO miniseries *Years and Years* references *Conspiracy* and Wannsee in a more immediate, chilling manner. *Years and Years* is a dystopian family drama about a fascist Britain in the 2020s. Created in response to Brexit and the resurgence of right-wing authoritarianism around the globe, *Years and Years* is a frightening window into a reality all too close to home. Penned by Russell T. Davies, best known for his work on *Doctor Who*, the series focuses on one Manchester family and its travails during this period. Stephen Lyons (Roy Kinnear) is the family patriarch and, although he begins the series as a financial advisor, he later becomes part of Vivienne Rook's (Emma Thompson) fascist regime. The series focuses equally on all members of the Lyons family, but for the purposes of this section, Stephen is the most relevant family member. Episode 5 of

the series, which takes place in 2028, contains a scene very reminiscent of Wannsee.¹¹ At a secret meeting, Prime Minister Rook discusses Britain's growing problem with homeless people and climate refugees, ultimately arguing that Britain will need to create concentration camps for them. The script is full of allusions to Wannsee. For example, the stage directions for the conference scene, which is set in a charming villa called the "Wessex House" (see Figure 8.4) begin with "[a] smart room; this whole place is kitted out for conferences so there's a long table, chairs, but still with a country house feel."¹² Additionally, the attendees oscillate between casually discussing mass killing and bureaucratic hurdles with laughter. Much as in *Conspiracy*, these conference attendees are concerned with language and euphemisms for mass killing. For instance, they refer to the concentration camps as "Erstwhile Sites" because they are located in "erstwhile" army bases, and police training centers. As at Wannsee, the Erstwhile Sites are to be kept secret. Jane Bordolino (Emma Fielding), basically playing the role of Eichmann at this conference, shows attendees a map of proposed Erstwhile Sites (Figure 8.5) before Rook interrupts her presentation. Rook discusses the term "concentration camp" and claims that the term has a bad rap:

VIV ROOK (CONT'D)

But let's look at the words. Let's stare them down. The word concentration simply means a concentration of anything. If you filled a camp with oranges, it would be a concentration camp, by dint of the oranges being concentrated, simple as that. I've made it sound rather tasty. And the notion of a concentration camp goes way back. To the nineteenth century. The Boer War. They were British inventions, built in South Africa to house the men, women and children made homeless by the conflict. Refugees! You see? Everything is older than we think. And everything old, happens again.¹³

Rook continues, saying that history forgot the fate of the Boers, so Britain should be fine with "let[ting] nature take its course"—that is, mass death through starvation and disease, as in the Boer War. She says that the Erstwhile Sites must be permanent as migration to Britain will continue for centuries as global warming worsens. This focus on the relationship between euphemism and genocide is

11 The entire scene can be viewed here on YouTube: *Years and Years Episode 5 | The Erstwhile Sites*, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EUPf5GagKF0>.

12 The BBC made each script for *Years and Years* available on its website. This is now a common practice with historical series. For example, HBO also made Craig Mazin's scripts for the miniseries *Chernobyl* freely available on its website. Russell T. Davies, "Years and Years. Episode 5. Russell T. Davies. Lilac Amendments," accessed June 27, 2022, <http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/writersroom/scripts/Years-and-Years-Ep5.pdf> 52.

13 Russell T Davies, "Years and Years. Episode 5," 56.



Figure 8.4: The Wessex House conference room in *Years and Years*. Red Production Company, Home Box Office (HBO), 2020.



Figure 8.5: Jane Bordolino (Emma Fielding) Shows attendees a map of proposed Erstwhile Sites. *Years and Years*. Red Production Company, Home Box Office (HBO), 2020.

clearly a reference to *Conspiracy* and is underscored by that film's British cast. The references to Wannsee are not confined to the script. Visually, the scene emulates *Conspiracy*, with its focus on papers shuffling, sinister conversations around a fireplace and a conference table, though the atmosphere is much more informal here as attendees are sprawled across sofas and armchairs – and in keeping with a contemporary conference, everyone is wearing nametags. The camera zooms in from over attendees' shoulders and focuses on characters speaking (Figure 8.4).

The conference room is elegantly decorated in the style of the English upper class, with eighteenth and nineteenth-century art hanging around the room. Rook, wearing a striking red dress, interrupts Jane's presentation to make things clear to everyone, much as Heydrich does in *Conspiracy*. While she speaks the camera cuts back to Stephen's shocked expression as he realizes just what they have been asked to do. At the end of the scene, Stephen and his friend Woody (Kieran O'Brien) drive back home, with Woody and his friends celebrating like fraternity members because they will get to be "property management" for two Erstwhile Sites. Much like in *Conspiracy*, some attendees are more concerned with networking than their moral culpability in genocide.

But *Years and Years* is tricking the audience here. Stephen does not resist the plans or even tell anyone about them. Instead, he uses them to his personal advantage and sends Viktor, a Ukrainian refugee whom he blames for the death of his brother Daniel (he is Daniel's former boyfriend), to an Erstwhile Site with a simple mouse click. And he smiles. As James Luckard noted in his review of the episode, Stephen's sadistic smile is "the most profoundly human action imaginable."¹⁴ The creators of television productions like *Years and Years* are not interested in creating simplistic villains who are easy for audiences to root against, but instead are interested in getting audiences to identify with characters like themselves who are then revealed to be morally repugnant. In this self-recognition, the audience should, if the drama lives up to its ambitions, engage in self-reflection. Only then can change be possible.

Two publications have noticed the Wannsee and *Years and Years* connection. In a piece on *Years and Years*, literature scholar Cornelia Wächter noted the scene's "obvious reference to the Wannsee Conference" while the film critic James Luckard called this section "Davies's nightmarish restaging of the Wannsee Conference."¹⁵ Luckard references a section from Davies's script which reads "In the light of the fire, with good coffee, she just gave them permission to murder."¹⁶ This bit of commentary echoes the final sentence of Mark Roseman's study on Wannsee, which reads: "Speaking to one another with great politeness, sipping their cognac, the *Staatssekretäre* really had cleared the way for genocide."¹⁷

¹⁴ James Luckard, "Roarbots Recap: 'Years and Years' Episode 5 – Triumph of the Will," *The Roarbots*, July 23, 2019, accessed June 27, 2022, <https://theroarbots.com/roarbots-recap-years-and-years-episode-5-triumph-of-the-will/>

¹⁵ Cornelia Wächter, "Skin in the Game," *Coils of the Serpent* 10, no. 10 (June 23, 2022): 153–169, 155n1, footnote 1; James Luckard, "Roarbots Recap: 'Years and Years' Episode 5 – Triumph of the Will."

¹⁶ Russell T Davies, "Years and Years. Episode 5," 57.

¹⁷ Roseman, *The Wannsee Conference and the Final Solution: A Reconsideration*, 110.

Years and Years is a political piece designed to portray the dangers of far-right authoritarianism, unchecked climate change, and societal apathy. In this respect, it is representative of the time when it was made – that is, Britain during Brexit, America under Trump. During this period, references to the rise of Hitler, to fascism, and to Wannsee appeared again and again throughout the English-speaking world. Here, Wannsee is not merely a chapter in German history, but a significant warning for the entire planet. For instance, the documentary filmmaker Alison Klayman, who directed the 2019 documentary *The Brink*, which focused on the rise of Trump-consigliere Steve Bannon, filmed a scene where Bannon meets with the heads of several European far-right parties, part of his effort to “unite the Right” in Europe against the EU, immigration, and LGBT rights. In multiple interviews, Klayman described shooting this scene in no uncertain terms:

After filming a chilling dinner sequence later in the documentary, Klayman took a half-bottle of wine to her room and called her husband. “I told him I think I just filmed the Wannsee Conference,” she says, referring to the 1942 Nazi “Final Solution” meeting held in Berlin. The scene is reminiscent of “The Wannsee Conference,” Heinz Schirch’s 1984 dramatization of the event. Asked if the resemblance was intentional, Klayman, who describes her Jewish ethnicity as “foundational” to her personality and work, replies that she has visited the villa where the conference took place and thinks she saw the movie in college.¹⁸

Post-2016 Anglo-American literature also addressed Wannsee.¹⁹ In his novel *Red Pill*, British writer Hari Kunzru depicts an unnamed writer descending into madness after staying at a fictionalized version of the American Academy in Berlin, which is located at Wannsee. His main character is constantly confronted by alt-Right figures at this retreat, first from a Jordan Peterson-like colleague, Edgar, then from a young, Steve Bannon-esque figurehead, Anton. Wannsee constantly looms in the background as a symbol of both the final consequence of far-right ideology and as the site of Heinrich von Kleist’s suicide. For almost two hundred pages, Kunzru leaves the Wannsee Conference unmentioned, although most of the novel takes place at the lake. About two-thirds of the way through the novel,

¹⁸ Maria Garcia, “Documentarian Alison Klayman Takes the Long View on Stephen Bannon in ‘The Brink,’” *Movies*, *Los Angeles Times*, March 28, 2019, <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/la-et-mn-the-brink-alison-klayman-20190328-story.html>. See also Alison Klayman, “Film-Maker Alison Klayman: ‘Bannon Holds Court and People Come to Him,’” interview by Rachel Cooke, *Film*, *Guardian*, July 6, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2019/jul/06/alison-klayman-interview-steve-bannon-film-the-brink>.

¹⁹ Hari Kunzru, *Red Pill* (London: Simon & Schuster UK, 2020). Kunzru’s *Red Pill* is part of a global literary reaction to the rise of the far-right. The most prominent and ambitious recent example of a historical novel grappling with this issue is Antonio Scurati’s, *M: Son of the Century*.

Kunzru's protagonist visits the exhibit at the Wannsee villa and is left cold. Having had his political and moral security shaken by Anton's far-right arguments, he travels to the memorial site seeking clarity, "[w]hat would clear my confusion was a baseline, a piece of firm moral ground," a lesson to provide comfort in a world that no longer makes sense. But his quest proves illusory:

To my dismay I found an empty shell, completely without character. I knew at once that I would find nothing to help me. There was little or no furniture, and in the absence of any meaningful connection with the past, the freshly painted rooms had been filled with images and texts narrating the events that led up to the conference and the terrible consequences of the policy that was agreed on there.²⁰

After a short visit, the protagonist leaves the Wannsee villa, disappointed because he could not handle the exhibit's quiet atmosphere of solemnity: "I needed the house to do something immediate, something primal. I wasn't in any condition to follow the whole grim story, from the medieval blood libel to the Eichmann trial. I felt distracted and claustrophobic."²¹ In this section of *Red Pill*, Kunzru depicts a common problem with Germany's memorial and museum culture. So focused on getting the facts right, museums often overwhelm visitors with granular historical detail while neglecting emotion or other facets of history to grab the viewer's attention. For some, especially international, visitors, these exhibits can appear cold, boring, and frankly dry. Holocaust memorial curators and educators often disdain anything that smacks of "emotionalization" out of a fear of reverting to the irrational, something which can quickly be associated with Nazi propaganda or manipulation.²² But these memorial sites often create a feeling of cognitive dissonance, as described by Kunzru. The German-Jewish writer Maxim Biller also criticized the exhibit at Wannsee along the same lines, comparing it negatively with the films.²³ This passage does not mean that the permanent exhibit in the Wannsee villa was a failure (it has since been overhauled), but rather that it was unable to reach all visitors because it solely aimed at the cognitive, not the emotional level. It is within this gap between cognition and emotion that historical films find their place.

²⁰ Kunzru, *Red Pill*, 186–187.

²¹ Kunzru, *Red Pill*, 188.

²² See Jackie Feldman, "Re-Presenting the Shoah and the Nazi Past: A Chronicle of the Project," in *Erinnerungspraxis zwischen gestern und morgen*, ed. Thomas Thiemeyer, Jackie Feldman, and Tanja Seider (Tübingen: Tübinger Vereinigung für Volkskunde e.V., 2018), 21–45; For a history of post-war Germany and its ambivalent attitude towards emotions, see Frank Biess, *Republik der Angst*.

²³ Maxim Biller, "Wannseevilla: Neunzig Minuten Holocaust," *Die Zeit*, October 24, 2020, <https://www.zeit.de/2020/44/wannsee-villa-konferenz-nationalsozialismus-juden-holocaust>.

2 Making *The Conference*

Why make another film about the Wannsee Conference? This question was not far from the mind of screenwriter Magnus Vattrodt, the writer chosen to adapt Paul Mommertz's script for ZDF. Global political developments since 2001, and especially since 2016, were not far from the producers' minds. Friedrich Oetker, producer at Constantin Television, stated that he first had the idea for a new film about the Wannsee Conference sometime in 2017 and bought the rights to Paul Mommertz's script for *The Wannsee Conference*. Importantly, Oetker stated that the producers had no intention of remaking the earlier film, but had optioned the script for "an initial orientation." Then he brought director Matti Geschonneck on board.²⁴ Geschonneck, who had previously directed *Das Zeugenhaus* [The house of witnesses] (2014) a television movie about Nuremberg Trial witnesses all living under the same roof, is the son of Erwin Geschonneck, an actor and resistance figure who spent World War II in various concentration camps.²⁵ In an interview, screenwriter Magnus Vattrodt described his long-standing collaboration with Geschonneck – the two have often worked together with Constantin Television producer Oliver Berben.²⁶ Geschonneck and Vattrodt's collaborations range from historical dramas to crime movies (the latter owing to German television's dependence on the genre). Nevertheless, it is clear that the pair have a passion for chamber play pieces, as evidenced by both *Das Zeugenhaus* and the 2015 family drama *Ein großer Aufbruch*, which takes place in a Bavarian lake house.

Das Zeugenhaus is important for the context of Vattrodt and Geschonneck's later collaboration on *The Conference*. The bulk of the film takes place in a Nuremberg villa where Holocaust victims and perpetrators live under the same roof while awaiting their turns to testify at the Nuremberg Trials. Visually, the film could fit into a series with *The Conference*. Geschonneck favors a minimalistic, cold, restrained, and claustrophobic atmosphere which increases tension and underscores the traumatic history depicted here. Although more artistically conventional than *The Conference*, *Das Zeugenhaus* is a satisfying television film about a little-known aspect of the Nuremberg trials.

Vattrodt described the initial idea for *The Conference* stemming from Friedrich Oetker, who had the support of his boss Oliver Berben. Vattrodt mentioned

²⁴ Friedrich Oetker, interview by author, February 7, 2022, 04:43–05:46.

²⁵ Matti Geschonneck, *Das Zeugenhaus*, Drama, History, 2014; Geschonneck, "Matti Geschonneck im Interview über seinen Film 'Die Wannseekonferenz,'" interview by Alexander Gorkow and Joachim Käppner, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, January 21, 2022, <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/kultur/wannseekonferenz-zdf-geschonneck-1.5512329>.

²⁶ Interview with Magnus Vattrodt, March 21, 2022, 01:23–02:50.

his initial reservations about a new Wannsee Conference dramatization, citing the earlier television films and wondering whether he would have anything new to add to a story which had already been told numerous times, noting that the project was something he and Geschonneck often discussed while working on other films together.²⁷ During this period, which Vattrodt estimates to be between 2017 and 2018, he grappled with the dilemma of how to tell the story in a new way. One initial idea was to depict the conference participants getting up in the morning and documenting their journeys to Wannsee:

And you don't really need to see how Eichmann gets dressed in the morning with his mistress before he heads off to the Wannsee Conference. Then it would have become so speculative, and I always thought "nah!"— Just introducing fifteen people in this way, when each only has a minute or two, would mean I already wasted half an hour of film and haven't even spread out my entire tableau of characters.²⁸

Vattrodt also noted the difficulty of introducing all of the fifteen participants in an ensemble piece. He claimed that the production team finally reached an agreement during a dinner he had with Geschonneck and Constantin Film producer Reinhold Elschot at an Italian restaurant in Berlin. The trio had decided to back out of the project, but during their dinner, they found a way to make it work. Someone – Vattrodt is not sure who – noted that *The Wannsee Conference*, while a good film for its time, had too much dramatic flair and that they would have to take a different course:

And then it was clear that the only way to really tell this story would be to boil it down even more brutally, to completely throw out all the entertaining stuff, and rely even more on the facts that we have today, and then basically clean the whole thing up, to get rid of all the gimmicks and make a very, very radical film – at least for our television environment. So it was always clear – it is still a movie, it . . . remains fiction out of necessity, but you . . . build a ramp for the viewers so that today's people also have a chance to understand it, but it's not sugar-coated in any way, we don't do much to keep the viewer entertained. We basically present what is possible to say in these ninety minutes, without any fun aspects to the left or the right, without any additional entertainment value, no love story, wartime drama, war movie effects, just an exact focus on a meeting.²⁹

For Vattrodt, Geschonneck, and Elschot, their version of the Wannsee Conference had to avoid all comic relief and dramatic flair found in the earlier two films. It is important to note that, for historical films, *The Wannsee Conference* and *Conspiracy* are already very conservative when it comes to dramatic devices. The produc-

²⁷ Interview with Magnus Vattrodt, 05:33–13:48.

²⁸ Interview with Magnus Vattrodt, 05:33–13:48.

²⁹ Interview with Magnus Vattrodt, 05:33–13:48.

tion team of *The Conference*, however, wanted to condense the drama even further than their predecessors. A significant point generally ignored in the press: is it better for German audiences to watch *The Wannsee Conference*, an older film which has little appeal for today's audiences, or a dubbed version of *Conspiracy* (German audiences overwhelmingly prefer dubbing to subtitles)? Why not release a new film shot in German? Vattrodt claimed that he could not take *Conspiracy* seriously as a historical film for this very reason:

Honestly, with the HBO Film [*Conspiracy*], I let that fall under the table anyway because as a German viewer I had trouble taking it very seriously. It was a bit like a Hamlet adaptation and wasn't German at all. I kind of . . . I never felt that those were Germans sitting at that table. It didn't have, I think, this sound either – speaking as a German, with my German visual taste.³⁰

Although Vattrodt's statement about *Conspiracy* being "like a Hamlet adaptation" is a matter of taste (and smacks of Continental reservations or even arrogance towards Hollywood), he is correct when it comes to the point about filming in the original language. For a German audience, something shot in their native language is likely a better experience than something dubbed. But otherwise, this is an odd statement which recalls a type of German protectiveness of their own history against outsiders, something which David Simon called "standing" in a completely different context when defending himself against charges of being unqualified to tell a story set in New Orleans as a Baltimorean.³¹ This attitude is a constant in German writing on *Conspiracy* and stands in a long tradition of uneasiness with Anglo-American depictions of German history, ranging from Edgar Reitz's venomous reaction towards *Holocaust* to moralistic invectives against *Schindler's List*, Jonathan Littell's novel *The Kindly Ones*, and most recently, *The Zone of Interest*.

Vattrodt's initial thoughts on writing a third Wannsee Conference movie are contained in an Apple Pages word processor file titled "Thoughts on Wannsee, New Film."³² This file, like the other pre-production files provided by Vattrodt, consists of a list of notes, thoughts, quotes, and other fruits of brainstorming. They are collages of historical information, argument, and ideas about how to realize them dramatically. As with production documents for *The Wannsee Confer-*

³⁰ Interview with Magnus Vattrodt, 15:45–28:27.

³¹ Cook, *Flood of Images*, 303–306.

³² I would like to thank Magnus Vattrodt for providing me with the pre-production material and screenplays cited in this chapter. The pre-production material consists of Apple Pages files and the three script versions are Adobe PDF files. Except for the scripts, all files are undated but stem from 2018 and 2019.

ence and *Conspiracy*, these documents cannot tell the complete production history of *The Conference* but provide historians with valuable clues and insights. Many decisions and conversations are lost to historians, because they either happened over the phone, in meetings, or via text message, email, or voice memos. The historian is usually limited to the remaining production files, which are only capable of providing a fragmentary picture of a production's history. Nevertheless, they are extremely valuable for historical studies about film and television productions.

Vattrodt's initial thoughts began with "What is new to say here? In the language of bureaucracy, the turn towards mass murder is made here."³³ The document notes areas where the previous two films had succeeded and is full of comments asking where the filmmakers can add something new. One area where Vattrodt thought that they could say something new was "the question of compassion. Several times the question of compassion. Again and again, the functionaries appeal to their fellow participants to not let pity keep them from the task at hand."³⁴ But Vattrodt was aware that besides this point, much of what could be said about Wannsee had already been said in the other two films:

One can make such a film again "roughly similar" with a few corrections – clarify the fault lines between the characters, depict some protagonists in a more intimate manner, take everything "diabolical" out of the characters, place Heydrich and Eichmann perhaps in the center, who have the success of the conference at heart (the Brannagh [sic] film does this quite well). Sharp young bureaucrats, successful in the system, sharp. But is that really enough for us? Basically, it's just a retelling, a different pitch – but thematically and substantively, it's kind of all said and done. The banality of evil, how mass murder is translated into a bureaucratic language . . .³⁵

Vattrodt was clearly vexed about this dilemma. One possible theme he teased out was the role of Pearl Harbor in Nazi decision-making.³⁶ Clearly frustrated, Vattrodt noted: "We can't just make some kind of remake of these movies. Totally boring. We need a reason to make this film, something to grapple with, an idea. I need a something to grapple with – a character, a conflict, a feeling, a music."³⁷ In

33 Magnus Vattrodt, "Gedanken zu Wannsee, Neuverfilmung," Undated, Apple Pages File courtesy Magnus Vattrodt, 1.

34 Magnus Vattrodt, "Gedanken zu Wannsee, Neuverfilmung," 1.

35 Magnus Vattrodt, "Gedanken zu Wannsee, Neuverfilmung," 1.

36 Magnus Vattrodt, "Gedanken zu Wannsee, Neuverfilmung," 2. For more on Pearl Harbor and Wannsee, see Brendan Simms and Charlie Laderman, *Hitler's American Gamble: Pearl Harbor and the German March to Global War* (London: Allen Lane, 2021), 361, 386–387; Longerich, *Wannsee*, 36.

37 Magnus Vattrodt, "Gedanken zu Wannsee, Neuverfilmung," 2.

the document on initial thoughts about a new Wannsee movie, Vattrodt listed possible storytelling avenues, some of which were later abandoned:

A Heydrich talking on the phone with his wife in Prague, after the flight, and telling her about the view of the snow-covered countryside. About beauty. A man with a sense of beauty?

The terrible thing about the Nazis is that they were human. They had compassion, like all human beings, must have had it, but what did they do with it? How could it be possible to eliminate compassion? Train away humanity. Hardness.

. . .

Eichmann with his mistress? Pillow talk, maybe playing the violin, and then putting on the SS uniform. (He's a bit excited about the conference he's organized . . .).

One who was never prosecuted, as an older gentleman in his 80s. Eating an ice cream in Koblenz, sitting by the Rhine. Dealing with grandchildren. Becoming mild.

Maybe Lange, who shows understanding during a shooting for someone who can no longer shoot, no longer likes – maybe after talking to a mother and child (two to be shot). The Nazi who also sometimes shows mercy (but then can be completely merciless again the very next moment). Like Himmler, who, at the request of the father, also sometimes sets one free.³⁸

None of these ideas made it into the script. But Vattrodt's ideas about historiography did. Vattrodt identified shifts in perpetrator historiography thanks to the work of historians like Christopher Browning and Michael Wildt and wanted to make sure these new insights, whether Browning's about group dynamics or Wildt's about the RSHA as a militarized police force imbued with Nazi ideology and staffed by an "uncompromising generation" of ideological soldiers, were included in the script. His notes are full of quotes from the two, especially Wildt.³⁹ The script itself even contains lines clearly inspired by Wildt's research, and compared to the first two films, *The Conference* also strongly emphasizes the role of the RSHA in genocidal policy and as an important institution. This reassessment of the RSHA is one important aspect of Wildt's study, which corrects earlier interpretations deemphasizing its role in the Nazi government and in the Holocaust. Wildt argues that the RSHA

did not represent a police agency in the traditional Prussian-bureaucratic sense of the term; rather, it has to be seen as a new type of specifically National Socialist institution intimately connected to the idea of the people's community, or *Volksgemeinschaft*, and its state organization. The RSHA formed the conceptual and executive core of an ideologically oriented po-

³⁸ Magnus Vattrodt, "Gedanken zu Wannsee, Neuverfilmung," 12–13.

³⁹ Magnus Vattrodt, "Gedanken zu Wannsee, Neuverfilmung," 18; Browning, *Ordinary Men*; Wildt, *An Uncompromising Generation*.

lice force that understood its responsibilities politically and in terms of maintaining the racial purity of the German Volkskörper, or people's body, and exterminating an enemy defined in völkisch terms, unencumbered by the restrictions of the normative state and obligated solely to the worldview expressed in "the will of the Führer."⁴⁰

This conception of the RSHA acts as throughline throughout Vattrodt's script, which – apart from Eichmann, who oddly seems unchanged from Hannah Arendt's depiction in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* – depicts the RSHA as an institution completely fed up with the modern state, with its rules, norms, and slowness. The RSHA-men (Lange, Schöngarth, Heydrich, Müller) constantly refer to their nearness to the front, to action, to mass murder. These are no desk-bound murderers (*Schreibtischtäter*). Additionally, Vattrodt stressed the importance of Harald Welzer's study *Täter* (perpetrators), a study which focuses on social-psychological reasons for mass murder.⁴¹ This collage also contains an array of quotes stemming from the 2014 documentary *Radical Evil*.⁴² This documentary, directed and written by Stefan Ruzowitzky (best known for the 2007 Holocaust drama *The Counterfeiters*), mixes dramatic reenactment and interviews with historians and psychologists. *Radical Evil* focuses on German Police Battalions, particularly on the sociopsychological aspects of Holocaust perpetrators investigated by Christopher Browning.⁴³ The reenactment sections of the film combine footage of actors in uniform with an audio collage of quotes from primary documents written by police battalion members as well as infamous quotes from high-ranking Nazis like *Gauleiter* Franz Sauckel or Heinrich Himmler.⁴⁴ A few of these quotes eventually made their way into Vattrodt's screenplay, particularly in one scene involving Eberhard Schöngarth and a discussion about a subordinate who exclusively shoots children in order to "do them a favor," because they would otherwise have to live as orphans.⁴⁵ Vattrodt's document includes quotes from the documentary about psychology and group dynamics often, including the work of psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton, but also references an article on Vanessa Lapa's documentary *The Decent One*, a biographical film about Heinrich Himmler.⁴⁶ His collage also contains some thoughts about directions for the script. For example, Vattrodt argued the fundamental dramatic problem at hand: "The problem: There is a great

⁴⁰ Wildt, *An Uncompromising Generation*, 9.

⁴¹ Interview with Magnus Vattrodt, 15:45–28:27; Harald Welzer and Michaela Christ, *Täter: Wie aus ganz normalen Menschen Massenmörder werden* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2006).

⁴² *Das radikal Böse*, Documentary, 2014.

⁴³ Browning, *Ordinary Men*.

⁴⁴ Magnus Vattrodt, "Gedanken zu Wannsee, Neuverfilmung," 7–8.

⁴⁵ Magnus Vattrodt, "Die Wannseekonferenz, Gelbe-Seiten Fassung" October 19, 2020, 68.

⁴⁶ Magnus Vattrodt, "Gedanken zu Wannsee, Neuverfilmung," 10.

deal of agreement. No open conflict, the conflicts among those present remain speculative . . .”⁴⁷ This fundamental dramatic problem is one Christopher Browning pointed out in a recent *New York Review of Books* article which briefly discusses Wannsee in television and his brief involvement with *Conspiracy*.⁴⁸ Vattrodt stated “we will not be able to reconstruct what happened. We will at best be able to approach it. We can, though, also take great artistic liberties to construct something correct and true against the background of the conference . . .”⁴⁹ Each of the men who wrote the three main Wannsee television films acknowledged this fundamental dramatic problem, with Mandel being the most explicit with his discussions of “informed speculation” and the writing process. None of them claimed to exactly reconstruct the Wannsee Conference; all noted that doing so would have been impossible based on the available sources. Nevertheless, it is shortsighted and frankly no profound insight on the part of historians and journalists who conclude that these films are mere exercises in speculation. They are much more than that and are worthy of investigation as examples of public history types (*Geschichtssorten*); as historical examples of how filmmakers interpreted Wannsee in 1984, 2001, and 2022.⁵⁰

One section of Vattrodt’s notes discusses Rudolf Lange and notes that he “may, in certain respects, be the most interesting out of all those present. He comes from killing. Has seen everything firsthand. You meet him – how? Like a leper? Someone to be admired?”⁵¹ Indeed, Lange’s depiction in *The Conference* ends up as one of the film’s improvements on its predecessors. This takes nothing away from Mandel’s depiction or Barnaby Kay’s performance in *Conspiracy*, but the Lange in *The Conference* clearly reflects more recent research developments.

Vattrodt, unlike Mandel and Mommertz, was able to rely on detailed studies about the Wannsee Conference which only came out after *Conspiracy*. These include the monographs by Mark Roseman and Peter Longerich, as well as the edited volume *The Participants*.⁵² These provide a much more detailed view of The Wannsee Conference, its participants, wider context, origins, and results, as well as the debates about them, than the sources available to Paul Mommertz and

47 Magnus Vattrodt, “Gedanken zu Wannsee, Neuverfilmung,” 3

48 Browning, “When Did They Decide?”

49 Magnus Vattrodt, “Gedanken zu Wannsee, Neuverfilmung,” 8.

50 Thorsten Logge, “‘History Types’ and Public History,” *Public History Weekly*, June 28, 2018, <https://public-history-weekly.degruyter.com/6-2018-24/history-types-and-public-history/>.

51 Magnus Vattrodt, “Gedanken zu Wannsee, Neuverfilmung,” 3.

52 Roseman, *The Wannsee Conference*; Longerich, *Wannsee*; Peter Klein, *Die „Wannsee-Konferenz“ am 20. Januar 1942: Eine Einführung*, (Berlin: Metropol-Verlag, 2017); Jasch and Kreutzmüller, *The Participants*; Kampe and Klein, *Die Wannsee-Konferenz*.

Loring Mandel. Vattrodt noted historiographical differences between these authors but argued that “they agree on a lot of things, even if they don’t like to hear it, but they still . . . of course, they always differ about the question of who gave the orders and where responsibility lies, and so on. But basically, they are all in agreement.”⁵³ This statement is largely true. When these historians differ, it generally centers on the question of when the Nazi government decided to murder all European Jews – a longstanding historiographical debate.⁵⁴

In the summer of 2019, the production team brought historian Peter Klein on board as a historical advisor.⁵⁵ Klein, a professor at Touro College Berlin, had previously published work on the Holocaust and Latvia as well as an edited volume (together with Norbert Kampe) on the Wannsee Conference. He had also written a short introductory volume about the conference and had often worked on projects at the Wannsee Memorial and Educational Site.⁵⁶ Norbert Kampe, former director of the Memorial and Educational Site, also assisted with script development but soon quit the project for personal reasons.⁵⁷ Kampe had introduced Klein to the production team and early on, Vattrodt and Klein watched *The Wannsee Conference* so Klein could provide “line by line” input on which parts of the older film were problematic or in need of updating.⁵⁸ Paul Mommertz and Heinz Schirk were also involved in early discussions, but it seems that their input was mainly there for the Constantin Television team to get their blessing. Oetker, who had purchased the rights to the *The Wannsee Conference* script, seems to have been the production team’s main point of contact with Mommertz.⁵⁹ In an interview, Klein noted how astonished he was during the initial 2019 meeting with Oetker, Vattrodt, and Geschonneck. Klein recalled that the three were extremely well-versed in Holocaust historiography and debates surrounding the Wannsee Conference, and that their preparation and seriousness convinced him to join the project:⁶⁰ “What was really amazing was their good, detailed prior knowledge . . . with Magnus Vattrodt, for example, you expect that a bit from a screenwriter. But that a producer, for example, also has that? I was amazed.”⁶¹ Klein described his

53 Interview with Magnus Vattrodt, 15:45–28:27.

54 For a good overview of these historiographical differences, see Browning, “When Did They Decide?”

55 Interview with Peter Klein, January 25, 2022, 03:26–5:00.

56 Klein, *Die „Wannsee-Konferenz“*; Kampe and Klein, *Die Wannsee-Konferenz*; Angrick and Klein, *The Final Solution in Riga*.

57 Norbert Kampe, E-Mail to author, March 7, 2021.

58 Interview with Magnus Vattrodt, 38:45–44:34.

59 Paul Mommertz, E-Mail to author, January 26, 2022.

60 Interview with Peter Klein, 03:26–5:00.

61 Interview with Peter Klein, 5:01–05:39.

role as historical advisor not in terms of someone with absolute veto power, but rather as someone who made sure dialogue and plot points were plausible based on historiographical consensus:

The job of a [historical] consultant is not to turn the film that's being made my film, but to give you a . . . so you get a plausible flow, a plausible plot, yes? Something where you say "yeah, it makes sense if you do it that way." So my job was actually to read the emerging screenplay in its . . . dialogues, so to speak, two or three times . . . and to pay close attention to whether and how these dialogues or these interactions meet a plausible historical situation, so to speak. That is, I always looked with one eye: can I refute this sentence or this dialogue sequence from a historian's point of view? So, it was always, so to speak, "Is it a falsification when we say 'well . . . this and this and this is now on the table' as a round of dialogue."⁶²

Klein described his working relationship with Magnus Vattrodt as a reciprocal process, or dialogue:

And you also have to understand that when a script is created, something also comes back. So the screenwriter says "Yes, that's right – I don't want to do away with this dialogue, but I have to create a different pitch," ok? Hesitant questioning, confident questioning, and things like that – and that's where we sort of turned the screws, see? And that was rarely the case. So, when it came to something, it was always about the specific time – so can we assume on January 20 that they're saying that? And there we had to occasionally talk, very often by telephone. And that's how this . . . that's how this existing script was refined, so to speak.⁶³

Here, Klein outlines a collaborative process common to all public history projects. The historian is not simply an expert with veto power over artists or other practitioners who do not know any better. Instead, the historian helps people with different skills – in this case screenwriting – to improve the overall project while preventing it from straying into the realm of historical implausibility or nonsense. Collaborative work is central to public history and the historical advisor is, in an ideal case, neither an ivory tower expert passing harsh judgment on ignorant filmmakers nor simply there to rubber-stamp a script and provide marketers with enough cover to claim their film is historically accurate.

One of Peter Klein's most important insights for this study was his goal to keep the screenplay free of what he termed "over-pedagogization" (*Überpädagogisierung*). This term refers to overly didactic dialogue – for example, the sexist scenes in *The Wannsee Conference* where the female secretary or the switchboard operators ask the men in the room to explain Nazi terms, ranks, and policy as if

⁶² Interview with Peter Klein, 5:45–08:43.

⁶³ Interview with Peter Klein, 9:05–11:41.

they were ignorant little girls – referred to in earlier chapters as “holding the audience’s hand.” According to Klein, this occurs

when, in the course of a film, you are constantly presented with situations, dialogues, or messages through deliberately created situations which are not at all important for the course of the film, which have been created by the director in the desire that you will in any case be able to analytically understand the situation that comes later because you have just learned something beforehand. And if that happens within a short time – and in the first Wannsee film . . . yes, maybe 15 minutes – if you constantly have to put it on the table so that everyone can notice it, then I think Mommertz and Schirk thought that people were so stupid in 1984 that they constantly had to help them along the way. And that’s what I call over-pedagogization. So, there are many messages which are unnecessary, and there are many messages that can be embroidered into the dialogue, and you don’t have to first create situations for conversations that you don’t actually need, right? So that the people are in a bad way with the deportations, and that the deportations are going to Riga, you don’t need to show a phone call beforehand for that. And it’s not important at all whether people are told exactly what a *Obersturmbannführer* is, but you can incorporate that into the dialogues, like when Stuckart looks out of the window and says “that one down there looks like a *Obersturm* – no – like a *Sturm*bannführer” and then someone says something, a little number like that, and then the next one says “Heydrich’s fighting administration!”, right? And poof, the subject is settled, right?⁶⁴

It is in this respect where *The Conference* avoids many of its West German predecessor’s dramatic pitfalls. Now, as discussed earlier in this study, this method of historical filmmaking was common in many productions, including HBO cable dramas, around the turn of the millennium and is not some invention of Klein’s. More likely, Klein simply had been exposed to such productions throughout his life and had become used to doing a bit of work as an audience member – and therefore he had come to expect more out of the film he was advising. But is also important to keep in mind that Klein had also worked as an educator both inside and outside academia as a public historian for decades – he knew when to let his “audience” think and feel for themselves and when they would be overwhelmed by information overload. This experience is likely crucial for a historical advisor – otherwise productions run the risk of hiring someone who has little feel for the needs of television productions and refuses to think outside of the academic box. Historians should keep in mind that, at the end of the day, dramatic historical film and television is not just made for them, but for everyone. Vattrodt summed up this tension:

We don’t make the film only for the community of historians so that they are happy and say “oh cool, you’ve done a great job!” It’s more like we say that we’re making a film for the

64 Interview with Peter Klein, 24:03–26:22.

audience first, as we always do, and if it goes well, many people in the field or historians will say at the end “it turned out well. It’s . . . really been valuable. It’s not bullshit.” (laughs). And for that, of course, Klein was great.⁶⁵

3 Script Development, 2019–2020

In a document titled “Master Brainstorming File,” Magnus Vattrodt assembled a collage of quotes, notes, and ideas for his script.⁶⁶ Vattrodt also outlined the structure of Mommertz’s script in a separate file.⁶⁷ This outline not only identifies instances where Mommertz simply got the facts wrong but also includes ideas for how to improve the new script. For example, Vattrodt discussed the scene in *The Wannsee Conference* where Heydrich meets in a separate room with Lange, Eichmann, and Müller, and argued that this scene’s discussion of poison gas should be moved to the end of his script.⁶⁸ This decision was likely intended to build dramatic tension. Another document dated May 2019 outlines the Wannsee Protocol.⁶⁹ Vattrodt drafted this document, together with the outline of Mommertz’s script, in collaboration with Peter Klein and likely in close collaboration with Matti Geschonneck.

Paul Mommertz is co-credited as screenwriter but had little input on the screenplay. Instead, Vattrodt used Mommertz’s script as a starting point to write his own. *The Conference* is not a straight remake of its 1984 predecessor, but some traces remain. Although it has a much darker tone and clearer plotline than *The Wannsee Conference*, *The Conference* still contains lines originally penned by Mommertz. In these instances, Vattrodt remixed the script – the 1984 lines may appear in different parts of the film and different characters speak them. The two films only overlap in a few areas, and usually only when the dialogue primarily serves to transmit historical information or when someone utters a particularly cutting or pithy line. Comparing the two screenplays makes it clear that *The Conference* is no mere reiteration of Mommertz’s work.

Magnus Vattrodt delivered his first draft of *The Conference* in mid-November 2019. Like early drafts of *Conspiracy*, this draft includes detailed descriptions of

⁶⁵ Interview with Magnus Vattrodt, 38:45–44:34.

⁶⁶ Magnus Vattrodt, “Wannseekonferenz – Master Brainstorming File,” Undated, Apple Pages File courtesy Magnus Vattrodt.

⁶⁷ Magnus Vattrodt, “Strukturskizze Drehbuch Mommertz,” Undated, Apple Pages File courtesy Magnus Vattrodt.

⁶⁸ Magnus Vattrodt, “Strukturskizze Drehbuch Mommertz,” 2.

⁶⁹ Magnus Vattrodt, “Struktureller und inhaltlicher Ablauf der Konferenz laut Protokoll,” May 24, 2019, Apple Pages File courtesy Magnus Vattrodt.

each historical figure. These shed light on the filmmaker's historiographic arguments and ideas.⁷⁰ For example, Heydrich is a "cool, intelligent, tactically adept manager at the highest level," while Eichmann is a "hardworking, detail-obsessed, somewhat pedantic doer in the background, a leader of lists and ruler of numbers."⁷¹ This section also describes Stuckart as "an experienced political leader with an aptitude for higher things. Possibly the man at the table with the most conference experience and an equal counterpart for Heydrich."⁷² This list also includes one person who is absent from the previous two Wannsee films: Ingeburg Werlemann, Eichmann's secretary.

The Conference is an example of public-private co-production. Although airing on public television network ZDF and with funds from the public broadcasting organizations Medienboard Berlin-Brandenburg and FilmFernsehFonds Bayern (FFF Bayern), actual filming and production was helmed by Munich-based Constantin Television (a subsidiary of Constantin Film). Constantin Film is one of Germany's largest production companies and historical films have consistently been part of its repertoire, including *Downfall* (2004), *The Baader-Meinhof Complex* (2008), the Weimar-era miniseries *KaDeWe* (2021), and, most importantly for this study, *Das Zeugenhaus*. Friedrich Oetker has stated that many members of Constantin Film, including its management, have Jewish backgrounds and therefore topics relating to the Holocaust are not taboo:

We are a company that is well acquainted with Jewish culture and beliefs. We simply have links to the culture and religion, and that's why we have no fear of . . . facing up to it, facing up to this memory. And as far as the Third Reich per se is concerned: we haven't really turned it into an industry, it's often the case that [productions about it] are also brought to you from the outside. So, a film from the US which is to be produced in Germany will often be about the Third Reich. And if they want a co-producer, then . . . we are the biggest independent [studio], and they approach us . . . the Third Reich in all its murderousness and inhumanity was unfortunately, at the end of the day, also a world-historical event.⁷³

Here, Oetker mentions several important themes for Holocaust remembrance in film and television. First, he notes that film productions often have a familial connection to the subject matter. This was the case for *The Wannsee Conference* and *Conspiracy*, with Manfred Korytowski and Peter Zinner both having direct con-

⁷⁰ Magnus Vattrodt, "Die Wannseekonferenz, Drehbuch von Magnus Vattrodt nach Motiven des gleichnamigen Drehbuchs von Paul Mommertz," First Draft, November 19, 2019.

⁷¹ Magnus Vattrodt, "Die Wannseekonferenz," First Draft, unnumbered page 2 of script PDF front matter.

⁷² Magnus Vattrodt, "Die Wannseekonferenz," First Draft, unnumbered page 3 of script PDF front matter.

⁷³ Interview with Friedrich Oetker, February 7, 2022, 50:52.

nections to the Holocaust and firsthand experience of exile. Second, he stresses how common international productions about the Nazi era are and how this means Constantin Film is often a production partner for international productions filmed in Germany. Both examples here complicate conventional understandings of film or television productions as belonging exclusively to one nationality. Is a film purely a Hollywood import if it is produced in concert with a German company? The fact that Jewish Germans helped produce *The Wannsee Conference* and *The Conference* also underscores the fact that these films about Wannsee are neither productions the German government or film machine impose upon an innocent population (in a tendentious understanding of the term “culture industry”), nor are they examples of a disingenuous and overly pious *Versöhnungstheater* (theater of atonement) focused on reconciliation and forgiveness, which the German-Jewish writer Max Czollek has justifiably criticized as an effort by gentile Germans to instrumentalize Jewish people in order to cast Germany as a modern, progressive nation which has moved beyond its dark past.⁷⁴ Lastly, Oetker notes that the Nazi regime (and the Holocaust) were “world-historical events,” that is, they do not exclusively belong to Germany – even if Germany bears responsibility. This is an important counterpoint in an era where the memory of World War II and the Holocaust is becoming renationalized (or, as Neil Levi and Michael Rothberg argue, an ever-present right-wing counternarrative is gaining traction), with public commemoration and education increasingly turning away from the idea of “cosmopolitan memory” espoused in the 1990s and early 2000s.⁷⁵ In this respect, international historical film production can act as a

74 See Max Czollek, “Versöhnungstheater. Anmerkungen zur deutschen Erinnerungskultur | bpb,” bpb.de, May 11, 2021, <https://www.bpb.de/geschichte/zeitgeschichte/juedischesleben/332617/versoehnungstheater-anmerkungen-zur-deutschen-erinnerungskultur>. Czollek uses the term “theater of memory” (*Gedächtnistheater*) as understood by Y. Michal Bodemann. For more, see Max Czollek, *Desintegriert euch!*, (Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag GmbH & Co. KG, 2018); Y. Michal Bodemann, *Gedächtnistheater: die jüdische Gemeinschaft und ihre deutsche Erfindung*, (Hamburg: Rotbuch, 1996). Although many critical scholars and journalists, including Bodemann, indict Holocaust films for contributing to *Gedächtnistheater*, this study argues that the three main Wannsee Conference movies stand outside of this paradigm, as do other more difficult Holocaust films which avoid the possibility of reconciliation or forgiveness. Note that the German government’s commemorative activities on January 20, 2022, however, particularly fit with Czollek and Bodemann’s ideas about theater of memory, especially German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier’s speech at the film’s premiere, which, with its “never again” pathos, fell particularly flat in the wake of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine several weeks later.

75 In the past decade, many genocide scholars have expressed alarm at this growing trend. See Neil Levi and Michael Rothberg, “Memory Studies in a Moment of Danger: Fascism, Postfascism, and the Contemporary Political Imaginary,” *Memory Studies* 11, no. 3 (July 1, 2018): 355–367; Valentina Pisanty, *The Guardians of Memory and the Return of the Xenophobic Right*, trans. Alastair

counterweight to the populist right, which seeks to reassert national narratives. Rich Brownstein's recent compendium of Holocaust film underscores this point by mainly listing non-English films in its list of the fifty best Holocaust films.⁷⁶

Filming *The Conference* took place during November and December 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic. Just as with the previous two films, exterior scenes were filmed on location at the Wannsee villa while interiors were shot at the Berlin Unionfilm Studios near the former Tempelhof airport. In a Constantin Film press release, executive producer Oliver Berben argued that *The Conference* was an important film for today's audiences because it "reminds [us] of what can happen when we do not watch out for our precious democracy," and that this political impetus was the project's "driving force."⁷⁷ In an interview, producer Friedrich Oetker praised the cast for their patience and expressed relief that all showed not only a professional, but also a political commitment to the project:

You have to find people who already have political integrity, and who are conscientious, and . . . so serious people make serious movies – without patting yourself on the back, but you have to think about the fact that . . . in Germany there are now so many [extreme, conspiracy-minded Corona skeptics, (*Querdenker*), literally "lateral thinkers"] etc., and that alone has been such a blessing to have a cast of sixteen people who stuck it out. To do that during the worst of Corona, so that's not so easy.⁷⁸

In interviews released around the premiere, several cast members spoke about the difficulties of working with the film's tough subject matter compounded by the effects of production-imposed isolation measures. For example, Philipp Hochmair (Heydrich), mentioned that the cast was "completely isolated. A single COVID-19 infection would have stopped the production. In those two months [of filming], I was exclusively around my colleagues in Nazi uniforms."⁷⁹ Similarly, Fabian Busch (Klopfer) recalled the shoot as extremely taxing:

McEwen (New York: CPL Editions, 2021); Tamara P. Trošt and Lea David, "Renationalizing Memory in the Post-Yugoslav Region," *Journal of Genocide Research* 24, no. 2 (April 3, 2022): 228–240. For cosmopolitan memory, see Levy and Sznajder, "Memory Unbound,"; Levy and Sznajder, *Human Rights and Memory* (University Park, PA: Penn State Press, 2015).

⁷⁶ Brownstein, *Holocaust Cinema Complete*.

⁷⁷ "DIE WANNSEEKONFERENZ – Drehstart im November," Constantin Film, October 8, 2020, <https://www.constantin-film.de/news/die-wannseekonferenz-matti-geschonneck-fuehrt-regie-drehstart-im-november/>.

⁷⁸ Interview with Friedrich Oetker, 14:28–16:52.

⁷⁹ Philipp Hochmair, "Hochmair als SS-Scherge Heydrich in 'Wannseekonferenz': 'Ich war auf einem ganz finsternen Planeten,'" interview by Birgit Baumann, *Der Standard*, January 24, 2022, <https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000132736865/philipp-hochmair-als-ss-scherge-heydrich-in-wannseekonferenz-ich-war>.

Of course, you can't completely escape this madness that was negotiated there [at Wannsee] day after day. You inevitably take some of it into your everyday life. In this case, it was especially difficult because I had to be in quarantine in a hotel room for the whole six weeks. There was simply no distraction. We shot until shortly before Christmas. After this long time, returning to the family was almost liberating for me, and I realized what a privilege it is to live today.⁸⁰

4 The Conference (2022)

The Conference distinguishes itself from its two predecessors primarily by its portrayal of consensus at Wannsee. While *The Wannsee Conference* and *Conspiracy* do portray figures who express doubts, most notably Stuckart and Kritzinger, *The Conference* dispenses with this idea and instead portrays an atmosphere of unanimity. To be sure, Stuckart expresses reservations about dissolving mixed marriages or reclassifying so-called *Mischlinge*. A disquieted Kritzinger also appears hesitant and repulsed by mass shootings but comes around when it comes to discussing the “more humane” method of gassing. *The Conference* is not fundamentally different in style or argument from its predecessors, but rather in detailed historiographic aspects. It borrows and remixes aspects of both earlier films, while still managing to offer something new.

The film opens with a wide shot of the Wannsee lake as the camera zooms in on the villa and the narrator, renowned actor Matthias Brandt, provides background information on the geopolitical situation in January 1942. We are quickly introduced to Eichmann (Johannes Allmayer) and his secretary Ingeburg Werlemann (Lilli Fichtner) arranging place cards around the table, similarly as in *Conspiracy*. This opening sequence is not a rehashed version of the beginning of *Conspiracy*, which focuses much more on the staff preparing for the conference, with shots of the kitchen, maids, and orderlies frantically getting things ready. In contrast, *The Conference* is much more restrained, at times feeling more like a stage production than a lived-in guesthouse. Like his predecessors, Geschonneck sticks to long takes, allowing the tension to build.

The conference room itself is much more spartan than in the other two films (see Figure 8.7). *Conspiracy*, for example, has a conference room full of plants, furniture, glassware, the table itself is more cluttered with papers and ashtrays, and overall, it seems much less orderly and stage-like than Geschonneck's version. The table is arranged differently, this time in a U-shape (Figure 8.6) with

⁸⁰ This quote stems from the now-offline ZDF presskit: <https://presseportal.zdf.de/pm/die-wannseekonferenz/>

Heydrich, Müller, and Hofmann at the head, with SS and occupation ministers (Bühler, Leibbrandt, and Meyer) to Heydrich's right and Berlin-based civilian ministers to his left. Eichmann and Werleemann sit at a small table to the right of Heydrich, at what Eichmann called the “side table” [*Katzentisch*].⁸¹

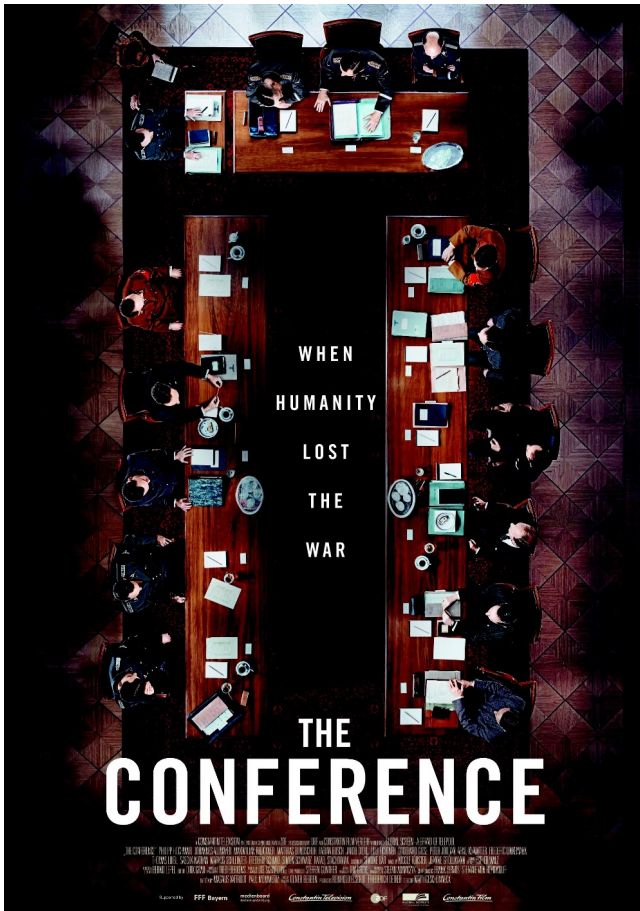


Figure 8.6: Overhead shot of the conference table, © Constantin Television. This publicity image served as the poster for *The Conference. Die Wannseekonferenz*. Constantin Television, Zweites deutsches Fernsehen (ZDF), FilmFernsehFonds Bayern, 2022.

⁸¹ Adolf Eichmann, “Auch hier angesichts des Galgens, Jahreswende 1961/1962,” Dokument 15 in Kampe and Klein, *Die Wannsee-Konferenz*, 112–113, 112.



Figure 8.7: Reinhard Heydrich (Philipp Hochmair) speaks to the conference attendees. Here, the spartan atmosphere and cold visuals are apparent. *Die Wannseekonferenz*. Constantin Television, Zweites deutsches Fernsehen (ZDF), FilmFernsehFonds Bayern, 2022.

The Wannsee Conference is neatly divided into three thematic sections, while *The Conference* script breaks free from Mommertz's structure, instead shifting themes around and leaving room for those quiet moments between people which are missing from its West German predecessor (but are present in *Conspiracy*). This difference in pacing is perhaps the strongest stylistic difference between the two German-language productions. Additionally, the film is devoid of music, something often mentioned in German-language reviews as something daring and original which *The Conference* brings to the small screen. As previous chapters have shown, this decision to air the film without a score is not unique to *The Conference* and in fact common to all three Wannsee films, except for a single piano tone at the end of *The Wannsee Conference* and the diegetic music playing out *Conspiracy*.

The SS in *The Conference*

The first group of participants mentioned in Vattrodt's research material is the the SS, and it is here where we can most clearly see how this new film benefits from recent perpetrator historiography. *The Conference* depicts Reinhard Heydrich (Philipp Hochmair) as something between Dietrich Mattausch's womanizing circus ringmaster and Kenneth Branagh's alternation between charming boy scout and frightening death stares. In this film, Heydrich is much more of a managerial figure, afraid that something could go wrong and eager to placate those with misgivings.

Friedrich Oetker described this version as more “conciliatory” and noted that the production team had also watched *Manager of Terror* during pre-production.⁸² Peter Klein noted that the two Mommertz films portrayed Heydrich in a much more “demonized” manner and that he felt the new film should do something different. He recounted a conversation with Vattrodt where they both discussed portraying Heydrich as someone whose goal was to “convince” the other participants, not intimidate them.⁸³ Klein justified this decision by mentioning the only inter-ministerial conference Heydrich had previously chaired a year previously (January 8, 1941), arguing that everything discussed at that conference fell apart afterwards, so Heydrich should be portrayed as someone with a lot riding on this conference, as someone with something to lose.⁸⁴ Additionally, the filmmakers decided to cut long sections from the Wannsee Protocol (both present in the other two films) where Heydrich speaks at length. Vattrodt justified this decision by stating that it “of course does not function at all filmicly” and noted that he and Klein had decided that they had to: “[F]ind a path between seriousness and historical correctness, but also always keep ‘imparting [history]’ in mind.”⁸⁵

Vattrodt’s first script draft describes Heydrich as “cool, intelligent”, tactically adept manager at the highest level, determined to consequently expand the scope of his agency’s power.”⁸⁶ An extensive document containing source material for each historical figure lists the most important sources for the script. These were: Paul Mommertz’s archival material, Peter Longerich’s *Wannsee*, Hans-Christian Jasch and Christoph Kreutzmüller’s edited volume *The Participants*, and material collected for the Historikerlabor Berlin’s Wannsee Conference documentary theater project. This seventy-page collection contains outlines and descriptions of each historical figure and summarizes recent research on them, consisting of quotes from the abovementioned sources, primary documents, and recent biographies.⁸⁷ For example, in the section on Heydrich, Vattrodt describes him as “an efficient manager, strict and hard, ambitious, goal-oriented, with a great talent for organization. In the practical realization of party and racial-ideological goals, he is characterized by unscrupulous efficiency. He is a collector of information, astute and determined, with arrogant tendencies (which cost him his naval ca-

⁸² Interview with Friedrich Oetker, 08:45–10:25.

⁸³ Interview with Peter Klein, 31:11–35:23.

⁸⁴ Interview with Peter Klein, 31:11–35:23.

⁸⁵ Interview with Magnus Vattrodt, March 21, 2022, 38:45–44:34.

⁸⁶ Magnus Vattrodt, “*Die Wannseekonferenz*” First Draft, unnumbered page 2 of script PDF front matter.

⁸⁷ Magnus Vattrodt, “Handelnde Personen, ‘Wannseekonferenz’ Materialsammlung,” Undated, Apple Pages File courtesy Magnus Vattrodt.

reer).⁸⁸ Philipp Hochmair's portrayal of Heydrich as a diplomatic manager with a lot to lose – he needs to convince the others of his proposal – is complicated by the way other characters react to him. Several attendees are clearly intimidated by him, and the film plays with that expectation. This is most apparently in a scene after Stuckart (Godehard Giese) and Heydrich argue about mixed marriages. Heydrich excuses himself and invites Stuckart into a side room, where the two look out at the lake. The way their path to the side room is filmed, it seems like Heydrich is about to intimidate Stuckart into acquiescence, much like in *Conspiracy*. Instead, this film offers us something arguably more chilling. The script notes that Stuckart “follows Heydrich with some distance –unsure about what could happen.”⁸⁹ Heydrich and Stuckart then discuss their various viewpoints, with some tension, which is then resolved when the two glance out the window at the lake and move on to small talk. Vattrodt makes it clear that Stuckart is just as much of a committed Nazi as Heydrich but has more concerns for laws and norms than his counterpart. The pair discuss their families and, in one of the most chilling lines of the screenplay, Stuckart suggests that after the war, when Heydrich has moved into the Wannsee villa, “our children can swim together in the Wannsee.”⁹⁰

One strong difference between *The Conference* and its predecessors is the complete absence of a scene at the end where a relaxed Heydrich drinks a cognac with Müller and Eichmann after the other participants have left. In an interview with the Dutch Nazi journalist Willem Sassen, Eichmann spoke about Heydrich's relief at length:

I remember that at the end of this Wannsee Conference Heydrich, Müller and my humble self settled down comfortably by the fireplace and that then for the first time I saw Heydrich smoke a cigar or a cigarette, and I was thinking: Today Heydrich is smoking, something I have not seen before. And he drinks cognac – since I had not seen Heydrich take any alcoholic drink in years . . . And after this Wannsee Conference we were sitting together peacefully, and not in order to talk shop, but in order to relax after the long hours of strain. I cannot say any more about this.⁹¹

The filmmakers mentioned various reasons for refraining from this scene. Oetker argued that the amount of alcohol consumed in the other two films “did not feel completely authentic” and that Heydrich “had a lot more to do” that day and

⁸⁸ Magnus Vattrodt, “Handelnde Personen, ‘Wannseekonferenz’ Materialsammlung,” 7.

⁸⁹ Magnus Vattrodt, “*Die Wannseekonferenz*, Gelbe-Seiten Fassung,” 88.

⁹⁰ Magnus Vattrodt, “*Die Wannseekonferenz*, Gelbe-Seiten Fassung,” 91.

⁹¹ So-called Sassen interviews, cited in the Eichmann trial, session 75, June 20, 1961, quoted in Roseman, *The Wannsee Conference and the Final Solution: A Reconsideration*, 103.

probably would have refrained from alcohol.⁹² A scene depicting this interaction is contained in Vattrodt's first draft but was later cut. In this cut scene, Heydrich says he is "very satisfied" with the conference's outcome.⁹³ The rest of the conversation here is contained in the final version of the script but instead of drinking a cognac, Heydrich busily gathers his things and talks to Müller and Eichmann as he heads out the door. This is one artistic decision that falls flat and does not really fall in line with scholarship on Wannsee, though the only evidence we have for Heydrich pausing for a drink after Wannsee comes from Eichmann's postwar statements. Because Eichmann told this story both at his trial and in the Sassen interviews, when he was still a free man, it is likely plausible.

The portrayal of Adolf Eichmann (Johannes Allmayer) in *The Conference* is more problematic. Vattrodt's Eichmann is a pedantic, rather wooden figure whose attitude is in keeping with Hannah Arendt's portrayal in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, which tends to uncritically accept Eichmann's self-depiction as an unideological order-follower during his trial. Later scholarship, particularly that from Bettina Stangneth and David Cesarani, is skeptical of this attempt on Eichmann's part to downplay his role at Wannsee and focuses more on his ideological motivations, proving that he was a committed Nazi and not an unthinking functionary.⁹⁴ Vattrodt's description of Eichmann in the screenplay is devoid of ideology.⁹⁵ His small biographical collage on Eichmann contains a more up-to-date depiction of Eichmann, often citing passages from Bettina Stangneth's article on Eichmann in *The Participants* and cites other passages which argue that the Wannsee Conference was a key event for his career.⁹⁶ Vattrodt discussed his version of Eichmann at length in an interview. First, Eichmann's placement at the small table, separate from the other participants, was meant to be "a nod to everyone who saw [Eichmann's] performance in Jerusalem" and a way to solve the problem of where to sit Eichmann at the table while surrounded by people who outranked him.⁹⁷ Vattrodt described Eichmann as a perfectionist who "simply conducts his work in a completely proper and dry fashion, someone who is unbelievably fussy and pedantic."⁹⁸

92 Interview with Friedrich Oetker, 26:20–27:23.

93 Magnus Vattrodt, "Die Wannseekonferenz," First Draft, 128–129.

94 Stangneth, *Eichmann Before Jerusalem*; Cesarani, *Eichmann*, 114.

95 Magnus Vattrodt, "Die Wannseekonferenz, Drehbuch von Magnus Vattrodt nach Motiven des gleichnamigen Drehbuchs von Paul Mommertz," November 19, 2019, unnumbered page 2 of script PDF front matter.

96 Magnus Vattrodt, "Handelnde Personen, 'Wannseekonferenz' Materialsammlung," 44.

97 Interview with Magnus Vattrodt, 54:50–1:00:51.

98 Interview with Magnus Vattrodt, 54:50–1:00:51.

Vattrodt was fully aware of other depictions of Eichmann, particularly those focusing on his fanatical zeal during this time deporting Viennese Jews, but decided to leave these aspects out in order to focus on what he thought was most important for the ninety minutes he had to depict Wannsee: “I left all of that out, I thought ‘no, we shall reduce him to his . . . this is a guy obsessed with numbers, he’s the guy who always has the latest figures and he is the one that allows the others to make a great show thanks to his bureaucratic work in the background.’”⁹⁹ This argument makes sense when one notes that *The Conference* is more of an ensemble piece than its two predecessors, and there simply was not enough time to depict everyone in full detail, though it casts earlier critiques of Stanley Tucci’s portrayal of Eichmann in *Conspiracy* in new light. In an article on *Conspiracy*, Alex J. Kay argued that the film’s characterization of Eichmann adhered closely to Arendt, noting its “absence of ideology.”¹⁰⁰ Kay’s observation here also applies to this film. Nevertheless, it would be unfair to accuse Vattrodt of simply falling back on an older depiction of Eichmann. Especially in its climactic scene, *The Conference* depicts Eichmann as someone who was much more than a desk-bound murderer, someone who had visited places like Chełmno, Belzec, Treblinka, and Auschwitz – not a bureaucrat sheltered from the results of his signature and stamp. As Mark Roseman has noted, “[t]he oft-cited gap between the ‘desk murderers’ and the men in the field barely applies at Wannsee.”¹⁰¹ In a recent collection of biographies about both leading and ordinary Nazis, Richard J. Evans defends Arendt against David Cesarani, arguing that “[m]any of his objections to [Arendt’s] book, however persuasive, were beside the point, or rested on a misrepresentation, or misunderstanding, of her concept of ‘the banality of evil.’”¹⁰² So, as with earlier depictions, Vattrodt adhering more to Arendt’s portrayal may simply be another fair interpretation.

Peter Klein notes that in contrast with the previous films, these high-level bureaucrats and officials do not stand at attention and shout “Heil Hitler!” at each other, but instead interact at a more informal level because they all know each other through work or other conferences. This informal atmosphere (compared to the earlier films) is illustrated by the film’s opening scene where Müller comes into the conference room as Eichmann is preparing: “they say ‘good morning’ to each other and shake each other’s hands.”¹⁰³ Klein also pointed out that the small scene where Eichmann brings Werleemann a sandwich is the only time we get to

⁹⁹ Interview with Magnus Vattrodt, 54:50–1:00:51.

¹⁰⁰ Alex J. Kay, “Speaking the Unspeakable,” 193.

¹⁰¹ Roseman, *The Wannsee Conference*, 96.

¹⁰² Evans, *Hitler’s People*,

¹⁰³ Interview with Peter Klein, January 25, 2022, 16:12–23:11.

see an “undisguised,” more normal Eichmann, who otherwise acts in a very straight-laced, official capacity in the film – this section is the only part where the audience can see a different facet of Eichmann, which is important because it complicates our conventional view of him. In this scene, Werleemann talks about how fun it is to work in Eichmann’s office, how people laugh a lot, and how they played music together.¹⁰⁴

Gestapo chief Heinrich Müller (Jakob Diehl) is portrayed as an enigmatic “sphinx,” in keeping with the earlier portrayals. However, Diehl’s chilling performance makes this version of Müller’s presence more prominent than in the two previous films. It is clearer that he is Eichmann’s direct superior and that the two have a strong working relationship. Vattrodt’s research material describes Müller as someone who kept out of the public eye, a powerful figure in the background.¹⁰⁵ Diehl makes Müller memorable simply by his facial expressions and unflinching gaze.

The Conference’s portrayal of Otto Hofmann (Markus Schleiner), head of the SS Race and Settlement Main Office (*Rasse- und Siedlungshauptamt der SS*, RuSHA) is a clear example of more recent perpetrator research appearing in film. Previous depictions of Hofmann and Wannsee may allude to Germany’s war of racial conquest in the Soviet Union, but none do so as explicitly as *The Conference*. The film’s depiction of Hofmann is largely owed to the work of Isabel Heinemann, a historian specializing in the history of reproductive politics and the SS Race and Settlement Main Office.¹⁰⁶ Whenever Hofmann, who clearly has a one-track mind, discusses race and colonization, the camera turns to Müller and Heydrich, whose expressions clearly betray annoyance with their colleague.¹⁰⁷ In one scene cut from the script, Hofmann discusses a Polish woman his family has acquired for domestic force labor and his goal of Germanizing her:

HOFMANN

. . . My wife really wanted household help, what can I say? So I got her a Polish girl capable of being re-Germanized who is now helping her out.

MEYER

That exists?

¹⁰⁴ Interview with Peter Klein, 16:12–23:11.

¹⁰⁵ Magnus Vattrodt, “Handelnde Personen, ‘Wannseekonferenz’ Materialsammlung,” 14.

¹⁰⁶ See Isabel Heinemann, “Otto Hofmann, SS Race and Settlement Main Office: A Pragmatic Enforcer of Racial Policy?” in *The Participants*, ed. Jasch and Kreutzmüller, 75–94, and Heinemann, *Rasse, Siedlung, deutsches Blut: Das Rasse- und Siedlungshauptamt der SS und die rassenpolitische Neuordnung Europas* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2013).

¹⁰⁷ Magnus Vattrodt, “Die Wannseekonferenz, Gelbe-Seiten Fassung,” 28.

HOFMANN

A young girl which our qualified examiner has rated as highly racially valuable.
And now we have to reeducate the young thing to be a German.

MEYER

And how do you do that?

HOFMANN

Simply imagine a somewhat feral, but all in all decent dog – it requires patience
and a strict hand at times.¹⁰⁸

Markus Schleinzer's performance is undeniably creepy. His wide-eyed stare and the almost sexual thrill he exudes about population transfer and genocide only underscore the horror of what he says. In one aside, he rhetorically asks why Germany should be concerned with eleven million Jews when, because of *Generalplan Ost*, tens of millions of Slavs will inevitably die from war, slavery, and starvation:

HOFMANN

We need to look at these numbers in the larger context – the Final Solution of the Jewish Question is only one building block of the planned reorganization of Europe. In the long term, we are talking about the removal of all low-raced ethnic groups from our sphere of influence. The stew of peoples we have encountered in the eastern territories must completely yield to create space for the for the Germanization of the won living space in the East through German settlement. At the end, there will be a Europe on which we have left the stamp of our Germanic cultural morals and in which non-Germanic peoples will be at most tolerated as slaves – reading and writing at the elementary school level, counting up to one hundred, we do not need them for more. This reorganization and racial restoration [*Aufrassung*] of Europe requires an ethnic replacement [*Umvolkung*] in the three-digit million range – in contrast, the implementation of a final solution for eleven million Jews seems pretty straightforward.¹⁰⁹

The film's emphasis on the imperialist nature of Nazi Germany's war is a key difference from earlier portrayals of Wannsee. In the past decades, Holocaust studies have increasingly focused on the colonial and imperialist aspects of the Nazi war in the East.¹¹⁰ *The Conference* tackling this aspect, albeit in a short aside, helps it stand apart from other German productions on the Nazi era.

¹⁰⁸ Magnus Vattrodt, "Die Wannseekonferenz," First Draft, 20.

¹⁰⁹ Magnus Vattrodt, "Die Wannseekonferenz, Gelbe-Seiten Fassung," 47.

¹¹⁰ This is not uncontroversial, as many German commentators find this emphasis problematic or even dangerously close to right-wing arguments, although it is established consensus in international scholarship. For more on this debate, see "The Catechism Debate Archives," *The New Fascism Syllabus* (blog), accessed August 5, 2022, <http://newfascismsyllabus.com/category/opinions/the-catechism-debate/> and "Forum: Timothy Snyder's Bloodlands," *Contemporary European History* 21, no. 2 (May 2012): 115–168. Key studies on the Eastern Front, the Holocaust, and colo-

The two lower-ranking SS officers representing “practical experience” at Wannsee, Eberhard Schöngarth (Maximilian Brückner) and Rudolf Lange (Frederic Linkemann), allow Peter Klein’s past work as a historian to truly come through in this film. Klein had previously written several articles and chapters on Lange, which clearly influenced Lange’s characterization in the script. At one point, the civilian ministers refer to Lange as part of Heydrich’s “fighting administration,” a key reference to Michael Wildt’s study of the RSHA.¹¹¹ Schöngarth has a much larger role than in the previous two films, and he acts as a mentor of sorts to Lange, taking him under his wing and encouraging his younger colleague as he introduces him to the world of political conferences and the circles of power. Schöngarth uses the most brutal language out of any of the characters and his lines, as mentioned above, often stem from primary sources written by Holocaust perpetrators. The screenplay refers to him as a hard man who looks down on civilians, as a man who “hides his complete disinterestedness behind a smile that says nothing.”¹¹² Schöngarth and Lange – in contrast with the other two films, where they barely interact – form a frightening team here.¹¹³ Here, they have a shared understanding as comrades, as mass murderers. In their first scene together, Lange, who is staying in a room at the villa, refers to Jews as “figures,” [Figuren] a common euphemism the SS used for its victims.¹¹⁴

Although Schöngarth is an intimidating, swaggering figure in *Conspiracy*, in *The Conference*, he is terrifying – he stares people down, he has no qualms about ruffling feathers, and acts as if the future belongs to him, as if the civilian ministers are simply relics of the past, soft fellows that modernity has passed by. He is an example of Wildt’s “Uncompromising Generation” par excellence. Whenever a civilian expresses discomfort, he cuts them down with statements like “Jewish suicides don’t bother me,” “if I don’t like someone’s nose, that’s Jewish enough for me,” or he describes “actions” in detail. The script notes that Schöngarth does this to toy with people; for example, in a scene on the patio with Lange and Krit-

nialism include Mark Mazower, *Hitler’s Empire: How the Nazis Ruled Europe*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2009), Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* (Basic Books, 2010), Moses, *The Problems of Genocide*, Kay, *Empire of Destruction*, and Kay, “Germany’s Staatssekretäre, Mass Starvation and the Meeting of 2 May, 1941,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 41, no. 4 (October 2006): 685–700.

111 Wildt, *An Uncompromising Generation*.

112 Magnus Vattrodt, “Die Wannseekonferenz, Gelbe-Seiten Fassung,” 6.

113 As the script notes, they nod and “understand each other.” Vattrodt, “Die Wannseekonferenz, Gelbe-Seiten Fassung,” 8.

114 Claude Lanzmann’s *Shoah* (1985) contains several instances of survivors referring to this language while having to exhume *Einsatzgruppen* victims in the Baltic, and Andrej Angrick’s recent study of *Aktion 1005* describes this language and practice in detail: Angrick, »Aktion 1005«.

zinger, he stresses the “necessity” of mass shootings, alcohol as a reward for his men, and, echoing the quote in *Radical Evil*, describes a man who “prefers to shoot kids because they can’t survive without their parents. He thinks he’s doing them a favor. Has its logic, don’t you think?” The horrified Kritzinger leaves without a word and Schöngarth derides civilian officials as “weak-kneed people who fart in armchairs” that treat the boots on the ground like him as “scum.”¹¹⁵

For Rudolf Lange, *The Conference* avoids both Paul Mommertz’s characterization of the man as a bumbling drunk and *Conspiracy*’s traumatized soldier. Largely drawing on Peter Klein’s work, this film emphasizes Lange’s “special role” at Wannsee as a practitioner of mass murder. The other attendees underestimate him, with Stuckart expressing surprise that such a low-ranking officer is present at this high-level meeting. Here, the film also clearly sides with one historiographical interpretation of Lange’s presence at the meeting – no surprise considering Klein was the film’s historical advisor. Klein and Andrej Angrick repeatedly argued that a lower-ranking officer like Lange’s presence at Wannsee is only understandable in the context of his experience conducting mass executions in Latvia.¹¹⁶ Klein’s latest article on Lange notes that “he also effectively stood for the practical enforcement of Heydrich’s unilateral control of the ‘Final Solution to the Jewish Question’ when necessary and against all previous resistance on the part of the Occupation’s civilian administration, as represented by Meyer and Georg Leibbrandt.”¹¹⁷ Peter Longerich, however, calls Klein’s interpretation of Lange’s role at Wannsee into question, arguing that there is no evidence that Lange would have spoken about mass killings at the conference and that any interpretation along these lines amounts to “pure speculation.”¹¹⁸ Vattrodt was aware of these differing interpretations.¹¹⁹ The screenplay describes Lange as someone skilled at improvisation but new to political meetings.¹²⁰ In the film, Lange partially functions as an audience stand-in, like the secretary in *The Wannsee Conference*. Schöngarth explains how a high-level meeting functions and, while standing on the patio with him, points out different attendees through the window, introducing both Lange and the audience to civilian and occupation authorities present at Wannsee. The

115 Vattrodt, “Die Wannseekonferenz, Gelbe-Seiten Fassung,” 67–68.

116 Angrick and Klein, *The Final Solution in Riga*, 260–262.

117 Peter Klein, “Rudolf Lange, Reich Main Security Office: Academic, Ideological Warrior and Mass Murderer” in *The Participants*, ed. Jasch and Kreutzmüller, 95–110, 100.

118 Longerich, *Wannsee*, 55–56.

119 Magnus Vattrodt, “Handelnde Personen, ‘Wannseekonferenz’ Materialsammlung,” 40–41.

120 Vattrodt, “Die Wannseekonferenz, Gelbe-Seiten Fassung,” unnumbered page 3 of script front matter.

camera even shows us these figures in a shot from Lange's point of view (this is also described as such in the script; see Figure 8.8).¹²¹



Figure 8.8: Wilhelm Stuckart (Godehard Giese) from Rudolf Lange's point-of-view. *Die Wannseekonferenz*. Constantin Television, Zweites deutsches Fernsehen (ZDF), FilmFernsehFonds Bayern, 2022.

This is the first explicit instance in any of the three scripts where we know that in this scene, the camera eye is meant to represent the view of a Nazi perpetrator, thereby making the audience complicit. Through Lange, the audience also learns a bit more about the villa's function as RSHA guesthouse – he has a room here, and later, Eichmann tells the attendees how much an overnight stay at the villa costs.¹²²

As in *The Wannsee Conference*, Heydrich calls Eichmann, Luther, and Lange into a side room to discuss strategy for the meeting. In this film, Lange also shows Heydrich the map of *Einsatzgruppen* killings, but compared to the previous film, he is shyer, a bit unsure of himself, not stumbling around or shouting. Here, they discuss gas vans and the problems with disposing of bodies and Müller alludes to the upcoming *Aktion 1005*, devoted to exhuming mass graves and burning all bodies and other forms of evidence.¹²³ Although speculative, this scene contains a veiled reference to *Conspiracy*, with Lange and Heydrich saying that the civilian attendees are on a need-to-know basis, a “question of dosage [*eine Frage der Dos-*

¹²¹ Vattrodt, “*Die Wannseekonferenz*, Gelbe-Seiten Fassung,” 8.

¹²² For more on the Wannsee villa's role as a guesthouse, see Tuchel, *Am Grossen Wannsee* 56–58, 105.

¹²³ Angrick, »*Aktion 1005*«.

ierung].” This alludes to a line in *Conspiracy* where Eichmann refers to issues with sterilization as “a problem of dosage.” Additionally, *The Conference* references *Conspiracy* when, in the abovementioned scene with Kritzinger, Lange’s education becomes a topic of discussion. Kritzinger is surprised that Lange knows about Max Liebermann, the Jewish painter whose villa was next door to the Wannsee villa – though here, instead of using Lange’s educational background to discuss language and euphemism, *The Conference* uses it to illustrate the resentment of frontline men like Lange towards bureaucrats back in Berlin. Throughout the rest of the film, Lange and Schöngarth interject whenever someone expresses concern about whether German soldiers and policemen can handle the stress of mass killings, considering their competence and honor insulted. Here is another key difference between *The Conference* and its predecessors. In this film, no one is really concerned about what happens to Jewish people, but about what a psychological burden the killing must be for the German killers. At the end of the day, Schöngarth steals a half-opened bottle of cognac and takes Lange into town, saying that he “know[s] a few quite dignified Berlin establishments where one can relax in the most pleasant manner.” After discussing mass murder for a day, they go for a night out on the town – like it’s any other workday.

The final SS member present in *The Conference* is someone absent from all other filmic, and for that matter, book-length treatments on Wannsee: Ingeburg Werleemann, Eichmann’s secretary. Historians were always unsure about who took the notes at Wannsee which Eichmann later used for the protocol. The 1984 film contains a sexist portrayal of a female secretary who serves more as an audience stand-in and as an ignorant, good-looking blonde for Heydrich to flirt with. *Conspiracy* has a nameless male SD stenographer working for Eichmann’s office. *The Conference* goes further and names this person. In the years immediately preceding production, a historian affiliated with the Wannsee Conference Memorial and Education Center, Marcus Gryglewski, uncovered the sixteenth Wannsee participant’s identity.¹²⁴ Ingeburg Werleemann (played by Lilli Fichtner) was a secretary and Eichmann’s *Referat* IV B 4, and in a 1962 testimony before a Frankfurt Court, Werleemann, the most senior secretary in Eichmann’s *Referat*, claimed to have taken down meeting minutes at a meeting in the RSHA guest house at Wannsee, but that it wasn’t for the January 1942 Wannsee Conference. In 1967, she mentioned that Heydrich had been present, and Gryglewski notes that there is no record of Heydrich having been present at any other meeting taking place at

124 Marcus Gryglewski, “NS-Täterin auf der Wannseekonferenz: Eichmanns Sekretärin,” *taz, die tageszeitung*, January 17, 2020, <https://taz.de/!5654203/>.

Wannsee.¹²⁵ The historian Rachel Century has also revealed that Werlemann was a key member of Eichmann's staff, that she "was efficient, and her work was impeccable," that she was one of many women working for the RSHA who "were highly committed and dedicated to their tasks, demonstrating qualities admired by the Nazis."¹²⁶ Werlemann was a committed Nazi Party member, and Century also pointed out her possible attendance at Wannsee but did not make a claim as to whether this was likely or not.¹²⁷ In a final twist to her story, Werlemann, who had married a colleague during the war, spent her postwar life in a life partnership with another woman, further complicating conventional understandings of Nazi women.¹²⁸

In a series of overwhelmingly male films, the inclusion of Werlemann in *The Conference*, which portrays her as complicit and as a figure with agency, is laudable. The film does not relegate her to the status of sex object or audience stand-in. In this respect, *The Conference* complicates conventional, male-only filmic depictions of Nazi perpetrators by also showing that women also participated in genocide from behind their desks, not just as concentration camp guards or as passive bystanders. This depiction is not for the sake of gender representation, but for the sake of depicting history more accurately. Previous depictions of female Nazi perpetrators have usually leaned towards the sensationalist, focusing on female concentration camp guards such as in the pornographic *Ilsa: She-Wolf of the SS*, or the apologist *The Reader*. In this area, *The Conference* joins a handful of smaller productions, most notably *Son of Saul* director László Nemes' short film *With a Little Patience*, in depicting desk murderers who also happen to be women. As Rachel Century concludes in her study, "Each of the female administrators may have been drops in the ocean, but it is the drops themselves that make up the ocean. The Nazis needed these women as administrators and as supporters of the regime. The vast majority of the women knew about the Holocaust, contributed towards its outcome, and took no action to prevent it occurring."¹²⁹

125 Gryglewski, "NS-Täterin auf der Wannseekonferenz."

126 Rachel Century, *Female Administrators of the Third Reich*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2017), 88.

127 Century, *Female Administrators of the Third Reich*, 89, 94.

128 Gryglewski, "NS-Täterin auf der Wannseekonferenz." See also the work of Anna Hájková for more on sexuality and the Holocaust: Anna Hájková, *Menschen ohne Geschichte sind Staub: Homophobie und Holocaust*, (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2021); "Sexuality and the Holocaust," OUPblog, March 11, 2018, <https://blog.oup.com/2018/03/sexuality-holocaust/>.

129 Century, *Female Administrators of the Third Reich*, 221.

By including Werleemann, *The Conference* helps bridge what historian Atina Grossmann has dubbed the “gender gap” in Holocaust studies.¹³⁰

Civilian Ministers and *Staatssekretäre*

The Conference largely avoids the dramatic mischaracterizations of Wilhelm Stuckart present in the other two Wannsee docudramas. In keeping with Vattrodt’s emphasis on unanimity, in this film Stuckart (Godehard Giese), while protective of the Nuremberg Laws and the definition of *Mischlinge*, does not vehemently protest genocide and he does not require reining in, as in *Conspiracy*. He is a committed Nazi, but – unlike the RSHA – still sees a need for rules, norms, and the rule of law. The film tensions between the Nazi Party (represented by Gerhard Klopfer) versus the Ministry of the Interior (represented by Stuckart) by having Klopfer (Fabian Busch), after an argument with Stuckart, apologize and say he was merely acting in the interests of the Party and his office and meant nothing personal. *Conspiracy*, for example, makes it seem like the two are bitter enemies who had first met at Wannsee, when historically, the two had known each other since they were students and had worked together on legal publications.¹³¹ The script even describes Klopfer as “a bit between the chairs” because he feels personal loyalty to Stuckart and Kritzinger, but at work, his “official loyalty” is to the SS.¹³² Just like its predecessors, *The Conference* discusses the issue of mixed marriages and the definition of *Mischlinge* at length and lampoons the ridiculousness of the definitions, with attendees like Schöngarth expressing complete exasperation and confusion at the dizzying number of exemptions and terms.

Godehard Giese portrays Stuckart as a sharp legal mind with a gift for persuasion, as well as a sly, confident man convinced of his own political acumen – in sharp contrast to the other two films, which portray him as a master jurist but also as someone a bit uneasy in a room full of SS men. Vattrodt’s script instead describes Stuckart as “mature, smart, and self-assured.”¹³³ Stuckart often has a bemused, catlike expression when others are speaking. Schöngarth even tells Lange that Stuckart is a person to watch out for, someone who will become the Interior Minister one day. Vattrodt’s research notes describe Heydrich and Stuckart as

¹³⁰ Atina Grossmann, “Holocaust Studies in Our Age of Catastrophe,” *The Journal of Holocaust Research* 35, no. 2 (April 3, 2021): 150–152.

¹³¹ Heckmann, “Gerhard Klopfer,” –190, 193.

¹³² Vattrodt, “*Die Wannseekonferenz*, Gelbe-Seiten Fassung,” 16.

¹³³ Vattrodt, “*Die Wannseekonferenz*, Gelbe-Seiten Fassung,” 12.

“two alpha males facing each other!”, a curious remark that nevertheless bears out in the film, with the two sizing each other up as equals and agreeing to put aside petty differences.¹³⁴ Vattrodt’s character profile describes Stuckart as a dedicated Nazi whose goal was always to provide legal cover for the regime’s racist actions.¹³⁵ In *The Conference*, Stuckart, much like in the other two films, constantly parries attempts to sweep aside legislation in the name of solving the “Jewish Problem” or sweeping bureaucracy aside – one of Heydrich’s constant prerogatives. At one point in the film when Meyer and Leibbrandt argue that distinguishing between *Mischlinge* is too difficult in the occupied East, Stuckart says “We aren’t in the East, but in the German Reich, and laws still apply here.”¹³⁶ *The Conference* succeeds at depicting Stuckart as a competent rival to Heydrich and avoids the problematic aspects of earlier portrayals – though, for example, his holding rank in the SS goes unmentioned. In portraying Stuckart as a man with many personal connections throughout the German government, the film helps underscore the unanimity at Wannsee – which was only disturbed by the question of mixed marriages, which was addressed but never resolved in a series of further inter-ministerial conferences chaired by Eichmann.¹³⁷

The Conference stands out from its predecessors by managing to clearly delineate between civilian ministers based in Berlin and occupational authorities in the General Government and the occupied Baltic, as well as their respective importance for genocidal policy, while still refraining from overly pedagogical narrative devices. Alfred Meyer (Peter Jordan) and Georg Leibbrandt (Rafael Stachowiak) represent the Reich Ministry for the Occupied Eastern Territories while Josef Bühler (Sascha Nathan) represents Hans Frank, head of the General Government in occupied Poland. The film portrays Meyer as a *Gauleiter* with a big ego, wishing to be flattered. A cut scene has Meyer engaging in a bit of public relations work for his *Gau* of North Westphalia, inviting attendees to attend a Wagner festival in Münster.¹³⁸ Meyer is fussy about his seating arrangement, immediately switching places with Bühler to sit closer to Heydrich and put Bühler in his literal and metaphorical place. *The Conference* portrays these two as bureaucrats that the SS wants out of their way. Meyer and Leibbrandt are protective of their territory and are annoyed at the RSHA, particularly Lange, making decisions about Jews without their input. Meyer tends to stick to arrogant pronouncements and shows off his status, while Leibbrandt comes across as a convinced ideologue.

134 Magnus Vattrodt, “Wannseekonferenz – Master Brainstorming File,” 19.

135 Magnus Vattrodt, “Handelnde Personen, ‘Wannseekonferenz’ Materialsammlung,” 65.

136 Vattrodt, “*Die Wannseekonferenz*, Gelbe-Seiten Fassung,” 81.

137 Longerich, *Wannsee*, 89–90.

138 Vattrodt, “*Die Wannseekonferenz*,” First Draft, 21.

The latter speaks at length about the dangers of “Judeo-Bolshevism” and feels that Berlin-based officials are out of touch with the “realities” of life in the occupied East. In this film, it is much more apparent that Heydrich needs to pacify these people to get his way and assume central control of the “Jewish Question.” Without their approval, his plan will fail.

Josef Bühler’s role at Wannsee is much greater in this film. The filmmakers present Bühler as a man who made a “deal” with Himmler and Hitler just before the conference.¹³⁹ This deal ensured that the “Final Solution” would begin in the General Government.¹⁴⁰ Throughout the film, Bühler impatiently insists that the General Government be given priority. He is at the conference with a specific mission (from Hans Frank) and is distrustful of the other attendees, especially Meyer and Schöngarth.¹⁴¹ This is one of the aspects where *The Conference* outshines its predecessors. The motivations and power of those representing the occupied East are much clearer in this film. The political gamesmanship, one-upping each other, and backroom intrigue are of course present in the other films, but *The Conference* succeeds at portraying the colonial nature of German authorities in occupied Eastern Europe. Nevertheless, it is important to note that while “the Holocaust formed one part of a larger, murderous German design,” Nazis considered Jews “as a danger of a unique kind” who were to be eradicated completely, unlike their Polish or Russian subjects. This drive to kill every single Jewish person in Europe “is why the paperwork for the Wannsee Conference listed even tiny Jewish communities in Ireland and Portugal.”¹⁴²

Martin Luther (Simon Schwarz), *Unterstaatssekretär* for the Foreign Office, is mostly portrayed as a confidant of Eichmann’s and as one of those opportunistic people who would have had a mediocre career in normal times but quickly ascended in the Nazi hierarchy. Vattrodt describes him as an individual with “an exact instinct for power relationships and deeply decided to align himself with winners.”¹⁴³ He is Heydrich’s man on the inside and the film mainly portrays him as such – Stuckart quickly recognizes this and cannot take Luther seriously.¹⁴⁴ As in the other films, Luther mainly serves to report on how willingly Germany’s al-

139 Vattrodt, “Die Wannseekonferenz, Gelbe-Seiten Fassung,” 49, 91.

140 Ingo Loose, “Josef Bühler, State Secretary for the General Government: A Behind-the-Scenes Perpetrator,” in *The Participants*, ed. Jasch and Kreutzmüller, 1. 157–159.

141 Vattrodt, “Die Wannseekonferenz, Gelbe-Seiten Fassung,” 12.

142 David Blackbourn, *Germany in the World: A Global History, 1500–2000* (New York, NY: Norton & Company, 2023), 516.

143 Vattrodt, “Die Wannseekonferenz, Gelbe-Seiten Fassung,” unnumbered page 5 of script front matter.

144 Vattrodt, “Die Wannseekonferenz, Gelbe-Seiten Fassung,” 25.

lies will give up their Jewish citizens. In this respect, *The Conference* does not stray too far from standard historiographical depictions of Luther and the Foreign Office stemming from Christopher Browning and Raul Hilberg.¹⁴⁵ The section of the film where Luther reports at length about foreign relations is much shorter than in *The Wannsee Conference* but still occupies about eight minutes of screen time. One key difference is a scene where Luther, Eichmann, Heydrich, and Müller leave the table during Luther's report and meet in the adjacent sunroom, making Luther's closeness to the RSHA even more apparent. In this short scene, the group discusses measures for purging Serbia of its Jewish population, and they decide to take a gas van off of Lange's hands and send it to Serbia.¹⁴⁶ This short scene also recalls David Albahari's novel *Götz and Meyer*, a postmodern autobiographical work which discusses a Serbian historian's descent into madness as he learns and speculates about the two men, Götz and Meyer, who drove the gas van which killed his entire family.¹⁴⁷

Erich Neumann (Matthias Bundschuh) of the Office of the Four-Year Plan and Roland Freisler (Arnd Klawitter) of the Ministry of Justice have more muted roles in *The Conference*, which is not that different from earlier portrayals. They mostly exist in the film to ask questions to or for clarification from more important characters. Neumann speaks a few times to plea for Jewish armaments workers and other labor-related issues, but otherwise remains a minor figure in this film outside of references to the war effort and his superior, Hermann Göring. Freisler is a fanatical Nazi here, but only shows shades of what he would later become as the chair of the *Volksgerichtshof*, where he became infamous for his fanaticism and shrill tirades. Like Neumann's role in *Conspiracy*, Freisler uses the conference mainly as a networking opportunity, even asking Meyer to help him get a personal audience with Hitler, since he has yet to meet him. Meyer of course politely lies to him and promises to do so.¹⁴⁸ He also pipes up one more time to defend Heydrich against Stuckart, ostensibly in the neutral interests of the Ministry of Justice, but Stuckart sees through this charade. The script notes that Stuckart "considers Freisler an opportunistic idiot."¹⁴⁹

Friedrich Wilhelm Kritzinger (Thomas Loibl) of the Reich Chancellery is the most hesitant out of all the participants in this film – in keeping with his postwar regret – but is neither the doddering old man of *The Wannsee Conference* nor the reluctant stickler with moral qualms of *Conspiracy*. Here, he is a representative

145 See Christopher R. Browning, *Final Solution and the German Foreign Office*.

146 Vattrodt, "Die Wannseekonferenz, Gelbe-Seiten Fassung," 75–76.

147 David Albahari, *Götz and Meyer* (San Diego: Harcourt, 2006).

148 Vattrodt, "Die Wannseekonferenz, Gelbe-Seiten Fassung," 64.

149 Vattrodt, "Die Wannseekonferenz, Gelbe-Seiten Fassung," 77, 81.

of the old Prussian bureaucracy but nevertheless recognizes that his time has passed and that the war requires new approaches.¹⁵⁰ Unique to all filmic depictions of Wannsee, Kritzinger emphasizes the importance of World War I to German decision-making and considerations about the psychological well-being of German perpetrators. Unlike Kritzinger in the previous two films, this version only expresses concern for the Germans, not their victims. Like in the previous two films, he annoys Heydrich with seemingly pedantic questions, but his moral scruples are not as prominent here. He instead has problems with “irregularities” like the transport of Berlin Jews mistakenly sent to Riga in November 1941 or the issue of Jewish World War I veterans. In a key scene, Werlemann offers to bring him a coffee, and he sharply rebukes her while looking at a pile of documents including the *Einsatzgruppen* report and map which Lange had previously shown Heydrich.¹⁵¹ As the rest of the attendees gather in the foyer, Kritzinger remains behind, studying the evidence. After Eichmann’s orderly brings Kritzinger into the foyer, Kritzinger asks the other attendees if they have thought about just how they will accomplish the “Final Solution,” based on the numbers he has just read about, as well as other *Einsatzgruppen* reports circulating in the past several weeks. He expresses reservations, but before he can finish, Schöngarth interrupts him, accusing him of “humanitarian stupidity (*Humanitätsduselei*).” Kritzinger continues, and then, to the surprise of all present – as well as the viewer – says that that aspect is not what bothers him:

KRITZINGER

Please, gentlemen. I’m not worried about the Jews. I, too, know that the history of the Jewish race is coming to an end. My worry is exclusively about our men and the mental burden which the Final Solution represents for them
For a moment, there is a surprised silence.

KLOPFER

You mean – for the Wehrmacht, SS, and Order Police?

KRITZINGER

We are speaking here about young, not fully matured people. We were also these people! And these – experiences – during the special actions, like in Kiev – over 33 thousand, corpses piled into mountains – something like that inevitably leads to – roughness. Sadism. To mental illnesses and alcoholism.

150 Vattrodt, “Die Wannseekonferenz, Gelbe-Seiten Fassung,” 8A.

151 Vattrodt, “Die Wannseekonferenz, Gelbe-Seiten Fassung,” 92.

LANGE

At least for my men, I can say that we understand our craft. We shoot with a fixed bayonet from behind, kneeling, there are barely any misses – you can imagine throughout organized processes . . .

KRITZINGER

That may very well be the case – but we want these men to return to us as healthy German men, as husbands of German wives, fathers of German children.¹⁵²

This section continues, and Eichmann reveals that the SS have found a way to prevent this problem: gas chambers. Kritzinger continues, saying that as a First World War veteran, he finds the idea frightening, but that it is a “great relief” because it “spares us the bloodbaths of mass shootings.” In this scene, Eichmann reports at length about gassing victims using carbon monoxide in the General Government at the extermination camps Belżec and Chełmno, as well as new experiments with Zyklon B in Auschwitz. Based on the Wannsee protocol, historians are still unsure as to what extent killing methods were discussed at Wannsee, even though Eichmann later testified that they addressed it explicitly and in very unadorned language. Nevertheless, it is likely inevitable that a film depicting Wannsee will show participants talking in detail about places like Auschwitz and Treblinka – places the audience is well aware of. Otherwise, the audience may not comprehend exactly what the point of the meeting or film was. In this sense, the filmmakers are clearly following the historiographical trend represented by Mark Roseman, Peter Klein, and Norbert Kampe – who all follow consensus and argue that killing methods were discussed in detail. Other, more skeptical historians like Peter Longerich, are less sure and argue instead that Heydrich probably would have avoided being so explicit. This climactic scene is also notable from a filmmaking perspective. Here, Geschonneck best demonstrates his craft. Although the script describes this scene as a “more relaxed group,” the scene has a Brechtian feel, with many participants standing around awkwardly sipping coffee as if they knew the audience were there.¹⁵³

As Eichmann discusses gassing techniques in detail, the camera rapidly cuts to a close-up shot of each participant as they comprehend what this development means. In this interplay between extreme close-up, almost theatrical standing around the room, and Eichmann’s words, the viewer is placed in an uncanny, alienating, and frightening nightmare as it becomes clear that none of these people have problems with what is being discussed. It is here where *The Conference* offers a rejoinder to Christopher Browning’s claim that “[t]he significance of the

152 Vattrodt, “Die Wannseekonferenz, Gelbe-Seiten Fassung,” 98.

153 Vattrodt, “Die Wannseekonferenz, Gelbe-Seiten Fassung,” 92.

Wannsee Conference is precisely that there was overwhelming consensus and no dissent about the projected murder of 11 million Jews, even if there was one minor squabble about the fate of German half Jews, but one could not make a commercial film about consensus.”¹⁵⁴ In this climatic scene, the filmmakers proved that one can indeed make a film about genocidal consensus and still maintain drama and suspense without losing any potential educational value.

Was it necessary to make a third docudrama about Wannsee? Does *The Conference* tell us anything new? From a public history perspective, it was necessary. First, most German audiences will watch *Conspiracy* dubbed into German. A film about Wannsee shot in the original German is arguably a much better cinematic experience than a dubbed version of *Conspiracy*, which retains most of its power due to Loring Mandel’s dialogue and its performances. *The Conference* is also both a filmic and historiographic improvement over its pathbreaking predecessor, even if that film was its initial inspiration. It refrains from Mommertz’s use of comic relief and “over-pedagogization” while portraying the event with the gravity that it deserves.¹⁵⁵

Yet, claims from the filmmakers and the German press about *The Conference* being vastly superior, historically speaking, to *Conspiracy*, which is supposedly a flashy Hollywood production without substance, are wildly exaggerated. In several instances, the filmmakers certainly borrowed from *Conspiracy*, particularly its “prestige horror” atmosphere.¹⁵⁶ In this sense, *Conspiracy* remains the superior viewing experience and will probably remain more prominent in film history and scholarship, but *The Conference* is an admirable and necessary corrective to its predecessors’ historical flaws. This is no slight on *The Conference*. German writers often ignore the artistic pedigrees of Frank Pierson, Peter Zinner, and Loring Mandel; it should be no surprise that they made an excellent film. *The Conference* differs from its predecessors as well by deemphasizing alcohol consumption at Wannsee. Compared to its two predecessors, it is literally a more sober film. Additionally, it further underscores the importance of the “Final Solution” to the German war effort, breaking with past cultural depictions which often treat the two as separate, unrelated policies.

Lastly, *The Conference* is an important political project in the wake of the rise of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) party. Prominent AfD politicians have argued against the country’s culture of remembrance and brought Nazi terms back into political discourse, including several which the characters use in

¹⁵⁴ Browning, “When Did They Decide?”

¹⁵⁵ See Interview with Peter Klein, 24:03–26:22.

¹⁵⁶ Hantke, “Horror and the Holocaust.”

The Conference. Their use of these terms is no accident but is clearly meant to remind viewers of the politicians and activists bringing such racist and antisemitic terminology back into mainstream discourse (*Umvolkung*, or “ethnic replacement,” being the most prominent example, today it is used to fearmonger about immigration). In this sense, *The Conference* serves as a warning. However, this political potential is somewhat undercut by the film’s credit sequence, which simply says that 6 million Jews were murdered during the Holocaust. There is no mention of what happened to the Wannsee participants after the war, as in *Conspiracy*. The audience learns about how West German society protected many of these men and how those who survived the war or escaped execution led quiet lives in peace. This aspect of *The Conference* is its biggest missed opportunity. In the filmmakers’ efforts to reduce the narrative to those 90 minutes at Wannsee, they skipped over some of the most important parts of Wannsee’s postwar legacy.

5 Premiere and Reception

The Conference premiered on ZDF’s streaming platform on January 18, 2022 and then aired on linear television on January 24 to fit with the Wannsee Conference’s eightieth anniversary on January 20, 2022. Compared with its 1984 predecessor, *The Conference* enjoyed a massive promotional campaign and ZDF drew attention to its place in the network’s educational mission (*Bildungsauftrag*). The official red-carpet premiere also took place on January 8 with German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier in attendance.¹⁵⁷ Steinmeier gave a speech at the premiere on the meaning of Wannsee today:

We are about to see an outstandingly good film – one that is also difficult to watch and disturbing. What begins with a sense of unease later becomes shock. That, at least, is how I felt – a feeling of shock that lingers for some time after the credits have rolled and the screen has turned black.

Whoever – as we will do today – steps out of the cinema onto the street afterwards or turns on the TV news at home will notice how, for an irritatingly long moment, one’s own language has taken on an unfamiliar sound. One mistrusts it. It is unsettling to hear that the administrative German spoken in the film employs the same words that are used in the here and now, in the street and on TV.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁷ “Premiere des ZDF-Films ‘Die Wannseekonferenz’ in Berlin : ZDF Presseportal,” January 18, 2022, <https://presseportal.zdf.de/pressemitteilung/mitteilung/premiere-des-zdf-films-die-wannsee-konferenz-in-berlin/seite/11/>.

¹⁵⁸ Frank-Walter Steinmeier, “Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier at the premiere of the film ‘The Conference’ on January 18, 2022 in Berlin,” Bundespräsidialamt, January 18, 2022,

Steinmeier remains one of the most prominent political figures to speak on any of the Wannsee films. His speech recounts the history of the conference, cites several historians, and ends with a discussion of Hannah Arendt, the banality of evil, and pleas for vigilance:

Ensuring that this never happens again is what every remembrance of the crimes committed by the National Socialist state aims to do. In our democratic state, each individual bears responsibility. This includes civil servants who work in the hierarchical structure of an administration. Let us not be nobody. Let us not abdicate our responsibility. Including the responsibility to say no where the law and our humanity bid us do so.¹⁵⁹

Steinmeier's speech, while well-meaning and true, appears naïve in hindsight considering Russia's invasion of Ukraine a little over a month later. Several writers directly criticized Steinmeier for his use of the phrase "never again" at Holocaust remembrance ceremonies in a manner that seemed hollow in the wake of the war's outbreak, especially considering Steinmeier's reputation in Ukraine as a politician overly friendly towards Russia. These articles unfortunately blame Germany's remembrance culture for its reluctance to send weapons to Ukraine, essentially blaming the country's historical community and grassroots activism for geopolitical and economic decisions.¹⁶⁰

If viewers wanted to learn more about the background to the conference and the fates of the participants, ZDF made a companion documentary available as well as a wide range of digital short-form documentaries from Mirko Drotschmann.¹⁶¹ Additionally, ZDF provided teaching material for educators wishing to show *The Conference* in class.¹⁶² This material is of varying quality, with the documentary exhibiting all of the artistic decisions Geschonneck refrained from: suspenseful music, dramatic edits and close-ups, flashy graphics, and a self-serious narrator. The supplementary educational material is more promising: Around fifty pages in length, the document includes lesson plans, a series of questions

https://www.bundespraesident.de/SharedDocs/Downloads/DE/Reden/2022/01/220118-Filmpremiere-Wannseekonferenz-Englisch.pdf?__blob=publicationFile,1.

159 Frank-Walter Steinmeier, "Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier at the premiere of the film" *The Conference* 4.

160 Viktor Pinchuk, "Nie Wieder?," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, April 14, 2022, p. 10; William Noah Glucroft, "Germany's Culture of Remembrance and Its Ukraine Blindspot," *Internationale Politik Quarterly*, May 10, 2022, <https://ip-quarterly.com/en/germanys-culture-remembrance-and-its-ukraine-blindspot>.

161 "Die Wannseekonferenz," accessed August 9, 2022, <https://www.zdf.de/filme/die-wannseekonferenz>.

162 "Unterrichtsmaterial zur Wannsee-Konferenz," accessed August 9, 2022, <https://www.zdf.de/dokumentation/terra-x/wannsee-konferenz-unterrichtsmaterialien-schule-100.html>.

and possible assignments, and provides context on the Holocaust and the Second World War. Assignments are paired with small clips of the film for students to analyze.¹⁶³

The Conference enjoyed almost universal acclaim in German-speaking countries. *The Conference* received many awards in the German-speaking world, including the 2022 German Television Prizes for best television movie and best screenplay.¹⁶⁴ In stark contrast with the West German reception of *The Wannsee Conference*, the German press usually mentioned the film's depiction of Nazi language, its spartan, cold atmosphere, and praised its acting. Critical pieces tended to focus more on the by now clichéd (and lazy) debate over whether it is morally appropriate to make a film about the Holocaust or, in some cases, lost themselves in overly pedantic questions, with one article expressing outrage that the film premiered on January 24 instead of on January 20.¹⁶⁵ In a review for *Die Zeit*, Peter Kümmel strongly praised *The Conference*, comparing it with Peter Weiss' classic documentary play *The Investigation*, noting that a disturbing similarity in both productions is that the perpetrators laugh a lot. He noted that "[t]here is no cathartic element in *The Conference* . . . we live in the world that they administered . . . television cannot get any better."¹⁶⁶ More critically, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung's* reviewer Andreas Kilb expressed reservations about the very idea of portraying history on television, arguing that none of the television depictions of Heydrich came close to portraying the real man, both in terms of outward appearance and his voice. Kilb argues that the film distorts history but he does not really provide evidence and instead mentions lines of dialogue which he found unconvincing, then he concludes with a paragraph about how we should "relearn to distrust images in order to comprehend the truth of history."¹⁶⁷ Such a review could have been written in the 1970s about *Holocaust* or in the 1990s

¹⁶³ Ralph Erbar and Niko Lamprecht, "Die Wannsee-Konferenz Unterrichtsmaterialien erarbeitet im Auftrag des Zweiten Deutschen Fernsehens (ZDF) und des Verbandes der Geschichtslehrerinnen und -Lehrer Deutschlands (VGD)," <https://www.zdf.de/dokumentation/terra-x/wannsee-konferenz-unterrichtsmaterialien-schule-100.html>, 2022.

¹⁶⁴ Der Deutsche Fernsehpreis, "Preisträger:innen 2022," *Deutscher Fernsehpreis 2022*, accessed November 9, 2022, https://www.deutscher-fernsehpreis.de/preistraeger_innen/.

¹⁶⁵ Joachim Huber, "Das falsche Datum der 'Wannseekonferenz' im Zweiten," *Der Tagesspiegel Online*, January 19, 2022, <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/gesellschaft/medien/zdf-wird-zdfchen-das-falsche-datum-der-wannseekonferenz-im-zweiten/27989132.html>.

¹⁶⁶ Peter Kümmel, "Die Wannseekonferenz: Es wird gelacht. Es ist zum Fürchten," *Die Zeit*, January 20, 2022, <https://www.zeit.de/2022/04/die-wannseekonferenz-film-ns-regime>.

¹⁶⁷ Andreas Kilb, "Die Wannseekonferenz' im ZDF: Die Massenmörder bitten zu Tisch," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, January 24, 2022, <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/medien/die-wannseekonferenz-film-von-matti-geschonneck-im-zdf-17744723.html>.

about *Schindler's List* and tells us nothing new. Arguably, no historical film would pass Kilb's muster, except, predictably, an experimental documentary along the lines of *Shoah*. *Der Spiegel* reviewed *The Conference* alongside the Netflix drama *Munich: The Edge of War*, arguing along similar lines.¹⁶⁸ In general though, the film's critical reception was very positive, even if the German-language press was often overzealous with their praise, sometimes giving the impression that this was the first film about Wannsee – if they acknowledged its predecessors, it was only to claim that this new version was better. Reviews often spoke of the idea to make a film about Wannsee, the lack of music, the focus on language, and the film's overall atmosphere as if Geschonneck invented it instead of following in the footsteps of two other productions. Reviews often mentioned the film's political implications, with Peter Kümmel calling it a warning for the future.¹⁶⁹

After 2016 in the US and the UK and after the resurgence of the German far-right in the wake of the 2015 wave of Syrian refugees, or after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 or the 2023 Israel and Gaza war, filmmakers, writers, and artists have all grappled with the realization that history is not over. Ideologies which liberal consensus believed part of a traumatic yet distant past have re-emerged with unexpected vigor in this era. Television productions like *Years and Years* and *The Conference*, as well as novels like Kunzru's *Red Pill*, serve as warnings to their audiences about the consequences of these ideologies. In 2023, Jonathan Glazer's Auschwitz drama *The Zone of Interest* inspired renewed debate about the appropriateness of depicting Auschwitz on film and on centering perpetrators instead of victims.¹⁷⁰ Similar to the three Wannsee docudramas, *The Zone of Interest* does not depict violence on screen (though, contrary to claims made in negative reviews, Jewish victims are present on screen), but rather through sound and through the words and attitudes of its Nazi protagonists. A seeming family drama about Auschwitz commandant Rudolf Höss (Christian Friedel) and his wife Hedwig (Sandra Hüller), *The Zone of Interest* is a deeply unsettling film which focuses on people who have no shred of empathy except for themselves.

One thread of *The Zone of Interest* concerns Höss' transfer to Oranienburg, near Berlin, to take over the Concentration Camps Inspectorate (IKL). One of the

168 Wolfgang Höbel, "Wie sympathisch darf man Massenmörder zeigen?" *Der Spiegel*, January 16, 2022, <https://www.spiegel.de/kultur/tv/wannseekonferenz-und-muenchen-zdf-und-netflix-widmen-sich-dem-schrecken-der-nazi-herrschaft-a-247893bf-fd29-46c2-b54e-bb4cde533062>

169 Kümmel, "Die Wannseekonferenz."

170 Fatma Aydemir, "The Zone of Interest Is a Portrait of Guilt. No Wonder It Has Divided Opinion in Germany," *The Guardian*, Opinion, March 27, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2024/mar/27/the-zone-of-interest-guilt-germany-germans-nazis-jonathan-glazer>.

scenes taking place at the IKL depicts a meeting about the deportation of Hungarian Jews, and its aesthetic, its matter-of-fact dialogue, and its chilling atmosphere echo *Conspiracy* and *The Conference* (based on when production took place, it is most likely that Glazer had only seen the earlier two Wannsee docudramas). Loudspeaker announcements mention day-to-day happenings at the base, such as a concert, and Glazer's screenplay notes the conference table's note cards, coffee, and glassware arranged for its participants.¹⁷¹ Höss's adjutant lists the participants and the concentration and extermination camps they represent, and the screenplay describes a map of the vast concentration camp network, which denotes camps with black dots, as "plague-like."¹⁷² Noteworthy is one aspect of the scene which, to German eyes, just depicts a standard feature of German meetings, but in the context of Holocaust cinema, directly references *Conspiracy*: "The men knock the table as an expression of appreciation."¹⁷³ The camera largely remains at the table, oval-shaped like in *Conspiracy*; the men discuss logistics of genocide in a detached manner. The cold lighting, oblique and overhead camera angles, combined with distorted focus (see Figures 8.9 and 8.10) and matter-of-fact, bureaucratic language contribute to the sustained sense of unease throughout Glazer's film.



Figure 8.9: The Oranienburg IKL Conference in *The Zone of Interest*. A24 Films, 2023.

¹⁷¹ Jonathan Glazer, Shooting Script for *The Zone of Interest*, 2023, <https://deadline.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/The-Zone-Of-Interest-Read-The-Screenplay.pdf>, 57.

¹⁷² Glazer, *The Zone of Interest*, 58.

¹⁷³ Glazer, *The Zone of Interest*, 59.



Figure 8.10: Höss (Christian Friedel) conducts a briefing on deporting Hungarian Jews to Death Camps. *The Zone of Interest*. A24 Films, 2023.

On November 25, 2023, members of the far-right party Alternative for Germany (AfD), business leaders, and other far-right activists met in a Potsdam villa to discuss plans for the deportation of millions of immigrants and German citizens.¹⁷⁴ After journalists revealed this secret meeting, it quickly became dubbed “Wannsee Conference 2.0.” In January 2024, millions of Germans took to the streets to protest against the AfD. By dubbing the Potsdam meeting “Wannsee 2.0,” Germans were participating in a cultural discourse where Wannsee has long been shorthand for mass murder rubber-stamped by bureaucrats, and the January 2024 protests are just the latest iteration of the Wannsee Conference entering public discourse.¹⁷⁵ Korrektiv, the publication which broke the story about the Potsdam meeting, even wrote and performed a stage adaptation of the meeting, echoing artistic depictions

¹⁷⁴ Maximilian Bornmann, “Geheimplan gegen Deutschland,” *correctiv.org* (blog), January 10, 2024, <https://correctiv.org/aktuelles/neue-rechte/2024/01/10/geheimplan-remigration-vertreibung-afd-rechtsextreme-november-treffen/>.

¹⁷⁵ See “More than 100,000 Protest across Germany over Far-Right AfD’s Mass Deportation Meetings,” *The Guardian*, January 21, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/jan/21/more-than-100000-protest-across-germany-over-far-right-afds-mass-deportation-meetings>; SPDde, “Kevin Kühnert: Diese Wannseekonferenz 2.0 betrifft uns Alle,” accessed September 2, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/shorts/2ZrKmFgcdO8>.

of Wannsee. The play discusses the Wannsee Conference and, more concretely, Eichmann's Madagascar Plan, as possible inspirations for the Potsdam meeting.¹⁷⁶

In the post-2016 Western world, the Wannsee Conference occupies an iconic cultural space where it is more than a meeting which happened on January 20, 1942 and which is only relevant to Germans attempting to work through their past. It has long been an international symbol of modern, industrial killing and of the language of cynicism, brutality, and exclusion. It has become shorthand for what our societies are capable of when they abandon all pretenses of democratic pluralism, constitutional procedure, and the rule of law. The television productions discussed in this chapter are one example of a cultural and intellectual reaction to Donald Trump's presidency, Brexit, and the rise of the AfD. They will not be the last.

In several essays on historical memory in Germany, the Jewish writer Max Czollek argues that contemporary Germany's focus on middle class, "normal" resistance figures like Stauffenberg and Sophie Scholl helps perpetuate the myth of the moderate, well-off, educated center as a bulwark against fascism. For Czollek, this idea is both dangerous and historically false because Nazi perpetrators mostly came from exactly this part of society.¹⁷⁷ All three Wannsee films make this same argument – especially when they mention how Wannsee participants lived normal lives after the war. Their cultivated manners, their doctoral titles, their elegant language, their very normality is what made the unthinkable thinkable. As Omer Bartov puts it, studying the Holocaust leads to disturbing implications for our own society: "What they tell us about the bureaucratic state, about lawyers, doctors, soldiers, technocrats, and so forth, is so frightening that we tend to ignore their relevance for our current civilization."¹⁷⁸ Education and normality did not save Germany from Nazism, and Czollek predicts that they will not save Germany in the future – and that mainstream German Holocaust commemoration ignores this aspect of Holocaust perpetrators at its own peril. For him,

The pluralistic Germany of the present is a post-national socialist and post-colonial society. In such a present, normality is not available. Nor do I believe that it would be desirable, certainly not as part of a culture of remembrance. Because a culture of remembrance means setting up society in such a way so that history does not repeat itself. It also means

¹⁷⁶ Lolita Lax, Jean Peters, and Kay Voges, *Geheimplan Gegen Deutschland: Das Stück* (Essen: Correctiv, 2024), 30–32. <https://correctiv.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Geheimplan-gegen-Deutschland-Das-Stu%C3%84ck.pdf>

¹⁷⁷ Max Czollek, "Erinnerungskultur: «Bürgerliche Mitte bedeutet auch heute meistens eine Legitimierung rechter Diskurse, die als Meinung einer vermeintlich schweigenden Mehrheit beworben wird», " *Die Wochenzeitung*, May 19, 2021, <https://www.woz.ch/b8c8>.

¹⁷⁸ Bartov, *Murder in Our Midst*, 92–93.

that there is a need for spaces of inconsolability in which what should be self-evident applies: it will never be okay again.¹⁷⁹

In the end, this is the fundamental message of all three Wannsee television movies. Educated, normal, and highly ideologically-driven people made this happen and can make it happen again. The films provide no comfort. Echoing Czollek, they provide “spaces of inconsolability.” There is no room for consolation, self-pity, or reconciliation at the end of these films. Only silence by the lake.

179 Max Czollek, “Versöhnungstheater.”